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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**“THE LOVED ONE DOES NOT YET KNOW ALL SHE SHALL BECOME”:
MYSTICISM AS ESCHATOLOGY IN MEDIEVAL WRITERS**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

New developments in the study of Western Christian mysticism demand that the mystics be interpreted theologically if we are to accept the mystics on their own terms and take them seriously. This study argues that the medieval mystics in Europe up to the 13th century understand their work to be eschatological in nature, interpreting the mystical experience of union with the Divine as an inbreaking or foretaste of the eschaton. Reading Hadewijch of Antwerp, a 13th century Dutch mystic, together with contributions from Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hildegard of Bingen, this study attempts to demonstrate that the medievals understand the eschatological promise of the *visio dei* to be a reality already accomplished through the work of Christ, a reality which is thus assured in the life to come and accessible in some limited sense to individuals in this life. The mystical experience is possible because the eschatological reality which it anticipates is already accomplished in the work of incarnation and resurrection.

CHAPTER I

THE CHALLENGE OF MYSTICISM: THE STATE OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent interest in medieval mysticism, especially women mystics, over the last half-century has led to a plethora of works on the subject. This renewed interest has played an important part in the formation of this thesis. The mystical writers of Christianity are in search of something that is of great interest to our current generation: the feeling of the presence of God. Although their approaches to this subject matter are very different from our own, they provide a certain comfort to modern readers in their conviction, belief, and trust in the promises of God.

In this essay, I will attempt to look at the mystical writers of the medieval era in terms of their theology, especially their eschatological focus. I am convinced that the medievals understand their writing to be eschatological. They view the mystical experience as a foretaste or inbreaking of the eschaton, a reality which is promised by God in Scripture and already accomplished by the work of Christ, making it accessible to the human person in a limited fashion in this life, and fully in the life to come. I will be exploring this insight mostly through the writings of Hadewijch, a Dutch mystic who wrote in the mid-13th century, with input from other medieval mystics as well.

II. THE STATE OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

The study of Christian mysticism and spirituality has been plagued by many interpretative and methodological difficulties throughout its history. These problems are identified by most authors of compendious historical surveys, but not all authors adequately deal with the problems which they bring to light. Perhaps the most pervasive

problem has been finding a concise and universal definition to the terms “mysticism” and “spirituality.” Bernard McGinn, whose five-volume (thus far) series on Christian Mysticism (*The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*) has greatly benefitted scholarship, offers a helpful discussion of the history of defining the term “mysticism,” coming to this conclusion:

Rather than trying to define mysticism (any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian), I prefer to give a sense of how I understand the term by discussing it under three headings: mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.¹

McGinn, inspired by the works of Joseph Maréchal, argues that “presence,” rather than “union,” is “a more central and more useful category for grasping the unifying note in the varieties of Christian mysticism.”² He writes: “Thus we can say that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”³ This distinction is helpful when one attempts a comprehensive study of all forms of Christian mysticism, which is precisely McGinn’s endeavor. However, this shift in understanding from “union” to “presence” is largely necessary due to developments in mysticism which occur in the late medieval and early modern period, as

¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv-xvi. McGinn has published five volumes of what is anticipated to be a seven-volume work under the title *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. *Foundations* is the first volume in this series. Other volumes published so far include *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* (New York: Crossroad, 2005); and *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)* (New York: Crossroad, 2012). McGinn’s multivolume series is thus far the best and most important history of Western Christian mysticism for the study of Christian mysticism today.

² McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii.

³ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii.

mystical reflection shifts to a more personal and devotional flavor, as seen in the works of Teresa of Avila and others.

McGinn's work is unique among histories of Christian mysticism in that it does not attempt to proceed from a theoretical perspective but a rather strictly historical one. To emphasize this, he includes his discussion of the nature of mysticism and the modern discussion concerning it in an appendix to his first volume, rather than in the introduction. This theoretical approach is a problem which he identifies in most scholarship on Christian mysticism:

The most significant modern studies of the nature of mysticism have generally proceeded from explicitly theoretical perspectives, however much historical evidence they have employed to support their case. While more or less descriptive historical accounts have not been lacking on the popular level, few of these have made any lasting contribution to scholarship.⁴

McGinn explains that a theology of mysticism is an important endeavor, but that a clear and thorough history ought to have the first word. This is what he sets out to do in his work; work that is much needed and much appreciated in scholarship on Christian mysticism.

McGinn identifies several important problems with the study of Christian mysticism in the appendix to *The Foundations of Mysticism*, including a tendency (especially among Protestants) to interpret mysticism and contemplation as Hellenistic philosophy imposing itself on what is essentially a Jewish religion, stemming from Albrecht Ritschl's *Theologie und Metaphysik* and Adolph von Harnack's *History of*

⁴ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 267.

Dogma;⁵ a tendency to attempt to capture and study the original phenomenological experience of the mystics, stemming from the psychological approach of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*;⁶ the tendency to sever Christian (and non-Christian) mysticism and spirituality from doctrine in order to compare it to the spirituality of other religions, stemming from the Schleiermacherian starting point of Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige*;⁷ and the resulting lack of emphasis on the texts and theology of the mystical writers themselves. Most scholars, argues McGinn, tend to come to their study of the medieval mystics with an a-priori idea of what "mysticism" is, and try to fit the mystics within their framework.⁸ This inevitably causes them to overlook or ignore much of what the mystics themselves emphasize in their texts.

Louis Bouyer, in the preface to his much earlier three-volume work, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, identifies similar themes and problems as McGinn, including an emphasis on the phenomenology of the mystical experience, the tendency to strip Christian spirituality of everything that makes it distinctive in order to place it in the

⁵ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma, Translated from the Third German Edition, 7 Vols.*, ed. A. B. Bruce (London: Willams & Norgate, 1896-99). Cf. discussion of von Harnack in McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 268-9.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, orig. pub. 1902). Cf. discussion of James in McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 293.

⁷ Rudolph Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz, 1927). McGinn discusses the influence of Otto in *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 327-8.

⁸ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xiv-xv.

broader field of comparative religions, and the danger of severing “spiritual theology” too greatly from dogmatic and moral theology.⁹

Since McGinn and Bouyer offer such a thorough and profound critique of the study of Christian mysticism and spirituality, I feel no need to further elaborate what they have already said. Interested readers can seek out their chapters for themselves. Nevertheless I have identified three more problems that hamper the current scholarship on Christian mysticism, which must be addressed before we proceed.

A. Anachronistic Trends

My first critique is more directed toward popular perception of medieval mysticism than scholarly trends. People tend to read medieval mystics through the lens of later spiritual practices, such as 16th century devotionalism of people like Ignatius of Loyola and Theresa of Avila, and trends in contemporary “spirituality.” Many writers, both in print and on the web, cherry-pick the mystics for a vague spirituality of “God-consciousness” or a “personal relationship with Jesus,” rather than recognizing the mystics primary concern, life in the presence of God, which requires virtue and holiness. This trend can be seen in non-scholarly writings on Hadewijch, who writes so much about Love. Many online sources can be found talking about how Hadewijch is just interested in love, while ignoring completely her love for Christian doctrine. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and yet, it seems clear that scholarship has not done enough to combat this widespread perception.

⁹ See Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality I: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, trans. Mary P. Ryan (London: Burns & Oates, 1963). Other works in this series include: Bouyer, Jean Leclercq, and Francois Vandenbroucke, *A History of Christian Spirituality II: The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, trans. the Benedictines of Home Eden Abbey (Carlisle), (London: Burns & Oates, 1968); and Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality III: Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality*, trans. Barbara Wall (London: Burns & Oates, 1969).

B. Oversight of Women Mystics

Another glaring and embarrassing problem in the study of medieval mysticism is the tendency to ignore or overlook the contributions of women. Indeed, this is a problem throughout the study of Christian history, as women have played an important role in moving and shaping the church from its very beginning:

In the Church, from the very outset women have played a role that, though different from that of men, appeared only the more indispensable and even precisely fundamental. To go back to its very beginnings, it was undoubtedly the apostles to whom Christ gave the mission of proclaiming with authority, in his own name, the gospel of the Resurrection. But it was from women that they received the content of that gospel. . . . In the Church, in all ages, women have therefore had a role—a role quite different, to be sure, from that entrusted to men, but one without which the men’s role could not have been carried out.¹⁰

As Bouyer points out in the introduction to his work on women mystics, women have played an important and vital role in promoting religious revival and reformation, calling the church back to its roots, while at the same time offering new and diverse ways to proclaim the old, old story. This has been true from the very beginnings of Christian history. The early church writers are fascinated with New-Testament biblical figures like the seven prophetess daughters of Philip, Salome, Priscilla, Mary Magdelene, and of course, Mary the mother of God. Likewise, throughout the “patristic” era, we are given countless examples of faithful women from the writers and theologians of the time: Augustine’s *Confessions* gives much greater credit to the faithfulness of his mother than the influence of Ambrose of Milan, the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Fortuna is as influential in the early period of the church as any other martyrdom stories, sermons by

¹⁰ Bouyer, *Women Mystics: Hadewijch of Antwerp, Theresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 10-11.

priests and bishops in the 2nd through 5th century tell hundreds of stories of women saints and martyrs whose work and witness brought glory to God and furthered the influence of the fledgling religion.

In medieval history, with regard to mysticism, at least, this trend is beginning to change. An enthusiastic interest in the contributions of women throughout history, started in the mid-twentieth century, has forced scholars to change their tone and work harder to include the contributions of women in their works on medieval mysticism. This renewed interest in medieval women mystics has led to countless of books being published on individual women and women's movements in the 12th-16th century, and the inclusion of many women in McGinn's *The Presence of God* series testifies to this increased awareness.¹¹ The work of Barbara Newman and Carolyn Walker Bynum also offers a balance of men and women, recognizing the important contributions of women to important doctrinal and cultural perspectives.¹² However, much more common is the practice of "ghettoizing" women mystics into separate volumes or separate chapters, as though their influence were limited only to other women, or only worth talking about if

¹¹ Although even McGinn's series has a tendency to devote entire chapters to individual men, while chapters that cover women mystics tend to survey several individuals more broadly.

¹² Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995), discusses Christian perspectives on femininity through the medieval period. Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) includes the important contributions of Hildegard of Bingen and later women mystics in understanding and articulating the relationship between the body and the soul through the 12th and 13th centuries.

men are completely removed from the equation.¹³ Bouyer, who lambasts broader Christian scholarship's treatment of historical women in his book *Women Mystics*, devotes a paltry twenty pages to various women in his three-volume *History of Christian Spirituality*. This isolation of historical women to a separate sphere in historical scholarship is an unfortunate and disappointing trend.

Another problem that reveals the lack of attention or lack of respect toward women is the tendency to write about women mystics in terms of which men influenced them. Introductions to works by Hildegard of Bingen never fail to mention her correspondence with Bernard of Clairvaux, whereas most works on Bernard of Clairvaux skip over this detail of his life.¹⁴ Likewise, most works on Hadewijch of Antwerp spend far more time on the influence of Bernard, William of St. Thierry, and Richard of St. Victor than they spend on the influence that Hildegard of Bingen has on Hadewijch, even though Hadewijch mentions Hildegard by name in her "List of the Perfect."¹⁵ Likewise,

¹³ Crossroad's three-volume *Christian Spirituality* series has one chapter on virginity (Vol. I), and one chapter on medieval religious women (Vol. II). Other works that deal exclusively with women include Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100-c. 1500* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010); Emilie Zum-Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, trans. Sheila Hughes (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Louis Bouyer, *Women Mystics*; Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996); Ulrike Wiethaus (ed.), *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Shawn Madigan, C.S.J. (ed.), *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Marion Ann Taylor (ed.), *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012).

¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, introduction by Barbara J. Newman, preface by Caroline Walker Bynum (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 5, 12-13, 30, 45. All mention of Hildegard is lacking in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans, introduction by Jean Leclercq (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (London: Sheed & Ward, 1940). Michael Casey's work on spiritual desire in Bernard mentions Hildegard once in order to emphasize her reliance on the same tradition as Bernard, but never mentions their interaction or correspondence: Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 134.

¹⁵ See discussion in chapter 2.

scholars are in no way hesitant to say with certainty that Hadewijch was influenced by William of St. Thierry and Richard of St. Victor due to similarities in their work; but on the question of whether Hadewijch influenced Meister Eckhart, whose theological emphases closely resemble Hadewijch's, scholarship has been fiercely divided.¹⁶ Women must be given the credit that is due them, and their influence on later writers and their role in the development of ideas and doctrines ought to be more properly emphasized.

C. De-theologization of Mysticism: Divorce from Eschatology

The problems identified by McGinn and Bouyer contribute to a larger problem in the study of Christian mysticism: the tendency to divorce mystical theology from dogmatic and moral theology. Although McGinn identifies this as a problem in *The Foundations of Mysticism*, his goal in his multi-volume work is not so much to fix this problem as to provide the historical foundation from which new work can begin to overcome it. Unfortunately, his work has not yet prompted a return to theological study of mystical texts. Certainly, when scholars write about mystics they include their Christian theology as an important part of their self-understanding. We are thankfully past the days when serious scholars endeavored to strip away the Christianity of the mystics to find the raw and unfiltered “spiritual experience” that underlay such reflections. Bouyer writes, already in the 60s: “Dogmatic theology ... must always be presupposed as the basis of spiritual theology.”¹⁷ Scholarship on mysticism over the past few decades tends to respect that the mystics believed and were shaped by these theological concerns, but still tends to

¹⁶ For Hadewijch's influence on Meister Eckhart, see Saskia Murk-Jansen, “Hadewijch and Eckhart: Amor Intellegere Est,” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 17-30.

¹⁷ Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality I*, viii.

focus on the theological novelty of the mystics, rather than emphasizing the mystics' own concerns to maintain, defend, or return to orthodox Christian teaching. This trend can be seen throughout *The Classics of Western Spirituality* series published by Paulist Press.¹⁸

Especially overlooked in what is already a rare theological treatment of the medieval mystics is the doctrine of eschatology. Although the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the resurrection of the dead are central concerns of all the mystics, in my reading I have not found a single introduction to a medieval mystical work that focuses on eschatological themes, most preferring to either dismiss or ignore them, even in works that explicitly deal with the final judgment. This criticism holds true for works by Protestants and Catholics alike. Related is the fact that most general surveys of Christian eschatology skip over the medieval period altogether.¹⁹ One might get the impression from reading such works that the doctrine of the last things was simply forgotten or overlooked for nearly a thousand years.

The reality, of course, is that eschatology underwent significant developments throughout the medieval era. Questions of the final state of human persons, of the possibility of bodily resurrection, of the relation between body and soul, of the

¹⁸ The introduction to Hadewijch focuses more on novel developments in Love mysticism than orthodox trinitarian and christological teachings (Hart, *Hadewijch*, 1-42). The introduction to Bernard focuses more on novel developments in bride of Christ imagery than his desire to revive the historically-rooted Christian faith (Leclercq, *Bernard*, 13-57). The introductions to Hildegard prove a great exception to this, as Barbara Newman and Carolyn Walker Bynum helpfully root Hildegard in the broader Christian tradition and show how she brings traditional theological themes to her time in a new way (Hart, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 1-61).

¹⁹ See, for example: Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994). In their historical surveys of the doctrine of eschatology, both works cover Jewish and New Testament eschatological themes, briefly address Augustine, and then skip to modern theology. A key exception to this critique is Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body*, which traces the Christian doctrine of the resurrection through the late antique and medieval eras, taking seriously the mystics' reflections on the nature of body and soul and the possibility of the beatific vision. Cf. also Carolyn Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (eds.), *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

intermediate state, of the return of Christ, of the possibility of the *visio beata*, of the nature of the glorified body, and of the final judgment abound in the works of scholastics, contemplatives, and visionaries alike. The crusades are motivated by a zealous devotion to a particular interpretation of Christian eschatology. A powerful eschatological anxiety builds around the writings of Joachim of Fiore in the 13th century, and much of the 14th century is spent in heated debates over whether Thomas Aquinas' appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy constituted an abandonment of the traditional Christian teachings concerning the resurrection of the body and the final state. Eschatology as a Christian doctrine was very much part and parcel of the medieval Christians' thought and writings.

In lieu of these critiques, and building on what McGinn and Bouyer have already established regarding the theological and dogmatic underpinnings of Christian mysticism, my goal in this thesis is to demonstrate that the medieval mystics understand their work to be thoroughly theological, and most especially eschatological. It seems clear that the medieval mystics themselves use primarily eschatological images, concepts, and doctrines to interpret and reflect on their mystical experiences. Far from being a mere aspect of which the modern reader must be aware in order to fully appreciate the richness of imagery, I will demonstrate that for the medieval mystics, the mystical experience is understood *as an eschatological experience*. If we are to truly accept, respect, appreciate, and understand the mystics on their own terms, this is a centrally vital task to the study of Christian mysticism.

Truly, when one thinks of Christian mystical writings, it seems this ought to be self-evident. Whether one writes of union with Christ, of perfect Sabbath rest, of the

fullness of being, of sinking into the divine abyss, or of contemplating the *visio beata*—all of these are, first and foremost, categories and images which are fundamentally eschatological in nature. Nevertheless, rare is the scholar of Western Christian medieval mysticism (or even Christian mysticism in general!) who recognizes this to be the case in more than a throwaway comment. In no history of Christian mysticism or mystical theology is eschatology adopted as the primary category of interpretation.

Two notable exceptions to this are the works of Albert Schweitzer and Kenneth Kirk, two Protestant theologians who view mysticism as an important, even central, aspect of the Christian faith. Albert Schweitzer's *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, published in 1931 and translated into English in 1955, continues his apocalyptic critique of biblical scholarship, claiming that Pauline mysticism is central to the primitive Christian religion.²⁰ However, Schweitzer falls into the Harnackian mistake of seeing all post-Pauline developments as Hellenistic corruption, and so, for Schweitzer, Paul is the last Christian mystic. His work is, therefore, of limited help, although very thought-provoking and influential. Kenneth Kirk's *The Vision of God*, first delivered as the Bampton Lectures in 1928, adopts the *visio dei* as the primary category of theological interpretation throughout the history of the church, even claiming that Christianity's insistence on the possibility and even certainty of humankind's attainment of the divine was the primary cause of the explosive growth of the Christian religion in the first and second centuries.²¹ His analysis avoids many of the difficulties that plague the study of

²⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

²¹ Kenneth Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (New York: Harper & Row, 1931).

mysticism, as he carefully intertwines mystical theology with dogmatic and moral theology, so much so, in fact, that McGinn, while recognizing the importance of his holistic approach to the study of mysticism, writes: “Kirk’s work pertains more directly to the history of Christian ethics than to the study of mysticism.”²² Despite what may be an overemphasis on ethics, Kirk offers an important corrective to most contemporary scholarship: for the medieval mystics, the mystical experience of the eschatological *visio dei* could be separated neither from orthodox Christian dogma nor from proper Christian living.

Although most large-scale explorations of Christian mysticism have not, as of yet, begun to answer the challenges posed by McGinn, the literature on individual mystics is sometimes better. Let us take, as an example, scholarship on Augustine, the much-studied father of Western Christian mysticism. Nobody doubts whether Augustine was influential in the development of Western Christian mysticism.²³ Nevertheless, a popular trend among scholars over the past few decades has been to question whether Augustine was truly a mystic, that is, whether the accounts included in the *Confessions* fit the category of a mystical experience.²⁴ Following the work of William James, who defines mysticism as an experience which is “ineffable, transient, passive, and noetic,”²⁵ many scholars have attempted to strip away the theological language of Augustine’s *Confessions* to find the

²² McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 275.

²³ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 231.

²⁴ For a lively and lengthy discussion and debate on this question see the first half of Frederick Van Fleteren (ed.), *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1994). For a briefer survey of the question see discussion in Bernard McGinn, “How Augustine Shaped Medieval Mysticism,” *Augustinian Studies* V.37 no.1 (2006), 2.

²⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985, orig. pub. 1902), Lectures XVI and XVII.

phenomenological experience underlying the account.²⁶ Other scholars, understanding mysticism according to Rudolph Otto's sense, as a phenomenon that is not so much religious as spiritual, and therefore a common shared experience across religions, have attempted to strip the ascent narratives of the *Confessions* of their Christian theological language to find the "original" Platonic ascent account hidden underneath the text.²⁷ Still others have gone even further, attempting to strip the work of both Christian and Neo-Platonic language in order to find the original a-religious phenomenological experience.²⁸ But as scholars like John Peter Kenney have pointed out, these projects which strip away the theology to find the core experience are useless at best, and harmful at worst:

The costs of this quest for the personal mysticism of the historical Augustine have been considerable. The principal loss has been theological. By displacing the spiritual content of these ascension texts, we are left with vague, putatively universal characteristics like joy, peace and a feeling of disclosure.²⁹

Kenney goes on to identify the eschatological pursuit of eternal sabbath rest as the unifying theme of Augustine's *Confessions*.

Works like Kenney's and McGinn's have argued strongly for respecting the originality and theology of mystical texts, exposing the false claims underlying the

²⁶ See discussion in John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-14.

²⁷ See Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*, (Paris: E de Boccard, 1950); Idem., *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire: Antécédents et postérité* (Paris: Augustiniennes, 1963); Paul Henry, *The Path to Transcendence: From Philosophy to Mysticism in Saint Augustine*, tr. Francis F. Burch (Pittsburgh, Penn: Pickwick Press, 1981, orig. pub. 1938); James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

²⁸ See, for example, Gerald Bonner, "Augustine and Mysticism," in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, et. al. (New York: P. Lang, 1994): 113-157. Gerald Bonner follows the "common core" theory of mysticism, which holds that all mystical experiences, religious and non-religious, derive from the same phenomenological core. Cf. Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London: Kegan Paul International Limited, 2000, orig. pub. 1922).

²⁹ Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine*, 9.

project of those seeking the “original spiritual experience” of the mystics. The works of the Christian mystics are inherently theological. To strip them of theological language, or to overlook the theology as superfluous, is to cast out the entirety of their work.

Despite this theological paucity in scholarship, eschatological doctrine and apocalyptic imagery is the primary theological category which the mystics themselves use in their writings. Any mystic could be chosen to demonstrate this fact, but Hadewijch of Antwerp is particularly helpful because of her unique placement in the 13th century and her focus on life after the mystical experience.

III. HOW WE WILL PROCEED

Having established my reliance on and critiques of existing scholarship on medieval mysticism, the rest of the thesis will proceed as follows. Chapter 2 will offer an introduction to the life, works, and times of Hadewijch. This chapter will show how eschatological concerns come to be an item of particular concern in the 12th and 13th centuries, and how Hadewijch receives and responds to many of these trends in her writings. Chapter 3 will demonstrate that Hadewijch views the eschaton as a reality that is already accomplished in the work of Christ, and is therefore present through the Spirit in a limited sense this side of the final judgment. Modern scholars took to calling this theological doctrine “realized eschatology,” but these insights were already well-established in the early and medieval periods of the church. Chapter 4 will explore the nature, possibility, and role of the mystical experience in Hadewijch and various other mystical writers, demonstrating that the medieval mystics understood the mystical experience to be an eschatological experience which calls the Christian to a life of virtue.

It is an inbreaking or foretaste of the final state of things, which offers confidence and assurance throughout life, especially in times of suffering. Chapter 5 will offer my conclusions, as well as a non-academic post-script in which I will highlight helpful correctives that the mystics can offer in response to trends in contemporary spirituality.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCING HADEWIJCH: HER LIFE, TIMES, AND WORKS

I. HISTORY OF HADEWIJCH STUDIES

Hadewijch of Antwerp is one of the more intriguing mystical writers of the High Middle Ages, precisely because there is very little we know about her with certainty apart from what she herself reveals in her works—revelations which are, at best, obscure. No life is written about her. Her influence before the 19th century is limited to such figures as Jan van Ruusbroeck and Meister Eckhart, and to complicate things further, her works fall into obscurity by the early 14th century to be lost for almost five centuries, until their discovery by medievalists in the late 19th century in the Belgian Royal Library.¹ Being the oldest known writings in the Dutch language, Hadewijch's works rapidly rose to prominence among Dutch linguists and medievalists. Due to the unique nature of her mystical writings, Hadewijch's works soon became prominent among scholars of medieval mysticism and Christian spirituality, and she now receives an automatic place in surveys of Medieval Christianity and works on Christian spirituality.²

The first critical edition of Hadewijch's works, based on the three known manuscripts at the time, was composed by Joseph van Mierlo in 1908.³ Since then, her

¹ Ria Vanderauwera, "The Brabantic Mystic: Hadewijch," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 192. Mother Columba Hart, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 1-2.

² McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 199-265; Jill Raitt (ed.), *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 130, 135; Bouyer et. al., *A History of Christian Spirituality 2: The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, 360-64; Minnis, *Medieval Holy Women*, 663-685; For other works on Hadewijch, c.f. Marieke Van Baest, *Poetry of Hadewijch: Introductory Essay, Translation, and Notes* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998); John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993); Bouyer, *Women Mystics*, 13-50; Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 137-171; Paul Mommaers and Elizabeth Dutton, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press, 2004).

³ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 2.

writings have been translated into English, German, Italian, Spanish, and modern Dutch. Her complete works were first translated into English by Mother Columba Hart in 1980, and published as part of The Classics of Western Spirituality series by Paulist Press.⁴ This gave rise to an increased interest in Hadewijch studies in the English-speaking world, and in works of the 1980s and 1990s she becomes widely referenced among scholars in the fields of religion and theology, history, and gender and feminist studies. Most scholarship on Hadewijch has focused on one of three things. Literary and linguistic studies, primarily in Dutch, have focused on her linguistic novelty and her contributions to the Dutch language.⁵ Theological study has focused on her contributions to Love mysticism, or *Minnemystiek*, of which she is considered to be the originator. Of particular interest as well, since she was a woman and most scholars agree wrote in and for a community of Beguines, feminist studies have taken to studying Hadewijch as well, focused especially on the role of gender and body in her writings.⁶

⁴ *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*. All references to Hadewijch's works in this paper are from Hart's translation, except for the "List of the Perfect," which is not included in Hart's translation. For aesthetic preferences, I have chosen to use in-text citations for the works of Hadewijch, abbreviating them as follows: *L* = *Letters*; *PS* = *Poems in Stanzas*; *V* = *Visions*; *PC* = *Poems in Couplets*; "List" = "List of the Perfect." References to the "List" are from Helen Rolfson, "List of the Perfect by Hadewijch of Antwerp," in *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources*, 5:4 (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishers, 1988) 277-87.

⁵ Of particular interest, given that, along with Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch is the earliest extant vernacular Dutch literature that is available. Most of this literature is, naturally, in Dutch, but some of it is addressed at various points in Mommaers, *Hadewijch*.

⁶ Of the various words that Hadewijch uses to refer to Love, the most interesting and the most prominent is the feminine noun *Minne*, a complex word which she uses quite loosely—referring sometimes to God, sometimes to Christ, sometimes to the experience of love itself, and sometimes to the rapturous mystical experience of divine love. Since the word *Minne* is a feminine noun, some scholars have used this to claim that Hadewijch understands God to be female. Hadewijch is certainly playful with gender, at times presenting herself in a decidedly feminine role as the bride of Christ (such as in her *Visions*), and at other times presenting herself in a masculine role, as a champion wooing his beloved in the tradition of French courtly love poetry, or as the lover seeking his beloved, alluding to the Song of Songs (such as in her *Poems in Stanzas*). There is much that is of interest here. However, since feminist critique and gender study is outside the scope of my paper, I do not interact with these sources.

II. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HADEWIJCH

A. *Who was Hadewijch?*

Despite over two centuries of study, the identity of the woman mystic Hadewijch remains a mystery, so much so, in fact, that the work of identifying who she was has largely been abandoned. We do not know who she was. Neither do we know when she was born or when she died. In her introduction to Hadewijch's works, Mother Columba Hart writes: "Scholars endeavored for years to solve the mystery of her family name, but since for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries 111 pious women named Hadewijch are known of, no answer could be found."⁷ Even three decades before Hart's translation, the frustrating elusiveness of Hadewijch's identity caused Stephanus Axters to write that "the identification of the mystic called Hadewijch has been a nightmare to philologists for nearly a century."⁸ Nevertheless, scholars have carefully gleaned some historical details from Hadewijch's works themselves, which help us understand her a bit better.

Scholars universally agree on very few things concerning Hadewijch, but those few are significant. First, and perhaps most importantly, using identifiable persons and events mentioned in her *List of the Perfect*, it is safe to say that she wrote sometime in the mid-13th century, likely in the decade of the 1240s.⁹ A second agreed-upon detail is that Hadewijch was the leader of some sort of spiritual community of women, believed by

⁷ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 2-3.

⁸ Stephanus Axters, *The Spirituality of the Old Low Countries*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1954), 22.

⁹ *The List of the Perfect* offers two clues to date Hadewijch: a reference to "A beguine who was killed by master Robbaert for her perfect Love" and "Among the still living there dwell seven as hermits on the walls of Jerusalem, and three live in the city." Paul Mommaers concludes that "master Robbaert" probably refers to "Robert le Bougre, who led the inquisition in Flanders between 1235 and 1238," and since Jerusalem was captured by Muslims in 1244, it is safe to conclude that Hadewijch completed her *List* sometime between 1238 and 1244. Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 8.

most scholars to be Beguines, lay communities of women who voluntarily lived in communities that practiced apostolic poverty, celibacy, and prayer. She writes in Brabantic, a Middle Dutch dialect, and has historically been associated with the city of Antwerp in the Duchy of Brabant, a detail which to my knowledge no scholar questions. Van Mierlo, who first edited and published the works of Hadewijch after their 19th century discovery, has suggested that Hadewijch's works are didactic, for the instruction of this Beguine community which she led and possibly founded. He suggests that the four volumes that we have of her works, although they may have originally been written at different times and for different occasions, in their final form were likely collected, organized, and edited by Hadewijch herself. Due to the more recent work of the Belgian scholar Paul Mommaers, van Mierlo's thesis is generally accepted among Hadewijch scholarship today.¹⁰ There is also no question as to whether she, as a woman in the 13th century, would be capable of organizing and editing such a work. In her writings, Hadewijch reveals incredible learning and skill, displaying a remarkable familiarity with Scripture and the church fathers as well as a thorough and capable knowledge of French troubadour poetry. Her extensive education demonstrates that she was almost undoubtedly of high society.¹¹

Other details are more fleeting, and therefore more controversial. It is clear from Hadewijch's letters and poems that she experienced opposition to her leadership. Scholars disagree over whether this opposition came from within her community, from women

¹⁰ Axters, *The Spirituality of the Old Low Countries*, 22; McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 200; Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 39-57; Hart, *Hadewijch*, 3. Other English-language authors reference these.

¹¹ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 2-3.

who were envious of her position or resented her leadership; or from outside of her community—from church hierarchy, the Inquisition, or some other force. There is also debate about whether this opposition resulted in her eventual expulsion from the community, and if she was expelled, whether she ever returned. Since the *Letters* are not ordered chronologically, it is difficult to establish these things with certainty. Since very little of her life is known, it is helpful for us to look carefully at the historical context in which she lived.

B. Religious Developments in the 12th and 13th Century

It is important to note significant developments in the Christian religion, especially regarding mysticism and piety that occur in the 13th century. As McGinn and other scholars have noted, the 12th century is a century of significant change in the Christian West. Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, the Victorines, Hildegard of Bingen, Joachim of Fiore, and Peter Abelard are all revolutionary and exciting figures who live in the century prior to Hadewijch's writings. The 13th century, likewise, has its giants, boasting the likes of Francis of Assisi, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. As a result of these influential figures, the landscape and character of Western Christianity undergo significant developments, especially as regards spirituality, the practice of mysticism, and the role and authority of women in ecclesial and monastic setting.

Although many contemporary scholars view 12th and 13th century Europe as a period of religious revival and spiritual renewal, many of those who lived and wrote in this time period did not have this perspective. The ecclesiastical abuses of simony and

what came to be known as nicolaism, the practice of clergy taking secret wives and concubines, reveal an uncomfortable relationship between ecclesiastical and secular leaders during this time. The magnificent opulence of the clergy and their all too apparent political power caused many to grow dissatisfied with the church. At the same time, increasing literacy among the laity helped to further this dissatisfaction among a greater pool of people who may have previously been unaware of these abuses, as education became available to the emerging middle class of lawyers, merchants, bankers, and craftsmen.

Already in the late eleventh century, with the rise of Gregory VII to the bishopric of Rome, one can see this dissatisfaction with the church at the highest levels of European religion. The letters of Gregory VII (Pope from 1073-85), and later, Urban II (Pope from 1088-99), indicate a desire to return to the Christianity of the apostles and early fathers, and an underlying feeling that the Christian church had lost focus on its primary and crucial work of leading people to God.¹² The Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century which intended to establish a “spiritual clergy,” ridding the church of simony and nicolaism, were not entirely successful. Although these abuses were largely subdued, and the papacy was established with more authority than ever before in the history of the church, the church continued to make compromises with secular rulers, resulting in uneasy relationships between the clergy, laity, and secular political powers.

The advent of the Crusades in 1095, under the leadership of Pope Urban II, and the formal establishment of the Inquisition in the late 12th century, further compounds the

¹² McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 149-50.

difficulty of church-state relations at this time. The papal desire to return to the original Christian faith of the apostles and the fathers was a widespread concern, but increasingly people, both laity and clergy, began to see these institutions which were intended to bring about a return to the roots of the Christian faith as moving farther and farther away from the spirit of Christ and the apostles. This attitude continues into the thirteenth century. McGinn writes: "Religion and politics were mingled in the thirteenth-century in inextricable fashion."¹³ The meddling of the church in political affairs, and the influence of secular leaders in ecclesiastical affairs, continued to cause an increasing feeling of dissatisfaction among clergy and laity alike.

One does not have to look very far in the literature to find examples of this dissatisfaction. Hildegard of Bingen, in an attempt to justify why God would have called a "weak woman" such as herself to preach and teach, declared that she was living in an "effeminate age" in which the male clergy who were rightly appointed to lead Christ's church had neglected their calling in favor of a complacent and pleasure-filled life. Similarly, Hadewijch shows a clear (if at times subtle) dissatisfaction with the state of ecclesiastical affairs, most clearly seen in the outcasts included in her "List of the perfect": a converted Jewess, a defrocked priest, a beguine executed by Master Robbaert, a recluse in Bohemia, a "forgotten master" in Paris. All of these were people whom the institutional church had ignored, isolated, forgotten, or persecuted, and yet she includes them among those who have experienced the perfect love of God.

¹³ Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 207.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of this widespread ecclesiastical dissatisfaction is the plethora of new monastic orders that spring up, beginning with the Cistercians in 1098 in France, whose express intention was to “adhere henceforth more strictly and more perfectly to the Rule of the blessed Benedict.”¹⁴ Over the following century hundreds of new monastic orders sprang up all over Europe: the Norbertines in France (1120), the Gilbertines in England (1130), the Carmelites in the Levant (late 12th c.), and the Franciscans in northern Italy (1209) are just a sampling of the hundreds of orders that arise, many following in the older Augustinian or Benedictine traditions. In addition to these monastic orders, the establishment of dozens of military orders—the Knights Templar c. 1118-19 and Teutonic Order in 1190 are perhaps the most famous—in and around Jerusalem reveal the religious fervor and zeal that typify this period.

These new orders were not met without resistance. Jean Leclercq, in his introduction to Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Selected Works*, notes a controversy between the monks of Cîteaux and the monks of Cluny: “The former accused the latter of lacking in fervor, while the Cluniacs maintained that the new order broke with tradition. The polemic was heated.”¹⁵ The tension between these two sentiments—a desire for religious fervor and a desire to return to the old traditions—perhaps best typifies the religious landscape of Western Europe in the 12th century. The zeal of the crusades and the rigidity of the Inquisition reflect these dual sentiments. The new mystical spirituality which was gaining steam viewed the established church as lacking in fervor, whereas the more

¹⁴ From the *Exordium Parvum*, in McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 150.

¹⁵ Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

traditional establishments viewed the newfound fervor of clergy and laity as feverish, undisciplined, and prone to heresy. The mystical renaissance of this period attempts to offer a synthesis of these divergent sentiments, re-presenting the apostolic and patristic teachings and practices of the Christian tradition with a newfound fervor and zeal for their age. The rise of vernacular religious writings at this time testifies to the desire of many to present the teachings of the Christian faith in a new way for a new era.

1. Monastic Contemplative Theology

Undoubtedly, the giants of 12th and 13th century European religion, especially in regards to developments in Western Christian mysticism, are the French monastic contemplatives: Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and the Victorines. Many scholars have written on the influence of these three on Hadewijch's thought.¹⁶ For this reason, I will only touch on certain important developments here.

The French monastics came on the stage in the 12th century with a profound fervor and zeal for the spiritual teachings of Scripture. They were firmly rooted in the Augustinian tradition of biblical interpretation, but were also well-versed in the early Greek fathers, and established the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite as standard fare for the rest of the history of Western Christian mysticism. Their expansive knowledge of Christian mystical teachings allowed them to combine and adapt traditional teachings with contemporary philosophy in a new and fresh way, emphasizing themes of desire for God and enjoyment of God, all the while insisting on a strict asceticism in monastic life. They recaptured the ancient Christian tradition of commenting on the Song

¹⁶ For example: Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 58-73; Hart, *Hadewijch*, 6-35.

of Songs as a mystical-spiritual text, begun by Origen. Bernard of Clairvaux in particular is famous for his bride-mysticism, in which the soul is depicted as the Bride of Christ. These innovative and creative developments by the monks of Cîteaux, St. Thierry, and St. Victor in northern France had a great impact on Christian mystical writings of the 13th and 14th century.

The greatest contribution of the French monastics, however, is their emphasis on love. McGinn explains:

The problem of love has been described as the “great preoccupation” of the thinkers of the twelfth century. Love, sacred and profane, ordered and disordered, rational and irrational, fills the texts, both Latin and vernacular, of the age. The student of medieval literature thinks of the twelfth century as the time of the birth of the ideal of courtly love. ... In the history of mysticism, the twelfth century is unsurpassed in its exploration of the experience of spousal love of Christ, *Brautmystic* as it is called in German. Bridal mysticism, however, was part of a wider concern for the *ordinatio caritatis*, the effort to energize and harmonize all the powers and relationships of individual believers and the whole body of the church toward the love and enjoyment of God, the true and final goal. To the mystics of the twelfth century, love was not only to be experienced; it was also to be set in order.¹⁷

The French monastics’ great and varied works on the topic of love leave little doubt that this was a topic of primary importance to them. Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On Loving God* and William of St. Thierry’s *On the Nature and Dignity of Love* are two impressive examples of their attempts to explore the “highest virtue” in greater depth, with great regard for its proper orientation toward the divine. Bernard begins his treatise:

You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason why he is to be loved. As for how he is to be loved,

¹⁷ McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 154-55.

there is to be no limit to that love. Is this sufficient answer? Perhaps, but only for a wise man. As I am indebted, however, to the unwise also, it is customary to add something for them after saying enough for the wise.¹⁸

What follows is a majestic and resplendent treatise of fifteen books in which Bernard covers everything from the nature of God to the nature of man to the spiritual and ascetical path from fallenness to perfection, all held together by the central topic of love.

This monastic and religious concern with the nature and limits of love follows a wider and less religious cultural concern with the topic, as can be seen in the French courtly poetry of the troubadours, which will be discussed below. Northern Europe in the twelfth century is obsessed with love. The great contribution of the French monastics to this conversation is their discussion of love of God from a perspective solidly rooted in the Christian tradition.

Hadewijch is strongly influenced by the French monks. She is particularly familiar with William of St. Thierry, whose work *On the Nature of Dignity and Love* is likely a source for *L* 18.80-130.¹⁹ Likewise, *L* 10.51ff seems to be a free adaptation of Richard of St. Victor's *Explicatio in Cantica Canticorum*.²⁰ Although, with the exception of Bernard, these sources are not referred to by name, it is clear that Hadewijch has received and internalized their ideas, particularly their focus on the love of God as the pinnacle of the Christian life.

¹⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God by Bernard of Clairvaux with an Analytical Commentary by Emero Steigman* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1973), I.1.

¹⁹ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 369 (n. 74).

²⁰ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 367 (n. 44).

2. Hildegard of Bingen and Changing Attitudes Toward Women

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is of particular interest for studying the developing trend of women mystics, of which she is the first of her caliber in the historical era which concerns us. Although Hildegard clearly has a strong sense of the divine presence that pervades her works, her goal is not union with God, but obedience and humility in carrying out God's commands. She does not approach God as the proud bride of Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, rather, she cowers in the presence of God, offering the classic scriptural response of prophets like Moses and Isaiah, who have received a calling which they have not chosen.²¹ Hildegard is chosen for a special purpose by God, but she is not ennobled in the same way that later women mystics are. She is clear about her authority, but also humbly hesitant, and her favorite descriptors of her own humanity are "frailness" and "weakness," emphasizing her mortality and humanity before her infinite and omnipotent God, making her living proof of the scriptural adage: "his power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

I have not found much work on the influence of Hildegard of Bingen on Hadewijch, despite the fact that Hadewijch lists her among the saints who she considers to have achieved the same sort of divine Love as herself in the "List of the Perfect."²² Perhaps this reveals an unfortunate tendency in the scholarship, which tends to write about medieval mystics in terms of which important historical men influenced them. In the case of Hadewijch, this list tends to be limited to Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St.

²¹ Newman, "Introduction," *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, 17.

²² "Hildegard, who saw all the visions, is the twenty-eighth" (List). Interestingly, Hildegard is listed between two beguines. Further work on influence of Hildegard on Hadewijch and the general importance with which medieval women mystics viewed Hildegard throughout the high and late Middle Ages would greatly profit the state of scholarship.

Thierry, and Richard of St. Victor, sometimes including Augustine. This despite the fact that William of St. Thierry and Richard of St. Victor are not named in the “List of the Perfect” or anywhere else in Hadewijch’s works. Although she was clearly familiar with their work, as noted above, Hadewijch herself seems to consider Hildegard to be a greater influence, a promising direction for future scholarship.²³

Despite the lack of scholarship, there are certain shared themes that obviously permeate both Hildegard and Hadewijch’s works. Perhaps the most obvious of these is a shared emphasis on the lowliness and frailty of the human person in the face of God. In the “Declaration” that precedes Hildegard’s *Scivias*, the voice from heaven refers to her as a “fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth.”²⁴ Likewise, Hadewijch refers to herself as “childish and too little grown-up” (*V* 1.1), to humans as having a “brittle nature” (*V* 1.24), and throughout her writings reminds her readers of their fickleness, fallenness, weakness, and lowliness. All of these make clear “the great debt you owe to God” (*L* 15.88).

A second theme shared between Hildegard and Hadewijch is the interplay and juxtaposition of God’s transcendence and immanence. For both Hildegard and Hadewijch, God is the Divine Other contrasted with the self, the Creator contrasted with

²³ Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, in their work, helpfully trace continuity and discontinuity between Hildegard of Bingen and the Beguine mystics, but do not address any direct influence. Cf. Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, trans. Sheila Hughes (New York: Paragon House, 1989), xiii-xxiv. Likewise, the first chapter of the third part of Ernest McDonnell’s magisterial work, “Hildegard of Bingen and Belgian Mysticism,” deals more with Hildegard’s correspondence with Cistercian monks, and the subsequent affinity of Belgian *mulieres religiosae* for the Cistercians’ writings, without dealing specifically with the influence of Hildegard on the writings of the Beguine mystics themselves. Cf. Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 281-298.

²⁴ “Declaration,” *Scivias*.

the creature. Nevertheless, both emphasize the immanence of God throughout time and space. Hadewijch writes:

God is above all, and unelevated; God is beneath all, and unabased; God is within all, and entirely uncircumscribed; God is outside all, and completely comprised.
(L 22.17)

These paradoxes of God's relationship with the creation permeate Hadewijch and Hildegard's work alike. Indeed, for both of them, it is precisely because God is transcendent that he can be present throughout time and space.

A final shared theme is a strong and pervasive eschatology. For both Hildegard and Hadewijch, the eschatological promises of God are the driving category behind all of their writings. Everything in creation, including dogmatic and mystical theology, is driving toward this one end: the vision of God. For Hildegard, this comes to its head in the "Symphony of the Blessed," the last vision of the *Scivias*, but is also present throughout her writings. For Hadewijch, as we shall see, the eschatological emphases permeate throughout her writing.

In addition to these shared themes, we can talk about Hildegard's influence on Hadewijch in terms of changing attitudes toward women and authority in the 12th and 13th centuries. Hildegard is unique in placing the basis of her authority not on her education or ecclesiastical status, but in her direct divine revelation. She writes in the "Declaration" to the *Scivias*:

And behold! In the forty-third year of my earthly course, as I was gazing with great fear and trebling attention at a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me: "O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and

write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God.”²⁵

Hildegard consistently emphasizes her own lowliness and lack of ability. She refers to herself often as “weak” and “sickly,” and continually reminds her readers that she is “unlettered,” emphasizing her inability to produce the kind of works that she has been able to produce throughout her life by her own skill or cunning. Even the fact that Hildegard has had visions since she was a child, but does not have them written down until God expressly commands her to in her forty-third year, bears testimony to her humility and meekness. Nevertheless, Hildegard is uncompromising in her insistence that these visions stem from divine origin: “These are true visions flowing from God,” she writes in the “Declaration.”

Such a claim, and such an action, was so unusual for a woman that Eugenius III (Pope from 1145-53) was informed of Hildegard’s activities during the Synod of Trier, during which he apparently read some of her writings aloud to the council of bishops, who offered great praise for Hildegard’s work. The approval of the Pope, together with the support of Bernard of Clairvaux and her mentor and scribe, Volmar, allowed Hildegard to write freely and boldly.

This approval, from the highest levels of ecclesiastical authority, of a woman to write, teach, and even preach to both women and men, rocked the medieval world in the twelfth century. Many scholars have noted the changing attitudes of European society toward women in the twelfth century,²⁶ and it is unclear whether Hildegard is a catalyst

²⁵ “Declaration,” *Scivias*.

²⁶ See, for example, Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, ch. 1.

for or a result of these changing attitudes, but Hildegard of Bingen sets the stage for a whole host of women mystics to be taken seriously by European religious society. Elizabeth of Schönau, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Angela of Foligno, Marguerite Porete, and many others all follow the example of Hildegard in recording and expounding their divine visions for the betterment of Christians everywhere. It is clear from their works that they feel authorized by God himself to write these things down for the instruction of others. From Hadewijch's work, especially her "List," it is also clear that she interacted with men, both monks and priests, and not only did these men teach and guide her, but in many cases she taught and guided them. She writes of "Mina, a recluse who dwells far away on craggy rocks and to whom I sent Master Henry of Breda," as well as "Honorius, who dwells in the sea upon a rough rock ... to whom I sent a monk who often used to visit me."²⁷ Both of these are examples of men whom Hadewijch sends to acquaintances of hers for instruction and further guidance, demonstrating the authority that she has over them. The authority granted to women by the divine encounter—an authority recognized even by the Pope in the case of Hildegard—undoubtedly changes the face of medieval European religion in the centuries following Hildegard's life.

3. The Joachite Controversy and Eschatological Anxiety

The Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135-1202) has been described as "one of the most influential figures of the 'renaissance of the twelfth century.'"²⁸ He is also

²⁷ Hadewijch, "List."

²⁸ M. Bloomfield, "Joachim of Flora: A Critical Survey of His Canons, Teachings, Sources, Biography, and Influence," in *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet*, 2 vols., ed. Delno C. West (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1975): 29-91.

perhaps one of the most controversial, receiving several condemnations of various aspects of his writings by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Later in the thirteenth century, the views of his followers, known as the Joachites or Joachimites, were opposed by Boniface VIII (pope from 1294-1303), Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure.

A humble and reluctant abbot at Corazzo in Italy, Joachim sought approval from Pope Lucius III to retire from his abbatial duties in the late 12th century. He cloistered himself at the abbey of Casamari in 1183, where he began his three most important works, including the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, and sought papal approval for his writings, which Lucius III granted.²⁹ Joachim's fame as a prophet and interpreter of Scripture grew throughout Europe already before his death. "The Anglo-Normans in the train of Richard I on the Third Crusade [1187-1192] ... gave Joachim his first large non-Italian audience."³⁰ This was a particularly vital group for the dissemination of ideas, as Anglo-Norman relations spanned the continent of Europe due to Norman presence in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and the Angevin state.

After Joachim's death in 1202, his writings continued to circulate throughout northern Europe. He was already well-known as a prophet and biblical exegete, especially concerning the Apocalypse of St. John, but after his death his writings (in addition to several pseudepigraphal writings attributed to him) gain a fervent following that anticipated the end of the world.

²⁹ Delno C. West and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore: A Study in Spiritual Perception and History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1983), 3-5.

³⁰ M. Bloomfield and M. Reeves, "The Penetration of Joachism into Northern Europe," in *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet*, 2 vols., ed. Delno C. West (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1975), 109.

Joachim of Fiore's major contribution to learning was to conceive a spiritual perception of history. ... the purpose of God and his design of history could be found only in the written dispensations of Holy Scripture, which to Joachim contained an exact revelation of God's purpose.³¹

Joachim's spiritual interpretation of history, including his ideas of three *status* of history corresponding with the three persons of the Trinity and the pattern of the "seven seals" in each of these ages were widely read and interpreted. The Age of the Father, governed by Law, had lasted from Adam to Christ. The Age of the Son, governed by the Spirit, began with Christ and had lasted to Joachim's present time. Given his understanding that each *status* lasted 41 generations, his followers after his death identified the year 1260 as the beginning of the third *status*: the Age of the Spirit, which would be governed by love. These ideas are picked up especially by a group known as the "Spiritual Franciscans," who began to view St. Francis as the herald of the third *status*. These "Spiritual Franciscans" were strictly opposed by Bonaventure throughout the latter half of the thirteenth century.

McGinn helpfully identifies three periods of the 13th century Joachite movement:

In the first period, from 1202 to the early 1240s, Joachim was chiefly famous as the prophet of the Antichrist and the object of the condemnation of the Fourth Lateran Council. Beginning in the 1240s, with the inauthentic commentary, *Super Hieremian Prophetam*, and the ideas of such Franciscans as Hugh of Digne, John of Parma, and especially Gerardo di Bargo San Donnino, the themes of the three *status* of history and the imminence of the third of these come to the fore. ... The condemnation of Gerardo's *Introductoris in Evangelium Aeternum* by Alexander IV at Anagni in 1255 and the passing of the fatal year 1260 which was to mark the beginning of the third *status* ushered in what might be called the classical phase of the Joachite movement. ... Joachite treatises stressing the

³¹ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore*, 10.

pattern of three *status* ... proliferated in the latter part of the century. This activity was most evident in the Franciscan Order.³²

Although the Fourth Lateran Council, the condemnations at Anagni, the uneventful passing of 1260, and the opposition from Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure suppressed the Joachite movement, there is no doubt that the popularity and dissemination of the Calabrian's writings and ideas created an eschatological anxiety that was omnipresent in the religious mind of 13th century Europe. Hadewijch, likely writing in the 1240s-1250s, steps into the middle of this heightened anxiety. Hadewijch does not mention Joachim in her "List," and does not anywhere allude to the end of time as imminent or impending. For these reasons Hart argues that Hadewijch likely has no Joachite influences.³³ Nevertheless her familiarity and fascination with the Apocalypse of John, as well as her use of apocalyptic symbolism and numerology reveal a broader fascination in European religion with these themes. Certainly the eschatological anxiety of northern Europe in the 13th century influenced Hadewijch. In the face of this anxiety, she responds with a strong emphasis on the assurance and comfort that come from the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, even in the face of the lack of feeling fruition in the Spirit.

4. Peter Abelard and Aristotelian Philosophy

Perhaps one of the most controversial figures of the 12th century is Peter Abelard (1079-1142), well known for his infamous affair with the nun Heloise and their passionate correspondence. Abelard was controversial, however, even before his affair became public knowledge. Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and William of

³² McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 208.

³³ Hart, "Introduction," *Hadewijch*, 28.

Champaux, his former teacher at Notre Dame de Paris, all lambasted Peter Abelard's writings for reducing the role and importance of the redemptive work of Christ in atonement, as well as for his rationalistic approach to knowledge of God. Mommaers puts it starkly, writing that Abelard was

the first mediaeval figure for whom the God-man is no longer part and parcel of the experience of God. ... The Jesus he testifies to is no longer the Christ who irradiates the cosmos and lifts the believer up into the divine life.³⁴

Abelard's writings rocked the Christian West, and were strongly opposed by many religious leaders, both his contemporaries and those who follow (including Thomas Aquinas).

For our purposes, it is important to understand Abelard's understanding of the knowledge of God, because this is something that affects Hadewijch's writing insofar as she explicitly rejects his ideas. Because he does not view the Humanity of Christ as an important element in salvation history, Abelard views God as completely Other, and therefore inaccessible to the human experience. He rejects the idea that the Christian can achieve union with God in this life through contemplation or any sort of affective experience. Mommaers explains:

In Abelard's view...the Transcendent does not allow himself to be met as the Beloved, but the masterly dialectician does not feel this is necessary, for reason going about its work in a lucid way is able to find how God is *in se* quite apart from any experience of union with him.³⁵

Reason without affect, for Peter Abelard, is the only way to achieve knowledge of God. Mommaers asserts that Abelard is the first medieval figure to claim this openly. He not

³⁴ Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 77.

³⁵ Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 78.

only rejects the pursuit of mystical union with the divine, but claims it is ontologically impossible.

This problem extends beyond Peter Abelard himself, as Abelard himself was a symptom of a larger trend in Europe at this time: the growing influence of Aristotelian philosophical concepts that were making their way across Europe from Spain. The 13th century is characterized by a fear that since God is wholly “Other”—the belief that the Divine is inaccessible to finite human nature.³⁶ The possibility of experiencing the presence of God, whether in this life or the next, seemed to be an ontological impossibility, especially for the embodied human person. Even Thomas Aquinas, who went to great lengths to bring Aristotelian philosophy under the umbrella of Christian thought, was considered suspect for his affinity to these new philosophical concepts, and his views on the survival of the disembodied soul and his articulation of the beatific vision were condemned in 1277.³⁷ Even though these censures were removed in 1325, the controversy and debate surrounding his writings reveal a broader anxiety over the tenets of traditional Christianity and the ability of the human to experience the divine. It is into this milieu that Hadewijch enters, with a strong critique of Abelardian interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy’s Divine “Other,” as we shall see in chapter 4.

5. *Thomas Gallus and the Dionysian Renaissance*

A second movement that Hadewijch reacts against is the Dionysian Renaissance of the 13th century, typified by Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), also known as Thomas of St.

³⁶ Mommaers cites the Aristotelian adage: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. *Hadewijch*, 75.

³⁷ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 10. A more thorough discussion of the condemnations against Aquinas and the “beatific vision controversy” that resulted over the following half-century can be found *ibid.*, 273-279.

Victor and Thomas of Vercelli. Thomas Gallus was widely read in the later Middle Ages as a commentator on the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite. The writings of Dionysius gained some interest and acclaim in the West in the ninth century (although they were known by at least some in the West before this) through the Latin translation of the works of Dionysius by John Scotus Eriugena, completed in 862.³⁸ Despite the work of Eriugena, the Areopagite's work did not have a major effect on Western mysticism for some time. It was not until the Victorines in the 12th and 13th centuries that the works of Dionysius became important for Scholasticism, starting with two commentaries on *The Celestial Hierarchy* by Hugh of St. Victor in the early 12th century.³⁹ The Victorines continued Hugh's work through the 13th century, and Dionysian writings experienced a sudden surge in interest in the years following 1250, due to new efforts to translate and comment on all four of the central treatises of the Greek's writings by such figures as Thomas Gallus, Robert Grosseteste, and Albert the Great, as well as the later commentary on *The Divine Names* by Thomas Aquinas in 1265.⁴⁰

Thomas Gallus is unique in combining his insights from Dionysian writings with his interpretation of the Song of Songs, leading him to a more affective approach to union with God than many, if any, of his predecessors. He represents "affective Dionysianism," often contrasted with the more "speculative Dionysianism" of Albert the Great. This affective approach is characterized by Gallus' novel idea that affect, in transcending reason, excludes it and leaves it behind. McGinn explains:

³⁸ Jean Leclercq, "Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Colm Luibhead, et. al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 27.

³⁹ Leclercq, "Influence and Noninfluence," 28.

⁴⁰ Bernard McGinn, "Thomas Gallus and Dionysian Mysticism," *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998): 81-96. Cf. pp. 83-4.

Gallus was one of the first authors, if not the first, to hold that affectivity tends to *exclude* rather than *subsume* human knowledge in the highest stages of the mystical itinerary. The Victorine based this view upon his attempt to show that the Dionysian writings and the Song of Songs were not only mutually compatible, but were really two sides of the same coin: the positive and negative versions of the higher knowledge of God that alone can lead to uniting with God (*unitio*) in this life.⁴¹

Although many previous mystics had given priority to love over intellect in the experience of union with God, Thomas is unique and novel in the way he understands the exclusion and inferiority of the intellect in his theology. Like the Cistercians and Victorines in the century before him, he understands both love and knowledge to be necessary to reach union with God, but rather than teaching that love is a higher form of “knowing” that goes beyond reason, as previous authors had done, Thomas rather emphasizes a cutting-off of all varieties of knowing during the experience of union. In the writings of the Frenchman, “Love no longer subsumes preparatory forms of knowing, however necessary, but discards or rejects them.”⁴²

As we will see in chapter 4, Hadewijch demands that reason be an essential part of the mystical program. Even though she prioritizes love over reason, and sees the mystical experience as going “beyond reason,” nevertheless this mystical love does not exclude reason but, in the tradition of the Cistercians and earlier Victorines, subsumes, enlightens, and expands reason. The mystical experience brings with it new forms of knowing. Reason grows and expands as it is conformed to the divine image. For Hadewijch, reason plays the ever-vital role of reminding Christians of their great debt to God, and offers an

⁴¹ McGinn, “Thomas Gallus,” 85.

⁴² McGinn, “Thomas Gallus,” 89.

important corrective to affective feeling in calling the soul to live a life of virtue in conformity with the Humanity of Christ.

These various figures and movements represent considerable development in Western Christianity through the 12th and 13th century. It is a time of great change and upheaval, when the traditional structures of the church are being challenged and traditional spirituality is being re-thought and re-articulated. The new monastic orders of northern France and northern Italy, the emergence of women mystics, and the challenges to traditional Christian spirituality offered in Aristotelian philosophy and Dionysian mysticism all shook the religious heritage of Christian Europe to its core. Into this maelstrom of controversy and change steps Hadewijch, who is both novel and conservative in her articulation of the Christian mystical life.

C. Secular Developments in Northern Europe

Many cultural developments occur in Northern Europe during the 13th century. This period saw the emergence of defined nation-states in France and Spain, and to some extent the Germanic Holy Roman Empire. The reforms of Pope Gregory VII created an identifiable distinction between ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The far-reaching consequences of the crusades and the work of explorers like Marco Polo transformed the economy of Europe, bringing along with them the realization that the world was a much bigger place than many had previously thought. This caused a renaissance of sorts, a revival of science, economics, sociology, humanism, and the arts.

One of the major movements prompted by this renaissance was the courtly love poetry in Northern France. Hadewijch shows a significant knowledge and mastery of this literary genre, skillfully adapting it to her own religious ends. Mommaers writes:

[Hadewijch] was ... familiar with French courtly love lyric in a unique way. She mastered the technique of the troubadours to perfection; she played with the love-themes of the southern singers—but she did not imitate their profane art. She succeeded in transforming the thematic conventions of this genre to serve her own purpose.⁴³

The troubadours of Northern France masterfully play with themes of loving abandon. In pursuit of the perfect woman, the *donna*, these poets wrote about love from a distance, of a woman who was so noble and pure that they could never deserve her love. They sang of the suffering of unrequited love. Rather than writing fantasies of bringing their *donna* under their protection, during the 13th century these French poets began to write about devoting themselves to their woman and submitting to her.⁴⁴

Hadewijch adopts this form of poetry and transforms its profane themes to her own religious ends. Presenting herself as the steadfast lover pursuing the unattainably perfect and pure Beloved, her *Poems in Stanzas* and *Poems in Couplets* cover all the same themes as the poetry of the troubadours. She suffers in exile, far from her beloved. Hadewijch's love-hate relationship with Love can be found in almost every poem, as she waxes eloquently on the suffering that comes from the lack of the feeling of Love's fruition. In *PS* 21.50-59, she compares love to a scorpion, desperately writings: "Were it

⁴³ Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 1.

⁴⁴ Veerle Fraeters, "Hadewijch," in *Women Writing in Dutch*, ed. Kristiaan Aерcke (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 16.

possible, I'd gladly make an end of this." In her *Letters* and *Visions*, too, the pain of separation and the unshakable devotion to her noble Beloved characterizes her work.

D. Women and Authority in the 13th Century

The 13th century also underwent major cultural changes that influenced the way that women saw themselves and were perceived by the broader culture, including the church. We have already discussed above the role of Hildegard of Bingen in bringing about some of these changes regarding the authority of women in religious writing and teaching, but the 13th century saw a great variety of development regarding attitudes toward women, both in the church and in secular society.

Jan Brinckerinck, who was involved with the Modern Devotion movement of the northern Low Countries about a century after Hadewijch, wrote, "When women apply themselves devoutly they often receive more grace and stand in greater favour with God than men do."⁴⁵ But this was hardly the prevailing view in the 13th century. The explosion of *mulieres sanctae* in the 13th century was clearly an unforeseen consequence with which the church struggled to find an acceptable and suitable solution. It was clear by this point, from the papal and ecclesial approval of teachers such as Hildegard of Bingen, that women could receive revelations from God, and that those revelations were good and profitable to the church. But the question of women's authority was one that clearly caught the established church off guard. This can be seen in the writings of 13th century scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent, who deal explicitly with the

⁴⁵ *Collatie VI*, 150. In Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The "Modern Devotion," the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, trans. David F. Johnston (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004). Originally published in Dutch as *Deemoed en devotie: de koorvrouwen van Windesheim en hun geschriften* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1997), 1.

question of what kind of authority ought to be given to women who receive divine revelations, distinguishing between teaching *ex officio*, out of authority from the church, and teaching *ex beneficio*, out of the gift of grace, which comes from God.⁴⁶ The conclusion of these great scholastics was that women ought to teach if they have such a gift of grace, but privately rather than publicly.

In addition to these scholastic articulations, many others reacted to this new influx of *mulieres religiosae*, both positively and negatively. Scheepsma explains:

The thirteenth century is considered [the] Golden Age [of religious women's movements], and the Maas-Rhine region the cradle of medieval women's religiosity. Women turned *en masse* to the spiritual life. New convents had to be founded in large numbers to accommodate them. While initially it was the orders of the Premonstratensians and Cistercians who accepted these women into their ranks, from the thirteenth century on this task fell to the Franciscans and the Dominicans. But there were other opportunities open to them besides the traditional monastic life. Some women sought out utter isolation and became anchoresses, others adhered to the ideal of practical brotherly love and became nurses in hospitals. And it was in the diocese of Liège that the Beguines movement was started. These women formed small religious communities without taking the official monastic vows. The Church had continual difficulties with these women, who could not or would not fit into its hierarchical structure. The success of the Beguines—Beguinaiges were founded in large numbers throughout northwest Europe—led ultimately to their severe persecution at the hands of the Inquisition.⁴⁷

Throughout this time of increasing female interest in the spiritual life, the church did very little to successfully welcome or guide them at first. Convents during this time were increasingly enclosed, and many of the Cistercian convents simply shut their doors, no

⁴⁶ Cf. discussion of Aquinas' *Summa* II.2 q.177 and Henry's *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum* 11 q.2 in McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 21-22; and Alastair Minnis, "Religious Roles: Public and Private," in *Medieval Holy Women*: 47-49.

⁴⁷ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 3.

longer allowing women to practice the cloistered life.⁴⁸ Thankfully, relief came in the form of new religious orders, notably the Franciscan order of the Poor Claires and new Dominican orders for women. For many, though, this was too little too late. Lay communities of women desiring to live the *vita apostolica* began to form, independently of ecclesial authority. These included the Beguines in northern France and Brabant—as well as comparable movements in the German Empire, northern Italy, France, and somewhat later the “Modern Devotion” movement in the north of the Netherlands.⁴⁹ These lay movements, being independent of the authority of the church in Rome, caused some anxiety among the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

According to the prevailing view, innovations in religious practice were to come from within the Church. And yet the impetus for change often came from circles more or less removed from its central establishment.⁵⁰

The women mystics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were unabashed in their critique of the abuses of the ecclesiastical institution, while nevertheless displaying a great love for the church as the body of Christ. Some scholars consider this to be their most important work in shaping the future of the Christian faith in the West:

Although ... the literary aspect of their writings is important, the main achievement of these women lies in their efforts to reform the Church, undermined by schisms, sclerosis, simony, and intellectual aridity, and to install new forms of Christian life. The former task, that of reformation, was more specifically Hildegard's, while that of renewal and even innovation is what characterizes the Beguine movement. In fact, from the beginning of the thirteenth

⁴⁸ Fraeters, “Hadewijch,” 16.

⁴⁹ Works on the Beguines include: Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Georgette Epiney-Burgard and Emilie Zum Brunn, *Femmes Troubadours de Dieu* (Belgium: Brepols, 1988); McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*; Milhaven, *Hadweijch and her Sisters*.

⁵⁰ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 3.

century, the aim of the great spiritual currents that were making headway was not only to restore but also to innovate.⁵¹

The contributions of these women writers and leaders captured the general sense of dissatisfaction and malaise that typified the concerns of the twelfth and thirteenth century, while also opening the way to new forms of spiritual expression.

Although it is impossible to state with absolute certainty whether or not Hadewijch was a Beguine, most scholars believe this to be the case, and there are good reasons for defending this claim.⁵² It is, at least, universally agreed among Hadewijch scholars that she is the leader of a community that is characteristically similar to the Beguines. She displays a clear familiarity with the Beguine movement, listing at least seven in her List of the Perfect: “a beguine called Helsewent, who lived near Vilvoorde” and “a beguine whom Master Robbaert put to death on account of her true love,” in addition to three Beguines in Flanders and two in Zeeland. There are also others in her List who may also be Beguines, although are not called by that name. It is clear from Hadewijch’s knowledge and interaction with these groups that she was strongly influenced by, and likely a part of, these lay communities of women living the *vita apostolica*.

III. THE WORKS AND THOUGHT OF HADEWIJCH

Much of what makes Hadewijch so fascinating is the way that she brings together all of these historical developments in her person. As a member and leader of the young Beguine movement, a master of the French style of courtly love poetry, an astute

⁵¹ Zum Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, xvi.

⁵² Mommaers offers a strong defense in *Hadewijch*, 21-22. Other scholars simply declare without hesitation that Hadewijch was a Beguine, for example: McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 200.

theologian distinctly aware of the theological trends of her time, a mystical visionary and poet writing in the Dutch vernacular, and a woman, Hadewijch embodies the dramatically shifting tides of 13th century Europe. She is uniquely skilled to re-articulate traditional Christian theology using literary tools and conventions of her own time. She creates a new genre: *minnemystiek* or mystical love poetry; a genre which is highly influential for the rest of the medieval period.

“Hadewijch’s literary mastery surpasses that of any other medieval woman mystic, not least because of the variety of genres in which she expressed her message.”⁵³ Hadewijch’s *Letters* are filled with careful advice and loving devotion for her followers, including a profound longing to be with those from whom she has been separated. They demonstrate her leadership and pastoral sensitivity, especially to those who desire to travel along with her on the path of Love but have not had mystical experiences of their own. Hadewijch’s *Poems in Stanzas* and *Poems in Couplets* display a remarkable mastery of troubadour poetry, her imaginative use of literary conventions, her versatility and skill with the Dutch language, and her visionary use of nature-imagery to demonstrate divine truth. Her *Visions* present an exciting spiritual autobiography of sorts, in which she is guided from spiritual childishness to mature perfection by the great cloud of witnesses from Christian history. Throughout her works she displays theological thoughtfulness, pastoral sensitivity, and a profound love and desire for God, her pure and noble Beloved, of whose love she is not worthy.

⁵³ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 200.

The rest of this paper will focus on Hadewijch's eschatology, and attempt to demonstrate through her and other medieval Christian mystics that the eschaton is a reality already accomplished in Christ, and that the mystical experience is a foretaste or inbreaking of that eschatological reality. But it is important to recognize, too, how masterfully Hadewijch re-presents traditional, conservative, Augustinian theology. It can be too easy to think that since Hadewijch is presenting Christian doctrine in a novel way, that she is offering a new or innovative theology, but Hadewijch's purpose, in contrast to what she obviously considers to be troubling theological trends explored above, is to present the theology that the church has taught throughout history. Thus, in contrast to some 13th century developments, Hadewijch emphasizes throughout her work the necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity, bringing the reader's attention to both the infinite "otherly" transcendence of the Divine Nature and the imminent activity of all three trinitarian Persons in the Christian life. She likewise emphasizes the necessity of the Incarnation, reminding her readers constantly that to love God in his Divinity, they must also love Christ in his Humanity, and strive to be like him in body and soul. The God-man is the bridge between humanity and divinity that invites Christians to participate in the Love of the Triune God himself.

CHAPTER III

“I MUST THEN LIVE OUT WHAT I AM”: THE ESCHATON AS A PRESENT REALITY IN THE WORKS OF HADEWIJCH OF ANTWERP

I. INTRODUCTION:

Part of what makes Hadewijch so interesting among medieval mystics is that she uses many metaphors for the mystical experience of the presence of God. Undoubtedly, her primary metaphor is that of Love (*Minne*), a word which occurs on almost every page of her writings. Nevertheless, she also draws from the rich and multifarious variety of mystical images, including sinking into the divine abyss, ascending to the height of being, union with Christ (expressed both sensually and eucharistically), bride of Christ, the lover and Beloved of the Song of Songs, theosis, perfection, maturity, and oneness with the Divine Essence.

Although Hadewijch talks about virtue as “the work of Love” throughout her writings, the sense that this work has already been accomplished through the work of Christ permeates her teaching from beginning to end. The Son of God is central to Hadewijch’s theology. He is the beginning and the goal of the Christian life. The work of his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection has simultaneously opened the way to a Christian life of virtue and suffering on the road to perfection, and completely accomplished that work of perfection already.

For Hadewijch, therefore, the perfected self in Christ is both a future eschatological reality toward which the Christian must work through a life of obedience, virtue, and suffering, as will be discussed in the next chapter. But this perfected self is already a reality, assured and accomplished through the work of Christ, and indeed

predestined even from before the foundations of the world. We see this most clearly in statements where Hadewijch is encouraged, or encourages herself, saying: “I must then live out what I am” (*PS* 22.1). Variations on this theme occur throughout Hadewijch’s work, as developed in her *Letters* and *Poems in Stanzas*, and most especially in the *Visions*, where a series of eagles cry out “The loved one does not yet know all she shall become” (*V* 12.35ff).

II. THE ESCHATON AS A PRESENT REALITY IN THE *LETTERS* AND *POEMS IN STANZAS*

Hadewijch’s *Letters* are primarily concerned with the pursuit of virtue in the Christian’s life on earth, as the Christian soul is drawn ever closer to the Divine Nature by living the Humanity of Christ. It would be easy, from these themes, to conclude that Hadewijch views the eschatological perfection of the Christian as a work which has yet to be accomplished, and in some ways, this is true. Perfection is a future reality which will not be fully accomplished until the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead, the work of virtue in this life being the primary means by which the Christian is drawn toward and prepared for this perfection in Christ.

Nevertheless, at the same time, this perfection of being is a reality already accomplished in the work of Christ. Although the Holy Spirit works to perfect the Christian through the work of virtue in this life, the perfected person is already a reality because of Christ, who is the first-fruits of perfected humanity. The reality of this work as already accomplished is made explicit a few times in Hadewijch’s *Letters*, and it is to these passages that we now turn.

Letter 6, which Hart entitles “To Live Christ,” most clearly and explicitly presents this tension in Hadewijch’s thought: that the work of virtue in this life is the pursuit of a reality that is already accomplished in Christ. Hadewijch begins this *Letter* with comments about people treating the letter recipients with fidelity or infidelity, something that has clearly become an object of great concern to those to whom Hadewijch is writing. Hadewijch exhorts her followers to not be preoccupied with the fidelity or infidelity of others, rather with their own fidelity toward God. She writes:

Everyone wishes to demand fidelity from others and to test his friend, and continually complains on the subject of fidelity. These are the occupations souls are now living in, when they ought to be tendering high love to the God of all greatness!

If someone desires the good and wishes to uplift his life in God’s sublimity, why is he preoccupied about who treats him with fidelity or infidelity, and whether he should be thankful or reproachful toward one who does evil or good to him? The man who fails in fidelity or justice toward another is the one who suffers the greatest harm; and the worst of it is that he himself lacks the sweetness of fidelity (*L 6.1-11*).

Hadewijch encourages her readers to view the fidelity of those who treat them well as a gift from God, and to thank God for their fidelity, since fidelity comes from God. She writes:

Leave that to God. For he is just in himself, and it lies in his power to take and to give what is right: For he is the height of his fruition, and we are in the abyss of our privation. I mean you and I, *who have not yet become what we are, and have not grasped what we have, and still remain so far from what is ours*. We must, without sparing, lose all for all; and learn uniquely and intrepidly the perfect life of Love, who has urged on both of us to her work (*L 6.19*).

The phrases I have italicized in the preceding quote bring to light an important point in Hadewijch’s theology: what the Christian strives for in this life has already been

accomplished in Christ. The reality of the eschatological perfection of the Christian's being is assured. Even though we do not necessarily experience or achieve this perfection fully in this life, nevertheless the reality of its achievement is certain and therefore gives the Christian certainty and perseverance to live a life of virtue here on earth.¹

This accomplished reality of the perfected self is what allows Hadewijch to mystically experience eschatological union with God in her pre-resurrection life, a theme which will be explored in detail in chapter 4. But this reality has important implications for the life of virtue as well, apart from the feeling of fruition experienced in mystical union. In *Letter 12*, which Hart titles "The Jacob Letter," Hadewijch develops the story of Jacob wrestling the angel (Gen. 32:22-31) as a metaphor for the Christian life. Toward the beginning of the letter, she makes this clear:

They who strive and desire to content God in love *begin here on earth that eternal life by which God lives eternally*. For to give him love to the full and content him according to his sublimity, heaven and earth are busy every instant in new service, and this they will never perfectly fulfill. For the sublime Love, in deed, and the grandeur that is God (cf. I John 4:16) are never satisfied or known by all that man can accomplish; and all the denizens of heaven shall burn in love eternally in order to give Love satisfaction to the full. So they who here on earth accept no other pleasure or alien consolation but strive at every moment to content Love *begin here that eternal life in which the denizens of heaven belong to God in fruitive love (L 12.13)*.

Hadewijch introduces the idea that it is through being filled with the Spirit of God—through being filled with God's love itself, the love with which God loves himself as Trinity—that the Christian is able to love God with God's love, able to conquer God (as

¹ Similar themes can be found in Augustine's *Sermons*, see, for example, *Serm. 272*, where Augustine, speaking of the Eucharist, urges catechumens to "become what you see, and receive what you are." *Serm 272*, in Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill O.P., ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2007), 318.

Jacob conquered God) through God's power, able to live the Humanity of Christ in exile on earth despite suffering and persecution and separation from the fruition of union with the Triune God. This participation in the biblical story of redemption, indeed a participation in the nature of God himself, offers Hadewijch a certain and unshakable hope that allows her to serve God through the exercise of virtue in obedience. This certainty makes her able to "set her mind on things above," despite the experience of suffering and exile she experiences in this life. Hadewijch is supported by the strength of the divine nature itself.

They who stand ready to content Love *are also eternal and unfathomable*. For *their conversation is in heaven*, and their souls follow everywhere their Beloved, who is unfathomable (*L* 12.40).

"Their conversation is in heaven" references Philippians 3:20, used here in *L* 12.40 and again in *L* 15.81 to show that Christians ought to live their lives boldly and fearlessly because of the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises that is already accomplished in the work of Christ. This "realized eschatology" is not something new, either in Hadewijch's time or, as some contemporary theologians seem to think, a product of modern theology. As several historical scholars have pointed out, this doctrine of the eschaton as already accomplished and already breaking in to the current reality this side of Christ's return stems all the way back to the earliest articulations of Christian doctrine.²

² Cf. David Edward Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972); Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Hayes, *Visions of a Future*.

In *Letter* 19, Hadewijch makes clear that this is not simply an eschatological reality, but going full circle, it is also a protological reality, rooted in the will of God from all eternity.

Oh, may you fully grow up according to your dignity, to which you were called by God from all eternity! How can you endure it that God has fruition of you in his Essence, and you do not have fruition of him? ... God must work according to his pleasure (*L* 19.37).

Passages such as this one make the assurance of perfection an even greater reality. Not only is the eschatologically perfected self already a reality through the work of Christ, but it is protologically a reality rooted in the unchanging will of God himself, which he instills in the nature of the soul in creation.

In Hadewijch's poetic writings, this theme comes across most clearly in *PS* 22, which explores the dichotomy between her current life of suffering and what she truly is in Christ. Hadewijch starts off the poem, introducing her theme:

My distress is great and unknown to men.
They are cruel to me, for they wish to dissuade me
From all that the forces of Love urge me to.
They do not understand, and I cannot explain it to them.
I must then live out what I am;
What Love counsels my spirit,
In this is my being: for this reason I will do my best. (*PS* 22.1)

Hadewijch poetically rehearses the challenge of the Christian life—to be faithful to what and who Christ has called the redeemed to be—but roots this reality both eschatologically and protologically. Hart notes, concerning this passage, that before the Council of Trent in the 16th century, “the opposition between nature and grace was not regarded as incompatible with a high esteem for the nature of the soul.”³ The created nature of the

³ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 376 n.48.

soul, which is noble, endowed by God with good qualities like love, calls the Christian to serve Love with all his or her being. But this is also, for Hadewijch, an eschatological statement, because the perfection of the human person, a fulfillment of what the human person *truly is*, is only accomplished through the work of Christ, and only fully achieved at the final judgment. Hadewijch is thus commanded and urged to serve Love completely, because to do so is true to her being, despite the counsel of men to the contrary. Although men tell her she shouldn't suffer so, she is able to bear this suffering because the reality that she will live in God's presence is something that she knows with certainty because it has been accomplished through the work of Christ.

Hadewijch elaborates and repeats these themes throughout the poem:

If I spared any effort in following Love's counsel,
 All who love know that I was offending.
 Then I implored what I can now be master of;
 Otherwise I could never have overcome such great harm.
 Now *in acting as what I am*, I find delight
 That gives me love and new ascent;
 Therefore in my fiery longing I will never be appeased. (PS 22.6)

Hadewijch repeats key themes that are found throughout her works. The Christian is called to a life of virtue in obedience to the will of God, here portrayed as "Love's counsel." Knowing this allows her to overcome great harm and master her self. The exercise of virtue in pursuit of Love also allows Hadewijch to find delight "in acting as what I am." The Love of God brings joy in the practice and exercise of virtue, which in and of itself can be a painful exercise, as Hadewijch makes clear in the next stanza:

It weighs me down that *I cannot obtain*
Knowledge of Love without renouncing self.
 Even if desire crushes my heart,
 Even if strength slips away from me through Love's coercion,
 I shall yet know what draws me
 And awakens me so mercilessly
 If for a moment I seek *pleasure for myself* in repose. (PS 22.7)

A creative juxtaposition between “what I am” and “myself” makes this poem particularly helpful for understanding this theme in Hadewijch’s work. The reality of “myself” for Hadewijch does not satisfactorily match “what I am,” the ennobled human nature intended by God in creation and accomplished in the work of Christ. Thus, in this life, “myself” must be renounced through the exercise of virtue if anyone wants to truly be “what I am.” This theme is summarized and concluded in the last stanza of the poem:

What use is it for me to sing of Love,
And newly prolong for myself my torment?
With whatever distress Love fetters me,
Before her might I am unable to plead.
 I avow what must be avowed by anyone
 Whose heart Love’s power has stolen.
What use is it for me to force my nature?
 For my nature shall always remain
 What it is and conquer what belongs to it,
However men may narrow its path. (PS 22.10)

Here again, Hadewijch reinforces her theme of assurance in the work of God. The nature of the soul, which is created, maintained, and redeemed through the work of God in Christ, “shall always remain what it is.”

III. THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF THE *VISIONS*

Hadewijch’s Book of *Visions* is perhaps the most important of her works for understanding her perspective on the Christian life as well as her understanding of the nature and role of the mystical experience, an experience she calls “indescribable sweetness.” The *Visions* are not organized chronologically, which raises important questions as to the ordering and structure of the book as a whole. Most scholars follow van Mierlo’s thesis, that Hadewijch organized the *Visions* herself for pedagogical and

catechetical purposes, and that they were used liturgically by her community.⁴ The *Visions* represent a theological journey, a journey from spiritual immaturity to perfection in both body and soul, culminating in Hadewijch joining the ranks of the Perfect.⁵

What I would like to focus on in this section is the subtle theme in the *Visions* that the eschatological, perfected humanity of the Christian (in the case of the *Visions*, the humanity of Hadewijch, although this principle can be extended to all Christians through Hadewijch's teaching, as we have seen above) is already a reality in Christ. Hadewijch has interesting pairs that pop up throughout the *Visions*: the two cities in *V* 4, the two Queens in *VV* 9 and 13, the two eagles in *V* 11, and in a more subtle way, the two brides in *VV* 10 and 12, and the two champions in *V* 8. All of these pairs are strategically utilized to teach this concept so important to Hadewijch: that the perfected, or sanctified, humanity of Hadewijch is already a reality in Christ.

It is important at this point to note that even though the *Visions* deal primarily with this journey of the soul from immaturity to perfection, and the assurance of the present reality of this perfection in Christ, there are reminders throughout to live a life of virtue, to live what Hadewijch calls "the Humanity of Christ." As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hadewijch views Christ's Humanity as the model and firstfruits of the character and nature that Christians are called to cultivate in their lives on earth. These reminders peek their way into the *Visions* incessantly, by means of charges and exhortations delivered by important figures including the Virgin Mary, John the

⁴ Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 39-57.

⁵ Hadewijch's *List of the Perfect* originally followed Vision 14. However, the fact that she chooses favorites from among the saints and then lists herself among them has "embarrassed her modern commentators more than it should" (Bouyer, *Women Mystics*, 22-23). The List is not included in Hart's translation.

Evangelist, the Champion of *V* 8, Reason (personified as the Queen of *V* 9), Augustine, Jesus Christ, and the Divine Nature, revealing how important this point this is to Hadewijch. Even though the mystical experience of sweetness is given to some in this life, it ought always to lead the believer to a life of virtue, in imitation of Christ, who embodies our hope for the future and is himself the goal toward which we strive, the perfect union of Humanity and Divinity. For Hadewijch, as we become like Christ in his humanity, we are drawn ever nearer to the Divine love which is God, the Unity of the Trinity. This will be further discussed in chapter 4.

For our purposes here, however, I think it best to walk through the *Visions* in order, painting with broad strokes when necessary, and lingering at points where Hadewijch makes these eschatological themes particularly clear. This will offer a clear view of the spiritual journey of Hadewijch's *Visions*, and how Hadewijch develops these themes throughout the book. Since *V* 1 serves as an introduction to the broader themes of the *Visions*, it is therefore worth careful consideration.⁶

The *Visions* begin on the Octave of Pentecost, a Sunday when Hadewijch is sick in bed, and the Eucharist is brought to her bedside because she is unable to go out.⁷ She describes an inward desire “to be one with God in fruition,” for which she is yet too childish and immature (*V* 1.1). At the point of receiving the Eucharist, she writes:

When I had received our Lord, he then received me to him, so that he withdrew my senses from every remembrance of alien things to enable me to have joy in him in inward togetherness with him. Then I was led as if into a meadow, an

⁶ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 24.

⁷ All of Hadewijch's *Visions*, excepting *VV* 7 and 14, begin with locating the vision somewhere in the Christian year (usually a feast day or a Sunday), and a brief explanation of her circumstances on that day. I have not had time to study these introductions in detail, and have not found any English-language scholarship that draws attention to them. This would be an interesting project for further study.

expanse that was called the space of perfect virtue. In it stood trees, and I was guided close to them. And I was shown their names and the significance of their names. (*V* 1.15)

Significantly, the *Visions* therefore begin with three important points. First, the weakness and immaturity of Hadewijch's humanity, represented by her childishness as well as her physical illness, as her body is debilitated by her spiritual yearning. Second, the already-present reality of the perfection of Hadewijch's humanity is present to her even at her bedside in the Eucharist, in which the perfect Humanity of Christ is offered to her, although she is as of yet too immature to recognize this. Finally, it cannot be emphasized enough that the first mystical experience of Hadewijch in the *Visions* is, in essence, a call to live a life of virtue. She is led into a meadow called "the space of perfect virtue" and shown its "trees" (*V* 1.15). These trees represent: knowledge of ourselves (1.24), pure humility (1.42), the power of the perfect will (1.60), wisdom (which encompasses holy fear, chastity, and purity in spirit, desire, and soul [1.71-163]), patience (1.177-181), knowledge of God (1.185), and knowledge of Love (1.199, 1.404). In many ways, these trees foreshadow or prefigure the spiritual journey that Hadewijch will travel throughout the course of the *Visions*, moving from a knowledge of the self to a knowledge of God and Love.

In *V* 1.214ff, Hadewijch is confronted by Christ, seated upon eternity, who both encourages her in her faith and chastises her for her mis-belief. His first words to Hadewijch are worthy of note. He says:

"Stand up! For you are standing in me, from all eternity, entirely free and without fall. For you have desired to be one with me, and in all respects you have done what you could to this end." (*V* 1.265)

The theme of standing is important in the *Visions*, rooted here in the reality that Hadewijch stands in Christ “from all eternity.” At several key points in the *Visions*, Hadewijch is told to stand after bowing or falling prostrate before the Divine Nature, because she stands in the Humanity of Christ, by which and in which she is perfected and united with God. In these words of Christ to Hadewijch, we already see the beginnings of this theme, that the eschatological perfection for which Hadewijch strives is already a reality in Christ.

Nevertheless, the striving is itself important. The desire for union with Christ is ever-present in Hadewijch’s writing. It provides the drive behind living a life of virtue, and also provides an interesting insight into Hadewijch’s understanding of the mystical experience itself, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that even the mystical experience for Hadewijch, these moments of “indescribable sweetness,” are bittersweet for Hadewijch. Although they are a foretaste of the perfect eternal union that Hadewijch shares, or will share, with God, they are nevertheless temporary. These mystical experiences of Love, in many ways, are imperfect, momentary experiences of perfect eternal Love.

Christ goes on to tell Hadewijch:

“Moreover I give you a new commandment: If you wish to be like me in my Humanity, as you desire to possess me wholly in my Divinity and Humanity, you shall desire to be poor, miserable, and despised by all men; and all griefs will taste sweeter to you than all earthly pleasures; in no way let them sadden you. For they will be beyond human nature to carry.” (*V* 1.288)

Christ calls Hadewijch to a life of virtue, and begins to reorient her understanding to view the preparatory suffering that she must journey through as sweeter than the pleasures of

the earth, because ultimately they will lead her to a sweetness that is beyond all sweetness, the sweetness of Love in God. The Humanity of Christ is the link by which Hadewijch is invited to possess the Divinity. By imitating the Humanity of Christ, by undergoing suffering, by being “poor, miserable, and despised by all men,” Hadewijch will be prepared to possess the Divinity.

Significantly, Christ tells Hadewijch that the griefs she will experience in her life are “beyond human nature to carry,” yet another clue early on in the *Visions* that there is an eschatological certainty to the success of Hadewijch’s journey to perfection. Even by bearing these griefs through her life, Hadewijch can be assured of her perfection in Christ, because these griefs are beyond human nature. Hadewijch bears these griefs not by her own power, but by the power of Christ working in her to endure all suffering for the sake of the restoration of humanity to God.

Christ’s words to Hadewijch end the first vision by comparing the experience of Hadewijch to his own experience in his Incarnation. His words are simultaneously encouraging, exhortative, and discomfoting:

“You shall always have knowledge of my will, and experience Love; and at the expedient time you shall feel me in fruition. So my Father did for me although I was his Son; he left me in affliction but never abandoned me; I felt him in fruition, and I served those to whom he had sent me. The heart that is found so full in the rose symbolizes the fruition of Love through feeling. My beloved, help all persons in their affliction impartially, whether they do you good or evil. Love will make you capable of it. Give all, for all is yours!” (*V* 1.408)

This passage reveals the richness that Hadewijch is able to fit into a single paragraph, but there are two vitally important themes for our purposes here. The first is the tension of affliction and fruition. For Hadewijch, the Christian life is a life of apparent abandonment

as Christians live lives of virtue in suffering, without the feeling of the presence of God. This is held in tension with the feeling of fruition, which is, on the one hand, experienced most directly in the mystical experiences that Hadewijch describes. On the other hand, however, what Hadewijch wants to do is bring the Christian to a place where this fruition is felt even in suffering, because it is in suffering and affliction that we are closest to Christ in his Humanity, and are drawn to him in his Divinity. The mystical experience is one type of fruition, but the life of virtue, in its own way, is a more important type of fruition.

The second important item for our considerations is Christ's closing sentence: "Give all, for all is yours." The command, paired with a present-tense causal clause, is significant, especially given that the reader would almost expect a future tense result clause: "Give all, and all will be yours." After the exhortation and instruction that Christ has given Hadewijch to live a life of virtue, imitate the Humanity of Christ, lead others to the knowledge of God, and pursue the knowledge of Love, one might even expect Christ to offer a contingent statement with the promise of reward: "If you give up all, all will be yours." But this is not the case. Christ tells Hadewijch, quite simply: "Give all, for all *is* yours." This reveals Hadewijch's eschatological certainty: In Christ, Hadewijch is already perfect. In Christ, Hadewijch already possesses God in his totality. In Christ, Hadewijch is already united with God in Love. And it is only because of the reality of these things that Hadewijch can return to a life of earthly suffering, in exile from the feeling of fruition in Love, apparently abandoned by God, and remain faithful to God by living a

life of virtue. The eschatological reality of Hadewijch's perfection in Christ is what allows Hadewijch to live a life of virtue on earth.

After Christ's admonition to live a life of virtue in imitation of his Humanity, and his declaration that the promises of God are already possessed by Hadewijch at the end of *V* 1, we are presented with two of the shorter visions. In *V* 2, on Pentecost, Hadewijch has a mystical experience which fills her with burning and longing for Love, and a desire to know more about Love: "What is Love? And who is Love?" (*V* 2.18) is Hadewijch's question at the end of this *Vision*, a question which occupies her for a span of two years (*V* 2.20). In *V* 3, her questions is answered. On Easter, Hadewijch is brought before the countenance of the Holy Spirit, who tells her that he is Love (*V* 3.8). The Holy Spirit commands Hadewijch: "Go forth, and live what I am; and return bringing me full divinity, and have fruition of me as who I am" (*V* 3.8). The Holy Spirit's discourse with Hadewijch in this *Vision* again highlights this theme that Hadewijch already possesses that for which she strives: fruition of Love in union with God.

Vision 4 deserves a closer look, because here Hadewijch presents the first of the couplets that dominate her *Visions*. On the Feast of St. James, "a burning Angel" shows Hadewijch "two kingdoms as of the same opulence, and the same birth, and the same race, and the same power in all dominion" (*V* 4.9). The language throughout is very eschatological, paralleling the language of Revelation and the apocalyptic prophets. The Angel strikes his wings together, emitting "seven mighty claps," and each clap has a particular effect on the cosmos: the moon, sun and stars cease their motion; those dwelling in paradise, in purgatory, and on earth are awakened; and "all the heavens of

each kingdom of heaven opened in eternal glory” (*V* 4.9). After clapping his wings, which results in silence throughout the cosmos, the Angel “emitted a voice like thunder or like the mighty trumpet with which the highest command is commanded” (*V* 4.33). Clearly, Hadewijch’s intention is to set the reader in an eschatological frame of mind.

At this, Hadewijch is drawn into the Angel’s embrace, “encompassed by a sweet new fidelity that was full of knowledge with the taste of veritable Love” (*V* 4.44). The Angel then commands Hadewijch to choose one of the heavens:

In this penetrating taste of sweet Love he said to me: “You are touched by the perfect fidelity, which eternally shall *make all things new* (Apoc. 21:5): Taste and understand what the difference between the two heavens is, and choose the richest and the most powerful.” (*V* 4.50)

Hadewijch realizes that the two heavens and the two kingdoms are the Humanity of Christ and the humanity of Hadewijch,

And then I saw her to whom one heaven pertained and my Beloved, each possessed of a heaven and each of them equally powerful, in the same service, the same glory, the same omnipotence, and the same long-suffering mercy in all eternal being. And all the heavenly bodies that had come to a standstill in their rotation—moon, sun, stars, and throne—and all that had appeared in order to bear witness—paradise, men, and all the heavens that serve them—all said: “Amen!” and bore witness to the unity of them both. (*V* 4.58)

This scene bears witness to Hadewijch’s profound point: the eschatological reality of Hadewijch’s perfected humanity is revealed as already accomplished in the mystical experience of fruition in Love. In Hadewijch’s *Visions*, she is confronted not only with the Divine Countenance, the Persons of the Trinity, and the saints who have gone before her into paradise, but also with her own perfected humanity, which is already a reality in Christ, equal to his Humanity in glory, united with him in perfect Love. It is significant

that at no point in *V* 4 does Hadewijch actually choose one heaven or the other. The Angel, who is revealed to be Christ, merely tells her,

“You are my loved one, loved with me. These heavens, which you behold, are wholly hers and mine; and these you saw as two kingdoms that were separated were our two humanities before they attained full growth.” (*V* 4.72)

When the two kingdoms do achieve full growth, they are one kingdom, united. But again, the vision ends with a reminder that to achieve this union, even though it is already revealed to Hadewijch as a certain reality, she must return to live a life of virtue on earth (*V* 4.90-120).⁸

This parallel of the two kingdoms and the two heavens of equal glory in *V* 4 is the first of many such parallels in the book of the *Visions*. In most of these parallels, Hadewijch is paralleled with another such perfected humanity, either the Humanity of Christ, as here in *V* 4, or the perfected humanity of a saint, such as the Champion in *V* 8 and Augustine, represented by the eagle, in *V* 11. In all of these, Hadewijch is presented with a symbol equal to or even surpassing these perfected humans—Christ, the Champion, and Augustine—and her perfected humanity is presented as already a reality.

There are two more parallels which demand our attention, because they are more subtle. Throughout the course of the *Visions* there are two queens: one in *V* 9 and the other in *V* 13. In *V* 9 Reason is personified by Hadewijch as a queen clothed in a robe

⁸ Visions 5-8 further develop the themes introduced in the first few *Visions*. In *V* 5, Hadewijch is shown the three highest heavens by St. John the Evangelist, represented by an eagle, as he is throughout much of the *Visions*. In *V* 6, Hadewijch beholds the Divine Countenance, and is taught the mysteries of union by God, who tells her again to live a life of virtue in conformity with the Humanity of Christ. In *V* 7, Hadewijch is given the body of Christ by Jesus himself, represented as a child and then a man, and experiences union with her Beloved. In *V* 8, Hadewijch is shown a mountain with five ways that lead to the Countenance. There are important eschatological themes in these visions, and we will return to touch on them in the next chapter, but first it is important to explore further Hadewijch’s use of parallel images in the *Visions*.

adorned with a thousand virtues, who subdues Hadewijch and demands that she submit to her and live a life of virtue.⁹ In *V* 13, the queen is Love, who sits upon the Divine Countenance and is crowned with “the high works of the humble” (*V* 13.66). These two figures, Reason and Love, feature prominently throughout Hadewijch’s work. Love drives Hadewijch to pursue the feeling of fruition, whereas Reason constantly calls Hadewijch back to a life of virtue, demanding that Hadewijch recognize the necessity of suffering and obedience for maturity, so that she can experience the feeling of fruition in Love fully and eternally. The fact that both of these are represented as queens at different points in the *Visions* also reveals Hadewijch’s eschatological focus. Early in the *Visions*, Hadewijch madly pursues the feeling of fruition in Love, until *V* 9, when Queen Reason demands that Hadewijch submit to her and recognize the necessity of virtue. After this episode, the *Visions* take a decided turn. *V* 10 introduces the figure of the bride, who is perfected already in *V* 12. After *V* 9, every remaining vision features the Divine Nature or Divine Countenance. There is a decided turn at the end of *V* 9 which drives the book of *Visions* to its end. At the direction of Queen Reason, Hadewijch agrees to live a life of virtue in union with the Humanity of Christ. As a result of this, Queen Reason clothes Hadewijch with her robe adorned with the virtues, and reason becomes subject to Hadewijch. Henceforth in the *Visions* reason is presented as expanding Hadewijch’s understanding of her union with God, rather than inhibiting her feeling of fruition, as was the case before *V* 9.

⁹ Cf. John C. Medendorp, “Correction and Guidance: The Role of Reason in Hadewijch of Antwerp,” *Stromata* 55 A (Winter 2014): 56-78, where I argue that Queen Reason in *Vision* 9 is the catalyst that drives the book of *Visions* to its conclusion.

Perhaps the most important figure for understanding the present reality of the perfected humanity of Hadewijch is the bride, introduced in *V* 10, which takes place on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist. Hadewijch is taken up in the spirit and shown a “new city of the same name as Jerusalem and of the same appearance,” another occurrence of the eschatological city. An eagle, representing St. John the Evangelist, flies over the city inviting all of creation to attend the marriage of the bride. Like *V* 4, the language is again very eschatological. The eagle cries out three times:

“All you lords and wielders of power, here shall you learn the eternity of your domain!” (*V* 10.12)

“The time is at hand! All you living, find joy in her who possesses the true life!” (*V* 10.15)

“O you dead, come into the light and into the life. . . . Come to our abundance and contemplate the bride, who by love has experienced all needs, heavenly and earthly! She is so experienced with need in the alien land that I shall now show her how she has grown in the land of darkness. And she shall be great, and she shall see her repose, and the voice of power shall be wholly hers.” (*V* 10.18)

Although we are not explicitly told that the bride is Hadewijch until about a paragraph later (*V* 10.29), based on previous imagery in the *Visions* it does not seem like much of a surprise. But what the eagle says about her is somewhat surprising. It is in the wedding of the bride that the powerful learn the eternity of their domains. It is in the bride, “who possesses the true life,” that the living find joy. It is for the wedding of the bride that the dead come into life. The eagle says that Hadewijch has “grown in the land of darkness,” a reference to Job 10:20-22, revealing that Hadewijch considers life on earth to be akin to

death when compared to the sweetness of union with God.¹⁰ The eagle also says that Hadewijch “shall see her repose,” common Augustinian language referencing the eternal Sabbath rest of the eschaton.

Everything in *V* 10 has a particular symbolic meaning. The city is Hadewijch’s “free conscience,” the city’s beauty is Hadewijch’s “manifold virtues with full suffering,” the city’s adornment is Hadewijch’s “fiery ardor,” the manifold ornaments are Hadewijch’s “unknown virtues with new assiduity,” and the bride in the city is Hadewijch’s “blessed soul” (*V* 10.29). But the most striking thing about the vision is what St. John the Evangelist says to Hadewijch later on:

“All those whom you see here ... the whole multitude who are highest in power, have come here to participate in your marriage. Moreover all the living, both of heaven and earth, shall renew their life in this marriage. The dead sinners—who have come without hope, and are enlightened by the knowledge of your union, and desire grace or entrance into purgatory—cling somewhat to virtue and are not altogether naked. If only they believe in the oneness of you both, they will find full contentment in your marriage.” (*V* 10.29)

It seems as though salvation and eternal life are brought to the living and the dead through the union of Hadewijch with God, but I think Hadewijch is doing something more subtle here. The Hadewijch of the *Visions* represents not only Hadewijch but is also an archetype of all people who are in Christ, as will be seen in *V* 12 and “The List of the Perfect.” The perfected humanity that is already a reality in Christ and revealed to Hadewijch is an assurance and a certain reality for all those who are in Christ. So this vision that Hadewijch has is not an assertion that all creation finds salvation through her

¹⁰ Are not my days few? Cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little before I go whence I shall not return, even to *the land of darkness*, and the shadow of death; a *land of darkness*, as darkness itself, and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness. (KJV)

exemplary union with God in Love, but rather an assertion that all people are saved through their union with God in Love. Eschatologically perfected humanity is already an established reality because of the work of Christ, and it is because of the Christian's eschatologically perfected self that the Christian can live a life of virtue on earth far from the feeling of God's presence—far from the feeling of fruition in union and Love—because the eschatologically perfected self is already a certain reality that inspires and motivates and empowers the Christian to live a life of holiness.

In *V* 11, Hadewijch beholds the abyss of God's omnipotence, into which two eagles, representing Hadewijch and St. Augustine, are swallowed up by a phoenix, which represents "the Unity in which the Trinity dwells" (*V* 11.49). Thereafter follows a long discourse on the nature of the feeling of fruition in Love, as Hadewijch reflects on the union she has achieved with St. Augustine in God. Hadewijch writes:

In this wonderful way I belong to God alone in pure love, and to my saint in love, and then to all the saints, each one according to his dignity, and to men according to what each one loved and also according to what he was and still is. (*V* 11.121)

Here Hadewijch makes clear the communal nature of the eschaton, where each person belongs to "God alone in pure love," but also, because each person belong to God, belong to each other. This union (or communion) with the saints is also already a reality in the Christian's life on earth, assured because of their common union with Christ.

This vision ends with a profound reflection by Hadewijch concerning her life on earth and the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises:

Thus I have lived quietly as a human being, so that I have taken repose neither in saints nor in men on earth. And so I have lived in misery without love, in the love of God and of those who are his; and *while I do not receive from him what is*

mine, and what God does not yet give me—I have it nevertheless, and it shall remain mine! Hence I never felt love, unless as an ever-new death—until the time of my consolation came, and God granted me to know the perfect pride of love; to know how we shall love the Humanity in order to come to the Divinity, and rightly know it in one single Nature. This is the noblest life that can be lived in the kingdom of God. This rich repose God gave me, and truly in a happy hour. (*V* 11.188)

Here Hadewijch once again presents this theme (which we have already seen in the *Letters* and the *Poems in Stanzas*) of the present reality of future fulfillment of God's promises. Hadewijch lives a life in apparent exile from Love. She does not taste Love's sweetness. She does not feel Love in fruition. God does not give her what is hers, but she has it nevertheless.

This sets up for the climactic scene of *V* 12, and the striking upward crescendo that characterizes the remainder of the book of *Visions*. In *V* 12, on Epiphany, Hadewijch once again sees a city and a bride, reminding the reader of *V* 10. In the midst of the city is the Divine Countenance, represented by a round spinning disk. The language is eschatological and has strong themes of destruction and restoration:

The disk, seen from above, was set with all kinds of precious stones and in the color of pure gold; but on the darkest side, where it ran so fearfully, it was like fearful flames, which devoured heaven and earth and in which all things perished and were swallowed up. And he who sat upon the disk was One whose Countenance none could perceive without belonging to the terrible flames of this disk and being thrown into the deep abyss which lay underneath. And that Countenance drew all the dead to it living; and everything that was withered blossomed because of it; and all the sick became strong; and all the poor who saw it received great riches; and all who were in multiplicity and division became one in that Countenance. And he who sat in this high place was clothed with a robe whiter than white, on the breast of which was written: "The Most Loved of all beloveds." That was his name. Then I fell down before that Countenance in

order to adore the truth of that terrifying Being whom I there saw revealed. (*V* 12.1-29)

The eschatological language of destruction and restoration, along with the reference to the Transfiguration (Mark 9) and the allusion to the book of Revelation (19:16), alert the reader to the fact that something significant is about to happen. Hadewijch is paving the way for what I understand to be the climax of the *Visions*.

This episode, at the end of which Hadewijch falls down before the Countenance, is followed by a series of four eagles. This also alerts the reader to the significance of this vision because up until this point, there has only ever been one eagle in a vision (excepting *V* 11, where there are two), and that eagle almost always represented St. John the Evangelist. Here there are four, the same number as the Gospels. Each cries out something different:

The came a flying eagle, crying with a loud voice, and said: “The loved one does not yet know all she shall become!” (*V* 12.35)

And a second eagle said: “The loved one does not yet know what her highest way is!” (*V* 12.38)

And a third said: “The loved one does not yet know what the great kingdom is that she as bride shall receive from her Bridegroom!” (*V* 12.40)

All three of these avian exclamations point to an eschatological reality which is not yet understood, but which is about to be revealed. Hadewijch continues:

And the fourth said to me: “Have patience, and watch, and do not fall down before that Countenance! They who fall down before the Countenance and adore receive grace; they who contemplate the Countenance standing receive justice and are enabled to fathom the deep abysses that for those unacquainted with them are so terrifying to know.” (*V* 12.42)

Hadewijch is then taken up, and sees “a great crowd in festive apparel ... They were all virtues; and they were conducting a bride to her Beloved” (*V* 12.49). The bride is conducted by a multitude of virtues, but she is also dressed in a robe “adorned with all the virtues” (*V* 12.58), referencing back to the robe adorned with virtues that Queen Reason demanded Hadewijch to acknowledge and wear herself. Hadewijch lists twelve virtues with which the bride is adorned, the descriptions of these virtues growing increasingly longer until the eleventh: Peacefulness. The description of Peacefulness emphasizes at considerable length how the bride has lived the Humanity of Christ in exactness and in humility, concluding with:

To all this her Peacefulness bore witness for her, that she has thus lived and that, later on, she will live perfectly as his, truly with love in love. (*V* 12.112)

The final virtue, Patience, is similarly emphatic:

And Patience showed her as conformed to God, in one Being and in one work. (*V* 12.135)

The bride is further described as adorned with the divine Nature, having “knowledge of the undivided divine Unity,” and understanding “the hidden word of God himself out of the abyss” (*V* 12.140). This mystical and contemplative language describing the bride is concluded with one final, but important note:

In this company [the bride] came into the city, led between Fruition of Love and Command of the Virtues; Command accompanied her there, but Fruition met her there. (*V* 12.140)

The characteristics of the bride, the virtues with which she is adorned, and other descriptors of her nature reveal that the bride has achieved spiritual maturity. Having become like Christ in his Humanity, she has been made like unto the Divinity as well.

The final note describing the bride, however, is significant. Two characters lead the bride into the city: Fruition of Love and Command of the Virtues. But Fruition meets the bride when she reaches the city. Command accompanies her, having been achieved through her life in imitation of the Humanity of Christ.

The vision ends in a striking manner, and is worth quoting in its entirety:

The eagle, who had just spoken to me, said: “Now see through the Countenance, and *become the veritable bride of the great Bridegroom, and behold yourself in this state!*” And in that very instant I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the abyss upon the circling disk, and there I became one with him in the certainty of unity. The eagle then said, when I was received: “Now behold, all-powerful one, whom I previously called the loved one, that you did not know all you should become, and what your highest way was, and what the great kingdom was that you as bride should receive from your Bridegroom. When previously you fell down before the Countenance, you, like an ordinary soul, confessed it as frightening. When you stood up and contemplated it, *you saw yourself perfect, together with us, a veritable bride, sealed with love.* You, all-powerful one, have received most profoundly that hidden word which Job understood, in the text beginning: *Porro dictum est.*” In that abyss I saw myself swallowed up. Then I received the certainty of being received, in this form, in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me. (*V* 12.152-172)

The text referenced is Job 4:12ff, where Eliphaz recounts a vision that he had in a dream.¹¹ In this speech, the eagle brings together all of the imagery scattered throughout the *V* 10 in a climactic moment where Hadewijch becomes her perfected self, whereas previously in the *Visions* she has only beheld or been assured of her perfected self through symbols. Here however, she *becomes* her perfected self in union with the One, and “received the certainty of being received, in this form, in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me.” The mystical experience of becoming the perfected self in union

¹¹ Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. (KJV)

produces an unshakable certainty of being fully received by God in Love after a life of virtue.

This vision, along with those that follow, reveals with little doubt that Hadewijch understands the mystical experience to be a foretaste or an inbreaking of what is truly an eschatological reality: she experiences her perfected human form, her union with the Trinity, the feeling of fruition in Love, her descent into the Divine Abyss, her ascent to the knowledge of God, and her marriage to the Beloved—all eschatological promises—as though they had already been accomplished. *VV* 13 and 14, concluded with “The List of the Perfect,” continue these themes in increasing crescendo. In *V* 13, on Pentecost, Hadewijch is shown the secret heaven, shown only to those who have perfectly lived the Humanity of Christ. In many ways, it parallels *V* 1. Hadewijch is guided by her Seraph through the secret heaven, and beholds Love, in the form of a Queen, seated on a throne within the divine Countenance. Like *V* 1, Hadewijch is shown many symbols. The vision concludes with a speech by the Virgin Mary, who, like Christ in *V* 1, exhorts Hadewijch to live a life of virtue and pursue Love with all her being, knowing that she has already become perfect in Christ.

Vision 14 is not really a vision in and of itself, *per se*. Rather, it is a further explanation of *V* 13. Unlike *V* 1, however, Hadewijch is able to explain the meaning of the symbols to the reader herself. Hadewijch explains that through this vision, God has given her “strength to endure, as long as the fruition of Love was denied me” (*V* 14.7). She goes on to exegete the rest of the symbols of *V* 13 with great clarity and expertise, revealing the knowledge and maturity that she has achieved throughout the spiritual

journey of the *Visions*. Before the “List of the Perfect,” the *Visions* conclude with a Voice from the Countenance, which says to Hadewijch:

“O strongest of warriors! You have conquered everything and opened the closed totality, which never was opened by creatures who did not know, with painfully won and distressed Love, how I am God and Man! O heroine, since you are so heroic, and since you never yield, you are called the greatest heroine! It is right, therefore, that you should know me perfectly.” (*V* 14.172)

Because Hadewijch has lived a life of virtue, imitating the Humanity of Christ, and thus understands his Divinity, she has conquered God with God’s own Love, as Jacob did (cf. *L* 12), and thus rightly knows God perfectly.

In Hart’s translation, this is where the *Visions* ends, for various literary and editorial reasons.¹² Since every manuscript that we have of Hadewijch’s works includes the “List” as the conclusion of the *Visions*, however, it seems important for our purposes to respect its place and emphases. In the “List of the Perfect,” Hadewijch lists those who have achieved perfection, twenty-nine of whom are living in heaven (including Biblical figures), and fifty-six of whom are living on earth, among whom she lists herself: “one Hadewijch.” Accompanying many of the twenty-nine are stories about their mystical experiences of Love, and the great suffering that followed them through life. This is the appropriate and expected conclusion of the *Visions*: a vision of all those who have become perfect, accompanied by their seraphim, and Hadewijch among them. It is

¹² Hart explains: “In the manuscripts, the *Visions* are followed by a supplement known as ‘the list of the perfect,’ referring to Vision 13. It gives the names of the saints most revered by Hadewijch, and of nearly eighty living persons known to her in various countries. The names appear to be authentic; a number of them designate persons historically identifiable, and with relation to certain of whom dates can be established that have been used to good advantage in Hadewijch studies. The comments that accompany the listings, however, lack the mature discretion that characterizes all her other writings. The ‘List’ as it has come down to us does not, therefore, enhance her literary standing, and for this reason is omitted from the present translation.” Hart, *Hadewijch*, 2.

important to remember that Hadewijch is writing in a time when the possibility of experiencing perfect divine love in this life had become suspect due to the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and the writings of people like Peter Abelard, as discussed in the previous chapter. Hadewijch was writing to a community that was beginning to despair of this possibility, and her answer is firm: divine love can be experienced in this life, and humanity can have knowledge of the divine other. She has experienced this in her life, as have many others, not only great heroes of Christian history, but also many now living who she has known personally.

This is what allows Hadewijch to live a life of virtue in imitation of the Humanity of Christ: the knowledge that she, along with many others who she knows personally, has experienced divine love in this life, and that she is already numbered among the perfect, and indeed has been numbered among them since before the foundations of the earth.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the spiritual journey of the *Visions*, and the excerpts from the *Letters* and *Poems in Stanzas*, it seems clear that Hadewijch understands the eschatological promises of God to have been already accomplished in the work of Christ. Even though in this life she may not yet experience them fully, in her *Visions* they are revealed as already accomplished, and this reality offers Hadewijch certainty as she strives, with the power of the Spirit, to imitate the Humanity of Christ through a life of virtue in obedience and suffering here on earth. As we shall see in the next chapter, this understanding of eschatological reality being already accomplished also provides the grounds for the

possibility of mystical union in this life, as well as helping to explain the nature and role of such union.

CHAPTER IV
THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN HADEWIJCH
OF ANTWERP AND OTHER MEDIEVAL MYSTICS

I. INTRODUCTION

“Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

The famous opening line of Augustine’s *Confessions* has touched the hearts and souls of readers since the fifth century. It expresses a longing, a yearning, a striving for wholeness and completion, but also at the same time an assurance, faith, and hope that this rest will certainly and indubitably be perfectly accomplished. The fulfillment of God’s promises is sure.

This is a theme that pervades Christian mysticism up through the medieval period, beginning with the earliest Christian writers. As was mentioned in the opening chapter, Kenneth Kirk identifies this emphasis of Christian mystical writings nicely, even going so far as to identify it as the central tenet that the Christian religion was able to offer the pagan Mediterranean world. He writes:

Christianity came into a world tantalized with the belief that some men at least had seen God, and had found in the vision the sum of human happiness; a world aching with the hope that the same vision was attainable by all. Men came into the Church assured that there, if anywhere, they would “see God”; and they brought with them all the diverse conceptions of theology and conduct with which the thought was invested in non-Christian circles. Their quest was primarily a selfish one; their motive to secure for themselves, either here or hereafter, an all-absorbing religious experience. ... The Church undertook the amazing task of transforming this self-centred cult of the divine into an ideal of disinterested worship and service. In doing so, she altered the entire emphasis of the doctrine of the vision of God; but the doctrine itself—purified, ennobled, and brought into coherence—was too precious to be thrown aside. Thus the stage was set for a new and epoch-making development of religion and ethics, in which

these various conceptions and experiences of pre-Christian pioneers should influence the distinctively Christian ethos and inheritance, and by them be influenced in turn; and the end of that development is not yet in sight.¹

Before the earliest creeds, before the establishment of proper language for talking about the relation of God and Christ, before even the identification of God as Triune, the Christian religion teaches: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). This promise captures the ancient world by storm, uniting ethics and eschatology in the mystical *summum bonum* of human existence, and pervades Christian thought from its very earliest origins.

This chapter will endeavor to demonstrate that the mystical experience, as understood by medieval Christians, is an eschatological experience, one that by its very nature calls Christians to a life of purity. Mystics who reflect on these mystical experiences, such as Hadewijch, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hildegard of Bingen, even going as far back as Augustine, understand and explain the radical experience of the presence of God in this life as an inbreaking, or a foretaste, of the eschatological reality that awaits the faithful and elect. Because of the certainty of this reality, accomplished in the work of Christ, the mystical experience of divine presence is indeed possible, and even granted to some in this life as a gift of grace. This will occupy the first two parts of this chapter, exploring the nature and possibility of the mystical experience.

The third part of the chapter will focus on the role of the mystical experience in medieval Christian thought, focusing on Hadewijch, but also bringing alongside of her other dialogue partners from the history of Christian mysticism. As we have already seen

¹ Kirk, *Vision of God*, 25.

in the previous chapter, Hadewijch's work emphasizes the importance of living a life of virtue. Her eschatological and apocalyptic visions give her hope and confirmation in living a life of virtue apart from the feeling of the full presence of God. Indeed, the characters in her *Visions* actively and directly command her to live a life of virtue in obedience to God. As Kirk and others have pointed out, Christian mysticism almost always has this ethical, social dimension. This will be explored in the second half of the chapter.

We will explore both of these areas primarily through Hadewijch, but will bring in Augustine of Hippo, Hildegard of Bingen, and Bernard of Clairvaux as significant and well-studied examples of the Western Christian mystical tradition. Hadewijch is particularly helpful for exploring these themes because she is responding to several recent developments in mystical thought: the impossibility of the affective experience of the divine to the human (demonstrated by Peter Abelard and Aristotelian philosophy), and a new, exclusively affective approach to mysticism that underemphasized and even rejected human reason and the life of virtue as ways of knowing God (demonstrated by Thomas Gallus and other writers of the Dionysian Renaissance).

II. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The point that the medievals themselves understand mysticism to be eschatological seems so apparent when one reads the primary sources that this section might appear at first to be superfluous. But, as mentioned in the opening chapter, many scholars fail to make this a clear emphasis in their analyses of Christian mysticism. The various images used by medieval Christians to make sense of the mystical experience,

and we could look at any—Augustine of Hippo’s portrayal of perfect Sabbath rest, Gregory of Nyssa’s depiction of the ascent to the divine essence, the plummet into the divine abyss of Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux’s imagery of the bride of Christ, or the experience of union with God described by so many others—all of these are imaginative descriptions of the *visio beata*, the vision of God, which is the eschatological promise of the Christian tradition. Irenaeus of Lyon, already in the second century, summarized this ultimate hope in his *Adversus Haeresis*: “The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God.”² In their reflection on the radical experience of the divine presence, Christian mystics throughout history have made recourse to eschatological images and eschatological promises to help them make sense of this experience. Even Hildegard of Bingen, who does not spend her writing in reflection on the mystical experience, and does not leave us any sort of personal phenomenological account of her experience, recognizes its eschatological nature, following the tradition and genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature.

A. Historical Precursors: Jewish Apocalyptic and Greek Philosophy

This eschatological interpretation of the presence of God is not surprising if one has a knowledge of the precursors to Christian mysticism, stemming from the Jewish apocalyptic and Greek philosophical traditions. Both of these historical movements are concerned primarily with ultimate things: the judgment of God, the new heavens and new earth, the return of the soul to the divine. However the various traditions articulate it, both

² Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haeresis* IV.xx.7 in *The Writings of Irenaeus*, vol. I, trans. Alexander Roberts & W. H. Rambaut (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 444.

are concerned with things eschatological, and both view the human experience of the divine in this life as rare, but possible.

The Jewish matrix out of which early Christianity arises is invaluable for understanding the development of the Christian mystical tradition, both in terms of the establishment of sacred texts as well as their interpretation. Also vital for the development of Christian mysticism is Jewish apocalyptic literature of the second-temple period, which prefigures Christian mystical writings both as concerns the journey of the soul to the experience of the divine as well as its eschatological focus.³ Likewise, the Greek philosophical tradition concerns itself primarily with ultimate things. Plato and Aristotle, in their quest for the *summum bonum* of human existence, are concerned with the relationship between the human and the divine, culminating in the ultimate fate of the human soul.⁴

Similarly, Christianity emphasizes the eschatological promises of God in its articulation of the spiritual and mystical life, the deeper level at which the presence of God is felt and known. In his work on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, Carlo Leget has noted that eschatology has a “twofold place” in Christian theology. As the “end of all things,” the doctrine of eschatology is appropriately discussed explicitly at the end of the systematic framework, but as the *telos* towards which all of Christian theology drives, it has a “more prominent and sort of ‘omnipresent place’ throughout” Christian theology.⁵ Because of this interwovenness of eschatological themes throughout Christian writings,

³ Cf. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, ch. 1; Kirk, *The Vision of God*, 10-22.

⁴ Cf. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, ch. 2; Kirk, *The Vision of God*, 23-38.

⁵ Carlo Leget, *Living With God: Thomas Aquinas on the Relation Between Life on Earth and “Life” After Death* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 209-10.

as the final *telos* of all things, it is possible to explore the eschatology of Christian writers who do not explicitly deal with eschatology in a systematic fashion.

B. Exegetical Foundations

Christian mysticism, by its very nature, is exegetical, stemming from the patristic practice of drawing out the spiritual sense of Scripture from the literal text. McGinn explains:

Christian mysticism forms a continuous tradition of a distinctively exegetical character. The activity of reading, interpreting, and praying the Bible and other classic texts has been a key ingredient in its history.⁶

This exegetical nature of Christian mysticism reveals the strong link between Scripture and theology in the first millennium of the Christian tradition. Many scholars recognize that until the 13th century, Scripture was the center of the scholastic life.⁷ This basic reliance on Scripture strongly influences the mystical tradition, as early mystics use Scripture to interpret their mystical experiences, and view their mystical project as one which explores the meaning of Scripture.

The early Christian mystics of East and West did not normally use their own personal experience of God as the subject for their teaching, the way Teresa of Avila and others later would, but sought to penetrate the mystical depths of the Bible to find the place where the meeting between God and humanity is realized.⁸

This can also be seen in the medieval method of exegesis, called the *quadrige*. The *quadrige* has four parts: the literal sense was what the text actually said, the allegorical

⁶ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 3.

⁷ Scholars note that in the 12th century, Lombard's *Sentences* began to replace Scripture as the center of theology. By the 13th century, Aristotelian philosophy also posed a challenge to the centrality of Scripture in the *schola*. Cf. Robert E. McNally, "Medieval Exegesis," *Theological Studies* 22.3 (1961): 450.

⁸ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 3-4.

sense was the doctrinal or spiritual truths to which the text pointed, the tropological or moral sense was the guidance for holy living directed by the text. Finally, the anagogical sense:

The most noble of the four senses, the last and highest achievement of biblical exegesis, is the anagogic sense, searching *superioria, invisibilia, futura, ultima*, and raising us up from the realities of the earthly Jerusalem to the realities of the heavenly Jerusalem.⁹

As McNally points out, the anagogical sense is understood as both eschatological and mystical:

In the medieval sources *anagogia* takes a double formula, of which one represents the objective, doctrinal, speculative aspect, looking to the eschatology of the individual as well as the universe, the other the subjective, theoretical, contemplative aspect, looking to the *hic et nunc*, the mystic in the Church. The first (*altior sensus*) *futuri saeculis sacramenta declarat, de vita futura disputat*. The second (*altior theoria*) is ordered *ad mysteria futuri saeculi contuenda, ad contemplanda mysteria caelestia*. The one is defined by its object, the other by the manner of apprehending it. Both are equally part of the Christian mystery, constituting its summit or term.¹⁰

It seems clear from these sources that for the medievals, mystical contemplation was a theological and personal exploration of eschatological truths, rooted in the anagogical sense of Scripture.

However, as McNally points out, eschatological concerns permeate all three of the spiritual aspects of medieval exegesis—allegory, tropology, and anagogy—as all three have to do with the coming of Christ, in different senses:

⁹ McNally, “Medieval Exegesis,” 453.

¹⁰ McNally, “Medieval Exegesis,” 453.

It is the sense which is involved in the *adventus Christi*, represented in three stages: (1) *occultus et humilis*: Christ, the Redeemer, comes; His redemption lasts in the Church and the sacraments; (2) *praesens quotidie*: Christ, the Sanctifier, comes to the just soul; (3) *terribilis*: Christ, the Judge, comes in glory. The first is allegory, the second tropology, the third anagogy.¹¹

For the medieval interpreters of Scripture, including the mystics, the entire text of the Bible points to the coming of Christ: his coming in time in the Incarnation, his coming in the Christian soul through the Holy Spirit, and his coming at the end of all things to judge the living and the dead and restore all creation to himself. The mystical project cannot be divorced from its biblical and eschatological underpinnings, the *telos* of all creation: the glory of God. As we have already seen, the mystics use biblical and eschatological imagery throughout their writings to demonstrate this.

C. Hadewijch on the Nature of Mystical Experience

Hadewijch is an interesting case because she uses almost *all* of the imagery that the Christian tradition has left at her disposal. She combines a philosophical anthropology of the body and soul with the visionary tradition of Jewish apocalyptic, infused throughout with references to Scripture. She takes advantage of the apocalyptic nature of the *Visions* to use a plethora of images. In addition to the image of the lover and the Beloved of the Song of Songs, which pervades her work, in her book of *Visions* she depicts a new Eden (*V* 1), consummation in the fire of the Holy Spirit (*VV* 2-3), citizenship in the Kingdom of God (*V* 4), union with Christ (*V* 7), ascent to the knowledge of God (*V* 8), the new Jerusalem (*V* 10), the bride of Christ (*V* 10, 12), falling into the divine abyss (*V* 11), and the vision of the divine Countenance (*VV* 6, 13). In

¹¹ McNally, "Medieval Exegesis," 453.

using all of these images, together with her own unique contributions of love mysticism, Hadewijch is able to bring together in one book almost every depiction of the eschaton that has been articulated in the Christian tradition before the 13th century.

In addition to this plethora of imagery, Hadewijch is significant because she spends a substantial portion of her writings reflecting on the mystical experience. Hadewijch's concern is to demonstrate that, in contrast to the Aristotelian distinction between the human and the divine "Other," the experience of divine love is not only possible for human persons in the hereafter, as is promised in Scripture. To the contrary, Hadewijch's emphatic point is that this experience of divine love—promised eschatologically to all who love and serve God—can be assured precisely because it *has* been achieved by human persons in this life, herself included.

Hadewijch describes the mystical ascent of the soul to God in *L 20*, perhaps the clearest writing we see in Hadewijch regarding the nature of the mystical experience itself. In the "Introduction" to her translation of Hadewijch's work, Hart writes:

Letter 20, a fascinating piece of prose, describes the soul's mystical ascent as a series of twelve hours; they are divisible into three groups of four each, corresponding respectively to "the seeking mind," "the desiring heart," and "the loving soul." A sense of God's transcendence, as experienced by the soul, is conveyed by the very obscurity of expressions and the use of negatives such as nameless, unknown, unawares, unbidden, unheard-of. ... This piece is often compared to *Seven ways of love* by Beatrice of Nazareth.¹²

Hadewijch describes the ascent of the soul from a rational contemplation of Love to an affective attraction to the sweetness of love, culminating in a complete abandonment of the self in union with Love. The purpose of sharing this process is not so much to raise

¹² Hart, *Hadewijch*, 17.

understanding in her readers, but rather to develop a deeper and more profound faith.

Hadewijch concludes the letter:

In none of these twelve hours can anyone understand the love of Love, except, as I have said, those who are cast into the abyss of Love's strong nature, or those who are fitted to be case into it. These last rather believe in Love than understand her. (*L* 20.135)

In *L* 20, Hadewijch does not include explicitly eschatological or trinitarian themes. Nevertheless, this encounter between the divine and the human is eschatologically focused, as can be seen in other parts of her works. In *V* 5, Hadewijch is shown the three highest heavens by John the Evangelist, represented by an eagle, and God reveals to Hadewijch that the hierarchy of the Angels (Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim) represents the Trinity. She concludes the vision:

He who sat on the throne in heaven ... took me out of the spirit in that highest fruition of wonder beyond all reason; there I had fruition of him as I shall eternally. The time was short, and when I came to myself he brought me again into the spirit and spoke to me thus: "As you now have fruition of this, you shall have fruition of it eternally." And John said to me: "Go to your burden, and God shall renew his old wonders in you." And I came back into my pain again with many a great woe. (*V* 5.59-71)

It is clear from this passage that Hadewijch views the mystical experience itself as an inbreaking of eschatological realities. As God brings her out in the spirit, she has "fruition of him as I shall eternally," and then God confirms this sentiment in his own words. But this fruition of God, in this life, is not lasting. It will not be so until the return of Christ at the end of time.

D. Other Mystics on the Nature of Mystical Experience

This perspective is not limited to Hadewijch. Similar perspectives on the eschatological nature of the mystical experience can be found in other Christian mystics as well, going all the way back, in the Western tradition, to Augustine, the father of Western Christian mysticism.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, John Peter Kenney identifies eschatology as the primary interpretive category of Augustine's *Confessions*. This was perhaps an overstatement, as Kenney does not emphasize the eschatological nature of the ascent narratives in his work as a whole, aside from one important paragraph:

Contemplation can only be an exercise in hope, the discernment of where the self may one day rest, if it should achieve its salvation. Thus, for Augustine, *contemplation is inherently eschatological*, and unlike Plotinus, that eschatological hope is never realized by the embodied soul. It can only be actualized after death.¹³

Interestingly, most of the scholarship that has addressed the question of eschatology in the *Confessions* is scholarship on the unity of the *Confessions*, which tend to view some sort of eschatological theme as the unifying theme of the work.¹⁴

Focusing more directly on his mystical accounts, however, it becomes clear that Augustine views the mystical experience of divine union as eschatological. The ascent

¹³ Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine*, 82. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Robert McMahon argues that the nine narrative books of the *Confessions* parallel the nine acts of creation, and therefore Book IX parallels the creation of "Sabbath rest." McMahon, "Book Thirteen," in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 207-223. Kenneth B. Steinhauser argues that beauty and aesthetics is the unifying theme in "The Literary Unity of the *Confessions*," *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 15-30. Ronald J. Teske suggests that the "Heaven of Heaven," the focus of Book XII, ties the work together in the concluding chapter of his book on Augustine: "The Heaven of Heaven and the Unity of Augustine's *Confessions*," in *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 259-274.

narratives of book VII, and the vision at Ostia in book IX, which describe a disclosure of the divine to the human soul, are woven through with eschatological language. In book VII Augustine writes:

With the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind: not this common light...but something different, utterly different... It was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below because by it I was made. Anyone who knows the truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. (VII.x.16)¹⁵

Later, in VII.xvii.23, Augustine describes it similarly:

My mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance. Then indeed did I perceive your invisible reality through created things.

The visionary experiences in Book VII have been characterized by some scholars as a depiction of failed attempts at Platonic contemplation, but to the contrary, they clearly describe real experiences of God's presence.¹⁶ The "failure" of the ascent narratives in Book VII reflects Augustine's recognition of his own human limitations in the face of the divine, a theme that also runs through later mystics, notably, Hildegard of Bingen, who is continually contrasting her own humility and worthlessness with God's perfection and infinity. The contemplative experience of the divine presence is unsatisfying for Augustine, and in Book VII he realizes that this experience in itself is not salvific. Ultimately, for Augustine, contemplation in this life is unfulfilling, because it is but a

¹⁵ Translations of Augustine's *Confessions* are taken from Maria Boulding's translation: Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Carl G. Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions: Books VII-IX* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2004), 42; Cf. VII.x.16 in O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, V. II. Even Maria Boulding's translation seems to accept this interpretation, subtitling VII.x.16 "He attempts Platonic ecstasy, but is 'beaten back'." This perspective is combated in Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine*, 58-62.

foretaste of the salvation we will receive at the eschaton. A life of confession, to and of God, is better by far.

The visionary experience at Ostia in Book IX makes this eschatological connection even more clear.¹⁷ After he sets the stage in a window overlooking a garden at Ostia on the Tiber, Augustine begins to recollect the conversation he and his mother shared before the experience:

We were alone, conferring very intimately. Forgetting what lay in the past (*praeterita obliviscentes*), and stretching out to what was ahead (*in ea quae ante sunt extenti*), we inquired between ourselves in the light of present truth (*praesentem veritatem*), the Truth which is yourself, what the eternal life of the saints would be like (*qualis futura esset vita aeterna sanctorum*). Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived it, yet with the mouth of our hearts wide open we panted thirstily for the celestial streams of your fountain, the fount of life (*fontis vitae*) which is with you (*qui est apud te*), that bedewed from it according to our present capacity we might in our little measure think up on a thing so great. (IX.x.23)

Already we see that Augustine is preparing us for an experience of eschatological proportions. He quotes and alludes to biblical texts containing resurrection themes, such as Philippians 3:13, Isaiah 64:4, I Corinthians 2:9-10. Augustine and Monica are found pondering together the *vita aeterna sanctorum*, which “eye has not seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived” (I Cor. 2:9-10; Is 64:4), and this pondering together the final state of eternal rest for the saints serves as the embarkation of one of the most eschatologically rich experiences in the entire work of the *Confessions*.

This visionary experience shared by Augustine and his mother culminates with their touching the “land of never-failing plenty (*regionem ubertatis indeficientis*), where

¹⁷ Cf. McMahon, “Book Thirteen,” 211-12.

you pasture Israel forever with the food of truth” (IX.x.24). This refers to Ezekiel 34:14 and Psalm 80:1, both passages which refer to God as Israel’s shepherd. Anagogically, these passages refer to the New Heaven and Earth. But here Augustine and Monica cannot remain:

We just touched the edge of it by the utmost leap of our hearts; then, sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first-fruits of our spirit captive there and returned to the noise of articulate speech, where a word has beginning and end. (IX.x.24)

For Augustine, the mystical experience is eschatological, a foretaste of eternal rest, of the *regionem ubertatis indeficientis* where all will live the *sempiterna vita*. But this cannot happen until the resurrection of the dead. For this reason, the mystical experience leaves him “sighing and unsatisfied.” He concludes the account:

If this could last, and all other visions (*visiones*), so far inferior, be taken away, and this sight alone ravish him who saw (*spectatorem*) it, and engulf him and hide him away, kept for inward joys, so that this moment of knowledge—this passing moment that left us aching for more—should there be life eternal (*sempiterna vita*), would not *Enter into the joy of your Lord* be this, and this alone? (IX.x.24)

Bernard of Clairvaux shares a similar perspective. Bernard generally refrains from autobiographical mystical accounts, but in *On Loving God*, he offers a striking picture of the mystical experience:

When will this sort of affection be felt that, inebriated with divine love, the mind may forget itself and become in its own eyes like a broken dish, hastening towards God and clinging to him, becoming one with him in spirit, saying: ‘My flesh and my heart have wasted away; O God of my heart, O God, my share for eternity.’ I would say that a man is blessed and holy to whom it is given to experience something of this sort, so rare in life, even if it be but once and for the space of a moment. To lose yourself, as if you no longer existed, to cease

completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing is not a human sentiment but a divine experience (X.xviii)¹⁸

Again, like Augustine, Hadewijch, and Hildegard, one of the primary themes in the divine encounter is the realization of the finiteness of the human person. Bernard explains that in the presence of divine love, the mind becomes “in its own eyes like a broken dish,” and this causes the person to cling to God. But this feeling of the presence of God is not lasting. Bernard mentions later:

Until death is swallowed up in victory and eternal light invades from all sides the limits of night and takes possession to the extent that heavenly glory shines in their bodies, souls cannot set themselves aside and pass into God. ... This rapture of the soul which is its most perfect and highest state, cannot, therefore, take place before the resurrection of the bodies, lest the spirit, if it could reach perfection without the body, would no longer desire to be united to the flesh. (X.xxx)

Because the human person is fallen and corrupt, the presence of God cannot be fully experienced this side of the eschaton. All mystics recognize that the experience of mystical presence is a disembodied experience, following Christian theology, which teaches that the spirit is renewed through the work of Christ in this life, but the body will not be perfected until the eschaton. Because of this, the body cannot experience the presence of God in this life, but the soul, through the work of the Holy Spirit, can. This state of rapture, or ecstasy, in which the soul is apart from the body, is an unnatural state. The soul longs for union with the body, and the body longs to see God, thus the mystical

¹⁸ Quotes from Bernard are from Emero Stiegman, *On Loving God by Bernard of Clairvaux with an Analytical Commentary* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1995).

experience of the eschatological vision of God is unsatisfying in this life, because it leaves the body behind, an unnatural and unsatisfying arrangement.¹⁹

III. THE POSSIBILITY OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

As we have already seen, one of Hadewijch's primary concerns is to ensure her readers that the fruition of divine love is possible to human nature, as demonstrated by her own experience and the experience of others whom she knows. Other mystics assume this, but in the 13th century, the possibility of human experience of God becomes a doctrine that mystics and theologians have to take time to defend.

As was mentioned in chapter 2, the emergence of Aristotelian philosophy causes great anxiety over whether the human experience of God is even an ontological possibility. The strong distinction in Aristotelian thought between the finite creature and the divine "Other" raises important questions as to the possibility not only of mystical experience of God in this life, but of the possibility of the eternal promises contained in Scripture, wherein God promises his people eternal life in his presence. Naturally, this concern is not limited to Abelard and other Aristotelian philosophers, but is of great concern to mystics as well. If the divine is inaccessible to the human, then the promises of Scripture will be left unfulfilled. And if the divine is inaccessible to the human in this life, how can Christians be assured that this will be different in the life to come?

¹⁹ Passages like these are helpful for combating the arguments of some who claim that the mystics are gnostic or escapist. Bynum, in *The Resurrection of the Body*, shows very clearly that throughout the early and medieval era, the resurrection of the body is a vital and central doctrine for the Christian church. Thomas Aquinas' adoption of Aristotelian categories creates problems for his understanding of the resurrection of the body, this is the issue for which he is condemned in 1277 (cf. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 10.). No Christian writers through the early and medieval era reject or downplay the importance of the resurrection of the body. They simply recognize the body's corrupted state this side of the eschaton, something which makes them emphasize the necessity of resurrection all the more!

Peter Abelard, of course, solves this problem by maintaining that the essence of God can be achieved through the exercise of reason. There is no real *presence* of God in Abelard's thought, but a *knowledge* of God is sufficiently satisfying as an answer to the promises contained in Scripture. Rather than experiencing God through our senses, Abelard argues, the human experience of the divine is one that takes place only in the highest of human senses, the exercise of reason.

Hadewijch vehemently rejects the Aristotelian and Abelardian perspective that the divine Other is inaccessible to the human creature. From her writings, it is clear that her works are intended to assure her readers that such an experience of union is possible, and that she has experienced such union in her own life. Mommaers explains:

Hadewijch's writings presented a strong challenge to the prevailing views of her time. Under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy, the idea had gained ground that the transcendence of God implies his being forever inaccessible to humankind: thus truly being one with the entirely Other is out of the question, for scholastic thought dictates that "whatever is received, is only received to the measure of that which receives it." Those who follow reason cannot therefore accept what is preached by faith, that God himself lives in humankind: that the transcendent is truly also immanent is inconceivable. Hadewijch was faced with the contradiction between reason and faith which led many of her cultured contemporaries to an *impasse*, and the exponent of mystical love lyric would under no circumstances push aside the "rational person's noble reason" (*L* 30.72).²⁰

Hadewijch is writing to a community that is in the "winter" or "desert," lacking the comfort of Love's felt grace, characterized by despair about the possibility of being one

²⁰ Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 2.

with God here on earth. In doing this, she does not denigrate the human faculty of reason, although she certainly puts it in its place.²¹

On the basis of Hadewijch's own experience, which she shares in the *Visions*, her friends could be assured that this union with God was undoubtedly possible.²² She defends this both experientially, using anecdotal evidence from her own experience and that of others, and theologically, demonstrating throughout her *Visions* especially that the eschaton is an already accomplished reality, as we have already seen in chapter 3. Because of the work of Christ, who unifies the divine and human in his very being, the human experience of God is a certain reality. Because the eschaton is a sure and certain reality, accomplished in Christ, it is possible to experience it, at least in limited fashion, in this life.

Hadewijch does not believe that "such a great being is out of reach" (*L* 4.39). The experience of the divine is eminently possible to the human because of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Aristotelian distinction between the finite creature and the divine "Other" is fundamentally unsatisfying for Hadewijch, contrary to the promises delivered in Scripture. Hadewijch asks her friends "How can you endure it that God has fruition of you ... and you do not have fruition of him?" (*L* 19.37).

In particular, the Champion in *V* 8 seems to fall into Abelard's camp, and two leading Hadewijch scholars have independently proposed that the Champion in *V* 8 may

²¹ It is helpful to note that Hadewijch holds to the classical distinction of human beings as "rational animals." Human beings are rational beings, and so affection and will are a part of the rational creature. That is to say, the faculties of reason, will, emotion, and even love are all characteristic of rational beings. One should not think that when Hadewijch speaks of the limits of reason when compared to love, that she is saying that love is irrational. To the contrary, Hadewijch holds that love, faith, and the *visio dei* are only possible for rational beings.

²² Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 47.

actually be Peter Abelard himself.²³ In the vision, the Champion shows Hadewijch the five ways up the mountain of the knowledge of God, but although he is able to lead her up the four ways, he is unable to lead her the “fifth and highest way.” At the end of the vision, Hadewijch asks the Champion:

“Lord Champion, how did you come to the beauty of your high witness, so that you led me upward and yet not to the end?” (*V* 8.109)

The Champion responds:

“I bear witness to you concerning the four ways, and I travel them to the end; in these I recognize myself, and I conquer the divisions of time. But the beloved gave you the fifth way; you have received it where I am not. For when I lived as a man, I had too little love with affection, and followed the strict counsel of the intellect. For this reason I could not be set on fire with the love that creates such a great oneness, for I did the noble Humanity a great wrong in that I withheld from it this affection.” (*V* 8.112)

The Champion has failed to love the Humanity of Christ with affection, and thus has not been given the fifth and highest way, the way of Love.

Hadewijch’s response to this over-emphasis on reason to the neglect of love can be found also in her *Letters*. In letter 4, Hadewijch discusses the appropriate role of reason in the mystical life:

Reason knows well that God must be feared, and that God is great and man is small. But if reason fears God’s greatness because of its littleness, and fails to stand up to his greatness, and begins to doubt that it can ever become God’s dearest child, and thinks that such a great Being is out of its reach—the result is

²³ Hart, *Hadewijch*, 382 (n. 79); Mommaers, *Hadewijch*, 77-79; Paul Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience: The Role of the Humanity of Jesus*, (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 2003), 167. Both Mommaers and Hart suggest that the Champion of Vision 8 may be Abelard. Barbara Newman explores this possibility as well, but is dependent on Hart and Mommaers. Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 168-71.

that many people fail to stand up to the great Being. Reason errs in this and many other things. (*L* 4.39)

For Hadewijch, there is an important role for reason in the mystical life, but reason is not the only way, or the highest way, to God. Love is the highest way. This is the way that Hadewijch has embodied in her life and the way in which she instructs her followers. But there are dangers in rejecting reason as well, to which we now turn.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The renaissance of Dionysian mystical texts in the 13th century posed a different answer to the Aristotelian problem. Apophatic theology allowed Christian mystics to express truths about God through an explanation of what God is not. This seemed to fit nicely into the broader mystical project, which had always found linguistic expression of the mystical experience to be a challenge. McGinn explains:

It would be easy to draw up a lengthy list of texts from the mystics ... that speak of a special consciousness of the divine presence as the goal of all their hopes and efforts. But this would be to tell only half the story. Precisely because of the incommensurability between finite and Infinite Subject, Christian mystics over the centuries have never been able to convey their message solely through the positive language of presence. The paradoxical necessity of both presence and absence is one of the most important of all the verbal strategies by means of which mystical transformation has been symbolized. ... Many mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is the consciousness of God as negation, which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic's journey.²⁴

For Thomas Gallus, the Victorine, this took on a form that responded directly to the challenge of Aristotelian philosophy: the experience of the divine transcends reason and leaves it behind. The mystical project is irrational, and therefore naturally does not fit the

²⁴ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xviii-xix.

mold of Aristotelian philosophy. In the experience of God, reason is left behind, even rejected, in favor of a purely affective mode of being. Contrary to Abelard, who was satisfied with knowing God, Thomas says that there is no true knowledge of God, only feeling.

In Hadewijch's writings, this perspective is vehemently rejected. Although Hadewijch holds Love in priority over reason, as most mystics do, both are necessary and vital to the end. Hadewijch describes the unitive experience of God as going "beyond reason," but throughout her works, reason calls her back to live a life of virtue. Hadewijch is also critical of those who seek a merely affective approach to God, as well as those who depend on the feeling of fruition for their fulfillment in Christian living. In *L 10*, a treatise on virtue and love, Hadewijch warns not only that the feeling of sweetness can happen to the virtuous and the non-virtuous, but also that the feeling of sweetness is not always from God, rather "sometimes also the evil spirit is the cause of sweetness" (*L 10.51*). She writes of those who put their faith in sweetness rather than virtue:

Desire for God is sometimes sweet; nevertheless it is not wholly divine, for it wells up from the experience of the senses rather than from grace, and from nature rather than from the spirit. (*L 10.1*)

The imperfect man imagines he is greater in love because he tastes sweetness; yet it is not pure but impure. ... Love is not to be measured by sweetness but by the possession of virtues together with charity. (*L 10.19*)

We discover in these souls that as long as sweetness endures in them, they are gentle and fruitful. But when the sweetness vanishes, their love goes too; and thus the depths of their being remain hard and unfruitful. The reason is that they are not equipped with virtues. (*L 10.26*)

The soul that seeks God affectively does not endure in times of suffering. Throughout Hadewijch's work, reason calls the soul from sweetness to virtue. Far from rejecting reason, the experience of Love is enhanced and furthered by reason:

Reason instructs love, and love enlightens reason. When reason abandons itself to love's wish, and love consents to be forced and held within the bounds of reason, they can accomplish a very great work. (*L* 18.80)

Indeed, in a somewhat surprising passage Hadewijch even goes so far as to say that the experience of Love cannot be truly achieved without reason:

He who wishes all things to be subject to him must himself be subject to his reason, above whatever else he wills or whatever anyone else wills of him. For no one can become perfect in Love unless he is subject to his reason. For reason loves God on account of his sublimity. (*L* 13.17)

For Hadewijch, reason is vital for the Christian life because it reminds the soul constantly of its great debt to God and directs the soul toward the practice of virtue. This emphasis is in direct contrast to the affective mysticism of Thomas Gallus and similar writers of the Dionysian Renaissance.

This emphasis on virtue is not something unique to Hadewijch. Many scholars have pointed out the close connection between mystical theology and moral theology.²⁵ Indeed, for most Christians, the radical experience of God's grace causes nothing less than a radical social transformation of the individual. From Origen and Chrysostom to Hadewijch and Eckhart, the experience of God's majesty demands that we live lives of purity, holiness, and service to others.

²⁵ Kirk, *The Vision of God*; Janet K. Ruffing (ed.), *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001); Ray C. Petry, *Christian Eschatology and Social Thought: A Historical Essay on the Social Implications of Some Selected Aspects in Christian Eschatology to A.D. 1500*. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1956).

For Hadewijch, this aspect of the mystical life is particularly important for those who are living without the feeling of fruition of God's love. She writes to her community in the *Letters*:

You are still young, and you must grow a good deal, and it is much better for you, if you wish to walk the way of Love, that you seek difficulty and that you suffer for the honor of Love, rather than want to feel love. (*L* 2.6)

As Mommaers makes clear, much of Hadewijch's instruction in the *Letters* is intended to be read by a community of people who are despairing of the possibility of feeling God's presence, and Hadewijch offers comfort to them. But the opposite problem is also becoming a reality in the 13th century: the problem of so focusing on the affective experience of God that one forgets Christ's call to virtue. This explains the intense focus on virtue in the *Visions*, where Christ, Mary, the Divine Countenance, and all the Saints call Hadewijch over and over again to live the Humanity of Christ, to live a life of virtue in obedience to the God whose presence she knows and has felt. The Hadewijch of the *Visions* begins as one "too childish and too little grown-up" (*V* 1.1), but throughout the course of the book, she grows into a mature Christian and even joins the ranks of the perfect *because she obey's Christ's call to virtue*.

This presents an important point in Hadewijch's work. Thomas Gallus and other writers of the Dionysian renaissance viewed the experience of divine ecstatic union as an assurance of one's salvation. For Hadewijch this is vehemently not the case. The mystical experience proves that the human experience of the divine is possible, but it does not ensure the mystic's salvation. "If you love me, you will obey my commandments" (John 14:15). Living a life of virtue, in obedience to the command of Christ in Scripture,

ensures the individual's salvation. In this sense, even the life of one who never experiences the sweetness of God in fruition can be thoroughly mystical. Hadewijch claims with absolute clarity that: "No one can teach a person love, but these virtues lead one fully to love." (*L* 24.99) Love is not accomplished through the mystical experience. Love is achieved through virtue.

This is the important role that reason serves in Hadewijch's theology, something she makes clear in the *Visions*, but also in the *Letters* and *Poems*. In *L* 30.155-162, Hadewijch compares the mystical experience of God's sweetness to lighting, during which one can see nothing else because of the radical brightness.

But after that comes the thunder. Thunder is the fearful voice of threat: and it is retraction; and it is enlightened reason, which holds up before us the truth, and our debt, and our failure to grow up in conformity with Love, and our smallness compared to Love's greatness. (*L* 30.162)

Reason continually reminds Hadewijch, in light of her experience of God's majesty, that she is unworthy of God's love, and must therefore strive in all obedience to live a life of holiness and virtue. Similar themes are at play in Hildegard, who continually contrasts her lowliness with God's majesty. Thus, the mystical experience calls Hadewijch and her followers to a life of virtue.

Lest one think, though, that Hadewijch falls into the category of "works-righteousness," it is important to point out that Hadewijch roots the life of virtue, as she does with everything else, in the work of Christ. A life of virtue offers assurance of salvation, as a tree is known by its fruit, but a life of virtue in and of itself does not come close to matching the great debt that the human owes to the divine.

Even though you alone were to practice all the virtues that all men alive could practice, you must think all these virtues small and nothing whatever in comparison with God's greatness and with the debt you owe God in service and in love. (*L* 15.88)

Far from "earning" salvation, the life of virtue allows the Christian to become truly human, to "become what we are," by following the example of the perfect Man, and growing in union with him. This is the proper response of gratitude for God's work through Christ. Hadewijch makes this clear in a wonderfully Dutch way:

Before Love thus bursts her dikes, and before she ravishes man out of himself and so touches him with herself that he is one spirit and one being with her and in her, he must offer her noble service and the life of exile—noble service in all the works of virtue, and a life of exile in all obedience. . . . This is to be crucified with Christ, to die with him, and to rise with him. To this end he must always help us; I pray him for this, calling upon his supreme goodness. (*L* 6.361)

Far from "earning" salvation, the life of virtue allows the Christian to become truly human, to "become what we are," by following the example of the perfect Man, and growing in union with him. This, it is important to remember, is not accomplished until the return of Christ. Through the work of Christ the Christian is able to grow into the Humanity of Christ. Because of God's own love, the Christian is able to love God.

V. LOVING GOD WITH THE LOVE OF THE TRINITY

Hadewijch elucidates these themes beautifully in *Letter* 28, a lengthy treatise on the mystical experience which deserves careful consideration. In this letter, Hadewijch explains that the mystical experience is a gift of God, thoroughly rooted in the love of the Trinity. This experience is given by the Father, revealed by the Son, and made available through the Holy Spirit, who gives the Christian the powers to taste and see the divine.

Ultimately, in the mystical experience, as in the eschaton, redeemed and glorified humanity is able to experience God because God, through the Holy Spirit, infuses in the soul that which he is, Love. This is a traditional Christian teaching: that Christians know God and love God through the gifts that he gives to us, not through our own natural power.

Hadewijch begins *L* 28 with a brief explanation of the mystical experience:

In the riches of the clarity of the Holy Spirit, the blissful soul celebrates wonderful feasts. ... Whenever God gives the blissful soul this clarity, which enables it to contemplate him in his Godhead, it contemplates him in his Eternity, and in his Greatness, and in his Wisdom, and in his Nobility—and in his Presence, and in his Effusion, and in his Totality. It sees how God is in his Eternity: God through his own Divinity. It sees how God is in his Greatness: powerful in his own power. It sees how God is in his Wisdom: blissful in his own bliss. It sees how God is in his Nobility: glorious in his own glory. It sees how God is in his Presence: sweet with his own sweetness. It sees how God is in his Effusion: rich with his own riches. It sees how God is in his Totality: happy in his own happiness. (*L* 28.1-10)

It is clear even from this opening section that Hadewijch sees the mystical experience as a gift from God, in which the soul, together with God, by God, through God, and for God, is ennobled and enabled to see and understand God in everything that he is, not simply everything that he is not, as the tradition of apophatic mysticism would demand. Indeed, in the reception of this gift, the soul is completely dependent on God. The power, goodness, insight, and nobility by which the soul is enabled to see and understand God is not something that can be achieved by any human effort, rather, it is fully and completely a divine gift, which solves the problem of Aristotelian philosophy's strong distinction

between the human and the divine “Other.” Humanity is ennobled and enabled to see God by the divine presence within it through the habitation of the Holy Spirit.

This indwelling of the divine within the human allows the soul to see God as God sees himself, something which cannot be explained in human language. Hadewijch writes elsewhere:

Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose. ... No Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things (*L* 17.112).

Nevertheless, Hadewijch labors to explain this in Trinitarian language that cannot possibly begin to come close to the reality:

A blessed soul saw with God according to God; and it saw God enclosed and yet overflowing. And it saw God overflowing in totality, and total in overflowingness. And this soul spoke with its totality and exclaimed: “God is a great and unique Lord in eternity, and he has in his Godhead the Being of Three Persons: He is Father in his power; he is Son in his knowableness; he is Holy Spirit in his glory. God gives, in the Father; and he reveals, in the Son; and he enables us to taste, in the Holy Spirit. ... Thus God works with Three Persons as one Lord; and with one Lord as Three Persons; and with Three Persons in a manifoldness of the Divine riches; and with the manifoldness of the divine riches in the souls he has blessed, whom he has led into the mystery of his Father, and all of whom he has made blissful.” (*L* 28.101)

These apparent paradoxes are infused throughout Hadewijch’s writings as she attempts to communicate the nature of the divine that has been revealed to her in these mystical experiences. The most common paradox that Hadewijch focuses on is the transcendence and immanence of God, for God is both wholly other and radically present in all things. But for Hadewijch, it is precisely because of God’s transcendence that he is able to be immanently present to all people, in all places, throughout time and space. Likewise, God

is overflowing and total, enclosed within himself and yet available to all. These apparent paradoxes are made possible through the work of the Persons of the Trinity.

These apparent paradoxes extend to the human person because of the habitation of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. Thus Hadewijch can speak with all honesty about the soul's "totality," a term she generally reserves for God. Extending this principle further, in *L* 18, Hadewijch can say,

The soul is a bottomless abyss in which God suffices to himself; and his own self-sufficiency ever finds fruition to the full in this soul, as the soul, for its part, ever does in him. ... As long as God does not belong to the soul in his totality, he does not truly satisfy it. (*L* 18.63)

This perfection of the human person allows Hadewijch to say, continuing in *L* 28:

Between God and the blissful soul that has *become God with God*, there reigns a spiritual charity. So whenever God reveals this spiritual charity to the soul, there rises within it a tender friendship. That is, it feels within it how God is its friend before all pain, in all pain, and above all pain, yes, beyond all pain, in fidelity toward his Father. And this tender friendship gives rise to a sublime confidence. In this sublime confidence there rises a genuine sweetness. In this genuine sweetness rises a veritable joy. In this veritable joy rises a divine clarity. Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing. It sees a truth—Subsistent, Effusive, Total—which is God himself in eternity. The soul waits; God gives; and it receives. ... What God then says to it of sublime spiritual wonders, no one knows but God who gives it, and the soul who, *conformed to God's spiritual Nature, is like God* above all spiritualness. (*L* 28.121)

In the face of the Aristotelian claim that the finite cannot approach the infinite, Hadewijch says that humanity can indeed have fruition of the divine "Other," even to the point of "becoming God with God." Not only does Hadewijch claim that the soul finds its satisfaction in God, but she even goes so far as to say that the soul is unsatisfied until God belongs to the soul in his totality. The soul becomes God with God through the

divine gift of charity. The soul is “conformed to God’s spiritual Nature” and made like God above all spiritualness.

The boldness of Hadewijch’s language is nothing short of shocking, and would have been in her own day as well. Hadewijch realizes this, and explains herself in one of the most powerful passages in all of her writings:

I saw God was God, and man was man; and then it did not astonish me that God was God, and that man was man. Then I saw God was Man, and I saw man was conformed to God. Then it did not astonish me that man was blissful with God.
(*L* 28.231)

No matter how far Hadewijch seems to go in combating the claims of those who say the human experience of God is not possible, no matter how extravagantly she makes her claims, everything, ultimately, comes back to the work of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Because God binds himself to humanity in Christ, the potential for unity between God and humanity is realized. Because God unites his very nature to the human person through the Holy Spirit, the human soul is transformed and expanded and, in some sense, made divine. Even though humanity is created and finite, and ontologically-speaking therefore infinitely far removed from the divine “Other” in its nature, the unity of humanity and divinity that occurs in Christ in the Incarnation, and in the Christian in the work of the Holy Spirit, allows humanity to comprehend and see God fully. The perfected person loves God as God loves himself. The perfected person loves God with God’s own love.

This love allows the Christian to see God, know God, love God, and live for God. In what Hart calls “The Jacob Letter” (*L* 12), Hadewijch demonstrates this through the

story of Jacob wrestling with God on the bank of the Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32). Jacob is able to conquer God himself through the strength God gives him. This theme is repeated throughout the *Poems in Stanzas*:

Love conquers all things:
 May she help me to conquer in my turn! (*PS* 16.3)

Through Love I can fully conquer my misery and exile;
 I know victory will be mine. (*PS* 16.4)

Conquer me, so that I may conquer you
 In your unconquered Power. (*PS* 19.8)

In the exercise of virtue, God gives Hadewijch power to achieve the essence his divinity. God gives Hadewijch the necessary gifts and the necessary assurance so that she can persevere in virtue through times of suffering and exile. Hadewijch can rejoice in her sufferings because through suffering she experiences the Humanity of Christ, who also suffered the absence of the feeling of God's presence, and is thus able to love the whole of God in his Humanity and Divinity. Until Hadewijch recognizes and loves the Humanity of Christ, she cannot know God or experience him fully, but through the work of virtue, she is led by God into a recognition and love of this Humanity, which allows her to love God in his Divinity even more.

VI. CONCLUSION

For Hadewijch and other Christian mystics, the mystical experience is understood as a foretaste or inbreaking of the eschaton. This is the rich tradition to which Hadewijch turns in attempting to answer the challenges posed by Peter Abelard and Thomas Gallus. The human experience of the divine is possible because of the union of divinity and humanity that is achieved in the Incarnation. The life of virtue, demanded by reason, is necessary because it allows the Christian to live the Humanity of Christ and thus grow in

union with the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity. By bringing together the Unity of the Divinity and Humanity in Christ, God has opened the door for humanity to participate in the unity of the divine life of the Trinity. All of this is eschatologically focused. The eschatological nature of the mystical experience demonstrates not only that human experience of God is possible, but that it is assured. The majesty of God seen and felt so powerfully by the mystics demands a life of virtue in response. In all of this, Hadewijch and the other mystics point their readers to the ultimate *telos* of all things: the glory of the Triune God.

CHAPTER V

LEARNING FROM THE MYSTICS: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

I. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Through a careful reading of Hadewijch, in conversation with other medieval mystics, it seems clear that the Christian doctrine of eschatology is a major emphasis of their writings. The eschatological imagery, themes, and symbols used by the mystics point to the fact that they understand the nature of the mystical experience to be an inbreaking of the eschaton. The experience of mystical ecstasy is an imperfect, momentary taste of the perfect, eternal fruition in the presence of God in which they will rest for all eternity. This is possible because the eschatological realities promised in Scripture are already accomplished in the work of Jesus Christ, the God-man, and are therefore accessible on some level to individuals this side of the eschaton.

Hadewijch uses this traditional Christian doctrine to bring together all the various spiritual trends that characterize her age, affirming the work of the Cistercians and Hildegard of Bingen, while offering correction for the novelties of Peter Abelard and Thomas Gallus. Hadewijch brings together the zeal of new forms of spiritual expression, the theological rigor of traditional formulations of Christian theology, the experimental poeticism of new literary genres, and theological reflection on her own life experience to present the message of Scripture in a compelling and profound way that speaks particularly to her context. She offers assurance to those who are despairing of the possibility of human experience of the divine, strongly rebukes those who may be prone to reject the importance of reason or virtue, and passionately encourages her followers to pursue the Love of God in complete abandon. The promises of God are sure, indeed, they

are already accomplished in Christ. This gives Hadewijch and her followers the strength to stand firm in the face of suffering and in the experience of apparent abandonment by God, knowing that in the experience of suffering, they are living lives that reflect the Humanity of Christ.

As we have seen, though, this perspective is not limited to Hadewijch, but is present in many of the great mystics of the Christian tradition. Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hildegard of Bingen also emphasize the eschatological and apocalyptic nature of the mystical experience of the presence of God. This experience of God's presence is possible in this life and assured in the life to come because of the work of Christ, who unites the Divine with human nature in the Incarnation. The eschatological experience of the *visio dei* causes the human person to recognize his or her own frailty and finiteness, prompting total reliance on God's grace, and the exercise of virtue in obedience. By the grace of God, the Christian is given new power to live a life of virtue and love, in preparation for the return of Christ.

These insights allow us to make several important conclusions concerning the medieval Christian mystics. First, the mystics are thoroughly and profoundly theological. Their reflection on the visions and ecstasies that they experience are deeply rooted in the exegesis of Scripture and their reception of the teachings of the church. To strip the mystics of their theological language in an attempt to discover some sort of "spirituality" is an act of profound disrespect that does not recognize how important these doctrines are to them. The experience of the mystics cannot be divorced from the religion that they know and love and strive to live.

Second, the mystics are thoroughly eschatological. Far from viewing the return of Christ and the fulfillment of biblical promises as a far-away reality that the Christian ought occasionally to contemplate, for the medieval mystics, the truths proclaimed in the Christian doctrine of eschatology contain the *telos* of the whole creation. Eschatology thus occupies an omnipresent place in their work, rather than being appended at the end as something that they must reluctantly discuss. The current state of affairs—in which eschatology is often seen as otherworldly, distracting, or escapist—is leagues away from the medievals' thinking. For the medievals, these are matters of ultimate concern.

In addition, for the medievals, the eschaton is a reality that is already accomplished in the work of Christ, and therefore accessible on some level through the Spirit. This “realized eschatology” permeates their thinking, and allows them to explain why the eschatological realities that they experience in mystical contemplation could be accessible to people this side of Christ's return. In strong opposition to the Aristotelian notion of the inaccessibility of the divine to the human, the medieval mystics see the *visio dei* as a reality that is certain and sure, and one that Christians ought to strive toward throughout their lives.

Finally, because the eschaton is already accomplished in the work of Christ, these doctrines have important ramifications for how Christians ought to live their lives. The assurance of the promises of God offer comfort and hope, allowing Christians to live lives of virtue in obedience, even though this demands a life of suffering and self-denial. The life of Christ, who unites the Divinity and the Humanity in his person, demands that

Christians live faithful lives on this earth. This is the truest expression of love for God: to rejoice in one's sufferings, because in suffering, the Christian participates in the Humanity of Christ, and loves God in his Humanity and Divinity at the same time. For Hadewijch, and the other mystics, this is the immediate purpose of the mystical life: a life of virtue.

II. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

Throughout the writing of this thesis, many other issues arose that I think would profit further scholarship on Hadewijch and medieval mysticism. I have been limited in my study largely to English-language sources, and am not as aware of European scholarship on these topics, but I think the following projects would greatly benefit English-language scholarship on these topics.

Regarding Hadewijch, several things would be of great benefit to scholarship. As I mentioned above, Hadewijch (like all the medievals up through the 13th century or so) is profoundly rooted in Scripture. A work exploring Hadewijch's use of Scripture, especially her use of the Apocalypse of John and the Song of Songs, would benefit Hadewijch scholarship. Likewise, works exploring her use of symbolism and numerology would help to draw conclusions regarding the influence of other writers on Hadewijch, particularly Joachim of Fiore and Hildegard of Bingen, both of whom use numbers and symbols with great care and precision. A study of the influence of liturgy on Hadewijch would also be of interest, particularly the course of the liturgical feast days in Hadewijch's *Visions*. I would not be surprised to find that there is a very particular order

to the feast days that begin each vision. This would help modern readers to better understand Hadewijch's biblical, liturgical, and poetic imagination.

Additionally, it would be of immense value for someone to trace the influence and non-influence of Hildegard of Bingen on Hadewijch and later medieval mystics. As mentioned above, current works that explore the topic fall short of noting any actual literary influence of Hildegard on later mystics. But works like Carolyn Walter Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body* reveal that Hildegard did indeed have an important influence on the direction and articulation of important Christian doctrines throughout the high middle ages.

A related point, and one that is vital for the future of medieval scholarship, is to trace the development of theological themes throughout the medieval period, as Bynum's book on the doctrine of bodily resurrection has done. Similar works on doctrines that are of concern to the medievals, such as the doctrine of assurance of salvation, the work of the Holy Spirit, the intermediate state, etc., would be of great benefit not only to the historical study of theology throughout the medieval era, but also for systematic theologians. Such works should be sure to include the contributions of women mystics and theologians in more than simply a cursory way, and avoid ghettoizing them into their own separate chapters. These works would offer a great resource for systematic theologians as they seek to re-articulate Christian doctrines for their own era, seeing how other great theologians of history have done so in their contexts.

Finally, there ought to be a greater recognition on the part of historians of medieval mysticism and theology that the primary goal of (most of) the medieval mystics

and theologians is to re-articulate the traditional doctrines of the Christian church, rather than to invent new doctrines or change the fundamental teachings of the church. Theologians throughout history have struggled to articulate the truths of Scripture in new and diverse ways for their contexts, and the medievals are no exception. Introductions, commentaries, and other works on medieval religious writings ought to recognize that this is the primary goal of the medieval writers.

III. POST-SCRIPT: REFLECTIONS ON TRENDS IN PROTESTANT SPIRITUALITY

I would like to conclude this thesis with a non-academic post-script reflection on contemporary trends in Protestant spirituality. The past few decades have seen marked interest in the “spiritual, not religious” mentality in Western culture. This has found its way into the Western Protestant church as well, with a particular focus on affective worship and doing nice things for others as the primary means of feeling the presence of God, to the neglect of Christian doctrine, virtue, and the means of grace administered by the church. Quippy, well-known sayings demonstrate this widespread sentiment: “I love Jesus, not the church;” “Seminary is a cemetery for the Spirit,” “Deeds, not creeds.” All of these demonstrate a preference for an affective approach to God, to the neglect of doctrine, catechesis, discipleship, and spiritual discipline.

At the same time, in more doctrinally-minded denominations, there is an insistence on education and understanding to the neglect of the spiritual life. While these more conservative and doctrinal traditions do tend to have a stronger emphasis on prayer, too often, emotion and feeling are treated as secondary, unimportant, and even dangerous. The capacity for the feeling of the presence of God is stunted, sometimes even rejected as

an ontological impossibility, as can be seen in traditions that still hold to the doctrine of cessationism.

Interestingly, at the same time, throughout Western culture, while there seems to be an increased interest in things “spiritual,” there has been a decided decrease in interest in things “supernatural.” Eschatological doctrines especially—the return of Christ, the final judgment, the new heavens and new earth, the resurrection of the body, eternal life—are seen as otherworldly, distracting, and escapist. These doctrines are painted as distracting people from the true purpose of the Christian life, which is focused on this-worldly works of charity and relief work, to the neglect of the spiritual life. Rather than being things of ultimate concern, supernatural things are often ignored or glossed over in contemporary reiterations of the biblical narrative.

All throughout contemporary Protestantism, there is a lack of spiritual discipline and asceticism, although this is beginning to change through the work of some evangelicals such as Richard Foster and others. Overwhelmingly, however, Protestants seem unconcerned with practices of spiritual discipline, especially practices that emphasize self-denial. Even in works on spiritual disciplines, Protestant writers have a tendency to focus on celebration, feasting, and other expressions of joy. These works often present the aspects of self-denial and discipline as a helpful method for developing rhythm and consistency in one’s schedule, rather than focusing on the fallenness of human nature, the great debt owed to God for his grace, or the harmful influence of passions (in the classical sense) in one’s life.

The medieval mystics offer a helpful corrective to current thinking about spirituality, worship, and faith. Hadewijch's insistence on the necessity of both reason and affect in approaching God, and the medieval understanding of love as a form of knowledge, rather than as an emotion, offer helpful ways of thinking about the Christian experience of God. In addition, we see in the mystics a great love for Christian theology, and a devotion to the church, even when recognizing and naming its faults. The church is the body of Christ, the instrument of God's work in this world, and the primary means of experiencing the grace of God in this life through the administration of the Word and the sacraments. For the medievals, having a well-developed theology derived from Scripture and in line with the traditional teachings of the church is freeing, not restricting. It shapes the imagination to see God's truth in all aspects of life, and offers great comfort to those living lives of faith, especially those who do so in circumstances where they experience suffering.

Another theme of the medievals which serves as a helpful corrective is their insistence on a life of virtue and self-denial, in imitation of the Humanity of Christ. The Incarnation is foundational and transformative for the medievals because the Son of God becomes Human, takes on human flesh, and experiences suffering. This is a radical act of self-limitation and self-denial. Because of Christ's example, the medievals are motivated to live similar lives of virtue and self-denial, because in doing so, they become Christ-like, and are conformed to him in their own lives. This is a much healthier understanding of virtue than the current conceptions of "charity" that characterize much of Protestant social thought, which tend to be self-serving and self-promoting, placing one's "self" in a

position of authority and generosity over the “other” who is being served. Self-denial goes much further.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the way the medievals bring the supernatural to life. God is present and moving in their works, and it is easy for us to see that they are very much aware of what God is doing in the world. The promises of God and the presence of God are consistent emphases in their lives and in their writings. As Hadewijch makes clear, the God who is the Divine “Other” is also radically immanent in all things. The eschaton is already accomplished. This radical immanence of the Kingdom of God is both parenetic and comforting. The knowledge that God is always present to the believer offers great comfort and assurance, especially in those times when the presence of God is not felt. At the same time, it serves as an encouragement, motivation, and warning to live a life worthy of that presence, while also supplying the strength to do exactly that. The mystics offer a strong and clear message: our salvation is already accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ, Divinity and Humanity have been brought together in holy union, and we already now live in the presence of the Triune God, who gives us his strength and his love to persevere to the end.

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