

## Medieval Axial Mysticism: The Beguines

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. Literacy differentiates oral dialogue into a contrast between objectivity and subjectivity, intensifying both. In the lecture on Medieval arguments over God we saw increasingly objective, conceptual approaches to the divine. We then looked at chivalry and popular religious devotions as hybrid spiritualities, that while public and communal religious practices, tended to stress the importance of the cultivation of a private interior life as well. In this and the following lecture we turn to a mystical intensification of subjectivity as an approach to the divine. In this first lecture we shall explore two women mystics, Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete. They draw upon the chivalrous ethos of the day, but from a woman's point of view. In the following lecture we will explore the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, a male Dominican who will speak of the surrender of the self, but from a male perspective.
2. These mystics will also be the first to begin writing in the vernacular, that is in the spoken language of ordinary people, rather than in Latin, no longer anyone's mother tongue. Medieval Latin had rather become the technical, analytical language of universities, courts and the church. Indeed their works are among the very first manuscripts we have written in German and in French respectively.
3. Their use of their mother tongue in which they were raised, afforded them access to evocative, even erotic metaphor. So too we will find poetic allegory (1) not of the traditional ecstatic ascent into the heights, but rather of (2) humbling descent into the depths, to the very "ground" of the soul, experienced as a porous opening onto the divine. (3) Divine transcendence is thus approached through radical immanence.
4. It will also be a spirituality not restricted to scribal monks, priests and nuns, but accessible to ordinary literate urbanites whose calling lies in the world not outside of it. Both the Beguines and the Dominicans were new religious movements, whose members lived in the city rather than apart from the world in monasteries. They would devote themselves not only to contemplation but to apostolic work among the urban populace.
5. As I mentioned earlier, both women mystics drew significantly upon the ethos and tropes of medieval romance and chivalry to fashion a romantic, even erotic spirituality. Ballads and legends of chivalric romance was about forbidden love, idealized but not

consummated, between a knight and his lady. It was a forbidden love in that the Lady was already married to his or another Lord. Now such dynastic marriages were political and economic, not romantic, usually arranged not by the couple themselves but by parents and councilors at court. For romance, the lord could often take a mistress, but the lady was stuck in what could be a loveless marriage, isolated from other men.

6. The code of chivalry encouraged such romantic entanglements. A knight ought to compete in tournaments on behalf of his Lady, but their love must remain chaste, never to be consummated, for that would involve the betrayal of the Lord of them both. Lancelot, the paradigm of chivalry in the Arthurian romances and Guinevere, Arthur's queen, would cross that line and be condemned for it, indeed blamed for the decline and destruction of Arthur's ideal kingdom, Camelot. The legend was popular because it was so poignant, and because it spoke to its audience at court.
7. The very distance inherent to the couple's intimacy catalyzed both its intensification and its idealization. Romantic, chivalric love had to remain in the imagination, it could never be incarnate. It was a love then that would forever transcend everyday life in the world. It could never lead to an ordinary marriage. As such for Mechtilde and Porete it was a perfect analogue for their mystical love for the divine. However, contrary to the code of chivalry, both of our mystics will also speak of their erotic, sensual love of God being ultimately finally consummated, and at the instigation of their lover, God himself, no less. Yet even here, such a romance was not a love fit for this world and the two would suffer accordingly.
8. Mechtilde's mystical life began with a vision when she was a young teenager. Such religious experiences at the liminal boundary between childhood and adulthood is not uncommon for those who would later become mystics. Valentinus and Mani before her; Joan of Arc, Bernadette Soubirous and Joseph Smith after her, would report their founding visions occurring at a similar age. At the request of her spiritual director, Mechtilde would later share her personal journal of short poetry, allegories and dialogues in a book for her Beguine companions. (1) The opening lines of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* already illustrates the tone and genre of the book as a whole:

(2) *God's true greeting, coming from the heavenly flood, out of the spring of the flowing Trinity, has such force that it takes away all bodily strength and she (Mechtilde) takes on a divine radiance. Then the soul leaves the body, taking all*

*her power, wisdom, love and longing. Just the tiniest bit of her life force remains with the body as in a sweet dream*

9. She continues:

*He greets her in courtly language that one does not hear in the kitchen, clothes her in garments that one fittingly wears in a palace and surrenders himself into her power.*

*Then he draws her further to a secret place....*

*All alone with her he wants to play a game that the body does not know, not the peasants at the plows nor the knights at their tournaments, nor his lovely mother Mary—not even she may play it there.*

Her relationship with her divine beloved is more intimate than even that of Mary, for Mary is God's mother, while she is God's lover.

*Then she soars further to a blissful place of which I neither will nor can speak. It is too difficult, I do not dare, for I am a very sinful person. Yet when infinite God brings the unfathomable soul to the heights, she loses sight of the earth in her astonishment and is not aware of ever having been on earth. But just when the game is at its best, one has to leave it.*

“One has to leave it” in that such mystical ecstasy, like erotic ecstasy is only momentary. It cannot be sustained. Indeed as soon as one becomes aware of experiencing it, one has moved from the standpoint of the subject to that of an observer.

10. Thus while her language is fluid and sensuous, Mechtilde sees her physical body as only a limitation and an obstacle. In one place her body chastises her leading to an argument:

a. **Well woman, just where have you been? You come back so love-struck, lovely and vibrant, free and witty. Your carrying on has cost me my appetite, my sense of smell, my color and all my strength.**

b. *Shut up murderer! Quit your bellyaching. I'll always be on my guard with you around. That my enemy has been wounded—what do we care about that? It makes me glad.*

c. Later her body will complain once more,

**Where have you been? I cannot take it anymore!”**

But she will only rebuke it ,

*Quiet you fool! I want to be with my lover even it if means you perish.*

*For I am his joy, though he is my torment.*

d. How could her lover be her torment? Precisely because as soon as ecstasy reaches its crescendo she returns to herself and God withdraws. She cannot remain in ecstatic union with her lover any more than the knight and his Lady can remain

together for more than a moment. Indeed Porete will later refer to her divine lover as Lord *Loin-Près*, Lord “Far-Near.”

11. Now at this point Mechtilde still refers to her erotic ecstasy in the traditional language of an ascent of her soul to God. But it is an ascent only made possible by her own falling headlong into God and her surrender to him.

*No one is able or is permitted to receive this greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and has become nothing. In this greeting I want to die living. This the blind saints cannot ruin for me. **They** are the ones who love but do not know.*

12. And while chafing at bodily limitations, her language is indeed sensuous, replete with the kind of fluid, watery associations we saw in maternal cosmotheism:

*O you pouring God in your gift!  
O you flowing God in your love!  
O you burning God in your desire!  
O you melting God in union with your betrothed!  
O you resting God on my breasts!  
Without you I cannot exist.*

13. To which God responds:

**O you beautiful rose among the thorns!  
O you fluttering bee in the honey!  
O you unblemished dove in your being!  
O you beautiful sun in your radiance!  
O you full moon in the firmament!  
I cannot turn away from you.**

Thus not only has Mechtilde fallen in love with God but God has fallen equally headlong in love for her. God cannot turn away from her anymore than she can from God. Here is an unprecedented reciprocity between creature and creator, even a mutual vulnerability.

14. In another allegorical passage the senses, depicted as her handmaidens, complain of her longing for erotic ecstasy in the divine.

**Oh, Lady, if you go *there*, we shall go completely blind. The Godhead is so blazing hot, as you well know, that all the fire and all the glowing embers, that make the heavens and all the saints glow and burn, have flowed out from his divine breath and from his human mouth, according to the plan of the Holy Spirit. How can you stay there for even an hour?”**

15. Her response to them says it all:

*A fish in water does not drown  
A bird in the air does not plummet  
Gold in fire does not perish  
Rather, it gets its purity and its radiant color there.  
God has created all creatures to live according to their nature.  
How then am I to resist my nature?  
I must go from all things to God  
Who is my Father by nature  
My Brother by his humanity  
My bridegroom by love  
And I, his bride from all eternity  
He can both burn powerfully and cool consolingly*

16. There immediately follows a dialogue with God:

Then, the bride of all delights goes to the fairest of lovers in the secret chamber of the invisible Godhead. There she finds the bed and the abode of love prepared by God in a manner beyond what is human. Our Lord speaks:

**Stay, my soul**

*What do you bid me, Lord?*

**Take off your clothes**

17.

*Lord, what will happen to me then?*

**Lady soul, you are so utterly formed to my nature, that not the slightest thing can be between you and me. Never was an angel so glorious that to him was granted for one hour what is given to you for all eternity. And so you must cast off from you both fear and shame, and all external virtues. Rather those alone that you carry within yourself shall you foster forever.**

**These are your noble longing and your boundless desire. These I shall fulfill forever with my limitless lavishness.**

18.

*Lord, now I am a naked soul. And you in yourself are a well-adorned God. Our shared lot is eternal life without death.*

Then a blessed stillness that both desire comes over them.  
He surrenders to her and she surrenders herself to him.

What happens to her then—she knows, and that is fine with me....

But this cannot last long. When two lovers meet secretly, they must often part from one another inseparably.

God surrenders to her? No wonder she will run afoul of the church's hierarchy. While her Dominican spiritual director will encourage her writing, the official church will censure her and seek to suppress her work. But this is before the printing press, and some of her companions had already copied her writings for their own use and passed them on to the likeminded after her death.

19. Porete can be seen to pick up where Mechtilde leaves off. In her work, "The Mirror of Simple Souls" God never speaks though. Rather hers is an extended dialogue between Lady Love and her soul, with occasional guest appearances by Lady Reason and others. -tellingly, all women.

a. Porete will delineate seven stages of spiritual descent into the divine, of which the mystical ecstasy of Mechtilde is but the fourth, with three more yet to follow.

20. She too will begin with a cautionary preface addressed to the reader in which she acknowledges that her writings are difficult to understand properly, especially for academic theologians.

*You who will read this book that I have writ  
Consider well what you may say of it  
For it is very hard to understand  
But let Humility lead you by the hand.  
She, keeper of the key to Learning's treasure chest  
She, the first virtue, mother to all the rest.*

21. She continues:

*Men of theology and scholars such as they  
Will never understand this writing properly.  
True comprehension of it is possible only  
For those who have progressed in humility.  
You must let Love and Faith together be  
Your guides to climb where Reason cannot come,  
They who this house as mistresses do own.*

22. The first step in humility is to resolve to be a virtuous and faithful follower of Christ, following God's will in all things.

*The first state, or step, is when the Soul which is touched by God's grace and stripped bare of sin, so far as in its power, has the intention of keeping for life, that is, until death, the commandments of God, which he commands in the Law.*

*(2) And so this Soul considers and ponders with great fear that God has commanded her to love him with all her heart, and her neighbor as herself. This seems to this Soul to be labor enough for her and all that she is capable of doing.*

23. The second step speaks to those called to religious life:

*(1) The second state or step is when the Soul considers what God recommends to his special loved ones over and above what he commands; and he is no true lover who can abstain from doing all that he knows will please his love.*

*(2) And so the creature abandons himself and strains to act beyond the counsels of men in mortifying nature, in despising riches, delights and honors, to achieve the perfection of the evangelical counsels ...*

*(3) So she does not fear loss of possessions, nor men's words, nor feebleness of body for her beloved did not fear them, nor can any Soul who has been overwhelmed by Him." This is the heroic, chivalrous spirituality of Bernard and his fellow monks that we saw in an earlier lecture*

24. In the third stage she leaves such heroic idealism behind. For she aspires not to be heroic but to love. Thus what was hard is now easy, for the point is no longer the renunciation of her desires but the fulfillment of her dearest desire. Like Mechtilde before her, she speaks of this as taking leave of the virtues, for she acts now not out of moral virtue, but from erotic love. Elsewhere Poret will address the virtues:

<i>Virtues, I take my leave of you...</i>	<i>forevermore</i>
<i>And so my heart will have more joy...</i>	<i>and be more free</i>
<i>Your service is a lifelong yoke...</i>	<i>as well I see</i>
<i>Once I set all my heart on you...</i>	<i>with never no or nay</i>
<i>You know that I was pledged to you...</i>	<i>to me it seemed for ever</i>
<i>There was a time I was your serf...</i>	<i>but now I break away</i>
<i>All of my heart was set on you...</i>	<i>the truth is clear to me.</i>
<i>There was a time when all my life...</i>	<i>seemed nought but misery</i>
<i>Suffering so many cruel pains ...</i>	<i>so many torments</i>
<i>That it is a marvel I escaped alive ...</i>	<i>for in such servitude I lay</i>
<i>But so it is; I have no cares...</i>	<i>your ransom now I pay</i>
<i>And the great Lord above I thank...</i>	<i>that I might see this day</i>
<i>Now I have left your bondage...</i>	<i>I have paid you my last fee</i>
<i>I never knew till free of you...</i>	<i>that there could be such liberty</i>
<i>Your bondage have I left...</i>	<i>and now I am at peace</i>
	<i>and peaceful I shall be.</i>

25. Understandably this piety will later get the Beguines in trouble with the ecclesiastical church. As Lady Reason complains,

**“Ah, Love,”** says Reason, who understands only the obvious and fails to grasp what is subtle, **“what strange thing is this?...Is she not out of her mind, this Soul who talks like that?”**

*(1) No, not at all, for such souls as she possess the virtues better than any other creature, but these souls do not make use of them, for these souls are not in the service of the virtues as they once were.*

26. On the other hand,

*Everyone who persists in loving his obedience to the virtues does not and will not understand this as it should be understood. Be sure of this, Reason, for only those who understand it should seek after perfect Love. This soul is learning in the school of Divine Knowledge, and is seated in the valley of Humility and upon the plain of Truth and is at rest upon the mountain of Love.*

27. The fourth stage is Mechtilde’s stage of erotic union:

*The fourth state is when the Soul is drawn up by the exaltation of love, into delight in the thoughts that come in meditation, and freed from all outward labors and from obedience to another, through the exaltation of contemplation, whereby the Soul becomes so vulnerable, so noble and so delicate that she cannot endure anything to touch her, except only the touch of Love’s pure delight, which makes her full of joy and lighthearted...*

28. She continues:

*Ah, it is no wonder if such a Soul is overwhelmed, for gracious Love makes her wholly drunken, and so drunken that she does not let her pay heed to anything but to herself, because of the intensity with which Love delights her.*

*And therefore the Soul can esteem no other state of being, for Love’s great brightness has so dazzled her sight that she does not let her see anything except her love.*

*But in this she is deceived, for there are two other states of being, here below, which God bestows, which are greater and nobler than this*

29. To Poret’s way of thinking, Mechtilde’s longing for mystical union and torment when not in it, is still an adolescent mysticism, not mature love of the other but a self absorbed infatuation with the feelings of ecstasy. In the terms of Neolithic maternal cosmotheism, it is the mysticism of the maiden to be followed by that of the obedient wife and finally that of the authoritative matriarch.

In the fifth stage Porete transcends even her longing for ecstasy, annihilating her own will altogether. For the mystic now recognizes that for God to be everything she must be nothing:

*The fifth state is when the Soul considers that God is he who is, of whom all things are, and that she is not, and that it is not from her that all things are. And these two considerations give her a wondrous sense of dismay, and she sees that he is all goodness who has put free will into her.*

At this stage then Porete strives for indifference, whether ecstasy or emptiness. Her own will now is only in the way and so to that extent “evil”.

*(1) The Soul abandons this will and the will abandons this Soul... Now such a Soul is nothing, for through her abundance of divine knowledge she sees her nothingness, which makes her nothing and reduces her to nothingness.*

*(2) She sees herself through the depth of her knowledge of her own evil, which is so profound and so great that she cannot find there any beginning, compass or end, but only an abyss, deep beyond all depths, and there she finds herself in a depth, in which she cannot be found.*

30. She continues:

*Now this Soul has fallen from love into nothingness, without which nothingness she cannot be everything. And this fall has been so low, if she falls as she should, that the Soul is unable to raise herself up again from such an abyss; nor must she do this, but rather remain where she is.*

*(1) And there the Soul loses her pride and her girliness, for her spirit has grown old, and no longer lets her be lighthearted and glad, because her will has left her, which often, when she felt the stirrings of love, made her proud and overweening and fastidious, when she was exalted in contemplation in the fourth state. But the fifth state has subdued her in showing to the Soul her own self.*

31. Having unencumbered herself of her own will, in the fifth state the mystic sees only God.

In the sixth, she does not even see God. Rather it is God who sees Godself in her, through her, without her, that is without her own will or any effort on her part.

*(1) The sixth state is when the Soul does not see herself at all, whatever the abyss of humility she has within herself, nor does she see God, whatever the exalted goodness he has.*

*(2) But God of his divine majesty sees himself in her, and by him this Soul is so illumined that she cannot see that anyone exists, except only God himself, who sees himself in this very Soul by his divine majesty. And so this Soul in the sixth state is made free of all things and pure and illumined*

32. She continues:

*This Soul, thus pure and illumined, sees neither God nor herself,  
but God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her,  
who shows to her that there is nothing except him.  
And therefore this Soul knows nothing except him,  
and loves nothing except him,  
and praises nothing except him,  
for there is nothing but he.  
For whatever exists has its being from God's goodness;  
and God loves his goodness,  
wherever he has given it in goodness,  
and his given goodness is God himself*

In other words in the sixth state the mystic not only loves Christ above all things, but herself becomes a new Christ, a new incarnation of the divine in her own time and place. All that remains is to transcend the limitations of space and time altogether, by immolating herself into the divine.

33. This last stage can only be achieved after death. It is beyond even the beatific vision, for here she does not behold God face to face, eye to eye, but rather moves from second-person intimacy to first-person identification. In the words of the Upanishads, "That are thou."

34. Already in the fourth stage of erotic ecstasy Porete is beyond any word or image to describe her experience of the divine. Hence her preface, warning that those who look to reason, literate or oral, to understand her writings will misunderstand even be scandalized by her language which she freely confesses is hopelessly inadequate, evocative rather than descriptive, intuitive rather than clear and distinct. Similarly she ends her work with an apology for having even tried to write it in the first place.

*(1) It was Cowardice who guided the writing of this book, and who surrendered this intention to Reason through Love's replies to Reason's questions; and so it has been made by human knowledge and human intelligence.*

*(2) But human reason and human intelligence know nothing of interior love, nor does interior love know anything of divine knowledge.*

*(3) My heart is drawn up so high and plunged down so deep that I cannot reach it; for everything which one can say or write of God, or what one can think of him is far more lying than it is speaking the truth.*

35. Echoes of Dionysius, for whom whatever we say of God is more false than true. She closes with a song:

*So foolish was I  
When enslaved I did lie  
That though I should die  
I could not speak my heart to you and so be free.*

*Still, while the Virtues' serf was I  
Holding them more high  
For pure joy I would cry  
To hear men speak of Love and what was she.*

36.

*I have said that I shall love him.  
I lie, it is not I,  
But it is he alone who loves,  
Loves me.*

*He is, and I am not;  
And I need nothing more  
Than what he wills  
And what he is worth.*

*For he is complete,  
And from this so am I.  
This is the divine heart of hearts,  
This is the true love, that never parts.*

37. Margaret Porete's predictions that the institutional church, who also makes a brief appearance in her dialogue, in the character of Holy Mother Church the Little, that she would inevitably misunderstand her writings proved correct. Porete would meet an even harsher punishment than Mechtilde, indeed the Church meted out to Porete its ultimate punishment. A Dominican inquisitor brought Porete up before the theologians at the University of Paris on the charge of heresy. She was found guilty and was burned at the stake at the Place de Grève in Paris on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 1310.

The Beguine movement as a whole would be suppressed and its spirituality condemned as "the Heresy of the Free Spirit" a year later at the Council of Vienne, the same council that would also suppress that iconic military order of medieval chivalry, the Knights

Templar. Porete's book was burned as well, but once again copies would survive and circulate for centuries as an "anonymous" spiritual work.

Witnesses at Porete's execution would remark on "her serenity and noble bearing" as she was led to the pyre. What then did Porete herself make of her end? Was it God's own condemnation of her mysticism? Or rather was it not rather its final consummation? (1) Her fiery end, the final incandescence of her love for God? Her body reduced to ash, like the Buddha's Nirvana, did she approach her fate as the final stage of humility, for her now to fall into the divine life of the Holy Trinity for all eternity?