Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

HADEWIJCH THE BEGUINE

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HADEWIJCH LIVED AROUND THE MIDDLE of the thirteenth century, probably somewhere in what is now Dutch-speaking Belgium. We know almost nothing of her other than the works attributed to her in five closely related manuscripts. These consist of thirty-two letters, fourteen visions, forty-five poems in stanzas, as well as a further twenty-nine poems in mixed forms of which certainly sixteen and possibly tweny-four are by her.[1] No reference to her or to her life independent of the manuscripts has been found. From internal evidence it seems likely that she was writing in the first half of the thirteenth century. There is a tradition going back no further than the fifteenth century that she was active in Antwerp. On the other hand, most of the manuscripts appear to have originated in or around Brussels and she was well thought of by Jan van Ruusbroec and his circle. Her writing displays an outstanding mastery of language and a knowledge of the courtly literature of the time. She also had a knowledge of the writings of Richard of St Victor, Gregory the Great, Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux and others. Indeed one of her letters is a free translation of a tract by Richard of St Victor which suggests she could read Latin. This is corroborated by the fact that in several of her poems she uses Latin tags to complete lines or for the refrain. To have enjoyed this level of education was not unusual for a woman at this period, but it was confined to women from the aristocracy or the emergent merchant classes. It seems likely therefore that Hadewijch would have belonged to such a family.

As well as consummate literary skill, the texts reveal a remarkable level of theological and spiritual insight – Hadewijch was clearly a profound thinker. However, in the encounter with her texts we should remember that, as a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas, she was writing before his systematic theology gained the reputation it was to have, and also before Aristotle's rationalisation of thought had taken hold. If we look for a Thomist, systematic, or speculative rationalization of theology we will be disappointed.What Hadewijch presents us with instead is a profound sense of the mystery of God and of God's love of humankind. Theology originally meant words about God based on experience. Hadewijch, like the great monastic theologians before her, speaks not with the voice of rational argument, but from the depth of her experience of God as the (W)Holy Other. Her theology is not rooted in theorizing or speculation. No construction of philosophical theories or doctrine will be found in her texts. Faced with the *tremendum mysterium* of God, she attempts to awaken the sense of it in others.

Hadewijch is generally thought to have been a Beguine. The Beguines were a women's religious movement which developed in the early thirteenth

century.[2] Many of the great thirteenth century mystics were associated with the Beguines, for example, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Beatrijs of Nazareth and Marguerite Porete.[3] The women, many of them like Hadewijch from well-to-do families, lived together in communities varying in size from a handful to several dozen. They did not follow any established rule, but lived lives of apostolic poverty and chastity doing works of charity among the poor and the sick. They are frequently associated with hospitals, especially leper hospitals, and with schools. In 1215 papal dispensation had been granted for them to live together in this way and for the women to exhort each other to greater faith. It is to this dispensation that we owe the flowering of religious and theological texts in the vernacular at this time.The papal dispensation is also the clue to the way in which we should read the texts by Hadewijch. Although to modern eyes much of Hadewijch's work appears to be outpourings of a personal nature, we should not forget that they are in fact didactic literature – she was writing to teach others. Her texts were intended as spiritual guidance for her community, and much of what they have to convey can be applied today.

In view of the Church's reputation for antagonism to women as teachers, it is reasonable to ask how Hadewijch justified to herself and to others the teaching role she took upon herself. The attitude of the Church in the early and middle medieval period has been somewhat exaggerated.[4] There was, of course, a strong tradition of misogynist writing following the example of Jerome and others, but there were also many who argued against it. Furthermore, women had always been allowed to teach other women. Indeed, this explains the very high levels of learning in many convents prior to the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, Hadewijch, as a lay woman rather than a member of an established order, was in a slightly different position. The papal dispensation granted to the Beguines to exhort one another to greater faith and good works did much to regularize this kind of activity in the eyes of the Church, at least initially. She herself, with the confidence of one certain of the importance of her role, draws neither on tradition nor on papal dispensation, but goes directly to the Bible for the justification of her speaking.

In Poem in Couplets 3 she speaks of Mary Magdalene as the great example to be followed by herself and her audience, and the aspect of Mary Magdalene's life to which she draws attention is the fact of her being the first to have seen the risen Christ. Hadewijch quotes the words of Jesus instructing Mary Magdalene to go and tell what she has seen, This, for Hadewijch, is the justification of her own speaking – she too is obeying the injunction of the risen Christ to tell what she has seen. This justification for speaking is one adopted, explicitly or implicitly by many women visionaries during the Middle Ages. Some indeed recount visions in which God gives them explicit instructions to reveal what he has shown them.[5] Hadewijch is one of the few who applies directly to herself and her fellow Beguines Christ's instructions to the women known as the 'Apostle to the Apostles'. Also remarkable is the fact that she does not restrict the command to what she has seen in visions, but applies it more generally to sanction her wider spiritual teaching.

Early in her career Hadewijch had a number of visionary experiences. Fourteen of these are preserved for us in the manuscripts. For many people such experiences are seen as signs of special grace, indicative of a high degree of favour with God. Hadewijch, however, reflects the general scepticism of the Middle Ages when she suggests that visions are by no means necessarily indicative of grace. She describes how God may give such experiences early on to encourage souls, but makes clear that these favours are just the first stage of a long and hard road. They are among the childish things of which Paul speaks and which need to be put away as the soul progresses. It seems likely that, following these experiences, Hadewijch herself went through a long period without any visions or other such indications of God's favour, and this helped her realize that the depth and richness of the relationship with God illustrated by visionary experiences is insignificant compared with that reached through suffering. This view by one of the more remarkable medieval mystics can serve as a useful corrective today, when there can be a tendency to establish a personality cult around visionaries.

Hadewijch, in an effort to evoke in her audience something akin to her own experience of God, uses imagery and metaphor to transmit her teaching. She also uses literary form, and one aspect of her teaching which has a particular resonance today is her sense that God is above gender. Especially in her Poems in Stanzas, but also elsewhere, Hadewijch speaks of God using feminine nouns, pronouns and adjectives almost interchangeably with masculine. The relationship between God and the soul she describes is very far from the standard patriarchal relationship currently decried by feminists and others. However, it would be wrong to interpret this as evidence of feminist theology *avant la lettre*. During the Middle Ages the notion of gender and gender difference was much more fluid than it is today. Male and female were seen as the ends of a continuum, more certainly joined by the fact of being creatures before God than divided by their sexual differences.[6] There is therefore a danger that we with our post-Freudian mind-set will interpret medieval texts in quite anachronistic ways, that we will see significance in juxtapositions which would have been considered entirely without significance at the time of composition. Hadewijch, taking the biblical text that God is love, refers to God as *Minne*, 'Love'. As a feminine noun, the noun *minne* takes feminine adjectives and pronouns. However, to argue that Hadwijch was making a proto-feminist statement by speaking of God in this way is to ignore the occasions when she speaks of God as a feudal lord or as a knight in battle. Such simplification does justice neither to the subtlety of Hadewijch's thought nor to feminist theology. More helpful than imposing our agendas on her texts is to see what her attitide might have to say to our situation.

The forty-five Poems in Stanzas are one of the most remarkable poetic achievements in the Dutch language. Hadewijch has taken the form and conventions of the French courtly love lyric and transposed them into Dutch, and from secular to religious love.[7] Typically, this kind of poem is a lament by the faithful lover-knight about the fickle behaviour and unreasonable demands

of his lady. Hadewijch speaks of God as *Minne* (Love), as the distant lady, and of herself as the faithful (male) lover. In poem 9 she describes the knight as follows:

> A handsome mien, fine clothes
> And fine language adorn the knight;
> To suffer all for Love without bitterness
> Is a handsome mien for those who can do it;
> His clothes are then his actions,
> Performed with new ardour and without complacency
> And more ready to help strangers in every need
> Than his own friends;
> That is colour, these tokens of nobility
> Count most highly in Love's eyes.[8]

She develops the image to draw the attention of her audience to behaviour appropriate for the knightly lovers of Love. It is important not to show what one is suffering – that is the significance of her emphasis on the handsome mien or appearance of the knight. Elsewhere, the fiction enables her to speak more fully of the sacrifices required in the service of God and of the divine, and of the unswerving, single-minded devotion in the midst of suffering and confusion required of the loyal servants. The gender reversal she employs (speaking of herself and her audience as a man) also enables her to illustrate, as well as simply describe, the fact that the relationship between God and the soul is completely 'other' – it is like nothing her audience has ever experienced before. Many of the Beguines will have been wives and mothers and have been courted with poetry like that being read to them, but in none of these relationships will they have been the man, the lover-knight.

Hadewijch's choice of *Minne* (Love) as the name for God enables her to exploit the ambiguity inherent in the word to good effect.[9] Since the word is only rarely capitalized in the original manuscripts, it can be very difficult to determine when it is being used as a proper noun referring to God, and when as a noun referring to the emotion, whether as God's love for humankind or as the soul's love for God. This difficulty mirrors that of the original audience of the texts who will have listened to them, rather than read them as we do now. A striking example occurs at the end of Poem in Couplets 15:

> O love, were I love
> And with love to love you, love
> O love, for love grant that love
> May know love wholly as love.[10]

The ambiguity inherent in the use of the word *minne* helps to illustrate a profound point, namely that the love wherewith we love God is the love wherewith he first loved us, and is indeed the love that is God.[11] In addition to

ambiguity, Hadewijch also makes use of paradox to illustrate the unfathomable nature and fascination of God. Poem in Couplets 13 is little more than a list of paradoxes which gradually overwhelm the listener in much the same way as the verse quoted from Poem in Couplets 15 does. For example:

> That which is sweetest of love is her storms;
> Her deepest abyss is her most glorious form;
> To go astray in her, that is to come near;
> To starve for her sake, that is to feed and to taste;
> Her despair is to be in bliss . . .[12]

In this way Hadewijch uses language and images to show that all speech about God must be metaphorical – words when applied to God do not mean the same as when applied to creatures.[13] The ways in which Hadewijch deliberately moves between the meanings of *minne* and other ambiguous terms alerts her audience to the error of mistaking metaphor and analogy for fact. Here, too, she has a valuable lesson for us today when many misunderstandings about Christian dogma are grounded in the assumption that metaphors commonly used to speak of God are literally true.

A powerful sense of God as the supremely 'other' permeates all of Hadewijch's work. She is not afraid to face the potentially awe-full nature of the gulf that separates God from God's creatures. That such experience is acceptable may be of comfort today as it was then. In Poem in Stanzas 17 she writes:

> How life horrifies and grieves
> The one who has given his all for all
> And is driven far along paths in the dark
> From whence he thinks never to return,
> And is crushed in a storm of despair.
> What grief can compare with this pain?[14]

Earlier in the poem Hadewijch speaks of how she had hoped to play in the sunshine, so the reference to the dark is especially poignant. Another example is where Hadewijch describes the seven names of God, of which the seventh is 'Hell'. She writes:

> Forever to be in unrest,
> Forever assault and new persecutions,
> To be wholly devoured and wholly engulfed
> In her (Love's) unfathomable nature,
> To founder in incandescence and in cold every hour
> In the deep high darkness of Love
> This exceeds the pains of hell.
> He who knows Love and her comings and goings

> Has experienced and can understand
> Why it is truly appropriate
> That Hell should be the highest name of Love.[15]

The question arises whether Hadewijch may here not be speaking of her experience of loving God rather than of her experience of God, although as we have seen there is a sense in which these two are the same. Her use of the word *minne* to refer to the Divine enables her to say things about her experience of God which might otherwise be hard to understand. Here as elsewhere, the suffering Hadewijch speaks of is psychological. She is very critical of those who create physical suffering by neglecting the body, and this emphasis on psychological pain gives what Hadewjich has to say about suffering increased relevance today.

In her thirteenth vision Hadewijch is shown the various stages on the approach to God, to *Minne*. The eighth and highest way is to realize that the closest one can get to God is in the suffering caused by the awareness of God's absence. She has already illustrated this in her use of paradox as quoted earlier, and here she writes:

> And the eighth is to be touched by bliss which does away with everything that pertains to reason, and love falls into union with love . . . What love gives turns bitter and is consumed and devoured, what she takes becomes riches by means of the greater desire for bliss of this demand of love which is every hour as great as herself.[16]

Here again there is no distinction made between the love that is God and the love that motivates the soul. The soul becomes aware that whatever God gives ceases thereby to be God and therefore cannot satisfy her longing to be one with him. The soul's desire for God becomes ever greater and it is in the greatness of this unfulfilled love that the soul is able to become one with the love that is God. Hadewijch shows that the pain and suffering of human exile is the place of closest encounter with God. Many today are inclined to see pain or suffering as wholly negative, and even as a punishment. Hadewijch may help us to find a way of redeeming pain in ourselves and others.

As the quotations above illustrate, Hadewijch does not shy away from the *tremendum* aspect of God, from the awe-fullness of the Divinity. In her vision of the Trinity in Vision 1 she turns to find herself on the edge of an abyss filled with a terrifying whirlpool which represents Divine fruition:

> I turned around and saw I standing before me a cross like crystal, clearer and whiter than crystal. And through it a great space was visible. And in front of the cross I saw a seat like a disc, more radiant than the sun in its most radiant power and beneath the disc three columns . . . And in the middle under the disc, a whirlpool revolved in such a frightful manner and was so terrible to see that heaven and earth

> would be astonished and made fearful by it. The seat that resembled a disk was eternity. The three pillars were the three names by which the wretched ones who are far from Love understand him. The pillar like fire is the name of the Holy Ghost. The pillar like topaz is the name of the Father. The pillar like amethyst is the name of the Son. The profound whirlpool, which is so frightfully dark, is divine fruition in its hidden storms. On this mighty seat sat the one whom I was seeking and with whom I desired to be one in fruition.[17]

Noteworthy in this passage is the suggestion that the one Hadewijch seeks is the unity of the one God.[18] The three elements of the Trinity support the One and are the names or aspects by which the One is known by those who are far off. This insight, that Trinitarian language is the way in which the aspects of God are made known and comprehensible to humankind, is of course not unique to Hadewijch, but could prove especially valuable today in discussions with the other two monotheistic religions.

The study of texts such as these can be a tremendous source of inspiration and strength to us today. The extra work involved in seeking to understand the context in which the authors were writing is amply rewarded by the dawning realization that a common bond links all those who seek earnestly to draw near to God. As we have seen, for Hadewijch the *tremendum mysterium* aspect of the Deity is central to her understanding of God. Her sense of horror and awe, as well as the fascination and the love, is the product of the acknowledgement of her creaturehood before God. In the twentieth century we have somewhat lost the awareness of the numinous, to use Rudolf Otto's word, in the desire to emphasize the accessibility and humanity of Jesus.[19] It may be time for the pendulum to begin to swing back. Hadewijch articulates what many have felt, namely the wonder at the love that is God while trembling in fear and awe at the gulf that separates Creator from creature. As the attendance in many churches drops, the value of regaining a sense of God as the (W)Holy Other may be realized once again. Church services are friendly but frequently contain no real sense of worship. It is at least arguable that this could be a reason for their increasing failure to attract. Humankind needs a sense of awe, of the holy. By re-acquainting ourselves with ways of dealing with the numinous, guided by those who have gone before us, we may find ways of talking about God that attracts an audience.

NOTES

[1] Unfortunately, most Hadewijch scholarship is in Dutch. For a discussion in English of the manuscript tradition and of scholarship to date see S. Murk Jansen, *The measure of mystic thought: a study of Hadewijch's mengeldichten*, Göppinger Arbieten zur Germanistik 536, (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1991).

[2] For an excellent survey of medieval religious movements in general and the Beguines in particular see Herbert Grundmann's seminal work recently translated into English for the first

time: Herbert Grundmann, *Religious movements in the Middle Ages*, translated by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

[3] See, for example, a recent book of essays examining the influence of the Beguines on Eckhart: *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine mystics*, edited by Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum Press, 1995).

[4] By the end of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth century, Church opinions had hardened and the education of women had gone into decline from which it was only to emerge several hundred years later.

[5] Examples of this are Hildegard of Bingen and Mechtild of Magdeburg.

[6] This view was changing towards the end of the thirteenth century as Aristotelian thought began to replace the Platonic world-view.

[7] That she was able to keep to the rigorous and complex rhyme schemes of the French when writng these poems in Dutch (two languages that function very differently from each other, for example Dutch has the verb at the end of the sentence) is a measure of her skill as a poet.

[8] Poem in Stanzas 9:31–40. Translations and all references to texts are taken from the only available translation of most of Hadewijch's work, with my own amendments. *Hadewijch the complete works*, translated by Mother Columba Hart, The Classics of Western Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1981). The reference to colour is significant as the wearing of colours other than brown and shades of buff was restricted to specific classes during the Middle Ages.

[9] That this ambiguity is still troubling scholars today is illustrated by the extensive debate about exactly what Hadewijch meant by *minne*. Some scholars have taken the view that she uses the word to refer to the Holy Spirit, but there are places where she is clearly speaking of God the Father or the Son. Others have argued that she is speaking not of God, but rather of the personification of God's love for humankind, or possibly of the soul's love for God. These explanations, too, can be countered by examples where she is definitely speaking of God.

[10] Poem in Couplets 15:49–52.

[11] See, for example, the discussion in I John 4.

[12] Poem in Couplets 13:1–5.

[13] This was to prove problematical for Eckhart early in the fourteenth century.

[14] Poem in Stanzas 17:25–30.

[15] Poem in Couplets 16:158–164.

[16] Vision 13:180–193 (Hart, p 300).

[17] Vision 1:216–247 (Hart, p 267).

[18] The definition of *Minne* as the essential unity of the Supreme Being is interesting in view of the debate that there has been about the exact import of the term for Hadewijch.

[19] Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the Holy*, translated by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).