

# A BEGUINE'S SPECTRE

**Marguerite Porete (†1310), Achille  
Gagliardi (†1607), and  
Their Collaboration across Time**

*Juan Miguel Marín*

**B**ETWEEN THE MONTHS of May and September 1584, in the Italo-Hispanic duchy of Milan, a laywoman, Isabella Cristina Berinzaga, took up the Spiritual Exercises that Jesuits were teaching across Italian cities. Achille Gagliardi, a Jesuit, led her in the religious practice, yet the teacher–disciple relationship turned around when Berinzaga began having mystical experiences and intellectual illuminations. Gagliardi would later say of her:

... this soul has [gained] the particular gift of being able to penetrate the heart ... at its most intimate, in such a way that when I think of what she has worked in me, I am truly astonished.<sup>1</sup>

Following a centuries-old tradition of confessors collaborating with women in writing mystical texts, Gagliardi collected her teachings under the title *Per via di annichilazione* ('By way of annihilation').<sup>2</sup> He would then work on a short treatise which could serve as a scholarly and theological exposition of Berinzaga's mysticism, *Breve compendio di perfezione cristiana*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pietro Pirri, 'Il Achille Gagliardi, la dama milanese, la riforma dello spirito, e il movimento degli zelatori', *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*, 14 (1945), 62. See also Achille Gagliardi, 'On Preparation for Prayer', *The Way*, 46/1 (January 2007), 91–99; and Achille Gagliardi 'Requirements for the One Giving and for the One Receiving the Exercises', *The Way*, 42/2 (April 2003), 29–40. Available online at [www.theway.org.uk/Back/461FIT.pdf](http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/461FIT.pdf) and [www.theway.org.uk/Back/422FIT.pdf](http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/422FIT.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Isabella Cristina Berinzaga, *Per via di annichilazione* (Rome: Gregorian UP, 1994). For background on the gender aspects of holy women authors and their confessors see Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P, 1999); John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006) and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Indiana: U. of Notre Dame P, 1995) 26–52. For the later medieval period after 1450 see Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives* (New York: Cornell UP, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Achille Gagliardi, *Breve compendio di perfezione cristiana* (Rome: Gregorian UP, 1994).

Many translations of his Italian manuscripts survive; in particular, in 1612, the Benedictine abbess Mary Percy read a French translation of the *Breve compendio* and retranslated it, in collaboration with the Jesuit Anthony Hoskins, as *Abridgement of Christian Perfection Containing Many Excellent Precepts, and Aduertisements, Touching the Holy, and Sacred Mysticall Diuinity*.<sup>4</sup>

Gagliardi sums up a medieval mystical path that begins with a so-called ‘annihilation’, *annichilazione*. When the soul conforms by accepting God’s will, this makes it lose its deformities, even its own unique form, becoming a reflection of God’s divine form in an ultimate stage of ‘deiformity’, *deiformità*. Gagliardi was writing during the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, a time when each warring European faction insisted that only its side carried the divine banner of reform, while the other side could only de-form the Christian faith. The women to whom he ministered were also associated with deformity—considered at the time to be ‘deformed males’, defective individuals not adequately reflecting God’s true form.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Gagliardi and Berinzaga taught that *all* souls are deformed by the obstacles that obscure God’s light. *All* souls can be annihilated and re-formed when God imprints on them *all* of the divine image. Although these teachings emerged, in Mary Percy’s words, from the ‘fraile and weake understanding of a

<sup>4</sup> Facsimile published in *Catherine Greenbury and Mary Percy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). For a brief introduction see xvi–xxi. Slightly changed editions appeared in 1625 and 1626. See A. F. Allison, ‘New Light on the Early History of the *Breve Compendio*: The Background to the English Translation of 1612’, *Recusant History*, 4/1 (1957–58) and Paul Arblaster, ‘The Infanta and the English Benedictine Nuns: Mary Percy’s Memories in 1634’, *Recusant History*, 23/4 (1997), 508–527. For a wider historical context see also the dissertation by Jaime Goodrich, *Early Modern Englishwomen as Translators of Religious and Political Literature, 1500–1641* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2008), 398–452.

<sup>5</sup> This idea comes from Aristotle, though St Thomas Aquinas, the primary scholastic authority for Jesuits of Gagliardi’s time, mitigates it. Aquinas accepts the scientific thought of his time, according to which woman’s nature, biologically speaking, is a deformed version of man. Nevertheless, as he replies to his critics, in regard to human nature women are fully human: God formed *both* male and female. ‘As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten .... On the other hand, as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten, but is included in nature’s intention as directed to the work of generation .... Therefore, in producing nature, God formed not only the male but also the female.’ (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 92, a. 1.) For the entire question see <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm>. For the controversies surrounding ‘the concept of woman’, and the dialogue between late medieval women mystics, including Porete, and male religious, including Aquinas, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 27–180, 321–438. For the transition to the Renaissance and Reformation centuries see its section ‘Women’s Contributions to the Reform of the Concept of Woman’, 1065–1070.

simple woman,' they alarmed several officials from the Holy Inquisition.<sup>6</sup>

In order to allay inquisitorial concerns about the controversial doctrines of annihilation and deification, Gagliardi had to spend the next decade revising his text. Despite this, permission to publish it was granted only after his death. Though all the Italian printed editions of Gagliardi's manuscripts are faithful to orthodox teaching, the Inquisition put them on the Index of Forbidden Books, along with other mystical texts teaching 'new doctrines' and 'dangerous imaginations and illusions'.<sup>7</sup> This only makes sense when we compare variations in the earliest manuscripts and read them in light of the censors' comments. Then we discover that Berinzaga and Gagliardi did indeed have radical ideas, especially in relation to 'annihilation' and 'deification'. While Gagliardi strove for orthodoxy in his publications, we will see that part of his difficult situation was due to falling under the spell of a kind of spirituality about which he had read in a book by another laywoman, who lived centuries earlier, the medieval beguine Marguerite Porete.



### **The Mirror of Simple Souls**

Porete was burned at the stake in 1310, charged with claiming in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, that 'the annihilated soul is freed from the virtues'.<sup>8</sup> The Inquisitors understood her as advocating indifference

<sup>6</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', in Catherine Greenbury and Mary Percy, 5; and see Achille Gagliardi, *Commentaire des Exercices spirituels d'Ignace de Loyola (1590); suivi de, Abrégé de la perfection chrétienne (1588)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), 22, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Pirri, 'Il Achille Gagliardi', 53; Edoardo Barbieri 'Fra tradizione e cambiamento: note sul libro spirituale del xvi secolo', in *Libri, biblioteche e letture dei frati mendicanti (secoli XIII–XIV): Atti del XXXII convegno internazionale, Assisi, 7–9 Ottobre 2004* (Spoleto: Fondazione centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2005), 39. See also Sabrina Stroppa, 'L'annichilazione e la censura: Isabella Beriganza e Achille Gagliardi', *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa*, 32 (1996), 618–625.

<sup>8</sup> 'Paris Condemnation', quoted in Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York: State U. of New York P, 2001), 109.

to moral dogmas and offering a licence to engage in shameful behaviour. But, as Porete explains, the free will of an annihilated soul,

... takes account of neither shame nor honor, of neither poverty nor wealth, of neither anxiety nor ease, of neither love nor hate, of neither hell nor paradise.<sup>9</sup>

Her teachings on annihilation and union with God echoed ideas that had been associated decades before with the so-called 'heresy of the free spirit': 'blasphem[ies]' such as that 'a person can become God' through arriving at a state where 'a soul united to God is made divine'.<sup>10</sup> In his study *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, Robert E. Lerner identifies these two doctrines as characteristic of the 'free spirit' movement, condemned at the 1311 Council of Vienne as an 'abominable sect of certain evil men known as beghards and some faithless women called beguines'.<sup>11</sup> Lerner found that this group was composed disproportionately of women, who included Marguerite Porete. Of the men, many were also involved with the lay pious women who were known as beguines.<sup>12</sup>

Lerner follows most historical research about free spirits and beguines in not reaching beyond northern and central Europe or the fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> He specifically tells us that he has found no evidence for free spirits any later, and claims that 'by the end of the fifteenth century the doctrines of the Free Spirit were known only to encyclopedists and antiquarians'.<sup>14</sup> But if we follow Lerner in considering the free spirit movement, not as a distinctive sect, but as a "free-spirit style" of affective mysticism particularly congenial to thirteenth-century religious women', then their history has a sequel.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated and introduced by Ellen L. Babinsky (Mahwah: Paulist, 1993), 84. It would be interesting to compare Porete's teaching on indifference with that of Ignatius of Loyola.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Compilation concerning the New Spirit', in Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 491.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ad Nostrum', in McGinn, *Essential Writings*, 493. And compare Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 229, 35 following.

<sup>13</sup> See Romana Guarnieri, 'Beghinismo d'oltralpe e bizzochismo italiano tra il secolo XIV e il secolo XV', *Analecta tertii ordinis regularis sancti Francisci*, 17 (1984), 1. And compare Guarnieri, *Donna e chiesa tra mistica e istituzioni* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 242.

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Lerner, 'Introduction' to Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (Indiana: U. of Notre Dame P, 1995).

I have argued elsewhere that the distinctive, extreme doctrines of annihilation and deification arose out of a fertile beguine imagination that nourished Porete's own individual and influential ideas in the *Mirror of Simple Souls*.<sup>16</sup> Here, Gagliardi's appropriation of these doctrines will help us see how Porete's spectral presence haunted Europe centuries after her death.<sup>17</sup> Although condemned by medieval inquisitors, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* survived as an underground classic of Christian piety, even published in 1911 by the Downside Benedictines in a modern English translation with the formal Church approvals of *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*. While many women were involved alongside Gagliardi in their preservation, Gagliardi never accepted the inquisitorial attitudes that pejoratively dismissed these doctrines as 'feminine'. In fact, he identified them as the essence of traditional mystical theology. Gagliardi's *Breve compendio* exemplifies for us today how collaborative ministry with women flourished among Jesuits who cherished a mystical spirituality that was considered suspect. It flourished even when they faced the threat of inquisitorial arrest.

### ***The Soul's Annihilation***

Beguines were condemned at the Council of Vienne, but this only led most of them to become integrated into more orthodox structures, especially in Italy.<sup>18</sup> Many Italian beguines ended up in enclosed women's communities such as the Benedictine congregation of St Giustina which, as late as the fifteenth century, was obliged to prohibit the reading of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*.<sup>19</sup> Others affiliated themselves with male communities, especially Franciscans and, in the sixteenth century, Jesuits. Isabella Berinzaga, with whom Gagliardi collaborated, became one of these beguines, now called *beatas*, *bizzoche* or, as Gagliardi preferred, 'daughters of the Society of Jesus'.

Recent studies seem to suggest that the language of 'annihilation' was particularly popular among Italian women of the first half of the sixteenth century, when the availability of the *Mirror* was at its peak, with probably 36 copies circulating.<sup>20</sup>

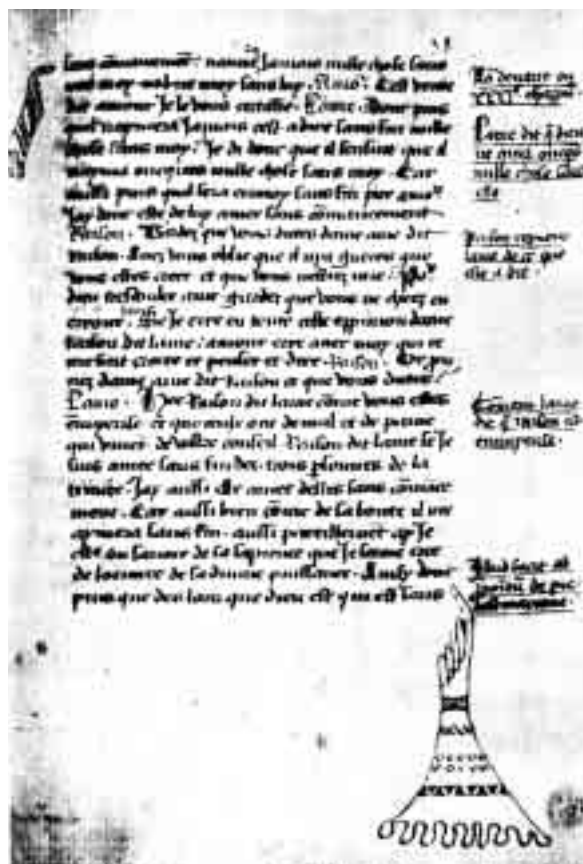
<sup>16</sup> Juan Miguel Marín, 'Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology and Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*', *Harvard Theological Review*, 103/1 (2010), 89–109.

<sup>17</sup> See Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1994), 118.

<sup>18</sup> See Guarnieri, 'Beghinismo d'oltralpe', n.13.

<sup>19</sup> Guarnieri, *Donna et chiesa*, 285.

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (Genova: Marietti, 1988).



A page from a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century manuscript of the *Mirror for Simple Souls*

### *Famearness*

Perhaps part of the *Mirror's* appeal lay in its conveying an intricate theology by means of storytelling techniques found in medieval romances. Porete frames her theology within a story involving the daughter of a king who falls in love with the mighty Alexander the Great. As we read in her prologue:

Once upon a time, there was a maiden, daughter of a king, of great heart and nobility and also of noble character; and she lived in a far off land. So it happened that this maiden heard tell of the gentle courtesy and nobility of the king, Alexander, and very soon her will loved him because of the great renown of his gentility. But this maiden was so far from this great lord, in whom she had fixed her love from herself, that she was able neither to see him nor to

have him. Thus she was inconsolable in herself, for no love except this one would be sufficient for her. When she saw that this faraway love, who was so close within her, was so far outside of her, she thought to herself that she would comfort her melancholy by imagining some figure of her love, by whom she was continually wounded in heart. And so she had an image painted which would represent the semblance of the king she loved ....<sup>21</sup>

Porete here plants her first clue to the true nature of the soul, one that provides us with the first of several distinctive elements. We have, not a humble peasant, but a noble princess. And while the Latin translation uses '*imaginarium efficiem*' for the painted image that reflected and represented the king's nobility, an association with the mirror (*speculum*) of the title would be present in the reader's mind.<sup>22</sup> The image of the mirror is a common one in the mystical tradition, but there is a more particular link between the maiden's portrait and Berinzaga's concept of annihilation described by Gagliardi. He writes:

This annihilation makes the soul become a true portrait of the highest majesty of God, for by taking away all the obstacles that are between the soul and God, which is done by desiring nothing, the soul becomes like a clear and polished mirror. And just as a mirror needs to be far away in order perfectly to receive the image of an object that is immense, thus the soul—through annihilation—not only takes away all obstacles between itself and God, but most infinitely, by submission to its lowliness and acceptance of the infinite divine majesty, becomes far from it, and renders itself able to receive it. Then the Lord in the pleasure of his infinite love for that soul, suddenly imprints a living image and a true portrait of all his immensity in her deepest centre.<sup>23</sup>

What makes me link this passage above to Marguerite's *Mirror* is not only the connection between annihilation and the portrait as mirror, nor the important Poretian themes of annihilation by desiring nothing, the imprinting in the soul, recognition of humility or God's kingly majesty. A more direct link is found when all these come together, turning this passage an exegesis of the *Mirror*'s prologue in light of

<sup>21</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Achille Gagliardi, *Breve compendio di perfezione cristiana* (Rome: Gregorian UP, 1994), 323. All translations from the Italian are mine unless noted.

Porete's distinctive theological concept of *Farnearness* (one of her names for the divine is *Loing-Près*).<sup>24</sup>

In the *Mirror*, Porete explains divine Farnearness as follows:

[God's] farness is greater nearness, because, from nearby, in itself, it better knows what is far, which [knowing] always makes her [the Soul] to be in union by his will, without the interference of any other thing which may happen to her.<sup>25</sup>

Porete writes about how God, although from one perspective transcendent and far from creatures, knows creation best through immanence: God's nearness to them is nearer than anything else. Gaining knowledge of this helps the soul to overcome the distance between the maiden and her king. She thus becomes aware of the obstacles that superficially deform her, the specks that need to be polished away—annihilated—before the soul recognises her royal nature.

Porete's annihilation becomes for Gagliardi the way the soul is transformed into a reverse Farnearness, which he explains in terms of a spiritual optics:

... just as a mirror needs to be far in order perfectly to receive the image of an object that is immense, thus the soul—through annihilation—becomes far from it, and renders itself able to receive [God's majesty].

We can understand better what Gagliardi is claiming here by using an optical vocabulary that was already developed in the medieval period. The soul here is becoming a convex mirror. Convex mirrors curve outwardly and reduce the size of the object. Thus a convex soul curves towards God, yet increases the distance—through annihilation—so as to accommodate the majesty of the divine image. We could then suggest that the divine Farnearness is also a mirror, this time a concave one. A concave mirror curves inwards, magnifying the reflected object. God would thus draw the soul towards the divine interior, magnifying it and bringing it to ascend towards an ultimate stage of union with God.

<sup>24</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 128. And see *Le Miroir des simples âmes anéanties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et désir d'amour*, translated by Claude Louis-Combet and edited by Emilie Zum Brunn (Paris: Jérôme Millon, 1991), 133.

<sup>25</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 218.



Gagliardi distances himself from the traditional understanding of mystical ascent, a spiritual and sequential moving towards God, by appropriating Porete's claim that this *moving towards* can also be seen as *moving away*. Porete's Farnearness supports such a paradox. Farnearness consists of a movement backwards which then brings the soul forward, closer to God (a theological innovation original to Porete).<sup>26</sup> What she means by Farnearness is part of a paradoxical subversion of the rhetoric of ascent and descent that she introduces in her penultimate stage of union with God. We know that Gagliardi is elaborating on Porete because, when he too writes about a penultimate degree or step before final ascent, the soul follows this same trajectory. It is first 'highly raised unto vertue ... and by this height of vertue the soul is plunged into this low estate ...'.<sup>27</sup> Here we have not only Porete's parabolic movement, but even an incorporation of Porete's radical and original doctrine of the virtues. I am citing Mary Percy's early seventeenth-century English translation, because it is the only one that preserves without censorship this last Poretian element.

### ***The Soul's Deiformity***

#### *Leaving the Virtues*

In Mary Percy's English we find how the annihilated soul reaches an ultimate state of deiformity, when the text echoes Luke 22:42 ('not my will, but yours be done'). The soul leaves 'all her actions, desires, & workes ... [i]n such sort, that even in vertues, and holy thinges, she willeth them no more'.<sup>28</sup> This Poretian claim is implicit in Gagliardi's account of Berinzaga's annihilation, 'done by desiring nothing'—now, not even virtue. The same passage in the Italian critical edition of the *Breve compendio* is based on a version only available in the 1611 edition. It is identical to the English except that it eliminates the controversial mention of virtues. In the English the soul 'leaveth all acts of virtue', but here it merely leaves 'all her desires and works ... that even holy things she wills them no more',<sup>29</sup> distancing itself from Porete's claim that the annihilated soul 'takes leave of the virtues'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 128.

<sup>27</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 74.

<sup>28</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 115.

<sup>29</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 336.

<sup>30</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 84.

In Percy's English translation, however, Gagliardi agrees with Porete that one must annihilate all desires, even those to do good works. This conflicts with his belief that the *duty* to do them is not eliminated. So he defends Porete when she says that 'the soul is a slave to virtue', but by citing Paul who 'made himself a slave to deliver another slave'.<sup>31</sup>

**At that  
moment no  
one works,  
only God.**

This helps us to understand his claim that annihilation involves first recognition of [the soul's] lowliness and acceptance of the infinite divine majesty': in its lowliness the soul must allow itself to be enslaved as a prelude to its liberation. Gagliardi accepts Porete's claim that the enslaving duty of the virtues can be a burden, but this does not mean one is exempt from doing good works whenever possible. He adapts Porete, reading her phrase 'taking leave of the virtues' as meaning that one may leave one virtue, such as prayerful meditation, in order to accept a higher one, such as serving the neighbour. After engaging in good works one must always return to restful contemplation, in which the soul 'works no more'. Desire for ministry must never exclude taking a moment for prayer. At that moment no one works, only God. Porete and Gagliardi also suggest a solution to the anxiety caused by the burden of duty when one is not able to do good works. One must consider oneself unworthy even of doing good works and accept God's will when this happens. This will give the soul 'peace and tranquility'.

#### *Perfect Identity*

Leaving the virtues leads to an ultimate state of remaining 'in the will of God, greatly deified, by being totally the same, and united to it'.<sup>32</sup> In the Italian critical edition the editors give us several variants for this statement. Some manuscripts originally had '*totale*', but Gagliardi replaced it with what the critical edition has as '*perfetta identità*', 'perfect identity'.<sup>33</sup> Others add qualifiers, such as identity or union 'with propriety' or, elsewhere, specify that the union is only of the wills. We know that Gagliardi was asked several times to revise his manuscript, especially because of his views on total identity and the 'real deification' of the soul.<sup>34</sup> In one commentary an inquisitor explains that if Gagliardi means

<sup>31</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 78.

<sup>32</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 81.

<sup>33</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 241 nn. 983 and 985.

<sup>34</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 41.

identity as union of wills, or an apparent affective identity of hearts and souls, then his view is tolerable.<sup>35</sup> He seems concerned that 'identity' in the text implies indistinction between human, created nature and divine, uncreated nature. His confusion arises once he reads Gagliardi's mystical theology as a heretical christology.<sup>36</sup>

Gagliardi indeed upholds such an indistinction, but as a Christian, messianic hope. He strongly believes in the future fulfilment of Christ's prayer: 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.' (John 17:21) We will become 'deified, in imitation of that union which the Son has with the eternal Father',<sup>37</sup> but only once we recognise that we *all* share the same human nature as the Son of God, and participate in the same divine nature through mystical union with him. Such indistinction will lead, then, to nondiscrimination, in which the soul annihilates its own identity. The soul will realise that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

We will understand the censor's suspicions better when we look at other expurgated words relating to mystical loss of identity, that reveal views Gagliardi's contemporaries considered too radical.

#### *Drops in the Ocean*

Gagliardi suffered a similar censorship when he, like Porete, explained *annichilazione* by appropriating images from mystical literature. In Porete's text the soul,

... loses her name in the One in whom she is melted and dissolved through Himself and in Himself. Thus she would be like a body of water which flows from the sea, which has some name, as one would be able to say Aisne or Seine or another river. And when this water or river returns into the sea, it loses its course and its name ....<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Pietro Pirri, 'Il breve compendio di Achille Gagliardi al vaglio di teologi gesuiti', *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*, 20 (1951), 201.

<sup>36</sup> The heresies in question are monothelitism and eutychianism, at the time often conflated. See Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 241 n. 985. Historians understand the former as claiming that Christ had two natures but only one will. The latter comes closer to monophysitism, claiming that Christ had only one nature. For a discussion on the complexity, even incoherence, of late medieval heresiology see Kevin Madigan, *The Passions of Christ in High-Medieval Thought: An Essay on Christological Development* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 335.

<sup>38</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 158.

As Ellen Babinsky, the translator of the English critical edition of *Mirror for Simple Souls*, observes, 'It is difficult to see how Marguerite could be any more clear about the nature of the union as identity'.<sup>39</sup>

In the 'epistle dedicatory' to her English translation of Gagliardi, Mary Percy describes his text as a preparation to receive,

... the holy embracings of your most loyal, and most faithful Bridegrome; or when you shall be absorpt and as it were drowned in that deepe, and large Ocean of his bounty and mercy, which hath neither end nor limit.<sup>40</sup>

But, by contrast with this intense bridal metaphor for loving union with God, the image of water appears in a banal form in Gagliardi's own text, even in the Italian critical edition. Here the soul undergoes annihilation 'in the manner in which a drop of water relative [*rispetto*] to the sea is nothing'.<sup>41</sup> This image involves no more than a cognitive process by which the soul compares itself to everything else in order to become aware of its own nothingness. In this version the annihilation of a drop of water in the sea is reduced to a simile which offers us only a static comparison between human nothingness and divine majesty. It is interesting to note that in those Italian versions the editors mention, but did not use, the word '*rispetto*' is omitted: '*nel modo che una goccia d'acqua al mare e niente*'. This could be translated as saying that the annihilated soul is nothing in the same way that a drop of water in, or towards, the sea is nothing. This alternative brings us closer to Porete's original image. The use of *rispetto* suggests an interpretation that is restricted to human humility. In the alternative version the preposition *al* now indicates movement towards annihilation in God.

This version also recalls Isabella Berinzaga's abyss imagery. For Gagliardi, Isabella's annihilated or 'abyssed' (*abyssata*) soul is drawn towards God in a mystical experience:

Finally, the Lord showed her why he was pleased in pulling her to himself by means of this way of annihilation .... [And she exclaimed]: 'Oh light that has illuminated my darkness! .... This abyss of my nothingness cries out to you, my most beloved Lord ....'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ellen L. Babinsky, 'Introduction', in Porete, *Mirror for Simple Souls*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 7.

<sup>41</sup> '*nel modo che una goccia d'acqua rispetto al mare e niente*' (Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 187).

<sup>42</sup> Berinzaga, *Per via di annichilazione*, 142–143.

It is possible that Berinzaga here, as a 'daughter of the Society of Jesus', found inspiration in a mystical text popular among Jesuit novices, the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*.<sup>43</sup> Angela and other late medieval women mystics expressed their mystical theology through imagery of the ocean or the abyss, to symbolize divine absorption.<sup>44</sup> Porete's doctrine of annihilation and deification appropriates these and other beguine ideas about the return to an original pre-creation state, a divine 'abyss of nothingness'.<sup>45</sup>

### *Divine Nothingness*

Porete presents this mystical doctrine as having been revealed by the divine personification of Truth,

... who told me that I will not see the divine Trinity until my soul is without stain of sin, like [the soul] of Jesus Christ .... Then I pondered who it is who will ascend to heaven. And Truth told me that no one will ascend there except the one who descended, that is, the Son of God Himself. This means that no one can ascend there except only those who are sons of God through divine grace.<sup>46</sup>

Christ is made to descend by the Father in order to recover fallen souls and bring them back in a soteriological ascent. Porete's salvation, not through works but through annihilation, means then that the soul is recovered when it ceases to be and only Christ remains. Gagliardi elsewhere describes washing away the stain of sin, the removal of the obstacles between the soul and God, as making the mind a 'tabula rasa', a blank slate welcoming whatever God wills.<sup>47</sup> Both Porete and Gagliardi claim that, in this way, the soul can return to a pre-creation state in the divine nothingness from which it was distanced. Imitating Christ's return to the Father, the soul 'returns to her prior being' having 'conquered the necessity of two natures'.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 272–279 and 219–45, passim. See also Juan Miguel Marín, 'On Confusion and On Prayer: St Francisco Borja', *The Way*, 50/4 (October 2011), 55. Available at [www.theway.org.uk/Back/504Marin.pdf](http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/504Marin.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> See B. McGinn, 'Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition', *The Journal of Religion* (1994), 155–181.

<sup>45</sup> See Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 131–134, and Marín, 'Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology', 89–109.

<sup>46</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> Gagliardi echoes this annihilation of encumbrances, or removal of impediments elsewhere. See Gagliardi, 'Requirements for the One Giving and for the One Receiving the Exercises', 38.

<sup>48</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 219–220.

All manuscripts of the *Compendio* agree that for Gagliardi imitating the union of the Son and Father's divine natures requires the soul to relinquish existence. The critical edition has 'we are, in a way [*in certo modo*], no more'.<sup>49</sup> The imitation of the divine persons is supposed to include a transformation that still preserves distinction. Mary Percy's English has 'although the persons are really distinct they nevertheless transform themselves by the force of this love ... that one truly seems to be the other'.<sup>50</sup> The editors of the Italian critical edition have the same.<sup>51</sup> Yet their version, chosen from three possible variants, reveals something interesting. They use the published text that has the persons as being '*realmente distinta*'—rather than just '*distinta*' or, in the third option, supposedly an error, '*di niente*'. The editors are aware that the multiple revisions in the several manuscripts of Gagliardi's text reveal the controversy that lies behind them, but seem to forget this background here. Gagliardi is attempting to satisfy his censors while preserving the teaching of a condemned heretic, again no easy task.

In light of Porete, and of passages elsewhere in Gagliardi, we can restore the variant reading '*di niente*' ('from nothingness') rather than '*distinta*', and make the passage cohere with the rest of the text. Gagliardi's radicalness lies in the fact that he originally interpreted annihilation and deification, following Porete, as ceasing to be by returning to a primal nothingness in which the distinction between humanity and divinity is eradicated. We know this, first, because all Italian texts repeatedly use '*niente*' to indicate how man has his 'first origin in nothing' (*prima origine dal niente*) and then, in sin, 'tends to the same nothing' (*tende al medesimo niente*).<sup>52</sup> Mary Percy's English varies the latter to: 'tending to returne to the same nothing yf God by his bounty did not conserve him'.<sup>53</sup> The later Italian versions treat nothingness as sin and annihilation as consciousness of sin: 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' (Genesis 3:19); we come from nothingness and to nothingness we shall return. In contrast, Percy's version preserves Gagliardi's original intention.

Gagliardi de-emphasized sin by focusing on its nothingness. As the soul advances it ought not to 'take care, or be too much grieved if she

<sup>49</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 335.

<sup>50</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 116.

<sup>51</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 336.

<sup>52</sup> Gagliardi, *Breve compendio*, 323.

<sup>53</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 83.

BREVE  
COMPENDIO  
INTORNO  
ALLA PERFETTIONE  
CHRISTIANA.

Donde si vede vna prattica mi-  
rabile per vnire l'anima  
con Dio.

Del M. R. P Achille Gagliardi. Teo-  
logo della Cópagnia di GESV.



IN NAPOLI,  
Per Gio. Giacomo Carlino. 1614.

*Title page of an early edition of Gagliardi's Breve compendio*

attain not to that height of perfection'.<sup>54</sup> Overemphasis on sin nullifies God's grace. For if justification comes from living a life according to law-designated virtues then Christ died for nothing, for the insignificant nothingness of sin. Emphasizing that Christ died for human sin comes at the price of forgetting the one important thing: if I constantly remind myself that Christ died for my sins, I risk forgetting that Christ died out of love for me. Gagliardi's inquisitors looked towards the past, to Adam's original sin. Gagliardi looks to the salvific future that is reached through imitation of Christ.

Gagliardi identified the deifying process of imitating Christ with a transforming mimesis of the divine persons: they come 'from nothing' in

<sup>54</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 215.

order to return to, transform into, each other in Love. Inquisitors, of both Porete's and Gagliardi's times, feared that in annihilation human consciousness forgets the shame of original sin, losing its awareness of the abyssal chasm of its own distinction from God. But Porete and Gagliardi explained that annihilation bridges the chasm: the consciousness of an original indistinction is regained. This is not Adam's paradise lost, but Christ's paradise regained.

### *Leaving God*

Porete concludes by revealing how the soul must learn to love God by leaving God. At first the annihilated soul maintains with certainty that,

... even if I might suffer as much poverty, rejection and torments as He has goodness, wisdom, and power in Him ... still I would love better such torments if I had them from Him, than I would whatever eternal glory I might have from myself.<sup>55</sup>

It would rather suffer eternal torment than do anything to displease God. God's love merits self-denial. But this certainty is challenged when the soul is asked what would happen if Love were to love someone else more, challenging its cherished assumption. To this it has no response, but falls into a state of stupefaction.<sup>56</sup>

Gagliardi borrows this material without much modification in order to elaborate on what annihilation means, especially the annihilation of the will in order to allow God to work through the soul. In several places, with many variants, he tells us how one should be resolute 'rather to suffer a thousand deaths, than to offend God'. This is not exaltation of suffering itself—'this very suffering has its limits ...'—but of the soul's prompt 'disposition to submit herself all in all, to that which God will work in her, by her and with her, according to his divine pleasure'.<sup>57</sup> Gagliardi's utter annihilation of the self only adds the lesson to be derived from Porete's own trial. One should be ready to surrender even God's gifts, 'if he were to give and make a present of them unto any creature whatsoever ... and this for his Love'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 212.

<sup>56</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 214.

<sup>57</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 43.

<sup>58</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 91.



In Porete, faced with the need to give away even God's gifts, the soul almost wavers but finally surrenders, doing so 'for the sake of your divine will alone'.<sup>59</sup> Willing to give up even God's love, the soul surpasses her 'infancy'. Gagliardi stops here, and does not borrow any more. He has already transferred all the elements he needs, including the return to prior being, from the end of the *Mirror*. He identifies the moment when Porete takes leave, not only of God's gifts of love, but also of God Godself, as the moment where annihilation leads to deification, when the soul 'leaveth God for God .... From whence follows a most high transformation and an admirable Deification'.<sup>60</sup> By now, the soul in love with God has annihilated everything within itself, including its own limited ideas about divinity. Gagliardi appropriates from Porete a radical annihilation and divinisation, a mystical union into actual, inseparable identity. Nothing remains but God and, for the annihilated soul, not even God remains.

### **How to Heal Souls**

The 1612 English *Abridgement of Christian Perfection* concludes by introducing a nameless holy woman as the true author of the text, Gagliardi being merely her scribe:

While I was writing a copy of this booke, our Lord made this vertous Dame that composed it, to understand, that she should advertise me as follows .... Advertise thy spiritual father, that he may learne, that, when anyone would heal a soule, ... [it is] by this meanes [that] she may more easily attaine unto the soveraigne perfection of the said love of God.<sup>61</sup>

Later editions amended this passage, erasing the memory of Isabella Berinzaga's contribution, just as centuries earlier inquisitors attempted to erase Marguerite Porete's authorial identity.<sup>62</sup> Yet their message survived.

Porete taught that:

All those who are planted as seeds from the Father and are come into this world, have descended from the perfect into the imperfect, in

<sup>59</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 168.

<sup>60</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 81.

<sup>61</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', 150.

<sup>62</sup> Gagliardi, 'Abridgement of Christian Perfection', xvi.

order to attain to the most perfect. And the wound is opened in order to heal those who are wounded ....

Once the soul has attained the ‘most perfect’, Love holds it in ‘... the country of complete peace ... for she is in the sovereign state ...’ where nothing interior or exterior can disturb it.<sup>63</sup> Along an arduous path the soul finally returns to its Sovereign King. Gagliardi appropriated what Love revealed first to the medieval holy dame and then to his spiritual daughter and mother Berinzaga: how to heal souls. Perhaps not in their lifetimes, but certainly afterwards, their works reached their goal. Through the extremely popular English, French and German translations of Gagliardi’s text, the *Mirror* indirectly gave rise to much of the spiritual language of the seventeenth century. In this way, Porete’s healing message reached yet another century unable to exorcise the beguine’s spectral presence.

**Juan Miguel Marín** is a DTh. candidate at Harvard Divinity School, specialising in the history of Christianity. Originally from Puerto Rico, he attended Tufts University and later Harvard, from which he received his MTS and MDiv. degrees. He is currently writing a dissertation entitled ‘Firestone of Divine Love: Erotic Desire in Hispanic Jesuit Mysticism’. His two most recent articles, ‘A Lucan Kenosis? Luke’s Concept of Truth as an Ethics of Service’ and ‘Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*’ have been published respectively in the *Journal of Scripture and Philosophy* and *Harvard Theological Review*. His essay ‘A Jesuit Mystic’s Feminine Melancholia: Jean-Joseph Surin (1600–1665)’ was chosen to appear in *Best of the Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spiritualities*.

<sup>63</sup> Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 156.