

Is the history of Western thought, among other things, a story of persistent neglect of certain ways of loving and knowing? Do establishment thinkers consistently reject, ignore, or downgrade these ways of loving and knowing? Are there sometimes a few thinkers who make much of such ways of loving and knowing, even though their voices are soon lost as the main body of Western thinkers marches on? Has this been true for three millennia? Is it true today?

This is a question of historical fact. When and to what extent has this happened in the course of Western thought? In the present book we pursue this historical question by attending to the words and actions of certain medieval women. But our questioning is aimed at and governed by a philosophical question. If certain ways of loving and knowing were and are dismissed programmatically by mainstream Western thinkers, are they valuable ways of loving and knowing? Is their neglect a substantial loss? Is their restoration to fuller use urgent? As I said in the *Introduction*, women thinkers of our time press this historicophilosophical question with precision, power and promise.

In a word, this book scouts historically for an answer to the philosophical question. In Part I we read the writings of a Christian theologian, Hadewijch, who lived in the Low Countries around the middle of the thirteenth century. We attend particularly to ways of *loving* to which Hadewijch gives pride of place. We contrast Hadewijch with other Western Christian thinkers of her time and earlier. Part I, as well as Part II, is a tiny exploration of possible evidence for an affirmative answer to our large historicophilosophical question. May it encourage other studies to follow up, whether to confirm, expand, revise or refute it.

During the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries in Western Europe, human life was changing enormously. People appealed regularly to past precedent, but they regularly—often less con-

sciously—were constructing an unprecedented present. Unprecedented ways of loving and knowing became widespread and powerful. Recall what was going on in connection with universities: songs of courtly love; devotion to the human Christ, Mary, and saints; devotion to the Eucharist; the Magna Charta; codes of chivalry; building of cathedrals; the spread of monasteries and cloisters; new instruments of war; founding of hospitals; a greater variety of imports (including translations from Islamic culture); and a plethora of native biographies and autobiographies. Social historians, such as Caroline Bynum, show new ways of loving and knowing in the data they have gathered on new forms of religious piety, for example, in feasting and fasting, and on new characteristics of domestic life. Art historians, such as Joanna Ziegler, have similarly researched the nature and use of religious art, such as Pietàs in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

In Christian thought of the time, new ways of knowing and loving came into prominence. Much of what was theologically new in the Middle Ages has been traced during the twentieth century by de Ghellinck, Gilson, Chenu, Leclercq, and others. But this advancing mainstream thought did not keep up with lived experience of the time, particularly the experience of devout women (or so I argue through this book). Let us listen to one thinker, an informed, able theologian, paralleling new ways of knowing and loving in popular piety and going ahead of other theologians of her tradition in articulating what was primary in her own experience.

The theologian, Hadewijch, lived in a Beguinage somewhere in the Low Countries during the middle of the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Beguines were devout women largely of noble families, who lived in self-supporting community, and breaking with precedent, chose to live lives of apostolic poverty, contemplation, and care for the sick without taking vows as nuns (Hadewijch 1980b, p. 3). Hadewijch wrote, in the Dutch language of her time, letters, poetry and accounts of her religious, at times mystical, experience. They come to over three hundred pages in Mother Columba Hart's English translation. We know little of Hadewijch or her life. We have no contemporary account of her. Her own writing, though often personal and autobiographical, is vague and reticent on factual detail.

Hadewijch's work was read in some circles and had influence for a century or two. She affected John of Ruusbroec, influential mystical theologian of the fourteenth century, and his disciples. She influenced thus major currents of mystical thought down to the present day. By the sixteenth century we hear no more of her or her works until 1838 when researchers discovered manuscripts of her writings at the Royal Library in Brussels.

Though Jozef Van Mierlo brought out a critical edition of her complete writings between 1924 and 1952, Hadewijch has to the present time received little attention in scholarly literature written in English and not much more in languages other than Dutch. Evelyn Underhill, in her twelfth edition of *Mysticism* (1930), made no mention of Hadewijch. Yet Paul Mommaers has called Hadewijch "the most important exponent of love mysticism and one of the loftiest figures in the Western mystical tradition" (Hadewijch 1980b, xiii). Listen to Letter 9 in its entirety:

May God make known to you, dear child, who he is, and how he deals with his servants, and especially with his handmaids—and may he submerge you in him. Where the abyss of his wisdom is, [God] will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine nature flows through both and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.<sup>2</sup>

In other passages, to be considered below, Hadewijch describes similarly this supreme human experience of the Divine. It is an experience that God grants some of his servants in their earthly life. It anticipates their eternal life with him. The experience, as Hadewijch describes it, resembles the lived experience of other devout persons of her time and the century before. With the help of Bynum and Ziegler, I will point to some of this resemblance in following pages. But Hadewijch's description is also theological. It is theologically articulated and theologically systematic. The theology arises out of and is true to her distinctive experience and that of other women of her time and place. Hadewijch's theology differs correspondingly from all systematic theological accounts of experience of the Divine with which I am familiar before and during Hadewijch's time.

This theologian breaks, therefore, from establishment theology of past and present to express theologically, as well as personally, widespread lived experience of the time. Such expression is typical of medieval theology, for the theologian is here an integral, interactive part of the public community. The theologian influences the community by, for example, teaching clergy and monks and by the clergy's preaching to other monks, nuns, and laity. The influence is mutual,

and Bynum and Ziegler point out parallels of theological development and cultural movements.

The quotation given above illustrates the theological articulation that characterizes Hadewijch's pages. Hadewijch does not speak in uniquely narrative terms. In the quoted passage, Hadewijch describes the union of servant and God. She describes the union in general terms, i.e., as applicable to many a "servant." She describes it, too, with general concepts such as fruition, distinguishability, different selves, body, soul, divine nature, and so on. This is true even on other pages where she writes explicitly of her own individual experience of God. Hadewijch is a competent, sophisticated theologian who interplays her religious experience and her theology throughout her work. She engages in dialogue with Christian thinkers of the past, echoing, for example, Jerome, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Richard of Saint Victor, while at the same time going beyond and even reversing them.

In the letter quoted above, as throughout her writing, Hadewijch does what all Christian theologians of the West before or during her time did. Their "pagan" forefathers: Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, and Neoplatonists did it too. They all work to identify what in their judgment is the completely good human life possible to humans in their earthly existence. It is a union with the divine. It is a specific kind of union.

For Hadewijch, as for Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and other Christian theologians—not to mention pagan, Jewish, and Muslim Platonists and Neoplatonists—before her time, the supreme experience of God that a human being can attain on earth is normative for appraising all human life and activity. The experience is not only satisfying rapture. It is not only overflowing illumination of mind. It is not only exquisite intimacy with God. The supreme experience of God that all these thinkers describe is, for them, the best human knowing and loving possible to humans on earth. All other human knowing and loving, therefore, is of worth only insofar as it resembles or contributes to this supreme experience.

Some of the thinkers so describe this supreme earthly experience that we of the twentieth century might categorize it as mystical. Others so describe it that we might categorize it rather as contemplative. Some thinkers, too, use one or both terms with differing senses. In all cases, this highest possible experience of God is for them a living, however temporary, of the ideal human life. It satisfies all human aspirations. Nothing better is possible for human beings. This experience "surpasses all that one can have from [the Beloved] and all that he himself can accomplish" (Vision 14, 145ff.).<sup>3</sup>

All this is true because, for Hadewijch as for Christian theologians before her, this supreme earthly union with the Beloved is, by God's gift, a momentary anticipation of the union with God that will constitute the beatitude of the soul after death for all eternity. This is why the experience reveals directly, if imperfectly, the supreme good, the final end of humanity, the norm in terms of which all earthly human life is appraised. Anything that a human being does or is on earth is good only insofar as it shares in or moves toward this union which the theologians describe and identify.

In articulating the nature of this union, therefore, the theologians do not only mystical theology but also fundamental ethics. How one of these Western thinkers describes the experience of the supremely possible earthly union with God is a clue to how he or she judges the intrinsic worth of this or that way of knowing and loving. I belabor the point for, as I have already said more than once, this is a foundational angle of my inquiry: What constitutes what is intrinsically good and worthwhile throughout human life? How does Hadewijch answer this question? How does her answer differ from traditional Christian theologians before and during her time? And at times implicitly or in passing: how does her answer differ from dominant Western thought of the late twentieth century, and how does it resemble or add coherently to contemporary feminist thought?

To my knowledge, no Christian theologian before or during Hadewijch's time describes supreme earthly experience with certain traits with which she does. I say this not only of men writing theologically such as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, the Victorines, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, etc. I say this of women, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Margaret of Oingt who like Hadewijch wrote theologically of and out of their individual experience of the divine. On the other hand, I believe, though I have not carefully verified, that some of Hadewijch's new characterization of these earthly heights of experience is voiced by later Western thinkers, such as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila.

In any case, the burden of Part I is to bring out in her writing some novel traits with which Hadewijch characterizes her supreme experience of God. I contrast Hadewijch's characterization with earlier theologians as Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Gueric of Igny. My historical searching is exploratory and still very limited. Is Hadewijch's picture of her supreme experience of God as novel as I conclude? I invite other historians of thought to return to further texts and prove or disprove these hypotheses. My main effort in what follows is to record sensitively what Hadewijch tells us that

she experienced. I contrast her with certain traditional thinkers, especially Bernard of Clairvaux, mainly in order to bring out more sharply what is this experience she had and describes.

Hadewijch writes about only one thing. She strives to live one thing alone. It is love, and all that love brings with it. Her love, as she believes all human love must be, is to share in Christ's love, God's love. Her love includes, therefore, love for fellow human beings. In this earthly life, love means sacrifice, suffering and service. Hadewijch recounts often her efforts to live this sort of love. She encourages and urges others to do the same (e.g., Letter 6; Vision 1).

Often, however, Hadewijch makes clear that the foregoing traits of love are not those that she most prizes and seeks. She prizes over all else and seeks most passionately with her whole body and soul the final fulfilment of love, i.e., "the fruition of God." She speaks over and over and with passion of "the fruition of God." At times Hadewijch uses the term in a broad sense for the union with God that all who seek and love God can attain on earth, at least to some degree and regularly (e.g., Letter 6, 117ff., 120ff.; Letter 12, 13ff.). At other times, Hadewijch speaks of a "fruition of God" that is vouchsafed on earth only to the few and infrequently to them (e.g., Letter 12, 53ff.; Letter 14, 3ff.).

To be united with God in this supreme fruition of love is the one all-dominant goal for Hadewijch as for all humans. It is what they really want. It is what God wants for them (e.g., Letter 1, 46ff.; Letter 2, 66ff.; Letter 6, 227ff.). It is what Hadewijch with the other blest will have for all eternity: "There I had fruition of him as I shall eternally" (Vision 5, 59ff.; see also 65ff.; Letter 12, 53ff.; Letter 14, 19ff.; Letter 16, 14ff.). She possesses it temporarily in earthly life, though less "amply" (Vision 5, 59ff.; Vision 6, 92ff.; more generally, Letter 12, 13ff.). What I have attributed to Hadewijch in these three paragraphs can be found in many Christian medieval thinkers of Hadewijch's time or earlier.<sup>4</sup>

In some of her writing Hadewijch laments that she has never yet had this fruition (Letter 1, 56 ff.). On other pages, presumably those written later (considered below), she describes her occasional experience of this supreme fruition of God and makes much of its sublime and completely satisfying nature. The fruition consists generally in two stages. First, Hadewijch is taken up "in spirit," "seeing" and "hearing" God. The fruition then changes sharply and climaxes as she comes "out of the spirit" into a new, more complete union with her Beloved, Christ, who is both man and God and thus whose nature is Divine Love:

But then wonder seized me because of all the riches I had seen in him, and through this wonder I came out of the spirit in which I

had seen all that I sought; and as in this situation in all this rich enlightenment I recognized my awe-inspiring, my unspeakably sweet Beloved, I fell out of the spirit—from myself and all I had seen in him—and wholly lost, fell upon the breast, the fruition, of his Nature, which is Love. There I remained, engulfed and lost, without any comprehension of other knowledge, or sight, or spiritual understanding, except to be one with him and to have fruition of this union. I remained in it less than half an hour. (Vision 6, 76ff.)

This experience out of the spirit is the supreme union for which, and for which alone, all humans yearn. What humans want is simply their fruition of Divine Love by becoming one with It.<sup>5</sup>

In other passages, too, Hadewijch, as many Western philosophers and theologians before her, describes moments or hours of earthly experience in which the individual unites supremely with God. Visions 5, 7, and 10 to 14 are instances. Her interpretive descriptions of this experience continue and resemble those of prior Christian thinkers. Her descriptions also differ substantially from theirs.

Take, for example, classical descriptions of this kind of experience by two early Christian theologians, two who influenced greatly theologians of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

Recall in his *Confessions* Augustine's vision as he and his mother stood alone leaning out a window onto a garden at Ostia, "talking alone together sweetly," wondering what would be the future eternal life of the blest.

We were opening the mouths of our hearts toward the streams flowing on high from your fountain, the fountain of life that is with you, so that, sprinkled from it according to our capacity, we could somehow think of so great a reality. Then...raising ourselves with more ardent love to the Selfsame, we proceeded step by step through all bodily things up to the heaven itself whence sun and moon and star shine upon earth. We mounted further thinking of and speaking of and marveling at your works and we came into our minds and went beyond them to reach the region of your unfailing abundance....There...life is the wisdom by which all these things are made that have been and will be. And it is not made,...nor is there in it to have been or to will be, but only to be, for it is eternal....And while we speak and gape at it with longing, we reach it slightly for a complete beat of our

hearts....And we sighed...and returned to the noise of our mouths where a word is both begun and ended. And what is like your Word, our Lord, which remains in itself without aging and makes all things new?

Augustine goes on to generalize:

If for a human being [all things changeable] become silent and turn his ear up to him who made them and he alone speak, not through them but through himself, so that we hear his word, not by tongue of flesh nor voice of angel nor thunder of cloud nor puzzle of similitude, but himself, whom we love in these things, himself we hear without them, as we now extend ourselves and with quick thought reach eternal wisdom abiding above us, if this be continued and other visions of far unequal kind be taken away and this one seize and absorb and hide its beholder within its inner joys, so that eternal life would be such as was that moment of intelligence for which we sighed, then is this not to "enter into the joy of the Lord"? (1962, IX, 10, my translation)

In *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius writes as follows of the supreme union that a human being can attain with God:

The divinest and the highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body or the mind are but the symbolic language of things subordinate to Him who Himself transcendeth them all. Through these things His incomprehensible presence is shown walking upon those heights of the mind; and then it breaks forth even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate into the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding. (1940, 194)

We are looking for differences between Hadewijch's account of supreme human union with God and accounts by Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and other Christian theologians preceding or contemporary with Hadewijch. First, however, note the similarities.



For Hadewijch, as for Western thinkers before her, the supreme union with God is or yields a supreme *knowing* of God (Vision 14, 172ff.; Vision 6, 76ff.; Vision 7, 1ff.; Vision 9, 40ff.; Letter 12, 53ff.; Stanzaic Poem 9, 71–75. For Hadewijch, therefore, and preceding theologians, “perfect knowing” (*vollen kins*) belongs to the fullness of human life. All human activity and living will be good and worthwhile, to the degree to which it partakes in such knowing. On the other hand, for Hadewijch and earlier theologians, fortunate individuals who achieve to some degree this knowing do so out of love. They know only because they love. Moreover, the knowing leads afterward to greater, stronger, better aimed loving. All human activity and living will be good, worthwhile, to the degree to which it partakes in such knowing and loving.

Hadewijch’s fruition of God has, as we saw, two stages. The prior stage, her being taken up “in the spirit,” fits the picture (sketched above) drawn by traditional thought. Hadewijch’s experience “in the spirit” resembles Augustine’s summit, illustrated by the passage from the *Confessions* quoted above. It is the height where divine wisdom abides. There the soul shares voluptuously the wisdom of the divine word. It is an experience of “intelligence” fused with love and joy. For Augustine, the “hearing” is metaphor for knowing by intellect. For Augustine as for all Christians, the divine word is a word of intelligence. The Latin *verbum* continues the Greek *logos*: both terms mean at the same time the thought and the corresponding word. Hart’s “spirit” translates Hadewijch’s *gheeste*. The Medieval Dutch word *gheeste*, like the modern Dutch *geest* and German *Geist*, and more strongly than the modern English “spirit,” connotes usually intelligence, a noetic dimension. In what Hadewijch describes as her being “taken up in the spirit” she continues the Christian Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition of the supreme heights of intelligence.

In describing this prior stage of fruition, Hadewijch may show originality of thought with respect to her predecessors and contemporaries of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, mystics and theologians, women and men. In my study, however, I pass by this prior stage and focus on Hadewijch’s final union with God, when she is taken “out of the spirit.” This is not further “ascent” but, as in Vision 6 and the passage of Pseudo-Dionysius cited above, a level meeting of God and the individual who has mounted thus far. For Hadewijch, like Pseudo-Dionysius, the uniting on a level is followed by a “falling” onto or “plunge” into the divine. Her “passing away” out of intelligence into an even more intimate union with the divine resembles Neoplatonic ideas, which Augustine and many Augustinians, despite their debt to Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, did not express, but

which other Christian theologians did, such as Richard of Saint Victor. This supreme union, though beyond intelligence, is or yields its own unique kind of knowing, as both the Hadewijch and Pseudo-Dionysius passages exemplify.

In describing this second stage of the supreme union with God, this passing “out of the spirit,” beyond intelligence, Hadewijch shows a second similarity with earlier thought. This supreme union with God is not first and foremost a knowing of God but, as we saw in Vision 6, a loving of God. It is, above all, a merging of human love with Divine Love. Listen again:

But then wonder seized me because of all the riches I had seen in him, and through this wonder I came out of the spirit in which I had seen all that I sought; and as in this situation in all this rich enlightenment I recognized my awe-inspiring, my unspeakably sweet Beloved, I fell out of the spirit—from myself and all I had seen in him—and wholly lost, fell upon the breast, the fruition, of his Nature, which is Love. There I remained, engulfed and lost, without any comprehension...except to be one with him and to have fruition of this union. I remained in it less than half an hour. (Vision 6, 76ff.)

In Chapter 4 of *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the supreme union with God as a union with divine “love” (*eros*) (1940, 101–11). So too do twelfth-century thinkers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, who develop the idea more expansively and systematically than Pseudo-Dionysius. Bernard is not so hardily Dionysian as to place this supreme union beyond and “out of intelligence.” Bernard locates on the same highest level of human experience both the soul’s affective union with God in love and the soul’s contemplative union with God in intelligence. But Bernard, like Hadewijch, follows the lead of Pseudo-Dionysius in seeing love as yielding a unique knowing, different from what mere contemplation reveals (e.g., SBO II, XLIX, 4; LXVII, 8; LXIX, 2).<sup>6</sup>

Bernard, more systematically than any theologian before him, affirms, explains and applies this supreme union of human love with Divine Love as the goal of all human endeavor. In so doing he begins the main currents of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theological thought that flow through Hadewijch’s writings.<sup>7</sup> This makes her differences from Bernard all the more significant historically and philosophically.

Let us compare more precisely Hadewijch and traditional theologians on the supreme union of the human individual with Love. An “equality,” in some sense, with God, as Hadewijch claims for her

supreme union with Him, is by her time commonly claimed by theologians; 2 Pet. 1:4, "that you may become sharers of divine nature," gave them warrant. Like Hadewijch, they affirmed at the same time the radical difference of Creator and creature, though other theologians and later historians dispute whether some theologians making such affirmation escape pantheism and thus heresy.

Christian theologians before Hadewijch have affirmed, as she does, that in the supreme union with God, the human person becomes and "is" God. In this respect, Bernard, Hadewijch, and other medieval theologians go beyond Augustine and follow rather Pseudo-Dionysius and other Neoplatonists. Since for Hadewijch, as for Bernard, God is primarily Love, Hadewijch, like Bernard, affirms that in this supreme experience she comes to be Divine Love and God (Vision 1, 138ff.; Vision 3, 1ff.).<sup>8</sup> For Bernard to be God or to be Love is not to lose one's personal identity. It is not to become one with God pantheistically.<sup>9</sup> Hadewijch, too, maintains a personal identity in the final merging. Thus she epitomizes the union as "to be God *with* God" (my emphasis; Vision 7, 1ff.; see Letter 9 above).

To Bernard, for the soul "to be Love" means two things. First, the soul now loves as God loves. It is to love as similarly to God as a human can. It is to will the same as God does. "It is plainly an embrace where to will the same thing and to not will the same thing makes one spirit out of two" (SBO II, LXXXIII, 3; see also elsewhere in 2 and 3; also SBO II, LXIX, 1; LXXI, 7–10; SBO III, *De Diligendo Deo* X, 27–28, 142–43). Hadewijch affirms this, too. God tells her that in this final fruition, "You will be love as I am Love" (Vision 3, 1ff.; similarly, e.g., Vision 14, 145 ff.). She spells it out:

When the soul is brought to nought and with God's will wills all that he wills, and is engulfed in him, and is brought to nought—then he is exalted above the earth, and then he draws all things to him, and so the soul becomes with him all that he himself is. (Letter 19, 46ff.)

For Bernard, a human being "is Love," secondly, in the sense that he is in the experience unaware of anything else. He is aware no longer of himself, but only of Divine Love (e.g., SBO III, *De Diligendo Deo* X, 27–28, 142–43; SBO II, LXIX, 1; LXXXIII, 3; LXXXV, 13). Similarly, Hadewijch affirms that in supreme union with God she loses all awareness of oneself. "I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself" (Vision 7, 94ff.).

The supreme experience Hadewijch has of God is, therefore, in part not new to Christian thought before her time. In part, it *is* new.

Hadewijch depicts the experience with certain traits that neither Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard, Hildegard of Bingen, nor any other prior or contemporary Christian systematic theologian whom I know did. I say "systematic theologian," for these novel traits Hadewijch asserts of her supreme experience of God are found in accounts of visions and devotion, particularly of women, of Hadewijch's time and the century before. Some of the authors of these accounts of "becoming Divine Love" make theological affirmations, but none that I know of articulate and explain the experience in a coherent theological way. This, Bernard does in his abundant writings and Hadewijch does in her letters, poems and accounts of visions. But Hadewijch, I am about to argue, describes this experience as even Bernard does not.