

Divinisation and Union in Love in Hadewijch of Antwerp Bridal Mysticism

Divinización y Unión en Amor en el misticismo nupcial de Hadewijch de Amberes

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Hadewijch of Antwerp's understanding of divinisation and union in love, highlighting its connection to the Western medieval tradition while emphasising her unique contributions. While not explicitly using the term "divinisation," Hadewijch's ecstatic visions and yearning for the Beloved reveal a profound spiritual journey of growth towards union with God. Central to her theology and metaphysics is the concept of *Minne* (Love), a complex and transformative force encompassing longing, communion, and even suffering. Through the interplay of *ghebruken* (divine union) and *ghebreken* (longing and absence), Hadewijch charts a path of spiritual growth culminating in Bridal Mysticism. This union involves annihilation, a symbolic dissolution of the self in divine love, leading to a deeper communion with God. Hadewijch's understanding of God emphasises the Trinity and the Incarnation, ultimately highlighting a relational knowledge of God through love. Her work, therefore, offers a unique perspective on divinisation and union, rooted in the transformative power of love and the yearning for divine communion and a rich ontological understanding of human relatedness.

Keywords: Hadewijch of Antwerp, Beguines, divinisation, union in love, Bridal Mysticism, annihilation, Trinity, Incarnation

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la comprensión de Hadewijch de Amberes sobre la divinización y la unión en el amor, destacando su conexión con la tradición medieval occidental al tiempo que subraya sus contribuciones únicas. Aunque no utiliza explícitamente el término

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“divinización”, las visiones extáticas de Hadewijch y su anhelo por el Amado revelan un profundo viaje espiritual hacia la unión con Dios. Central en su teología y en su metafísica es el concepto de *Minne* (Amor), una fuerza compleja y transformadora que abarca el anhelo, la comunión e incluso el sufrimiento. A través de la interacción entre *ghebruken* (unión divina) y *ghebreken* (anhelo y ausencia), Hadewijch traza un camino de crecimiento espiritual que culmina en el Misticismo Nupcial. Esta unión implica la aniquilación, una disolución metafórica del yo en el amor divino, que conduce a una comunión más profunda con Dios. La comprensión de Hadewijch sobre Dios enfatiza la Trinidad y la Encarnación, destacando en última instancia un conocimiento relacional de Dios a través del amor. Su obra, por lo tanto, ofrece una perspectiva única sobre la divinización y la unión, arraigada en el poder transformador del amor y el anhelo de comunión divina y un poderoso entendimiento ontológico de la relacionalidad humana.

Palabras clave: Hadewijch de Amberes, beguinas, divinización, unión en el amor, misticismo nupcial, aniquilación, Trinidad, Encarnación.

Introduction

In Christian theology, divinisation—also known as “deification”, theosis or theopoiesis—refers to the transforming effect of divine grace. While the term implies becoming divine or God-like, theologians and spiritual writers do not interpret Theosis as overcoming a fundamental ontological difference between God and humanity. Instead, deification signifies a profound spiritual transformation within the individual as she or he experiences the divine life. In other words, deification is a gift of union with God consistent with the mysteries of Incarnation, Salvation and Glorification that ends in the participation of the divine life. The concept of deification has roots in early Christian thought. Greek Fathers like St. Irenaeus (c. 130-202) spoke of it, emphasizing that through Christ’s transcendent love, humans could become what He is. Similarly, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria expressed that Jesus was made human so that we might become sons of God. However, this transformation does not breach the absolute ontological distinction between God and His creation, most of these authors of the first millennium, like Gregory of Nyssa, talk about deification as a union in love².

1. Hadewijch: Life in Obscurity, Legacy in Light

Hadewijch, known by some scholars as a 13th-century mystic and poet, remains an enigmatic figure whose life is shrouded in the mists of lost medie-

² Louth, Andrew. *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 73-94.

val texts. Despite her profound spiritual insights and literary prowess, concrete biographical details about her are therefore scarce. Scholars have pieced together fragments of her life from her own writings and limited historical records, creating a portrait of a woman deeply devoted to God and driven by an insatiable longing for divine union.

Born sometime in the early 13th century in the Duchy of Brabant, Hadewijch likely hailed from a privileged background, as her writings reveal a familiarity with courtly life and education. She is often associated with the Beguine movement, a community of laywomen who dedicated themselves to a life of prayer, service, and spiritual pursuit outside the confines of traditional monastic orders. While the exact nature of Hadewijch's involvement with the Beguines is debated, her writings resonate with their emphasis on personal experience, mystical union, and devotion to Christ's humanity.

Hadewijch's literary output comprises a collection of visionary poems, letters, and prose texts, written in the vernacular Middle Dutch language. Her works, particularly the *Visioenenboek* (Book of Visions) and *Brieven* (Letters), offer a glimpse into her rich inner life, her struggles and ecstasies on the path to spiritual fulfilment. Through vivid imagery and passionate language, she explores themes of divine love, suffering, and the transformative power of union with God.

For centuries, our Brabantine's writings remained largely unknown, preserved in a few scattered manuscripts. The rediscovery of her works in the 19th century sparked a renewed interest in her mystical theology and literary artistry. Modern scholars, such as Mother Columba Hart, Paul Mommaers, and Barbara Newman³, have devoted considerable effort to editing, translating, and interpreting her texts, bringing her profound insights to a wider audience. This efforts, nonetheless, are only the beginning of a serious academic engagement with these materials.

Contemporary scholarship on our Flemish Mystic is flourishing, with researchers exploring various aspects of her life and work. Some scholars delve into her historical context, examining her relationship with the Beguine movement and the broader social and religious landscape of 13th-century Brabant. Others focus on her literary style, analysing her use of metaphor, allegory, and poetic devices to express her mystical experiences. Still others

³ Some of these key works are the following: Hadewijch. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. by Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Mommaers, Paul, and Anikó Daróczy. *Hadewijch: The Complete Letters* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016); Newman, Barbara. *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

investigate her theological contributions, exploring her unique understanding of divine love, suffering, and *theosis*. However, there is little said about the metaphysical underpinning of her ideas, and this article explores them for the first time.

One particularly intriguing area of research is Hadewijch's use of vernacular language. Writing in Middle Dutch, she challenged the traditional dominance of Latin in religious discourse, making her spiritual insights accessible to a broader audience. This choice reflects her commitment to sharing her experiences and empowering others on their own spiritual journeys.

As Holly Hillgardner observes, "Hadewijch's poetry and prose are characterised by a remarkable blend of intellectual rigour and emotional intensity, reflecting the depth and complexity of her spiritual life"⁴. Her writings continue to inspire and challenge readers today, offering a timeless testament to the power of faith, love, and the human quest for divine union.

Exploring medieval accounts such as that of Hadewijch, I will accept the continuity of a Latin tradition (Western Christianity) that preserved the topic of deification and union in love; but will also stress her own contribution to the tradition and the ontological consistency of that union. Important examples as well as possible influences on Hadewijch⁵, according to scholars as Mommaers, are Richard of St. Victor, William of St. Thierry, St. Bernard of Clairvaux with regards to the mysticism of love and Gregory the Great with regards to the itinerary of spiritual growth. We could say that these authors constitute a Western or Latin medieval tradition of deification. Hadewijch's Book of Visions (*Visioenenboek*) and Letters (*Brieven*) feature dialogues between her and Christ in visionary speech, providing an early example of vernacular religious instruction. While Hadewijch's work does not explicitly use the term "divinisation," her ecstatic renderings and yearning for the beloved state themes of spiritual transformation and union with the divine. Consequently, in this paper I aim to show that, for Hadewijch, divinisation (deification) represents a profound spiritual journey toward union with God, where the individual's nature is transformed by divine grace, leading to a deeper communion with the divine presence, an itinerary of transformation of our being in a *being-for-love*. In addition, I shall explore her continuity with the tradition of Western Medieval deification and union, as well as her particular and unique angle and contribution to the understanding of deification and union in love in her unique categories. This will require an analysis of some

⁴ Hillgardner, Holly. *Longing and Letting Go: The Spiritual Teachings of Hadewijch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Mommaers, Paul. "Introduction". In Mommaers, Paul & Anikó Daróczy. *Hadewijch The Complete Letters. Middle Dutch Text, trans. and commentary* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 7.

of her concepts such as *Minne* (Love), *Ghebruken* and *Ghebreken*, her concept of Bridal Mysticism, and her understanding of God, annihilation, union, and their interrelationship to reveal their importance and originality. The article will open some doors of exploration that might generate further discussion on some particular nuances of her ideas to be explored by future scholarship.

2. Hadewijch and the Beguine movement

Our Brabantine mystic and poet was deeply entwined with the burgeoning Beguine movement, a vibrant expression of female spirituality that flourished in the Low Countries during the High Middle Ages. The Beguines, who often hailed from affluent backgrounds, formed communities that fostered a distinctive form of religious life. The spirituality of the Beguines during Hadewijch's time was extremely vibrant: The Beguines were women who lived together in communities, varying in size from a handful to several dozen. These women, though not bound by formal monastic vows, dedicated themselves to lives of prayer, service, and mystical seeking. Their spirituality, as recent scholarship by Bernard McGinn⁶ elucidates, was characterised by a profound affective piety centred on the humanity of Christ, particularly his Passion and Incarnation. They cultivated an intense devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, often expressed through visionary experiences and ecstatic forms of prayer, the Beguines were influenced and serviced by Mendicant Orders, mostly Dominicans, which might be yet another reason for the emphasis of an Incarnational spirituality.

Hadewijch's own mystical writings, with their emphasis on the transformative power of *Minne* (divine love), resonate deeply with this Beguine spirituality. Her poems and visions express a passionate longing for union with God, often employing the language of courtly love to depict the soul's yearning for the divine Bridegroom. This emphasis on affective piety and the transformative power of love aligns with the broader Beguine emphasis on cultivating an intimate relationship with Christ. Furthermore, Hadewijch's visionary experiences, in which she encounters the divine in both personal and communal settings, reflect the Beguine emphasis on visionary piety and the sharing of spiritual experiences within the community. As Veerle Fraeters⁷ notes, "Hadewijch's mystical experiences and writings...were deeply

⁶ Bernard McGinn. *The Crisis of Cenobitism in the Latin West, 1200-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷ Fraeters, Veerle. "Hadewijch and the Beguine Movement". In Andersen, Elizabeth e.a. [red.]. *Mysticism and devotion in northern Germany in the late Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 32-41.

embedded in the social and spiritual context of the Beguine movement".⁸ Her work, therefore, can be seen as both a product of and a contribution to this vibrant expression of female spirituality in the Middle Ages.

3. Deification in Hadewijch's writings

Our author made an emphasis primarily and extensively into the concept of *Minne* in her writings. *Minne* broadly means love. However, *Minne* is also a polysemic term, as I will show below. *Minne* is the central component of Hadewijch's poetry and collected works, including her religious *Visioenen* (Visions). Originally, *Minne* was drawn from the traditional courtly love poetry of medieval troubadours or "minnesingers". In this context of courtly love, it expressed the perpetual longing for an unattainable, worldly love. However, Hadewijch transformed this concept. She associated *Minne* with the eternal love of God, spiritualising it. *Minne* also means the appropriate human response to divine love. For her, *Minne* was not merely an earthly desire but a profound connection with the divine: *Minne* is a real relationship with God⁹. She depicted God directly as Love, transcending the limitations of human knowledge, language and experience: we can penetrate the divine life and essence not through our thoughts but through love, but this relationship, more than moral, is ontologically real. Hadewijch even considers this as a rational response to God's love consistent with human nature. Our author described *Minne* as multifaceted¹⁰, love is more than affection: It embraces unrequited desire, the confusion of longing, and even estrangement, suffering and pain. Simultaneously, it embodies the joy of divine union—the profound communion with God. Hadewijch's exploration of *Minne* goes beyond conventional boundaries, intertwining earthly and divine aspects. In summary, *Minne* represents a complex and transformative force—an intertwining of human longing and divine communion that is ingrained in human nature, while our nature is not static but dynamic, it needs a relationship tending to the divine reality that brings about the true self in love, the growing dynamism that expands a nature meant to progress. Metaphysically, *Minne* bespeaks the

⁸ Fraeters, *The Crisis*, 35.

⁹ See for example Vision II: "In the past, before that time, I always wanted, with everything I did, to figure out something. For I asked myself and continuously said: What is *Minne* and who is *Minne*? I had been doing that for two years". Hadewijch, vision II (v. 16-20), in: Hadewijch. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 271.

¹⁰ Bernard. *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 201-211.

dynamism of a self, that rather than substantial and fixed, is relational and dynamical without losing the personal identity.

4. *Ghebruken* and *Ghebreken*, and Bridal Mysticism

In her poetry, the Brabantine mystic introduced the terms Middle Dutch terms: *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* in her mystical writings, she played with these terms in creative ways. *Ghebruken*¹¹ signifies the positive aspects of spiritual experience, divine union, and the transformative power of love¹². It represents the moments of communion with God, where the soul is filled with grace and divine presence. Conversely, *ghebreken*¹³ refers to the negative aspects—the moments of longing, absence, and spiritual dryness. These are times when the soul feels distant from God, yearning for a deeper connection. Together, *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* form a dynamic interplay in the soul's journey toward divine union. Hadewijch's concepts of *Minne*, *ghebruken*, and *ghebreken* intertwine earthly longing with divine communion, inviting us to explore the depths of spiritual experience.

Ghebruken is the beginning, the courtly “honeymoon” stage of love, but in maturing this love, we end up at the ‘lacking’, the ‘*ghebreken*’¹⁴, living life on earth; and at thoughts about spiritual growth and deification. Following her narrative, then ‘*Ghebreken*’, “lacking”, means the separation from God in the sublunary sphere. But Hadewijch does give meaning to such a life in ‘*ghebreken*’. She even has very daring and radical ideas about it: it is the insatiable longing for our Creator, that will not be fulfilled until we are united to the Infinite source of our being. She even suggest that should there not be original sin, we will still be torn and longing to be united to our Creator. With her opinion about the meaning of ‘lacking’, she integrates her spiritual experiences within life in this world. From her use of these terms and the dynamism they reflect, becomes clear that Hadewijch, with her ideas about spiritual growth and union during earthly life, is in line with the rejection of *Theosis* as an ontological union (we do not become God in nature). However, Hadewijch is completely on board with a total and unreserved union in love (we become God-like when our nature is touched by God in love, this is her sense of *theosis* or *deification*). I will show that this idea of union in love is apparent in his bridal mysticism.

¹¹ Letter 11, in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

¹² Mommaers, “Introduction”, 10-11.

¹³ Letter 16 in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

¹⁴ Letter 18 in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

5. Bridal Mysticism as the culminating expression of the interplay between *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*

Bridal Mysticism (in Dutch, *Brautmystik*) is an entire genre of spirituality, and Hadewijch used what Barbara Newman¹⁵ termed “*la mystique courtoise*”, “mystical courtship” to construct a devotional system of spiritual growth. Indeed, in her poems, she wove a complex web of relations between the speaker (often allegorically personified as a courtly woman) and *Minne* (Love). This produced variations on the *Brautmystik* (bridal mysticism) also found in monastic commentaries on the *Song of Songs*¹⁶, in these works, as for example is found in the commentaries of Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry, the soul is united to God in an sponsal act. But our mystic’s perspective is unique to her: The interplay of the meanings of *Minne*, *ghebreken*, *ghebruken* is woven into a poetic summit in her bridal visions. For our Brabantine mystic the relationship is not only between the soul and God, but between the soul, *Minne* (personified love) and God. Everything substantive we read of Hadewijch thus far logically arises from one another: the roads of the virtues and the *Minne*, spiritual growth and divinisation in the longing for God; and finally, the bridal mysticism, that represents the moment of union. In the summit of the presence of God, she will stand as a bride in front of God, grown-up and proud (*fier*) - decorated with virtues and with perfect *Minne*. And Hadewijch, in the end, does meet God: at the end point of the road along the virtues, she describes a mystical unification:

And my Beloved gave Himself to me, in a way that I could understand and feel Him. But when I saw Him, I fell down before His feet. After all, I saw the road by which I had been led towards Him and I understood that I still had to do very much to *live* like that.¹⁷

In this vision, Hadewijch distinguishes a mystical experience on the one hand, a sudden experience whereby the mystic states that he becomes conscious of the loving presence of God. And on the other hand a road of spir-

¹⁵ Newman, Barbara. *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 139, for an introduction to this term.

¹⁶ In this regard we can show two classic examples, Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry: For the former “The soul is espoused to the Word when she is joined to Him by love... This is the spiritual marriage, in which the soul is united to the Word, not by bodily contact, but by the embrace of love” (Sermon 83). Bernard of Clairvaux. *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. by Kilian Walsh (Cistercian Publications, 1971). For the latter: “The soul, inflamed with the fire of divine love, longs to be united with her Beloved... She seeks Him in the solitude of contemplation, in the silence of the heart” (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Chapter 1) Saint-Thierry, William of. *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans. by Columba Hart (Cistercian Publications, 1970.)

¹⁷ Hadewijch, vision I (v. 229). My translation of: P. Mommaers. *De visioenen van Hadewijch* (1979). Vision I entire text (Commentary and text).

itual growth. Here, once again, with the word *ghebreken* (to be? “wanting”) she expressed the deprivation of *ghebruken* (“to enjoy”). She thus provided a significant word-play which in Middle Dutch is at once a play of sound: e.g. “to be wanting in enjoyment, that is the sweetest enjoyment (*dat ghe breken van dien ghebrukene dat es dat suetste ghebruken*)”¹⁸.

If we attend to the estrangement for the sake of Minne as presented in Vision I (particularly v. 250s), Hadewijch wants to experience the love of God, the ‘ghebruken’, the divinity of God; then she has to resemble (‘gheliken’) God in His humanity (Christ). This is what the Son of God shows through the kenosis (humiliation) of incarnation, an estrangement¹⁹. This means bearing to be poor, despised and disdained, to feel misery.²⁰ She even feels free to complain about this in stanzaic poem 17, for example, she sorely laments:

... The number of my griefs must be unuttered,
My cruel burdens must remain unweighed:
Nothing can be compared to them...²¹

Spiritual growth and deification

Hadewijch, like other spiritual writers of the time, recommends the growth in virtues. Virtues are habits of self-control, ways in which we can develop and flourish our human capabilities, the more noble virtues are mirrors of our more noble potentialities: because of this, ethical virtues are the summit, while intellectual virtues are instrumental for the search of the Good. However, the spiritual growth in virtue has a preparatory function²², the orientation of virtue is to create a white garment of dignity finally aimed to prepare the bridal chamber for the final encounter of union. This does not overthrow the goodness of virtue, the only condition is that this virtue does not become pride (another sense of the Dutch word “fiere”) and thus impedes the total unification, we will see

¹⁸ Letter 16, 17-19, in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

¹⁹ Hadewijch, thus, wrote about the estrangement because of *Minne*: “If you want to strive after the love (*Minne*) like it belongs to your proud (*fiere*) nature that completely claims Me for yourself, then you will become so estranged from the people, that you will be despised and disdained by all human beings, that you won’t know where to find a place to stay, not even for one night. All human beings will let drop and forsake you and no one will be with you in your need and in your misery”. Hadewijch, vision I (v. 250-260). My translation of: Mommaers, *De visioenen van Hadewijch*. Vision I entire text (Commentary and text). In this text estrangement is defined through a personal experience of humiliation that makes the author think of Jesus’ experience of human contempt.

²⁰ This is the crowning dynamism of “*Ghebruken*”: mystical experience, loving presence of God and “*Ghebreken*”: earthly life, the road of spiritual growth.

²¹ “Poems in Stanzas 17: Under the Blow,” in Hadewijch. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 172, lines 19-21.

²² This is the use of the word “fiere” that in the moment of mystical union has to be finally abandoned see Vision I (v. 250-260).

below that this is an important key to interpreting her concept of annihilation. The consequence of a real union is a return to the world as a transformed being.

I lead you, as god and human, again back into the cruel world. There you will taste all kinds of deaths, until you'll return here, in the whole name of my ghebrukens, in which you are now baptised, in my deepness²³.

In this last fragment, Hadewijch herself is called 'god and human'. As 'god and human' she goes back into the cruel world, so she can, through all kinds of deaths, through the 'lacking', the ghebreken, grow towards the ghebruken, to grow as a human being towards the divine. However, to grasp the interplay of these concepts we need to understand the goal of the union: the image of the God that growth aims at. In what she calls "noble unfaith" (edele ontrouwe), she even lets go of her faith! Hadewijch longs for Love so intensely that she lets go of her faith to continue enlarging her desire for Minne²⁴.

We can interpret Hadewijch's conception of the union in love as a process of *epektasis*, i.e., both an unlimited growth and an unlimited act of union with God. *Epektasis*, derived from the Greek word ἐπέκτασις meaning "stretching out" or "extension," signifies a perpetual state of spiritual growth and longing for God. In Christian theology, particularly within Eastern Orthodox tradition, it represents the ongoing process of drawing closer to God throughout eternity, even after reaching a state of *theosis* (divinisation). Stephen Finlan describes the concept thus: "*Epektasis*... describes the process of the soul's continuous progress towards God, even in the afterlife. It is the dynamic aspect of *theosis*, indicating that even in a state of union with God, the soul will never cease to grow in its knowledge and love of Him."²⁵ In the case of Hadewijch, this means that as we grow without end in receiving God's infinite love towards us, we also become infinite beings by participating in that love, this transforms our limited metaphysics in a definite and irreversible way.

6. Hadewijch's concept of God and the union with God

Hadewijch's works provide us with glimpses into her understanding of God. The image emerges from the tumultuous longing for God's Infinite

²³ Vision VI (v. 86-88), in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 278-279.

²⁴ Couplet Poem 10: No Feeling but Love, in Hadewijch. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 337, lines 93-98. For the meaning of Hadewijch's "Noble unfaith", cf. Hillgardner, Holly. *Longing and letting go* (AAR/Oxford: OUP, 2017), specially chapter 5.

²⁵ Finlan, Stephen. *Theosis in the Cappadocian Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 132.

joy. Hadewijch's image of God is fully and fundamentally Trinitarian, we are called to "live the Trinity"²⁶, but the life of the Trinity is essentially love. Throughout her writings, Hadewijch's central theme is the intense yearning for the infinite joy of possessing a God who is *Love*. We know that God is love, however, because of the Second Person of the Trinity. Her spirituality is deeply rooted in the mysteries of Christ's life, especially his childhood and passion, and hence marked by an emphasis on the Incarnation²⁷. Hadewijch's longing for God transcends mere intellectual knowledge; it is a heartfelt desire²⁸ to be united with the divine, and thus should give priority to the relational knowledge of God through love, because *Minne* is God's being: As stated above, *Minne* is Hadewijch's central concept, acting as the focal point of her belief system. While scholars debate its precise meaning, *Minne* represents a profound connection with the eternal love of God. Hadewijch spiritualised the concept, associating it with divine communion and direct experience of God as Love²⁹. Hadewijch's image of God is an ecstatic yearning for the Beloved: Her writings invite readers to explore the depths of spiritual experience and union with God. Hadewijch's concept of God, thus, revolves around intense longing, divine love, and the pursuit of infinite joy through communion with the divine presence.

7. Annihilation as Spiritual Attainment

The union with God, the attainment of the spiritual union with the beloved is a kind of annihilation. Hadewijch uses words of abyssal and liquid imagery. In Poem 7, Stanza 4:

My soul melts away
In the madness of Love;

²⁶ Letter 1, p. 46, in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

²⁷ Letter 28, p. 101, 121, 146 in: Mommaers & Daróczy, *Hadewijch The Complete Letters*.

²⁸ On this, the study of Agatha Anna Bardoel (1987) *Hadewijch of Brabant and the Hermeneutics of Desire*, Dutch Crossing, 11:32, 26-36, DOI: 10.1080/03096564.1987.11783864 shows that *Minne* is also a word for desire.

²⁹ Thus she writes in Vision III: "And when you accomplish me in yourself, pure human in me, by going all the roads of the complete *minne*, then you will experience enjoyingly ('*ghebruke-lik*') who I am *minne*. Until that day you will keep on loving. Because I am love, and then you will be love as I am love. You will, no less than I, live a life that is love, all the days till your death, the day that you will become alive. With my unity you receive me and I have received you. Go and live what I am and return and bring me the entire divinity, and experience then '*ghebruke-lik*' who I am".

And with that I returned into myself and I understood everything I had said before. And I remained looking into my warm-hearted sweet love". Vision III (v. 1-25) in: Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 272.

The abyss into which she hurls me
Is deeper than the the sea;
For Minne's deep new abyss
Renews my wound...³⁰

However, for Hadewijch, annihilation was not a mere negation or obliteration. Instead, the term is poetic and metaphorical, it represents a profound union with God in which mutual belonging blurs any division. Hadewijch believed that through the process of annihilation, the soul could attain a state of oneness with the Divine³¹. The use of this concept went beyond the ordinary boundaries of self and ego, leading to a transcendent experience.

In this union, Hadewijch suggests that there is a goal of Nothingness: Hadewijch's vision of annihilation was closely tied to the form and nature of nothingness³². Indeed, she dared to claim not only to be a daughter of the Father by nature but also to be identical with Him. Her mystical journey involved a radical transformation, where the soul moved toward a state of divine likeness. Therefore, Hadewijch's concept of annihilation was not about self-erasure but about becoming one with the divine, transcending individuality, and attaining a deeper spiritual reality.

Conclusion

Though I have accepted and stated that Hadewijch connects to the Western tradition of deification, I have also shown that she has a very particular angle to contribute to the tradition, she is unique in her perspective on the dramatism and force of Love, showing like no other medieval mystic how Love is also a force of tension and estrangement, Love has its demands up to the point of a total abandonment an annihilation of everything else. An analysis of some of her concepts such as *Minne* (Love), *Ghebruken* and *Ghebreken*, her concept of Bridal Mysticism, and her understanding of God, annihilation, union, and their interrelationship to reveal their importance and originality and her dynamic theological anthropology and metaphysical conception of human nature as primarily relational and dynamical. Let us retrieve the

³⁰ Poem 7, Stanza 4, Hadewijch, *Hadewijch. The Complete Works*, 145.

³¹ Marín, Juan. "Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology and Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*". *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 103, n° 1 (Jan., 2010): 92.

³² See McGinn, Bernard. "Suffering, Emptiness, and Annihilation in Three Beguine Mystics". In *Homo Medietas: Aufsätze Zu Religiosität, Literatur Und Denkformen Des Menschen Vom Mittelalter Bis in Die Neuzeit: Festschrift Für Alois Maria Haas Zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Niklaus Largier and Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde, 155-74. Bern: Peter Lang, 1999, 161-162.

analysis made here: Hadewijch shows that our entire relationship with God, who is the Trinity, is manifested in terms of *Minne*. Love has its demands, and in these demands, the beloved starts by enjoying the gratuitous divine love (*Ghebruken*) but as love gets deeper, the growth in love (*Ghebreken*) relativises everything else (even, to some extent, virtues and faith) and leads the lover to give up every preconception as to configure the entire life to this love, to the point of union in which all reservations are annihilated in union. Deification is the divine gift in the union, one participates fully in the divine life of the Trinity, leaving all other concerns aside, but always coming back to normal life with renewed love that is incarnated in our actions. We find in our author, therefore, both continuity and originality with the medieval mystical tradition: she is on board of Bridal mysticism and the Western tradition of deification, but she also offers a unique perspective that will show the radical commitment involved in the union in love even to the point of estrangement. Further lines of research will unveil the nuances of these, but in this article, we have illustrated how mysticism cross-fertilised theological anthropology and opened new developments in the flourishing of medieval faith.

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