Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter*

Bernard McGinn
Divinity School, University of Chicago

On 10 March 2005, Professor Bernard McGinn delivered the William James Lecture on Religious Experience at the Harvard Divinity School. The founding bequest of this annual lectureship was made for the purpose of having an outstanding scholar or scholars lecture on some aspect of this subject, which received classic treatment in William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience. *James's aim was not to defend religion by scientific proof, but to stake out his own position as a "piecemeal supernaturalist, one who admits miracles and providential leadings, and finds no intellectual difficulty in mixing the ideal and real worlds together" to locate where the "ideal region" interacts with "the real world's details" to cause experiences—prayer, epiphany, or visions—that generate faith.*

An almost forgotten incident during the summer of 1202 C.E. will help introduce my theme. That year Pope Innocent III and his court abandoned the disease-ridden city of Rome for the salubrious retreat of the monastery of Subiaco, St. Benedict's original foundation. An anonymous curial official who did not like the summer excursion wrote a letter to a friend telling him about the activities of the papal officials, including how they sported like fish in the adjacent lake. The pope himself, he tells us, enjoyed gargling with the cold water—"The third Solomon loved to put his holy hands into it freely and take a frigid gargle (*gargarismus frigidus*) to provide medical aid for the twofold need of human life [i.e., inner and outer] with its double power."[1] During this retreat, apparently strengthened by his gargling,

*A more detailed account of the late medieval debate over the beatific vision touched on here will appear in my essay, "*Visio Dei*: Seeing God in Medieval Theology and Mysticism," in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages* (ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter; Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

[1]The account of Innocent's summer vacation is found in the letter edited by Karl Hampe, "Eine Schilderung des Sommeraufenthaltes der römische Kurie unter Innocenz III in Subiaco 1202," *Historische Vierteljahrsschrift* 8 (1905) 509–35. The text given here is on page 530.

HTR 98:3 (2005) 227–46

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Innocent preached a sermon to the Subiaco community, taking as his text the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).[2]

This text is one of the scriptural foundations for the Christian belief that the *visio dei* is the ultimate human felicity. But what that vision would consist of, and to what extent it might be shared in this life, had long been subject to discussion. Innocent, though primarily a canonist, had received a good theological education in Paris. His sermon begins with the classic distinction between two kinds of blessedness (*beatitudo*): that possible in this life (*in via*), and the perfect happiness of heaven (*in patria*). He also treats the contradiction between the promise that the pure of heart will see God, found in the beatitude, and the many biblical texts that deny that God can ever be seen (e.g., Exod 33:20, Isa 45:15, John 1:18, 1 Tim 6:16). In scholastic fashion, the pope solves the contradiction by distinguishing three kinds of vision: "Thus it is necessary to distinguish that one kind of vision is corporeal, another veiled, another comprehensive. The corporeal vision belongs to the senses; the veiled (*aenigmatica*) to images; the comprehending to the understanding."[3] The invisible God can never be seen by corporeal vision, though, of course, the second person of the Trinity who took flesh in Jesus Christ was seen and will be seen corporeally after the resurrection of the body. "In the present life," continues the pope, "the invisible God can be seen by the effect of inspiration, contemplation, prayer, meditation, reading, and preaching, which lift the soul up to gazing on God," at least for those who have purified their hearts.[4] These veiled forms of vision, all dependent on faith, are far inferior to the comprehensive vision of God to come in heaven on which Innocent spends most of the sermon.

Innocent's threefold distinction of ways of seeing God is clear and deeply traditional, being based upon a distinction that went back to Augustine and that was widely held among Western theologians. One might have thought that the pope expressed a theological consensus that would settle debates on seeing God, if not once and for all, at least for centuries to come. The story, however, is quite different. Innocent's generic Augustinian view of *visio dei* was about to receive two massive challenges that were to lead to discussions, contentions, and even to condemnations. The debates about seeing God in the here and hereafter were never more varied and fervent than in the last centuries of the Middle Ages.

The first challenge to Innocent's view came from what I have called elsewhere the visionary explosion in Western mysticism, that is, the significant increase in accounts of visions of God and other celestial beings that began in the late twelfth

[2]Innocent III, Sermo XXXI (PL 217:589–96). On this sermon and its context, see John C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216): To Root Up and To Plant* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 87–91.

[3]Innocent III, Sermo XXXI (592D). The source for the triple distinction is ultimately Augustine, *De genesi ad litteram* 12, but the terminology, especially the adjective *comprehensiva*, is not Augustine's.

[4]Innocent III, Sermo XXXI (593B).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century and grew apace in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[5] These visions differed from the standard visionary showings of the early Middle Ages, either the journeys to heaven and hell, or the manifestations of angels and saints for purposes of admonition or consolation. Many of these showings involved mystical illumination and transformation; others were messages about the reform of the church. Some, especially those given to women, describe encounters with Jesus that were more direct, more somatic, and even sexual in nature than was customary in monastic mysticism prior to 1200. Such visions were often the basis for claims to special authority on the part of the seers that raised questions among both clerical officials and even the mystics themselves. The second challenge to Innocent's broadly Augustinian view was from the revival of Dionysian theology in the thirteenth century and the subsequent struggles between different ways of understanding Dionysius's mystical theology. This theological movement had implications, not only for understanding the beatific vision, but also for how to evaluate claims for seeing God and attaining union with God in the depths of the soul during this life.

The Problem of the Beatific Vision

Here I will only make a few comments on the debates over the beatific vision side of the equation, in order to concentrate on some of the ways that the visionary explosion influenced conceptions of what it might mean to "see" God. It is important to note, however, that the many intersecting lines of late medieval thought about seeing God, reflected in both text and image, need to be seen as part of a larger, if complex and often amorphous, whole to begin to make sense.

As in so much medieval thought, we can begin with Augustine, because the bishop of Hippo set forth a theory of *visio dei*, both here and hereafter, that shaped the medieval discussion.[6] With regard to the beatific vision, Augustine insisted that the final satisfaction for all human longing is found in heaven in "the contemplation of the Good that is unchanging, eternal, always the same."[7] At the end of *De civitate Dei* he summarizes this reward as follows: "There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise; this is what shall be in the end without end."[8] Later

[5]The best overview is Peter Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981) esp. chaps. 12–16. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad-Herder, 1994) chap. 8, and Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 8 (2005) 1–43.

[6]Augustine's discussions of seeing God are found throughout his writings. Especially important for his notion of the *visio beatifica* are: Epistula 92 (408 C.E.); three texts of 413: Epistulae 147 and 148, and Sermo 277; Epistula 162 (414); and *De civitate dei* 22.29 (426). On the kinds of visions found in this life, besides *De genesi ad litteram* 12, see Epistula 147, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41.2–10, 99.5–6, 134.6, and the *Tractatus in Iohannem* 20.11. Sad to say, recent scholarly tools and indices do not provide much help on this vast topic in his thought. For one starting place, see Margaret Miles, "Vision: The Eye of the Body and Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate* and *Confessiones*," *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983) 125–42.

[7]Augustine, *Enn. in Ps.* 26.2.11.

[8]Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 22.30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theology correctly read such statements as indicating a direct mental beholding of the divine nature or essence. With regard to what kind of seeing of God is possible in this life, Augustine, like other church fathers, wrestled with the contrasting biblical texts about whether or not God could really be seen here below. His treatise-letter *De videndo deo* of 413 C.E. argued against any corporeal vision of God himself, but allowed that some kind of interior vision of God as he "willed himself to be seen" could be given to the saints in this life.[9] As he said in a sermon on Psalm 41: "With the fine point of the mind we are able to gaze upon something unchangeable, although hastily and in part."[10] The impossibility of seeing "God's fullness" in this life supports the scriptural texts claiming that God cannot be seen, while still allowing for inferior forms of vision. Like other patristic and later theologians, Augustine allowed for a few miraculous exceptions, especially in the cases of Moses and Paul, who enjoyed something close to a vision of God's very nature while still alive.[11] But for the vast majority of those still caught in the toils of fallen flesh any interior vision of God's nature, and any other experience of God in the spiritual senses, was always partial and fleeting.

Augustine summarized his view of the kinds of *visio dei* found in this life in book twelve of *De genesi ad litteram* written in approximately 415. Here the bishop distinguishes three kinds of seeing that can be realized either on a natural or a supernatural register—*corporalis*, *spiritualis* (that is, by interior images), and *intellectualis*, the mind's direct grasp of truth. God can miraculously create new external objects to be seen in a corporeal way, but most visions are either *spiritualis* or *intellectualis*. In the midst of a discussion of God-given raptures, ones in which, as he puts it, "the soul's intention is completely turned away or snatched away from the body's senses" (12.12.25), Augustine allows for both imaginative visions sent by God, such as the images given to John in the Apocalypse, as well as higher intellectual visions in which God grants an immediate perception of divine truth. "There," he explains, "the brightness of the Lord is seen, not through a symbolic or corporeal vision . . . nor through a spiritual vision, but through a direct vision

[9]Augustine, Ep. 147.20 (PL 33:605). There is a translation of this letter in Mary T. Clark, *St. Augustine: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 365–402. For an improved edition and discussion, see Erich Naab, *Augustinus. Über Schau und Gegenwart des unsichtbaren Gottes* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstaat: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998).

[10]Augustine, *Enn. in Ps.* 41.10 (PL 36:471).

[11]Augustine, Ep. 147.31–37, and *De gen. ad lit.* 12.1.1–5.14, 27.54–29.57, and 34.65–67. For surveys of the large literature on whether or not Moses and Paul enjoyed a direct vision of God in this life, see Joseph Maréchal, *Études sur la psychologie des mystiques* (2 vols.; Paris-Bruges: Alcan-Beyaert, 1924–37) 2:165–86, 204–8, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thomas und die Charismatik. Kommentar zu Thomas von Aquin, Summa Theologica Quaestiones II II 171-182* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1996) 418–57, 481–90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and not through a dark image, as far as the human mind elevated by God's grace can receive it."[12]

Augustine's teaching about the beatific vision and the vision of God possible *in via* were challenged by an alternate view that took the biblical prohibitions against seeing God more literally and denied that God's essence could ever be seen, either in this life or in the world to come. This tradition, which developed in Eastern Christianity, distinguished between the divine essence that is always invisible and the divine energies, manifestations, or theophanies, that can be seen in some sense in this life and that will be beheld directly in heaven.[13] Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the beatitude about seeing God is a good statement of this position,[14] but it was primarily through the Dionysian corpus and its interpreters that this option became present in the West. For Dionysius *theōria*, or contemplation of the manifestations of God in the hierarchies of created being, is a vital part of the ascent to God. Yet his *De mystica theologia* insists on the absolute invisibility of God, claiming that Moses, the exemplary mystic, did not contemplate the God who cannot be seen, but only attained a vision of the place where he dwells. Moses broke free of everything perceptible by corporeal or mental vision, "away from what sees and is seen and plunged into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" in order to be "supremely united to the totally Unknown by an inactivity of all knowing," as the first chapter of *De mystica theologia* puts it. Dionysius effected a radical separation between all knowing and seeing and union with the Unknown God, although chapter two of the work describes a paradoxical "unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing" by which "we may see above being that darkness that is concealed from all the light of beings."[15] While *De mystica theologia* discusses this non-seeing seeing in relation to our situation in this life, the first chapter of *De divinis nominibus* deals with its realization in heaven. Dionysius says that when we have attained full likeness with Christ in beatitude we shall "enjoy his visible theophany in purest contemplation, illuminated by his radiant beams, just as the apostles were illuminated at the time of his divine Transfiguration."[16] In other words, heaven features a vision of the Incarnate Son, the full manifestation of God, but the super-essential divine nature remains hidden.

[12]Augustine, *De gen. ad lit.* 12.26.54 (PL 34:476). See also 12.27.55 and 12.31.59. Augustine did not restrict intellectual visions to biblical figures, as is evident from *Enn. in Ps.* 134.6 (PL 37: 1742).

[13]See especially Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (London: The Faith Press, 1963).

[14]Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio 6 (PG 44:1263–78). For a translation, see Hilda C. Graef, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer; The Beatitudes* (Ancient Christian Writers 18; New York: Paulist Press, 1954) 143–53.

[15]For the passages cited, see *De mystica theologia* 1 (PG 3:1000D–1001A) and 2 (1025B). For other texts on non-seeing seeing, often citing 1 Tim 6:16, consult Ep. 5 (1073A), *De cealesti hierarchia* 4.3 (180C), and *De divinis nominibus* 4.11 (708D). The Dionysian corpus does not cite Matt 5:8.

[16]See *De divinis nominibus* 1.4 (592C), and the comment in Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 103–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The ninth-century Irish scholar, John Scottus Eriugena, not only translated the Dionysian writings into Latin, but in his *Periphyseon* developed the Eastern option further, especially with regard to the beatific vision. In reality, if not in the same language, Eriugena accepted the distinction between God's hidden essence and his manifested energies, or theophanies. He also used the Transfiguration account of Matthew 17 as a paradigm for understanding the forms of contemplation in this life and the next.[17] Elijah is the type of those who contemplate God while still in the body; Moses prefigures those few saints who see God's higher manifestations when released from the body in rapture and ecstasy. Christ himself represents those who will enjoy perfect vision after the resurrection of the body. What can never be seen, either in this life or in the next, is God's essence. God is never visible in God's self, but only in his theophanies, that is, in the illuminations that objectively are identical with God insofar as he shows himself to us, and that subjectively are the deifying graces that transform humans. At the end the saved will gaze upon "theophanies of theophanies," things unimaginably higher than what we can see here, but these are still theophanies.[18]

Eriugena's translation of the Dionysian corpus and his *Periphyseon* were by no means unknown from the tenth through the twelfth centuries, but Dionysian theology experienced an upsurge in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Between 1230 and 1250 C.E. three thinkers, Thomas Gallus, Robert Grosseteste, and Albert the Great, wrote commentaries on the entire Dionysian corpus. In the 1240s an unknown editor also produced a glossed version of the Dionysian writings that became a textbook at the University of Paris.[19] The new Dionysianism assumed two forms. In commentaries and glosses produced between 1230 and 1246, Gallus reinterpreted Dionysian negative theology in terms of the priority of "the supreme point of affectivity" (*apex affectus*) over all intellectual vision or contact with God. Taken up by Franciscans, especially Bonaventure, and later by the Carthusians and such texts as the English *Cloud of Unknowing*, this "affective Dionysianism," as it has been called, became a significant strand in late medieval mysticism.

A second strand emerged about a decade later. In the late 1240s Albert the Great began to study and teach the Dionysian writings, first at Paris and then at Cologne (Thomas Aquinas was among his students). Between 1248 and 1252 he produced a massive commentary that took the other side, arguing "it is necessary to be united to God through intellect."[20] This "intellective Dionysianism" was to

[17]John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* 5 (PL 122:998B–1000A).

[18]On the eternal need for theophanies, see *Periphyseon* 1 (448C), 2 (557BC), and 5 (905CD, 926CD, 945CD, and 1010 CD). For general discussion of the *visio beatifica*, a good text is *Periphyseon* 1 (447B–451C). A good analysis can be found in Dominic J. O'Meara, "Eriugena and Aquinas on the Beatific Vision," in *Eriugena Redivivus. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit* (ed. Werner Beierwaltes; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987) 224–36.

[19]See H. F. Dondaine, *Le Corpus dionysien de l'Université de Paris au XIIIe siècle* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1953); and L. Michael Harrington, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris* (Paris/Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

[20]Albert the Great, *Super mysticam theologiam* 2 (*Opera Omnia* 37.2:465).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be of considerable moment in German Dominican theology and mysticism for the next century. In the mid-fifteenth century the debate over the respective roles of knowledge and love in the path to union with God in which Nicholas of Cusa took part can be seen, in part at least, as a clash between the affective and the intellective forms of Dionysianism.

Intellective Dionysianism was involved in the debates over the nature of the beatific vision during the century between ca. 1240 and 1340 C.E., disputes brought to a conclusion by Pope Benedict XII's 1336 condemnation of the view of his predecessor John XXII about the delay of the vision of God's essence until after the resurrection of the body.[21] The first major moment came in 1241 when the bishop of Paris, William of Auvergne, and the authorities of the University attacked the view that even in heaven God will not be seen directly, but only through theophanies. The first of ten rejected articles in the condemnation document states: "The first [error is] that the divine essence in itself will be seen neither by man nor angel. We reject this error and we excommunicate its upholders and defenders by the authority of Bishop William. We firmly believe and assert that God will be seen in essence or substance by the angels and all the saints and he will be seen by glorified souls."[22] The denial of a direct vision of God in heaven was the expression of a form of Dionysianism influenced by Eriugena, as well as a challenge to the traditional Augustinian position. We are not sure who its proponents were, though they seem to have included some Dominicans, a rather scandalous fact since these mendicant preachers were the champions of orthodoxy.

The condemnation, however, did not mean the end of all differences of opinion about the nature of the beatific vision, even among the Dominicans. While it was not possible to disagree directly with a pronouncement of such doctrinal weight, there was considerable wiggle-room in how it was to be interpreted. Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the beatific vision is the classic synthesis of the Augustinian position and takes direct exception to Eriugena's view of theophany.[23] In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* Thomas even declares Eriugena's teaching on the need for theophanies in heaven heretical.[24] Albert the Great, however, worked out a solution to the nature of the beatific vision that adhered to the Paris condemnation

[21]Much has been written on these scholastic debates; see especially the massive work of Christian Trottmann, *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa definition par Benoit XII* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1995).

[22]The text of the condemnation can be found in the *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis* (ed. Heinrich Denifle; vol. 1 of 4; Paris: Delalain, 1889) no. 128. The condemned article directly reflects Eriugena's *Periphyseon* 1 (447C). On the condemnation and its context, see Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, chap. 2.

[23]Aquinas's theology of the beatific vision has been written about often. For a summary, see Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, 302–20. Some key texts include *Summa theologiae* (STh) Ia, q. 12; *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.51–55; and *De veritate* Q. 8, aa. 1–2.

[24]Thomas Aquinas, *In Epistulam ad Hebraeos*, chap. 1, lect. 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but also managed to salvage the core of Dionysian negative theology about the limits of all seeing of God.[25] This is not the place to go into the details of Albert's position, but it is important to note one key difference that shows the distance between his student Thomas Aquinas and himself. Albert continued to use the language of theophany to describe the way in which God's essence is seen in heaven by means of the light of glory. In his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, for example, he says: "Thus God himself is in each of the blessed as an illumination by whose participation he makes himself his own likeness. In such a likeness the vision of God is called a theophany. In this way, the same God will be illumination and object [illuminated], but object as he is in himself, illumination insofar as he is participated in by the blessed."[26]

Continuing in the same line, Albert's student, Meister Eckhart, although he agreed that God cannot be seen through likenesses,[27] tended to subvert traditional notions of what it means to see God through his teaching of what might be called ocular identity, as expressed in the formula, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving."[28] Although Eckhart did not deny all difference between seeing here on earth and seeing in heaven, his radicalized and dialectical version of *visio dei* elides any essential distinction between what it means to see God in this life and the *visio beatifica*. For Eckhart, the eschatological vision of God becomes immanentized in the a-temporal birth of the Son of God in the soul.[29] On the other side, however, Eckhart's insistence on a strong apophatic theology means that all vision of God, even in heaven, is really a vision of the divine nothingness. As he says in German Sermon 71, "One must receive God as he is a mode beyond measure, a being beyond being, for he has no limited mode."[30] This apophaticism helps explain Eckhart's critical attitude toward the visionary explosion of his time.

[25]For an overview, see Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, 282–302, as well as William J. Hoye, "Gotteserkenntnis per essentiam im 13. Jahrhundert," in *Die Auseinandersetzungen an der Pariser Universität im XIII Jahrhundert* (ed. Albert Zimmermann; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976) 274–79.

[26]Albert the Great, *Super Caelestem Hierarchiam* 4 (*Opera Omnia* 36.1:71).

[27]Eckhart seems to follow Aquinas (STh Ia, q. 12, a. 2) in holding that *theophaniae* are always inferior created images of God and therefore cannot really convey the divine nature. See the following texts in *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936 [hereafter abbreviated as LW for the Latin works and DW for the German]): *Liber parabolarum Genesis* n. 218 (LW 1:696–97), *In Exodum* n. 111 (LW 2:109–10), and *In Sapientiam* n. 284 (LW 2:617).

[28]Meister Eckhart, German Sermon (hereafter Pr.) 12 (DW 1:201). See also Pr. 69 (DW 3:175); Pr. 76 (DW 3:310); and *In Iohannem* nn. 405–6 and 506–9 (LW 3:343–45, 437–41).

[29]Implied in many texts; explicit, for example, in *In Iohannem* n. 573 (LW 3:500).

[30]Pr. 71 (DW 3:231).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Visionary Mysticism

The visionary explosion formed the other pole of the debates about seeing God present in Western Christendom from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. The visionary impetus was part of an important shift in mysticism evident from the twelfth century on that put increasing emphasis on what Bernard of Clairvaux famously called "the book of experience" (*liber experientiae*).[31] Contact with God, especially in the case of women, came to be more and more expressed in the language of personal encounter, though the many and subtle ways in which these visionary and auditory encounters were written down, both by the mystics and by their clerical advisors, preclude any simple reduction of such narratives to the category of autobiography. Indeed, it is clear that we are often dealing with what Franz Bäuml memorably called "the creation of a fiction that a fiction is not a fiction."[32] Although the appearance of innovative modes of presenting visions and of using them to convey mystical teaching argues for a new stage in the evolution of Western mysticism, we should strive to avoid simplistic notions of the emergence of what some German scholars have called a new "experiential mysticism" (*Erlebnismystik*).[33] Rather than straight-forward descriptions of visions and other ecstatic experience, we are dealing with sophisticated texts that require close attention to their theological, cultural, and literary contextualization and shaping in order to be properly understood.

In confronting this issue, it may be helpful to make a distinction between vision and visualization. What are presented as supernaturally-given visions breaking into the consciousness of the mystic contain important elements of visualization, that is, they are dependent both in reception and expression on the subject's power of imaginative seeing. Visionary narratives were often created, and always mediated, by the religious person's meditation on the imagery of the Bible, participation in the action of the liturgy, prayerful gazing upon artistic representations of Christ, Mary, angels and saints, as well, of course, by his or her literary skill in expressing what is presented as a gift from God. It is somewhat akin to Willa Cather's description in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: "[A]n apparition is human vision corrected by divine love."[34] Religious women, both nuns and beguines, were particularly adept

[31]Sermo super Cantica Canticorum 3.1, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera Omnia* (ed. Jean Leclercq et al.; Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77) 1:14.

[32]Franz Bäuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Speculum* 55 (1980) 262. A similar point is made by Miri Rubin who says that "we should, therefore, talk not of experience but of the relation between representations of such experience." See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 169.

[33]On the debate over *Erlebnismystik* among students of medieval German literature, see the helpful discussion in Frank Tobin, *Mechthild of Magdeburg: A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995) 115–22.

[34]Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993) 56.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

practitioners of such modes of visualization.[35] How much any particular mystical vision may owe to the subject's or author's creative powers of visualization is not easy to discern, but the distinction is worth keeping in mind. Medieval believers did not doubt that God could and did grant visions to certain favored souls, but they were more concerned about the truth of the teaching found in the vision than in whether the vision was being recounted "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist."

This is evident from the fact that some mystics were quite prepared to admit that some of their visions were literary creations for teaching purposes. An example can be found in Henry Suso (ca. 1295–1366), a student of Meister Eckhart, but one who was more open to visionary narrative to convey his message. Suso had one of the most powerful visual imaginations among the male mystics of the late Middle Ages. To quote Jeffrey Hamburger, "Suso first saw and then read."[36] Suso's texts, both the four vernacular works that make up the collection he called the *Exemplar* and his popular Latin *Horologium Sapientiae*, are filled with imagistic showings, not only those ascribed to the Servant, but also to other holy "friends of God." For the *Vita*, or *Life of the Servant*, the presentation of the story of the Servant of Eternal Wisdom as the exemplar of the mystical life (a figure who both is and is not Suso), he even commissioned twelve illustrations for some of the visions recounted in the text. In his writings Suso presents a sophisticated view of both the necessity for and the limitations of visions and images in the path to mystical union.

One of these pictures, based upon a showing recounted in the *Life*, provides a sense of Suso's special place in the visionary explosion of late medieval mysticism. The early chapters of the *Life* deal with the beginning of the mystical path and feature a plethora of descriptions of visionary and auditory experiences of supernatural beings. Chapter five recounts no less than nine examples of the "divine consolations" (*goetliches trostes*) God uses to attract beginners. The consolations begin with a perfectly normal form of consciousness, that of the Servant greeting the dawn in thanks to the divine Lightbringer. The following three experiences shift to a more supernatural register and involve internal music that comes partly from within the Servant himself and partly from overhearing the angels' song. The fifth consolation is both auditory and visual, as his guardian angel appears and leads the Servant to another land, embracing and consoling him. The sixth vision is the most visual and receives the actual illustration. Here the Servant is surrounded by the heavenly host "in a vision" (*in einer gesiht*) and asks one of the angels to show him the hidden dwelling place of God in the soul. The angel commands him to look, just as angels bade John look at heavenly scenes in the Apocalypse. The

[35]See, for example, Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), and Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), as well as *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[36]Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Seuse's Exemplar," in *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans* (ed. Kent Emery, Jr., and Joseph P. Wawrykow; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1998) 441.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

account continues: "He quickly looked inside and saw that over his heart his body was clear as crystal, and he saw in the middle of his heart Eternal Wisdom sitting quietly with a pleasing appearance. Nearby the soul of the Servant was sitting and longing for heaven. It was inclined in love at God's side, embraced by his arms, and pressed to his divine heart. There outside itself and immersed in love it lay in the arms of its beloved God."[37]

This is clearly an Augustinian spiritual vision, but one of a novel nature. First, it is self-referential, though in a way typical of Suso in that it places the Servant both inside and outside himself, just as the whole *Life* has a studied ambiguity about how far we should identify Suso with the Servant. The vision is also shaped by visual objects from Suso's religious milieu. The Servant has become a kind of reliquary, or even a monstrance, whose crystal clarity allows a view of something sacred within. The Servant's soul is inclined on the breast of Eternal Wisdom, exactly as the figure of John the Beloved is embraced by Christ in the well-known sculptural form called the "Christus-Johannes-Gruppe."[38] Suso's talent for visualization has used these artistic images to create something new. The visionary narrative and its image form an effective teaching tool, not only for what they reveal about the relation between the soul of the Servant and Wisdom, but also for what they suggest about the role of visions in the beginning of the mystical life by being placed relatively early in the text.[39]

In the Prologue to the *Exemplar* Suso says of the *Life* that "it is entirely about the life of a beginner in a figurative way (*mit bildgebender wise*), and in a hidden way (*togenlich*) it shows how a beginner should order his inner and outer self according to God's dearest will. . . . By way of giving examples (*mit glichnusgebender wise*) it describes many holy works that actually took place."[40] The exemplary nature of the narrative is clear here, and it is important to note that Suso says that "many" but not all of the things recounted actually happened. The point is made again in the prologue to his Latin *Horologium Sapientiae*. Here Suso explicitly says that the visions (*visiones*) in the work need not all be taken literally, though many were perceived by him as such. But they are all described as *figurata locutio*, that is, a "speaking by way of figures," such as we find in the biblical parables.[41] "All these things are true," he adds, "not according to the letter, but according to their true

[37]*Heinrich Seuse: Deutsche Schriften* (ed. Karl Bihlmeyer; Stuttgart, 1907; reprint Frankfurt: Minerva, 1961) ch. 5 (20.16–23). I use the translation of Frank Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 73.

[38]On representations of John in medieval art, see Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) esp. 131–35 on the Christus-Johannes-Gruppe.

[39]The Servant never abandons visions, however, the way that he gives up his literal imitation of Christ's passion; see ch. 18 (ed. 52–53), and ch. 51 (ed., 181).

[40]*Deutsche Schriften*, prol. (3.2–10).

[41]On *figurata locutio*, see Niklaus Largier, "*Figurata Locutio*. Philosophie und Hermeneutik bei Eckhart von Hochheim und Heinrich Seuse," in *Meister Eckhart. Lebensstationen—Redesituationen* (ed. Klaus Jacobi; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 303–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

significations. . . . The attentive reader will easily note the hidden mysteries of this speaking through figures, if he makes a skillful effort," that is, if he recognizes how images and visions are both necessary, but limited, in mystical praxis.[42] As a mystagogical strategy, Suso's *figurata locutio* does not differentiate between visionary event and literary elaboration, not hesitating to introduce what we would call fictional visions into narratives of different forms of showings. Suso does not feel it is necessary to give clues about which visions "really" happened and which did not. What we might be tempted to separate as fact versus fiction is all part of one overarching didactic strategy. To be sure, many late medieval visionaries, especially those who were subject to challenge as so many women were, felt they needed to present all their visions as literally true; but Suso's practice may well have been more widespread than we can demonstrate.

Suso's presentation of Eternal Wisdom in his breast demonstrates something of the visual creativity of late medieval visionaries. Among the wealth of showings found in late medieval mystical literature we can also find many that call into question the standard Augustinian categories—differentiating between corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual visions. One example is the Flemish beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp, who seems to have lived in the mid-thirteenth century, though a minority view places her in the early fourteenth. Hadewijch exemplifies a new form of vision that is both highly pictorial, as well as frankly corporeal in its description of the mystic's reception of the showing. Nonetheless, many of her showings are also presented as giving Hadewijch a direct intellectual grasp of divine truths about the Trinity and other celestial matters. Her Vision Seven records a typical experience of late medieval female mystics, a powerfully erotic experience of oneness with Christ taking place in a Eucharistic setting.[43] It begins with a Pentecost vision at dawn while Matins are being sung. At first she experiences extreme physical symptoms, such as trembling and quaking with madness and fear lest "I did not content my Beloved and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire." After this description of her outer and inner troubled state, the first-person account moves to the visual register. Hadewijch says she saw an eagle flying from the altar to her with a message to prepare herself for the encounter with Christ. Then, "he came from the altar, showing himself as a child," but bearing the eucharistic elements of bread and wine. Suddenly, Christ changes into a beautiful man, as he was at the time of the passion. He gives himself to the beguine, first sacramentally and then physically: "Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came to me, took me entirely in

[42]*Heinrich Seuses Horologium Sapientiae* (ed. Pius Künzle; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1977) 366–67.

[43]For the text of Hadewijch's Vision 7, see *Hadewijch Visioenen* (ed. Imme Dros and Frank Willaert; Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 1996) 78–83. I use the translation of Mother Columba Hart, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 280–82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity."

This sense of full physical satisfaction, however, is not the end of the experience. Hadewijch goes on to say that she lost sight of the "manly beauty" of Christ's form so that she could no longer distinguish him within or without. She continues: "Then it was to me as if we were one without difference." The "without difference" (*sonder differentie*) qualification suggests that this mystical union goes beyond the erotic model in which two persons become one in flesh without losing their personal being. Her visionary account fuses the corporeal and imaginative realms, and yet also involves an intellectual conviction of oneness with the divine nature. This kind of mingling of aspects scarcely fits the Augustinian model of vision.

Critiques of the Visionary Explosion

The proliferation of visionary narratives in the late Middle Ages, many of a new form and making strong claims to authority, initiated even more extensive debates than those over the nature of the beatific vision. The reactions fell into two broad streams. The first was the growth of interest in the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*), that is, the rules for sorting out good from bad impulses and visions. The second was the appearance of an anti-visionary reaction among many mystics themselves.

The discernment of spirits has received a good deal of scholarly attention of late.[44] The theme is rooted in scripture, especially in Paul's listing "discernment of spirits" (*diakriseis pneumatōn*) among the charisms the Spirit gives to the church (1 Cor 12:10) and in the warning found in 1 John 4: "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Discernment in the broad sense as a form of contemplative wisdom that issues in a life of obedience and moderation was much cultivated in monasticism. It was primarily directed toward the self as a praxis involving, if only in part, distinguishing the good and evil impulses in one's intentions and actions. This broad view was well expressed in the words God addressed to Catherine of Siena in chapter nine of her *Dialogo*: "Discernment is nothing else but the true knowledge a soul ought to have of herself

[44]A classic account remains the multi-author article, "Discernement des esprits," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–94) 4:1222–94. A recent theological analysis is Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad, 2004). For accounts concentrating on the late Middle Ages, see Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2003), Deborah A. Frioli, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), Dyan Elliott, *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) ch. 7, and Wendy Love Anderson, *Free Spirits, Presumptuous Women, and False Prophets: Discernment of Spirits in the Late Middle Ages* (University of Chicago, Ph.D. dissertation, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and of me, and through this knowledge she finds her roots. It is joined to charity like an engrafted shoot."[45]

Discernment of spirits in the more narrow sense is a late medieval development. This form of discernment sought to establish guidelines and rules to distinguish the good from the bad spirits in other people, especially in heretics and in those who made claims to visionary contact with God. Canonically it had its source in a letter Innocent III sent to the clergy of Mainz in 1199 about the dangers of secret conventicles, false preaching, and heresy. In this letter, which made it into canon law, Innocent lays on the clergy the obligation to distinguish good from evil in such matters: "There is need for greater discernment, because vices can secretly work their way in under the guise of virtues, and Satan's angel can pretend to be and transform himself into an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14).[46] At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Augustinian Henry of Friemar, a contemporary of Eckhart and member of the commission that condemned the beguine mystic Marguerite Porete to death, wrote the first formal treatise on the topic, the *Tractatus de quattuor instinctibus*, analyzing the four internal promptings that incline humans to action: divine, angelic, diabolical, and natural. Henry was as much worried about mistaking merely natural instincts for divine or angelic ones, as he was about the action of the devil. Henry's treatise still had a relatively broad focus, but his contemporaries Augustine of Ancona and Venturino of Bergamo were more concerned with invoking discernment, to quote the latter, in the case of "visions, revelations, or experiences that are supernatural or beyond the common ken of those who love or fear God."[47] In the troubled times of the Great Schism and its aftermath, when visionaries and prophets abounded, discernment of spirits, or at least writing treatises about it, became a growth industry. In 1383 the German theologian Henry of Langenstein wrote the first work specifically with that name. Pierre d'Ailly composed two tracts *De falsis prophetibus*, and his student Jean Gerson wrote no less than three works on discernment. Catherine of Siena, Birgitta of Sweden, and Joan of Arc are just some of the visionaries whose showings were subjected to discernment analysis, sometimes with fatal results.

What has not yet been systematically studied is the second reaction, that is, the criticisms of visionary claims by the mystics themselves.[48] This anti-visionary tradition originated in the thirteenth century, grew strong in the fourteenth, and continued on into the fifteenth. To be sure, opponents of the visionary explosion

[45]*S. Caterina da Siena: Il Dialogo* (ed. Giuliana Cavallini; Rome: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1968) IX (22).

[46]The letter "Cum ex iniuncto" is found in *Corpus iuris canonici* (ed. E. Friedburg after the second Leipzig edition of A. L. Richter; 2 vols.; Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881) Lib. V, Tit. VII, *De Haereticis*, cap. xii (c. 785).

[47]For Venturino and this quotation, see Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 218–21.

[48]For some thirteenth-century examples, see Bernard McGinn, "Visions and Critiques of Visions in Thirteenth-Century Mysticism," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions* (ed. Elliot R. Wolfson; New York: Seven Bridges, 1999) 87–112.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

found it difficult to condemn revelations and visions totally, since they were witnessed to in the Bible and had been ascribed to many of the post-biblical saints and leaders of the church. Mystical opposition to visions, therefore, came in several varieties, ranging from those who rejected visions outright—on the basis of the argument that the age of visions belonged to the good old days and not to the evil present age—to those who sought to show that visions at best were peripheral to the real pursuit of God, and at worst a distraction and danger.

Among the earliest witnesses to the anti-visionary movement was the German Franciscan David of Augsburg (d. 1272). David's ascetical and mystical teaching is not Franciscan in the sense we know from Bonaventure and the literature about Francis. It harkens back, rather, to the Cistercian and Victorine mysticism of the twelfth century. In the 1240s he wrote a popular spiritual handbook called *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione secundum triplicem statum incipientium, proficientium et perfectorum* (over three hundred manuscripts survive).The end of the third book of this manual for novice masters contains a treatise on prayer and concludes with the interior pure prayer that leads to union with God. It also has a treatment of visions, revelations, and ecstatic experience (Bk. 3.66–68) that takes a decidedly negative attitude. "The less we meddle in such matters," David warns, "the less opportunity there will be for deception."[49] Of course, David allows that God sometimes consoles his saints with visions, but he is obviously worried about the kind of vision that we have seen above in the case of Hadewijch. He specifically warns against visions involving embracing, kissing, and "being caressed in other less decent ways," as he delicately puts it, so that both the interior and even the exterior person are affected.[50]

At the turn of the fourteenth century Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, two of the most important mystics of the time, also took a negative attitude toward visions of God and the saints. Porete, herself a beguine, seems even more critical than Eckhart of the dangers of desiring to see God.[51] Porete had a great interest in "specularity," or seeing in a mirror, especially the role of her book *Le mirouer des simples ames* as a visible image of the way in which the annihilated soul vanishes so that God can see himself in the soul as in a non-existent mirror,[52] but the beguine does not recount any appearances of Christ or the saints in her book. The *Mirror* is

[49]*Fr. David ab Augusta: De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione secundum triplicem statum incipientium, proficientium et perfectorum* (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1899) 3.66.1 (ed., 356).

[50]*De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione* 3.66.5 (ed., 359–60).

[51]Porete was almost certainly a beguine, although she says that other beguines attacked her (presumably the approved communities of beguines). See *Marguerite Porete: Le Mirouer des Simples Ames* (ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen; Turnhout: Brepols, 1986) ch. 122 (344): "Amis, que diront beguines,/et gens de religion,/Quant ilz orront l'excellence/ de vostre divine chançon?/ Beguines dient que je erre."

[52]See, e.g., *Mirouer*, chs. 91 and 118 (ed., 258 and 330). The Latin text for chap. 26 (ed., 93) puts it clearly: "Talis anima habet ita claram notitiam, quod uidet se nichil in Deo et Deum nichil in se."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a dialogue among various personifications rather than a visionary narrative. Porete's apophatic message about the necessity for total annihilation means that visions, even of the highest sort, are not important for her. In chapter forty-nine Love proclaims, in her usual hyperbolic way, that willing nothing in God is better than even willing good in God. To the extent that will remains in persons, everything they do is tainted, "even," she says, "if they could be raptured into heaven each day to see the Trinity, on account of such a will, as was Saint Paul the Apostle."[53] Since Paul's rapture to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12 was traditionally considered the highest of mystical visions, Porete's comment is startling and also helps explain her studied disregard of lower forms of vision.

Meister Eckhart's attitude toward the visionary explosion of late medieval mysticism was guarded but also negative. As a good scholastic, he was aware of the long discussion over whether or not Moses and Paul had really seen God in this life, and he several times discusses this and the nature of rapture in general in his Latin works, adhering to the Thomistic-Augustinian view.[54] But Eckhart's attitude toward the obsession with visions he found around him, especially in the Dominican nuns and beguines to whom he preached and counseled, was a part of the constructive criticism by which he sought to encourage and learn from the good aspects of female mysticism while also being ready to correct what he found suspect, such as the visionary impulse.[55] His most famous statement against visions takes an ironic tone. German Sermon 16b declares: "Some people want to see God with their own eyes, just as they see a cow; and they want to love God just as they love a cow. You love a cow for the milk and the cheese and because of your own advantage. This is how all those people act who love God because of external riches or because of internal consolation."[56] So for Eckhart the desire for visions was just another example of the spiritual self-centeredness and refusal to detach from all that is not God that forms the fundamental barrier to a true spiritual life.

Many of the late medieval women visionaries themselves, while willing to recount their showings and to use them as didactic tools, go out of their way to emphasize the secondary status of visionary experience. The Franciscan tertiary, Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) recounts numerous appearances of Christ to her, some quite erotic, but the long and intricate path to God described in her *Memoriale*

[53]*Mirouer*, ch. 49 (ed., 148). However, in chap. 33 (ed., 108–10) Marguerite does thank God for having given her an intellectual vision of the Trinity higher than that given to the body of Christ. Marguerite seems to be claiming to enjoy the beatific vision here below.

[54]For discussions of rapture in Eckhart, specifically adverting to Paul, see Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) 150–51.

[55]There is an extensive literature on Eckhart's relation to female mysticism. In English, see Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) and Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

[56]Meister Eckhart, Pr. 16b (DW 1:274).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concludes with an apophatic plunge into the divine Nothingness "in and with a darkness" that annihilates the mystic and hence all seeing. It is not surprising then that in the *Instructiones* that are supposed to contain her subsequent teaching to circles of devoted followers, she says: "O my dearest sons, of what use are revelations, visions, feelings of God's presence, sweetnesses from him? Of what use are gifts of wisdom, elevations? Of what use even is contemplation? Indeed, all these are useless unless one has a true knowledge of God and self."[57] Perhaps this is editorializing by one of her disciples, but the same point was made by an even more famous visionary, Julian of Norwich, in the long version of her *Shewings*, a text that does not seem to have been subject to much clerical editing. Julian's famous series of fifteen visions of Christ on the cross, given her on May 13, 1373, as she lay dying, are the source for her whole mystical teaching, expounded not once but twice in the short and long versions of the book she worked on for at least three decades. She makes it quite clear that it is the content of the visions, that is, God's overpowering salvific love and our response to it, that is important, not the visions themselves. In chapter nine of the Long Text she says: "I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better; and inasmuch as you love God better, it is more to you than to me. . . . For I am sure that there are many who never had revelations or visions, but only the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I do."[58]

The two most decisive rejections of visions come from anonymous fourteenth-century German texts: the mystical dialogue known as *Schwester Katrei* (*Sister Katherine*), perhaps from about 1330, and *Buch von geistlichen Armuth* (*Book of Spiritual Poverty*), which seems to date from the third quarter of the same century. In both these works corporeal and imaginative visions are strongly attacked. *Schwester Katrei*, which was sometimes ascribed to Eckhart, has two parts.[59] The first tells the story of how an anonymous beguine gives up the formal spiritual direction of her friar confessor to go off into exile (obviously an internal one) in which she experiences a transformation of decidedly Eckhartian character. After a three-day mystical death, she is "permanently established in eternity" and exchanges roles with the confessor. The enlightened beguine is now his instructor in the series of nine dialogues or instructions that makes up the long second part of the work. *Sister Katherine* contains much challenging and difficult material, though I do not think it is a heretical "Free Spirit" text, as some have said. The sister not only condemns

[57]*Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno* (ed. Ludger Their and Abele Calufetti; Rome: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1985) Instructio XIV (ed., 564).

[58]*The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton; Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) ch. IX (ed., 49).

[59]For an edition, see Franz-Joseph Schweitzer, *Der Freiheitsbegriff der deutschen Mystik: Seine Beziehung zur Ketzerei der "Brüder und Schwestern vom freien Geist," mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den pseudoeckhartischen Traktat "Schwester Katrei"* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981). There is an English translation by Elvira Borgstädt, "The 'Sister Catherine' Treatise," in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (ed. Bernard McGinn; New York: Paulist, 1986) 349–87.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

false mysticism,[60] but in the eighth instruction also mounts what is perhaps the most powerful late-medieval attack on the desire for corporeal and spiritual visions.[61] Christ's physical and imaginative presence needs to be removed, says the beguine, if a soul is to attain true inner understanding of the Trinity. She says: "The people . . . who want to see God with exterior eyes are unbelieving people. Here the devil confirms them in their wrong belief so that they stay with him eternally. In the air he takes from the elements whatever shape he wants and appears to people when and how he wants to: sometimes as a child with curly hair in the consecrated host; at other times, he appears to them as a youth of twelve or a pious man of thirty."[62] The author might have been reading the Hadewijch vision noted above, but he (or she) rejects such showings as diabolical forms of a dangerous external religion, concluding "since Christ has gone to his heavenly Father no one has seen him with exterior eyes."[63]

Book of Spiritual Poverty is a kind of textbook of basically Eckhartian mysticism.[64] Along with the better known *Theologia Deutsch*, it was at times ascribed to John Tauler and so had a significant impact on later mystical literature. As befits its systematic character, it takes up almost all the themes and elements of late medieval mysticism, including a section on the discernment of spirits based on the work of Henry of Friemar. It could scarcely avoid the issue of visions. Once again, we find a strongly negative view of visions as dangerous delusions. In discussing the difference between true and false freedom, the book twice attacks both the Free Spirit heretics and also the desire for visions or revelations that would uncover previously hidden secrets. Such desires are dangerous, not only because they threaten humility, but also because of the strong possibility of diabolical delusion.[65] At the end of the treatise the anonymous author summarizes: "If a person attaches importance to visions and concerns himself with images, that is a sign that his ground is not simple and pure, for in a pure and simple ground nothing is born but God and what is godlike. God is invisible and beyond all images, and so they are deceived who accept visions." He goes on even more strongly, arguing that to seek truth in a person who claims visions or revelations has "more in common with Antichrist than with Christ."[66]

It would be easy to pursue the story of the mystical reaction to the visionary explosion into the fifteenth century, as, for example, in the case of Nicholas of

[60]*Schwester Katrei*, Instruction 5 (ed., 347–49).

[61]Ibid., Instruction 8 (ed., 356–59).

[62]Ibid., Instruction 8 (ed., 358.2–23; trans. 374–75).

[63]Ibid., Instruction 8 (ed., 358.42–44; trans. 375).

[64]Heinrich Seuse Denifle, ed., *Das Buch von geistlicher Armuth bisher bekannt als Johann Taulers Nachfolgung des armen Lebens Christi* (Munich: Max Huttler, 1877). There is an English version by C. F. Kelley, *The Book of the Poor in Spirit by a Friend of God (Fourteenth Century): A Guide to Rhineland Mysticism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

[65]Heinrich Seuse Denifle, ed., *Das Buch* (ed. 19–20, and 192; trans., 74 and 267–68).

[66]Ibid., (ed. 192.18–33; my trans.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cusa.[67] Rules for discerning spirits, as well as suspicions about visions and visionary narratives, continued on into the early modern mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[68] But the point, I hope, is made. Visions and visualizations, both here on earth and even in the *visio beatifica* to come, were never simple, uncontroversial, and generally agreed-upon aspects of Christian belief and practice. Instead, they provide fruitful access into some of the major debates that helped shape the Christian mystical tradition.

Conclusion

A final word. It seems fitting to talk about mysticism under the auspices of the William James Lectureship a bit more than a century after the publication of his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I am not a James scholar, though like so many others, I have read and reread *The Varieties*, thinking along with James, learning from him, both when I agree and when I disagree. On June 16, 1901, in the midst of giving the Gifford Lectures that formed the basis for the book, James wrote to the Rev. Henry Rankin, who had provided him with materials for his talks, claiming, "The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense."[69] The degree to which we can assent to this pronouncement will depend to a large extent on just how wide is "wide" and how one understands that slippery term "mystical experience." Actually, in the chapters devoted to mysticism in *The Varieties*, James tends to talk of "mystical states of consciousness" (a better term in my view), although "mystical experience" slips in from time to time. What is revealing is that James sided with the critics of visions rather than with their proponents. In a footnote he says that "visual and auditory hallucinations," and the like, "have no essential mystical significance, for they occur with no consciousness of illumination. . . . Consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of 'mystical' states."[70] Of course, many of the figures of the visionary explosion of the Middle Ages would claim that their visionary and auditory experiences did convey illumination, and James does not discuss the criteria by which he distinguished between visual and auditory hallucinations and showings that claimed personal illumination. However, it is worth noting that although James has been

[67]A fifteenth-century example of a cautious approach to visions can be found in Nicholas of Cusa, as in his letter to Kaspar Ayndorffer on September 22, 1452, in Edmond Vansteenberghe, ed., *Autour de la docte ignorance. Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XVe siècle* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1915) 112.

[68]John of the Cross's suspicion of all visions and illuminations is well known. See, for example, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Mystical Rejection of Mystical Illuminations: A Note on St. John of the Cross," *Religious Studies* 1 (1966) 177–84.

[69]The letter is cited by Eugene Taylor, "Introduction: Section One. The Spiritual Roots of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) xxxiv–xxxv.

[70]*Varieties*, "Lectures XVI and XVII. Mysticism," 316 n. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press

accused, somewhat unfairly perhaps, of directing the study of mysticism into the exploration of pure "experientialism," he was a more subtle thinker than that. His view of illuminative states of consciousness as the main criterion for the mystical shared important elements with late medieval critics of visions and the visionary. One may conclude that the visionary element in mysticism has remained, both then and now, as much of a problem as it has a possibility.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000969 Published online by Cambridge University Press