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Mystical handbooks of the late middle ages

ABSTRACT

Mystical handbooks, or how-do-it books describing the path to union with God, was a genre that arose in Western Europe in the 12th century and lasted into the Early Modern period. These works, though rarely original, have often been overlooked, but they played an important role in disseminating mystical teaching to an increasingly broad audience. Many religious writers contributed to the genre: Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians, Dominicans, and so on. This article concentrates on the Franciscan friars, who played a major part in the production and spread of the handbooks.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CREATION OF THE HANDBOOK TRADITION

The communication of spiritual wisdom, as Cousins (1985:xiii) reminded us, is one of the oldest types of formalised learning known to human beings. In the history of Christianity, spiritual wisdom has taken many forms, not least what, in the modern era, we call mysticism, but which, in the Middle Ages, was often called mystical theology. For medieval folk, mystical theology was not an academic exercise for the classroom. It was a way of life that comprised the attitudes and exercises, physical and mental, designed to prepare a person for a deep transforming encounter with God in the ground or centre of the soul. While such meeting with God was personal, it was not individualistic. Mystical consciousness was to be realised in and through the Christian community as part of



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a general process mediated by prayer, sacrament, spiritual guidance, and reading mystical literature.

Exactly how the communication of mystical teaching took place is not always easy to discern. The sayings and stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers provide us with glimpses into the ways in which the early *abbas* and *ammās* disseminated their teaching to their disciples. A striking late medieval example is found in the life of Agnes Blannbekin, a beguine who lived in Vienna from roughly 1260 until her death in 1315. Agnes' confessor was an anonymous Franciscan whose life of the ecstatic visionary is our sole source for her career and teaching. Agnes' visions and mystical encounters with Christ are mostly liturgical and eucharistic, framed within the context of her attendance at the neighbouring Franciscan church and her relations with her spiritual father. Like many beguines, she could read, at least enough to say her office. She also profited from discussing mystical literature with her confessor. In *Life and revelations*, the friar recounts the following incident:

One day, I read her something by Blessed Bernard on the Song of Songs, how the Soul Bride renounces all other affections and throws herself completely into love. She thought about this intensely in her mind ... And when she contemplated this in her mind, she heard a voice within her saying to her, "The devout soul in the bridal chamber of contemplation, like a bride, does not strive after anything but love" (Wiethaus 2002:83).

This incident is like a window opening onto a world rarely glimpsed – the actual practice of reading and instruction that was integral to the passing on of mystical teaching, as well as its confirmation through the reception of an inner divine voice.

Such glimpses are unusual, but mystical literature, including instructional literature, is extensive, especially from the late Middle Ages. One of the less-studied aspects of this flood of mystical writings is what can be called the handbook tradition. Until the 12th century, most of the literature that we classify as mystical was in the form of scriptural commentary, either in sermons based on the biblical texts used in the liturgy, or in actual commentaries such as Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, or Gregory the Great's immense *Moral commentary on Job*. This is why it makes perfect sense for Agnes and her confessor to be reading Bernard's exegetical sermons on the *Song of Songs*. There were, to be sure, some early formal treatises dealing with mystical theology, the most notable being that composed in roughly 500 CE by the mysterious Dionysius, which spawned its own commentary tradition as a quasi-scriptural text (Rorem

1993). Nevertheless, prior to 1100, the writing of extensive treatises and handbooks on contemplation and the path to God was rare.

The 12th century saw a rapid emergence of treatises and tracts designed to summarise the stages of progress toward a mystical encounter with God and the practices proper to each step of the ascent. The growth of the new model of scientific theology known as Scholasticism, with its drive toward rational articulation and comprehensive organisation of the teaching of the faith, doubtless had a role in this proliferation. Some of the most impressive and influential mystical treatises of the 12th century were produced by the Victorine canons, whose school near Paris combined the contemplative interests of the monastic tradition with the passion for rational ordering of the new schools. Richard of St. Victor's treatises, often called *Benjamin major* and *Benjamin minor*, but originally entitled *The mystical ark* and *The twelve patriarchs*, are commentaries on biblical texts such as Exodus 25 and Genesis 29-49, respectively, as well as comprehensive treatments of the nature and modes of contemplation in the first instance, and the role of the soul's powers in the path to union with God, in the second instance. Mystical treatises, however, were found not only among the more academic Victorines, but also among the monastics. Bernard of Clairvaux's *On loving God*, written in roughly 1130, is one of the earliest examples. His friend William of St. Thierry's *Golden letter*, often ascribed to Bernard, was among the most widely read mystical treatises in the later Middle Ages. The work known as *The spirit and the soul*, circulating under Augustine's name, but actually a Cistercian anthropological and mystical manual from the 1170s, was also fairly popular in the late Middle Ages (McGinn 1977:179-288). Carthusians began to write similar treatises in the second half of the 12th century, producing works such as Guigo II's (d. 1188) *The ladder of monks*, of which over 100 manuscripts survive (Colledge & Walsh 1978), and the Scots Carthusian, Adam of Dryburgh's (d. ca. 1210) *The fourfold exercise of the cell*. It seems that the production of ordered summaries of mystical teaching became a general phenomenon in the 12th century, one influenced by Scholasticism, but also impelled by the desire to synthesise traditional and often disparate spiritual material into treatises and handbooks to be read and used by both clerical instructors and their charges, religious and lay.

The desire to create comprehensive treatises grew in the 13th century and into the era of what I have called the "New Mysticism" (McGinn 1998:1-30). Given the explosion of mystical literature in the vernacular of the late Middle Ages, many new genres came into use for conveying mystical teaching – visionary narratives and collections, poems, letters, new types of hagiography, and vernacular sermons different in form from

the Latin “arborised” homilies (in other words, ones composed in articulated sections such as a tree and its branches). During the 13th century, treatises dealing with how to understand the stages of the contemplative life were mostly written in Latin and thus designed for clerics to use in their capacity as spiritual directors. These account for some of the masterpieces of medieval mysticism, such as Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The mind’s journey into God*), and his even more popular *De triplici via* (*The triple way*).¹ The Franciscan scholar J.-F. Bonnefoy (1932-33) referred to the latter as “une somme bonaventurienne de théologie mystique”, an apt characterisation of this form of quasi-scholastic mysticism. At present, we highly value the *Itinerarium*, with its rich distillation of Augustinian, Dionysian, Cistercian, and Victorine mystical teaching into a new specifically Franciscan form, as one of the premier mystical texts of the Christian tradition. *The triple way* is currently less read, but is equally significant for the history of mysticism.

For the type of literature examined in this article, however, another, less-studied work of Bonaventure is of central importance: *The soliloquy*, or, to give it its full Latin title, the *Soliloquium de quatuor mentalibus exercitiis*, written in roughly 1259 or 1260 (*Sancti Bonaventurae opera omnia*: 8:28-67). A brief perusal can identify one of the reasons why the work is neglected nowadays. Although the treatise is as carefully structured as Bonaventure’s other spiritual writings, it is primarily a tissue of quotations and references, a kind of manual or book of instruction, which seeks to organise and present the wisdom of tradition for future generations of directors and readers. This is what I call a handbook.

We tend to think of mystical handbooks such as the *Soliloquy* as unoriginal, derivative, and often organised in, what we find, artificial ways. There is no need to deny the partial truth of this, while simultaneously insisting that such treatises played a vital role in the history of mysticism. Many of the mystical writings widely read nowadays were hardly known or cited in the late Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period. Think, for example, of Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*, which survives in only three manuscripts and one collection of excerpts. It was not until the 20th century that Julian emerged as a major figure in the history of mysticism. Some of the mystical handbooks that are almost unknown nowadays survive in hundreds of manuscripts and scores of early printings and were widely used by generations of mystics.

1 The Quarrachi edition of the works of Bonaventure lists 138 manuscripts of the *Itinerarium* and no less than 299 of the *De triplici via*.

There is an imprecise distinction between an original synthesis of mystical teaching in treatise form such as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* and a mystical handbook such as the *Soliloquy*. Such modern differentiations should not prevent us from directing our attention to works that may be difficult for contemporary readers to appreciate, but that are perhaps no less important than the current "classics" for grasping the continuity of the mystical tradition. The handbooks were useful, perhaps because rather than in spite of their character as compilations of diverse sources and materials into compendia that could be adapted for a variety of purposes and mined for helpful information in different contexts.

2. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND SPIRITUAL WRITERS

The Carthusians played an important role in the handbook tradition, a contribution that fits the order's concern for the copying and dissemination of spiritual literature. Among the most influential of the Carthusian handbooks was the treatise entitled *The roads to Sion mourn* (*Viae Sion lugent*), which takes its name from the text of Lamentations 1:4. It was written by Hugh of Balma in the 1290s, but often circulated under the name of Bonaventure, perhaps because the work, like the Franciscan's *Threefold way*, is organised according to the traditional pattern of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. The treatise survives in over 100 manuscripts and was printed in as early as 1495. There were a host of later editions in many languages and even a modern English translation (Martin 1997:67-170). In the 15th century, two German Carthusians, Jacob of Paradise (d. 1465) and Nicholas Kempf (d. 1497), also produced mystical handbooks, although these were less widely circulated than *The ways to Sion mourn*.² The foremost Carthusian producer of mystical handbooks was the prolific Dutch monk, Denys Rijkel or Denys the Carthusian (ca. 1402-1471), who wrote on many topics, including a three-volume Latin treatise *On contemplation*.³ Denys read and used almost all the mystical writers of the West, but his handbooks were most noted for the deep influence of the great Flemish mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec (d. 1381), whom he described as a *doctor divinus* and *alter Dionysius*.

Members of other religious orders also contributed to the growing body of late medieval mystical handbooks. A good example is the brief treatise sometimes known as *On cleaving to God* (*De adhaerendo Deo*), but more

2 On Kempf, see Martin (1992).

3 On Denys, see Emery (1996).

correctly entitled *The goal of religious perfection*, which was composed by the German Benedictine John of Kastl (d. 1430) and often circulated under the name of Albert the Great (55 copies survive; see Sudbrack 1967). Another German, the Augustinian Henry of Friemar the Elder, wrote a highly structured scholastic summary of mystical teaching entitled *The Word's coming into the mind (De adventu Verbi in mentem)*, written in roughly 1310, although it survives in only a few manuscripts (Zumkeller 1975). Treatises and handbooks were also composed in the vernacular, especially in 14th-century Germany. The most famous of these, due to its later championing by Luther, is the *Theologia Deutsch*, or *Theologia Germanica*, penned by an anonymous chaplain of the Teutonic knights. This brief work is more than simply a handbook, however; it is an original rethinking of the main lines of late medieval German mysticism (Blamires 2003; McGinn 2007:392-404).

Other vernacular treatises have a more textbook-like character. Among the most interesting is *The book of spiritual poverty (Buch vom geistlicher Armut)*, which survives in 13 manuscripts (ed. Denifle 1877; English transl. Kelley 1954). This lengthy work has been ascribed to both Franciscan and Dominican authorship, but we really know nothing definite about its author (McGinn 2007:377-92). *The book of spiritual poverty* summarises many of the key themes of the mysticism initiated by Meister Eckhart, such as detachment, poverty of spirit, the birth of the Word in the soul, and the breakthrough into the ground. Despite original elements, it has the flavour of a compilation, although it rarely names sources, thus forming a kind of middle ground between a handbook and an original treatise.

A similar middle ground is occupied by one of the most noted contributors to the mystical literature of the 15th century, Jean Gerson (d. 1429), the Chancellor of Paris, conciliarist, and theological polymath. Gerson was a secular priest, who was deeply interested in mystical literature. He added to the handbook tradition both in Latin and in the vernacular in the first decade of the 15th century. For learning and theological acumen, Gerson's *Mystical theology: Speculative and practical (De mystica theologia speculativa et practica)*, composed in roughly 1402-1403 and surviving in 67 manuscripts, is among the most successful examples of the handbook genre (ed. Combes 1957). The Chancellor's treatise is noted for its attack on incorrect notions of mystical union, such as those found in Eckhart and Ruusbroec. At roughly the same time (ca. 1400), Gerson also wrote a treatise called *The mountain of contemplation* in French for his sisters who lived as house beguines (transl. McGuire 1998:75-128). In this tract, as well as in some of the works written after his fall from power and during his exile at the end of his career (1421-1429), a more original and less artificial mystical teaching begins to emerge in the Chancellor's writing.

A puzzling situation emerges when we ask what contribution the Dominicans made to this widespread form of mystical literature. Despite their considerable mystical preaching and importance as guides for religious women, the Dominicans appear to have had a limited role in the production of mystical treatises and handbooks. Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) wrote only two treatises, namely *The counsels on discernment* (*Die rede der underscheidung*) and *The book of divine consolation* (*Daz buoch der goetlichen troestunge*). Neither is really a handbook in the sense used in this article. His disciple John Tauler (d. 1361) leaves us only sermons. Henry Suso (d. 1366) penned some popular mystical treatises, but neither his *Little book of truth* (*Büchlein der Wahrheit*), nor the *Little book of wisdom* (*Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*) can be described as handbooks, nor can the revised Latin form of the latter work, *The clock of wisdom* (*Horologium sapientiae*). Of course, there were a few mystical treatises, or handbooks, produced by the German Dominicans in the first half of the 14th century, including Eckhart Grundig's *Teaching on holiness* (*Ler von der Selikeit*) and Hermann von Fritzlar's *The flower of contemplation* (*Die Blume der Schauung*). These do not appear to have been popular in their day (Ruh 1996:199-204, 366-370). On the other side of the Alps, the Italian Dominicans, who spread the teaching of Catherine of Siena, such as Raymond of Capua (d. 1399) and Thomas of Siena (d. ca. 1430), restricted their efforts to preserving her texts (letters, prayers, and the treatise called *Il dialogo*) and to producing hagiography about the saint. They did not create handbooks or syntheses of her teaching for dissemination to a broader audience.

3. THE FRANCISCAN CONTRIBUTION

The case is different with the Franciscans. The impact of Bonaventure's treatises may help explain this, but the production began before Bonaventure's mystical writings of ca. 1260. I will examine three popular Franciscan spiritual handbooks that deal in large part with mysticism: David of Augsburg's *Composition of the interior and exterior man* (*De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*) (1240s); Rudolph of Biberach's *Seven roads to eternity* (*De septem itineraibus aeternitatis*) (ca. 1300), and Hendrik Herp's *Mirror of perfection* (*Spiegel der Volcomenheit*) (1460s). I chose these three works, because not only were they among the bestsellers of late medieval mystical manuals, but they also constitute a significant line in the Franciscan spiritual tradition. Herp's treatise, for example, which was one of the most important links between late medieval and early modern mysticism, uses many sources, but the works of David and Rudolph had a particularly significant impact on his mystical theology.

The full title of David of Augsburg's work provides a good idea of the encyclopaedic nature of the handbook: *The composition of the interior and exterior man according to the triple state of beginners, proficient, and perfect* (ed. Quaracchi 1899; transl. Devas 1937). We know hardly anything about David, who was master of novices at the Franciscan priories of Regensburg and Augsburg. The extraordinary popularity of David's Latin treatise (close to 400 manuscripts survive, mostly in Latin, but also in a number of vernacular forms) was due in part to the fact that it was not overtly Franciscan (Francis is only mentioned three times in passing). With its three volumes treating of the exterior man, the interior man, and the seven stages of progress in contemplation, the work was an ideal instructional handbook that could be used by any order – a monument of largely monastic tradition dependent on Augustine, Gregory the Great, and the Cistercians, especially Pseudo-Bernard's *Golden letter*. David's quasi-monastic treatise could as easily have been written in the 12th century as in the 13th century (McGinn 1998:113-116).

As a good novice master, David is moderate and practical. It is only after an extensive consideration of the preparatory discipline of the cloister in the first two books that he turns to the properly mystical stages of Christian life in book three. His mystical teaching is set forth under the general rubric of the forms of prayer as the means whereby the soul

becomes one spirit with God through the melting action of the most pure love and through the gaze of the clearest knowledge and through being hidden from the world's tumult in God's countenance in the calm ecstasy of fruition (*De compositione* 3.62.2; ed. 338).

David's triple mode of analysing prayer witnesses to his familiarity with the Victorines; his consideration of the four highest stages of contemplation, designated as ecstatic shout (*iubilus*), inebriation of spirit (*ebrietas spiritus*), spiritual delight (*spiritualis iucunditas*), and finally, melting away (*liquefactio*), is an apt summary of much of the early medieval monastic mystical tradition (*De compositione* 3.64.1-5; ed. 347-51).

David's bestseller, however, was not simply a monument to older spiritual traditions. His handbook also demonstrates engagement with contemporary debates on aspects of mysticism. An explosion of visionary accounts was part of the post-1200 "New Mysticism". Many of these described powerful erotic encounters with Christ, such as we find in the beguines Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechthild of Magdeburg, whose lives overlapped with David's. David was also aware of the visionary claims of the followers of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) concerning the coming third age of the Holy Spirit, which were strong among the Franciscan Spirituals.

David would have nothing to do with either type of visionary experience: “The less we meddle in such matters, the less opportunity there will be for deception” (*De compositione* 3.66.1; ed. 356). David was far from being an unyielding traditionalist. His originality is evident in a second shorter manual, *The seven stages of prayer*, that circulated in both Latin and Middle High German versions. A comparison of the two treatises, one in Latin, the other in the vernacular, shows how the vernacular version was prepared for a different audience, dropping many of the citations of authorities and providing more detailed explanations of the higher forms of prayer.

The Franciscans produced several other mystical treatises in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Examples are Gilbert of Tournai’s *Treatise on peace* (*Tractatus de pace*, ca. 1276) and James of Milan’s *Goad of love*, or *Stimulus amoris* (ca. 1290), found in 221 manuscripts and many versions and translations (see ed. Quaracchi 1905). These treatises, despite their popularity, did not have the scope or systematic structure of David of Augsburg’s work.

A book that rivalled David’s in its general character – and almost in its wide dissemination – was composed at the end of the century by another German Franciscan, Rudolph of Biberach (ca. 1270-ca. 1320). Rudolph’s *Seven roads to eternity* survives in 109 manuscripts and was translated into German in the mid-14th century (eds. of Latin and German by Schmidt 1985). Rudolph was a contemporary of Eckhart and he appears to have been well-trained in the procedures of scholastic argumentation. His well-organised treatise on the path to God is scarcely original, but his readers were doubtless impressed by the meticulous articulation of the seven roads or paths he sketched out and the wide range of over 40 spiritual writers whom he cites in support of his mystical *summa*. The seven “itineraries” are successive stages on the one road to the divine goal described as “the internal secret” (*intrinsecum secretum*). The first stage of “right intention” is discussed in six distinctions; each of the following six stages, namely *studiosa meditatio*, *limpida contemplatio*, *caritativa affectio*, *occulta revelatio*, *aeternorum experimentalis praegustatio*, *aeternorum meritorum operatio* is treated in seven distinctions. The articulated structure is clearly expressed in the opening remarks to the seventh stage or path:

The seventh path to eternity by which our spirit comes to the internal secret and the eternal manner of living of the Lord Jesus is the meritorious working of the things of eternity, or being deiform, or conformed to the divine working. Unless our works were a path to things eternal the Lord would never have said that he will give to each “according to their works” (Mt. 16:27). “Their works will follow them,” as John says (Rev. 14:13). To gain greater knowledge of this path there are seven things to be noted (Schmidt 1985:473b).

Rudolph's *Seven roads* had an important source in the affective interpretation of the Dionysian corpus pioneered by Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), "the last Victorine". Bonaventure had adopted this affective Dionysianism, which placed the high point of the mystical ascent in superessential love rather than in some form of cognitive unknowing. It was also a crucial element in the late medieval Carthusian tradition. Writers who employed this form of Dionysianism seem to have felt a strong impulse to systematise their reading of the Dionysian corpus with other strands of traditional mystical teaching.

Rudolph was not alone among the Franciscans of his time in producing mystical handbooks. The Latin *Tree of love* (*Arbor amoris*), composed in Provence in roughly 1300 and obviously indebted to Bonaventure's treatise *Lignum vitae*, was translated into German and Dutch. It also displays a scholastic-inspired mentality in the way in which it sets out the seven characteristics of the highest, seraphic, form of love in light of a wide range of traditional spiritual authorities (Peng-Keller 2013). Toward the end of the 14th century, the Franciscan Marquard of Lindau (d. 1392), the greatest mystical preacher of his era, wrote no less than 27 treatises in both Latin and the vernacular (McGinn 2007:329-39). Many of Marquard's treatises were widely read, but they deal with specific doctrinal and spiritual issues, rather than attempting to synthesise mystical theology.

The last great medieval mystical handbook of Franciscan origin comes from the late 15th century and was the product of Hendrik Herp (Latin: Harphius). Herp was born in roughly 1400, studied at the University of Leuven, and joined the Brethren of the Common Life. In 1450, he went to Rome for the Jubilee Year and there joined the Franciscan Observance at the Ara Caeli. He later served in several official capacities in the Cologne Province of the Observants and was a famous preacher, a founder of houses, and a prolific writer until his death in 1477 (Ruh 1999:219-28; McGinn 2012:130-36).

One can call Herp a compiler, as long as one does not understand this negatively from the outset. A great part of late medieval spiritual literature, and even into the early modern period, is compilation ... A compiler does not as a rule simply copy out, but he chooses, he shortens, he expands, he explains (Ruh 1999:221).

Herp's major work, composed in the 1460s, was *The mirror of perfection* (*Spieghel der Volcomenheit*) (ed. Verscheuren 1931; partial transl. Van Nieuwenhove 2008:144-164). The work was written for a pious laywoman, as the prologue indicates, testifying to the spiritual sophistication of the late medieval lay audience. Herp's sources are many. Ruusbroec's

mysticism forms the basic structure and provides much of the content of the *Mirror*. Herp also knew Ruusbroec's Groenendaal pupil and follower, Willem Jordaens. A wide range of other traditional mystical writing is used in the *Mirror*. The Dionysian affective tradition is important, especially as mediated by Hugh of Balma. Among Franciscan sources, Herp used Bonaventure, though he rarely cites him by name; he also knew David of Augsburg and especially Rudolph of Biberach. Herp was familiar with Eckhart's follower, Tauler, or at least the Pseudo-Tauler, as well as several mystical treatises connected with the 14th-century "Friends of God" movement (*Gottesfreunde*), such as Rulman Merswin's *The book of the nine rocks* (McGinn 2007: Chapter 9). Like almost all medieval spiritual authors, he was deeply imbued with Bernard of Clairvaux; he also knew the Victorines.

Herp's *Mirror* was widely read in early modern times. Verscheuren's edition of 1931 uses 48 manuscripts and references no less than 66 editions in many languages (Latin, German, Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese) besides the original Dutch. Peter Blommeveen (1466-1536), the founding father of the great spiritual publishing house of the 16th century, the Charterhouse of St. Barbara at Cologne (Chaix 1981), translated the *Mirror* into Latin in 1509 under the title *The golden directory of contemplatives* (*Directorium aureum contemplativorum*). The Carthusians of Cologne also published an anthology of Herp's writings under the title *Mystical theology* (*De mystica theologia*), in which the second book is based on the *Golden directory*. The Carthusian Dirk Loher, in his preface to the 1538 edition of this work, summarised the Franciscan's place in the mystical tradition as follows:

Those matters which Dionysius the Areopagite left behind for us in Greek beneath the dark veil of his words, and then John Ruusbroec and Tauler also left concerning mystical theology, though more clearly expressed in German, our Harphius here hands on to you, most generous reader, in a more pleasant style as a compendium. If you are fair, I believe you will approve equally of their savor and their fruit (cited in Gullick & De Veghel 1969:351).

Many later editions and translations appeared, and the work became popular with the Spanish Franciscans who helped lay the foundations of Spain's "Golden Age" of mysticism, such as Francisco de Osuna (d. ca. 1541) and Bernardino de Laredo (d. 1540). Although Herp's reputation declined in Spain in the second half of the 16th century, it revived in the 17th so much so that, in 1633, a General Chapter of the Franciscan Observant friars made the reading of Herp obligatory at the weekly conferences on mystical theology to be given to all friars. The *Mirror* was also known in

France and made its contribution to the great era of French mysticism in the 17th century. French versions of the first and second parts of the Latin *Directory* appeared in 1549 and 1552. Jacques Huijben's (1930-1932) series of articles "Aux sources de la spiritualité française du XVII^e siècle" provides much evidence for his claim for the preponderant influence of the Ruusbroec-Harphius-Tauler line on the origins of French mysticism.

Herp's treatise was not without its critics, especially during the 16th century. In 1559, the *Mystical theology* was put on *The index of forbidden books* for a number of theological "errors" (not "heresies"). For example, the Roman authorities were uncomfortable with Herp's use of Ruusbroec's term "superessential", preferring the more traditional "supernatural". They also wondered to what extent the Franciscan allowed for a direct vision of God's essence in this life – an issue that is still unclear, not least because of Herp's seemingly contradictory assertions (Reyppens 1924). A corrected version of Herp's treatise, prepared by the Dominican theologian, Peter Paul Philippus, appeared in Rome in 1586. This allowed for further circulation of his work through the 17th century.

The 65 chapters in four parts that constitute Herp's *Mirror of perfection* betray the Ruusbroecian orientation of the Dutch Franciscan in their structuring according to Ruusbroec's three stages of spiritual life: the active life (*dat werkende leuen*); the spiritual contemplative life (*dat gheestelick scouwende leuen*), and the superessential contemplative life (*dat ouerweselic scouwende leuen*). Each of these forms of life is treated in terms of a threefold analysis that appears original to Herp, namely preparation, adornment, and ascent. Part I (12 chapters) deals with preliminaries, that is, the mortifications to be practised before undertaking the spiritual path. Part II (14 chapters) deals with "The preparation, adornment, and ascent of the active life", while Part III has 31 chapters treating "The spiritual contemplative life" according to the same pattern. As in Ruusbroec's *Spiritual espousals*, on which so much of the work is based, this stage receives the most attention, probably because Herp, like Ruusbroec, thought that the vast majority of his readers would be at this stage of spiritual development, rather than at the highest stage of the superessential life. The treatment of the "The contemplative superessential life" in Part IV thus has only seven chapters.

A more extended analysis of Herp's *Mirror* cannot be given in this instance. We should note, however, that aspects of his presentation of the mystical life, such as the way in which the Franciscan joins the spiritual and superessential stages of contemplation through a schema of seven levels of "ascension" (*opclimminghe, consurrectio*) seems fairly original. The general flavour of the work, nonetheless, is dependent on others, mostly

Ruusbroec. The section on the superessential life contains Ruusbroecian teaching on the Trinitarian character of the highest stages of union with God possible in this life. The “hidden embrace of divine love, ... mutual friendship and embracing” of the three persons of the Trinity includes a mode of union that seems to move beyond the Trinity into a union of indistinction. Herp mentions:

All the blessed spirits who are united to the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit burn as an infinite fire. Here the divine persons too, in the unity of their essence, melt through love into the abyss of simple beatitude. Here there is no Father or Son, Spirit, or creature, but only a simple essence, namely the most simple substance of the Holy Trinity in which all creatures in their superessence become absorbed. Here all enjoyment becomes perfect and fulfilled in essential beatitude (*Spiegel* IV.63.2; ed. 2:408-11; transl. 160).

Like Ruusbroec before him, Herp insists that this absorption into God does not cancel out the distinction between Creator and creature, as other passages make clear (for example, *Spiegel* III.57).

The adequacy of Herp’s use of Ruusbroec needs to be examined further in light of negative judgements such as that of Albert Deblaere (1969), who claimed that Herp over-systematised Ruusbroec’s teaching. This may be so, but to my mind the issue is still *sub judice*. Herp has been credited with a significant role in the development of the use of brief, affective “aspirations” as a key exercise for attaining loving union with God (Janssen 1956), but the extent to which his teaching in this regard is original in relation to the whole tradition of affective Dionysianism needs more work. Finally, Herp often speaks of being able to enjoy a vision of God’s essence in this life, but he qualifies what he means in various ways so that we are not sure if these adjustments constitute a very subtle doctrine or merely some confusion on his part in trying to relate his many different sources. All in all, Herp’s work is of great importance in the story of late medieval mysticism and its effect in Early Modernity.

4. CONCLUSION

Studying textbooks and manuals is not the most interesting form of reading, unless one wants to master a new skill or perhaps prepare a class. The late medieval mystical handbooks surveyed in this article are not among the works of genius in the Christian mystical tradition. Nevertheless, their importance has too often been overlooked, especially in an age that stresses originality as much as ours. The late Middle Ages and the early modern periods were convinced that contemplation was an

art, not perhaps an art that human effort could master, because only God can raise the soul to the heights of contemplation, but still an art that sound instruction and useful textbooks could encourage, clarify, and facilitate. Mystical bestsellers such as those of David of Augsburg, Rudolph of Biberach, and Hendrik Herp still have much to teach us nowadays about the story of the mystical tradition.

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