



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Jesus, receive my heart,
and bring me to your love.
All my desire you are.
Kindle fire within me,
that I may receive your love,
and see your face in bliss
which will never cease,
in heaven with never an ending. Amen.
--Richard Rolle

Week #11a: Walter Hilton and *The Ladder of Perfection*

Introduction to Late Medieval Mystical Traditions

There were a variety of trends toward spiritual renewal in the late Middle Ages. Much (but not all of it) now came from outside the traditional monastic and clerical structures.

- First, there were groups of people who lived together in a **community of prayer that was not affiliated with one of the traditional monastic orders** (Benedictine, Cistercian, Franciscan, etc.) and was not formally sanctioned or supervised by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.
 - This was a particularly common option for women who were not of noble families and did not have the resources to enter an older community affiliated with a traditional monastic order. Such women were known as **Beguines** and their male counterparts were known as **Beghards**. These informal communities were more loosely organized than a traditional monastic community. One could enter the community
 - without making formal, lifelong vows
 - while retaining some private property and
 - being able to move about geographically or even to leave the community and get married.

These communities were common in the France and the Low Countries (Netherlands/northern Belgium), though not in England. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century centuries they were increasingly suspected of heresy (incorrect teaching about perfection through union with God) and were repressed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

- Thus, for example, in 1310 Marguerite Porete of Hainault was burned at the stake for ideas advanced in a book attributed to her entitled *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.

- The Council of Vienne in 1311-1312 similarly condemned eight propositions attributed to the Beguines and a number of supposed Beghards were put to death. (The Latin text of these proposition is given in Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum*.)
 - It is not clear how accurate these propositions were in describing their beliefs, but they attribute to the Beguines and Beghards
 - a monistic view of the Godhead,
 - a substantial union achieved between the uncreated God and the created soul, and especially
 - the notion that union with God made unnecessary all external religious acts (good works, the sacraments of the Church, etc.).

Another author traditionally associated with the Beguines was Hadewijch of Antwerp (+1282 or 1297), who combined

- traditional concepts of the soul's union with God through ecstatic love and mystical marriage with
 - visionary mysticism.
- Second, there were also patterns of renewal by which persons lived a solitary (**anchoritic**) life of prayer but remained available to provide spiritual counsel and spiritual direction to others.
 - Julian of Norwich, whom we will discuss next week, would be an example of this type of life, which was especially common among religious committed people in England and, to a lesser extent, northern Italy.
 - The Camaldolese and Carthusian orders allowed people to progress toward a solitary life of prayer within the frame of a recognized and ecclesiastically sanctioned religious order. The Carthusians were particularly important in promoting spiritual renewal in fourteenth century England and were instrumental in copying and transmitting late medieval spiritual works.
 - Third, even among the **traditional religious orders**, there was a strong drive for **renewal**.
 - These writers (e.g. Meister Eckhart) often further developed ideas of divine love and union of the soul with God (traditional in monastic theology) in a more Platonic direction, developing an **essence-based mysticism** that viewed the intellect as a spark (*scintilla*) of the divine and regarding this as an unfallen (and indefectible) point of contact between the created soul and the uncreated God. Cf. the quotation from Eckhart in Anna Maria Reynolds, "Some Literary Influences," 27 (cited in Denise N. Baker, "The Structure and the 'Godly Wylle' in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," 45): "The soul has a spark in her which has been in God eternally, life and light. And this spark is conveyed into every man together with the soul. It is pure light in itself and it is always censuring to sin and urging to virtue. The spark of the soul cannot be extinguished

either in hell or in heaven." This was not a wholly original idea: "Medieval theologians commonly assumed that an inextinguishable spark of goodness existed in man's reason and will (*synteresis rationis et voluntatis*), a natural a natural point at which every person, even if he did not consciously choose to be such, was conformed to God. Each person experienced this residue of prefallen and even precreated purity as pangs of conscience and an irrepressible desire for truth and goodness--a permanent reminder of man's eternal and original unity with God" (Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980, 243; cited in Baker, 46-47).

- There were a number of remarkable female religious writers whose works discuss visionary ecstatic experiences that had an eschatological dimension and were communicated to promote the renewal of the Church. Some of these **female visionary mystics** clearly espouse a version of the essence-based mysticism described above (e.g. Mechtild of Magdeburg), while in others such a connection is less evident (e.g. Brigid of Sweden and Catherine of Siena).

The Emergence of a Distinctive English Mystical Tradition in the Fourteenth Century

The popularity of the individual (solitary), contemplative life (eremitism) in England in the late Middle Ages (particularly the Carthusian order) created a social context in which mystical literature could be appreciated and transmitted. Writings that intended to describe and support the individual, contemplative life (e.g. the early thirteenth century *Ancrene Riwe*), despite their practical character and absence of speculative reflection, display an intense interest in spiritual discernment and ascetical care of the soul. In writers of the late fourteenth century, this is fused with a particular kind of an Augustinian love-mysticism derived from reading William of St. Thierry's *Golden Epistle* and certain works of Bernard of Clairvaux. In these works contemplative prayer is depicted as the summit of the Christian life, in which, as a foretaste of heaven, one is able briefly and imperfectly to see and taste the sweetness of God and divine love.

Representative of the emerging English mystical tradition in the late medieval period are the works of **Richard Rolle of Hampole** (1295-1349), a hermit of limited education who produced a number of influential works including *Incendium amoris* (ET *The Fire of Love*) and *Emendatio vitae* (ET *The Mending of Life*), as well as commentaries of an devotional/ascetical/mystical character on various books of the Bible (particularly the Psalms and canticles [e.g. the Magnificat] used in the Divine Office). His works and the circle of followers he founded provide part of the background that is necessary to understand the works of Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich.

Rolle's Life: Went to Oxford to study arts but left at the age of eighteen to go back to his hometown of Thornton-le-Dale, where he resolved to take up a life of solitary prayer and made his first hermit's habit out of two of his sister's garments, which led his sister to proclaim, "My brother is mad, mad!" He then went to Pickering where his friend John de

Dalton allowed him to live in an "enclosure" on his property, which in this case was a storeroom next to the kitchen that looked out on the stable yard.

Rolle was critical of the conventional monastic life as then practiced:

- "Why do you live tepidly in a monastery? You might as well live *that* way in the world."
- "One can appear obedient to man and nevertheless be altogether in contradiction with the will of God. Indeed monks or others living according to an established religious habit are not holy because they obey their superiors, but only insofar as, in the zeal of holy love, they seek to serve God alone."

Note the emphasis upon **interiority** and subjectivity here.

The person devoted to a life of solitary prayer must prove himself or herself to be a creative, discerning idiosyncratic individual:

- "He does not do things because they are done, or because other have done them, such as excessive fasting or always kneeling in prayer. He is careful to subject his methods to the achievement of the best results. He therefore boldly goes his own way, despite criticism." (cf. Rolle's practice of always sitting for prayer)
- To these attitudes, a monastic critic responded that Rolle's followers "make men judges of themselves," being unwilling to submit themselves to a monastic rule and ecclesiastical oversight.
- Note the clash here between Rolle's proposal for inward spiritual renewal and the traditional Benedictine emphasis on obedience to the rule and to one's superior).

Like Francis of Assisi, Rolle was critical of wealth and secular and scholastic learning (almost to the point of anti-intellectualism), emphasized the nobility of poverty, and (later becoming a wandering mendicant) hoped by his preaching to reach the underprivileged. Rolle's works have a florid, lyrical character, with his *Meditation on the Passion* being particularly fine and his *Fire of Love* containing much interesting and influential material in spite of its rambling and undisciplined style.

His description in *The Fire of Love* of the experiencing in prayer of the three (successive and ascending) stages of

- *calor* (=heat, when the mind is inflamed with love),
- *canor* (=song, when praise moves beyond thought to hear the angel's song of everlasting praise) and
- *dulcor* (a sweetness which is grasped by the spiritual sense and pervades one's whole being)

Contemplation is thus defined as "exultation in the love of God, taken up in the mind with the sweetness of angelic praise" (*Emendatio vitae* 12). This love must be toward Jesus to the exclusion of trust in any created thing, so that all the soul's love and all its faculties are wholly devoted to him, finding all its delight, comfort and sweetness in him alone:

- "If thee list [=desire to] love anything, love Jesu Christ, that is the fairest, riches and wisest, whose love lasts in joy endless."

- "If the soul loves a creature, it loses God and goes with what it loves to death...But whoever loves his Maker rejects everything that is in the world" (*Emendatio vitae* 6)

When the soul is surrendered to Jesus, the sweetness of this overwhelming love occupies the heart, inebriating it, taking it captive and driving out all other loves and passions. This becomes a permanent and habitual state, in which one experiences the continual heat and sweetness of divine love and hears the angel-song which drowns out the groaning of the flesh, the raging of the world and the roaring of the Devil, so that these things no longer disturb or trouble the soul or cause one to fear.

Walter Hilton and the *Scale of Perfection*

Hilton (d. 1396) may have taken a degree in theology or law at Cambridge, then apparently took up a solitary life of prayer before becoming an Augustinian canon (i.e. a member of a community attached to the local cathedral who lived in accordance with a monastic rule, dividing their time between prayer [the daily office=the chapel services associated with the eight canonical hours] and various clerical duties and practical work) at Thurgarton Priory in Nottinghamshire. In some ways, Hilton can be seen as a part of a reaction to the early fourteenth century emphasis upon innovative, solitary, visionary religious practice (e.g. Richard Rolle and his followers). Hilton is able to appreciate what is valuable in these early writers but has a greater contact and continuity with the preceding Augustinian theological tradition (Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, etc.) and, in place of the earlier individualist speculative theology or visionary accounts, the claims of community are reasserted.

His *Scale of Perfection* is generally recognized as the most orthodox and pastorally useful work produced by the late medieval English mystics. By the middle of the fifteenth century it had become the most popular English devotional book and remains a foundational reading in all English-language courses on spiritual direction. Hilton also wrote a number of other (minor) works (translations, treatises and letters), of which the letter entitled *The Mixed Life* is arguably the most interesting. Many of Hilton's works were widely circulated, being read by both laypersons and members of religious communities.

The mention in the title of a ladder (=ME "scale" from the Latin *scala*) reflects Hilton's debt to the earlier Western monastic tradition. For example, Benedict in chapter 7 of his *Rule* had outlined twelve steps (grades or rungs) of humility by which one ascends to Heaven (the way up to Heaven is down through humility). This idea is often developed (with reference to the ladder Jacob beheld reaching from earth to heaven, with angels and descending) in Latin medieval literature (especially late medieval mystical literature, where the ladder = the progress of the believer from beginning of the faith toward full development in contemplative prayer, silent wisdom and mystical union with Christ). The goal of growth in prayer is to "only think on Jesus," entering into the fullness of his love and becoming conformed to his image, so that we become more like him in his humility and virtues.

The *Scale of Perfection* is comprised of two books addressed to an anchoress, i.e. a nun living a solitary, enclosed existence.

- The first book was perhaps written in the early 1380's and the second book written not long before his death in 1396.
- The second book is a careful and more cautiously developed restatement of some of the ideas initially advanced in the first book, functioning more as a reappraisal than a sequel to the first book.

Hilton begins with a distinction between the active life (of repentance, works of charity, and pursuit of virtue) and the contemplative life (of prayer) that had been traditional since at least the time of Gregory the Great. The active life is normative for all; the contemplative life is normative only for a few (but open to all). The active life is not independent of or opposed to the contemplative life; rather, the active life is the basis or foundation upon which the contemplative life rests.

Hilton's description of the three stages of progress in the Christian life differs from that of Rolle, consisting instead of

- (1) bare knowledge
- (2) the affection of fervent love which is given by the Holy Spirit and allows one to delight in Christ and taste the sweetness of his presence
- (3) union of the soul with Christ, so that, ravished by divine love, one is conformed to the divine image, becoming humble and virtuous (How much of this third stage is reserved for heaven?)

Spiritual progress is linked to a progressive discovery and recognition (by introspection) of the darkness of sin that attaches to one's soul due to excessive and disordered self-love (deforming the image of God within us).

The soul can be cured (i.e. returned to health and reality) only when Jesus breaks down our self-love from within, so that eventually one wishes nothing more than to see and possess Jesus and to be conformed to his likeness (reformation of the image of God within us).

This occurs in conjunction with a certain "meekness" and evangelical humility in which one forsakes (i.e. no longer looks to or trusts in) one's good works but looks to Christ alone for all things. ("Noughted" = a complete abandonment of self-love and all trust in creatures.)

- A practical test: "If you want to know what it is you love, just consider what it is you are usually thinking about."