

S. Birgitta and Mysticism

By BIRGIT KLOCKARS

S. Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden (about 1303–1373) lived in a period of flourishing Christian mysticism. Hardly any epoch has produced as many well-known mystics in Western Europe as the 13th and 14th centuries. In Eastern Christendom mysticism also reached one of its highest points in the 14th century.

It is no easy task for the historian to find some of the connecting links, the causes and effects of this spiritual movement, to follow the threads connecting one group of mystics with another, one individual with another. Often it is as if a strong underground current were breaking through at many different points simultaneously—in Flanders and northern France, in different parts of what is now Germany and Switzerland, in Britain, in Italy, in Sweden.

Wherever these mystical experiences were put down in writing, it is of course possible to detect much that is common, similar exstatic and visionary phenomena, identical images and ways of expression. But it may be a question of literary commonplaces, and there need not necessarily be any direct connections. Several of the better-known mystics and their followers were convinced of the fact that their calling and message were something altogether exceptional, something received by direct divine intervention, without human meditation. This is true for instance of S. Francis, of Gertrude of Helfta, of Birgitta, of Christina Ebner. And yet, in most cases there have certainly existed outward causal connections as well, by means of direct personal contacts, pilgrimages and study trips, wandering preachers, correspondence and other communications, between individuals, monasteries and towns.

The common literary sources of inspiration can be traced more easily than other influences. The writings of the Church Fathers, and many other works of older date, were known and read in the whole of the Western world. There were also some more recent works that had already become common property, the works of S. Bernard for instance.

Characteristic of this period in the history of Western mysticism is the fact that so many of the mystics were women. Already in the 12th century Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau had written down their "revelations". Since then the development had gone in the direction of a more subjective and emotional piety.

Towards the end of the 12th century there were in many parts of Flanders, later also in the Rhine valley and in northern France, large groups of pious women, called beguines, living together without belonging to an ordinary monastic order. About the same time monastic life also experienced an era of growth. New convents were founded in many places, sometimes in connection with old monastic orders, sometimes as entirely new orders or new branches of old orders. In these monasteries and beguine houses mysticism was thriving, often accompanied by ecstatic and visionary phenomena.

In the beginning of the 13th century the Mendicant Orders were organized, and they soon established female branches as well. Apart from that, the mendicants acted as confessors for many sisters of other orders, for instance of the well-known monastery of Helfta in Germany, which produced several renowned women mystics.

Associated with the Dominicans and Franciscans were also groups of pious laymen, which were later organized into the so-called Third Orders. Two of the Italian mystics, Angela of Foligno and Catherina of Siena, had associations of this kind, the former with the Franciscans, the latter with the Dominicans.

On the whole the Mendicant Orders seem to have played an important part in spreading the spiritual currents from one country to the next. The friars were often moved from one house to another, and they were sent for their studies to convents abroad.

The three great Dominican mystics, Meister Eckhart, Johann Tauler, and Heinrich Suso, exercised an important influence, especially with nuns and with some of the German women mystics. These sisters wrote down their sermons and other works and thus helped to spread the message to new circles.

There are threads connecting S. Birgitta with this mighty current. One such thread leads back to one of the oldest known representatives of the beguine movement, S. Marie of Oignies, or of Nivelles, in Flanders. Marie

died in 1213, and her biography, written by Jacob of Vitry, was widely distributed and contributed to the quick diffusion of the beguine movement.

It was after Birgitta's lifetime that the biography of Marie of Oignies was translated into Swedish in the Brigittine Monastery of Vadstena,¹ but it is very likely that Birgitta had heard her story. Anyhow she knew part of it, because Master Matthias, Birgitta's confessor, quotes some episodes in his collection of "examples", *Copia exemplorum*.² He mentions Marie's ecstasies and visions, often received in connection with the feasts of the Church Year. (This feature is typical of several later women mystics and also of S. Birgitta.)

From Flanders the beguine movement spread also to Cologne and its surroundings, where in the middle of the 13th century no less than about 140 beguine houses are said to have existed. In Cologne many of the Scandinavian Dominicans received part of their training, and it was there that one of the best known of them, Petrus de Dacia, a native of Gotland, became acquainted with a beguine having strange ecstatic gifts, Christina of Stommel. This friendship inspired his writings, which contribute greatly to our knowledge of the forms of mystical piety existing in these parts in the 1260's and 1270's. Petrus himself had been greatly impressed by Christina and helped to spread the movement to the North. In one of his letters he tells about a group of women that he had gathered around himself at Skänninge in Sweden.³ That was the beginning of the Dominican Sisters' convent in this place. There was a lively correspondence between this group in Sweden and Christina and her friends in Cologne, and the forms of piety were similar in both places.

This all happened some forty years before S. Birgitta established herself as a young housewife at Ulvåsa, not far from Skänninge. We may take for granted that some of the early traditions were then still alive in the convent. Birgitta was, by the way, distantly related to its foundress, one of the women around Petrus, the blessed Ingrid of Skänninge. Birgitta's two eldest boys went to school in the Dominican friary at Skänninge, and her daughter

¹ *Ett fornsvenskt legendarium* 3, ed. G. Stephens, Stockholm 1874, pp. 390 ff.

² B. Strömberg, *Magister Mathias och fransk mendikantpredikan*, Stockholm 1944, pp. 160 ff.

³ About Petrus and Christina see B. Klockars, *Medeltidens religiösa litteratur (Ny illustrerad svensk litt.hist. 1, 2 ed. Stockholm 1967) pp. 150 ff.*, and bibliography, pp. 388 f.

Cecilia spent some of her early years with the sisters. On the whole, Birgitta and her family had close connections with the Dominicans.

She also had connections with the Cistercians, S. Bernard's followers, who had several monasteries for men and women in Sweden. One of Birgitta's daughters became a nun in the Riseberga monastery, and another daughter, S. Catharina, got part of her education there. One of Birgitta's sons died in the monastery of Alvastra, and towards the end of his life Ulf, her husband, had had the intention of entering it. Birgitta herself lived close to this monastery during the decisive years following her husband's death. It was then that the subprior, Petrus Olavi, became one of her confessors.¹

A few years earlier Birgitta and Ulf had gone on a pilgrimage to Compostela in Spain and had also visited Cologne and Aix-la-Chapelle. On the return journey Ulf fell ill and they had to spend some time at Arras in northern France, where the beguine movement was well rooted. Most likely Birgitta had personal contacts with pious circles in these countries. By the way, it was at Arras that she had one of her own first "revelations". (*Rev. extr. 92.*)²

One of Birgitta's companions on her pilgrimage to Compostela was the Cistercian monk Svennung, later abbot of Varnhem. It is told of him that he saw Birgitta crowned with seven crowns and heard a voice predict her coming greatness. (*Rev. VI:36 decl.*) In the Canonization Acts of S. Birgitta several other persons in Sweden are mentioned as having visions and dreams of different kinds. It is obvious that the ecstatical, visionary piety was still current in the northern countries.

We may lay down with great probability that S. Birgitta, by means of her voyages and personal contacts, had got impulses directing her potential piety into a certain mould. With still greater certainty we know that she got similar impulses through her readings. She read books like the *Old Swedish*

¹ About Birgitta's relations to Dominicans and Cistercians, see B. Klockars, *Birgitta och böckerna*, Stockholm 1966, pp. 189 ff., 197 ff.

² See also *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgitte*, ed. I. Collijn, Uppsala 1924-31, p. 80, 482 f. There is no modern critical edition of the Latin text of the *Revelationes* of S. Birgitta. Only a part, *Revelationes Extravagantes* (ed. L. Hollman, Uppsala 1956) and *Book VII* (ed. B. Bergh, Uppsala 1967), has been published so far. Between 1492 and 1680 there were nine printed editions. The Old Swedish text, which is mostly a retranslation from the Latin, was edited by G. E. Klemming, Stockholm 1857-83.

Legendary, the *Dialogue* of Gregory the Great, containing the biography of S. Benedict etc., *Vitae Patrum*, stories about and sayings of the Eastern monks and hermits, *Speculum Virginum* and *De modo bene vivendi*, books written for convent sisters. She knew some of the works of Cistercian authors and had read her contemporary, Heinrich Suso's *Book of eternal Wisdom*.¹ Many of the images, expressions and allegories she uses can be found in one or more of these works.

In her reading, as well as in her contacts with pious circles Birgitta had been confronted with an ascetical way of living. She had a certain ideal of piety painted before her eyes, an ideal that, more or less consciously, she tried to imitate.

But this ideal, of course, did not limit itself to outward ascetical habits or ecstatic and visionary phenomena. If that were all, we should have no reason to call Birgitta a mystic. Phenomena of this kind, as we know, sometimes accompany the mystic's experience, but they are not essential to it, and, from the point of view of Christian mysticism, they may exist even apart from any authentic mystical experience.

Mysticism in a narrower sense can be defined on one hand as man's intimate experience of God or the transcendental, on the other hand as an exposition of or doctrine about this experience. In the latter sense Birgitta is no mystic. She does not give any systematic exposition of the different stages on man's road to union with God. But that does not necessarily imply that she herself had not an intimate experience of God. She may be a mystic even if her writings do not reach the same depths or heights as those of Meister Eckhart, Johann Tauler or Angela of Foligno, just to mention some of her contemporaries.

Birgitta was conscious of having a very special calling. Her confessors relate an incident shortly after Ulf's death. In a vision in her chapel she then heard Christ speak to her. Among other things he said: "You shall be my bride and my mouthpiece."²

Bride and mouthpiece—those were the two poles of Birgitta's calling. She was to be the bride of Christ, intimately united to him, but she was also to be

¹ About the literary sources of S. Birgitta, see Klockars, *Birgitta och böckerna*, passim.

² "Tu eris sponsa mea et canale meum —" A. et pr. p. 80 f., Rev. Extr. 47.

his mouthpiece, his messenger. In her *Revelations* it is the latter, prophetic side that is dominating. The revelations are mainly messages to individuals or groups. Their readers were mostly people who were taking the first stumbling steps on the road or who had not even started walking on it. They were not ripe for hearing about stages on the road to perfection, to union with God. Birgitta admonishes them to penitence and conversion, she speaks about the punishing justice of God and about his pardoning mercy.

In the *Revelations* of S. Birgitta the emphasis is thus put on the preparative stages of Christian life, on conversion, whole-hearted surrender, obedience, self-denial, asceticism. But there are also revelations, especially among those directed to Birgitta herself, that describe her own inner life. There is for instance the description of her state of feeling when receiving some of her revelations:

“Dearest God, sweetest of all, what you have done with me is wonderful to all who hear about it. Whenever it pleases you, you put my body to sleep, not with physical sleep but with spiritual rest. But the soul is then, as it were, being roused from sleep by you, to see, hear and feel in a spiritual way. O Lord God, how lovely the words from your mouth are! Each time that I hear your Spirit speaking, it is as if my soul absorbed His words with a feeling of ineffable sweetness, like the most delicious food. They fall, as it were, into my heart with great joy and incomprehensible consolation. It seems strange that, as I hear your words, I am satisfied and hungry at the same time—satisfied, because I do not feel the need of anything else, hungry, because my desire for them continually increases.” (*Rev. IV:77.*)

Many revelations give a glimpse of what is, for Birgitta as for most mystics, the final goal, union with God:

(Christ speaking:) “But you, my daughter, whom I have elected and to whom I speak through my Spirit, love me with all your heart. ... I, who created you, did not spare any of my members from suffering for you. And I still love your soul with a love so great, that instead of losing it I would, if it were possible, let myself be crucified once more. Imitate my humility ... Let my will go before your own will ... If you do this, your heart will be in my heart and will be set on fire by my love. Just as something dry is easily kindled by the fire, so your spirit will be filled by me, and I shall live in you, and then all temporal things will seem bitter to you and all carnal lust like poison. You will rest on the arm of my divinity, where there is no carnal lust, only the spirit’s joy and pleasure.” (*Rev. I:1.*)

Like many other mystics Birgitta also compares the soul’s road to God to a mountain climbing. One passage of a long revelation on false and true Wisdom runs as follows:

“If you want to follow my wisdom, it will lead you up a very high mountain. But there are hard stones in the road before your feet, difficulties and precipices will meet during the climbing. If you persevere in this wisdom, you will find what is dark on the outside but shiningly clear on the inside. If you persist in holding to it, you will reach what you desire. It runs round you like a circle and draws you to itself, more and more, with an increasing sweetness, until at last you will be suffused with joy from all sides.” (*Rev.* II:22.)

There are likenesses as well as differences between Birgitta and earlier women mystics. There is much in her revelations that reminds us of the Helfta-mystics, Gertrude and the two Mechthilds. Like them, Birgitta was often inspired by the liturgy and feasts of the Church. Like them, she calls herself the bride of Christ.

But there is a notable difference between Birgitta and the more emotional representatives of “bride mysticism”. Birgitta is sound and without sentimentalism. She has none of the pathological features we may notice with Christina of Stommeln. She does not give any expositions of the intimate relations between bride and bridegroom according to the Song of Solomon. She has no visions of Christ in the shape of a beautiful young man.

We have to keep in mind that when Birgitta came to the turning point of her life she was already a mature woman, mother of eight children. She had no romantic ideas about married life. To her, marriage meant consenting to somebody, and then carrying out this consent during long years of faithfulness and self-denial. It is this prosaic side of the “bride’s” life that Birgitta stresses.

We have already quoted some passages in which we glimpse the intimate love between Birgitta and Christ. But even in this context Birgitta’s calling to work among her fellow Christians is emphasized. She ought to “bear spiritual children” for Christ. (*Rev.* I:20.)

Being a “bride of Christ” had a very special meaning in traditional Church vocabulary. That was the expression used for a woman entering a monastery, and the dedication ritual had many likenesses with a wedding ceremony. The epistle in Masses for holy virgins quotes S. Paul’s words: “I have espoused you to Christ, that I may present you to him as a chaste virgin.” When Birgitta, shortly after the death of her husband, drew his ring from her finger, this act meant to her just that—from now on she wanted to belong wholly to Christ. It was then her intention to realise this purpose in monastic life. But

as things worked out, she never entered a monastery but lived all her life out in the world. Here lies one of the main reasons why her revelations differ from those of the women mystics who since their childhood or early youth had lived inside the walls of the cloister.

But Birgitta remained convinced of the fact that in a very special way she belonged to Christ. Her revelations refer to a moment in her life when Christ "consented to her" and she to him. (See *Rev.* VI:14.) As far as possible she tried to imitate the monastic life in her habits and in the ordering of her daily life. With many others she regarded monastic life as a short cut on the way to union with God.

This purpose—union with God—was present in Birgitta's thoughts when she founded her own monastic order. Even more consistently than earlier rituals, the Brigittine ritual for receiving new sisters is formed into a bride Mass, a wedding ceremony. (*Reg.* 11.)

The ceremony begins with the bishop blessing the ring, "the sign of the new bride", at the church door. He exhorts the new sister to give God her faith and her consent, "not to love anything like God". She answers: "I consent to God with all my heart and all my mind, and I give myself to him in simplicity of heart." The bishop says: "And I consent to you on behalf of almighty God and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ." He puts the ring on her finger saying: "I bless you to be the bride of God and his eternal possession."

It is in some of the following prayers, read while the new sister was being dressed in her nun's clothing, that we clearly glimpse the purpose of this "marriage". The prayers contain several of the common expressions of mystical literature: illumination, embrace, knowing God, union with God, etc.

Birgitta, as we have seen, stresses the necessity of man's preparation, his will to belong wholly to Christ, to love God above everything, to renounce all that may hinder him. But like other Christian mystics Birgitta knows that what is essential in the inner life is of God's own working. God is the magnet that attracts the iron, he is the fire that lights and heats and kindles the dry wood. It is God who puts into man the desire, "desiderium", of which she speaks so often. About "the good Spirit" Birgitta writes:

"He warms, but not like ordinary fire, not like the visible sun melting something. His warmth is a love and desire inside the soul, that fills it and absorbs it in God. It is sweet to the soul, not as a delectable wine or like sensual pleasure or anything

earthly. This sweetness of the spirit cannot be compared to any temporal sweetness, and it is incomprehensible to anybody that has not tasted it himself." (*Rev.* I:54.)

"Incomprehensible to anybody that has not tasted it himself!" There is a similar line of thought in Bishop Alphons' *Prologue* to the 8th Book of the *Revelations* (Chapter 1). In order to judge of such things as Birgitta's revelations and visions, Alphons says, a person has to possess theoretical knowledge, know what the Scriptures and the Church Fathers say about such things. He also has to have practical experience of spiritual life and of "divinely inspired feelings, consolations and visions". "There are not many nowadays", Alphons continues, "who possess that kind of theoretical and practical knowledge".

Mysticism, the mystic's experience, cannot be put into words, cannot be made comprehensible to those who have not themselves any experience of such things. Therefore, we are forced to respect the silence with which Birgitta and others have chosen to surround most of their inner lives.

The threads connecting Birgitta with other mystics and devout circles lead not only backwards, but also forwards. The Canonization Acts bear testimony to the fact that Birgitta's personality made a deep impression on many of those who met her. By her life and example, by conversation and counsels she gave others the impulses she had herself received. Her *Revelations* were distributed widely and later printed in many editions.

The Brigittine order also played its part in this respect. The Brigittine houses were seats of mystical piety. Among books translated into Swedish in the monasteries of Vadstena and Nådendal were Suso's *Book of Eternal Wisdom*, the *Revelations* of Mechthild of Hackeborn, Pseudo-Bonaventura's *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, etc. The *Diary of Vadstena* gives us glimpses of many devout brothers and sisters carrying on the mystical tradition.¹

¹ More important works on Birgitta and her spirituality are: F. Hammerich, *Den hellige Birgitta og Kirken i Norden*, Kjøbenhavn, 1862; K. B. Westman, *Birgitta-studier*, Uppsala 1911; E. Fogelclou, *Birgitta*, Stockholm 1919, new edition 1955; F. Vernet, "*Brigitte de Suède*" (*Dict. de spiritualité asc. et myst.* 1, 1937); T. Schmid, *Birgitta och hennes uppenbarelser*, Lund 1940; Y. Brilioth, *Den senare medeltiden*, Stockholm 1941; S. Stolpe, *Vadstena*, Stockholm 1949; B. Klockars, *Birgitta och böckerna*.

For details and literature on the beguine movement, the Helfta mystics etc. see J. Leclercq, F. Vanderbroucke, L. Bouyer, *La spiritualité du Moyen Age (Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne 2*, Paris 1961), p. 425 ff., 537 ff., etc.