

# The Eye of the Storm

## Mystical Theology in Dialogue with Teacher Education

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### Abstract

In this interdisciplinary paper we explore ways in which medieval mystical theology can inspire religious education teachers in their work in the classroom. One of the major challenges to them is to (help to) understand the tension between religious literacy and religious experience. By using an experiential and imaginative rather than a rational theology, based on the work of the mystics, we hope to clarify this tension. Firstly, we describe the “hermeneutical storm”: a metaphor to understand the complexity of the religious learning process in the context of friction between worlds. Teachers bear witness and need to stand firm at the centre of this clash. Secondly, we present medieval mysticism as a frame of reference to deal with this situation that challenges the modern urge for rational control. We discuss the historical context of the democratization of mystical theology, the multiple genres and the imaginative language mystics use to guide their students during their personal development, exemplified by Hadewijch’s mystical experience as an interplay between Love and Reason. This imaginative theology can offer contemporary religious education teachers insight into the “hidden presence of God” when faced with hermeneutical storms in the classroom and can help them in clarifying the tension between religious literacy and experience.

### Keywords

religious education; mystical theology; teacher education; religious literacy; religious experience; interdisciplinarity; Hadewijch

### Introduction

Contemporary religious pedagogy espouses a concept of theology that relies heavily on a cognitive understanding of religious texts, rituals, practices and communities. Religious literacy, it is then claimed, should be the aim of religious education and assumes a grammar, the mastery of a language game, in order to learn to understand the phenomenon of religious (and non-religious) worldviews. True, there are performative broadenings available in this concept to fill in the missing experiential substrate and provide the concepts with content. That which is missing in a secularized context, particularly religious experience, is then supplemented by spiritual and moral practice elements within or outside the classroom.

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But is this cognitive perspective the only theological perspective conceivable and available to guide the development of religious education (research)? A provocative proposal is made in this paper: in particular, the mystical theology of the Middle Ages, strongly marked by experience and imagination, is invoked here to describe the tension that exists between professional subject knowledge, on the one hand, and personal spiritual knowledge of teachers and/or students, on the other. We contend that mystic theology can open up the classroom and its traditional “learning *about* religion” approach for new forms of “learning *from* religion” (Grimmitt 1987, 225).

### **1. Enduring “hermeneutical storms” in the classroom**

A good learning process presupposes and generates friction: between the learner’s life world and the world of the text, between person and subject, between experience and tradition. Learning is an answer to the question, “What does this (segment of reality) have to do with me (as a learning person)?” Both worlds collide and create an interesting friction. The friction motivates the learners to explore questions that arise during the learning process. The teacher stands in the middle. He or she mediates between the colliding worlds, standing in the eye of the hermeneutical storm: he or she voices both worlds, builds bridges and increases the knowledge-cutting point between the two worlds, in order to create a maximum of learning opportunities (Roebben et. al. 2023).

Religious education offers a great example of this stormy learning process. Here, too, worlds collide: the world of the existential questions of children and young people and that of the theoretical responses from religious and non-religious traditions. Spontaneous and simple correlations between the two worlds ceased to exist. Students enter the classroom these days as “a rich hermeneutical field of ‘multicorrelation’” (Pollefeyt 2020, 8), of different options through which powerful knowledge is activated and negotiated.

A great deal of interaction of the *subject* (person) with the *object* (thing) of knowledge and vice versa can be sparked by the *intersubjective* moment of intervention by the teacher. He or she can decide to consciously collide the two worlds with each other, not only perceiving and naming their collision, but also activating the collision in a methodically controlled way or even embodying the collision in one’s own person as a teacher. Whoever as a teacher of religion thus lights the fuse, “hermeneutically irritates” children and young people (Roebben 2023, 91–92) with existential issues that are profoundly ambivalent, and provides them with a theological jargon will be confronted with hermeneutical storms. Anyone who theologically empowers young people with theological knowledge on beginning and end, vocation and occupation, desire and pain, life before and after death, connection and rupture, to name only a few, will be challenged by them. And that need not be destructive, but quite the contrary.

The traditional presupposition is that the teacher should control this storm during the learning process by working with students on religious literacy and argumentative power. But it may happen that this does not remove the irritation from the learning process. On the contrary, even more ambiguity, discomfort and messiness may arise during rational discourse, because

religious issues simply cannot be separated from the undefinable and unsolvable existential questions of concrete (young) people. From the moment religious literacy (e.g., based on a religious text, symbol or space) in the classroom is enriched with biographical elements based on religious experience (“what does this knowledge do to me?”), a different language game is needed. Which theological languages and genres, which creative methods do teachers need besides domain-specific knowledge and didactic skills? How do they communicate about religious experiences that surpass rational control?

## 2. Medieval mystical theology as an interdisciplinary research format

Our premise in this article is that the teacher must performatively weather the hermeneutical storm with students. Students wait for a courageous signal from the teacher not to flee from the storm and count on him or her to be a safe guide. In a previous paper three performative teacher education models were presented, in which teachers learn to deal with this vulnerable challenge: through music, body work and dance, pilgrimage (Roebben et. al. 2023; Vloebergs 2021). What follows is a first step<sup>3</sup> in an interdisciplinary search design to ground this experience-dense and performative-oriented vision of the religion teacher as a “wounded healer” from a mystical-theological perspective. This perspective offers a different kind of theological rationality, specifically that of “enlightened reason” from the time of medieval mysticism. It provides us with creative methods and literary genres that can pique our interest and offer us clarity. This reason is first and foremost about bodily knowledge and imagination, encapsulated in the concept of *minne*, which is the medieval Flemish word for love, through which the human person learns to open up to a reality other than the observable one.

Drawing on the insights of the Australian practical theologian Aaron J. Ghiloni, we take three steps in this interdisciplinary search design (Ghiloni 2013). First, we point out the democratic nature of this enterprise. Then we briefly explain the diversity in mystical genres that emerged in the Middle Ages, among other things, from this democratizing trend. Finally, we address one mystical author specifically. Hadewijch of Brabant illustrates how mystical knowledge is based on an experiential wisdom that crosses different theological genres.

### 2.1. The RE teacher as a medieval mystic?

Mystical theology is a relatively new discipline within modern academic theology. Yet mystical theologians specialize in a corpus of texts that starts with the Church Fathers and extends to contemporary times (for a survey of primary and secondary literature, see McGinn 1991). This is an interdisciplinary field of research in which the texts are studied by theologians, philosophers, (art) historians and literature scholars. Mystical theologians reflect on the experiences of the “hidden presence of God”, rooted in an immediate personal encounter

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<sup>3</sup> First attempts on the work of Meister Eckhart can be found in “Looking at the Religious Education Teacher Through the Lens of Medieval Mysticism” (Roebben 2016, 121–26) and in the doctoral work of Maria Magdalena Stüttem at the University of Cologne.

with the divine that requires a creative and rational word play in order to communicate (Howells & McIntosh 2020, 1–2).

The mystics of the past were gifted word artists whose experiential language could directly touch the hearer or reader. This language is different from the objective and precise language that academic theology cultivated in universities. The mystics created a language that is inspired by their own personal experience. Contemporary mystical theologians are, first and foremost, academics who function within the rational environment of the university. These researchers often avoid personal involvement in their examination of mysticism. They write about historical mystical experiences of other Christians.

Contemporary theology, however, does not happen only at the university,<sup>4</sup> nor do numerous theologians agree with eliminating personal experience from theological discourse. On the contrary, the movement towards context, situation and biography – both personal and structural – has in many ways formally democratized and substantively dynamized the academic theological enterprise.

We go one step further and propose that, like the mystics and mystical theologians of the past, our own personal and image-rich experiences also inform our reflection – in this case, on religious teaching and learning. We look at the role of the religious teacher as a “student in the school of the mystics”. Indeed, both the teacher and the mystic are rooted in a personal experience of reality which they seek to put into words, based on different traditions and worlds. The mystic and *mutatis mutandis* the teacher of religion is:

(...) Someone who, overwhelmingly, experiences the presence of what transcends him/herself and which is much more real than all that is usually considered real. The whole human system – the world in which we live and which seems so natural and solid – becomes a transparent backdrop for the mystic, because another, ultimate reality presents itself (Mommaers 1997, 25, our translation).

## **2.2. A rich treasure of mystical knowledge**

The democratization trend in theology is not only characteristic of the present period. The late Middle Ages also saw a rich exchange between theological traditions and genres in which experience and imagination played a crucial role. The literary scholar Barbara Newman even speaks of an “imaginative theology”, an umbrella term to subsume the various genres based on a shared interest in imagery (Newmann 2003, 295–96). The mystical tradition, previously practised in monastic contexts and written down in Latin, now reached people outside the monastery walls with its imaginative language (McGinn 1998, 19–24).

In these exciting but also turbulent times, mystical theologians were masters at handling and teaching this lived imaginative theology. Their texts were mystagogical in nature and aimed at training and supporting students in their personal experience of the hidden presence of God. This assumed a creative approach since this experience cannot be captured by words.

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<sup>4</sup> This line of thought refers to the development of “children’s theology” and “youth theology” in the German speaking world and “ordinary theology” (Jeff Astley) in the Anglo-Saxon world (cf. Roebben 2016, 81–97).

Mysticism therefore consists of several genres. Vision literature is a privileged genre through which mainly female mystics shared their knowledge. We take the mystic Hadewijch as an example to illustrate how mystical imaginative theology can still appeal today, especially when we learn to understand how embodied imagery and rational reasoning are not mutually exclusive.

### **2.3. Hadewijch and the images of storm and love**

The mystic Hadewijch is an enigmatic figure about whom researchers have been able to gather only scant biographical material. Situated in the thirteenth century, she probably lived as a beguine or Cistercian (Faesen 2004). She wrote in several genres: visions, songs and letters. Especially, her visions are mystagogical in nature (Fraeters 1999). In each vision, she presents new imagery which, through the medium of text comes to live within in the personal imagination of the reader, and which, in turn, is interpreted and re-interpreted. To understand Hadewijch's mystagogy and visionary imagery, it is necessary to understand her key concept of "minne" (Love). Love is the subject and object of theological knowledge that can only be known through personal engagement, through experience (Mommaers 2004, 45–46). God as Love, and Christ as the ideal lover play the leading role in her theology. Through visions, the mystic teaches Love.

Reason is given a unique place as both antagonist and accomplice of Lady Love. Reason is an intellectual function of the soul that provides the soul with the capacity to make distinctions. It is responsible for creating (visual) language. Of great importance in Hadewijch's love mysticism is the voice of Reason that warns the mystic of a possible fusion with the object of love's desire, with God himself. Indeed, Reason clarifies the distinction between the human being and God, where Love emphasizes that a personal encounter with God is possible. Together, Reason and Love form "two eyes" through which the person gains divine knowledge (according to Hadewijch in Letter 18). The tension between the two is highlighted and depicted by the mystic in various ways. In her ninth vision, for example, Reason takes the form of a queen who attacks the mystic and holds her in a stranglehold until she surrenders. Hadewijch writes in Vision 19: "The queen approached me dreadfully fast and set her foot on my throat, and cried with a more terrible voice, and said: 'Do you know who I am?' And I said: 'Yes indeed! Long enough have you caused me woe and pain! You are my soul's faculty of Reason'" (Hadewijch 1980, 285). However, Reason is in turn vanquished by Love, who embraces the mystic and leads her to an unspeakable oneness with God, transcending the soul's capacities. Thus, the mystic reaches a wisdom that human reason deemed impossible.

The vision reveals that Reason remains active, even when overcome or transcended by Love. Reason is included in Love's dynamic embrace and will act out of Love, still conscious of human limitations and distinctions but no longer hindered by them. Reason is incorporated in Love and in the eternal desire for Love. Hadewijch called this "enlightened reason". The enlightened mystical writer can act in daily life without losing the constant access to divine inspiration. Thanks to this process, Hadewijch gained self-knowledge and appropriated the divine attribute of Wisdom. She accepted that human Reason always fails to comprehend

Divine Love entirely. This impossibility to capture Love, however, did not stop her from speaking. Human Reason is not annihilated but transformed. She now serves not the individual but Love.

This process of enlightenment and transformation is not meant for the faint-hearted as it can be very painful. In her Letter 20, Hadewijch mentioned how Love “cries with a loud voice, without stay or respite, in all the hearts of those who love: ‘Love ye love!’ This voice makes a noise so great and so unheard of that it sounds more fearful than thunder (cf. Apoc 6:1)” (Hadewijch 1980, 92). Thunder accompanies the lightning that enlightens reason. It is a dreadful sound that wounds her disciples. Lightning blinds reason, leaving an afterimage on the retina, before being plunged into darkness. It is a struggle in the dark, reminiscent of the battle the visionary fought with Lady Reason in her ninth Vision. Combined with the thunder, lightning creates a violent drama that is also evoked by the imagery of the storm.

The mystic can face this storm when reason surrenders to the deep undercurrent of Love that connects the human being to the infinite source of Love, God. The storm blinds the eye of reason. The mystagogical process deals with the difficulties of learning on how to see with both eyes, Reason and Love, despite the dark path before our feet. However, the mystics offer pointers, strong images that help the “student in the school of Love”. Their mystical theologies seek images and genres that guide their students to a deeper understanding of reality. What takes shape in this imaginative world of visions is a reality that touches human beings. In this sense, the vision is real. It encourages one to bear witness to God as Love, and yet to continue to seek anchoring in the “hidden presence of God” that sometimes has an overwhelmingly illuminating effect on the human soul, and sometimes seems painfully clouded in darkness.

## **Conclusion**

In the eye of the hermeneutic storm, the teacher seeks “groundedness”, so that he or she does not get lost in the whirlwind of the classroom. How will the teacher manage the learning process of children and young people in search of a language for vulnerable existential experiences, knowing full well that he or she does not know the answer to all theological questions and is often tongue-tied? And is there a theological “language game” conceivable and available to address the tension between religious literacy and experience? In this paper we reframed this situation as interdisciplinary by looking into the theology of medieval mysticism. Conclusively, we believe that, especially for young teachers with less and less living connection to religious traditions (i.e., literacy and experience), this approach can be helpful. Or, many seek a foothold in a mere objective religious studies knowledge and transfer. But perhaps, following the medieval tradition of imaginative theology that we exemplarily presented here, a path is just conceivable whereby teachers learn to rely on their own strength and develop their own language for the transcendent. This language is imaginative and experiential, but also reasonable, as it searches for words and understanding. It involves a “mysticism with open eyes” (Metz 1998, 163) – with the eyes of Love and Reason (Hadewijch).

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