



Virtue in Mechthild von Magdeburg (1207–1282)

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Mechthild of Magdeburg was a beguine whose strong mystical experiences propelled her to write, and yet give credit to God as the actual author of her works. Scholarship on her has tended to revolve around the notion of the authorial, i.e., whether Mechthild is the author of the contents of *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, or acts completely as God's instrument by inscribing what is dictated to her. Independent of addressing the authorial question, the fact that Mechthild chose to make the statements that she did indicates that she felt strongly about how a metaphysical merging or union of the soul with the divine could give rise to a special concept of virtue. This merging of the soul with the divine would allow a soul to be possessed by God in such a way that God's will would be enacted as a result. She makes this clear in such lines from the Prologue to *Flowing Light of the Godhead* as "O Lord, what shall this book be called for your honor alone? It shall be called a light of my godhead flowing into all hearts that live without falseness." As Bowie notes, Mechthild's visions were "visual parables for use as teaching aids."

Bowie is very straightforward about the controversy aroused by the beguines' spiritual experiences and the fact that these experiences might be thought to be inimical to Church teaching, and hence not virtuous insofar as they contradict established doctrine. Mechthild in a sense answers such charges by noting that she "loves [her] enemies with a painful and holy longing for their blessedness." We can assert then, that the union of Mechthild with the flowing light of the divinity in a sense immediately gives rise to the virtuous, i.e., to Mechthild's love of enemy and to her desire for their salvation. This is both God's will and Mechthild's will. For purposes of contrast, a thinker such as Hildegard of Bingen is clearly writing in a somewhat more detached vein.

Primary Source:

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