

Abstract

„O du gießender Gott in deiner Gabe“ (Oh, you pouring gifted God“)
The giving and receiving of gifts in the work by Mechthild von Magdeburg

Mechthild von Magdeburg, whose birth may be assumed to be sometime between the years 1207 and 1208, comes from a noble family in the West Middle Mark, which is part of the Diocese of Magdeburg. At the age of about 20 she leaves home to join a beguinage in Magdeburg. She writes her work “The Flowing Light of the Godhead”, written in Middle Low German and consisting of seven books, between the years 1250 and 1283. The Latin translation of books I to VI is made in the Dominican monastery of Halle, which proves the high value that is attributed to this work. Still preserved are the Latin and Alemannic translation of her work that were made between 1343 and 1345 in Basle. Excerpts can be found in many sermon texts and manuscripts. Her book was rediscovered in the year 1861 in the convent library of the monastery of Einsiedeln.

This paper examines the work of Mechthild von Magdeburg under the point of view of giving and receiving gifts. The comprehensive topic is about the love relationship with God, which is the greatest divine gift she is granted whereby she owns the literary talent to transcribe this experience into words.

An introductory paragraph shows biblical basics about gift-giving: Starting with the biblical Act of Creation until the “gift of laws” of the Decalogue and the self-abandonment of Jesus Christ, who breaks radically with the balance between the giving and receiving of gifts.

Mechthild sees her poetical talent and her book as a gift from God. She attributes her authorship to God under his protectorship to give her work the highest authenticity possible. Her talent to write becomes evident in scenes that describe the act of giving and receiving. She considers the visions granted to her as a special gift that give her insight into heaven, hell and purgatory, the account thereof she wants to be understood as a warning to its recipients, her book explicitly being given as a gift to “all clerical people, the good and the bad”.

Mechthild understands love as divine emanation. To convey divine gifts and divine love she employs the verbal metaphors flowing and pouring as well as receptacle as a metaphor for receiving. She feels her election as bride of trinity as a big gift of love. God and she praise this gift - a voluntary act of God – with exuberant words. They both adopt the worldly, erotic language to express their feelings. Their passionate love, their yearning – according to her wording – “reach higher than the stars, equal the desire of an eagle”, and she experiences a “height that cannot be exceeded”.

The greatest divine gift to Mechthild is the *unio mystica*, the unification of the soul with God, which, according to medieval ideas, is possible as the “personality of God is fundamental” to the devoutness of these days. In the 12th century a change of religious mentality sets in that shows in the humanization of the Divine and a stronger psychologization of the human being so that a partnership-like relationship between God and mankind can develop.

The *unio* takes place in the “Tree Garden of the “Minne”, in the isolation of a fictitious garden, the *hortus conclusus*, represented by the erotic picture of breaking flowers. The “Hohelied” (Song of Songs) serves as an example and a great source of inspiration to her.

For the indescribable in spiritual unification she uses the abstract image of “blessed silence”. The reproduction of this experience is done in a narrative account or in the form of a dialogue and she expresses this mystical experience in pictures that until then had never existed in “theological tradition” as Claudia Opitz points out. Starobinski talks about “the greatest possible exchange of gifts” when he speaks about mystics.

Mechthild knows that the state of fortune in *unio* cannot last for long and that the return to reality is associated with great suffering as the soul needs to descend back into the body and thus the distance from God can be seen as an opposite pole to the *unio*. The soul has experienced the greatest possible closeness and now consciously chooses the greatest possible distance from God to prove its faith in the “big darkness”.

The account of her experience with God is made out of the distance since Mechthild always talks about an experience in the past thus trying at the same time to come to terms with it, which again symbolizes a re-actualization of the mystical act through the use of language according to Walter Haug.

For the gifts received from God, Mechthild combines all her efforts in order to be a perfect gift in return that leads her towards unconditional abandonment. But God as well demands gifts in return leading her to self-abandonment and complete exhaustion. God wants complete exchange: “Give me everything you own, then you will receive everything I own”.

Mechthild’s book offers no rational, theoretical thinking about God. She describes her happy experience of her spiritual unification with God knowing at all times that she is unworthy of this greatest gift. With her work she combines the social obligation to pass on her mystical experience and insight as a reminder to the addressees of her book.