

# Beatrice

## of Nazareth

### *On Seven Ways of Holy Love*



WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

menſche noch vāt. noch ingel noch heile-  
gen. noch gode ſeluz ī al haren doene ofte  
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met begten. en li ne mogent m̄ haren  
ī groten arbade en m̄ vele pīnē en m̄  
oghemake te dogene. en alle clene d̄nc  
moetē li achte groet tote die m̄ale dat  
li d'coe comen dattiz mīne binē hare  
regnere die geweldelike wort d' mīne  
weet en die alle d̄nc clene maket en

# On Seven Ways of Holy Love

by Beatrice of Nazareth



Middle Dutch text with  
English and Dutch translations

by

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

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gen. noch gode seluz i al haren doene ofte  
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met begten. en si ne mogent in haren  
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si d'oe comen dattie mine binne hare  
regneet. die geweldike wert d' mine  
weert en die alle dinc dene maket en

Folio 35r of the *Brussels codex*  
ca. 1350

*The Sixth Way*

# Preface

The study of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Beatrice of Nazareth was part of my research into the relationships between knowledge and mysticism. In 1983, I had the opportunity to study *On Seven Ways of Holy Love*, Beatrice's seminal treatise on mysticism, under the tutelage of dr. Joseph Alaerts, a Jesuit Ruusbroec expert and a foremost Middle Dutch scholar.

Between 1986 and 1990, as a scientific collaborator at Ghent University (faculty of Logic and Epistemology), I probed into the cognitive aspects of the experience of the mystics. Because of the poignant sublimity of Beatrice's treatise on holy love, it was scrutinized using the tools of criticism (cf. *On the Categories 'Rationality' and 'Irrationality,'* 1985, *Kennis*, 1995, *Criticosynthesis*, 2008).

In 1994, *Kennis en Minne-Mystiek* was written. This text studied the cognitive structures underlying mystical experience. It advocated a 'mysticology' or scientific study of the logical, epistemological, and phenomenological features of mystical experience (Staal, 1978). The mystagogic treatise of Beatrice was its hermeneutical object.

In this exercise, two distinctions helped. On the one hand, there is the experience of the mystic versus the 'superstructure' (Staal, 1980) of this experience. The latter is the conceptual framework (of the mystic, her surroundings, and the interpreters) used to grasp the outstanding features of the mystical experience.

On the other hand, 'direct' and 'indirect' registers (Alaerts) prove crucial to move away from the framing of this Christian mystic's experience in terms of



Rome's mystical theology. Let me explain this a little further. A superstructure is always contrived, never the real thing (like R.O.S.E. is not the flower). But neither can it be avoided. It has to be made explicit before allowing it to organize experience and help make sense of what is happening (which always depends on theoretical presuppositions). If we can't take away presuppositions, we can *choose the best framework* to investigate mystical experiences.

Experience is to be isolated as much as possible. In most cases, the superstructure explains mysticism, the direct experience of the Divine, in terms of an acquired, religious and intellectual framework, often ruled by dogma.

Draw a margin and note what belongs to direct experience instead of fitting its 'explanation.' This helps identify the *direct* experience of the mystic and how much it contrasts with acquired, conceptual interpretation.

The register approach introduces sets, each defined by a theme. Direct registers contain information (words, phrases, motifs, themes) related to the direct experience of the Divine. Indirect registers organize superstructure. Identifying these registers advances understanding of the core of the superstructure at hand, which may differ from how it is presented. In my further studies, participant observation provided better information than hermeneutical analysis, especially regarding how spiritual life is lived.

This little book contains my English and Dutch translations of the Middle Dutch text with a small commentary on each way.

Wim van den Dungen  
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'By light, we learn the customs of Love and know her well under all its forms : of the human just like the Divine.

By the coal of life, Love sets the two aflame ;  
By the fire, she burns them in the Unity,  
just as in the fire of the salamander, the phoenix  
burns to ashes and metamorphoses itself.'

Hadewijch : *Love's Seven Names*, 181 – 188.



Portrait of Beatrice in stained glass

## Situating *The Seven Ways*

Beatrice of Nazareth (1200 – 1268), born in Tienen as the daughter of Bartholomew de Vleeschouwer, a well-to-do butcher, was the first Flemish Cistercian mystic to develop –in her own mystical language and idiom (in Middle Dutch)– a synthetic and original overview of this vibrant and wisdom-bearing mystical intimacy that may exist between the love-mystic and holy love, the Bridegroom, experienced as Divine.

This she did in her *On Seven Ways of Holy Love (Over Seven Manieren van Heilige Minnen)*, composed for novices (ca. 1236). It is the oldest datable mystical prose text in Middle Dutch. In 1236, she moved with her sisters to the convent of Nazareth (near Lier) and was elected prioress (1237). Scholars reckon she had the material of the *Seven Ways* back then but may have postponed the completion of the treatise. If so, the *Seventh Way* was written at the end of her life. In due course, this exceptional, mystagogic treatise got published as a sermon in the *Limburgsche Sermoenen*, a collection of 48 sermons written by a monk from Limburg near Maastricht or Tienen (ca. 1320 – 1350).

As late as 1926, Reypens & Van Mierlo formally identified Beatrice as the author of the text ; they had discovered an unknown treatise on Christian mystical experience by a Cistercian nun practicing very harsh austerities.

Besides this treatise, between 1217 and 1235, Beatrice kept a journal, the *Liber Vitae*, probably lost. After her death, commissioned by the abbess and her sisters, an unknown author wrote the *Vita Beatricis*, a

hagiography based on the *Liber Vitae*, testimonies of eye-witnesses, and remarks by the author. The third part of this Latin work is entitled '*De caritate Dei et .vij.eius gradibus.*' Some identified the author as the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Willem of Affligem. He turned her into a saint, obscuring the experiential vector.

In the 13<sup>th</sup>-century, the entire area, now northern France and Belgium, experienced an unparalleled spiritual change. The Beguine Movement (starting at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century) flourished. The Beguines of the first hour lived and worked as small groups of spiritual women, mostly near hospitals and guided by a 'visionary.' Rome did not recognize these groups. Next to the Church, they cherished a direct, often trance-like interaction with God. Does it surprise they were persecuted ?

E.g., in 1310, Beguine and mystic Margaret Porette (1250 – 1310), influenced by Beatrice, was burned in Paris by civil authorities.

In Flanders, the Cistercians gained popularity thanks to the activity of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153) and his 'mysticism of the heart.' This direct approach had empowered the 'monastic revolution' initiated by Cîteaux, turning away from Clunaic ritualism.

The model of the strictly regulated Benedictine 'office' monastery (like Cluny) was rejected because it prevented the authentic, direct, and personal experience of the original Christian message of love. In Bernard's works, we discover the use of *a new metaphoric language*. The feeling aspect of the mystical experience (the Eastern '*bhakti*') is primarily at hand. Bernard himself founded a total of 68 monasteries !

In Bernard's nuptial metaphors, he or she who loves perfectly marries. In and through the heart, the mystical soul directly and without means experiences a uniformity of will turning into a single spirit ; a mystical kiss crowning transportation towards the heart, uniting what is human with what is Divine.

In highly emotionally charged nuptial and Christocentric imagery, Bernard embodies the opportunity to experience God directly without eliminating the ontological difference between God and the soul. After all, the Bridegroom appears to the bride as He wishes, not as He is. The bride is a creature, God the Creator. His essence is for Himself, but he shares His existence with His chosen, the mystics.

Beatrice studied the work of Bernard, especially his *Sermones in Cantica cantoricum*. To allow the soul to experience God directly was part of the 'Gothic worldview.' God's Light penetrated the confines of materiality. The human soul could reach the heights allowing for better direct participation in the Divine panorama.

Beatrice's approach is systematic and very rich. Hadewijch of Antwerp, her contemporary, was also influenced by William of St. Thierry (1085 – 1148). This nobleman from Liège left his hometown for the school of Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1104). Later, he met Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142) and was influenced by the school of St. Victor, the '*via negativa*,' the Jewish-Arab medical tradition, and the Greek Patristic Movement (Origen and Gregory of Nyssa). He resigned to become a Cistercian. By way of his writings, Beatrice assimilated the Eastern Church (the '*Oriente Lumen*'), as well as the mysticism of the void of hyper-existence (ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite), with its

Greek (Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism) and Oriental (Egyptian and Indian) overtones.

So Beatrice drank from monastic and Christian Neoplatonic sources. This she did in an open and rather revolutionary spiritual climate. Because of the intensity of this authentic encounter of the heart with the Bridegroom and its impact on the whole person, the text provides us with the outcome of a '*cognitio Dei experimentalis*' (cf. Thomas Aquinas and the Parisian Chancellor Jean Gerson).

Here, both heart and mind work. Some claim the soul must be wholly passive in this. Not so. She reaches out, yearns, and actively seeks. She goes out to meet what she knows will come.

Both heart and reason lead to this '*unio mystica*' and assist her in her love-mysticism, clarifying how the nuptial relationship between the soul and God is the dynamic synthesis of work, mind, feeling (heart/soul), and spirit (Eden). The fact Beatrice developed her own mystical language makes this effort outstanding.

The use of the vernacular (even found in the love songs of the Dukes of Brabant) contributed in a significant manner to the development of a mysticism directly influencing the more scholarly approach of Jan of Ruusbroec (1293 – 1381), Margaret Porette (or Marguerite Porete), the Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart (1260 – 1327/8) and the Modern Devotion (Gerard Groote, 1340 – 1384). Beatrice could be called the 'mother' of all these ways to the direct experience of God. Her work is canonic.

Beatrice likely reworked the text in her old age, given the cadential sentence at the end of the Sixth Way. The Seventh Way is the masterly organ point of the discourse.

Each 'way' of 'love' is like a petal. Upon opening the flower, every petal plays its role. On first reading, the 'ways' are read in sequence. Later, however, one may notice they always illuminate a part of the same, namely holy love. Holy love unites by working towards the 'Edenic state' and can be distinguished by its exemplary 'holy' forms of expression.

Each way of love brings us a unique state or station in the development of this holy love. This love is continuously 'in process.' Her fortitude becomes a fact only when the loving soul has consistently practiced all holy forms.

These seven ways are not unrelated, but together form the 'Mystical Rose,' the dynamic equilibrium of the process of spiritualization. In the Seventh Way, probably written at the end of her life, Beatrice crowns the path of holy love by a painful existence between the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit and the '*contemptus mundi*.' She sheds tears for this world of sin and misery. The mystic is of the world, but not in it, and wishes to return to the 'Fatherland.' One may wonder why the soul still suffers and complains being dissatisfied with life in this highest expression of holy love. All commentators agree Beatrice had exceptional compositional abilities. The composition has internal (in every way) and external features (between the ways themselves).

Internally, we find :

- a) definition : explaining the core of the particular manifestation of holy love ;
- b) development : describing this core in terms of a growth process with its physical, psychological, moral, and mystical features ;



c) closure: repetition of the essence and its connection with the other ways.

We also observe the use of circularity, as in the subtitle: 'from the highest working back to the highest.'

Externally, we may identify three models :

1) the 'graded' model : each 'way' is a 'degree' of a mystagogic process. The mystical 'ascent' is chronologically and hierarchically organized. The degree system used in the Qabalah (based on the 'Tree of Life' found in the *Zohar*) agrees with this. The Spanish qabalists were especially active in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (cf. Moses ben de León). The 'Tree of Life' (*Etz ha-Chayim*) is a *scala perfectionis* rooted in the Old Testament and influenced by Hellenism (Pythagoras). It too introduces 7 degrees. The highest degree provides access to the direct experience of the Trinity (Kether, Chockmah, and Binah) ; a total of 10 degrees. It is unlikely the Qabalah directly influenced Beatrice, but she knew the '*Oriente Lumen*.'

Moreover, mystical experiences worldwide share *universal characteristics*, as was evidenced by comparative religion and transpersonal psychology (Bucke, Deikman, Maslow, Stace, Sundén, Tart, Wilber, etc.).

These are : unity, noetic quality, spatiotemporal changes, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency.

2) the 'energy' model : the text reveals 'moments' central to the 'flow' of the 'energy' of holy love. This flow implies : (a) initiation / termination (0), (b) rejection (-) and (c) attraction (+). It can be traced in the seven ways :

0 (I)  
+ (II) versus - (III)  
+ (IV) versus - (V)  
00 (VI)  
000 (VII)

3) the 'Edenic' model : the primordial 'Edenic state' of purity, freedom, and nobility is the 'red thread' connecting the seven ways. The Edenic state represents the 'original' to be recovered by the 'good' soul. Understand each 'way' as a single 'moment' (or 'step') in the process of spiritualization 'in holy love.'

Realizing this state means the '*imago Dei*' is actualized in the consciousness of the mystic. In this way, holy love herself is the process of spiritualization.

Each way is a moment organizing this in terms of the Edenic state. These three hermeneutical models may be combined.

Regarding the two key terms 'love' and 'way,' note the following. The Middle Dutch word '*minne*' is commonly translated into English as 'courtly love.' This noun stood for an extensively conventionalized medieval tradition of love between a knight and a married noblewoman. Mostly invented by the troubadours of southern France, it figured extensively in the literature of the time. The knight's love for his lady was regarded as an *ennobling* passion, and the relationship was typically unconsummated.

Beatrice qualifies '*minne*' by the word 'holy,' thereby taking a precise distance from the profane, mundane use, even if the latter pointed to a spiritual ideal. The bride in white rests on the pure nuptial bed, awaiting her Divine Bridegroom ; all that happens between them is a manifestation of holy love.

The motion of this sublime passion is towards the jubilation of the heart (the Sixth Way) sanctified by the Spirit of Holiness (the Seventh Way). The distinction between profane and sacred is crucial. 'Holy love' is what happens between an individual human being and the Divine. This love is unique, as well as the shared process towards its sublime manifestation.

Besides '*minne*,' which I simply translate as 'love,' '*maniere*' is the other key term. Translated as 'steps' or 'modes,' the processual is accentuated. Rendered as 'manners,' action is targeted based on the coordination of (physical and mental) movement. I translate '*maniere*' as 'way,' in its double meaning of process (path) and particular action (specific spiritual exercise).

So, on the one hand, holy love is a *process* happening in time. It is a path, a road before us, as reflected in the seven ways. On the other hand, it is an *action*, a form of practicing the mind to jubilate, to go out to meet the Spirit. It happens in every moment. The spiritual soul always finds herself loving in one of the 'ways' or 'manners' of holy love.

In all likelihood, the original text of the treatise is lost. Three historical transcripts survived, kept in the Royal Libraries of Brussels, The Hague, and Vienna.

My translation is based on the first two manuscripts found in the *Royal Library of Brussels* and dated ca. 1350 (Heymans & Tersteeg, 1973, 3037-73, folio 25r-40v) and the document stored in the *Royal Library of The Hague*, dated ca. 1400 (Huls, 2002, 70 E 5, olim K6 ; nr. 377, folio 190va-197rb).

The mid-15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, kept in the *National Library of Austria in Vienna* (15258, folio 252r-271v),

shares more textual variations with the *The Hague codex* than the *Brussels codex*. It has more omissions and corrupt places and has not been used in the present translation. Moreover, it originates from the same monastery as the *Brussels codex* (Rooklooster).

The *Brussels codex* was a Brabantine flavored compendium of spiritual miscellanea. Did Jan of Ruusbroec commission it? The *The Hague codex*, with its southeastern Limburgian touch, is beautifully written by a steady hand.

Because of the possible link with Jan of Ruusbroec, preference is given to the *Brussels codex*, while some solutions found in the *The Hague codex* are not avoided. A contemporary feel was incorporated in the English translation, whereas the Dutch translation sticks closer to the Middle Dutch originals.

The message of the mystics reaches beyond their immediate, medial, and general context. It translates their immediate experience of the Divine the best way they can. Different spiritual practices show remarkable similarities, while differences are mostly, not always, ideological or language-based. Mysticism seeks to understand the constants, variables, and dynamics of the direct experience of the Divine, not the mystic's belief system.

Note how superstructure, or the conceptual understanding and elaboration of the mystical experience in indirect registers, may also impact the mystic, possibly influencing the depth of the encounter with the Divine. Christian theology is invoked in the Seventh Way and serves to underpin the '*contemptus mundi*.' Beatrice has not realized the cessation of suffering. Although she witnesses the eternity of holy love, her dissatisfaction remains.

Beatrice seeks to escape this world and so cherishes nostalgia for the hereafter. She does not realize holy love finds its culmination in compassion, the activity ending the suffering of others and oneself. Instead, we read a desperate plea to be dissolved in Christ, a longing for the land of bliss. Beatrice does not realize (as Jesus points out in Q<sup>1</sup>), the Kingdom of the Father has arrived. Hence, suffering is not the outcome of a Platonic rift between this world and the land of bliss but on remaining intellectual and emotional obscurations.

The main point of contention between the previous interpretations of the treatise and my own is the supposition that the soul is fallen without Christ (not to speak of the body).

That in its natural state, soul, and body do not deserve God. So passivity is the best attitude towards the Bridegroom.

Beatrice and many other Christian mystics are clear : holy love craves to exist in the Edenic state. The good soul is created after the Divine image and to His resemblance. If so, the soul can stand up and work to deserve holy love. In this embrace of love, the soul is not merely passive, disappearing because holy love immerses her. The soul and holy love join and make love. First, this love purifies her ego and its egology. Then, to teach the soul not to grasp at this blissful experience of the Divine, she temporarily raises the mystic's state of consciousness. When integrated, a stable love station ensues.

Also here, in the Sixth Way and in the longing for eternal love following it, the soul remains a center of activity, not mere passivity. The presence of the *Imago Dei* in the heart makes the soul apt to interact

with the Divine, eventually becoming *one with God in the spirit*.

The Seventh Way explicitly invokes Beatrice's theology. Two themes seem to run against the message of holy love, namely man's fallen nature and the rejection of this world.

The Buddhadharma explicitly warns against the view that human nature is unworthy, weak, fallen, or debilitated. Catholic theology accepts that humans are made after God's image and His resemblance (*Genesis*, 1.27, *Psalms*, 82.6). Still, since his exile from Eden, Adam fell, and so did all the generations after him (original sin). Christ (called 'the Second Adam') redeems those who believe His Cross took away our sins (Paul). Without Christ, no human can withstand the 'prince of the world' and break the chains of bondage. Without Christ, the devil, who is 'legion' and the supreme power on this planet, enslaves us ...

Buddha pointed out that all sentient beings are endowed with an innate potential to awaken and be free from suffering. Nobody gives this very subtle layer of mind and its enlightened properties, *nor* can they be taken away. Poverty-mentality does not realize one can secure the end of suffering *all by oneself*.

Beatrice returns to the Edenic state of purity. Still, depending on a fundamental theology stressing man's fall, she deems this *Imago Dei* only accessible through Christ. Her efforts do not suffice. On her own, she cannot access the Edenic state. The initiative must come from God.

How to miss the sadness found in the Seventh Way ? While Beatrice touches upon the eternal aspect of holy love, this sublime experience makes her disconsolate

regarding the world she finds herself in. Her mindset is dark, and she even refuses to be consoled by God Himself. Is this not a kind of *hubris* ?

Something has gone wrong here. The angelic station arrived at in the Sixth Way is interchanged for a brooding meditation on the hard work demanded by holy love and the fact its finality lies *beyond* death, in a world transcending this world. How can this '*contemptus mundi*' be embraced by a love-mystic celebrating the eternity and profundity of holy love ?

The fact she counterpoints this persistently morbid line of thinking with theological statements may perhaps shed some light. Beatrice cites the apostles' desire to be dissolved in Christ and Augustine's longing to 'enter the Lord'. Indeed, in his *Confessions*, we find the helplessness of man vis-a-vis God ; supplication, begging and waiting for the hereafter remain. The implied metaphysics is Platonic, defined by this strong ontological rift between the suffering and shadowy world of becoming and the ablaze world of ideas, the mind of God. This view adds a disdain for the body, deemed a tomb for the soul (cf. the '*sōma sēma*' doctrine of Plotinus). Indeed, her asceticism called for inflicting sharp pain on her physical body (*Vita*, 30-33). So was the '*contemptus mundi*' not dictated by her superstructuring of what she experienced ?

How can the eternity of love not lead to an insight into the *interconnectedness* between all that exists ? How can this not result in *universal compassion* intended to end the suffering of others ? If holy love results in a rejection of the world, it seems the message of the Sixth Way was not truly integrated. Or should we conclude, as some have, that the Seventh Way was interpolated and should not be considered part of the treatise ?