

Medieval Women Mystics' Visionary Answers to the Modern Theodicy Question: Angela of Foligno and Hadewijch of Antwerp On Understanding the Love of God

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Abstract

Angela of Foligno and Hadewijch of Antwerp are two mystics from the Middle Ages who could enhance the current theological understanding of the modern question of theodicy. Theodicy attempts to reconcile the existence of an omnibenevolent deity with the existence of evil. While modern theologians can conclude that God is not in control of evil, that evil actions can lead to a greater good, or that humans initiate evil through refusing to imitate God's love, purely intellectual answers might have limited ability in explaining God's infinite love. Perhaps humans need a faculty which, although human and finite, can experience the infinite God. Angela and Hadewijch's mystical experiences of the infinite God in their finite souls lead them to innovations in describing the simultaneous experiences of God and evil. Although they experienced visions of God which led them indirectly and preemptively to address the theodicy question, their unique approach of understanding God as a love which is unlimited only because it is willing to undergo evil actions and suffering provides an effective response to the inquiries of modern theologians. Their visions can enhance the theodicy arguments of the past century without portraying the intellect as useless in understanding God because they themselves reason that trust in God allows them to experience divine love even when their experiences of evil limit them to viewing themselves as separate from it.

Keywords: theodicy, mysticism, love

1. Introduction

Angela of Foligno came from a town in Umbria, a province in the middle of Italy, and lived from 1248 to 1309. She became a Franciscan in the middle of her life and began to experience visions of God. She dictated her visions to a friar. No contemporaneous images of her exist; the sculpture on the cover of her complete works is a sixteenth-century reliquary, holding physical remnants of her. Pope Francis declared her a saint in 2013. Hadewijch of Brabant lived in what is now Belgium. She probably died around the time that Angela was born. She was a member of a religious community, wrote poetry, and personally recorded her visions. No likenesses of her exist, either.

Studying their visions could help theologians to address the problems of evil and suffering beyond the theoretical parameters of modern, academic theodicy. Theodicy, which became popular in the twentieth century, attempts to reconcile the existence of an omnibenevolent deity with the experience of evil. Modern theologians can conclude that God is possible (i.e. he suffers) along with human beings in the face of suffering, that evil actions can lead to a greater good, or that humans initiate the presence of evil through refusing to imitate God's love.¹ However, answers generated from the intellect might not be able to explain the presence of evil because humans directly experience evil in the world, but do not directly experience God. In order to understand God's presence, humans need to experience God.

However, their finite intellects might not be capable of comprehending his infinite presence. Perhaps they need a faculty which, although human and finite, can experience the infinite God.

Angela and Hadewijch's mystical experiences of the infinite God in their finite souls lead them to innovations in describing the simultaneous experiences of God and evil. They indirectly and preemptively address the theodicy question because they understand God as a love which is unlimited only because it is willing to undergo evil actions and suffering. Their visions, experienced in their souls, can enhance the intellectual arguments of the past century without portraying the intellect as useless in understanding God because they themselves reason that they can experience divine love even when their experiences of evil limit them to feeling separated. The capacity of their souls to exist through God's love allows them to be simultaneously human and divine, finite and infinite. Angela and Hadewijch believe that they share the spiritual strength of Jesus Christ, in whom God's infinite love and humanity's finite separation from it meet.

2. Main Topic of Research

Angela of Foligno initially feels dissatisfied with intellectual explanations for the coexistence of a loving God with the influence of evil. She asks, "Lord, why did you create man, and after you did, why did you allow us to sin?"¹ She tries to answer the question by proposing that the influence of evil best "demonstrate[s] his goodness." However, she realizes that this answer does not account for the seeming contradiction between the existence of God and the limit which evil poses to his infinity. Evil seems to obliterate signs of God's existence rather than to "demonstrate his goodness."² In order to understand the answer to her question, Angela would need to understand how God exists despite the limiting effect of evil, but her finite intellect prevents her from understanding the infinite. Because her finite intellect forms only one part of the universe which God allows to exist, Angela can find an answer to her question only if she transcends her intellect and participates in the entirety of God's existence.

In a vision, Angela participated in the entirety of God's existence. She asserts, "My soul was drawn out of itself to perceive that the mystery of what I was asking had neither beginning nor end."³ Although Angela's soul is finite, God allows it to transcend its intellectual abilities of understanding through arguments; instead, she understands through direct experience of God. Because God created Angela's soul, his own existence is a precondition for the existence of her soul. When Angela tries to understand God with her finite capacities as an intellectual creature, she fails. However, when God allows Angela to understand him with his own capacities, which condition her finite capacities, she participates in his existence. Only the experience of God's infinite existence can satisfy Angela's longing to understand how God can exist despite evil.

Because Angela's soul understands the infinite existence of God, her intellect accepts seeming contradictions. She states, "I was so content and secure that were I to know for certain that I would be damned, I could find no reason in it for grief, and I would keep right on working and do what I could to pray and honor him."⁴ Damnation entails eternal separation from God's loving and good existence. Although the writings of Angela describe her wholehearted attempts to participate in an intimate relationship with God, in this passage she declares that even eternal estrangement from him cannot disturb her. Angela's simultaneous acceptance of estrangement pursuit of love imply that she and other humans cannot understand God's love intellectually.

When humans participate in God's love and existence, viewing themselves as intimate friends of God, they might expect to experience him like they experience human friends. In human relationships, friends often anticipate feelings of joy in each other's company and abandon acquaintances who do not lead them to feel happy. Human relationships generally function based on expectations.

However, Angela views God's love as transcending human expectations. She explains that she once "saw [herself] as total love," participating perfectly in God's love, but she learned that "that which loved in [her] came from God alone."⁵ Because humans can love only with the infinite love of God, they cannot reasonably set boundaries for a relationship with God. Angela's acceptance of her inability to control God's love allows her to live peacefully despite unexpected aspects of their relationship, including separation.

For Angela, God experiences infinite separation from and union with himself. Angela learns from her most intense visions that "[e]ven before man sinned, God the Father loved this bed and its company (poverty, suffering, and contempt) so much that he granted it to his Son."⁶ God wants to suffer infinitely, even before humans sin and experience suffering. The very essence of God as love is to want to experience separation from himself. Because love willingly endures separation from itself, finite conditions do not apply to it. In order for humans to love as unconditionally as God loves, they must willingly endure separation from love. Love is unconditional only if it endures anything for the sake of loving.

Although the mystic Hadewijch lived earlier and at a far distance from Angela of Foligno, she also addresses the topic of love which can experience separation from itself. Hadewijch questions the possibility of a simultaneously present and absent love.

In a vision, Christ says to her, “You have said to me at times that it was easy for me to live as Man . . . [but] Never did I dispel my griefs or my pains with the aid of my omnipotence.”⁷ Apparently, Hadewijch had told Christ that his relationship with God made it “easy” for him to experience suffering as a human.⁸ Because Christ was both God and human, he might have felt less sad than other humans. However, Christ claims that he accepted his sufferings without trying to lessen them through accessing his divine nature. Because Christ lived as both God and human, he was totally united with and totally separated from God.

Hadewijch describes Christ as living within the confines of the human intellect. Christ says, “All the suffering that belongs to the human race I experienced while I lived as Man *except sin* alone (Heb 4:15). I never cheered myself by my inner power, except with the consolation that I was certain of my Father.”⁹ Because Jesus experienced “all the suffering that belongs to the human race,” he experienced the pain of feeling separated from God and not understanding reasons why God allowed the separation. The Biblical cry of, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” plausibly could indicate the anguish of the intellect’s inability to comprehend the actions of God.¹⁰ Like other intellects, such as those of Angela and Hadewijch, the intellect of Christ cannot transcend its limits. Christ does not transfer his “inner power,” or the infinite ability of God, to his human intellect, amplifying its reasoning ability in order to understand the meaning of suffering.¹¹ He does not assuage his suffering by changing his intellect.

Instead of melding his “inner power” with his human traits, Christ remembered “the consolation that [he] was certain of my Father.”¹² The dependability of the love of God the Father seems to enable Christ to endure suffering with peace. Because Christ knows that God’s love is steadfast and unconditional, his inability to comprehend it in its infinite entirety and to understand the experience of separation from it leaves him undisturbed. In order to understand the infinite love of God, Christ needs to transcend the limitations of his intellect. If he understands through the experience of infinite love rather than through trying to explain it with finite, intellectual arguments, Christ can know that he is “certain” of the love of God.¹³ The presence of the unconditional love of God in Christ gives him the spiritual strength to suffer through evil, although he does not understand intellectually how the love can endure.

According to Hadewijch, humans must suffer like Christ in order to become Godlike. In a vision, Hadewijch visits God and experiences his divine love so perfectly that she loses awareness of anything besides him. Afterwards, God directs Hadewijch “to live in conformity with [his] Divinity and [his] Humanity” by leaving “the fruition, of his Nature, which is Love” and returning to “the cruel world.”¹⁴ At one moment, Hadewijch intensely experiences infinite love; at the next moment, God commands her to return to the finite universe in which she cannot experience it perfectly. In order to conform to the “Divinity” of God, Hadewijch must love infinitely.¹⁵ In order to conform to the “Humanity” of God, she must suffer.¹⁶ Christ, who is both divine and human, who simultaneously loves and suffers, links Hadewijch and other humans to God. God loves infinitely, humans suffer in a finite world, and Christ performs both actions. In order for humans to love as infinitely as God, they must suffer with the spiritual strength of Christ.

3. Conclusion

Angela and Hadewijch teach readers that Love is simultaneously infinite and finite, united and separate, divine and human. In order for humans to Love, they must live these seeming contradictions, an action which one scholar of Angela calls “the doctrine of our duty to live Christ,” revealed through visions rather than through logical, academic, and theological reasons.¹⁷ The women mystics reveal that incomprehensibility does not indicate contradiction and nonexistence. Love, although incomprehensible, truly exists. They can trust in Love because they experience existence through Him, not because they can analyze and define Him. By performing the intellectual activity of contemplating their experiences of Love, Angela and Hadewijch indicate that the intellect is useful despite its limitations. They act as teachers of theological reasoning through their explanations of their belief that humans should exist through the existence of simultaneously infinite and finite Love. Only when Love is willing to experience limitation can it truly exist without limitation, as unconditionally as the Christ who was Love while he died.

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5. References

1. Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 32, 4, 36, 147. “Many theologians today . . . approach theological issues as if they were scientific problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be discerned and clarified. However, the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological *problems*, but the discernment of what a *mystery* of the faith is . . . theology by nature is not a problem solving enterprise, but a mystery discerning enterprise.” Weinandy identifies the twentieth-century mindset, as exemplified by Rudolph Moltmann’s belief that “only a God who suffers in solidarity with the innocent is worthy of the name God.” Weinandy explains that “many theologians argue that God’s impassibility [inability to suffer] cannot be compatible with his being a loving person who cares for and interacts with human beings throughout time and history.” Basically, a common contemporary argument contends that evil and suffering affect God, which deemphasizes his omnipotence and transcendence. Eventually, Weinandy summarizes arguments, popular for thousands of years, for human sin as the main cause of suffering and evil.
2. Angela of Foligno, *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 178.
2. *Ibid.*, 178.
3. *Ibid.*, 178.
4. *Ibid.*, 177.
5. *Ibid.*, 178.
6. *Ibid.*, 183.
7. *Ibid.*, 206.
8. Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 269.
9. *Ibid.*, 269.
10. *Ibid.*, 269.
11. Reference to *The Harper Collins Study Bible*.
12. Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 269.
13. *Ibid.*, 269.
14. Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 269.
15. *Ibid.*, 279-80.
16. *Ibid.*, 279.
17. *Ibid.*, 279.
18. Mother Columba Hart, “Introduction,” in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 10, 12, 24.