

## A View of 14th-Century Contemplation: Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*

S. G. FERNÁNDEZ-CORUGEDO

Universidad de Oviedo

### Introduction

The period of Medieval history which lies between the dissolution of the Order of the Templars (1312), and the end of the Great Schism (1417), is full of astonishing troubles. There are very few other times in the development of Western Europe which are so difficult to understand and to comprehend as the 14th century. We may find some comfort if we take into account that most probably the men and women of that age had at least as much of a headache themselves as we might have when dealing with their society. But it is not just social revolutions, or political struggle, or economic change, or plain war, or even the deep transformation of the world itself what seems to have caused the greatest stirring in minds and souls. We are rather to find in the 1300s. a spiritual distress which pervades all aspects of life, and in a certain sense, it provides one of the best ways for our better understanding of the period. Spiritual life is specially attractive as the blossoming of mysticism on the one hand, and of heresy on the other, are the predominant feelings in a somewhat complicated Christendom. The rôle of the Church under the scope of being *the* institution of the West, was first widely discussed, then attacked, and finally either rejected or reformed. And all this was done not only by the heretics in the grand style like Wycliff or Huss, but also by a quite largish number of people whose spiritual uneasiness gave way to heterodox thought. Of course, this phenomenon is not restricted to this particular century, but we are to assume that it was mainly thanks to the breakdown of the confidence of the common people in the Church, and many times it was her own behaviour which caused it, that later reformation was achieved in the next hundred and fifty years. However, these spiritual problems were balanced by the devotion

and asceticism of the many who undertook the tremendous task of adapting devotion, rules, and hierarchy to the new ways of thinking.

Spiritual people, moreover, belonged to all levels of society; they were not just those in holy orders. The monasteries and convents had ceased to be the redoubt of spirituality, and the secular clergy and the lay had started to claim their share in the building of a new mysticism. All over Europe the cultivation of an inner life instead of plain devotion or the following of the traditional liturgy and teachings of the Church, became a sort of fashion which opposed the unnatural lures of the fight between the religious and the secular powers, and those of the deprived against the powerful. This new sense of individual Christianity did not avoid tradition, but its followers aspired to make of religion an experience which might justify their lives.

Several places on the continent became the gathering sites of these men and women: the Rhine valley, the Netherlands, and Flanders being the principal places. But they could be found as well in Italy<sup>1</sup>, in Spain<sup>2</sup>, in France<sup>3</sup>, in England<sup>4</sup>,... almost anywhere. We cannot mention here all the new methods or congregations which followed these ideas, as they were spread all over Europe, and this paper is concerned with Walter Hilton, but we may say that there were two main directions in the orthodox Christian thought. Heretical procedures will not be considered here, although many of them are very attractive.

The Germans, and to some extent the Dutch, preferred deep thought, and thus they created the theory of mysticism. We may bring to mind the well-known names of Eckhart<sup>5</sup>, Seuse<sup>6</sup>, Tauler<sup>7</sup>, Van Ruysbroek<sup>8</sup>, etc. This theory was further developed and complemented in northern Italy<sup>9</sup>.

1 For example, writers such as G. Colombini, St. Catherine of Sienna, Francesca Romana, Katherine of Genoa, etc. Vid. their corresponding entries in the *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, Rome-Vatican City, 1948-1954. And specifically for St. Catherine, A. Grion's book: *Santa Caterina de Siena, dottrina e fonti*, Rome, 1953.

2 The names of Ramón Llull and of García Jiménez Cisneros may be the best known ones. A full reference can be found in J. M. de la Cruz Moliner: «Repertorio de autores españoles de espiritualidad», *Revista Española de Espiritualidad*, Madrid, 1955, pp. 53-70; & 1956, pp. 95-100, or in his book *Historia de la literatura mística española*, Burgos, 1961.

3 The Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, started an eclectic *via*, which was also followed by many other French authors such as R. Ciboule or P. d'Ailly. Vid. F. Rapp, *L'Eglise et la vie religieuse en Occident à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, 1973; or E. R. Labande & al., *Histoire Spirituelle de la France*, Paris, 1964.

4 The English mystics cover almost every possible approach to asceticism. Some are mere translators and compilers of continental works, but many others like Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, are absolutely original and form that current which is commonly known as the English tradition. Vid. D. Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, London, 1961; and W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the 14th Century*, Cambridge, 1955.

5 Vid. *Deutsche und lateinische Werke*, ed. J. Quint & J. Koch, Stuttgart, 1936-1939.

6 Heinrich Seuse is perhaps better known under his Latin name, Enricus Suso. However, it

The English and Flemish chose a more reserved attitude towards visions and the joys of mystical life. They concerned themselves with the method which could enable men and women to follow devotion and contemplation: they decided to manage the more practical consequences of religious experience. Therefore, the distinction between speculative mysticism and methodical devotion was to produce the finest works of pious literature until the arrival of the *Devotio Moderna*<sup>10</sup>, which blended and superseded most of these two ways of understanding the practice of religion.

The most important problem with speculation, so loved by the German Dominicans, was that it had been considered heretical —sometimes the ideas of one's enemies are filtered into one's own— and it took some time and some effort before they were approved and reconsidered. Speculation in mysticism had its martyrs early in the 14th century: Margerite Porete, the author of *Le Miroir des Simples*<sup>11</sup>, had been burnt in Paris in 1310. And indeed speculation led later on into true heresy. Our favourite example is Wycliff and the Lollard Movement in England. It also caused Occam's philosophy which found itself greatly suspected by the high Church.

Speculative mysticism was greatly influenced by the canonical doctrine of Albert the Great<sup>12</sup>, but also by the works attributed to St. Denis, which we know nowadays as the Pseudo-Dyonise. These latter had also a remarkable ascendancy over the devotional branch of mysticism, and we find them underlying many of the English writings, *The Cloud of Unknowing*<sup>13</sup> being the best example. All these related traditions crystallise in the *Wesenmystik*<sup>14</sup>,

---

is in his vernacular writings that his best doctrine on mysticism is to be found. Vid. his *Deutsche Schriften*, ed. K. Bihlmeyer, Frankfurt, 1961.

7 For a comprehensive view of Johann Tauler's ideas. vid. his *Die Predigten*, ed. F. Vetter, Berlin, 1960.

8 Also known as Van Ruusbroec, «The Admirable». Van Ruusbroec only wrote in Dutch, and although it has been claimed that he was a disciple of the German Dominicans, it is most probable that he had very little or no news at all about them, but that instead his thought developed in a parallel way; again a proof of the spiritual community of mystical thinkers. Vid. his *Werken*, ed. J. B. Poukens & al., Tielt, 1944-1948.

9 Saint Catherine of Sienna's *Dialogo*, ed. I. Taurisano, Rome, 1947, is a very good example of the exposition of the theory of mysticism.

10 The most important work of this devotional current is that of the Flemish School. Its most popular extant writing is nowadays Thomas Hammerken's —who is better known as Thomas à Kempis— *Imitatio Christi*, widely translated to all Western vernacular languages.

11 There is a 14th century English translation of this French original: *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ed. C. Kirchner, London, 1927, whereas no modern edition of the French work seems to have been published.

12 For Albertus Magnus —Albert the Great— vid. his *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Borgnet, Paris, 1890-1905.

13 *The Cloud of Unknowing* has been edited by Ph. Hodgson, Oxford, 1958. A modern translation with an excellent introduction is that of C. Wolters, Harmondsworth, 1978.

14 Vid. Ph. Dollinger, *La Mystique Rhénane*, Paris, 1963, and W. Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik*. Tübingen, 1970 [1st ed. 1962]).

the mystic of the being, which deals mostly with this idea: the soul can and must return to the divinity which had begotten it. The means of achieving this transcendent aim are the peculiarities of each author. We may add to the German writers previously mentioned, the English name of Julian of Norwich inasmuch as her *Revelations of Divine Love*<sup>15</sup>, are precisely inspired by God, and are not a result of the following of an ascetical method.

### **Methodic devotion: *The Scale of Perfection***

The other movement we have spoken of, Methodic Devotion, has produced in England its best works: Richard Rolle's writings<sup>16</sup>, *The Cloud...*, and those by Walter Hilton<sup>17</sup>. The devotional method is much more down to earth, and it is best exemplified by Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*. Even the very title indicates the method: a sort of ascension, of careful climbing up the everhigher steps which lead the pious soul towards perfection. By the way, we are to understand *perfection* as the mystical union of the being with God. And it must be borne in mind that the speculative tradition and the devotional aim at the same object, and that it is just a matter of procedure that allows us to separate their methods. Of course, this is an over-simplification, but over-simplifications prove sometimes to be useful.

In the German via, the spiritual union derives from a special grace granted by the divinity. The practice of pious works and the reinforcement of virtues are not placed in the first instances of the procedure, but all authors remind us that faith is not enough, that practice is also necessary. The result is spiritual marriage of the soul to God once the «night of love» is over.

---

15 Mother Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love* have also been rendered into Modern English by C. Wolters, Harmondsworth, 1966. The *Revelations*, as far as I have been able to collate, are the only major English work which can be directly linked to the German «Wesenmystik».

16 For Richard Rolle, vid. G. G. Perry's edition: *English Prose Treatises*, Oxford, 1920. For *The Fire of Love*, and other works of lesser length vid. C. Wolters edition (Harmondsworth, 1971).

17 We are exceedingly ill-informed about Walter Hilton's life, as we only are rather certain of his death in 1396. It is improbable, although not absolutely impossible, that he was a Carthusian, whereas critics are nowadays in favour of Hilton's possible office as an Augustinian canon. On the other hand, his works are much better known, as many have been studied and translated, although critical editions are still missing. Vid. *The Scale of Perfection*, translated by G. Sitwell, London, 1953, and by L. Sherley-Price, Harmondsworth, 1957; *Epistle to a devout man in temporal state*, ed. D. Jones, London, 1929; *The Song of Angels*, ed. G. G. Perry, Oxford, 1886, a work which had been previously ascribed to Richard Rolle: *Eight Chapters on Perfection*, ed. D. Jones, London, 1929; *Qui habitat ad Bonum est*, ed. D. Jones, London, 1929; *Benedictus*, ed. D. Jones, London, 1929; *The Goad of Love*, ed. C. Kirchberger, London, 1952. Hilton's Latin works are a forthcoming publication of Rev. J. Clark for the Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Salzburg.

In the English via the soul may reach perfection by means of the methodical practice of good works, virtues, and contemplation. It presupposes a graded effort in which grace has to be accounted for, but grace is to be present as a reward only once a determined degree of piety has been achieved. It can be present from the beginning of the excursion, but not necessarily, because it may be obtained through devotion. Of course, the final step of this scale is also the spiritual marriage.

This spiritual marriage has a lot to do with *contemplation*. We will discuss now in some detail Hilton's contemplative method as presented in *The Scale of Perfection*<sup>18</sup>.

«But thou shalte euer seke by grete besynes in prayer that thou myght come to the ghostly felynge of god, and that is that thou myght knowe the grete goodnes of hym, in hym selfe & in his creatures. For this is contemplacyon & that other is none»<sup>19</sup>.

---

18 There is no critical edition of *The Scale of Perfection* as far as I know. Professor S. S. Hussey is preparing one for the Early English Text Society, but in the meantime the text is not easily accessible as both modern renderings by Sitwell (1953) and Sherley-Price (1957) —*vid. supra*, note 17— are difficult to find presently. Therefore, all quotations from *The Scale of Perfection* in this paper refer to late 15th century and 16th century printed versions to be found in the British Library. The actual quotations are from Wynkyn de Worde's edition of 1525 [British Library 1.A17940(1)], as basic textual reading, but collated when necessary with de Worde's previous version printed in 1494 [British Library 1.B55165], and with Julian Notary's one of 1507 [British Library C.25.g.16]. None of them have pagination, and foliation, when any, is defective. Thus, quotations are referred to chapters of the work —as they usually cover the space of one page— as numbered in the text, although their Roman numbers have been converted into Arabic ones i.e., XV=15. There is also the question of the two parts into which *The Scale* is divided. As it is the First Part the one strictly devoted to contemplation, and there should be no doubt that it must have been written several years before the Second Part, which deals with the higher steps in ascetic practice, all references are to the chapters of the first part. Nevertheless, we also provide a reference to the foliation set in which the chapter is to be found. We have also to consider that the aims of both parts of *The Scale* are different. In the First Part, Hilton preaches to an anchoress who has started her new religious life recently, as Hilton specifically says:

«Ghostly syster in Jesu Chryst, I praye the that in the callynge whiche our lord hath called the to his seruyce, thou holde the payed & stande stedfastly therein, trauayling besyly with all the myghtes of the soule by the grace of Chryst Jesu, for to fulfyll in sothfastnes of good lyuyng the state whiche thou hast take in lykenes & in semyng: & as thou hast forsake the worlde as it were a deed man turned to our lorde bodyly in syght of men» (Chapter 1, fol. a.4. verso).

and thus there is a general didactic mood, whereas in the second part the practice of piety has already been established long ago, and meditation and reflection appear as the mainline of religious conduct.

As contemplation as explained by Hilton is our main concern and topic in this paper, the second part of *The Scale* is of little interest, and therefore it shall not be dealt with in these pages. All quotations refer to Part I.

19 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 13, fol. b. 2 verso. See also A. Nygren, *Eros et Agapé*, Paris, 1944-1952.

This is one of the definitions of contemplation in short as expressed by Hilton once he has already defined what are active and contemplative lives, and the mainlines in the contemplative method. We will come to these later, because something about contemplation ought to be said beforehand.

The Old Testament never mentions contemplation. This is a rather logical consequence of Hebrew mentality, in which God and his transcendency are felt in quite a different way from that of the Christian faith. Israel has always feared to see God's face. We might quote here a particular interesting passage from *Exodus*:

«And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live»<sup>20</sup>.

Nevertheless, the authors of the holy books have longed to see Him, although teophanies are scarce, and if any, they are always blurred and mysterious. The burning bush, or Moses's receiving the Law on Mount Sinai from a sort of cloud, are just examples. There is an overall «hunger of God» which is only quenched by His voice through revelation.

Christ's epiphany changed to a certain extent the vision of God inasmuch as Christ is a man, and therefore men can see Him. But we are also to remember the episode of the Transfiguration<sup>21</sup>, or that of Christ's Baptism<sup>22</sup>, to return to the divine mists. Christ has nevertheless made possible the development of the most important ideas of contemplation, because contemplation is the eager search for God and the ultimate achieving of spiritual marriage. It is the unyielding effort to see Him and be one with and in Him.

But contemplation is not merely a theological phenomenon; contemplation has a lot to do with psychology. There is a physical observation of things in everyday life, and from that actual experience there is a movement towards imagination and conceptual perception. In this inner world of the mind, contemplation is a very simple knowledge in which the observer pays special attention to a determined object. As a consequence either love or hate — another form of love in any case— arise. There are of course many degrees in the loving experience of man. A stone can be loved, or a chair, or a plant, etc. And then the understanding of the object of contemplation which was motivated first by curiosity, is complemented by the apparition of a new feeling: love. Love is very important whenever the object of contemplation is not a senseless object. Generally speaking, we are rather more attached to animals and people, even to plants, than to inanimate things. It may be just a question of proximity in evolution, though.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Exodus* 33: 20. Vid. *VV.* 17-23.

<sup>21</sup> Vid. *Matthew* 17: 1-9.

<sup>22</sup> Vid. *Matthew* 3: 16-17.

The more important and numerous the feelings are, the greater the attachment to the object which produces them. Whenever we deal with persons, either human or divine, the understanding of them, and the love for them, follows after a sense of communion which results from a sort of blend between the subject and the object of contemplation. Hilton expresses it thus:

«The knyttyng & the fastenyng of Jesu to mannes soule is by good wyl & greete desyre to hym, onely to haue hym & se hym in his blysse ghostly. The more that this desyre is, the faster is Jesu knytte to the soule»<sup>23</sup>.

This process of knowledge about the object of contemplation can be seen from at least two perspectives: as mere intuition, produced by the proximity of the object itself; or as a simplified understanding which is a product of study, reflection, and meditation. All these psychological processes appear whenever the object of contemplation is not a sensible one, but an abstract one. Then religious contemplation must be abstract contemplation, and also it must be linked to man's soul. This abstract contemplation is what we may call devotional prayer.

### **Prayer and contemplation in *The Scale***

By prayer I mean here communication with God, or at least the will of establishing it. This is best achieved by three very well known means to all Christian mystics: faith, hope, and charity. Faith because there must be an answer to the call made in communication, and there must be a belief in the other element with which one tries to establish it, as it is an abstract object. Hope because the soul must have the confidence of having payed attention to God and receiving His answer after the call. And charity because if communication is to be possible, love must be present, there must be some interest in it. Therefore prayer has multiple possibilities. If that communication is practised constantly and seriously, then it will become simpler and simpler, although never simplistic, until the moment in which it will be a sort of contemplation akin to the dealing with sensible objects. And the response to the call made by the soul is God's grace. Then communication works:

«Prayer is profytable & spedefull to vse for to gete clenness of herte by destroyinge of synne and resceyuyng of vertues, not that thou sholdest by thy prayer make our lorde knowe what thou desyrest, for he knoweth well ynough what the nedeth, but for to make the able

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 12, fol. b.2 verso.

and redy by thy prayer that thou myght receyue as a clene vessel the grace that our lord wyll frely gyue to the, for the grace may not be felte tyll thou be assayed and puryfyed by the for[c]e of desyre in deuote prayer. For though it be so that prayer is not the cause for whiche our lorde gyueth grace, neuertheles it is a waye by the whiche grace frely gyuen cometh to a soule»<sup>24</sup>.

This attitude we commented on has at least four basic elements:

- a) A religious intention.
- b) Prayer, being liturgical or meditative.
- c) Perseverance in behaviour.
- d) Practice in all virtues, especially that of Christian charity<sup>25</sup>.

After these have been fulfilled, serenity and spiritual balance are acquired. The soul reaches the *apatheia*, the state of abandon, and then it is prepared for the next step. But God has again the last word in this communication process, because we are to suppose that the soul of the faithful has undergone the daily practice of the aforesaid requirements, and nevertheless if grace is not received, all has been in vain. Grace, let us remember, is freely given by God; it cannot be obtained without His will.

All this leads to one of the major problems of contemplation: whether it is an active occupation, i.e., it is reached after long practice; or whether it is infused in the soul. Some classical mystic writers have discussed widely (and sometimes wildly) this problem<sup>26</sup>, but the distinction itself seems to be a pseudo-problem, as *both* possibilities, the active and the infused, must be inspired by God as it is His call combining man's response to it that provokes such an experience:

«I saye but that a man may by the gyfte of god haue by tymes a tastynge & a glemerynge of lyfe contemplatye in the beginnyng. But the sadde felynge of it shall he not haue for Chryst is the dore... [...] ...no man may come to contemplacyon of the godhede but he be fyrst reformed by fulnes of mekenes and charite to the lykenes of Jesu in his manhode»<sup>27</sup>.

To follow «Jesu in his manhode», prayer and contemplation are the primary efforts in Christian life, because religion, if lived with an inner feeling, either in a community or in solitude, leads to the exercise of the theological life, and this is what we may call contemplation. Hilton, again, has expressed it with greater accuracy:

24 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 24, fol. c. 8 recto.

25 Vid. B. Jiménez, *Teología de la Mística*, Madrid, 1963.

26 Vid. for instance, Richard of St. Victor, *Beniamin Maior*; Denys Rijkel, *De Fonte Lucis*; St. John of the Cross, *Subida al Monte Carmelo*; or St. Theresa, *El Castillo Interior, o Las Moradas*.

27 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 92, fol. k.4 verso-k.5 recto.



«Contemplatyfe lyfe lyeth in perfyte loue & cherite feled inwardly by ghostly vertues & by sothfast knowinge & syght of god & ghostly thynges»<sup>28</sup>.

From the early contemplation of the object through worldly eyes, we arrive at that inner contemplation of the spiritual object which will become the sole noble aspiration and occupation of the mystic soul: it is charity —*charitas*— expressed in its ultimate mode, *God*. But contemplation is not the end of worldly life, not at all, because charity is a way to reach perfection, and through charity towards God —which is a sort of *eros*, or love for one object— charity towards the «even Christians», the *agapé* —or love for the community— is to be achieved. There is a tendency to associate the first kind of charity with the contemplative life, and the second kind with the active life. Again we must bear in mind that these two concepts are but different aspects of the same spiritual feeling, and that both of them are necessary. It is a mere question of focus in their manifestations which may cause the different appreciations of the observer.

The Church approved from its earliest stages in Western History of this kind of life which aims at finding the love of God, and ever since called it contemplative life. It is a special call, as defined by the common doctrine, which certain Christians receive in order to carry on with three very important missions in the social activity of the religious life of the community:

- 1) The contemplative person worships and praises God in the name of the whole congregation.
- 2) The praying, which is dedicated to asking for the perfection of the apostolic mission of the Church.
- 3) The contemplator is a witness of God's call among men.

According to these principles, contemplation is not a selfish and strictly personal attitude. Quite on the other hand, it is a token of the love of God, of that singular charity to which the members of the Church must aim. As a result, the personal or individualistic way towards perfection is mediated by the social needs of contemplation, thus implying that the selfish *eros* is transformed into the communal *agapé*<sup>29</sup>, a conjunction of the manifestations of Christian love. Once more this universal extension of charity is manifested in *The Scale*:

«This is my byddyngge, that ye loue togyder as I loued you, for in that shall men knowe you for my dyscyples. Not for ye werke myracles, or cast out deuylles, or preche or teche, but yf echone of you loue other in charite, and yf thou wylte be lyke to hym, haue mekenes and

28 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 3, fol. a.5 recto-verso.

29 Vid. A. Nygren, *Éros et Agapé*, Paris, 1944-1952.

charite; that charite is thou knowest well: loue thyne euen chrysten as thyselfe»<sup>30</sup>.

### Contemplative method in *The Scale*

Hilton's contemplative method is set out in three main steps which intertwine in some intermediate by-ways. He establishes the first part of contemplation thus:

[it] «...lyeth in the knowynge of god & ghostly thynges gotten by reason, by techynge of man, & by study in holy wryte without ghostly affecyon & inly fauour feled by the specyall gyfte of the holy ghost»<sup>31</sup>.

Therefore this first step is a sort of introduction to a better understanding of God and His work. But it lacks the inner feeling which must be present in order to have a true spiritual development. And the inner feeling must be charity. On the other hand, Hilton admonishes his readers against the natural pride and vainglory which may arise from this pious study of Christ as a model. The devotee should:

«...turn the vnsauery knowledge into wysdome & the colde naked reason in to ghostly lyght & brennyng loue by the gyfte of the holy ghost»<sup>32</sup>.

The second part of contemplation is subdivided into two steps or degrees of observance. Once knowledge and understanding have been obtained in the first part, then love itself must enter the scene:

«The seconde parte of contemplacyon lyeth pryncypally in the affecyon without lyght or understandyng of ghostly thynges... [...] ...This felynge may not be had without grete grace & who so hath it for the tyme he is in charite, whiche charite may not be lost ne lessed though the feruour of it passe awaye, but by a deedly synne, & that is comfortable»<sup>33</sup>.

This «affecyon» can be felt in two ways, and thus the establishing of two degrees in this second part is necessary. A lower degree is just the work of

30 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 51, fol. f.4 recto.

31 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 4, fol. a.5 verso.

32 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 4, fol. a.5 recto.

33 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 5, fol. a.5 recto-verso.

grace in men whenever their active life allows communication with God. However, it is an intermittent communication, as His grace comes and goes. The reason why the line is cut off from time to time, or why it is even dead, is explained by Hilton through the existence of charity, «charite», which implies that God's free concession of His grace to the faithful, is not always complemented by the latter's efforts. The relapse of the Christian into worldly affairs may cause temporary estrangement from God, and «deedly synne» the final and definitive dead line in the communication process.

The higher degree of this second affective step seems to be the first one specially concerned with what we usually identify with religious life. This step starts the true ascent towards the fulfilment of contemplation, as it already presupposed a great spiritual peace and permanent prayer and reflection on Christ and his life and passion. The underlying result is having established a permanent communication. Accordingly, the third part of contemplation is reached by the intertwining of knowledge —the first step— and of love —the second step—:

«The thyrd parte of contemplacyon the whiche is perfyte, as ye may here, lyeth bothe in cognicyon & in affeccyon ... [...]. And that is whan a mannes soule fyrst is reformed by fulhede of vertues to the ymage of Jesu»<sup>34</sup>.

This is indeed contemplation, as its end is the full union with God and the conforming of the human soul to God's nature and essence. We may remember that this is to be obtained in the bliss of heaven by all those who after death receive that everlasting gift; but contemplation can be the means to start it in this world of human affairs. The beginning of eternal contemplation may start in this worldly life, but its perfection is to be reserved for the life to come. Some may get a hint of it if they follow the contemplative method, and that is what Hilton's *The Scale* leads to: to propose a method of contemplation. Once God and the soul have become one, spiritual marriage, the goal of the mystic, has taken place. But contemplation does not limit its objectives to the mere union, because it also intends to exploit that marriage in order to make it like a fire of love. A fire of love which may start as soon as devotion overcomes all other feelings:

«...it may be called brennyng loue in deuocyon, and this brennyng loue in contemplacyon that is lower, this is the hyer; that is swetter to the bodyly felyng this inwardly felyng better to the ghostly felyng, for it is more inwarde, more worthy, more ghostly, more wonderfull»<sup>35</sup>.

34 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 8, fol. a.7 verso.

35 *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 9, fol. a.8 recto.

And all this is further explained later on:

«Al men that speke of the fyre of loue knowe not well what it is, for what it is I can not tell the. But this I may tell the, that it is neyther bodyly ne bodyly feled. A soule may fele it in prayere & in deuocyon, whiche soule is in the body, but he feleth it not with no bodyly wytte. [...] Neuertheles the fyre of loue is not bodyly, for it is onely in the ghostly desyre of the soule, this is no doubtte to ne man or woman that feleth deuocyon. But some be symple & wene bycause it is called fyre that it sholde be hote as bodyly fyre is, & for thy i saye that I haue sayd»<sup>36</sup>.

This sublimation of *charitas* then overcomes all other possible intentions. There seems to be an overpowering sense of transcendent love in the contemplative method.

## Conclusion

Finally, what I consider to be the most important doctrinal innovation of Hilton's mysticism is the democratic possibilities of devotion. This may be closely linked to some 14th century political theories as for example those expressed by Wycliff, among others<sup>37</sup>. Hilton proposes for the first time, as far as I know, that the soul's holiness, or rather, that the possibility of achieving holiness is never conditioned or handicapped by place, time, or wordly circumstances such as social class or status. *All* Christians may have it, although there is an important difference in the means and in the method to reach that aim:

«Contemplacyon god gyueth where that he wyll to lerned & to lewde, to lewde, to men & to women, occupyed, in prelacy, and to solytary also. But it is specyall not comyn, & also though a man whiche all his lyfe is actife haue the gyfte of it by a speciall grace, neuertheles the fulnes of it by a speciall grace, neuertheles the fulnes of it may no man haue, but he be solitary & in lyfe contemplatife»<sup>38</sup>.

Then, whereas all men and women may reach contemplation through God's special grace, only those who practise an ascetical method are able to reach the sight of bliss and be ravished in the fire of love through spiritual life.

<sup>36</sup> *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 26, fol. c.7 verso.

<sup>37</sup> Vid. G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1967, vol. II, pp. 494-605. A forthcoming paper, «Political Theory in Walter Hilton», by the author, deals with the relationship between theology and politics in Hilton and Wycliff.

<sup>38</sup> *The Scale of Perfection*, chapter 9, fol. a.8 verso.

The exaltation of anchoretic life, the man «solitary & in lyfe contemplatyfe», is previously contested by the orthodox claim that God's grace may be granted to anybody, but that the personal effort required to follow the devotional method, the triumph of man's unrestrained thirst in spiritual matters, has a lot to do with the continuous practice of virtue. Therefore, only by the conjunction of both *viae*, that of the spiritual world and that of the sensorial world, contemplation—or a flexible political system—may be perfect, and God's praise will be the prevailing emotion in the soul. Only by the marriage of both aspects of charity the Christian climbs the ever sweeter steps of the scale that leads him to perfection. Another great English mystic writer also living in the same 14th century, Richard Rolle of Hampole, expressed it thus:

«...þan may i say þat contemplacion es a wonderful joy of godes luf, þe whilk joy es lovyng of god þat may noght be talde. And þat wonderful lovyng es in þe saule, and for abundance of joy and swettenes it ascendes intil þe mouth, swa þat þe hert and the tongue accordes in ane, and body and sawle joyes in god lyvand»<sup>39</sup>.

No better words might have expressed such a delight in contemplation.

---

39 Richard Rolle, *De Forma Vitae*, Cambridge University Library Ms. Dd. LXIV, fol. 12.