ETHICAL MYSTICISM: WALTER HILTON AND THE SCALE OF PERFECTION

ELLEN M. ROSS

INTRODUCTION

In introducing readers to the late fourteenth-century English spiritual guide and mystic Walter Hilton this essay explores a crucial dynamic within medieval mysticism: a focus on ethical imitation of Jesus Christ as the model for religious transformation and as the means for reformation of human persons' nature as image-bearers of the Divine.

I call attention to four related issues in considering the configuration of ethical mysticism in Walter Hilton. First, the nature of ethical mysticism as a type of spirituality characterized by imitation of the ethical spirit of Christ's life. Second, the correlation between an ethical imitation of Christ and humans' constitution as images of God. Third, a specific aspect of the form this ethical mysticism takes, namely, an embodied spirituality with an ordered love of neighbor at its heart. And fourth, the overarching goal of ethical mysticism, a moral or operational union with God. As will become clear as we proceed, these four issues are interrelated and united in Hilton's thought as crucial components of the process by which human persons seek experiential understanding of a God who is Love, and fulfillment of their nature as images of this God.

BACKGROUND

We have little background information about Walter Hilton. Various analyses of his language indicate that he was from the North of England; we know nothing certain, however, about his place of origin or even his birthdate. Some sources suggest that he was trained in England in canon law; others suggest that he studied theology in Paris. Some of Hilton's writings imply that prior to joining the Augustinian canons he may have spent some time as a solitary; Harley 2397 calls him "maister watir hiltone ermyte." He seems to have joined the Augustinian canons late in life after 375, and to have spent the rest of his life as a canon at Thurgarton Priory, near Southwell in Nottinghamshire, in England. His date of death is given variously as either 1395 or 1396.

At the time he wrote his major work, The Scale of Perfection, Hilton was a member of the Augustinian canons. Although most English Augustinian houses were small, the communities were widespread with about 206 houses by the late thirteenth century and over 300 houses in the fourteenth century. They varied in type; some priories leaned toward the active life, some
toward the contemplative, and some emphasized both. Walter Hilton was an Augustinian canon who emphasized the contemplative life. Thurgarton Priory, founded in 1119–1139, was a prosperous house with extensive holdings. And the fact that the prior at Thurgarton was assigned to be a judge of the Lollard heretics in 1388 would seem to suggest that Thurgarton was a priory actively involved in at least the local church movements of its time.

Hilton’s focus on the contemplative life was not new to the canons as this emphasis had been a part of the Augustinian canons’ tradition since its earliest days. Often Augustinian canons lived in community, and were actively involved in the life of the society outside their immediate community walls. The nature of Hilton’s works itself is evidence of this dual focus, a focus both on the life of the religious community and on ministry to a broader community. The Scale of Perfection, for example, or at least the first of its two books, is written to an anchoress, a recluse who had devoted her life to contemplation. She was not a member of Hilton’s own community. A second work, On the Mixed Life, is written to a worldly Lord who was considering whether he should enter a religious order or remain in the world pursuing the active life. Thus, Hilton’s audience extended far beyond his immediate companions among the Augustinian canons.

The focus of our consideration here is Hilton’s major work, The Scale of Perfection, a spiritual guide that explores the human person’s relationship to God. Although at the outset the first of the two books is explicitly addressed to the anchoress, Hilton later extends his audience to “stir you or any other man or woman who has taken on the contemplative state of life.” The second book, which has no direct addressee, could have been written for the anchoress, although analysis of the subject matter suggests that Hilton intended a larger audience and not one necessarily committed to the reclusive life.

The Scale addresses readers at all levels of the spiritual journey to God. It starts out at the earliest stages of the journey, when believers first become aware of themselves as sinners and when they first recognize the possibilities for their relationship to God. And it describes the most advance stages possible in this life, stages at which “Jesus, [their] friend” reveals to them the deeper and spiritual meaning of Scripture, stages at which they recognize “...the length and endless being of God, the breadth of the wonderful charity and goodness of God, the height of God’s almighty majesty, and the bottomless depth of God’s wisdom.”

I. ETHICAL MYSTICISM: MYSTICISM AND ETHICAL IMITATION OF CHRIST

Great debate surrounds the meaning of mysticism. For our purposes here it is not necessary to engage the debate extensively but rather to point
out that Christian mystics like Walter Hilton are united in maintaining that all believers have the potential to experience the Church's teaching that God is love. For mystics like Walter Hilton, mysticism can be aptly understood as a life-long journey — a process of faith seeking understanding that is oriented toward an experiential knowledge of the Divine.15

Although the process may involve momentary ecstatic experiences, the goal of this process is not any one or another particular or momentary experience: it does not seek frequent visions or ecstatic experiences. In Hilton's schema mystics can pursue the mystical life quite successfully without ever experiencing any phenomena such as visions or voices. Hilton, in fact, cautions his readers against putting much stock in such experiences, and he provides criteria to sort out the experiences of God from the experiences of the devil.

If it so happens that you see any light or brightness with the eyes of your body or with your imagination ...or if you hear any kind of wonderful melody or sound with your physical ears, or taste in your mouth any sudden sweet taste which is other than natural, or feel heat in your breast like a fire ...if the experience does not draw your heart away from spiritual occupation but makes it more devout, more fervent in prayer, and wiser in thinking spiritual thoughts, and though it astonishes you when it first begins, nevertheless turns and quickens your heart to a greater desire for virtues, increases your love for God and your fellow-Christians, and makes you smaller in your own estimation — by these signs you can tell that the experience is from God.16

What he says can be identified with Augustine's rule of charity: believers can trust such extraordinary experiences rooted in the senses if they promote love; anything which does not promote charity cannot be from God. Moreover, even if they do promote charity, they are only secondary when compared with the spiritual knowing and loving of God which is not finally dependent upon the senses.17

While the mystical process is intensely personal and specific to individuals' spiritual quests, it is neither restricted to the educated elite nor anti-institutional.18 The way of life Hilton describes is not set over and against the church as a whole, nor does it oppose the church's theological and doctrinal formulations. Quite the contrary, in fact, it positively confirms what can be known through official church sources — just as virtue confirms doctrinal and ecclesial themes in a concrete and personal manner.
And be well assured that the same essential truths about the blessed Trinity that these holy doctors, inspired through grace, have written about in their books, a pure soul may see and know through the same light of grace.\textsuperscript{19}

Through the mystical process believers come to experience, then, what at first they know by faith alone. Using Augustinian and Anselmian parlance, Hilton conceives of the Christian life as a transformative process of faith seeking understanding, or faith seeking experience.\textsuperscript{20} The Augustinian claim of the precedence of belief over understanding in the initial stages of growth in relationship to God is developed in Hilton's Scale where the soul's mystical journey to God is explicitly identified with the process of coming to understand what is at first believed by faith.\textsuperscript{21} The Augustinian theme pursued by Hilton is clearly expressed in Anselm (an important source for Hilton's Augustinianism) where it is clear that what is being talked about is experiential understanding.

For he who does not believe, will not experience; and he who has not experienced will not know. For as much as experience surpasses hearing about a thing, so the science of one who has experience surpasses the knowledge of one who only hears [emphasis mine].\textsuperscript{22}

Hilton draws directly on Augustine's formulation in The Confessions: "believe without spiritual experience...and if [we] should first believe it, [we] will later experience through grace and understand that it is true...Belief goes first and understanding follows after it."\textsuperscript{23} Belief precedes and understanding follows. The mystical way is the way of pursuing experiential understanding of what is already known by faith.

IMITATION OF CHRIST

Within Christianity one of the key means by which believers progress from faith in the God of love to experiencing this God is by way of imitation of Christ. The practice within Christian mysticism of centering on identification with Jesus Christ exemplifies how "religion specific" much mysticism is. It bears out the scholar of mysticism Gershom Scholem's observation that mystics express and name their experiences by drawing on the images and language of the traditions of which they are a part: "I have often marveled at how lightly the psychologists of mysticism take the fact — and this is a social fact — that the mystics on their way encounter only figures from their own tradition. The Buddhist mystic does not encounter Christ nor does the Christian mystic encounter one of the Buddhas. The
Jewish Kabbalist encounters neither of them, but on the threshold of mystical revelation he encounters the Prophet Elijah, a figure of tremendous social importance in Jewish tradition.24 The figure of Jesus Christ stands at the center of Christianity and Christian history has indicated a great many ways to imitate Christ, from the martyrs' imitation of Jesus Christ's death on behalf of humanity, to the early monastic tradition's imitation of Christ's struggles with Satan in the desert. Ewert Cousins suggests that a further form of imitation is "mysticism of the historical event" as exemplified by the thirteenth-century St. Francis of Assisi.25 This tradition is characterized by its imaginative reenactment of literal events of Christ's life and emerges at a time characterized by a great deal of attention in Christian art, theology, and literature to the historical person of Jesus Christ. So, for example, the mendicant lifestyle of St. Francis recalled and imitated the itinerant life of the historical Jesus Christ. Remembering, and in some sense reliving, the events of Christ's life evoked in believers an experiential understanding of the Person and Work of Christ and led believers beyond the physical, historical Jesus to perceive the God of love revealed and present in Christ.

There are a variety of forms of mysticism associated with the historical events of Christ's life. While some mystics of the historical event, like Francis of Assisi, focus generally on the events of Christ's life; others, like Julian of Norwich (d. c. 1416) and Margery Kempe (d. 1438), focus even more specifically and systematically on the events of Christ's suffering as the way to know and love God. But, as Cousins rightly points out, this mysticism is unified by its focus on the moral values reflected in the events of Christ's life. (As Cousins also notes, this focus on the moral cannot be separated from the further meanings of the events of Christ's life; so, for example, Hilton, like many other mystics, correlates a progressive understanding of the meanings of Scripture — literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical — with the progress of the mystical journey.26) However, for many mystics, as also with Hilton, it is the "ethical" nature of mysticism that is "concerned with virtues"27 which takes center stage. While Cousins perceives this, he does not develop an analysis of this aspect of late medieval mysticism of the historical event. In this contribution to the typologizing of mysticism I will develop an analysis of this feature of mysticism through a discussion of Walter Hilton. In texts like Walter Hilton's Scale of Perfection a clearly-defined way to imitate Christ emerges: in imitation of the way of Christ in the world, that is, an imitation of the ethical activities and attitudes of Christ in his earthly ministry becomes the most important way for experiencing the Divine and for mystics to link themselves as closely as possible to the Divine.

Walter Hilton differs from other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English mystics like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe because for him
and mystics like him it is not the literal imaginative reenactment of the particular events of Christ's life that are the central starting points in leading the believer to understand first the humanity and subsequently the divinity of Jesus Christ. The particular events of Christ's life continue to be significant, but now the recollection and reenactment of the spirit which underlay and gave rise to these events is critical. Specifically, Hilton seeks to convey and communicate the attitudes which shaped Christ's life; he seeks to cultivate a Christ-identified love in his readers, a goal he attains in the manner of other "mystics of the historical event," by frequently reminding his audience of the humanity of Jesus Christ. In particular, Hilton specifically, and ethical mystics generally, highlight those features of Christ's life which illuminate the motive of love in his life, and the revelation of a loving and merciful God.

Ethical mysticism is characterized by its focus on the theme of love as the key aspect of the process by which mystics seek union with God. As Christians become more filled with and motivated by love they grow as images of Christ and, consequently, they grow as images of God. Progress in the mystical journey is measured according to the depth to which believers are motivated by love, or, as Hilton would describe it, by the extent to which their actions reflect love. And, as will become clear, this happens to the degree that their wills are conformed to God's will. Ethical mystics like Hilton are less interested in describing the metaphysical changes engendered by the increase of love within believers; rather, their focus is on the moral or ethical implications of union with Christ.

II. CONTEXT OF ETHICAL MYSTICISM: HUMAN PERSONS AS IMAGES OF GOD

Imitation of Christ emerges within a general understanding of the central idea in Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*: the human person's creation and existence as an "image of God." This scripture-based concept of the human person as image-bearer of the Divine (Gen. 1:26) provides the theological keystone in Hilton's writings and especially in the *Scale*. But while this concept for Hilton guides and directs all aspects of humans' relationships to the Divine, Hilton's concern, as we will see, is not so much with the metaphysical character of human persons' constitution as images of God (*pace* Scotus Eriugena) as it is with the moral and operational implications of human persons' existence as image-bearers. That is, he explores the moral and volitional implications of image-bearing rather than the philosophical foundations of the *imago Dei* idea in terms of fundamental theological anthropology.

The *Scale of Perfection* details a theologically-grounded description of the person's journey toward God. Hilton describes the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ insofar as they are the foundation-stones in the process of reforming humanity to God's image. "This Passion of
Our Lord and this precious death is the ground of all the reforming in man's soul. Without it, man's soul could never have been reformed to His likeness, nor come to the bliss of heaven. Christ's work is the instrument by which it once again becomes possible for persons to be reformed to God's image. Christ's vindication of sin effects the defeat of what had hindered movement toward God, restoring the possibility of cultivating the image by enabling humans to cooperate with the reformation process as it is offered to them.

Not only is Hilton's understanding of the incarnation described in conjunction with the imago Dei, but also Christ's ongoing interaction with humanity is described with reference to the image theme. Christ's work through grace is directed toward restoring the image: "He [Our Lord] will break down this false image of love in yourself — not all at once, but little by little, until you are somewhat reformed to His likeness." Grace's action upon believers, and cooperation with them, is described in terms of its function to restore the image: "[I]his Love is nothing else but Jesus Himself, Who, for love, does all this in man's soul and reforms it in experience to His image." Restoration of the image is humanity's highest goal: Hilton calls humans to set before themselves the goal of having their souls reformed "as a shadow of the image of the Trinity."

The "image" concept describes both a capacity and a state of being. First, it is a capacity: that about persons which makes it possible for them to move toward God. The image was "disfigured" and "misshapen" as a result of the fall: "Exiled it was cast out from the heritage of heaven.... It would never have emerged from that prison and come again to its heavenly heritage unless it were reformed to its original shape and first likeness." Hilton explains that although the original state of the image was damaged in the fall, now, stirred by initiating grace, believers are once again able to nourish the image within themselves. "[W]e should covet nothing and seek nothing but how [we] can be reformed to God's likeness." This is the logic of Hilton's anthropology: by virtue of being images of God humans are offered the heritage of heaven, but it is only insofar as they are images of God that they are capable of receiving this heritage. Specifically, then, the image of God describes humanity's capacity for knowing and loving God.

Second, the image of God theme refers to an actual state of being; it indicates that on some level humans are always already reflections of God. Persons are already, by their very nature and in their present state, images of God. Once they increase their love and knowledge of God and reform in faith, and eventually, in faith and experience, the image grows clearer and believers become better images of God.

But how can persons be said to be like God or more or less like God? The answer is that humans are like God insofar as they participate in God. Hilton presumes Augustine's explanation of how the image is fulfilled: "it
Ethical Mysticism: Walter Hilton and the Scale of Perfection

[the principal part of the human mind] is [God's] image by the very fact that it...can be a partaker of God [particeps Dei]."³⁷ Loss of participation impairs the image while growth in participation fulfills the image. For Augustine the order of being is determined by degrees of participation in God; all created things are what they are insofar as they participate in God's divine ideas.³⁸ "For since God is Supreme Essentia, that is, since he is in the highest sense and is therefore immutable; [so] he gave esse to the things which he created out of nothing, but not esse in the highest sense as he is; and to some he gave more esse, and to others less; and thus ordered [these] natures in grades of being."³⁹ The Logos is the primary Likeness of God and insofar as persons participate in the Likeness they can become like God. "But if all things are what they are because they resemble something else, then there must be a Resemblance and by participating in it all like things are alike."⁴⁰ Christ is the Imago of God; humanity is created ad imaginem Dei.⁴¹

Humanity's participation in rationality shows that humans have been created in God's image. The more fully persons participate in wisdom or intelligere, the more fully they are like God.⁴²

[For him that little spark of reason, in which he has been made to the image of God has not been entirely extinguished.... And it is he who gave to the human soul a mind...about to be aroused and exercised through the increase of age, by which it is capable of knowledge and doctrine, and fit to perceive truth and love good [emphasis mine].]⁴³

Hilton does not develop the concept of participation as fully as Augustine had, but it is the crucial theme and assumption lying behind his claims that the image can be restored because it functions to explain how persons are presently like God and how they can become more like God.

For Walter Hilton, drawing upon Augustine, human's creation in God's image describes humans' present state which is the basis for affirmation of the dignity and grandeur of the human person; and it also describes possible future states which is the basis for confidence in the potential reformation of the human person. The concepts of "imitation of Christ" and "image of God" are related insofar as growth as an image of God comes about in part by imitation of Christ, the primary image of God: as believers imitate Christ they become more like him.⁴⁴ Furthermore, as will become clear in sections three and four, the constitution of human persons as images of God implies a relationship of love not only to God, but also to neighbors, and the status and potential of human beings as images of God is most fully realized through
conformity of the human will to Christ's will. These four convictions may be said to form the essential characteristics of the moral or operational understanding of the medieval Augustinian *imago Dei* tradition as exemplified by Walter Hilton.

III. IMAGE OF SIN AND IMAGE OF JESUS: ETHICS AND VIRTUE

Hilton incorporates the imitation of Christ systematically into his work. Picking up on the Cistercian development of the imitation of Christ as a way to love of Christ, Hilton extensively elaborates on the process by which humans defeat the image of sin, the "false, misruled love" of the self, constituted by vices, and are conformed to the image of Jesus the paradigmatic human person, by developing virtues. As believers are restored to the image of Jesus the human person by living virtuously, they move beyond a physical love of Jesus and are readied to love Jesus spiritually. They move from a flesh-governed love of the world to a spiritual love of the world, a love which emerges from viewing the world from the perspective of its relationship to the Divine.

The contrast between the image of sin constituted by vices and the image of Jesus the human constituted by virtues forms a key part of the framework of the *Scale of Perfection*. In traditional Augustinian fashion Hilton names two powers of the soul: the first is sensuality, which is experienced through the five senses, and is properly subject to the second power of the soul, reason, which can itself be further subdivided into superior and inferior reason (with inferior reason, as the name suggests, being properly subordinated to superior reason). Inferior reason is charged with the task of knowing and governing earthly things and functions to rule sensuality. When the chain of command weakens and the link to superior reason fails, sensuality, now improperly governed, becomes the image of sin. The image of sin, or "great chaos," is a "false, misruled love" of the self. Hilton describes in morbid tones this false image as it becomes visible through introspection:

> What you will find is the dark and painful image of your own soul which has neither light, nor knowledge, nor feeling of love nor delight. If you examine this image carefully, you will see that it is entirely wrapped up in the black, stinking clothes of sin — pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lechery.

He analyzes the image of sin as a dark cloak covering the natural beauty of the soul made in God's image. Drawing upon scriptural motifs, he even sketches a word picture of the human-like image constructed of vices.
This, then, is an ugly image to look at.... The head is pride, for pride is the first and principal sin... the back and rear part of the sin is greed.... The breast of the image, where the heart is, is envy.... The arms of the image are wrath, inasmuch as a man avenges himself in his wrath through his arms ... The belly of this image is gluttony ... The members of this image are lechery.... The feet of this image are sloth.49

The transformation from the image of sin to the image of Jesus happens slowly, over time, through the grace of Christ and the diligence of the human person.

The process of cultivating virtues correlates with the process of conforming to the image of Jesus. Believers are conformed to the image of Jesus the paradigmatic human person (or “Jesus the man,” as Hilton calls him) when they develop virtues and particularly the virtues of meekness and charity. As the image of Jesus the human person constituted by virtues is restored believers defeat the image of sin, the false, misruled love of the self, constituted by vices.50 Hilton’s parallelism is clear: to each vice constitutive of the image of sin there is juxtaposed a virtue constitutive of the image of Jesus.51 Pride is replaced by meekness; wrath and envy by love and charity; greed by poverty of spirit; sloth by a readiness to perform good deeds; and gluttony and lechery by sobriety and chastity.

The stage of pursuing virtues involves a transformation from the intellectual pursuit of virtue (“because it is the ‘law’”) to its affective pursuit. The second metamorphosis, brought about by grace and sustained effort, stimulates the dynamic process of affection (or love). It is at this juncture that the importance of the twin virtues charity and humility emerges: meekness leads believers to recognize that alone they are nothing because they are created by, sustained by, and oriented toward God, and love strengthens their perception of the God-orientedness of human nature. Believers love the one who creates, sustains, and guides them; in saying “I covet nothing but One, and that is Jesus,” love of Jesus fills the emptiness left by the retreat of stark self-centeredness.52

The heart of The Scale of Perfection appears where Hilton pursues the question of how believers move from knowledge of God to love of God or from faith alone to faith and experience. Intellectual knowledge alone is not enough for the way of life Hilton describes. Believers can know what God expects of them; they can know the law, but they are called to progress further. This movement to stage two can happen, Hilton says, when the virtues have been transformed into affection: “that happens when [believers] love[virtue because it is good in itself].”53 Finally, a third stage in the process of spiritual transformation is indicated by Hilton’s distinction
between the image of Jesus where the focus is on Jesus’ humanity, and the image of Jesus where the focus is on Jesus as God. In those cases where Hilton suggests an identification between, on the one hand, the image of Jesus, and, on the other, the possession of virtues, he is referring to the image of “Jesus the man,” the image of Jesus as the paradigmatic human being. For example, when he claims “the image of Jesus is made from virtues — meekness, perfect love and charity,”^54 this must be understood in the context of his later comments that

[y]ou will be shaped again in the image of Jesus the man through meekness and charity. Then you will be fully shaped to this same image of Jesus as God...through contemplation, while you are here in this life and through the fullness of essential truth when you have come to the bliss of heaven.^55

Hilton’s distinction between the image of Jesus where the focus is on Jesus’ humanity, and the image of Jesus where the focus is on Jesus as God highlights Christ’s crucial dual role in the pursuit of Christian perfection, first seeking to draw Christians to love Jesus Christ’s humanity, and then raising believers to a spiritual love. This indicates that the events of Jesus Christ’s life are important for Hilton insofar as they propel human persons beyond the immediate physical reality of the world to the spiritual meaning beyond it. This awakening to the spiritual realm and recognition of Jesus Christ as human and divine, leads persons not to an abandonment of the physical world, but rather to a spiritual this-worldly reorientation in relationship to it.

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR
The significance and nature of love are crucial for understanding the process of image restoration and for assessing the social implications of the successive stages of knowing and loving Christ. Cultivating a spiritual understanding and love of Christ leads not to the mystic’s distancing herself or himself from the world, but rather leads to a deepening involvement with the world since the love that Hilton encourages refers not only to love of God, but also to love of neighbor: “charity consists in nothing else but a man’s loving God and loving his fellow Christians as he loves himself.”^56 Characterizations of mysticism as pertaining almost exclusively to private spiritual life with little or no concern for involvement with individuals in the broader religious community or the wider culture overlook the fundamental significance of involvement with “the neighbor” in many Christian mystical traditions. Drawing on Augustine’s description of the love God calls persons to,^57 Hilton explains that active love of neighbor is integral to a life rooted
in charity: "Like every man and woman you are principally bound to love your fellow Christians in your heart and in your deeds as well...."^58

There may at first appear to be some ambiguity in Hilton's talking about love of neighbor since it is quite obvious that in at least the majority of The Scale of Perfection he is writing to a woman who is a contemplative, someone who is not engaged in active service in the world. What sense then, does it seem to make to speak of love of neighbor as a significant aspect of the spiritual life?

Hilton does, at the outset, distinguish between the active life and the contemplative life.\(^59\) He describes the active life as "consist[ng] in love and charity shown outwardly in good works, in obedience to God's commandments, and in performing the seven corporal and spiritual works of mercy for the benefit of our fellow-Christians." Here the importance of love of neighbor is obvious.

The contemplative life, on the other hand, "consists in perfect love and charity inwardly experienced through the spiritual virtues, and in a true knowledge and perception of God and spiritual things."\(^60\) And yet even the life of the contemplative described by Hilton is not a life best understood as that of a disengaged self-oriented spirituality distanced from the community. The mystical journey takes place in the context of the religious community, and Hilton's audience is portrayed as thoroughly involved with the traditions and community of the medieval church and society. Even though Book 1 is addressed to an anchoress who had sealed herself into a cell, the cell was adjacent to a church with a window into the church so that she could participate in the liturgy;\(^61\) and further, the anchoress' social role was to pray for the good of society. Hilton assumes that even his contemplative readers will take part in liturgical offices, scriptural study, participation in the sacraments, and most important of all, prayer.\(^62\)

Although Hilton never tells his reader to imitate the active and even itinerant ministry of Jesus, he reminds her repeatedly to imitate the humility and charity of Christ, and he further defines the charity of Christ as love of neighbor.\(^63\) As Hilton explains, contemplation conforms the soul to God, but this cannot take place until the person is reformed by the "fullness of virtues which have been transformed into affection."\(^64\) Christ is the model:

And therefore, if you want to follow Christ, be like Him in this skill. Learn to love your enemies and sinful men, for all these are your fellow-Christians.... Look and consider how Christ loved Judas....\(^65\)

Reformation to Christ's image involves a correction and deepening of love for other persons. Reaching the highest stages of love possible on earth does
not necessitate that the mystic utterly absent herself or himself from involvement with other people; quite the contrary, it involves rather a reorienting of human love: “I’m not saying that the soul will not love nor think about the other creatures. But I do say that he will think about them as being in time and will seek them and love them spiritually and freely, and not in a flesh-governed, painful way as he did before.” Like the Hasidic traditions Gershom Scholem studies, Christian mystics in the tradition of ethical mysticism were involved with the communities around them not only on the journey toward the Divine, but also even after they experience the Divine: “When the Hasidic mystic had reached his highest goal, he faced a choice: to remain hidden in the world, to renounce its sweep and whirl and to cultivate the bond between him and God in solitude, or to turn to the world, to become active in society and to fulfill his spiritual vocation there.... The mystic starts by entering the social sphere in order to spiritualize it, to reduce active life to its contemplative roots, but while striving to do so, he himself is changed. The true friend of God becomes the true friend of man.” Although the contemplatives Hilton describes did not live a life of active service to the world as in carrying out the seven works of mercy outside their places of enclosure, their interaction with society was an important aspect of their lives.

In late medieval England anchoresses and anchorites were an integral part of the religious structure of society. Theirs was a reciprocal relationship with the community. They depended upon the community for physical sustenance, including alms, clothing, food, and fuel, and, as Ann Warren demonstrates, they were supported by people from across the societal spectrum, including royalty, bishops, abbots, aristocracy, clergy, merchants, town guilds, and even the poor. In return, contemplatives prayed for the well-being of the world and of individual persons within it. The anchoress’s roles as spiritual advisor and comforter are apparent in Hilton’s advice to her: “Weekly ask whoever comes to you what he wants. And if he comes to tell you his troubles and be comforted by your talk, listen to him gladly and allow him to say whatever he wants in order to ease his own heart. When he has finished comfort him well and charitably if you can, and break off quickly.... And if another man comes to you to give you his alms, to hear you speak or be taught by you, speak well and meekly to them all.” Hilton urges the anchoress to be attentive to people who come to visit her, even if that should mean cutting her prayers and devotions short because she can meet God in her encounters with others. “For if you are wise, you won’t leave God, but will find [God] and see [God] in your fellow-Christians as well as you do in prayer, but you will have [God] in another way.”

Restoration of the image is consistently identified with relationships of love toward neighbors. In describing the characteristics concomitant to reformation in faith, Hilton writes, “In that faith they keep themselves in
love and charity toward their fellow-Christians as much as they can, flee all mortal sins as best they can, and perform deeds of mercy for their fellow-Christians."71 The significance of an ongoing love of neighbor is indicated in Hilton's claim that believers' rewards in heaven correspond to the measure of their charity here on earth. He warns the anchoress that a person of the world may have a greater reward in heaven than an anchoress since human persons are rewarded according to the measure of their charity while in this world.72

BODY AND SOUL.

As the preceding discussion indicates, although a power of the soul makes it possible for humans to know and love, good actions administered by the body, as it were, are an important part of how believers live out their relationship to God. While the soul has the capacity for love, it is only through the words and deeds of the body that this love can be communicated to fellow-Christians. Bodily activity reveals the state of the image within persons: "As much as you love others, so great is your soul."73

Since it is through the superior reason that persons are capable of knowing and loving God, it is the soul alone and even the superior reason within the soul that is most properly named "image of God." And yet the knowing and loving of God can never be separated from bodily existence because knowing and loving God should always be the guide for the life of the body. Hilton affirms that soul and body function together in lived historical experience. "But this kind of prayer, offered by a contemplative man, is made from a single word, for what is formed in the heart is wholly sounded by the mouth...you souls who are reformed by spiritual living, through the opening of your inner eyes, blow devoutly, sounding psalms with the trumpet of your body's tongue."74

At times Hilton's association of the image with the powers of the soul and not with the body might seem to place him in the camp of theologians who associate human worth with the soul and disparage the body.75 This would, however, be a misreading. The body is not evil in itself. Lying behind much of what Hilton says about the soul/body relationship is an implicit assumption of a hierarchical structure of being, an assumption common also to most, if not all, of his contemporaries and the fourteenth-century intellectual and spiritual milieu they shared. The soul, and, particularly, the higher powers of the soul link humanity to God in the chain of being and are described in some sense as "standing above" the body, which through the five senses, provides a link to the earthly domain. But as I have suggested, this is not to say that Hilton advocates a way of life in which persons try to get beyond their existence "in the body." Thus there is no reason, according to Hilton, to severely discipline the body as if subduing the body were an
end in itself; it is only insofar as the body becomes an occasion for a "false, misruled love of the self," or sin, that believers are to subdue it. Hilton's affirmation of the intimate and fundamental association of body and soul is evident in his description of the final stage of image restoration. In the "bliss of heaven" the soul will be capable of fully knowing and loving God, and the body will be glorified and made immortal, and in this life, too, reformation in the soul will always be accompanied and even preceded, sometimes, by reformation of the body.

Imitation of Jesus Christ — which means that believers first imitate the humanity and then the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ — leads believers from a flesh-governed existence to an embodied spirituality that seeks a God-directed orientation toward the world.

IV. MORAL UNION WITH THE DIVINE

Hilton tells believers to seek "nothing of God except this gift of Love that is the Holy Spirit." Love is the bond which links the trinitarian God with human persons: "The perfect man is completely made one with Him, through the essential truth of love." In accord with what we have seen so far what Hilton calls for here can be understood as encouraging a union of wills between humans and God as the goal of the mystical life.

Believers set imitation of Christ as their immediate spiritual goal. Although perfect imitation of Christ is difficult to achieve in this life, "it is most suitable that the soul, the ‘bride,’ be like Jesus, the ‘bridegroom’ in behavior and in virtues and be in complete harmony with him in the stability of perfect love. But that seldom happens here and now except in the special spouse." Hilton's use of language of the relationship between lover and beloved as a primary expression of the higher stages of the God and human relationship locates him in the tradition of Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and Hadewijch of Brabant (mid-thirteenth century), mystics whose magnificent descriptions of the intimacy possible between God and human persons stir believers to spiritual diligence. Hilton shares in this tradition's convictions about the closeness between God and human persons.

Be this as it may, I want to point to another crucial dimension of this dialogue: its moral and ethical implications. The more closely believers imitate Christ, the more like Christ they become. Hilton describes human beings as mirrors whose nature is to reflect the Divine, so that the more "love-filled" believers become, the more like Christ "who is Love" they are in their very beings: "the more unharmed and unbroken stability there is in grace, the more love-filled the soul is, and the more he is like Him in Whom there is no kind of change, as the Apostle says." As we have seen, the process of cultivating love entails an ethic of care toward others: "This gift [of love] establishes complete peace between God
and the soul and unites all blessed creatures wholly in God. For it makes Jesus love us, and makes us love Him in return and makes each of us love all the others in him." As Christians become more like Christ morally, it can be argued that they become more like Christ ontologically, since becoming more like Christ in praxis entails becoming more filled with and motivated by love. For Hilton, the transformation is primarily understood as a conformity of the human will to God's will. "I am God...I am Love and for love I do all that I do..." Union of wills with God brings about the situation in which "to preserve any virtue seems to [the believer] to require no skill and to be no hardship, but to be his greatest delight. And all this is Love's work." Union with God here refers to a union or commonality of will, and restoration of the divine image is identified with restoration of a good will.

Although Hilton frequently identifies the image explicitly with reason, he also associates it with the will. Through a synonymous willing of love with the Divine, believers become like the God who is Love. The familiarity and intimacy reflected in the commonality of wills is evident in the final stages of image restoration where the image is most fully realized when human volition is conformed to God's will. Augustine wrote,

For when you created men, you did not say "Let man be made according to his kind" but "Let us make man wearing our own image and likeness." You spoke this way because you meant for us to see for ourselves what your will is ...when he has remade his mind and can see and understand your truth, he has no need of other men to teach him to imitate his kind. You show him and he sees for himself what is your will, the good thing, the desirable thing, the perfect thing...when we learn to know God, we become new men in the image of our Creator [emphasis mine].

Throughout the stages of restoration believers' wills are reformed and the proper order of creation is restored as they participate more fully in the will of God.

Conclusion

Walter Hilton's explorations of the dynamic relationship between God and the human person aim at guiding Christians toward fulfillment of their capacities as image-bearers of the Divine. Hilton has a fundamentally moral or operational understanding of the human person as imago Dei. The fulfillment of the image is most fully realized through the conformity of the human will to God's will. As I have illustrated here, cultivation of love is one of the key aspects by which believers fulfill their being as images or mirrors of the Divine. Mystics begin the ascent by contemplating Jesus'
humanity and by cultivating their resemblance to Jesus by developing virtues and particularly through loving God and their neighbors. They finally progress to contemplation of the divinity of Christ, and eventually, at the highest stages, to some understanding of the Trinity. Imitating the spirit of Jesus Christ in the world leads mystics beyond the humanity of Jesus to experience the divinity of Christ, the revelation to the world of the God who is Love, and the basis for a spiritual reorientation of human life.

The God of Walter Hilton is love, and the mystical process of understanding the Divine who is love by becoming love is the key transformative guide for believers. Jesus Christ, human and divine, provides the model mystics imitate in pursuing the mystical journey. Ethical imitation of Christ as fulfillment of the image of God entails a process in which the mystic aligns her or his will with the will of the Divine, and learns to act out of love in the world as God acts out of love. Love for others is a crucial step in and result of this process which calls for a holistic involvement of the human person in an embodied spirituality.

The language Hilton uses to describe the final stages of the God–human relationship further illustrates the key role of love in his thought. Language of friendship and language of marriage characterize the fully-developed relationship of the soul and Christ. As the mystic progresses Jesus begins to “speak more familiarly and more lovingly to the soul,” and again, “…the actions Jesus performs in the soul are done to make it a true, perfect spouse to Him in the intensity and fullness of love.”

Swarthmore College

NOTES


2. Phyllis Hodgson says that Hilton “belonged to Cambridge University where he probably studied canon law after ordination to the priesthood” (Hodgson, Three Fourteenth Century English Mystics [London: British Book Center, 1967], 32).

3. Pepler maintains that Hilton “had studied theology in Paris, where he had probably become a Master of Theology” (Conrad Pepler, The English Religious Heritage [St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder Book Co., 1958], 376). Marseilles manuscript 729 calls Hilton “Parisius,” which suggests that he studied in Paris. And he is usually called “Magister,” which, as Helen Gardner points out was, at this time, a term generally reserved for doctors of theology. See Helen Gardner, “Walter Hilton and the Mystical

4. Helen Gardner examines the evidence in his writings and concludes that “there seems no other way of reconciling Hilton’s own words with the testimony of the manuscripts that he died at Thurgarton, than by assuming that he began his religious life, probably inspired by Rolle, as a hermit, that he found himself unsuited to that way of life.” (Gardner, “Hilton and the Mystical Tradition,” 113). Kennedy, who also examines the evidence, agrees with Gardner’s assessment. See David G. Kennedy, “The Incarnational Element in the Spirituality of Walter Hilton,” Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1979.


8. 128, 230.

9. Underhill suggests that from 1325 the priory sent its students to schools, and also that the canons of Thurgarton seem to have been among the earliest composers of vernacular religious works. She claims that Thurgarton was intimately concerned with local affairs, although she does not elaborate on the nature of the involvement. See Underhill, “Introduction,” in Scale, xi.


11. Although Hilton wrote a number of works in addition to The Scale of Perfection, the discussion here will focus only on the Scale, since the Scale, and especially Book 2, represents Hilton’s most detailed and organized discussion of the image of God theme and confirms what can be found elsewhere. Helen Gardner (“Walter Hilton and the Mystical Tradition”) and David Kennedy (“Incarnational Element”) discuss Hilton’s writings with an eye both to establishing the chronological order of his works and to highlighting some major developments in his thought. The Scale, Book 2, is generally accepted as one of, if not the, most mature works of Walter Hilton. It was probably written in 1385. There are no discrepancies between Hilton’s discussion of the image in Book 1 and his discussion of the image in Book 2, so I will deal with the work as a whole. Translations are taken from Walter Hilton, The Stairway of Perfection, trans. M. L. Del Mastro (New York: Image Books, 1979). At the time I wrote this article I used this translation because it is based on a close reading of what are generally regarded as the three most reliable manuscripts of the Scale: British Museum MS Harley 6579, Cambridge Additional 6686, and Trinity College, Cambridge MS 354. Del Mastro remains remarkably close to the language of the original, and is sensitive to the nuances of Hilton’s language; he conveys not only Hilton’s

12. Hilton, Stairway of Perfection, Book I, chapter 93, page 187. Hereafter The Stairway of Perfection will be referred to in the notes as SP; references are to book, chapter, and page reference in the Del Mastro translation (e.g., SP, 1.93; 187).

13. SP, 1.12–13; 75–77.


15. One of the most important recent analyses of mysticism appears in the work of Bernard McGinn. McGinn describes three characteristics of Christian mysticism which are found in the writings and lives of mystics like Walter Hilton. He suggests first that mysticism is "a part or element of religion"; religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam contain mystical elements as part of a wider whole. Second, mysticism is a "process or a way of life." And third, mysticism is an "attempt to express a direct consciousness of God." "The mystical element
in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], xvi-xvii.

16. *SP*, 1.11; 74-75.

17. “You must understand that any kind of visions or revelations of spirits...or any other experience of your physical senses seeming to come from a spiritual source...be it never so comforting and pleasant, is not true contemplation. However good these are, these things are only simple and secondary experiences, compared to spiritual virtues and to this spiritual knowing and loving of God...Jesus is knitted and fastened to our souls by good will and a great desire for him alone. Be rooted and grounded in charity...that you may know and experience...what is the length and endless being of God, the breadth of the wonderful charity and goodness of God and height of God’s almighty majesty, and the bottomless depth of God’s wisdom” (*SP*, 1.12-13; 75-77).


20. “O, because understanding consists in eternal sight, faith nourishes us as little children... But unless we have walked by faith we cannot come to that sight which does not pass away...therefore the one version says, ‘Unless you believe, you will not abide’, the other, ‘Unless you believe you will not understand’” [emphasis mine]. Aug., *De doctrina Christiana* 2.12.17: “Ergo, quoniam intellectus in specie sempiterna est, fides vero in rerum temporalium quibusdam cunabulis quasi lacte ait paruulos; nunc autem per fidem ambulamus, non per speciem; nisi autem per fidem ambulauerimus, ad speciem pervenire non possimus, quae non transit, sed permanent per intellectum purgatum nobis cohaerentibus veritati. Propter eam ille ait: nisi credideritis, non permanebitis; ille autem, nisi credideritis, non intellegetis.” English translation in J. H. Clark, “Augustine, Anselm, and Walter Hilton” in *Medieval Mystical Tradition: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1982*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer), 119, n. 2.


23. SP, 2.11; 215.


28. I am grateful to Bernard McGinn for suggesting this language to me.

29. SP, 2.2; 194.

30. “For now every soul, if he wills it, can be reformed to the likeness of God, since the sin has been forgiven and, through Jesus, amends have been made for the first guilt” (SP, 2.2; 194–195).

31. SP, 1.89; 183.


33. SP, 1.45; 123.

34. SP, 2.1; 191.

35. SP, 2.14; 220. Sometimes Hilton says that our souls are images of God; sometimes he says that our souls are made “to” the image of God. Kennedy maintains that “clearly, it is man’s soul which is made in the image of God” (“Incarnational Element,” 142). I would rather want to maintain that, as was the case with Aquinas, in speaking in these two ways, Hilton is emphasizing that on the one hand, we are already images of God; that is, he is describing a state. On the other hand, the notion of creation “to” the image indicates that the image within us describes a capacity, something about us that can develop.
36. Knowledge and love appear side by side throughout Hilton's writings. While a complete analysis of his works is incomplete without a study of the interactions of these two themes, this paper is primarily concerned with a focus on the theme of love.

37. "We begin to consider the principal part of the human mind, by which it knows or can know God, in order that we may find therein an image of God...even though it has become impaired and disfigured by the loss of its participation in God, it remains nonetheless an image of God. For it is His image by the very fact that it is capable of Him, and can be a partaker of Him; and it cannot be so great a good except that it is His image" [emphasis mine]. Augustine, De Trinitate 14.8.11; 425-426 (PL 42:1044):

"Sed prius mens in se ipsa consideranda est antequam sit particeps Dei, et in ea reperienda est imago ejus. Diximus enim etsi amissa participatione, absoletam atque deformem, Dei tamen imaginem permanere. Eo quippe ipso imago ejus est, quo ejus capax est, ejusque particeps esse potest; quod tam magnum bonum, nisi per hoc quod imago ejus est, non potest."


39. Augustine, De civitate Dei 12.2; (PL 41:350).

40. Gilson, Saint Augustine, 211.


44. Augustine raised the issue of imitation frequently. E.g., Aug. Conf. 8.2.3; 159 (14:14).

45. SP, 1.78; 170.

46. SP, 1.78; 170.

47. SP, 1.78; 133.

49. SP, 1.85; 179.
50. SP, 1.78; 170.
51. SP, 1.86; 179. “Turn your heart with your body principally to God. Shape yourself inwardly to His likeness by meekness and charity and other spiritual virtues. Then you are truly turned to Him” (SP, 1.1; 63; 1.50; 131, et al.). Believers are conformed to God’s image through the exercise of the virtues meekness and charity: “and if you want to resemble Him, practice meekness and charity” (SP, 1.52; 132).
52. “Meekness says, ‘I am nothing and I have nothing.’ Love says ‘I covet nothing but the One, and that is Jesus.’ These two strings, well-fastened by the awareness of Jesus, make good harmony on the harp of the soul, when they are touched with skill by the fingers of reason. For the lower you strike on the harp of the one, the higher the other will sound. That is, the more intensely you experience in meekness how little you are, and how little you have by virtue of your own powers, the more you will desire to have from Jesus in the desire of love” (SP, 2.21; 239).
53. SP, 1.4; 74.
54. SP, 1.86; 176.
55. SP, 1.92; 186.
56. SP, 1.67; 154; also SP, 1.57; 140, and SP, 1.83; 175-76. “For what is a man but his thoughts and his loves? These alone make a man good or bad. As much as you know and love God and your fellow-Christians, so great is your soul. If you love them little, your soul is small, and if you don’t love them at all, your soul is nothing. That is, your soul is nothing as far as good is concerned, but it is great in sin” (SP, 1.89; 182).
58. SP, 1.83; 175-176.
60. SP, 1.2; 64.
62. For example, Hilton’s emphasis on the roles of baptism and penance in the stages of reformation in faith and experience illustrates his commitment to and participation in the life of the institutional church.
63. SP, 1.51; 132.
64. *SP*, 1.14; 78.
65. *SP*, 1.70; 158.
66. *SP*, 2.30; 314.
69. *SP*, 1.83; 176.
70. *SP*, 1.83; 176.
71. *SP*, 2.10; 210.

72. "The reward is greater or lesser according to the quality and greatness of their charity...it may well happen that some man or woman in the world — a lord or lady, a knight or a squire, a merchant, a plowman...will have more of it than some priest or friar, monk or canon, or anchoress enclosed...Truly, because he loves God more in the charity God has given him." (*SP*, 1.61; 146).
73. *SP*, 2.88; 181.
74. *SP*, 2.42; 325.
75. *SP*, 2.13; 219.

76. Hilton urges moderation and corrects misunderstandings of the body/soul interaction: "For be assured, he who in his desire and labor has regard for nothing other than meekness and charity, always craves them and continually thinks of how he can obtain them, will profit from that desire and the works which flow from it and will grow more in one year in all the other virtues — like chastity, abstinence, and the like — even though he’s not paying much attention to them, than he would profit in them in seven years without this desire, even if he fought continually against gluttony and lechery and the like and beat himself every day from morning till night" (*SP*, 1.76; 169).

77. "Practice discretion in your labors...For however much in a hurry the pilgrim may be on his journey, still, from time to time, he must eat and drink and sleep. Do the same thing yourself, for though it may hinder you at one time, it will aid your progress at another" (*SP*, 2.23; 247).

78. "in the bliss of heaven...the soul will receive the full experience of God...the body of man shall be glorified then. For it shall fully receive the rich dowry of immortality with all that belongs to it. The soul with its body shall have all this." (*SP*, 2.4; 198). (For a seemingly different view see *SP*, 1.12; 218.)
79. *SP*, 2.36; 295.
80. *SP*, 2.41; 320.

81. God is love, and yet when we become images of God we do not become God, because God is Unformed Love; we are formed love, that is, love created by God. "This love [of the affection of the soul] is not God
in Himself, for it is created, but it is the love of the soul, experienced as the sight of Jesus and attracted to Him alone" (SP, 2.34; 288). Thus, we are images of God, not God.

82. SP, 2.41; 319.
83. SP, 2.30; 273; SP, 2.44; 335.
84. SP, 2.30; 273.
85. SP, 2.36; 296.
86. SP, 2.36; 296.
87. SP, 2.36; 297.
88. Augustine, Conf. 13.22.32; 332 (14:482): "Again, you do not say 'Let man be made' but 'Let us make man.' You do not say 'Let us make him according to his kind' but 'Wearing our own image and likeness.'" ("Ideoque non dicis: fiat homo, sed: faciemus, nec dicis: secundum genus, sed: ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram.")
89. SP, 2.44; 333.
90. SP, 2.44; 335.