

Thinking about God's desire with the medieval mystics

“I have the sense that Mechthild of Magdeburg's whole life was lived in pursuit of her divine beloved.”

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Wendy Farley in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue



Theologian Wendy Farley (Courtesy photo | GFreihalter, Andreas Praefcke, Ralph Hammann / Creative Commons)

Wendy Farley is professor of religion at the Graduate School of Theology, University of Redlands, where she directs the program in Christian spirituality. Her research focuses on contemplative practice, mysticism, and classical texts and how they intersect with issues of social justice, feminism, womanism, and queer theology. She is the author of several books on mysticism and feminism, including The Thirst of God: Contemplating God's Love with Three Women Mystics, about medieval mystics Marguerite Porete, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich, and, most recently, Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion.

Some readers may not have heard of Mechthild of Magdeburg. Who was she, and why does she interest you?

Mechtild was a 13th-century contemplative in what is now Germany. She was a beguine. The beguines were a group of lay women—primarily in the 13th century, although they still exist today—who did not want to become nuns and did not want to live the married life. Some were widows; some were virgins. They were distinctive in that they did not have a particular order.

They were like many women and men today who are searching for a contemplative way of life. Maybe they find a small community, maybe a study group. They do some meditation on their own. They may work in the world. They may live in community together.

The beguines were dedicated to a life of prayer and service. I find in them a kind of kindred spirit because there are so many people now who are searching for a rich spirituality and are having trouble finding it. And they're great models for, "if you can't find it, then create it."

What kind of theological training would Mechthild have had? What opportunities were available to her?

That's a question people debate a lot because it's not clear. She certainly would have been deeply immersed in daily practice. I won't say biblical study, but she would have prayed with the Bible, and her writings are full of biblical imagery.

She was close to the Dominicans, so she would have had many conversations with them about spiritual matters. Her book exists because a Dominican father asked her to write down her visions and thoughts. But she would not have had formal training. We don't know exactly what she would have had available to read. But it was a very fecund period of spiritual investigation, and she would have been in that conversation.

One phrase of Mechthild's that caught my attention in your book is "the God-hunting heart." What might she have meant by that?

"Belief can be governed by authority structures. Desire is different."

I can't know what she meant by that, but it does evoke something that was very passionate in her: a consuming desire for relationship with God. At age 12 she began

a very devoted life of prayer. As a very young woman, she left her city and went to live as a beguine. I have the sense that her whole life was this pursuit of her divine beloved.

You write of a “theological world governed by desire.” I was really struck by that phrase because I often think of theology and desire as two very different things. How do they intersect?

In the modern period and in Europe and America, we’ve tended to think of religion in terms of belief. That means cognitive assent, cognitive understanding. Theology is often, though not always, an investigation of the beliefs, claims, and doctrines of Christianity.

But most human beings don’t live in that kind of modern, somewhat sterile world. We’re always oriented to our desires. Whether they’re simple desires, like “I’m thirsty or hungry,” or whether they’re a desire to see a beloved child or a lover: our whole life is really about desire. A lot of our hymns capture this more affective, aesthetic, openhearted way of experiencing our life and our faith.

This notion of desire as a part of faith is very ancient. It goes back as far as the Song of Songs in the Bible. It’s very much present in Origen, in the third century. It suited Dionysius all the way up through Schleiermacher and some of his contemporaries. It is a different way of organizing how we think about religion.

Belief can be governed by authority structures. Desire is not so governed by authority structures. It is the openness of the heart and the heart’s effort to find what is most appropriate to it now.

Our culture has associated desire with consumer desire. We’re shaped deeply—whether we want to be or not—by desiring new items that we can buy. The whole consumer culture is about inflaming desire for things you can buy and building our identity around those things.

We have this sense that desire is, “If I get this thing, I will be okay. I will be pretty. I will be smart. I will be popular. I will be safe.” Divine desire is structured quite differently. It’s not about possessing something. It’s not a religious form of consumerism where you think, “Oh, if I get this holy thing, I will be okay.”

It's opening your heart to a relationship, which is not structured by possession but by love—which is by its very nature open-ended, non-possessive, non-thematic. When we fall in love with a person or we love a child or a friend, we don't possess that person. Part of what you love in loving a person is the mystery of them, the way they change and the way there are things about them you don't understand.

To try and empty our love for a person into a series of understandings would be deeply objectifying, and it would not satisfy our spirit. It's this openness, the loveliness of mystery, that we love. Even more, our love of God is an abandonment to not knowing, to not controlling. Simone Weil says beauty is what we love without wanting to eat it. And that's what this holy desire is: desire that is liberation from the craving to possess.

As a contemporary person, living in a consumer society, I feel like I've trained myself against desire because of my concern that I'm going to overconsume. What does it mean to desire like Mechthild of Magdeburg or other women that you write about in your work?

A lot of Christian teaching is about controlling or even destroying desire. The kind of anxiety that you're talking about worries that desire can lead us astray. Therefore we destroy desire. We oppress it. But Mechthild and others like her take a totally different strategy: we don't destroy desire, we route it in the right direction. When we do this, the beauty of creation becomes much brighter. We not only move from a human desire to a divine desire for God as this ultimate mystery, this divine beloved, but we also learn to love the world nonconsumptively.

I don't love a person because they'll make me feel better. I love a person because I think they're precious. I crave their well-being. I can love the Earth—not as a resource, but I love its raw beauty. I am therefore provoked to want to care for it. This divine desire of God washes back in the other direction to a divine desire for the beauty and well-being of creation.

That leads to a complex issue. You suggest that God might desire us as well as us desiring God.

At a certain point, all language about the Divine is poetic. It's evocative. It's performative. It's not like a geometry problem where you're using math or concepts to adequately describe something. The expression "the thirst of God" is from Julian of Norwich, but it's very present in Mechthild and other contemplatives. It's a way of

describing this experience of God's love for us, God's deep desire for our well-being. This desire becomes a flow back and forth. You hardly know whose desire is whose. It's this deep enjoyment of a beloved and a deep desire for their well-being. These contemplatives are not afraid to think of God as desiring our well-being and desiring us.

How is trinitarian theology related to a theology of desire?

Many contemplatives were very embedded in trinitarian patterns of thinking in a way that many of us are not. Even though we accept the doctrine of the Trinity, we don't think that way.

But for someone like Mechthild, this triadic set of energies was at the heart of who God is. The Trinity is united by love. There's not one part of the Trinity whose job is to love and another part whose job is to do something else. All parts of the Trinity are united by love.

The old word for that is *perichoresis*, which means dance. I love this, that there's a dance of love happening within the Trinity, and that dance of love spills out into creation and redemption.

Mechthild has this fascinating and beautiful parable where she imagines the Trinity before creation. She's imagining what we call "the Father" or the "Divine" as power.

But that power has a sterility to it. And so the parable talks about the Holy Spirit plucking desire and evoking in the Father a desire for humanity. The second person of the Trinity knows that this will have a tragic outcome, that the human being can't really bear existence without falling, and anticipates that this desire for connection, for creation, will include redemption. So the second person takes on that task from the beginning.

Each side is contributing in the yearning for an other to love, even if that beloved is going to fall and therefore need to be redeemed. In this interaction of desiring creativities, God manifests as fully divine. It's when God's desire becomes fruitful, as Mechthild says, rather than sterile within itself that the Divine is born in its fullest sense.

I think immediately of the way that desire can make us vulnerable. When Divine desire is "plucked," the divine becomes vulnerable to desire and to

human choice.

That's right. Because in loving, we are vulnerable. Our heart is open, and therefore when the one we love suffers, we're embedded in that suffering. There's no way to love something created without the understanding that it is going to suffer. It's going to make mistakes. You have to fall in love with the whole thing, not a fantasy of perfection—fall in love, in the case of the Trinity, with humanity and the suffering that that's going to involve.

The second person of the Trinity, who becomes Christ, knows this immediately about divine desire and takes that love on. In essence, all aspects of the Trinity do. But Christ names it and takes it on.

They go into it open-eyed. It's not like, "Oh my gosh, who knew that they were going to fall? That's a big surprise now, what do I do?" It's this sense of, "If I in love created humanity, I love their fallenness, too. I have to be there in the work of redemption as well as the work of creation."

At the very beginning of her book, Mechthild uses this fascinating play on words. She says, "Oh Lord God, who made this book?" And then God responds, "I made it in my powerlessness." In the German, it's a pun, *gemacht* and *ungemacht*. I had the power to create it in my powerlessness; I can't restrain my gifts. I made this because I'm powerless not to give my gifts.

Because love can't not love. Love can't withhold.

That's right. God's eternal knowledge holds all of that and remains, in an interesting way, powerless not to create, powerless not to redeem. God's power grows out of this inability to restrain love.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "God's desire."