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Gilbert Fournier, Balázs J. Nemes (Hg.)

Die Kartause als Text-Raum  
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Wissensdiskurse, Schreibpraktiken,  
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# HENRY OF COESFELD AND DENYS THE CARTHUSIAN ON WOMEN'S VISIONS AND REVELATIONS. A QUESTION OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY\*

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This essay explores the Carthusian reception of women's visions and revelations in the medieval Low Countries. It argues that authors such as Henry of Coesfeld and Denys the Carthusian were not only interested in late-medieval visionaries as so-called "advocates of reform", but were also willing to grant authority to women's revelations, e.g. in a theological context. Such influential Carthusians might have contributed to a climate in the Low Countries in which it became increasingly acceptable to give voice to women's revelations in composing theological treatises, sermons, and works of art.

Under the signature group "I" the library catalogue of the Erfurt charterhouse lists a number of books on diverse exempla and revelations (*libros de diversis exemplis et revelationibus*), performed by certain persons (*factis quibusdam personis*). In spite of the use of the gender-neutral word *persona* in the rubric, the persons that are actually mentioned are mostly women with a strong reputation for saintliness and devotion and especially with a proclivity to receive revelations (Bridget of Sweden, Mechthild of Hackeborn, Margaret of Ypres, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Dorothea of Montau, and Elisabeth of Schönau).<sup>1</sup> The important role for women might raise the question whether, in receiv-

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<sup>1</sup> *Mystische Bücher in der Bibliothek der Kartause Erfurt. Digitale Edition*, hg. v. MARIEKE ABRAM / SUSANNE BERNHARDT / GILBERT FOURNIER, Freiburg: Universitätsbibliothek, Version 1.0 (02.03.2022) URL: <https://making-mysticism.org/edition-von-ddfefi/>, fols 118<sup>r</sup>–119<sup>r</sup> [= Erfurt, Bistumsarchiv, Hs. Hist. 6, fols 118<sup>r</sup>–119<sup>r</sup>]. On this signature group, see: MARIEKE ABRAM / GILBERT FOURNIER / BALÁZS J. NEMES: Making Mysticism. *Theologia mystica* als historische Kategorie der Wissensordnung in der Katalogisierungspraxis der Erfurter Kartause, in: *Die Bibliothek – The Library – La Bibliothèque*, ed. by ANDREAS SPEER / LARS REUKE (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 41), Berlin / Boston 2020, 621–655, at 650–651.

ing such texts, Carthusian monks of the Later Middle Ages discerned a distinctive women's personal 'Erlebnismystik'.<sup>2</sup>

However, the signature group also lists a number of titles referring to less personal and more anonymous miraculous accounts (*miracula*) and exemplary stories (*exempla*), as well as likenesses (*similitudines*). Hence, there are good reasons to believe that Carthusian monks were more concerned about the authority of the teachings found in these exemplary stories and revelations than their subjects or authors (let alone their gender), or whether they were being recounted "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist".<sup>3</sup> Such concerns are not only reflected in the inclusion of certain titles (e.g. 'De superstitionibus' or 'De reformatione ecclesie'), or in some comments made by the catalogue's compiler, but also in the aforementioned rubric, which designates the signature group as subjected to the historical sense [of Scripture] (*Et subordinatur sensui historico*).

With this essay, I would like to explore the Carthusian reception of women's visions and revelations in the medieval Low Countries. Specifically I will analyze how influential Carthusians such as Henry Kemenade of Coesfeld (d. 1410) and Denys the Carthusian (d. 1472) contributed to the discussion about the aforementioned issues, that is to say, the exemplarity of women's devotion and the authority of visions and revelations.

## 1 DIFFERENT KINDS OF DEVOTION AND REVELATION

Henry of Coesfeld discusses revelations as part of his theology of devotion (*devotio*), outlined in a tract on the Eucharist and a few sermons.<sup>4</sup> Starting from the Thomist notion of devotion as an interior act of the virtue of religion (*religio*), Henry recognizes two kinds of devotion. The first kind can be called rational or spiritual (*devotio rationalis sive spiritualis*), as it only resides in reason or spirit, without any significant overflowing or flowing down into the senses, that is to say, the sensual part is not yet calmed or not yet promptly subject to the spirit, but rather rebels and murmurs. The second kind of devotion can be called sensible or sensual (*devotio sensibilis sive sensualis*), as it significantly overflows into the senses, so that the sensual nature, once quieted, wholly obeys and conforms to the spirit.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> BERNARD MCGINN: The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism, in: *Church History* 65:2 (1996), 197–219, at 201–202.

<sup>3</sup> BERNARD MCGINN: Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter, in: *The Harvard Theological Review* 98:3 (2005), 227–246, at 236.

<sup>4</sup> TOM GAENS: *Sic vivere est devote vivere*. Henry of Coesfeld as Theologian of Modern-Day Devotion, in: *Church History and Religious Culture* 96 (2016), 13–39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–18.

The latter he again divides into three kinds of devotion, along the lines of John of Ruusbroec's 'Espousals'. The first kind, desirous devotion (*devotio desideriosa*), is present in the beginners, when all the senses obey the spirit in a union of the heart (*unio cordis*) and promptly submit themselves to the service of God, but without noticeable savoring (*sapor*). The second, more advanced kind, delightful devotion (*devotio voluptuosa*), is present when the senses obey the spirit with a stronger inclination, perfused with noticeable savoring or spiritual sweetness and consolation (*spiritualis dulcedo et consolatio*). When it is increased so that it delights the heart enough, it is called pleasure of the heart (*voluptas cordis*) and spiritual delight (*spiritualis iocunditas*). When it grows so that the heart can no longer fully take it in, and the mind is alienated in this way, it is called spiritual drunkenness (*spiritualis ebrietas*). The third kind, feverish or spiritually fierce devotion (*devotio fervorosa vel spiritualiter furiosa*), is present when the senses, in an even stronger way, are above all consolation temporarily granted to it or even grantable, seek God's honor and glory with such a great fervor, and are inclined to serve God in inconvenient ways so that it looks like the mind is in a rage (*furor*). When it sees itself not to be able to accomplish at will its intent, sadness arises, and this is called spiritual languor (*spiritualis languor*), and, in Scripture, wounding of love (*vulneratio amoris*).<sup>6</sup>

According to Henry, the ones that are believed to be *experti* in this matter also state that often human beings receive many revelations (*revelationes*) in this devotion. Sometimes these are words, images, or signs, produced in the imaginative power (*vis imaginativa*), and these tend to be effected by the service of angels.<sup>7</sup> At other times, Henry continues, a naked truth presents itself to them in the intellectual power (*vis intellectiva*), without signs or images, and these are caused by God alone, without the service of another creature.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the Carthusian considers John of Ruusbroec to be one of these *experti*, because he is closely following and almost literally citing Ruusbroec's 'Espousals' in this entire passage.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he adds that this is seen to be truthful, because the more and the more excellently someone is removed from the senses (as in this mode of devotion), the more clearly he receives intellectual or spiritual visions, in accordance with Augustine in the twelfth book of the literal commentary on Genesis. Sometimes, Henry concludes, such human beings are pulled above themselves according to every mode into a certain incomprehensible

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> Henry of Coesfeld: 'De sacramento Eucharistie', in: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS. 11811–12 (cat. 2160), fols 1<sup>r</sup>–99<sup>v</sup>, at fol. 86<sup>v</sup>: *Dicunt etiam qui creduntur in hac re fuisse experti quod in ista devotione sepe hominibus multe revelationes fiunt. Aliquando ut aiunt verbis aliquando imaginibus aliquando signis et huiusmodi fiunt communiter in vi imaginativa et solent ministerio angelorum fieri.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., fol. 86<sup>v</sup>: *Aliquando etiam ipsis nude veritas se obicit sine signis aut imaginibus et hec revelatio fit in vi intellectiva et causatur a solo Deo sine ministerio alicuius creature.*

<sup>9</sup> TOM GAENS: How Ruusbroec Tastes, Sounds, and Smells. Henry of Coesfeld and the Gerson-Groenendaal Controversy, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 88:2–4 (2017), 178–208, at 198–199 n. 85–87.

good that they cannot express in words or show in signs, according to the mode in which they have heard or seen this – hearing and seeing are here called the same – and this mode is commonly called rapture (*raptus*).<sup>10</sup> However, Henry warns his readers to be cautious, since many have been deceived in these modes, believing to be a spirit of God, invented by one's own sense or suggested by an evil spirit.<sup>11</sup>

## 2 PERFECTION OF DEVOTION AND WOMEN'S DEVOTION

The treatment of these different kinds of devotion inevitably leads Henry of Coesfeld to a discussion of perfection of devotion. For indeed, one might be led to think that sensual or sensible devotion is by definition more perfect than rational or spiritual devotion, or that more sensual devotion is better than less sensual devotion. But, Henry says, perfection of devotion is only considered in that the proposition to serve the Lord is more perfect, or the prompt benevolence of the mind to worship the divine is greater. For this benevolence or this proposition is properly called devotion, and not some savoring or delight of the senses. And that perfection can be considered in three ways. In one way, “objectively”, i.e., by reason of the object or the thing or the service in which or by which it strives to serve God. For a moral act gets its perfection in one way from the perfection of its object. Then, it is more perfect wanting to serve God in counsels than only in precepts. In another way, “extensively”, i.e., in accordance with the proposition being more extensive. For it is better wanting to serve God in many things than in few things. In a third way, “intensively”, i.e., in accordance with the proposition to worship God being more intense or more ardent.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Henry of Coesfeld: ‘De sacramento Eucharistie’, in: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS. 11811–12, fol. 86<sup>v</sup>: *Et istud videtur mihi multum verisimile quia secundum quod quis plus et excellentius a sensibus abstrahitur secundum hoc clarioris recipit visiones intellectuales vel spirituales secundum beatum Augustinum 12<sup>o</sup> super Gen. ad literam. Sed per istum modum devotionis videtur quis multum a sensibus abstrahi cum tam importune et seriose nitatur spiritui subici immo ut quidam [= Ruusbroec] scribit homines huiusmodi aliquando trahuntur super seipsos secundum omnem modum in quoddam incomprehensibile bonum quod non possunt verbis exprimere vel signis ostendere secundum illum modum secundum quem bonum istud audierunt vel viderunt. Idem namque vocatur hic audire vel videre et iste modum communiter dicitur raptus. Cf. Jan van Ruusbroec: ‘Brulocht’, b549–b558.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 87<sup>r</sup>: *In omnibus autem modis predictis oportet hominem esse cautum quia in eis multi decepti sunt credentes spiritum esse dei quod proprius sensus finxit vel seductor spiritus suggestit.*

<sup>12</sup> Henry of Coesfeld: ‘Sermo in purificatione BMV’ (De multiplici devotione sive de diversis generibus devotorum), in: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS. 1212 (cat. 1945), fols 91<sup>r</sup>–97<sup>v</sup>, at fol. 93<sup>r</sup>: *Sed et hoc diligenter notandum est quod non omnis devotio sensibilis est omni devotione non sensibili sive solum rationali perfectior nec omnis magis sensibilis minus sensibili melior quamvis fortasse semper sic est quando omnia sunt paria. Ex hoc enim solum attenditur perfectio devotionum quod propositum serviendi domino sit perfectius sive prompta mentis benevolentia ad divinum famulatum sit maior. Hec enim benevolentia sive hoc propositum ut prius dictum est dicitur proprie devotio et non aliquis sapor vel delectatio sensualitatis. Et potest perfectio illa uno modo considerari obiective id est ra-*

For Henry, then, it is clear that, in these three modes, some come with more difficulty and slower from a greater rational devotion to some sensible taste, or even a calming of the heart or the senses, than others from a lesser devotion. This, Henry thinks, sometimes happens because of the natural disposition of the body, because some human beings are of a harder and more rigid corporeal nature, and consequently more difficult to move to virtues, while others are of a softer nature and more able to be incited to virtues. Because of this, Henry says, people commonly see that women come to sensible devotion more lightly and easily than men and men of one region more than those of another. But, he adds, they are therefore not more devout or holier.<sup>13</sup>

A few decades later, Denys the Carthusian would make very similar remarks regarding women's devotion in 'De professione monastica', a tract written for an enclosed regular canoness.<sup>14</sup> In the eighth article, on the (mostly negative) properties of women (*De proprietatibus personarum feminei sexus*), Denys states that commonly women are soft-hearted, compassionate, and prone to weeping – which are good things in his view – and also that they are commonly not as haughty and stern as men. For this reason, Denys concludes, they are better disposed for devotion than men.<sup>15</sup>

In the Low Countries, not only Carthusian monks such as Henry of Coesfeld and Denys the Carthusian held such opinions. So, for example, the modern devout John Brinckerinck (d. 1419), who devoted his entire life to the pastoral care of female communities, believed that there is little difference between women and other persons but, when women apply themselves devoutly, they often receive more grace and stand in greater favor with God than men do.<sup>16</sup>

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*tionem obiecti sive rei vel servitii in qua vel quo quis deo servire nititur. Actus enim moralis sumit uno modo suam perfectionem a perfectione sui obiecti. Porro perfectius est velle deo servire in consiliis quam solum in preceptis. Alio modo extensive id est secundum quod hoc propositum est ad plura servitia extensive. Melius est enim ceteris paribus velle deo servire in multis quam in paucis. Tertio modo intensive id est secundum quod propositum domino famulandi fuerit intensius sive ferventius.*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., fol. 93<sup>r</sup>: *Sed luce clarius patet quod quidam omnibus hiis tribus modis ex maiori devotione rationis difficilius et tardius perveniunt ad aliquem saporem sensibilem vel etiam tranquillitatem cordis seu sensualitatis quam alii ex minori quod aliquando contingit propter corporum naturalem dispositionem quia aliqui homines sunt durioris ac rigidioris nature corporalis et per consequens ad virtutes difficilius mobiles. Alii vero sunt nature mollioris et ad virtutes incitatiores propter quod communiter videmus quod mulieres levius et facilius veniunt ad devotionem sensibilem quam viri et homines unius regionis quam alterius. Non tamen oportet quod semper propterea sint simpliciter devotiores et sanctiores.*

<sup>14</sup> Denys the Carthusian: 'De professione monastica', ed. in Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera omnia, vol. 38, Tornaci [Tournai] 1909, 547–582.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 562: *Femine quoque communiter sunt molles corde, et multum compassive ac prone ad fletum. Et ista sunt bona. Communiter quoque non sunt ita superbe et dure ut viri. Idcirco ad devotionem solent esse magis disposite quam sunt viri.*

<sup>16</sup> John Brinckerinck: 'Collation 6', ed. by WILLEM MOLL: Acht collatiën van Johannes Brinckerinck. Eene bijdrage tot de kennis van den kanselarbeid der Broeders van het Gemeene Leven, uit

## 3 THE AUTHORITY OF WOMEN VISIONARIES

In line with John of Ruusbroec, Henry of Coesfeld thus saw revelation and rapture as the result of the most advanced devotion, which involves spiritual delight, fervor, languor, or fury. At the same time, he believed that women by nature have privileged access to the more advanced forms of devotion. Whether he held the latter opinion from an awareness that so many ecstatic visions and divine revelations were received by women, or he was merely giving vent to popular opinion or articulating proper experience, we will never know. From his use of some women's revelations, however, it is clear that he has willing to grant authority to various teachings therein.

When, for example, Henry states in a sermon on the feast of Nativity that Scripture does not unfold anything about the actual mode of Mary's labour, he refers to a revelation of Bridget of Sweden:

*Truly, this mode is somewhat signified in the revelations of that blessed Bridget of Sweden, who flourished not that long ago, and whose revelations are said to have been examined by the doctors and found conforming and not contrary to sound faith, in the sense that nothing is stated in them that one could not believe with pious faith. One can find there, I say, that, at the beginning of the night in which the Lord was born, because the holiest virgin was fatigued, perhaps from the journey, and had wanted to give her weary members a short rest, and she had already started to uncover her clothes, and had taken off, if I remember well, the shoes from her feet, she dedicated herself to pray to her Father in heaven, kneeling down. And see, suddenly, raptured in a departure of the mind, just as she was not unaccustomed to, she was illumined with a marvelous vision, and also revived with the sweetest joy and sweetness of delight in God. And then, indeed, the days of Mary were accomplished [Luke 2:6] so that, in accordance to what Gabriel had promised her, she gave birth and begot her son – yes! – the son of the highest. And when she had returned to herself, she saw a nude baby, lying on the bare ground, and wailing bitterly and crying. And, without doubt, the most chaste mother, pitying the infant, carried him, wrapped him in the vile rags that she could find, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn [Luke 2:7].<sup>17</sup>*

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handschriften der vijftiende en zestiende eeuw, in: *Kerkhistorisch archief 4* (1866), 97–167, at 150: *Luttel ondersceits is in vroupersonen of in ander personen; maer als die vroupersonen hem neerstelike pinen, soe crighen si dicke mere gracie ende werden meer verheven bi onse lieven heer dan manspersonen.* Translation of this passage taken from WYBREN SCHEEPSMA: *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries. The 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim, and Their Writings*, trans. DAVID F. JOHNSON, Woodbridge 2004, 1 n. 1. Note that, in the view of the modern devout, devotion is to a large extent made possible by the grace of God, cf. ANTON GERARD WEILER: *La construction du soi dans les milieux de la Devotio Moderna*, in: *La dévotion moderne dans les pays bourguignons et rhénans des origines à la fin du XVIe siècle. Rencontres de Colmar-Strasbourg* (29 septembre au 2 octobre 1988), ed. by JEAN-MARIE CAUCHIE (Publications du Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes 29), Neuchâtel 1989, 9–16, at 16.

<sup>17</sup> Henry of Coesfeld: 'Sermo in nativitate Domini', in: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS. 1212, fols 152<sup>v</sup>–154<sup>r</sup>, at fols 153<sup>r</sup>–153<sup>v</sup>: *Hinc est etiam quod non cum dolore ut cetere parturientes sed cum immenso gaudio et delectatione vice obstetricum gaudentibus et circumstantibus angelis et archangelis*



Moreover, Henry literally quotes from the revelations of Mechthild of Hackeborn (although he incorrectly calls her Elisabeth):

*That nun and virgin, the blessed Elisabeth, says very similarly in her revelations to have seen how the blessed virgin sat ready to bear her child. When the time came for her to give birth, she was filled with an ineffable joy and gladness. And a divine light shone around her, so she rose quickly with amazement, came forth with infinite humility, and bent down to the earth in thanksgiving. She was so astonished that she did not even know what was happening to her until she held a child in her lap, beautiful beyond the sons of men.*<sup>18</sup>

Also in the more theological context of other sermons, Henry makes use of women's revelations. When discussing the time and mode of the assumption of the virgin Mary's soul and body, for example, Henry turns to the revelations of Elisabeth of Schönau and of Bridget of Sweden.<sup>19</sup>

Henry of Coesfeld was not the only authoritative voice in the Low Countries to adduce such revelations. Also Geert Grote of Deventer (d. 1384), initiator of the *Devotio moderna* movement, who had stayed at the charterhouse of Monnikhuizen near Arnhem under Henry of Coesfeld's priorate, identified revelations as one of the four subjects suitable for meditation. In a sermon on Nativity, he particularly

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*immo divinum adorante misterium multitudine celestis exercitus peperit filium suum primogenitum. Quis autem fuerit modus parturitionis eius nobis evangelicus sermo non explicat. Verum modus aliqualiter innuitur in revelationibus illius beate brigitte de suecia que ante paucos annos floruit cuius etiam revelationes a doctoribus dicuntur examinate et invente satis conformes non contrarie sane fidei sic quod nichil in eis ponitur quin pia fide credi possit. Innuitur inquam ibidem quod imminente nocte qua natus est dominus cum esset virgo sacratissima fatigata forsitan ex itinere voluissetque lassa membra parumper quieti dare atque iam incepisset se spoliare vestimentis suis exuissetque si bene recordor calciamenta de pedibus prius studuit flexis genibus orare patrem suum qui in celis est. Et ecce [subito] rapta in excessum mentis prout non erat insolita mirabili visione illustrata est atque dulcissimo gaudio et delectationis dulcore in deo refocillata. Et tunc quidem impleti sunt dies marie ut pareret et peperit secundum quod gabriel sibi promiserat filium suum immo et filium altissimi. Cumque ad se reversa fuisset vidit infantulum super nudam humum [nudum] iacentem et vagientem amareque plorantem. Et nimirum castissima puerpera miserta infantis tulit eum ac vilibus pannis quos habere potuit involvit eum et reclinavit eum in presepio quia non erat ei locus in diversorio.*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., fol. 153<sup>v</sup>: *Conformiter satis dicit in revelationibus suis illa sanctimonialis et virgo beata elisabeth se vidisse qualiter beata virgo vicina partui sedebat et cum tempus instaret pariendi ineffabili letitia et iubilo replebatur circumfulsitque eam lux divina ita ut cum stupore cito surgeret. Et infinita humilitate procidens se in gratiarum actione usque in terram declinaret nesciens quomodo sibi esset donec puerum haberet in gremio pre filiis hominum speciosissimum. Hec illa.* Translation taken from: Mechthild of Hackeborn: *The Book of Special Grace*, trans. by BARBARA NEWMAN, New York / Mahwah NJ 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Henry of Coesfeld: 'Sermo in assumptione BMV', in: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS. 1212, fols 142<sup>v</sup>–145<sup>v</sup>, at fol. 143<sup>v</sup>: *Et sic dicit etiam sibi revelatum fuisse illa sancta virgo et sanctimonialis elizabeth circa finem secundi libri revelationum suarum . . .*; fol. 144<sup>v</sup>: *secundum quod ubi supra in revelationibus illius beate elizabeth legitur . . . prout sibi revelatum dicit illa beata brigitta de suecia in revelationibus suis cum oraret ad sepulchrum beate marie virginis . . .*

discusses the usefulness of revelations of particular things, if they are to be mystically understood and they foster higher ascent, and of those revealed generally to the saints, provided they are not at odds with Scripture and good reason, especially if they are in accordance with saintly visions recorded in Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

The case of Denys the Carthusian is especially interesting, as the *doctor exstaticus* was himself the recipient of numerous visions.<sup>21</sup> In a somewhat similar way as described by Geert Grote, Denys tends to discern between visions provided for personal profit, about which it is typically better to remain silent, and visions that are useful to others, in which the receiver is more a tool in the hands of God.<sup>22</sup> In his 'De particulari iudicio', Denys also employs the Augustinian distinction between the exterior vision (*visio exterior*) that appears to the exterior eye, the imaginary vision (*visio imaginaria*) that is formed in the imaginative power, and the intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis et anagogica*) that is brought about through intelligible species and mental illumination, as well as the infusion of light.<sup>23</sup> Denys himself judges revelations to be true and worthy of faith provided that, first, they comply with Scripture; second, they are not dissonant to the Fathers; third, they are agreeing with the Catholic doctors; fourth, they are suitable for spiritual progress and devotion; fifth, if what is foretold in them, is truly fulfilled; and sixth, the visionaries are virtuous and good (although revelations have even occurred to evil people).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Geert Grote: 'Sermo de nativitate Domini', ed. by ALBERT HYMA, Het 'Tractatus de quatuor generibus meditationum sive contemplationum' of 'Sermo de navitate Domini', door Geert Grote, in: Archief voor de Geschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Utrecht 49 (1924), 298–326, at 325–326; trans. by JOHN VAN ENGEN: *Devotio Moderna. Basic Writings*, New York / Mahwah NJ 1988, 117–118: Such revelations of particular things are of little use, except when they are to be mystically (*mistiche*) understood and foster higher ascent; these are found in nearly all those revelations, full of mysteries, vouchsafed to the extraordinary. Most other revelations are proportioned to those who see them, since they are meant primarily for their utility [...] So also the visions and forms of angels and of God himself take a shape appropriate to the acts they are to do or to the bearing of those they are to meet, even when they are saints. But those revelations are especially to be accepted which were revealed generally to the saints and are not at odds with Holy Scripture and good reason, particularly if they are in accord with the visions of the saints recorded in Scripture.

<sup>21</sup> PETER NISSEN: Dionysius de Kartouizer en het testament van Johannes de Lovanio, in: *De Maasgouw. Tijdschrift voor Limburgse geschiedenis en oudheidkunde* 99 (1980), 33–50, at 35–37; JOHANNES MANGEL: Kartäuserorden und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit, in: *Bücher, Bibliotheken und Schriftkultur der Kartäuser. Festgabe zum 65. Geburtstag von Edward Potkowski*, ed. by SÖNKE LORENZ (Contubernium 59), Stuttgart 2002, 289–316, at 297–305; DENNIS D. MARTIN: Carthusians as Advocates of Women Visionary Reformers, in: *Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by JULIAN M. LUXFORD (Medieval Church Studies 14), Turnhout 2008, 127–153, at 138–142.

<sup>22</sup> D. A. MOUGEL: *Dionysius der Karthäuser (1402–1471). Sein Leben, sein Wirken, eine Neuauflage seiner Werke*, Mülheim a.d. Ruhr 1898, 20; NISSEN (n. 21), 36–37; MANGEL (n. 21), 299.

<sup>23</sup> Denys the Carthusian: 'De particulari iudicio', ed. Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera omnia, vol. 41, Tornaci [Tournai] 1912, 419–488, especially art. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 27.

In his 'De dignitate et laudibus BMV', Denys extensively makes use of the revelations of Bridget of Sweden<sup>25</sup>, while also referring to Elisabeth of Spalbeek and Catherine of Siena.<sup>26</sup> When discussing purgatory and hell in his 'De particulari iudicio', Denys specifically mentions the revelations of Bridget of Sweden and Mechthild of Hackeborn, next to the visions of Tundale, a monk of Eynsham, Saint Patrick, Christina the Astonishing, and others.<sup>27</sup> Later the Carthusian again refers to such revelations, including those of Christina and Bridget, in the similar context of his 'De quatuor hominis novissimis'.<sup>28</sup> In his less theological and more exhortatory 'Letter to Catholic Princes', Denys offers a summary statement about the frequent conversations Bridget of Sweden had with Christ regarding the vices and scandalous lives of prelates, princes, and their ministers as well as the terrible judgement that awaits them.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

From this essay, it is clear that influential Carthusian monks in the Low Countries, such as Henry of Coesfeld and Denys the Carthusian, considered women better equipped than men for the forms of devotion that John of Ruusbroec had described as favorable conditions for revelations and rapture. In line with the Brabantine mystical theologian, these Carthusian theologians discerned between revelations in the imaginative power, mostly through the service of good (or evil) spirits, and in the intellectual power, directly caused by God.

From a closer look at some sermons and tracts, it becomes apparent that influential authors inside and outside of the Carthusian Order in the Low Countries were not just interested in late-medieval visionaries as so-called "advocates of reform".<sup>30</sup> Henry of Coesfeld turned to approved women's revelations to fill certain gaps in Scripture, e.g., when discussing the Virgin Mary's parturition. Along similar lines, Geert Grote considered revelations to a certain extent as profitable material for meditation, next to Scripture and the doctors. Moreover, Carthusians such as Henry of Coesfeld and

<sup>25</sup> Denys the Carthusian: 'De dignitate et laudibus BMV', ed. in *Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii Carthusiani Opera omnia*, vol. 36, Tornaci [Tournai] 1908, 11–174, especially lib. 1, art. 6, 8, 19, 24, 27, 30; lib 2, art. 11, 14; lib. 3, art. 18, 30; lib 4, art. 6, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, lib. 2, art. 11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 20–33.

<sup>28</sup> Denys the Carthusian: 'De quatuor hominis novissimis', ed. *Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera omnia*, vol. 41, Tornaci [Tournai] 1912, 489–594, especially art. 47–54.

<sup>29</sup> MARTIN (n. 21), 142.

<sup>30</sup> JOHANNES MANGEI: Die Bedeutung der Kartäuser für die Überlieferung der 'Visio Edmundi monachi de Eynsham', in: 'Visio Edmundi monachi de Eynsham'. *Interdisziplinäre Studien zur mittelalterlichen Visionsliteratur*, ed. by THOMAS EHLEN et al. (ScriptOralia 105), Tübingen 1998, 135–164, at 154–160; MARTIN (n. 21), 137, 142, 151, 153.

Denys the Carthusian were especially willing to grant authority to women's revelations in a more theological context, such as a technical discussion of the mode of the Virgin Mary's assumption or an extensive treatment of purgatory and hell.

To cite the revelations of women such as Bridget of Sweden in a theological argument is certainly something that would abhor many a scholastic theologian.<sup>31</sup> However, one should not simply conclude that Carthusian monks were advocating an uncritical reception of revelations. In fact, a common thread running through all of the cited texts is that they reflect concerns about the relative usefulness of revelations and about the discernment of true and false revelations. Hence, the interpretation of what could be considered as part of the tradition is often what is at stake. In this context, authors such as Henry of Coesfeld used the terms "to agree" (*concordare*) and "to accord" (*consonare*).<sup>32</sup>

That the influence of visionary women extended beyond the reformist literature of the Later Middle Ages, can be seen in the early Netherlandish painting of the fifteenth century, in which the iconography of the Nativity shows significant parallels to the aforementioned visions of Bridget of Sweden and Mechthild of Hackeborn.<sup>33</sup> Hence, it could be argued that authoritative voices among the Carthusians and the early modern devout contributed to a climate in the Low Countries in which it became increasingly accepted to make use of women's revelations in composing theological treatises, preaching material, and works of art.

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<sup>31</sup> For the case of Jean Gerson, see BRIAN PATRICK MCGUIRE: *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*, University Park PA 2005, 318; BARBARA OBRIST: *The Swedish Visionary Saint Bridget*, in: *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. by KATHARINE M. WILSON, Manchester 1984, 227–251, at 236.

<sup>32</sup> GAENS (n. 9), 201.

<sup>33</sup> MARIA H. OEN: *Iconography and Visions. St. Birgitta's Revelation of the Nativity of Christ*, in: *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art. Iconography, Iconology and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, ed. by LENA EVA LIEPE (*Studies in Iconography. Themes and Variations*), Kalamazoo 2019, 212–237.