

Faith and Protest: Then and Now, Medieval Womens' Literary Protest Strategies, Focussing on Marguerite Porete's Mystical Treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and its Possible Relevance to Current Issues Surrounding Faith and South African Realities¹

Leila Hassim²

Abstract

This article considers the application of two counter-cultural issues of faith taken from a thirteenth century French manuscript to current issues of faith in South Africa. The thirteenth century French manuscript is a mystical treatise by Marguerite Porete who was burned at the stake for her ideas of faith, and the current issue of faith in South Africa is the charismatic movement currently flourishing on the South African landscape.

Introduction

What does a thirteenth century spiritual treatise, credited to a woman whom it is thought resided in northern France in Valenciennes but hailed from Hainut (a county loosely connected to the German Empire) and who was burned at the stake, have to do with issues of faith in current South Africa? The separation between the two by time, geography and culture would have one think that there can be no link. Yet a closer look at Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* would have one consider that Marguerite was dealing with issues not unlike those South African women are currently facing. Two such issues are reclamation of autonomy and arguing for the allowance of contrasting diversity.³

¹ This article is relative to research for Ms Hassim's Literature PhD, the working title of which is: "Liminality and Aspects of Divinity in Two Late Medieval Mystical Texts": Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Both texts deal with issues of faith and how divinity might be experienced by, and present itself to, individuals and society.

² Leila Hassim, (PhD.) is a Fellow at St. Augustine College. Her field of interest is in issues of faith as presented in medieval literary texts and especially women's roles and contributions. Email: <l.hassim@staugustine.ac.za>.

³ Clarification of this statement unfolds as the discourse progresses.

What is generally considered by scholars to be Marguerite's social critique is embedded in *The Mirror's* spiritual theme. The theological and social aspects of the text are intertwined and not easily distinguishable. No attempt at disentanglement will be made here. Instead, *The Mirror's* less obvious counter-cultural formulations which are implied in the text's theological discussion and which are rooted in the female experience and how that relates to current issues of faith in the South African context, will be discussed. The focus will be on two of Marguerite's heterodox spiritual sentiments and how that might be used as a filter in order to arrive at a nuanced comprehension of emerging and flourishing charismatic movements. For the purposes of this paper, charismatic movements will mean "the innumerable churches and sensibilities that are phenomenologically Pentecostal or charismatic – i.e. manifesting many of the charisms central to Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality – but self-identify in ways that include neither the word "Pentecostal" nor "charismatic." It is worth noting that most [charismatics] simply understand themselves as "Christian," considering their religious experience to be more or less a normal part of Christian life."⁴

It is not to be understood that Marguerite's mystical treatise is a thirteenth century equivalent of, or that it in any way forms a basis for, or supports, charismatic movements in South Africa. It is to be understood that *The Mirror* only lends itself as a means to understanding religious variance as it presents itself in any given society. It is also not to be understood that this paper has as its basis a theological departure point. The discourse for this paper is rooted in a literary exploration of Marguerite Porete's mystical treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and the literary exploration is applied to an empirical understanding of a current phenomenon, that is, charismatic movements in South Africa. The following point has already been made in the previous paragraph but in the interest of avoiding any confusion as to how Marguerite's treatise is being applied, I repeat it here: Marguerite's treatise is a spiritual one. The unorthodox spiritual tenets of her treatise lend themselves to being used as a lens through which one can filter the social ethics that are inherent in charismatic movements. To read this paper as one which reduces Marguerite's treatise to a social critique would be to misunderstand the application of a thirteenth century spiritual treatise to a modern religious movement. It must be understood that Marguerite's treatise is being applied only as a means to filter empirically understood social ethics of charismatic movements.

⁴ Amos Yong, "The Emerging Field of World Christianity: A Renewal Reading of the Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity," *Journal of World Christianity* 4, No.1 (2011): 27-43.

***The Mirror* in Context and how it is Relevant to Current South African Realities Regarding Faith**

The Mirror of Simple Souls is a medieval manuscript widely accepted to be the work of Marguerite Porete and produced between the years 1285 to 1306.⁵ In 1310⁶ Marguerite was executed for refusing to recant 'the heterodox tenets of her ideas.'⁷ There is speculation that Marguerite might have been a Beguine.⁸ Beguines were lay religious women who in their shared adversity as marginalised medieval women-folk, formed quasi-autonomous communities dedicated to humanitarian efforts and lifestyles of solitary religious worship and who were recognised but not necessarily endorsed by the Catholic Church.⁹ This sub-culture arose out of an awareness that medieval women had of their marginalised status. Beguines did not necessarily consciously choose to form a sub-culture. Rather, it seems that women, being aware of their social restrictions, consciously chose an alternative lifestyle. Due to the increase in the number of women who exercised the choice of a solitary and mendicant lifestyle, Beguines and Beguinages developed spontaneously as a semi-organised subculture. Whilst Beguines were recognised by the Catholic Church and some Beguinages enjoyed the patronage of endorsed clergy and aristocrats, not all Beguines were subject to this privilege and were, generally speaking, viewed suspiciously due to their choice of living on the margins of society. Just as noteworthy is the fact that Beguines were not heretical *per se*. Unfortunately for Marguerite, she happened to be condemned for heresy but this does not mean that the movement itself was, and that all Beguines (or even mystics) were heretical.

To illustrate the relevance of a thirteenth century document's postulations to current issues of faith in South Africa it is necessary at this point to consider a few similarities between fourteenth century Beguinages and charismatics. First, like the Beguines, the persons constituting charismatic movements are seemingly lay-religious. Second, like the Beguines, members of charismatic movements seem to practise a form of religious worship that does not conform to mainstream liturgy. Third, like the Beguinages that received recognition but little or no

⁵ Robert Lerner, "New Light on the Mirror of Simple Souls," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 91-116.

⁶ Maria Litchman, "Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls: Inverted Reflection of Self, Society and God," *Studia Mystica* 16 (1995): 4-29.

⁷ Katherine Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984): vx.

⁸ Edmund Colledge, OSA., J. C. Marler and J. Grant, "Introductory Interpretative Essay," *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, by Marguerite Porete, trans. E. Colledge, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991): xlviii.

⁹ Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs* 14.2 (Winter 1989): 321-341.

endorsement from the Catholic Church, charismatics are recognised as a feature of the South African religious landscape but are seemingly not endorsed by any of the centralised, established Abrahamic institutions or by any of the latter's associations. In fact, it seems that charismatics are self-endorsed. That is not to say that charismatic movements and their members' experiences are any less authentic. It is pointed out here only to show that a given parallel exists between two religious groups so far removed by time, geography and culture. Fourth, Beguine communities seemed to form spontaneously but not necessarily arbitrarily and operated quasi-autonomously. So too it seems, do charismatic movements. Fifth, in so far as the Beguines' and charismatics' religious practise seem to be at variance with society as a whole, both could be referred to as religious sub-cultures: the Beguines in their overall lifestyle and charismatics in their individual character. However, just as there are similarities between the two groups there are also differences.

First, the Beguines formed a sub-culture due to their knowledge of themselves as marginalised women and responded according to that self-knowledge. Charismatics seem to assemble under a different kind of self-knowledge than that of the Beguines. Second, Beguines generally lead ascetic lifestyles whereas charismatics (and seemingly the principals of the movements) seem to lead more worldly lifestyles. Paradoxically, these differences still reveal given parallels between the two unorthodox faith communities and thus compound the idea that Marguerite's thirteenth century *Mirror* is relevant within the context of current South African issues of faith.

So what are we to make of the charismatic-church phenomenon? In order to understand the phenomenon we could look at commonalities in charismatics' self-knowledge because it is that self-knowledge and a recognition of a similar knowledge in another that draws individuals together, thus creating a potential charismatic movement because surely the gatherings are not arbitrary, and surely it is in response to some or other 'thing'? Furthermore, we could also look at the ministry that charismatic movements espouse in order to understand what in the ministry resonates with the congregation and thus holds individuals in fellowship. But this paper is not a study about charismatic movements but about how a thirteenth century's spiritual treatise may be used as a filter through which to view charismatics so as to augment our understanding of the phenomena. So we will turn our attention to applying *The Mirror's* counter-cultural spiritual sentiments to charismatic movements in the hope that we might arrive at a nuanced comprehension of the phenomena.

Annihilating the Soul, or being 'Saved', as a Means to Reclaim Autonomy

The full title of Marguerite's mystical treatise reads *The Mirror of Simple Souls brought to nothing, and who live only in the will and desire for Love*. The words 'brought to nothing' and 'live' introduces the juxtaposing concepts of life and death, ascent and descent, and creation and 'de-creation'¹⁰ all of which relates to the text's theme of liberation via annihilation. That is, it is through the death of the external that the internal starts to live: zoning out external forces that an individual is subject to, awakens an internal guiding force. That internal force is the soul who is already in union with God. This concept links to Marguerite's protest against religious authorities having control over the minutiae of the lives of individuals, such as the 1215 Catholic Church's ruling of ministering to the laity and making communion, confession and penance obligatory.¹¹ This means that late medieval religious worship and ritual was characteristically a public act, not a private one. Mass was a corporate activity and the community would ideally gather for the various daily religious rituals. Thus, religious worship had become increasingly 'clericalised.'¹² Marguerite takes issue with such forces when in the prologue she pointedly says 'Men of theology and scholars ... /Will never understand this writing properly.' So if Marguerite's notion of annihilating the soul might be a response to repressive legislation from an ecclesiastical source and is what birthed *The Mirror*, what is it that births charismatic movements and/or, what might they be responding to? To answer this question we have to explore the parallels between the two communities further.

Given the Catholic Church's 1215 ruling of intervention in the lives of the laity it is unsurprising to find that early on in *The Mirror* there is an entire chapter dedicated to arguing for autonomy and liberation from centralised religious authority. Chapter four of *The Mirror* is a soliloquy by the interlocutor Love, the main thrust of which is a desire for freedom from external religious dictates. External religious dictates here mean the many and varied tiers that formal theology postulates are the means towards reaching union with God. These tiers, I contend, can range from basic liturgical practice, to attending mass, to tithing, to dressing in a

¹⁰ William Pratt, *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1996), 183.

¹¹ Caroline Dinshaw and D. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

¹² Valerie Edden, "The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Late Middle Ages," *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts: Christianity and Culture: Issues in Teaching and Research* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 38-40.

particular religious manner, to formal theological study, and so on. Accessing God through these steps only becomes accessible by attending to this kind of religious prescription or, as was the case in the early thirteenth century, via endorsed clergy/institution/patron. What Love claims in chapter four is that one is accountable only to the self because the self is considered as being in union with God. This Bonaventurian perspective sees God and the individual as one and as such postulates that there is no need for mediation or to attend to religious prescription because accessing God is as simple as inner contemplation which leads to the self-dissolving into divinity. In the opening line Love makes clear her deviation from obligation to man-made laws (religious prescription) by using the words 'to no created thing.'¹³ Furthermore, the charity that Marguerite speaks about rests upon the notion of complete abandonment to an inner self which recognises that it is in union with God. Because the inner being is in union with God, it does not recognise any external authority that seeks to contain it.

The concept of charity has numerous functions here. It operates in the biblical sense in that it is a form of tithing. It can mean a state of mind or a state of being. It works as a personification in that the abstract becomes embodied in an interlocutor named Charity. From this personification of the word and concept flows its metaphysical sense and application which suggests complete abandonment of Marguerite's self, that is, her soul as it transmutes into the divine soul. In other words, the act of charity is the complete surrender of the human soul so that it no longer exists except in a state of perfection in that it is at once the divine spirit. Could this thirteenth century notion of annihilating the human soul possibly be what charismatics call being 'saved'? Certainly the notion of being saved seems to permeate charismatic rhetoric as does the notion of annihilating the human soul in *The Mirror*. Could it be then that what charismatics call 'saved' is what Marguerite wrote about eight hundred years ago? That is, the complete surrender of the human soul to the divine spirit constitutes the perfect act of charity and is what it means to be 'saved'? Before we can answer this question we have to look at what 'saved' means and what it is 'saved' persons consider themselves saved from.

Empirically speaking, 'saved' seems to indicate a desire and acceptance of material and spiritual blessings as opposed to abandonment of such. This notion of 'saved' seems contrary to the understanding that to be a

¹³ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. College, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 13.

'Christian' means to be Christ-like, that is, to imitate Jesus in humbleness and simplicity and so on. However, empirically speaking, the notion of 'saved' also seems to indicate a surrendering of personal angst in favour of a spiritual force that exists beyond human comprehension and which directs the lives of the 'saved' persons. So, in answer to the question is Marguerite's thirteenth century idea of annihilating the soul today's idea of being 'saved', I would answer yes. Some would argue that being 'saved' seems incomplete and artificial in so far as the human soul is not entirely abandoned because the state of being is still a corrupt human form that aspires to the purity of the divine. Charismatics then, by this argument, fall short of actually annihilating the soul. To annihilate the soul, according to Marguerite and the aforementioned contention, means to go beyond human limits and the notion of being 'saved' seems only an expression indicative of dedication to religious living within human limits. I contend that both notions, that is annihilating the soul and being 'saved', by implication, mean that one is wholly liberated from strife, be that external and concrete and/or internal and intangible. Thus, by my thinking, the two notions are similar. By this latter argument, to be 'saved' or for a soul to be annihilated, means to abide by the Bonaventurian reckoning that God is innate and not by Aquinas's philosophy that God is external.¹⁴

So what are persons 'saved' from? I would say from the visceral and/or cerebral human response to external and/or internal struggle, because ceding to struggle would mean severance from the ultra-pure free-flow state that is divinity which by Marguerite's postulations is characterised by dissociating from strife and an absence of accountability. That is, if we are to believe Marguerite's descriptions of being in a sublime unification with spirit. This latter conclusion we arrive at via a reading of the whole of Marguerite's mystical treatise and how she describes what it is like when the human soul has transmuted into the divine spirit. Chapter four – being only one of many sections in the text that is at pains to explain this ineffable state of being – implies that unification with divinity means that one's consciousness is in a flow state that comprehends neither good nor bad because its God-essence is incorruptible and that free will is actually divine will in disguise. Again, this theory resonates with Bonaventura's philosophy.

Following on then from the aforementioned philosophy, it is important to bear in mind that annihilating the soul and being saved are notions that

¹⁴ Richard McKeon, "Philosophy and Theology, History and Science in the Thought of Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36.3 (July-Sept. 1975): 193-212.

at first glance seem to be at variance with each other but may actually be notions referring to the same idea but that that idea applies differently according to era. For the Beguines it meant living ascetic and mendicant lifestyles coupled with humanitarian activities. For charismatics it seems to connote existential and egalitarian activity that seem to mimic Marguerite's discourse on the conduct of annihilated souls. For example, Marguerite's theory that annihilated souls answer to no central authority but God resonates in the fact that some charismatics are self-endorsing. The anxiety about conforming to social and religious stricture exposes itself in Marguerite's annihilation-of-the-soul discourse as well as in charismatic movement's self-endorsement. For Marguerite there appears to be a desire to surrender to uninhibited freedom. There is a sense of the desire to release a deeply hidden and suppressed natural being who knows only pure love and no corruption. The analogy Marguerite uses in chapter twenty-nine when Love explains to Reason the state of being an annihilated soul is in when in union with God is that of a child who cannot tell the difference between safety and danger or wrong and right because it is so immersed in its own pleasure and in its own naturalness that it is actually behaving according to divine will. What Marguerite is communicating is a desire for freedom from social dictates and constraints and immersion in a pleasurable spiritual identity. It is also a communication of a desire to be self-possessed in that the inner-being recognises that it is in harmony with the divine and as such is not accountable to anyone or anything because whatever its undertakings, they are undertakings by recognition of an innate divine consciousness exercising itself. This, I contend, is what charismatics are communicating in their existence and presence on the religious landscape and in their deviation from normative religious practise in that their practise mimics Marguerite's description of annihilated souls. That is, based on their unorthodox style and character, charismatics are not only expressing the desire to immerse themselves in spiritual freedom but are also signalling their release from centralised religious authority and the desire to personally fulfil their needs, be that spiritual or worldly.

Centralised religious authority seems to be one of the structural forces charismatics might be responding to given that mainstream authoritative ecclesiastical endorsement is largely absent from these communities. The notion of entitlement by right of divine consciousness is aptly captured in the ministry of prosperity theology, for example. The move by Charismatics away from mainstream churches towards a decentralised, semi-organised and quasi-autonomous community, such as that experienced by Beguines, now starts to make sense. It is the promise of freedom from strife embedded in the prosperity ministry of some charismatics that seems to resonate with congregations whose members

lives seem at times to be filled with strife in any given sense of the word for, philosophically speaking, every person seeks the kind of fulfilment espoused in the Bible. It is the promise of freedom from strife as detailed in Marguerite's annihilation discourse and as applied in charismatics' application of the notion 'saved', that seems to bring members to assembly. However, it is to be noted that this might be only one of many variables at work. The spontaneous assemblies are, I contend, not arbitrary but are of themselves an existential response to the desire for socio-economic and spiritual upliftment, perhaps due to a failure on the part of mainstream churches and/or government to fulfil the socio-economic and spiritual needs of their members – not unlike the Beguinages whose female members socio-economic and spiritual needs were not being met by society, government and the Catholic Church. We can speculate about whether or not those needs were being fulfilled in life as a Beguine, and similarly we can only speculate about whether or not women's needs are being met within charismatic movements. The matter is raised here to illustrate that the issue needs investigation.

Marguerite's annihilation discourse is a call for liberty of conscience. It espouses the notion that because God is pure love, a soul can only enact and embody that love. Marguerite argues that the divine conscience is in control of human will when human will completely surrenders to it. Thus the proposal is freedom of conscience as opposed to moral policing. For women in charismatic movements liberty of conscience could mean less vilification regarding given historical religious perspectives of women as 'temptress' of Adam and thus responsible for mankind's fall from grace. Charismatic movements also make upward mobility within church more accessible for women due to there being little or no prescriptive endorsing religious authority, as is sometimes the case in mainstream Abrahamic organisations. Hence, for women in charismatic churches, there seem to be little or no oppressive forces at work and thus women in these organisations seem to enjoy more 'freedoms' than those in orthodox mainstream religious organisations. In these three senses then, it could be said that women enjoy liberty of conscience within charismatic movements.

The discourse on the annihilation of the soul is also an assertion for an independent spirituality informed by subjective religious experience and not only informed by organised religion, and Marguerite frames this assertion within mysticism. This is one of the ways that Marguerite circumvents dogmatic theology and social restriction and puts out the idea that a society without systematically enforced strictures is possible. It is important to bear in mind that during Marguerite's lifetime many Templars, Cathars, Waldensians and others, met their fate under papal

and/or regency initiated orders for refusal to cede to authority. In essence, then, *The Mirror* promulgates a refusal to conformability when and where no wrong is deemed to have been done, especially on the part of those subject to conventional strictures. Perhaps this is a charismatic perspective, given that it seems it is not deemed morally questionable when some charismatics (mostly the figureheads) flourish materially whilst the larger congregation seems to not only fund that prosperity but also seem to spiritually feed off the success of the figureheads. Perhaps charismatics are themselves the embodiment of the child-like innocence that Marguerite speaks of that is synonymous with being in union with divinity. But what then is the significance of this child-like innocence for women in charismatic movements? One speculative answer could be that in charismatic movements, the seemingly lesser vilification of Eve births a perspective that regards women as irreproachable which, in turn, confers upon women a child-like innocence, one that is susceptible to corruption by malicious force as played out in the story of Eve and the snake in the Garden of Eden in the Bible. From this perspective women are not seen as evil temptresses but rather as innocent victims themselves. Ultimately, though, it may be that the charismatic phenomenon is just a demonstration – like Marguerite’s *Mirror* is a theory – of alternative spiritual precepts which simultaneously function as a voice-over for critiquing the norms of society. In short, Marguerite’s *Mirror* and charismatic movements’ presence and unorthodox ministry presents subversive objection to normative sociological and theological discourse and both make arguments about existentialism and egalitarianism. Certainly, like *The Mirror* in theory challenged its era’s conventional notions of wrong and right, charismatics by their existence and *modus operandi*, are challenging contemporary conventions regarding moral and religious codes.

The Case for Heterogeneity and Universalism

The inherent polarities that seem to co-exist in *The Mirror* reveal Marguerite’s articulation of a desire for the accommodation and acceptance of diversity and heterogeneity. I do not use diversity and heterogeneity in the modern political understanding of the words. Here, it implies the following Augustinian thinking: systems exist. Systems exist within systems. There are categories of systems, be that human, animal, spiritual and so on. Each system has a unique character that appears to contradict that of other systems. However, units in a system, and systems themselves, synergise in their space and place towards a unifying wholeness despite their seeming contradictory appearance,

function and chaotic interaction.¹⁵ We could relate this to Marguerite's social reality. French religious population during the fourteenth century included Cathars, Waldensians, Beguines, Jews, Franciscans, Dominicans, and so on. All desired the same outcome, that is alignment with God. However, practise and custom differed and the variations seemed to contradict each other. Unhindered, this seemingly chaotic human-scape is actually cohesive because their commonality is their contemplation of God. Thus, despite their differences their commonality holds them in unity. Bearing this in mind then, diversity and heterogeneity as it applies here, refers to overall multiplicity as opposed to the current political understanding of it, which only implies variety in culture and race in human society.

We cannot, however, ignore the political aspect of diversity and heterogeneity altogether. Within the historical context, politics deserves some mention because Marguerite's environment informed her discourse in the same way that charismatics' environments inform their establishment and practice. Let us consider, for example, the fact that there is a diverse cast of forty-one characters in *The Mirror*. All these characters orbit three main characters, namely Reason, the Soul and Lady Love, at random intervals. Each of these characters relate to government (religious and political), the individual and God respectively. What Marguerite seems to be doing in casting numerous and contrasting interlocutors held together by three main cast members is what Richard Rohr might call trying to 'find a higher order inside constant disorder.'¹⁶ When we place this assertion in the historical context we see that Marguerite could be commenting on the suppression and slaughter of various religious sects – some of which were endorsed – that sprouted during the medieval era such as the Cathars, Waldensians, Beguines, Templars and Jews. The presence of various faith communities in fourteenth century France constituted an array of differing beliefs and customs, all of which claimed to answer to and worship only, God. In her discussion on the meditation of love in chapters twenty-seven to twenty-eight, Love asserts that all souls share a common will. That is, the souls belonging to the various sects present differently yet the basic and common tenet is their meditation of Love/God. This reiterates the idea of systems synergising towards a unifying wholeness. It is borne in mind that whilst the discussion at this point in the dialogue is only between Love and The Soul and is about their will combining, at an alternative

¹⁵ Arthur Hillary Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (London: Methuen and Company, 1986), 221.

¹⁶ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 2011), 59.

level The Soul also functions as the layman, that is, the medieval world's Every(wo)man. Therefore, whilst the conversation between Love and The Soul is about these two characters' wills specifically, there is sub-textual comment about the soul of Every(wo)man meditating on pure love, such as that exercised by anchorites, Beguines, Cathars, Templars and so on. However, it is not being suggested here that Beguines are the equivalent of Cathars, Waldensians, Templars, Jews, and so on. What is being pointed out is that Marguerite was sensitive to variation within her environment and alludes to this lyrically in chapter twenty-two which is titled, 'Here the Soul begins her song'. Interestingly, there, Marguerite gives recognition to 'priests, and clerics, the Preachers/The Austin Friars, the Carmelites, and the Friars Minor'¹⁷ at a point in the narrative trajectory when the soul has transmuted with divinity. The significance of this is that at a spiritual level of comprehension Marguerite acknowledges and accommodates variance and especially that which differs from hers.

It is not a stretch to link Marguerite's theory of differing cultural practices all working towards the same goal, that being unity with God, to the vast array of faith communities in current South Africa. I assert that Marguerite's socio-cultural religious environment was not all that different to the current socio-cultural religious environment in South Africa in the sense that there are many and varied charismatic churches co-existing with many and varied endorsed, mainstream churches. In the preceding paragraph we could substitute the medieval religious movements with current religious organisations such as Catholics, Protestants, Moslems, and so on. The point is that the religious landscape is as varied now in South Africa as it was in medieval France, despite the space, time and cultural differences. Hence it is not a stretch to link Marguerite's notion of what constitutes the soul to the individuals that constitute charismatic churches and other mainstream religious practices. Furthermore, I contend that current 'souls', to use Marguerite's nomenclature, function according to the aforementioned Augustinian philosophy. That is, despite their seeming contradictory appearance and practice, their commonality is their contemplation of God and in that contemplation they sometimes unwittingly and sometimes consciously synergise towards a unifying whole, despite their contradictory and chaotic interaction. There are many examples of unwitting synergy towards a unifying wholeness. I shall mention only two recent ones. One occurred in Kenya when Kenyan Moslems protected Christians on a bus during a terrorist

¹⁷ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. College, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 152.

attack.¹⁸ Another occurred during the protests at South African universities when white students surrounded black protesting students knowing and realising that as white students they were less likely to be harmed by riot police.¹⁹ Surely the Kenyan Moslems and the white South African students did not organise and plan on those days to take moral stands? Their incidental virtuous conduct serves here to illustrate the Augustinian theory that despite contrasting differences and chaotic interaction, everybody and everything synergises towards a unifying whole. For an example of conscious synergetic activity that seeks universalism we can look at 'The House of One' being constructed in Berlin. This undertaking is a conscious effort headed by a rabbi, a priest and an imam in conjunction with their congregations to set up a singular building to stand as a place of worship for all three religious sects.²⁰ This project is in and of itself testimony to the argument that chaotic interaction seems divisive even polemic, but is actually at a deeper level of understanding, synergy towards unification in its deliberation of the divine.

In *The Mirror* Love says 'This soul gives to Nature whatever she asks of her.'²¹ This implies that we cannot judge an individual's response to an inner prompt, be that active or passive or a bit of both, and responses are neither good nor bad given that free will is divine will in disguise. More to the point, Love says 'sin is nothing.'²² The implication is that everything is predetermined and nothing is coincidental and what might appear random and morally questionable is actually decided upon at a higher spiritual level. By this understanding then we could philosophise that charismatic churches are functioning units within society and are contributing towards a greater good. Marguerite illustrates this point by using the medieval tropes of book, painting and mirror. On an inter-textual level these medieval tropes enhance Marguerite's protest against exclusive ideology. That is, Beguines are different from Catholics who are different from Cathars and so on. Here we can substitute medieval organisations for current South African ones and the construction could read: Catholics are different from Protestants, who are different from

¹⁸ "Kenyan Muslims Shield Christians in Bus Attack" <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35151967>

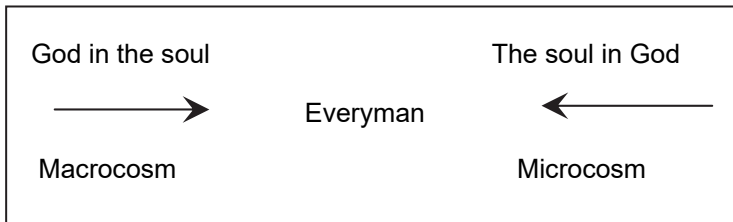
¹⁹ "White Students Form Human Shield To Protect Black # Fees Must Fall Protesters From South African Police," http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/10/22/white-students-form-human-shield-protect-black-protesters-south-african-police_n_8356054.html

²⁰ "Berlin's House of One: a Church, a Mosque and a Synagogue under One Roof" <http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/Jun/25/berlin-house-of-one-unity-christian-muslim-jew>

²¹ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 36.

²² Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 22.

Charismatics and so on. The implication is that at a micro level individuals present differently just as the book, the painting and the mirror are different products. However, at the macro level all are functioning parts of a sameness. The book, the painting and the mirror all have the same purpose which is the ability to reflect. That is, the book reflects society, a painting is a likeness of something and a mirror displays images. Thus, at the macro-level, religious variation is also part of a sameness in that all ponder God. In other words, the book, the painting and the mirror are foils to religious variance and serve to show how things can be different yet the same. The triple imagery of self-reflecting book, mirror and painting serves to compound Marguerite's notion that God reflects in the soul and vice versa. The link to social diversity is situated in the dialogue when the soul moves from speaking about herself only (singular) being an image of God, to referring to how God is reflected in all his creatures (plural). Diagrammatically the construction looks like this:



This depicts God, the macrocosm, resident in the soul, the microcosm, and how that an individual is incorruptible because he/she is in accordance with the divine will which is the permeating presence of the Holy Spirit, and thus, that the divine will is acting through and out of the individual. Hence, we come to see that by Marguerite's articulation diversity is actually similarity. The book and the mirror become unifying concepts that symbolise an all-encompassing macrocosm. Self-reflecting microcosms constitute the macrocosm.

Conclusion

If we abide with Marguerite's recognition of variation and how all differences are actually a sameness, then we have to adjust our perspectives of charismatic churches and instead of viewing them suspiciously like Marguerite was viewed in her day, we might have to view them as part of a functioning macrocosm exercising their variation towards a universal wholeness. The alternative is to maintain a suspicious view of charismatics and conform to what is the general

perception of them as a corrupt form of religious practice. The question we then have to ask ourselves is, if we maintain the latter view, will we be making the same mistake(s) medieval government made when they executed Marguerite at the stake and will we then also be guilty of, in the figurative sense, *auto de fê* in our judgement of apostates? Since this paper's departure is a literary and empirical one regarding issues of faith in South Africa, it does not presume to have an answer or answers but only postulates that *The Mirror* lends itself well to being a filter with which to view the charismatic movement.

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