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Medieval Mystical Narratives as Pre-Modern Utopias: New Conceptualizations of the Religious Experience by Mechthild von Magdeburg and Angela da Foligno

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ABSTRACT

Older research had traditionally assumed that the genre of utopias emerged only with Thomas Morus's *Utopia* (1516), that is, at a time when the concept of the early modern nation had reached maturity and when intellectuals began to question the political *status quo*, looking for political and social alternatives in a future or projected world. Medievalists, however, have argued by now against this myopic and limiting perspective, pointing out, for instance, the genre of the Grail romance (Chretien de Troyes or Wolfram von Eschenbach), the *Tristan* romances (Gottfried von Strassburg), the many different *Alexander* romances, or love narratives (Marie de France) as forerunners of utopias. Carefully considered, medieval mystics can also be identified as strong performers of utopian ideas through their religious narratives reflecting otherworldly experiences, but in a different way than we might assume today from a social-historical perspective. Widening the notion of 'utopia' to incorporate spiritual dimensions where the individual mystic achieves a new level of divine existence, we can recognize many passages in their revelations or visions as intriguing forms of utopias in the general sense of the term because they represent radical alternatives to human life in its spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Medieval Mysticism; Medieval Spirituality; Medieval Utopias; Mechthild von Magdeburg; Angelina da Foligno

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1. Introduction

Mysticism is truly an uncanny phenomenon we cannot approach with rational terms and through rational perspectives. Many scholars have already realized the deep conundrum with mystical narratives or related images and music, alternative media used by the mystics to express the ineffable. Intriguingly, all those documents have been consistently identified as significant expressions especially by medieval women visionaries and their male contemporaries and hence composers of powerful, often rather startling texts (see, for instance, Hildegard of Bingen, Henry Suso, Johannes Tauler, Catherine of Siena, Hadewijch of Brabant, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich). Revelatory narratives open epistemological windows into another realm the readers or listeners are not privy to and yet could simply accept as 'factual' in terms of what the author had to say regarding their extraordinary, extrasensory experience with the Godhead.

Thus, we are left with texts, or images, compositions or even sculptures such as wooden figures of the infant Jesus of a very different kind compared to traditional, canonical works mirroring standard religious practices. If we attempt to apply the notion of utopia to mystical visions, we might be able to approach the latter from an innovative interpretive position, analyzing them in light of the following questions: what the respective authors might have intended with their accounts that contrast so remarkably with the mundane material existence, and what relevance might the individual texts have had within the cultural context and historical developments.

2. Materials and Methods

This literary-religious genre has so far allowed us to recognize, for instance, the enormous potential of a revelation as a medium for women's discovery of their own literacy and creativity, apart from their spiritual experience. We have also noticed the degree to which mystical perspectives and philosophical notions were explored by some of the male mystics (e.g., Meister Eckhart, Heinrich von Nördlingen, St. John of the Cross) who endeavored to explore innovative modes of thinking about God and the individual's relationship with the divine [1,2].

Of note is the degree to which mysticism, as esoteric and ephemeral as it might be, or as ineffable and apophatic as it appeared to the outsiders, has attracted many modern scholars, whether they embraced those spiritually graced individuals as true recipients of God's messages or not [3–6]. Undoubtedly, as it appears to outsiders, mystical revelations, if accepted by the Church authorities, received much respect and granted the visionary enormous authority in religious terms because they were thereby recognized as God's mouthpieces here on earth, and some were even regarded as new prophets like those in the Old Testament [7–11]. Many religious scholars have already observed this phenomenon, but we have not yet fully identified how to describe and characterize this mystical experience in conceptual terms, especially because it often proves to be so ineffable and inaccessible for rational analysis.

Some of the mystics' words reached countless people who saw or heard in them a divine voice, and thus the many spiritual accounts, either in prose or verse, or in a mixture of both genres, as was often the case, served very important purposes for medieval Christian society, as revolutionary as they might have been [12]. Of course, mysticism also existed in other cultures and religions, but for the present argument, I limit myself to medieval Western Europe. Once a mystic, such as Birgitta of Sweden or Margery Kempe, was acknowledged as an individual the Godhead had shown Himself to, or to whom He had spoken personally, there were no limits as to the admiration of that person who was quickly worshipped as a saint because many times miracles were reported having been produced by the mystic as well. But not every mystic was a saint, and not every saint was a mystic. As the cases of Marguerite de Porète and Joan of Arc indicate, however, to claim mystical experiences could also have deadly consequences when they were not acknowledged and identified as heretics—both were burned at the stake in 1310 and 1431 respectively [13–16].

3. Results

There is a plethora of possible approaches to mysticism, ranging from philosophy and theology to feminism, literary research, medicine, psychology, economics, rhetoric, the visual arts, and history. This paper offers a new,

heretofore hardly ever considered perspective, identifying some of the mystical texts as expressions of utopian imagination. Alexandra Verini has recently offered a similar approach, but her study focuses primarily on social conditions. The online abstract summarizes her emphasis as follows: "The utopianism developed within the English convent percolated outwards to unenclosed women's spiritual communities such as Mary Ward's Institute of the Blessed Virgin and the Ferrar family at Little Gidding. Convent-based utopianism further acted as an unrecognized influence on the first English women's literary utopias by authors such as Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell. Collectively, these female communities forged a mode of utopia that drew on the past to imagine new possibilities for themselves as well as for their larger religious and political communities" [17,18]. To do justice to this task, I will first have to define utopia, especially within the medieval context, and legitimate the use of that term with an eye toward the Middle Ages. Then I examine how the concept of utopia could be applied to the mystical discourse within the medieval framework, and finally balance the religious perspectives pursued by the various mystics with the notion of an ideal community, the foundation of a utopia, that is, as a critique of the present world in its material limitations as expressed by Mechthild von Magdeburg and Angela da Foligno.

The real difficulty rests in our perhaps rather limiting modern concept that utopia refers exclusively to a political entity—hence also dystopia in negative terms—whereas here I suggest embracing rather the idea of a community where perfect harmony resides, whatever that might consist of, such as the union of lovers or the merging of the mystical soul with the Godhead. 'U-topia' simply means an alternative world where human dreams are realized unexpectedly and where the individual can expect happiness and personal satisfaction [19,20].

3.1. Conceptual Framework: Utopia in the Middle Ages

Various scholars have explored the potential of identifying the idea of a utopia already in the Middle Ages. Foremost among them, Tomas Tomasek, drawing from a range of previous scholar studies anchored in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, claims that it would be appropriate to define the love cave into which Tristan and Isolde in Gottfried von Strassburg's eponymous romance retire after King Mark had been forced to expel them from court, as a utopian space. He emphasizes that there are numerous possibilities to define a utopia, which makes the terminological issue considerably easier. Nevertheless, if we conceive of utopia as a form of intellectual criticism of the current conditions (political, economic, religious, or social), and this with the goal of establishing a better, a happier world, we have much more flexibility in applying this term to a variety of other conditions [21]. As he emphasizes, an author of a utopian text claims, based on the range of specific historical conditions in place, that a better world can be achieved (my paraphrase). He describes it as follows: "ihr eigentliches Ziel ist der Optimalzustand menschlichen Daseins" (p. 23; their real goal is the optimal condition in human life).

Significantly, Tomasek recognizes that utopia is in principle a "Sprachproblem" (language problem) because it must "das konventionell nicht Sagbare erzwingen" (p. 23); overcome the conventionally ineffable). Through a utopian projection, "neue Sprechweisen" (p. 27), or modes of speech, must be developed that would address innovate perspectives, experiences, and observations. Even a hunch of what could be a utopian world, or simply a better, happier, more fulfilled existence, constitutes a human dream of a future world (pp. 30–32).

Every utopia implies criticism of the present world, which suggests that much of world literature contains at least some utopian elements. For Tomasek, this has the consequence that much of what we define as courtly culture constitutes an ideal dream the poet and his audience tried to imitate or to transform into reality, if not to join or merge with (p. 63). But, if we want to talk about a utopia in Gottfried's *Tristan* (ca. 1210), then it would be a highly intimate community of lovers in contrast to the court at large where many political, ethical, and moral shortcomings have emerged (p. 85) and where true love is no longer quite possible. However, even Tristan and Isolde cannot stay in their cave far away from society for long. Once they are discovered by a huntsman and then King Mark, they actually want, or even need to return to the court, the only place where they can live out their ideal of honor (pp. 177–180), or their sociability.

This move from the remote sylvan isolation back to the royal court and aristocratic company also constitutes one of the essential features of most utopias because, in the classical examples such as Morus's *Utopia*, the protagonist is regularly presented as a 'refugee' from utopia and yet then wants to return to that place, or needs to leave utopia because s/he longs for the social reality. As we will see, this at times seems to be the case with mystics. Living in Paradise, so to speak, is just not sustainable for the human individual, and this is neither for Adam and Eve nor for any of the countless protagonists in medieval romances.

Since the 1920s, scholars such as Alfred Doren, and later Ferdinand Seibt, Gregory Claeys, and Otto Gerhard Oexle have argued against the traditional concept of the political utopia as coined by Thomas Morus (1516), but they tended to limit themselves to the concept of dream visions, longing for Paradise, or other idealized spaces in human imagination [22–25].

It remains a bit ambivalent how to define a utopia, especially if we take it to mean more than only a political community beyond this world, but it is clear that it always represents an alternative, a better, a foreign space where all the problems in this world are overcome or no longer exist [26,27]. From this perspective, we can go one step further and claim that it might be possible to recognize in much of medieval literature efforts to envision utopias, whether we think of the world of King Arthur or the world of the Grail [28–31]. After all, most medieval poets presented ideal images, developed dream concepts, or outlined paradisiacal conditions that normal people could only fancy without ever witnessing or realizing them.

3.2. Mystical Utopias?

The present paper considers two major mystical authors, Mechthild von Magdeburg (d. ca. 1290) and Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) as examples of visionary poets who presented to their audiences alternative forms of religious experiences. Both enjoyed tremendous popularity among their contemporaries and in posterity [32–36], and both left extensive accounts of their experiences in meetings with the Godhead, which they often described in terms of courtly love. Neither one offered a consistent and coherent account of their visions because those came and left them again at irregular intervals. Nevertheless, both, like many other mystics, faced a unique situation of having been enraptured by their spiritual encounters in which they were welcomed as God's bride or companion and could thus form, together with Him, a new 'erotic' companionship, both deeply bonded through love in a stupendous parallel to contemporary courtly or secular love poetry, including Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia*.

I argue that we could describe that spiritual union with the Godhead as an alternative form of utopia in mystical terms [37–41]. In the relevant research literature, however, the topic of the religious utopia is not even considered anywhere because most scholars think of utopia only in political and social terms. Heyer and Saage comment on the radical change in the post-modern world since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and of other totalitarian regimes allegedly leading to the end of utopian discourses, but they reject such a naive perspective and insist on utopia being an integral element of the entire world since antiquity and associate this concept with solidarity, equality, and freedom. Here, I pursue a different notion of utopia predicated on the merging of the self with the Godhead.

After all, these mystics projected an alternative existence where all self-centeredness was eliminated in favor of a utopian union between soul and the divine power. I suggest that accepting such an approach as the basis of utopian thinking makes good sense because the true mystic is elevated out of her/his physical realm and transported, at least in spiritual terms, into another one where s/he can experience not only a complete transformation of the self, but also a deep sense of love and happiness. Just as Tristan and Isolde enjoy their time in the love cave far away from society focused only on each other and living out their love, so do the mystics feel extreme delight in the presence of and union with the Godhead, which creates, so to speak, a third space.

Tomasek already indicated the possibility of reading Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* in light of mystical traditions, especially those developed by Richard of St. Victor for whom love was a delirious experience and ultimately represented a direct encounter with God (pp. 219–224). Our analytic challenge thus consists of identifying the mystical account as well as a narrative strategy to catapult the individual inspired by visions and revelations out of his/her material and social dimension into a new sphere constituting a completely new existence in spiritual

terms. If we keep in mind that the encounter with the Godhead was always a most transformative experience which commonly made the mystic feel deeply excruciated when s/he had to return to her/his own body, it seems reasonable to identify the perspective outlined here as a move toward a utopia in religious terms [42–44].

3.3. Test Case 1: Mechthild von Magdeburg

There is no need to introduce this mystical author in biographical terms, except to reiterate that she was born to parents of a lower aristocratic class in the northern German town of Magdeburg around 1208. She appears to have received a solid religious and secular education and to have been familiar also with courtly culture and poetry at large. Since ca. 1230, she lived as a beguine in the vicinity of the city, although the Church was increasingly skeptical of the independent existence of secular and yet exclusive women's groups at the margin of the Christian community. In ca. 1250, she revealed for the first time her visions to her confessor, the Dominican friar Heinrich of Halle, who was deeply impressed and urged her to record those visions for posterity. In her older age, that is, ca. 1270, Mechthild joined the Cistercian community of Helfta outside of Eisleben, a town today famous particularly because Martin Luther was to be born there in 1483. In Helfta, Mechthild encountered not only a welcoming group of devoted nuns, but especially two other major mystics, Gertrud von Helfta, and Mechthild von Hackeborn, who composed their mystical accounts in Latin. Mechthild, by contrast, knew only Middle Low German and some Latin. Her original work, the *Fließendes Licht der Gottheit* (The Flowing Light of the Godhead), which was later lost, was translated into Middle High German by a group of devotees in Basel under the leadership of Heinrich von Nördlingen [45–47].

Mechthild's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* proves to be a rather challenging text because it is structured just as the title indicates, as a flow of impressions, comments, poems, dialogues, visions, exchanges, and narratives. We cannot easily characterize it and are constantly forced to engage with the mystic's ideas as they emerge randomly in her narratives. We could call her account a kaleidoscope of personal experiences through which her soul was transposed out of her body and into a sphere where she met the divine voice or Love and was granted insights of an extraordinary kind. For our purposes, however, we can easily identify the literary aspects through which the author projected herself and her encounters in specific poetic terms that are accessible to a critical reading.

In the introductory sections, the mystic explains the conditions that led her to write this book. The arbitrary nature of her spiritual reflections implies that the mystic did not and could not pursue a rational line of arguments. For the critical question raised here, this means that I will only focus on representative excerpts of Mechthild's and then Angela's texts to illustrate the degree to which we might be able to identify utopian aspects, or mysticism as a religious utopia.

Beginning with Mechthild, we observe that she constantly reflects on her exchanges between her soul and the Godhead, here labeled simply 'Love' in ever-new approaches Having journeyed for a long time, the soul arrives at the divine court and "gazes at her God in high spirits. Oh, how tenderly is she welcomed there. She remains silent, longing boundlessly for his praise. With great longing he reveals to her his divine heart" (p. 43). The basic elements of the utopia are present, underscored by the physical distance between the material and the spiritual dimension. Although the soul demonstrates profound humility, she is welcomed and accepted, hence invited to join the court, i.e., the Godhead. The divine grace she experiences consists of a mysterious process of self-dissolution into nothing, but then both are "united as water and wine" (p. 43). In this way, she can shed her body, or her physical existence, and merge her soul with the new entity, but this is not to her disadvantage because once all her energy has disappeared, the Godhead demonstrates the strongest love for her: "He is as lovesick for her as he always was" (p. 44). As the subsequent verses indicate, many times, Mechthild draws indirectly from the tradition of courtly love poetry (*Minnesang*) but then exceeds its vocabulary and pronounces Him to be her lover, that is her "flowing fount,/ My sun" (p. 44).

This process of finding her lover and uniting with Him is regularly described as being most painful, yet as necessary because at the end "my soul is in sublime bliss, for she has both gazed upon and embraced her Lover in her arms" (p. 44) [48]. The corollary from this observation invites us to consider erotic love literature such

as Gottfried's *Tristan and Isolde*, Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, or the Middle English *Pearl* poem as comparable narrative works, many containing a strong streak of utopian thinking [49–53]. The closer she gets to the Godhead, the more painful the experience proves to be for the body that is ultimately left behind because the soul is drawn out for the *unio mystica*: "She cannot hold herself in check until he brings her within himself" (p. 44). Speaking becomes impossible, while the spiritual experience takes over her whole being. Although the Godhead then withdraws for a short while, this serves only to intensify the mystical sensation because subsequently He "draws her up again, and gives her a greeting that the body cannot express" (p. 44). In fact, characteristic of mystical discourses, the body does not even understand what the soul has undergone and demonstrates its perplexity as to the experience of having lost the soul temporarily. But both parts no longer understand each other because the soul only wants to be together with the Lover, even at the risk of the body's death: "I am his joy, he is my torment" (p. 44). This profound pain is not seen as a negative; instead, it serves as the catalyst for the soul to liberate itself from the body and thus to achieve the deeply desired union with the divine.

While the nine choirs sing praise to the Godhead, the latter curses the body and pushes it completely away to free the soul as His only beloved: "May your spirit stand in the presence of the Holy Trinity" (p. 45). The soul outlines the triumphant results of the battle with the body, or the material existence, that is, the infinite experience of love: "She loves/And keeps on loving,/And she does not know how to do otherwise" (p. 46). Subsequently, we are increasingly confronted with erotic imagery, which serves as a medium to highlight the spiritual dimension of the other space, or utopia, as I want to suggest here. God says, which might be one of the most famous lines in Mechthild's *Flowing Light*, "I come to my beloved as the dew upon the flower" (47). In fact, the soul is then welcomed in the divine realm and can enjoy absolute bliss: "Welcome, my precious dove./You have flown so keenly over the earth/That your feathers reach to heaven" (p. 47). For God, the mystic's soul tastes like grape, smells like balsam, shines forth like the sun, and it is "an enhancement of my most sublime love" (p. 47). Mechthild, as a poet, attempts to put her visions into words, but she can only draw upon traditional biblical and courtly imagery, and this underscores the true character of the ideal world in which her soul dwells within the Godhead, a utopian realm.

In full conformity with the title with which Mechthild described or summarized her collection of visions, the mystical union is achieved through a flow "forth from the fountain of the everlasting Godhead into the flower of the chosen maid, and the fruit of this flower is an immortal God and a mortal man and a living hope of eternal life" (p. 49). The mystic's soul is transported into the other world, where it enjoys the greatest joy and happiness and no longer wants to return to the body here on earth. Very similar to other poetic expressions of mystical experiences from the following centuries, such as by Angelus Silesius (ca. 1624–1677) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Mechthild points out that "Under this immense force she loses herself,/In this most dazzling light she becomes blind in herself" (p. 49), which she then contrasts with the very opposite vision, turning from darkness to light: "And in this utter blindness she sees most clearly./In this pure clarity she is both dead and living" (p. 49). The very dialectic nature of this imagery indicates that she has a new world in mind where the bodily senses no longer serve their purposes and new perceptions dominate the mystical soul.

The poet works with rhetorical dialectics because her experience constitutes an intellectual conundrum, an epistemological impossibility, or an aporia, as Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1328) was to mirror in his spiritual, or at least theological ruminations [54,55]. There was no way for the mystic to formulate in human terms what she had witnessed or sensed, so her poetic words are only approximations of a utopian encounter: "The longer she is dead, the more blissfully she lives./The more blissfully she lives, the more she experiences./The less she becomes, the more flows to her" (p. 49). Or: "The more she labors, the more contentedly she rests./... /The more quiet her silence, the louder she calls./... the greater the marvels she works with his strength in proportion to her power" (p. 49).

Mechthild drew extensively from courtly love poetry, which she must have been exposed to during her childhood and youth. Statements like the following fully confirm this observation and also signal that her experiences amount to the realization that she had entered a utopian space of utmost delight and love: "The sweeter the kisses

on her mouth become, the more lovingly they gaze at each other/... The more ardent she remains, the sooner she bursts into flame./The more she burns, the more beautifully she glows./The more God's praise is spread abroad, the greater her desire becomes" (p. 50). While the erotic discourse tended to be limited to the experience of longing and hence unrequited love—with the exception of the dawn song and, to some extent, the pastourelle—the mystical experience transcends all limitations and opens a third space where the union of soul and Love is possible.

Even in spatial terms, the revelations transport her soul out of the material dimension into a new location where the new community with God becomes possible. Asked where Christ had become the Bridegroom, we learn: "In the *jubilus* of the Holy Trinity. When God could no longer contain himself, he created the soul and, in his immense love, gave himself to her as her own" (p. 50). Addressing her soul, Mechthild inquires: "What are you made of, Soul, that you ascend so high above all creatures, mingle with the Holy Trinity, and yet remain whole in yourself?" (p. 50). Subsequently, the mystic has the Godhead, or Love, describe itself: "I was made by love in that very place. For that reason no creature is able to give comfort to my noble nature or to open it up except love alone" (p. 50). This then translates into imagery of nursing and motherhood, all associated with the space of the worldly family: "When I was thus the mother of many a banished child, my breasts became so full of the pure, spotless milk of true, generous mercy that I suckled the prophets and sages, even before I was born" (p. 51) [56–59]. Mechthild employs a highly effective strategy of drawing from a basic human experience, of the young mother nursing her child. Everyone was hence able to empathize with this because virtually every infant is suckled by it [60,61]. But even though the image applied here seems to take the spectator/reader/listener back to the ordinary situation in human life, she then transcends it and projects herself as a mother of the Godhead, or of the prophets and saints. In other words, she has entered a mystical space which is not the same as humans would normally conceive of.

How else could a mystic describe this experience if not by means of analogy? Hence, Mechthild draws from common reality and then catapults herself in metaphorical terms far beyond it into a parallel world of the divinity, or, as I suggest here, into a religious utopia. It is, very much as in the case of Gottfried's *Tristan and Isolde*, a utopia based on love between the soul and the Godhead: "Ah, Lord, love me passionately, love me often, and love me long. For the more passionately you love me, the purer I shall become. The more often you love me, the holier I shall become here on earth" (p. 52), a comment that indicates that she knows only too well of her place also in this world, but a deeply transformed one based on her experience. God then responds that He loves the soul because "I am love itself" (p. 52). Thus, the mystico-erotic experience represents a radical turn away from the material existence toward a new reality of pure love, which represents, in many ways, a utopia as well where a higher degree of existence, completely spiritualized, can be found because the merging with the Godhead requires "that one submit to God relinquishing all human control, and that one piously hold on to God's grace and willingly keep it by being forgiving in all things as far as is possible for a human will" (p. 53). A final quote confirms, highlights, and summarizes this astounding perspective: "I long to love him to the death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul... Thus you burn ever more without ever being extinguished as a living flame in the vast fire of high majesty" (p. 53).

3.4. Test Case 2: Angela da Foligno

Within the genre of mystical poetry or writing, we are not surprised about Mechthild's narrative move from the ordinary and material to the spiritual and transcendent. To achieve that goal, mystical authors at times coined new phrases or projected different images to express their extraordinary experiences. However, that is precisely the same operation by any author of utopian narratives, including those dedicated to the political aspect, contrasting the traditional dimension with another one, commonly much superior and better, unless the very opposite, a dystopia, is formulated. To confirm our observations, let us also consider the examples provided by Angela da Foligno, a near contemporary of Mechthild. She was born in Foligno/Umbria in 1248 and died as a Franciscan Tertiary in 1309. Her family seems to have been well off, and she herself married and had several children. When she was forty, however, she had a vision of St. Francis of Assisi, and from then on turned to a much more pious lifestyle. Three years later,

around 1288, first her mother, then her husband and children died. She removed herself from worldly society and divested from all her properties, finally joining the Third Order of the Franciscan, the Tertiaries, leading a pious and humble life, dedicating herself and her quickly growing community of like-minded women to the care of the sick and dying. She experienced many more visions and recorded them, leaving behind after her death both her *Il libro della Beata Angela da Foligno* (Book of Visions and Instructions) and her *Memoriale* (Memorial) [62–66].

In contrast to Mechthild, however, Angela approached her task as a recorder of her visions in a much more systematic fashion and detailed all the steps she felt forced to follow in this effort. Nevertheless, here as well her mystical vision elevates the author to a new spiritual level where Christ invites her to Him and takes her up as His beloved: “while I was standing in prayer, Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side” (p. 128). And: “I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side” (p. 128)—a very physical but also spiritual metaphor of her merging with the beloved Godhead. For a long time, however, Angela had to realize that she was still very far away from the Godhead and could only long for His invitation to join her (p. 129).

Once the distance had been overcome and the mystical vision has set in, Angela found herself being elevated and transformed, rising up to a new world where she experienced utter happiness and delight: “From it [i.e., the mystical union] I received the greatest consolation I had yet experienced. It was so great that for most of that day I remained standing in my cell where I was praying, strictly confined and alone. My heart was so overwhelmed with delight that I fell on the ground and lost my power of speech” (p. 131). Her visions separated her from the people around her, including her Brother Scribe who could not understand her fully and only wrote down what he thought she had told him about the twenty steps toward spiritual penance and then perfection. But Angela found his words dull, inaccurate, and incomprehensible. This went so far that she commented: “The words you read to me do not convey the meaning I intended to convey, and as a result your writing is obscure” (p. 137). In other words, the mystical experience was not fully translatable into human words because it took place in a different space beyond the level where ordinary communication takes place, that is, the physical environment [67,68]. In fact, she sharply criticizes the scribe for his failure to capture what she had to say: “but concerning what is precious in what my soul feels you have written nothing” (p. 138) [69–74]. The poor scribe admitted his inadequacy regarding the task of rendering Angela’s visionary oral account into writing and felt almost ashamed, but thereby he also signaled the divine nature of her revelations that could virtually not be translated into common words. When he had not done confession before the recording session, “everything went so badly for both of us that I could hardly write anything in an orderly way” (p. 138)—orderly because the human and rational concept was no longer available to her.

Nevertheless, as the subsequent account confirms, Angela managed to relate to him understandably enough what the Godhead had told her, so there is a linguistic bridge between the spiritual otherness (utopia) and the normal human world represented particularly by her scribe: “I am the Holy Spirit who comes to you to give you a consolation which you have never tasted before. I will accompany you and be within you until you reach Saint Francis’s church; and no one will notice it. I wish to speak with you on this path and there will be no end to my speaking” (p. 139). Despite all her doubts about the voice from above, and despite her fear of becoming a victim of pride and vanity, she was calmed down and assured of the ultimate truth: “At that I felt a sweetness, an ineffable divine sweetness” (p. 140), which in turn helped her to bridge the divide between the material existence and the divinity that had entered her and beyond her body.

Angela was overjoyed when she realized that this voice was truly the Godhead, the source of all existence, the supra-world, or utopia, an appropriate term for the mystic’s experience and subsequent narrative projection: There is no way that I could possibly render a just account of how great was the joy and sweetness I was feeling, especially when I heard God tell me: “I am the Holy Spirit who enters into your deepest self” (p. 141). The relationship between both is defined as love, as the voice told her: “Thus I will hold you closely to me and much more

closely than can be observed with the eyes of the body... I will never leave you if you love me" (p. 141). The mystic reveals, however, the extent to which she depended on this love coming from the Holy Spirit without which she felt she could no longer exist—a very common experience among mystical authors in the Middle Ages. Her vision had catapulted her out of her life into another dimension, as she describes it constantly in many different images, and from then on she was fully aware of the other world where her lover was waiting for her.

But this love relationship was kept a secret and was not to be divulged, as Angela related to her scribe, quoting what she had heard: "Once back in your home, you will feel a sweetness different from any you have ever experienced. And I will not speak to you then as I have until now; but you will feel me" (p. 143). This mystical sensation made it impossible for her to speak or do anything for many days since she continued to feel the Godhead in her and was thus removed from the material world to a large extent during her ailment. The deep communication and community with the divine separated her from the body and the physical existence because she had resided in a utopian space established by God Himself, and this realization made it impossible for her soul to return quickly or unaffected to her old self (p. 144).

Angela's goal, like that of all other mystics, was to leave her previous corporal life behind and enter the divine space, which we can now characterize as utopia or a third space, although she never specifies it as such with that term, which was at any rate only coined by Morus in 1516. But whenever she related what she had seen or felt, she made it very clear that she had been moved on to a different location and wanted to stay there: "I was in such a delightful contemplative state. I know that I was also very upset because the priest put down the host on the altar too quickly. Christ was so beautiful and so magnificently adorned. He looked like a child of twelve. This vision was a source of such joy for me that I do not believe I will ever lose the joy of it" (p. 147). After all, as we hear next, the Godhead promised her to manifest His glory to all people: "My daughter, sweeter to me than I am to you, my temple, my delight, the heart of God almighty is now upon your heart" (p. 148). In other words, she had already become an integral part of Him, and He a part of her, and she was thus transformed into a member of the new utopia, the other space, although she continued to live in the old physical life as before and thus communicated with and through Him, serving as His mouthpiece.

And yet, which is a characteristic feature of virtually all mystical discourses, the conveyance of the meaning His words into human language remained basically impossible: "In fact, everything he said was so much more delightful, affectionate, and full of meaning that what we are saying about it now seems like absolutely nothing at all" (p. 150). No wonder that we then learn about her own transcendence into a part of a utopian, spiritual space: "In this unction, then, I felt within and without a delight such as I have never experienced at any other time nor in any other circumstance, but I cannot say much—or even little—about it. It was a consolation different from what the others had been because in those other delight-filled moments I desired to immediately leave this world, but in this one I desired a lingering death accompanied with every kind of torment" (pp. 150–151). Of course, the quest for utopia depended on the awareness of this world as well, so Angela intriguingly combines the process of dying with the experience of the spiritual transformation. The perfect mystical union, the *unio mystica*, however, does not take place because the Godhead wants her to continue with her longing, her desire to join with Him: "... I want you to hunger for me, desire me, and languish for me" (p. 153), an indirect reference to the typical experience of the courtly lover.

Altogether, Angela, very similar to Mechthild, turned into God's fervent adherent, loving Him with all her might and strength, being graced by these visions and those overwhelming feelings. Those combined regularly to transport her into the other world of the divine that can be characterized as a utopia, at least in spiritual terms.

4. Conclusions

For Angela, the mystical realm can be found everywhere, so the utopia rests really within this world as well, and so also in all the words she used to explain her experiences to the scribe: "God is present in all those things which you are writing and stands there with you" (p. 154). At the same time, she did not hesitate to create metaphors for the joining with the Godhead, resorting to a traditional

image of a courtly banquet, but now a festive event in another space: “The ones, however, who invited to a special table, and those whom the Lord leads to eat from his own plate and drink from his own cup, are those who wish to know who this good man is who invited them, so that they may learn how to please him” (pp. 159–160). Even though Angela does not project a very specific locality for this event when the soul and the Godhead merge, she perceived this as an opportunity for otherworldliness.

We can now bring all the evidence together and claim that these two mystics, very parallel to many others, operated with a spiritual form of utopia where the *unio mystica* could take place. We are, of course, far away from Thomas Morus’s *Utopia* (1516), which was a social and political construct, but in principle, the similarities are actually quite striking. The mystic’s soul is drawn out from the body and engages in intimate conversations with the Godhead, but the Holy Spirit also enters into the mystic, so there are many points of contact and merging, which all combine to create a new dimension that is both out of this world and yet still somehow part of it.

The concept of ‘utopia’ appears to be very useful in describing the otherwise ineffable phenomenon because the visions or revelations exceed our rational grip and require either faith or a phenomenological description of this movement from the mystic to the Godhead and the other way around. To be sure, the fundamental experiences presented by Mechthild or Angela were predicated on the strong sense of a separation of the soul from the body, hence the transcendence toward the Holy Spirit, or the Godhead. Although the epistemological otherness is never fully overcome for us as readers or listeners, as the Brother Scribe in Angela’s text confirms repeatedly, the concept of the other space, or utopia, proves effective in coming to terms with the experiences presented in these mystical texts.

Considering the consequences for the contemporary, especially secular audiences, it is not difficult to imagine the huge impact of these utopian notions on ordinary people who were told through those narratives that an alternative world where the self would be welcomed by the Godhead would be possible. Of course, the mystics were extraordinary individuals graced by their profound piety and devotion, but the accounts resulting from their experiences signaled that there was an opportunity for each person, lay or ecclesiastic, to free him/herself from the material or physical constraints and reach out to the divine, liberating them from the constraints of a limiting, frustrating, sorrowful existence here on earth, once the right conditions had been met. Altogether, it makes perfect sense to identify some aspects of the mystical discourse, whether abstract or very concrete, as a specific strategy to project a religious utopia.

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