Sweet Communion

Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation

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Introduction

Title

The expression “sweet communion” is based on an eighteenth-century Psalm versification.¹ Because this book describes forms of piety from a period preceding that century, the title is in a certain sense anachronistic. Moreover, it is hardly original. Under the same title, the young Miskotte published a series of reflections in his first congregation’s newsletter already in 1924.² Nevertheless, I have opted for it. The reason is that it captures precisely what this study is all about: the interchange between God and humanity that is called “hidden” or “sweet” because it takes place in heart-to-heart intimacy. This fellowship is also called “hidden” because of its mysterious quality that never fully relinquishes its secrets. God allows his hidden self to be disclosed to some extent, but never to be fathomed. What the forms of spirituality reviewed here have in common is the recognition that they can only stammer what is fundamentally inexpressible.

The term “hidden fellowship” has assumed an identity apart from the Psalm versification, and as such has captured a unique place in the vocabulary of later pietism.³ That is understandable. This combination of words characterizes the sweet communion that pietism understands to be at the heart of piety. The expression may be relatively young, but the reality which it identifies is as old as piety itself. The primary sources that are the foundation for this book are filled with it. Intimate fellowship with God is the heartbeat of the spiritual life examined in these texts.

Theme

The choice of the theme of this work reflects the course of my own life. I was born and was borne witness to in a pietistic environment, and I have carried the scent of that background with me ever since. In my student days and during my early years in the pastorate my interest in this tradition was certainly overshadowed by the strictly reformational and the Kohlbruggian legacies. But

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1. Psalm 25:7 (1773 versification) in Dutch literally says “hidden fellowship,” but is better captured in the English expression “sweet communion”: “Souls find sweet communion with God wherever the fear of him is found.” The Hebrew equivalent, sod, has the meaning—among others—of secret, reliable fellowship. See Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament, ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann (Munich and Zurich, 1976), 144-48.

2. K. H. Miskotte, Als een die dient: volledige uitgave van het “Gemeentebladje Cortgene” (Baarn, 1976), 254-305. The explanation is also included in K. H. Miskotte, In de gecreëerde allemanngading: Keur uit het verspreide werk van prof. dr. K. H. Miskotte (Nijkerk, 1946), 97-120.

around the time that I was preparing my dissertation, the pietists came into focus in a new way. And over the last seven years this interest gradually intensified. Because the terrain of my academic research and teaching not only includes the history of the Reformation, but also that of the Further Reformation, the examination of the last-mentioned tradition and particularly its spirituality constitutes an essential part of my work.

Perhaps I might be permitted to add something else at this point. The choice of the theme for this work was not only motivated by the course of my own life, but also by my deep convictions about life in general. I believe that one of the most serious symptoms of the present crisis in church and culture is the increasing loss of sweet fellowship with God. I also believe that its renewed practice contains healing power. This in no way means that the piety of an earlier era should be imitated, let alone copied exactly. But it does mean that its vitality can inspire an authentic spirituality that is contemporary.

The Further Reformation

In this study attention is focused on dimensions of the spirituality of the Further Reformation, especially its mystical component. I need not provide an extensive discussion and characterization of the Further Reformation. I am content to summarize a few of its main features.

As is generally understood, this seventeenth-century movement strove for a contemporary application of the sixteenth-century Reformation and pleaded for both an inner vitalization of Reformed doctrine and a radical sanctification of life. It is regarded as the Dutch version of an international and inter-confessional movement that along with Anglo-Saxon puritanism and German pietism is designated by the over-arching name “pietism.” Willemm Teellinck, who is properly regarded as the father of the Further Reformation, introduced the Puritan term “further reformation” from England to the Netherlands. In various writings he pleaded for “further reformation of the things entrusted to us.” By so doing he was referring to the frustrating fact that a considerable part of the Dutch population was nominally Reformed, but in practice was not so in the least. The sad condition of Dutch popular culture indicated this.

From the very beginning, the concept of reformation had a dynamic significance, therefore. It functioned more like a verb than a noun, and in so doing it designated the activity of reforming. This process needed to advance further and to be taken more personally. These comparisons assumed a particular relation to the sixteenth-century Reformation. The intent was not to exaggerate it nor to minimize it, but to give it a more precise expression. Representatives of the Further Reformation like Gisbertus Voetius, Johannes Hoornbeeck and Jacobus Koelman were strongly supportive of the agenda: “The church must be continuously reforming because it is reformed” (“Ecclesia semper reformanda,

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4. An orientation is provided in C. Graafland, W. J. op ’t Hof and F. A. van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie: Opnieuw een poging tot begrinsbepaling,” in DNR 19 (1995): 105-84. The literature also refers to this movement as the Second Reformation, but I find the arguments in favor of calling it the Further Reformation more compelling.
Standing on the doctrinal foundations of the Reformation, these pietists wanted to realize its spiritual and ethical implications in a practical godliness (praxis pietatis) in which piety and scrupulousness (pietatis and praecisitas) were corollaries. The movement was temporally parallel with the cultural trend of individualization and was connected with the growing tendency to emphasize the inner life; therefore, it was historically comparable to movements like seventeenth-century Jansenism and quietism.

The Further Reformation developed a comprehensive pastoral psychology by which it intended to provide guidance on the manner in which the applied work of the Holy Spirit brought people to certainty of faith. It achieved its goal through an intense promotional effort and constant preaching. The sermons that it left us are characterized, therefore, not only by exegetical and dogmatic instruction, but especially by a pastoral dialogue designed descriptively as well as prescriptively to build spiritual life. However typical the theocratic spirit and as a result the social relevance of the bulk of the Further Reformation may have been—dimensions that went beyond a purely pietistic ideal—in my estimation, the Further Reformation was primarily a spirituality movement that was focused on the heart.6

On this crucial point, proponents of the Further Reformation certainly attached themselves to the spirituality of the Reformation, but they did not hesitate to combine this continuation with completion. In that regard, they did not hesitate to cross the boundaries of the Reformation and to appeal for assistance to the pre-Reformation’s devotional literature. Just as Reformed scholasticism was driven to advance Reformed theology on an academic level, and in so doing made full use of patristic resources and medieval scholastic instruments,7 the Further Reformation’s movement in spirituality did not fail to consult pre-Reformation sources. To be specific, the spirituality reflected in the Modern Devotion by Thomas à Kempis was held in high regard. His spiritual authority was exceeded only by that of Bernard of Clairvaux, an outspokenly mystical author.

At present, the Reformation and the Further Reformation are repeatedly played off against one another. From the perspective of the Reformation, the Further Reformation would then represent a return to the so-called darkness of the Middle Ages. This perspective is to a great extent unnuanced. But it cannot be put that simply, since the Reformation itself was tied to the Middle Ages with so many threads, particularly its Augustinian theology and spirituality. The recent research of scholars like H. A. Oberman, D. Steinmetz and R. A. Muller has demonstrated this convincingly.8 By not ignoring discontinuity with the

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8. See, for example, Oberman, Spätscholastik und Reformation, vol. 1: Der Herbst der mittelalterlichen Theologie, trans. Martin Rumscheid and Henning Kampen (Zurich, 1965), originally published as The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval
Roman Catholic Middle Ages, particularly with respect to the doctrine of grace, one is less likely to misunderstand the continuity, particularly on the matter of spirituality. The transposition that spirituality experienced did not mean that it was replaced. Undoubtedly, its continuity depended on the common orientation of both the Reformation and medieval theology to the sources of the early church. Virtually all of the reformers had enjoyed an education in Christian humanism and shared the ideal of ad fontes. None of them represented the simplistic Anabaptist perspective that the unique authority of Scripture would render the retooling of the catholic tradition superfluous, let alone forbidden. Luther, Bucer and Calvin—to name only three reformers—certainly knew better than to accord tradition the highest authority, but they nevertheless eagerly emphasized the Reformation’s agreement with the early church, and in so doing the catholicity of their own movement. Their movement was no schism, but a legitimate, biblically purified advance.

This conviction was shared by the Further Reformation. This appears from the fact that the appeal of these later reformers to the spiritual legacy of Bernard and Thomas can be called both quantitative and qualitative. Apparently this understanding of catholicity was so powerful that its representatives drew appreciatively from pre-Reformation sources. The Reformation certainly functioned as a point of reference, but not as the final goal. This introduced an unmistakable ambivalence in its relationship to the Roman Catholic tradition. On the one hand, people emphatically rejected what they regarded as objectionable silt, especially with respect to the doctrines of grace and the sacraments; on the other hand, they adopted a large-hearted integration of pre-Reformation spirituality into their own. In this way, they incorporated such devotional nuggets as meditation, solitude, mysticism and contemplation into their own Reformed framework. In short, in the history of spirituality the Further Reformation was the lively experimentation of a movement that sought its spiritual identity in a synthesis of a reformational and a broadly catholic faith-experience.

Design

This study is not about the doctrinal side of the Further Reformation and even less about its theocratic ideals. What I am interested in is a spiritual-ethical
investigation into both the quality and form as well as into the roots of its spirituality. This design is not entirely new. Interest in the spirituality of the Further Reformation may be found in various publications. Here its content and shape receive attention, as does the influence of the medieval devotional material. In this connection, the dissertation of I. Boot\textsuperscript{10} and especially the extensive investigation of W. J. op ‘t Hof deserve to be mentioned with respect. This literature will be amply consulted in the course of this study. I have utilized its results. In two senses, however, I would also like to complement this research. The first way is by more explicitly surveying how this spirituality is interpreted formally and informally. The second way is by going more deeply into which medieval spiritual themes have worked their way into the Further Reformation legacy, and especially how these later writers integrated them into their own framework. I am well aware of the risks involved in the approach of providing extensive citations. Through repetition, interpretation can sometimes remain underdeveloped. When this pitfall is avoided, however, I think the advantage of providing generous quotations is large. By so doing, the flavor of the sources themselves is most purely protected. Precisely in the genre of spiritual texts, the idioms that they generally employ emerge in their uniquely characteristic significance.

The Main Question

The main question that plays an explicit role in this study is that of the continuity or discontinuity of the Further Reformation’s spirituality with that of the Middle Ages. Are the frequently striking textual comparisons perhaps relativized by the differences in intervening time and context, or is it rather just the other way around, and are the temporal and contextual differences relativized by the agreement found in the textual material? The deeper question of whether a devout medieval person means the same thing as the paragon of pietism when they speak the same words is even weightier. I must admit that I am better at acknowledging this problem than at providing a definitive solution for it. Convinced that both drank from the same spring of word and Spirit, I am inclined to honor the textual analogies as substantive affinities. I will delve into this question only sporadically in the course of my investigation. But throughout it, the texts cited offer a cumulative basis for discerning whether through attentive interpretation a continuity exists that is unmasked as merely apparent, or whether—to turn matters just around—amidst all the apparent discontinuity there is still an actual continuity.

Choices

The number and selection of authors to which I have limited myself are not accidental. The criterion for choosing the medieval authors consists of the degree

\footnote{10. I. Boot, De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied voornamelijk in Nederland: Een onderzoek naar de verhouding tussen Bernard van Clairvaux en de Nadere Reformatie (Woerden, 1971).}
of their spiritual influence on the Further Reformation. W. J. op 't Hof, an exceptional expert in the field of pietism, has documented persuasively that in a selection of Further Reformation works an appreciable amount of material may be recovered from pre-Reformation literature.\textsuperscript{11} His conclusion, which he establishes convincingly, is that among virtually all of the forty (!) pietists explored by him, Bernard of Clairvaux was quoted with the greatest affection and that Thomas à Kempis indisputably captured second place on the list of frequently cited medieval authors. This conclusion justifies my choices of Bernard and Thomas.

As far as figures of the Further Reformation are concerned, my eye fell on Willem Teellinck because he qualifies as the father of the movement; on Theodorus à Brakel on the basis of his decidedly meditative lifestyle; on Wilhelmius à Brakel on the basis of his widespread influence; on Herman Witsius because his devotional insights received expression in an academic setting. I included Guiljelmus Saldenus on the list based on personal preference. His style, mild in temperament and rich with imagery, appeals to me. The omission of men like Gisbertus Voetius, Jodocus van Lodensteyn and Simon Oomius—names that would have worked excellently in this study—are not in the least unqualified. To keep this book within its allotted limits, I had to restrict myself to the five people named. I consider them to be representative of the Further Reformation's spirituality.

\textbf{Concepts}

In the foregoing, concepts were used, two of which require some further explanation. I refer to the terms "spirituality" and "mysticism." Concerning the first concept, much could be said, but I will endeavor to keep it short. I will not get into the diversity of descriptions available.\textsuperscript{12} I am content to clarify what I myself mean when I use the term in this book. Christian spirituality I summarize as the religious disposition that is worked in the heart by the word and Spirit, that is influenced by its time and setting and that takes shape in living before the face of God. I use the concept with a meaning that coincides with that of Christian piety.

Concerning the word "mysticism," I need to be more detailed. This is not to make the matter more complicated, but precisely to avoid the problematic associated with it. The term is both diffuse and loaded. Yet, in my opinion, it is useful as long as a person explains what he means by it. Also in this instance, it


\textsuperscript{12} Among others, I point to C. Aalders, \textit{Spiritualiteit: Geestelijk leven vroeger en nu} (The Hague, 1969); J. Beumer, ed., \textit{Als de hemel de aarde rukt: Spiritualiteit en mystiek—ervaringen} (Kampen, 1989); C. Graafland, \textit{Gereformeerd op zoek naar God: Godsverduistering in het licht van de gereformeerde spiritualiteit} (Kampen, 1993); W. H. Velema, \textit{Nieuw zicht op gereformeerde spiritualiteit} (Kampen, 1990); W. van 't Spijker, ed., \textit{Spiritualiteit} (Kampen, 1993); A. E. McGrath, \textit{Christian Spirituality: An Introduction} (Oxford and Malden, 1999); K. Waaijman, \textit{Spiritualiteit: Vormen, grondslagen, methoden} (Gent and Kampen, 2000). Further, see the various lexicons and handbooks cited throughout this study.
does not make a lot of sense to me to summarize this widespread, not exclusively Christian phenomenon here. I restrict myself to a few basic observations.

I consider the four-fold aspects that Otger Steggink proposes to be important for outlining the uniqueness of Christian mysticism. Phenomenologically, he regards the following elements to be constitutive. The first is when something other breaks through into everyday reality: a vertical intrusion into horizontal existence. The second is an encounter with God which dominates the entirety of life. The third is a union (unio or communio) with God that is the result of the former and by which the soul is “immersed” in God. The fourth is the paradoxical interpretation of this experience, by which the person undergoing it attempts to put into words what essentially cannot be described. A person cannot express it, let alone explain it. But even less can a person resist attempting to give a stammering testimony about what is inexpressible.

What is striking about this approach is that it is apparently not regarded as inherent in mysticism to relinquish the distinction between God and the person. The latter form of mysticism is not imaginary. In it, mystical union does not involve a faith-union with God, but a melting away of one’s being into God. In it, the issue is no longer about a personal experience of fellowship with the God of revelation, but about the boundary-crossing deification of the person. This

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14. Etymologically, the word “mysticism” is derived from the Greek word mystikos, that in turn comes from the verb mnyeo, which means “to close the mouth and eyes.” It also appears to be related to nyoo, “to be initiated into mysteries.” Otto, Het Heilige, 29, thinks that “mysticism” apparently comes from a Sanskrit root word, maeṣṣ, “to perform something mysterious.” Early Christian usage covered three fields: the biblical, the liturgical and the spiritual. In the biblical area, the word “mysticism” was used, for example, by Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD) and Origen (c. 225 AD) regarding the Christ-mystery as the key to understanding the mystical sense of Scripture. Liturgically, it was customary to use it to designate the Lord’s supper (“the pascal mystery”), especially the hidden presence of Christ in the bread and wine. The spiritual use had reference to the experience of Christ’s presence in the word and sacrament—so used for the first time in Origen. He placed great emphasis on the mystical theoria, existential insight into Scripture that preceded ecstasy. See O. Steggink, “Mystik,” in Praktisches Lexicon der Spiritualität, ed. C. Schultze, 904-5.

15. However passive a person might be in such an experience, for it overpowers him by grace, there is certainly a route of entry that leads to it. This is the route of asceticism, meditation and emptying oneself. The threefold way (triplex via) is well-known, and Bonaventure (c. 1217-1274), consistent with an ancient tradition, gave it great weight: purification, illumination, unification (purgatio, illuminatio, unio). Compare F. van der Pol, “Spiritualiteit in de Middeleeuwen,” in Spiritualiteit, ed. van ’t Spijker, 118.

Construal of mysticism is neither required nor satisfactory. What must actually be called mysticism is the faith-knowledge that comes over a person by the word and the Spirit and includes an intimate communion with God himself. One is inclined to speak here of a discovery. This is not unjustified, if only the person understands that the “discovery” covers a broader field than mysticism. The discovery involves not only direct communion with God, but simultaneously the experience that one is indirectly involved with him in the full breadth of one’s existence, in one’s trials and deliverances, one’s cares and one’s blessings. The vertical dimension, the heart of this discovery directly focused on God, is what is designated by the word “mysticism.” Calvin at any rate, did not hesitate to speak of this central point in his pneumatology as the mystical union with Christ. In this regard, he shows that he is in the company of Luther and Bucer.

Now one can naturally observe that mysticism is a typically catholic and medieval phenomenon and be struck by the differences and even the contradictions between the piety of the reformers and that of Rome’s medieval mystics. The points of difference are certainly there. Whoever obscures them does violence to the historical facts. However, in addition to the gaps, undeniable points of contact between them can be identified. The rejection of mysticism by the reformers involved only a certain form of it. This form included, in the first place, a mysticism that functioned as an experiential union in which the boundary between God and humanity was obliterated. It included in the second place a mysticism that was prized and practiced as a meritorious pre-condition for salvation that ignored grace. It included, thirdly, a mysticism restricted to monastic observances. Fourthly, it involved a mysticism that upset the balance between faith and love at the expense of faith. These points of criticism did not produce a break with mysticism as such, however. The judgment of C. Aalders, in translation, seems right to me: “While the reformers strenuously opposed monastic mysticism with its dangerous, self-involved tendencies, it must never be forgotten that an undeniable mysticism also developed in the churches of the Reformation.” With the same author, it can be affirmed that all experience of a knowledge of God and of fellowship with God is mystical in nature. It involves what Thomas Aquinas designates as “cognitio Dei experimentalis,” that is to

17. Compare W. J. Aalders, Mystiek, 68.
21. C. Aalders, Spiritualiteit, 196.
say, a knowledge that is not based on intellectual reflection, but on communion
with God himself. It grips people at the deepest level of their existence.

God’s revelation evokes a matchless experience that may be called
“mysticism.” Least of all does mysticism by definition stand in opposition to
word-based faith, which was certainly Emil Brunner’s position: “Entweder die
Mystik oder das Wort.” But that hardly does justice to the sources. Albrecht
Ritschl is no less guilty of this, when in his Geschichte des Pietismus he
accused both Lutheran and Reformed pietism of breaking the power of the
Reformation by exchanging faith for mysticism. On the basis of extreme
examples that undoubtedly appeared, a contradiction was created that brought
mysticism as such into discredit. I am of the conviction that we may legitimately
speak of mysticism wherever the effect of the word of God is a personal
encounter between God and the soul worked by the Holy Spirit. The term
“Mystik des Wortes” that K. H. zur Mühlen coined deserves approval. A. A.
von Ruler points to this experiential word as a movement that extends “from
the verbal to the actual.” A person need not disqualify using the term “mysticism”
as dubious or risky, therefore. But, I would like to plead for using the term
sparingly, based on the conviction that it involves a valuable characterization of
that which may be regarded as the very marrow of the faith-experience, namely
fellowship with God in Christ through the word and Spirit. Whoever emphasizes
the idea of mystery in the term “mysticism,” in any case, is in step with an
honorable tradition.

Route

I hope that by means of this introduction I have paved the way to a unique
investigation. The route that I will follow is chronological in design. We first
visit the twelfth-century Clairvaux in French Champagne. Then we make the
transition to the fifteenth-century monastery of St. Agnietenberg near Zwolle. In
what follows, we make stops at a number of places in sixteenth-century
Netherlands: Middelburg and Makkum, Enkhuizen and Delft, Leeuwarden and
Rotterdam, Franeker, Utrecht and Leiden. It is during this period extending from
1100 to 1700, and in this geographic region stretching from Champagne to

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23. E. Brunner, Die Mystik und das Wort (Tübingen, 1924), could see nothing else in
mysticism than “geraube Unmittelbarkeit.”
25. S. van der Linde, “Mystiek en bevinding in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme,” in
Quispel et al., Mystiek en bevinding, 47.
Geschichte des Pietismus, vol. 1: Der Pietismus von siebzehnten bis zum frühen achtzehnten
Jahrhundert, ed. M. Brecht (Göttingen, 1993), 58. The author wants to distinguish between
mysticism in a narrower sense (spiritualism), which specifies the immediate union of the soul
with God and to which all external types are relative, and the mystical element in all human
longings for a personal experience of God’s nearness. Also compare J. de Boer, De verzeelging
met de Heilige Geest volgens de opvatting van de Nadere Reformatie (Rotterdam, 1968), 16-22.
27. Zur Mühlen, Reformatorisches Profil, 84.
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Friesland, that these seven spiritual Christians experienced and recorded their sweet communion with God.