

Medieval Women Mystics' Visionary Answers to the
Modern Theodicy Question:
Angela of
Foligno and Hadewijch of Antwerp On Understanding
the Love of God

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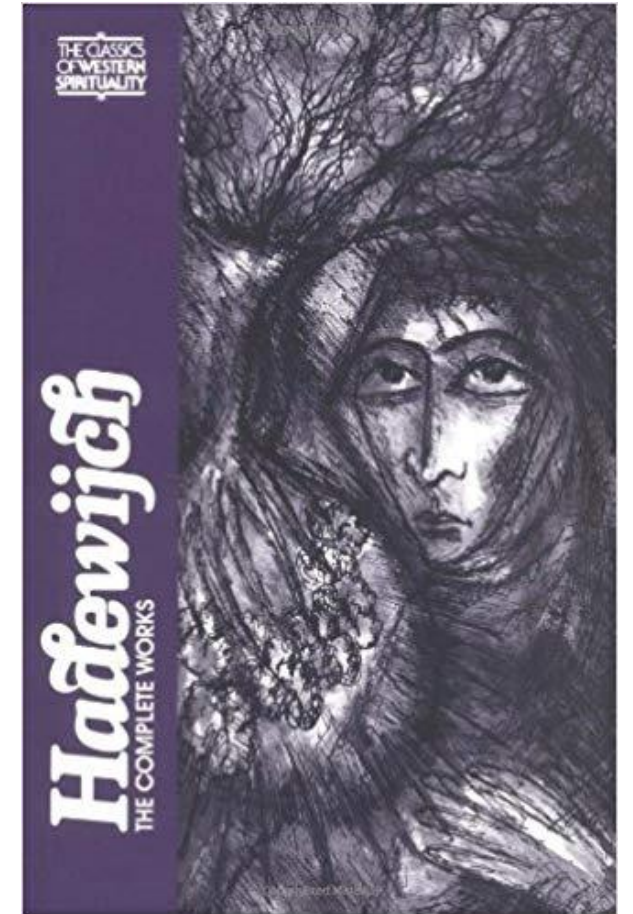
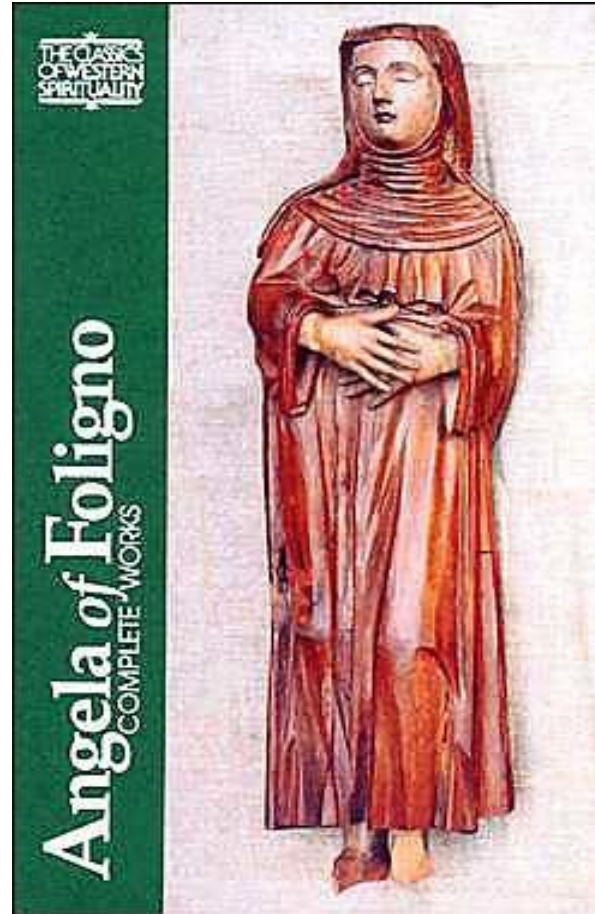
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Angela of Foligno

- From Umbria, Italy
- Lived from 1248-1309
- Franciscan
- The sculpture is a sixteenth-century reliquary

Hadewijch of Brabant

- From the Duchy of Brabant
- Lived in the early- to mid-13th century
- Lived in a religious community



They indirectly and preemptively address the theodicy question because they understand God as a love which is unlimited only because it is willing to undergo evil actions and suffering. Their visions, experienced in their souls, can enhance the intellectual arguments of the past century without portraying the intellect as useless in understanding God because they themselves reason that they can experience divine love even when their experiences of evil limit them to feeling separated.

Angela asks, “Lord, why did you create man, and after you did, why did you allow us to sin?” She tries to answer the question by proposing that the influence of evil best “demonstrate[s] his goodness.”

Angela of Foligno, *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 178.

She asserts, “My soul was drawn out of itself to perceive that the mystery of what I was asking had neither beginning nor end.”

Ibid., 177.

She explains that she once “saw [herself] as total love,” participating perfectly in God’s love, but she learned that “that which loved in [her] came from God alone.”

Ibid., 183.

Angela learns from her most intense visions that “[e]ven before man sinned, God the Father loved this bed and its company (poverty, suffering, and contempt) so much that he granted it to his Son.”

Ibid., 206.

Christ says to her, “You have said to me at times that it was easy for me to live as Man . . . [but] Never did I dispel my griefs or my pains with the aid of my omnipotence.”

Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 269.

Christ says, “All the suffering that belongs to the human race I experienced while I lived as Man *except sin* alone (Heb 4:15). I never cheered myself by my inner power, except with the consolation that I was certain of my Father.”

Ibid., 269.

God directs Hadewijch “to live in conformity with [his] Divinity and [his] Humanity” by leaving “the fruition, of his Nature, which is Love” and returning to “the cruel world.”

Ibid., 279-80.

Angela and Hadewijch teach readers that Love is simultaneously infinite and finite, united and separate, divine and human. In order for humans to Love, they must live these seeming contradictions, an action which one scholar of Angela calls "the doctrine of our duty to live Christ," revealed through visions rather than through logical, academic, and theological reasons. The women mystics reveal that incomprehensibility does not indicate contradiction and nonexistence.