This is lecture 22, and the topic is Anabaptism and mysticism. Western Christian mysticism, which flourished during the age of the Reformation, has a long tradition going back to Jewish as well as to neo-Platonic sources. In this lecture, we wish to lift out and accentuate certain aspects of this tradition that played a very important role in medieval and Reformation mysticism, as well as in Renaissance humanism, both secular and Christian.

Let us begin with Tauler’s view of the soul, because it is this concept that lies at the heart of the entire edifice. Tauler, when he speaks of the soul, often quotes directly from Saint Augustine, and so one can argue that both Tauler and Saint Augustine were influenced by the same sources. For example, on one occasion Tauler quotes directly from Saint Augustine: “Oh noble soul, oh noble creature of God, wherefore goest thou outside of thyself in search of Him who is always and most certainly within thee and through whom thou art a partaker of the divine nature? What has thou to do, or why dost thou concern thyself with creatures?”

According to Augustine, the soul had an interior and sacred abyss in which union with God could be achieved. This was known in German mysticism as the Abgründe der Seele, as the abyss within the soul, which played such a central role in medieval German mysticism. Since God resided in this interior abyss of the soul, one should, as Augustine quoted by Tauler said, “Turn into thyself. There alone shalt thou find God.”

God was not to be found in the external written Word, but He was to be found in the interior abyss of the human soul. To allow this interior voice to be heard, one had to “weed the garden of one’s soul.” One had to eradicate the human vices, and one had to flee the creatureliness of the world. Tauler was very much aware that this view of the human soul as the abode of God did not have its origin in Christianity. Citing Augustine once again, Tauler remarked:
This deepest region of the spirit was in a manner known to some of the Gentiles of old, and as they searched its depths, this knowledge caused them to despise all transitory things. Such great philosophers as Plato and Proclus gave a clear account of it to guide others who knew it not. Therefore Saint Augustine says that Plato proclaimed the first part of Saint John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the Word,” as far as “There was a man sent from God.”

In other words, verses 1 to 5 of the gospel of John, and he continues, “But all this the philosopher taught with words of hidden meaning. The same philosopher gained some knowledge of the most holy Trinity. Children, all such things come from the deep recesses of the soul in which such men as Plato lived and whose stores of wisdom they had access to.”

Divinity, therefore, was within the human’s grasp. Indeed, it lay in the abyss of one’s soul. This same concept was found in Renaissance humanism, and it is their common neo-Platonic source that leads to some of the startling similarities between German mysticism and Renaissance humanism. So if you study Thomas Müntzer, for example, and you study Erasmus, there are some striking similarities that one would not expect with respect to the soul and the divinization of man.

One of the great Italian Renaissance humanists, by the name of Pico della Mirandola, could write in his On the Dignity of Man, putting into God’s mouth these words. Speaking of man, Pico had God say:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone, nor any function peculiar to thyself have We given thee [Adam], to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment, thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other things, being limited and constrained within the bounds prescribed by Us. Thou constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have placed thee at the world’s center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape
thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power out of thy soul’s judgment to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.

For the German mystics, however, being reborn into the higher forms involved the baptism of the Holy Spirit. For the humanists, that was not the case. The humanists believed that by an act of the human will—and therefore they stressed the freedom of the will—one could overcome the lower tendencies, the passions, and one could move up into the realm of the divine.

We must understand the use of this term “the baptism of the Holy Spirit” by the mystics, because it differed from the way that Manz and Marpeck, for example, used the same term. Thus, while they may have used similar terms, they meant very different things by it. For Tauler, the first step in preparation for the reception of the Holy Spirit was that one had to turn away from all creatures, from all external things. Once having done that, one could then weed the garden of one’s soul; that is, one could then begin to eradicate the sins that grew up within the soul. Thus detachment, or as it was called, Gelassenheit, was to be followed by self-renunciation. And then, once this has taken place, then comes the work of the Holy Spirit, who empties the soul and then fills it with Himself. This filling Tauler called the divine birth within man, the coming together, he said, of the Holy Spirit with God in the abyss of the human soul.

Such persons had experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and they now knew the Word of God, the Holy Spirit. They had it, in fact, nakedly within them. They had God within them, and God had now been freed, and so one didn’t need the Bible anymore. What need did they have of the written Word, of the dead letter, when this living Word was within them? What need did they have of the scholars of that written Word, the scribes and the Pharisees who gloried in their knowledge of theology, in their knowledge of the dead Word?

As the Historia or the Meisterbuch said of Tauler’s supposed conversion: “Now thou has the light of the Holy Ghost received from the grace of God, and thou hast the Holy Scriptures in thee.” And it’s out of this basic argument that we have within the German mystics the separation of the inner Word, which is the real Word—it’s the voice of the Holy Spirit inside of one—from the written Word, the dead Word, the Scriptures. This
Historia described a dramatic conversion, probably based on the example of Augustine’s own conversion as he recorded it in his Confessions; but then also, as Augustine’s conversion was based ultimately on that cataclysmic conversion of Saint Paul. And when this conversion had happened, Tauler was enabled to live his theology. Not only could he preach a correct theology now, but he had the power of the living God within him to fulfill all the commands of that theology.

At the center of German mysticism, therefore, stood the concept of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The experience was the criteria or the norm, not Luther’s sola Scriptura. Even Christ became somewhat peripheral, though the mystics did have a theology of the cross; but this theology was not Luther’s theology of the cross. It was rather a theology of suffering the cross in oneself as the road to purification. And the Bible became merely a testimony of the work of God, a testimony of the work of the Holy Spirit in other “friends of God,” as those were called who had experienced this conversion of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was not the norm by which one judged the experience. The inner Word, therefore, was vastly superior to the written Word. Similarly, all externals, which in any case belonged to the realm of the creatures, became irrelevant, especially once the inner experience had been achieved. Reliance upon the external rituals at the expense of the inner was downright pernicious, as both Thomas Müntzer and Erasmus claimed.

Tauler’s sermons were first printed in a 1498 Leipzig edition. Over the years, in manuscript form, a preface had come to be attached to these sermons, a preface which purported to be the story of Tauler’s own conversion. Tauler, the great preacher of the Dominican order, was confronted one day by a pious layman who told him that whereas he preached a good doctrine, he obviously lacked the power of the Holy Spirit to live up to it. And so Tauler placed himself under the pious layman’s tutelage, and several years later himself experienced a very dramatic baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now he was transformed, now he was empowered to live his faith. The only problem was that the Historia, as it was called—or we’ve called it also the Meisterbuch—the only problem with it was that it was a forgery and had nothing to do with Tauler, as the German scholar and Jesuit Heinrich Denifle, pointed out in an article in 1879. Nonetheless, till that time, virtually all editions of Tauler’s sermons contained this Historia, and it exerted a great influence during the period of the Reformation and even later into German Pietism.
A second edition was printed at Augsburg in 1508, and it was this edition that was used by Luther and Thomas Müntzer. A number of editions were later published in Basel during the early years of the Reformation, that is, during the 1520s. Luther himself discovered *The German Theology*, an anonymous mystical tract from the fifteenth century, in fragmentary form in 1516. So aside from the sermons of John Tauler, there was another document that became very important, and this document came to be known as *The German Theology*. It was Luther who found it, and he published it in 1516 in fragmentary form. Two years later, in 1518, he published a complete edition.

At first he thought that this document had to have been written by Tauler, but then he realized it had not been written by John Tauler. He praised it highly in his preface of 1516, and then on December 14, 1516, he wrote of it to George Spalatin, his very close friend, in the following terms:

> Should you find pleasure in reading a pure, solid theology in the German language, very similar to that of Christian antiquity, then procure for yourself, if you can, the sermons of John Tauler of the Order of Preachers. What I send you here is an unknown excerpt of his total work, for I have not found, either in Latin or German, a more wholesome theology or one in greater conformity with the gospel.

In 1518, he arranged this German theology alongside of the writings of Augustine and even of the Bible; but Luther’s study of Romans, which he was involved in during the years 1515 to 1516, gradually bore fruit in a clarification of the issues. By 1521 he was rejecting the mystical approach to God by saying, “One cannot reach up to God, but God in Christ had to reach down to us.”

Two aspects of the above are important for the Radical Reformation. First, Luther’s glowing early endorsement of Tauler’s sermons and of *The German Theology* must certainly have encouraged a great number of his early admirers to embark on a mystical path. If it took Luther—immersed in Romans at the time, from 1516 to 1521—five years to recognize mysticism as inimical to his Reformation theology, why should we be surprised if it took the Swiss Brethren, if it took Marpeck and others, some time to realize the latent dangers of mysticism, as reflected in the spiritualists of their day? In any case, all theological issues were not instantaneously clarified in 1516 or 1525. It took time to sort these matters out.
Mysticism constituted a significant aspect of Müntzer’s thought as well. Perhaps it even provided him with his organizing principle, but it did not constitute the entirety of his intellectual position. It did give him the concept of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It also gave him his argument for the divinization of man, and it gave him his emphasis on the inner Word and upon the experience of conversion. Mysticism also allowed him to ignore the external aspects of baptism and to continue baptizing infants virtually until the end of his life. The Bible he regarded as a witness of the work of the living God, but the Bible for him was not normative. What was normative for him was the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Many scholars have also sought the roots of his revolutionary thought in mysticism, but I regard this as totally mistaken. The roots of his revolutionary thought are to be sought in the political context of his reform activity in the city of Allstedt, in the contradictory imperial edict of 1523, and in his appropriation of Augustine’s erroneous interpretation of the parable of the tares.

Clearly, when this mysticism emanating from Müntzer and the young Luther encountered Anabaptism, there were certain points of contact. Both mysticism and Anabaptism emphasized conversion, even indeed the baptism of the Holy Spirit; but the Anabaptists proceeded from the basis of a Christ-centered Reformation theology, while the mystics ultimately grounded their view in a neo-Platonic interpretation of the soul, the source of which had long since been forgotten—same words, different meaning.

As we have seen, however, the spiritualism, the emphasis on the inner Word and its virtual separation from the written Word, was rejected by the Anabaptists. The Swiss, South German Anabaptists, and Menno Simons were biblicists. For them visible ritual was important because it had been commanded by Christ and the apostles, and they criticized the mystical position, implicitly in Thomas Müntzer and explicitly in Melchior Rink and Caspar Schwenckfeld and in Sebastian Franck. They apparently never recognized Hans Hut’s latent revolutionary tendencies, though they criticized the same tendencies in Thomas Müntzer.

Hans Denck combines mystical and humanistic elements. Strongly moralistic, as John Tauler and Thomas Müntzer had also been, Denck nevertheless raised the inner Word above the written Word. He too accepted rebaptism and joined the Anabaptists, but
he appears later to have regretted having accepted rebaptism because of the divisions that it caused in the Christian church. Others influenced by mysticism were never rebaptized, men like Thomas Müntzer, Martin Cellarius, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and one could probably list a number of others. For these the externals, the shadows of the pure forms, as Platonism would have called them, were not important enough to create division over. In the thought of Hans Denck another element is added that is not present in these other people. It is the repeated report of his universalism, which he apparently shared with Origen. Whether drawn from mystical sources or not, this universalism certainly must have had a neo-Platonic origin.

We have also noted Pilgram Marpeck’s quarrel with Caspar Schwenckfeld at close hand. The same rejection of the mystical attitude to the external ceremonies of the church is seen there as elsewhere. This attitude is explicitly stated in Sebastian Franck’s letter to John Campanus of 1531, a letter that received wide circulation in the Netherlands. That letter shows quite clearly both the similarity with the Anabaptists and the differences. Sebastian Franck wrote:

I do not doubt but that all the highly famous doctors whose works are still available are those same wolves which Peter, in Acts 20:29, spiritually anticipated would fall in upon the flock and which John, in I John 2:18, calls antichrists—men who, even in the days of the apostles, fell away from them and indeed had never really been with them. This is proved by their works, especially those of Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Chrysostom, Hilary, Cyril, Origen, and others, which are utterly child’s play and quite unlike the spirit of the apostles; that is, utterly filled with commandments, laws, sacramental elements, and all kinds of human inventions. But right after the apostles, everything unfolded in a contrary fashion. Baptism was changed into infant baptism, the Lord’s Supper into misuse and a sacrifice. What they have written is nothing but a shame and a disgrace.

Having recognized the problems, as the Anabaptists also had, Sebastian Franck, however, would have nothing to do with any attempt to restore, to revive, or to reinstitute the primitive practices. For, he continued, and he’s talking to John Campanus:
But that thou dost have great zeal for the outworn church is, I know for a certainty, in vain. For thou wilt not gather the people of God, nor ever bring their polity and sacraments to the light of day. Cease therefore from thy enterprise, and let the church of God remain in the Spirit among all peoples and pagans. Let them be herein instructed, governed, and baptized by the Doctor of the New Covenant, namely, by the Holy Spirit.

Here you have a similar analysis of the problem but a very different solution presented. Whereas the Anabaptists regarded these mystical spiritualists as false prophets, the mystics had their own false brothers. In a sermon, Tauler himself warned against those who believed that to those who had been purified by the Spirit, all things were now pure.

Tauler may well have been referring to the Brothers of the Free Spirit, who were reputed to practice ritual sex in their midst. The same may have been the case in the rupture between Thomas Müntzer and Nikolaus Storch, who was also reputed to be a notorious lecher. And Ludwig Haetzer was apparently executed in Konstanz for bigamy in 1529. Perhaps all of these shared the same belief.

In any case, differences, nuances were often difficult to detect in these early years of the Reformation; and the process of crystallization of views was often a very difficult matter. Nowhere was it more difficult than in the encounter between mysticism, humanism, Reformation, and Anabaptism.