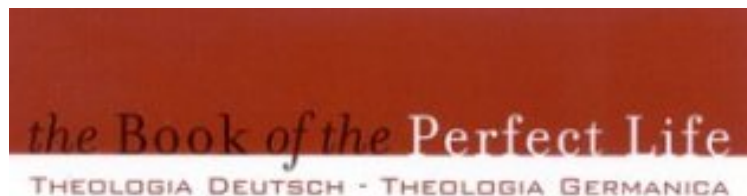


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The Book of the Perfect Life: Theologia Deutsch-Theologia Germanica (Sacred Literature Series)

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Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
David Blamires

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From AltaMira Press : The Book of the Perfect Life: Theologia Deutsch-Theologia Germanica (Sacred Literature Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Book of the Perfect Life: Theologia Deutsch-Theologia Germanica (Sacred Literature Series):

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful. An Enduring Christian Mystical ClassicBy Cameron B. ClarkThis

new translation by David Blamires of what Bernard McGinn calls "the most widely known of all the late medieval MHG [Middle High German] mystical treatises" is given the new title of "The Book of the Perfect Life" in place of its more long-standing and well-known titles of "Theologia Deutsch" and "Theologia Germanica" which are included as subtitles. This translation deserves better recognition since it supercedes other English translations like those of Susanna Winkworth and, more recently, Bengt Hoffman whose translation, published in 1980, is misleadingly entitled "The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther" (from the Classics of Western Spirituality series). The Blamires translation is based on Wolfgang von Hinten's critical edition published in 1982 which "had recourse to eight manuscripts, dating from c.1453 to c.1497, in addition to Luther's two editions." It is the primary translation used by Bernard McGinn when discussing the text in Volume IV, entitled "The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300 - 1500)," of his monumental history of Western Christian mysticism. I highly recommend McGinn's book to better understand the historical context and content of this mystical treatise. According to Blamires' introduction, "This little book encapsulates the best insights of Christian mysticism as experienced in late medieval Germany." The anonymous author states in his preface that the book "teaches many valuable aspects of divine truth and particularly how and in what way one can distinguish between the true, just friends of God and the unjust, false, free spirits who are so harmful to the Holy Church." The "friends of God" represent a true and selfless union with God in Christ which produces obedience whereas the "free spirits" are assumed to represent a false, self-centered "union" and license to sin. According to McGinn, as a historical movement of spiritual reform, "The Friends of God grew out of the preaching and teaching of Eckhart, and especially his spiritual heirs Henry Suso and John Tauler, and therefore put mysticism at the center of its spirituality" (The Harvest of Mysticism [HM], Chapter 9, pg. 407). The Free Spirit movement, on the other hand, was seen from the viewpoint of the critics as representing a heretical or false mysticism, although McGinn is aware that even Eckhart and some of his spiritual heirs were accused by the Inquisition of holding some of the same or similar mystical heresies as the Free Spirits. Nonetheless, McGinn states that the Theologia Deutsch (which came out of the Friends of God movement) repeatedly addressed what it considered the fundamental errors of the Free Spirits as follows: "the spiritual pride which allows them to be deceived by the false light (chaps. 25 and 40); their mistake in thinking they are equal to God (chaps. 20, 40, and 42); their disregard for Christ's humanity and attempt to live without the suffering that marked his life (chaps. 17, 18, 29, 40, 42, and 53); their false conception of freedom (chaps 5 and 25); and their rejection of order, law and conscience itself (chaps 25, 30-31, 39, and 40)" (HM, Ch. 8, pg. 402). Although the treatise separates itself from the doctrines and practices of what is considered a false, ego-centric type of mysticism, it does contain some questionable or controversial doctrines (and scriptural interpretation) which, perhaps, are present with any "mystical" treatise. For example, the treatise assumes a neo-platonic understanding of divine creation using the metaphor of flow (i.e., emanation). This is seen in the first chapter which associates God as creator with the perfect and whole, and creation with the imperfect and partial, the latter of which "originates or arises from this perfect, just as a beam or a ray flows from the sun or from a light and appears as something, this or that, and is called a creature." Plotinus in his Enneads used this same metaphor. From this doctrine comes the idea that creatures have no "true being" and are, in themselves, nothing. God is the true being underlying all contingent things. One can see how this idea could be, and has been, construed - rightly or wrongly - as pantheism and raises the question of whether creation is out of nothing (ex nihilo) or out of God (ex Deo). The concept of nothing is paradoxical yet essential to most, if not all, forms of mysticism, including Christian mysticism with its understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent simultaneously. Nothingness is the fulcrum between both. It is the Not or Null in the Infinite (not finite) that separates it from (and unites it to) the finite; it is the point where thought stops and turns into unknowing and mind-blowing possibility. Now, add to the above the biblical idea of the Adamic Fall and its production of universal sin. According to the treatise, sin centers around the self which sees itself as something independent and good apart from God. "Scripture, faith and truth speak of sin as nothing but the creature's turning away from what is unchangeably good and turning towards what is changeable, that is, turning from the perfect to what is in part and imperfect, and most of all to itself" (Chapter 2, page 32). The treatise affirms that all good in the creature is solely of God whereas all evil in the creature is solely of self. It is this radical dichotomy that, I believe, appealed to Martin Luther, the author of "The Bondage of the Will" who published and helped popularize the little book. Although the treatise is definitely God-glorifying, Christ-centered and self-abasing, it still raises questions about the nature of sin and moral freedom and God's purpose in enabling and allowing their existence which are not directly answered in the text. For example, it was God and not each individual who determined that each of Adam's descendants, except Christ, would become a sinner because of Adam's sin (see Romans 5:19), so why did God allow this and how does it relate to the divine Christ, the last Adam, who incarnated to suffer for others out of love, overcome evil with good, and restore what was lost in Adam? Chapter 51 answers the question of "Why God created free will if it is so opposed to him," but the answer doesn't include the important biblical doctrine that the sinless Christ had to "learn obedience by the things which he suffered" and was "made perfect through suffering" that was caused by divinely-created moral freedoms (abilities to sin or do the divinely forbidden). There is a divine purpose to innocent suffering involving the creation of a God-glorifying perfection out of a sinless imperfection that is Christ-centered and non-punitive and can only be fully appreciated in an absolute humility. Also, there is a distinction

between moral and non-moral freedom that is not clearly taught in the text. The former involves the ability to [willfully] sin (as distinct from the inherited sinful nature) whereas the latter does not. God has non-moral freedom and so will all who eventually enter heaven where sin will be impossible. In this regard, I consider Chapter 50 insightful in its association of the forbidden tree with one's own will (which I would call one's "moral freedom"). I would also add that the tree of life represents God's will (non-moral freedom) which, by divine union and the leading of the Holy Spirit, produces abundant fruits of righteousness such as joy unspeakable and full of glory and peace which passes understanding where God alone gets the glory since human will is one with the divine will and moral freedom is not used. Against such fruit there is no moral law of prohibition (see Galatians 5:23). There is much food for thought here and insightful points that warrant its durability as a Christian mystical classic.

The Book of the Perfect Life crystallized the mystical experience of the late Middle Ages, yet still speaks to seekers today. Martin Luther wrote of this 14th century devotional work that "next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned-and desired to learn-more concerning God, Christ, man and what all things are." *Theologica Deutsch*-the title this work has most commonly appeared under- has been through 190 editions in ten languages throughout its 600-year history. Now drawing on the latest German critical edition of the work, David Blamires brings us the definitive English translation of this classic mystical work, *The Book of the Perfect Life*.

About the Author David Blamires was formerly a professor of German at the University of Manchester