

Freed from selfhood

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [January 24, 2001](#) issue

As I was browsing through a used bookstore, I chanced upon a small treasure, an early English translation of a book whose author we don't know (identified only by place of residence as "the Frankfurter"). I could only guess at the date of composition (probably toward the end of the 14th century). The nondescript title—*Theologia Germanica*—was chosen by someone other than the author. Martin Luther was the first to publish the book in 1516, mainly because he had "not seen a more wholesome theology, one more in accordance with the Gospels, either in Latin or in our language." In the preface to the second edition he praised the author, who spoke "beyond the manner of ordinary preachers and teachers. . . . Yea, [the book] floats not on the surface like foam on the water, but it is gathered from the bottom of the Jordan by a true Israelite, whose name God knows."

Contemporary cultural sensibilities would likely predispose a Western reader to disagree with Luther about the wholesomeness of the book's theology. Its opening lines seem both pretentious and quaint: "Here begins the Frankfurter and speaks very lofty and lovely things concerning a perfect life. Jesus. Mary. John." But the real problem lies in the way the book treats the human self. Whereas we believe that we should unreservedly affirm the self, the *Theologia Germanica* argues that we should radically deny it. "A man should stand and be so free from himself, that is, from selfhood, I-hood, Me, Mine and the like, that in all things he should no more seek and regard himself and his own than if he did not exist, and should take as little account of himself as if he were not and another had done all his works." For "I-hood, selfhood, Mine, Me and the like, all belong to the Devil, and therefore it is, that he is an evil Spirit."

"Has not the denial of the self become so radical here," we may protest, "that it undermines the plausibility of the position taken? Does not the 'I' end up obliterated? Have not human beings here been dragged down to the level of mere sentient beings without self-consciousness?" But the *Theologia Germanica* is careful not to cross that line. For in that case God could neither be desired nor loved and human beings would be "as the brutes that have no reason." The goal is not the

erasure of the self but its preparation to become “nothing else but a house and habitation of God.” And just why should we strive after this goal? The reason the book gives is as simple as it is profound: “Now that creature in which the Eternal Good most manifests itself, shines forth, works, is most known and loved, is the best, and that wherein the Eternal Good least manifests itself is the least good of all creatures.”

A basic principle of the *Theologia Germanica* is: “The more God indwells me, the better I am as a human being.” A basic principle of contemporary Western culture, on the other hand, is: “The more I possess—the more power, the more ‘toys,’ the more pleasure—the better I am as a human being.” It might seem that contemporary culture would do a better job helping the self to thrive than would the *Theologia Germanica*. Yet this is not so.

Consider sex in relation to our belief that the only duties and rights that matter “are those which indulge the self.” Freed from the shackles of what is deemed repressive morality, the modern self seeks guiltless erotic pleasure whenever and wherever he or she can find it. Has that self therefore become sexually fulfilled? As Adam Kirsch points out in his review of Frank Bidard’s *Desire*, “We value sexual desire so highly that we do not want it to refer beyond itself.” As a consequence, we are incapable of seeing sexual pleasure as a sacrament for something more enduring. Sex therefore gets reduced to “the neurological effects of vascular congestion in the genitals,” as one critic put it. Far from finding fulfillment, the self turned in upon itself loses itself in the emptiness of its own meaninglessness. And the emptier the self is, the more obsessed with the self we become; and the more obsessed with the self we are, the emptier the self becomes.

Our obsession with the self is equal in wisdom to the act of shooting oneself in the foot. But more than being just foolish, this obsession of the self with itself is also petty. Think of the author of the *Theologia Germanica*. She—or was it a he?—wanted for the self nothing less than to make it a habitation of God—that perfect existence “which comprehends and includes all existences in Itself and in Its Essence; and without which and beside which, there is no true being; and in which all things have their life. For it is the Essence of all things and is in Itself unchangeable and immovable, yet It changes and moves all things else.” Directed completely away from itself toward God, the self of the *Theologia Germanica* finds itself host to the source and goal of all being. Surely a rather immodest “accomplishment” for a self that is intent on being free “from selfhood, I-hood, Me, Mine and the like”!

At Christmas we shop, we feast, we exchange gifts, we pursue pleasure, and in all of this we indulge the self. *Theologia Germanica*—that unexpected Christmas gift of Providence—reminded me afresh that the remembrance of God’s coming into the world is not a feast of the pampered self but a celebration of something much more profoundly meaningful: the fact that, as the mystics were fond of putting it, God desires to be born in our soul.