

BLOOD AND BODY: WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN LATE MEDIEVAL
EUROPE

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BLOOD AND BODY: WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN LATE MEDIEVAL
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A Thesis

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Abstract
of
BLOOD AND BODY: WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN LATE MEDIEVAL
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Religious women in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Western Europe developed forms of pious practice that were unique in their extreme devotions to the blood and body of Christ and unique in their use of their own physical bodies to practice these devotions. Thirteenth-century sources including works authored by Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude the Great, and Angela of Foligno, as well as the late medieval biographies written by Thomas de Cantimprè and Jacques de Vitry demonstrate a form of female piety that included physical starvation, cutting, flagellation, and the prayerful welcoming of debilitating illnesses. Considered incapable of the intellectual devotions of male mystics, women sought to grow closer to God through the physical imitation of Christ's human suffering in the Crucifixion. Theologians criticized female practices as being lesser forms of devotion, but also recognized female practices as orthodox and sometimes used the lives and examples of holy women to support and promote the interests of the Church. Some recent writers have concluded that these unique female devotions constituted an attempt to subvert the religious power held by men, however a contextual analysis of female piety indicates that women's practices developed not as an attempt to gain power, but as a result of the restrictions inherent within misogynistic medieval culture.

 Committee Chair
Dr. Candace Gregory-Abbott

4 August 2009
Date

DEDICATION

To K.A.W.

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I owe thanks to many who supported, encouraged, and inspired me. My thanks to my readers for their time and expertise. My thanks also to 'the Giles group' for being fantastic colleagues and for their encouragement and friendship. I also offer my appreciation to others whose friendship and inspiration were invaluable to my completing this project. Thank-you for your passion.

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Image 1

Crucifixion, Prayer Book, Strasbourg. Reproduced from Jeffrey E. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, page 19.

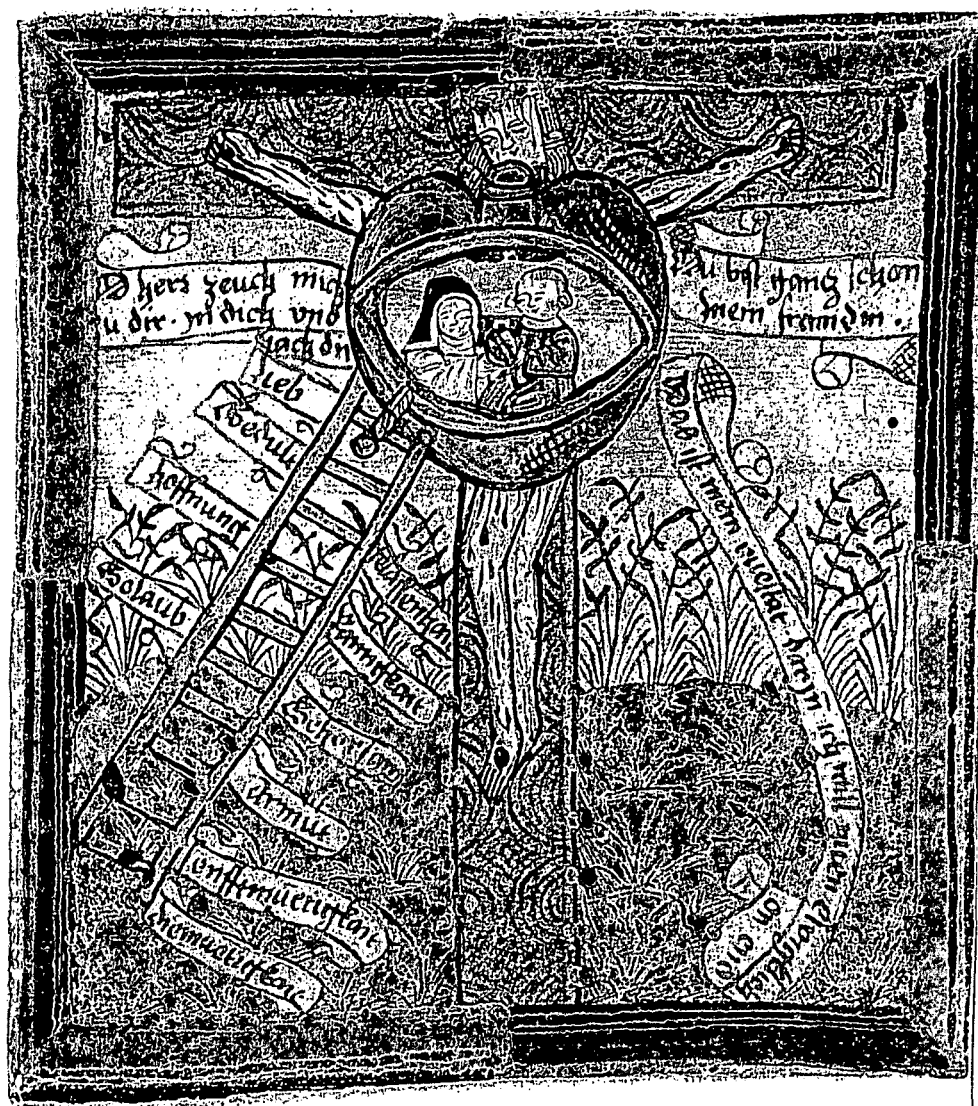


Image 2

The Heart on the Cross, Eichstätt, St. Walburg. Reproduced from Jeffrey E. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, plate 10.



Image 3
Crucifixion, Cologne, Schnütgen Museum. Reproduced from Jeffrey E. Hamburger,
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Image 4
Anröchte Pietà, Soest, ca 1380-90. Reproduced from Caroline Walker Bynum,
*Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and
Beyond*, plate 17.



Image 5
Fritzlar Pietà, probably before 1350. Reproduced from Caroline Walker Bynum,
*Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and
Beyond*, plate 15.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Most scholars will agree that the year 1200 marks the beginning of a change in women's religious practices in Western Europe. Bernard McGinn writes that "the great age of women's theology begins in 1200,"¹ and Caroline Walker Bynum argues that women were the impetus behind some of the defining aspects of late medieval piety. For the first time in the history of Christianity, she writes, "certain major devotional and theological emphases emanate from women and influence the basic development of spirituality."² The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that late medieval holy women were extraordinary in their extreme devotions to the blood and body of Christ and unparalleled in the physical abuses of their own bodies undertaken as the basis of their devotional practice. Thirteenth-century sources show that the numbers of women practicing some form of ascetic or devotional life increased during the late Middle Ages, and they also demonstrate that women's devotional practices were unique from the practices of pious men. Believed to be incapable of the intellectual religious practices of men, women starved and flagellated their bodies, practiced hours of genuflecting in prayer, and prayed that God might grant them debilitating illnesses, all in the attempt to grow close to Christ through an imitation of His physical earthly sufferings.

Some recent scholars have concluded that unique female devotions constituted an attempt to gain authority or subvert the power and authority held by the male controlled

¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism. Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998), 15.

² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 172.

church. However, this paper also intends to demonstrate that a contextual analysis of women's practices will show that this was not the case. The unique nature of women's devotions did not develop as a conscious attempt to worship differently than men. Women's particular physical devotions were a result of women using the one path or approach that was allowable for them. Women approached God through the physical body because medieval culture defined them as physical beings incapable of purely intellectual or spiritual worship. Men criticized the physicality of female practices, but tolerated them because they recognized these practices as being pious, orthodox, and somewhat paradoxically, men used the lives and experiences of holy women to support and promote the church's own interests. This is not an attempt to discount the occurrence or sincerity of the uniquely physical imitations of the bloody, painful, and extreme devotions of thirteenth and fourteenth-century women, for within their limitations, women expressed a piety that was altogether extraordinary and worthy of study.

Medieval culture believed that understanding comes through imitation. For the pious, this meant that one could grow close to God through imitating the events of Christ's human life. As the church began to focus less on the image of Christ resurrected in glory, and more on Christ's humanity, devotional practices changed as well. Scenes from the Passion became central and the most important image was the bloody and beaten body of Christ on the cross. The thirteenth-century image of the crucifixion, in comparison to depictions from other centuries, was particularly gruesome. Art from this time shows Christ's emaciated body, twisted in agony, blood running from the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. The crown of thorns created punctures around his brow from

which blood fell in gory drops. The images of the pietas that developed and became popular at this time showed Christ lying across Mary's lap to position the gash in his side at the central point of the image. Women, often quite literally and physically, devoted themselves to worshipping Christ through imitating the pain, suffering, and bleeding exemplified by His human death. Women prayed to God that they might be "blessed" with painful and debilitating illnesses seeing such illness as an opportunity to suffer as Christ suffered. The reception of stigmata, physically real and bloody wounds that imitated the wounds of the crucifixion, was a sign of the highest grace. In the absence of God given illness or suffering, women made a routine practice of whipping, cutting, starving, and beating their own bodies. Hedwig of Laufenburg, a thirteenth-century nun from Unterlinden who "continually scratched a deep cross-shaped wound on her breast with a sharpened stick, 'in order to keep the memory of the passion and cross of our Lord Jesus Christ always in mind and body,'" is but one such example.

The study of women's piety and the role of women in the church after the beginning of the thirteenth century is a study in contradictions and paradox. Medieval theologians and scientists understood the physical human body to be weak and prone to sin, and while this could be true of both male and female bodies, men and masculinity were also associated with the higher faculties of mind and spirit, while women were associated with the "inferiority and subordination" of the lower realm of the physical.⁴ The ultimate desire of the male mystic was an ineffable experience of union with God, a

³ McGinn, 304-305.

⁴ Elizabeth Spearing, ed. *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, intro. Elizabeth Spearing (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), xi.

fully spiritual and intellectual experience completely beyond the realm of the physical. This was not a devotional path available to women, however. The question over whether an intellectual approach to God was *appropriate* for women was not at issue as male mystics and theologians considered women intellectually *incapable* of approaching God in this way. Subordinated by their nature and their physiology, which closely connected them to the body and to blood, women's piety emphasized the physical over the intellectual as the means to worship. As a result, women developed intensely physical and literal pious practices of worshipping Christ through physical acts that appear extreme or even bizarre from a modern point of view. Although the male clergy and theologians considered these somatic devotions to be lowly forms of worship compared to the intellectual and spiritual practices of men, the church also taught that it was the fully human physicality of Christ's body and the blood shed from that body at the crucifixion that were the essential elements of Christian salvation. If by their natures women were connected to the body, then women could "be felt to have a special connection with Jesus in his Passion, and through their bodies they could hope to have special access to the sacredness associated with his body."⁵

This attempt to connect with Christ is evident in the writing of medieval women, and this paper will rely on the words of thirteenth and fourteenth-century female writers including Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude the Great, Angela of Foligno and others. These women describe their own experiences of praying to God for illnesses for themselves and for their sisters, of having visions of Christ crucified in which they

⁵ Spearing, xi.

approach the body and drink from the wound in Christ's side or enter His body through this wound in order to rest within the Sacred Heart. Because much of what is known about medieval women comes from texts written *about* them, this paper will also rely on late medieval biographies written by Thomas de Cantimprè and Jacques de Vitry. These biographies, as is true of hagiography in general, are inherently problematic because the author's primary concern is demonstrating the holiness of the subject, not presenting a complete and factual account. As Richard Kieckhefer writes, we must remember that when we study the saints of the Middle Ages, we are not studying the saints so much as "the documents that claim to inform us about them." Even texts that claim to be autobiographies were probably, at the least, edited by a male scribe or confessor. As Kieckhefer rightfully notes, knowing whether the source is representing itself accurately is not so as important as asking "why their biographers represented them as they did."⁶ These biographies describe holy women who wept uncontrollably, stood in freezing rivers, were unharmed by fire or boiling water, genuflected thousands of times in prayer, ate no food other than the communion wafers, and who torturously flagellated themselves. The authors record brutal acts, but do so in such a way that they actually present their contemporary subjects in a relatively positive way as lives to be admired. These texts contrast to the more openly misogynistic authors of other texts referenced here including *De Secretis Mulierum*.

Much of this paper is based upon work that explores the perceptions, experiences, and understandings of the female body. Medieval historian Elizabeth Clark credits the

⁶ Richard Kieckhefer reminds us Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-4.

scholarship of Caroline Walker Bynum for advancing the possibility of such research. Prior to Bynum's work, Clark argues, the study of religion was primarily "text oriented and 'over-intellectual,'" and therefore often excluded medieval religious women from study. Bynum, perhaps more than any other writer has "served to raise 'the body' to the status of a worthy historical subject."⁷ Bynum's conclusions regarding the ways in which women used their bodies as tools for devotion and as a means to exhibit control over their own lives, have set an example for approaching women's history based upon women's experiences, especially their experience of the body. However, Clark also questions whether this approach to women's history is appropriate. She asks whether historians have focused too closely on women's physicality, to the detriment of other aspects of women's lives, and she makes the argument that this focus is not any different from the misogyny that placed similar limitations on women's experience in the Middle Ages.⁸ It is worthwhile to consider Clark's arguments, however, the limited amount of female writing, art, and biographies that do survive, show that medieval religious women based their lives on physical devotions. The scholarship of the last thirty years demonstrates numerous approaches in the study of medieval piety in general and women's religious experiences in particular. Many scholars include women's words and consider women's pious practices in terms of history, theology, art, as well as gender, but whatever the approach, a study of women's physical experience is unavoidable.

⁷ Elizabeth A. Clark, "Women, Gender and the Study of Christian History," *Church History* 70, no. 3 (September 2001): 409.

⁸ Clark, 407, 409.

Bernard McGinn approaches the subject of medieval female piety from the perspective of “historical theologians.” McGinn acknowledges that modern feminist scholarship has been invaluable in gaining a better understanding of medieval women. While McGinn writes that he has benefited in his own work from feminist scholarship, he also states that he does not write from a feminist perspective so much as from “that of a historical theologian attempting to do justice to the full range of late medieval mysticism.”⁹ McGinn’s broad and well-documented work gives necessary context to the lives of female mystics in relation to their male contemporaries and while he does not rely on gender, a generous amount of his writing is devoted to the specific practices of women. Historians Michael Goodich, Miri Rubin, and Richard Kieckhefer discuss the changes occurring in religious practices in the late Middle Ages using various approaches including the political, social, economic, and theological. Art Historians Joann Ziegler and Jeffrey Hamburger approach women’s piety through a study of Art History and Iconography. Their studies of women’s use and creation of art as a component of religious life provide additional evidence and insight into the unique nature of women’s piety. Grace Jantzen also focuses on a study of women in the context of the Christian mystical tradition, but unlike McGinn or Milhaven, she states in her introduction that she approached her research with a “growing feminist consciousness.”¹⁰ While this admission alerts the reader that she is approaching the study of medieval women from a modern feminist perspective, Jantzen makes a compelling and more balanced argument

⁹ McGinn, xii.

¹⁰ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xiv.

than many of the recent writers who are working from a gender-based approach. She writes that mystical experiences, by definition, were unmediated experiences of God that might have allowed the possibility of female power or authority based on divine authorization. However, because the male controlled church retained the power to determine whether a person or an experience might be properly defined as “mystical,” men retained authority to define and control this aspect of women’s piety.

Other writers do attempt arguments for female agency. Arguing that women’s unique experiences of piety constituted a subversion of the misogynistic medieval culture and a bypassing of male clerical authority, they argue that the dramatic increase in the numbers of pious women living as recluses, tertiaries, beguines, or cloistered nuns might be defined as a type of women’s movement. Bynum argues that women were arguably “the impetus behind some of the defining aspects” of late medieval piety.¹¹ Elizabeth Petroff and Michelle Sauer make stronger arguments that religious experiences provided women with an authority that allowed them to take an active role in their world and that their visionary experiences allowed women to subvert the image of fragmentation of the female body imposed upon them by men. While Sauer and Petroff offer interesting arguments that may hold true in a few extraordinary cases, a failure to consider the historical context of their subjects ultimately weakens their arguments. Viewing the actions or writings of women in isolation instead of within their society leads to limited, and often incorrect, conclusions. Viewing medieval women within their historical context is essential to understanding their lives and writings.

¹¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 172.

It is difficult to set aside completely one's own contemporary context when considering historical lives. As Judith Bennett acknowledges:

As a feminist medievalist, I respect the possibilities and limitations of my sources; I approach the dead and different people of the Middle Ages with....an essential 'epistemic humility'; and I would never manipulate my research findings to suit present-minded concerns. Yet I am more than an antiquarian, more than a reporter of facts newly uncovered; I am also a historian, an interpreter of the facts as I find them. In its interpretive aspects, my work necessarily reflects my feminist politics, just as the interpretation of all historians reflect their political views.¹²

While it may be difficult, the historian must make the attempt to set aside contemporary views and understand the practices of medieval women within their own contemporary culture. Jantzen strengthens her argument by appropriately considering the actions and ideas of women within their contemporary culture. The demographic studies of Rudolph Bell and Donald Weinstein, as well as the scholarship of Elizabeth Spearing, Laurie Finke, Rosalynn Voaden, and Ulinka Rublack provide analyses of particular aspects of women's piety that when taken together help to develop the accurate and necessary context for the study of women's lives. While they do not make gender based arguments, these writers consider the reality of misogyny and discuss how a male controlled church hierarchy reacted to female experiences of divine revelation and the potential implications of divine authorization. Although these scholars do not reach a singular conclusion, their various interpretations are valuable in keeping the lives of the women within their appropriate context.

¹² Judith M. Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993): 322.

Chapter 2

WOMEN'S PIETY

How God Touches His Friends with Suffering

When one experiences sadness
 That one has not sought
 And in no way has been the cause of,
 Our Lord says this about it:
 'I have set it in motion. That is,
 Just as my Father had me set in motion on earth
 Suffer much pain because of it.
 They should indeed know this:
 The harder I draw them toward me,
 The nearer they come to me.
 When a person so overcomes himself
 That he considers suffering and consolation of equal value,
 Then I shall raise him up into sweetness,
 And thus he shall have a taste of eternal life."¹³

Modern study of medieval women's piety often focuses on the lives of female mystics and visionaries. Experiences of "ecstasy" or "rapture," during "which a person's consciousness of the spatio-temporal order is temporarily lost or diminished" defined the life of the mystic. During these raptures, the mystic experienced "extraordinary glimpses of spiritual or otherwise hidden realities (revelations), whether communicable or ineffable."¹⁴ Mystical experiences of direct union with God were seen as the ultimate sign of God's favor and were often the culminating experiences of a life devoted to contemplation and prayer. While many religious men and women devoted their lives to asceticism and meditative prayer in a "quest for direct personal contact with God," only

¹³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 325.

¹⁴ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 151.

an elite few actually experienced mystical union. The majority of pious women practiced “a cultivation of the interior life—a practice of the presence of God—that did not involve actual mystical experience.”¹⁵ This development in popular piety “that sought to unite a life of inner devotion with a life of active service in and to the world” reached its peak in the late Middle Ages in Europe coinciding with the peak of Christian Mysticism.¹⁶

Following the patristic analogy that “spirit is to flesh as male is to female,” medieval theology equated the male with the intellectual or spiritual, and the female with the physical or somatic.¹⁷ The particular forms of religious devotion that were practiced by women have their source in this idea. In earlier centuries, the most important religious images in Western Christianity were of the infant Christ, Christ in the glory of the resurrection, and Mary as Queen.¹⁸ In the twelfth century, however, an emphasis on images and events from Christ’s human life replaced these central images. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, images of the Passion and the crucifixion that emphasized Christ’s broken and bloody body became the central images for Christianity.¹⁹ Richard Kieckhefer describes the late medieval period as having a

¹⁵ Williston Walker and others, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 259.

¹⁶ Walker, 359. Of the women considered here, some are true mystics, some may be defined as visionaries, and many other named and unnamed women practiced lives of devotion, asceticism, penance, and prayer. At times it is difficult to determine whether a particular figure is a true mystic or visionary because it is often difficult to know with certainty whether narrative accounts of visions of God or the Saints are true visions, or whether the narrative given by the author is actually a way of describing prayerful meditations. Strict distinctions between mystical experiences, visionary experiences, and the ‘visions’ encountered during meditation will not be made here. Of more interest are the elements that these experiences share and how the elements of women’s experience differ from men.

¹⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books), 100.

¹⁸ Joanna E. Ziegler, *The Word Becomes Flesh* (Worcester Massachusetts: Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, 1985), 10.

¹⁹ Ellen Ross, “‘She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain’: Suffering, the Spiritual Journey, and Women’s Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism,” in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The*

“tendency to accent the darker side of earthly life,”²⁰ and he writes that during these centuries Christ’s “incarnation, his active ministry, and his resurrection were all subordinated to his supererogatory self-sacrifice, by which he took upon himself the burden of human sin.”²¹ With this evolution, the earlier motivation to reform the institutions and practices of this world gave way to the concept that rewards will not be paid until the afterlife and that earthly suffering is preparation for the life to come.²²

After the thirteenth century, there was an underlying belief in this period that one comes to understanding through experience. Late Medieval thought understood *imitation* as *becoming* or *being*, and so in the attempt to understand and grow close to God, the imitation of Christ “became more and more literal” during and after the thirteenth-century. Beyond developing a “compassion” for Christ suffering on the Cross, the women of this period sought to “become” the suffering Christ.²³ Suffering as Christ did and feeling as Christ did “explicitly linked oneself with the salvific work of Christ.”²⁴ Jacques de Vitry (c.1160-c.1240) cites the biblical source of this idea is his biography of Marie d’Oignies (1176-1213). He wrote, “Let us see that first lesson of the school of Jesus Christ, that first text of the teaching of the Evangelist: ‘Who wishes to come after me, let him renounce himself and take up his Cross and follow me. (Luke 9:23)’”²⁵ This practice of literally imitating the sufferings of Christ was especially important to women

Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 46.; Ziegler, 10.

²⁰ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 11.

²¹ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 90.

²² Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 11-12.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century,” *Women’s Studies* 11 (1984): 201-202.

²⁴ Ross, 47.

²⁵ Jacques De Vitry, *The Life of Marie d’Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1986), 21.

because “the weight of Western tradition had long told women that physicality was particularly their problem.”²⁶ Because women were explicitly and implicitly linked to the body, it should not be surprising that their devotion to God would also be through the physical.

Women carried the practice of devotion to Christ’s body and the ascetic abuses of their own bodies in imitation of Christ to literal extremes.²⁷ Physical miracles and at times bizarre behavior were seen as proof of divine favor bestowed upon the individual, and bodily illnesses or suffering were seen as divine gifts.²⁸ Christianity, from its origins with the crucifixion, had always contained an element of suffering, however, the piety of earlier centuries was focused more closely on a devotion to the glory of Christ resurrected. The martyrs of the early church were the victims of horrifying executions, but their tortures and their blood were not the focus of their stories. Early Christian stories and art instead emphasize “the martyrs’ obliviousness to pain and complete absorption in reflecting on the world to come.”²⁹ This focus on the glory of Christ’s resurrection is in direct contrast to visions of late medieval women who most often contemplate Christ at his moments of suffering and dying. As one fourteenth-century German nun wrote, she envisioned Christ:

as when he had just been taken off the pillar, with fresh wounds and so wretched and miserable that his blood flowed everywhere over all his body.” And he

²⁶ Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion,” 203.

²⁷ Asceticism as practiced through extreme fasting as been discussed at length by Caroline Walker Bynum, and so a discussion of this particular ascetic practice will not be repeated here. For Bynum’s research see, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women*.

²⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 182. This behavior, while certainly bizarre to modern sensibilities was considered extreme even by contemporary biographers who warned that their subjects were to be admired but not imitated. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

²⁹ Ross, 45.

spoke to her: "O woe, you poor human being, how long do you want to remain in the empty forlorn life? Regard me and look at my many needs and at the anxiety that I have suffered because of you. And regard these fresh wounds and this rose-coloured blood that I have shed for you."³⁰

Following this direction, women devoted themselves to the gory and bloody image of Christ on the cross and especially to the specific bodily wounds associated with the crucifixion. Perhaps the most well known example of the physical imitation of Christ's human suffering is that of St. Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata. The story of St. Francis was enormously popular and the widespread circulation of his story "led many mystics, and more particularly women, to wish to have imprinted on their own flesh 'the five signs of love.'"³¹ Although St. Francis remains the most famous stigmatic, the imitation of the wounds of the crucifixion was primarily a female phenomenon with all but one other case of full and visible stigmata belonging to women.³² Gertrude the Great (1256-1302) continually wrote of a desire for God to afflict her with Christ's wounds and repeatedly prayed,

... O most merciful Lord, engrave Thy Wounds upon my heart with Thy most precious Blood, that I may read in them both Thy grief and Thy love; and that the memory of Thy wounds may ever remain in my inmost heart, to excite my compassion for Thy sufferings and to increase in me Thy love. Grant me also to despise all creatures, and that my heart might delight in Thee alone. Amen.³³

When God finally granted her what she desired, Gertrude did not receive a visible imitation of the wounds, but wrote that:

³⁰ Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 107.

³¹ Gougaud, 88.

³² Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 56.

³³ Gertrude the Great, "The Life and Revelations of Gertrude the Great," in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth A. Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224-225.

I knew in my spirit that I had received the stigmata of your adorable and venerable wounds interiorly on my heart, just as though they had been made on the natural places of the body. By these wounds you not only healed my soul, but you gave me to drink of the inebriating cup of love's nectar.³⁴

In this passage, Gertrude explicitly links the image of wounds and blood to the idea of love of God. She wrote of in increased compassion that came with an increased level of suffering, and the reception of the wounds of the Crucifixion allows her to love God even more. Of special significance to female piety is the wound in Christ's side, cut by the lance of a Roman soldier as Christ's body hung dead on the cross. This gory image of the bloody and beaten body with its gaping wound became an image of consolation for the Cistercian nun, Lutgard of Aywieres (1182-1246). Lutgard echoes the theme of wounds and blood bringing love and comfort to the religious woman. "Whenever she was burdened by any disquiet of heart or body, she would stand before an image of the Crucified One....Then, completely rapt in spirit she would see Christ with the bloody wound in his side and, pressing the mouth of her heart against it, she would suck such sweetness that nothing at all could distress her."³⁵

The image of the blood and water flowing from Christ's side was instrumental to the concept of salvation and this idea is found repeatedly in visions and prayers. The Gospel of John states that when the Roman soldiers approached the crucified Christ, they "found he was already dead." Although they saw that he had died, "one of the soldiers thrust a lance into his side, and at once there was a flow of blood and water."³⁶ A vision

³⁴ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 100.

³⁵ Thomas of Cantimprè, "The Life of Lutgard of Aywieres," in *Thomas of Cantimprè: The Collected Saints Lives*, trans. by Margot H. King and Barbara Newman (Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 229.

³⁶ John 19:33-34. All Biblical citations are taken from *The Oxford Study Bible*.

of Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1210-1285) explained the importance of this flowing blood:

And my soul said: 'Alas, Lord, why did you suffer such distress? From that time when so much of your pure blood was shed from your pure heart the whole world should rightfully have been redeemed by it.'

'No,' he said, 'that did not satisfy my Father. For all the poverty, all the toil, and all the suffering and humiliation are just a knocking at the gate of heaven up to the time when my heart's blood poured onto this earth. Only then was heaven opened.'

The soul said: 'Lord, when this happened, you were dead. I am confused. How can someone dead still bleed?'

Our Lord said: 'My body was then in a human manner dead when my heart's blood flowed with a beam of the Godhead through my side. The blood issued forth by grace, just as did the milk that I drank from my virginal mother. My divinity was present in all members of my body while I was dead, just as it was before and afterward.'³⁷

The blood of the initial wounds of the Crucifixion was "but a knocking." The wound in Christ's side allowed for Heaven to be opened. The wound in Christ's side is not only important as the source of the salvific blood and water; it was also an image of entrance or pathway to the Sacred Heart of Christ. The "riches" of Gods glory had been hidden away, "but now the lance of the soldier has opened the side of thy Son, our Savior and Redeemer, on the cross, and the sacraments of our redemption have come forth."³⁸ In the *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, written especially for his sister, Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1166) described the crucifixion scene and encouraged the recluse to seek shelter and nourishment in Christ's wound. "Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water.... The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you." Aelred also encourages the recluse to take shelter:

³⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 251-252.

³⁸ William of St. Thierry, quoted in Louis Gougaud, *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1927), 91.

"wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with his blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet."³⁹

The image of Christ's wounded side also appeared to women in visions in contexts separate from the crucifixion. When Lutgard of Aywieres was sitting with a young man for whom she had previously had much affection, she had a vision in which

Christ appeared to her in that human form in which he had once lived among mortals. Drawing back from his breast the garment in which he seemed to be covered, he showed the wound in his side, bleeding as if recently opened, and said, 'Do not seek any longer the caresses of unseemly love. Here you may perpetually contemplate what you should love and why you should love it. Here I pledge that you shall attain the delights of total purity.'⁴⁰

The image of Christ in bloody agony is also the image of salvation. The image of the side wound, often depicted as the most gruesome and bloody mark on Christ's body becomes, for women, the site of safety, comfort, and love.

The development of devotion to the Sacred Heart was primarily due to the influence of the nuns at the convent of Helfta in Germany, especially Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240-1298). Gertrude wrote of the Lord showing her his wound and "issuing from his left side as through from the innermost depths of his blessed heart, a stream of flowing water as pure as crystal."⁴¹ For Mechthild of Hackeborn, the Sacred Heart appeared most often as a physical space in which she can find solace or

³⁹ Aelred of Rievaulx, "Rule of Life for a Recluse," In *The Words of Aelred of Rievaulx*, trans. M.P. MacPherson (Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 90-91.

⁴⁰ Lutgard of Aywieres, 218

⁴¹ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. Margaret Winkworth (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 108.

sanctuary.⁴² When Mechthild was sick with a terrible headache, the Lord showed her “the wound in his heart and said ‘Go in here, so that you may rest.’” There is no mention her of blood or gore, instead Mechthild, “entered with great gladness and joy into the heart of God which was like a most beautiful house...Then it seemed to her that there were as many silken pillows there as she had previously had painful throbbings in her head.”⁴³ In a reverse of this image, Lutgard of Aywieres sees Christ dwelling in her own heart:

At about the same time, she was gravely tormented by scruples and, considering herself a sinner, she did not dare to receive the body of Christ as had been her wont...she asked the Lord to show her the condition of her heart in some way. At once she was rapt in ecstasy and the Lord inwardly showed her her own heart in the likeness of a small, beautifully decorated chapel. He said to her, ‘Do not fear, daughter, to approach me, your spouse, because in such a place and such a manner, I have prepared for myself a dwelling in your heart.’”⁴⁴

Despite the comfort taken in these images, women’s connection to Christ’s humanity was primarily demonstrated through suffering. Illness and bodily pain were willingly accepted and actively desired as opportunities to share in the sufferings of the Passion. The soul that does not desire to participate in suffering “may know itself to be very far removed from the likeness of Christ,” taught Angela of Foligno (1248-1309).⁴⁵ When the Blessed Margarita (1382-1464) focused her meditation only on the pleasurable images of Christ’s infancy, Christ came to her and said, ‘It is not a balanced thing to taste only my honey, and not the gall. If you wish perfectly to unite yourself with me, with an

⁴² Rosalynn Voaden, “All Girls Together: Community, Gender, and Vision at Helfta,” in *Medieval Women and Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 83.

⁴³ Voaden, 74.

⁴⁴ Thomas of Cantimprè, “The Life of Lutgard of Aywieres,” in Newman, 188-189.

⁴⁵ Angela of Foligno, 144.

intent mind you must experience those illusions, shames, flagellations, death, and torments which I bore for you.” Margarita obeyed and began meditating on the Passion, praying that Christ might grant her tears and grief so that she “might be strong enough to scrutinize the wounds of [the] passion.”⁴⁶ When another devout woman who often prayed before the crucifix experienced a “great affliction” she asked God to take the suffering from her. God came to her too, saying, “‘Oh! Will you not suffer a little bit for my sake?’ And he took her by the hand and said to her: ‘Look at my fresh wounds and deny what I suffered for your sake.’ And she said: ‘O Lord, I will endure all the more gladly what I must suffer for your sake.’”⁴⁷

Pious women prayed for God to strike them with illness so that they might share in Christ’s suffering. Earlier mystics viewed illness as a reminder of the sinful natures of humans, but by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, physical illness was often the “initiating factor or central element in the mystic’s encounter with God—a special form of the *imitation passionis*,” and this is especially true for women’s piety.⁴⁸ Pain and suffering “were not an effort to destroy the body, *not* a punishment of physicality, not primarily an effort to shear away a source of lust....Illness and asceticism were rather *imitatio Christi*, an effort to plumb the depths of Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness—the moment of his dying.”⁴⁹ For late medieval

⁴⁶ Elizabeth A. Petroff, ed. *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, intro. Elizabeth Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 12.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey E. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 94-95

⁴⁸ McGinn, 301.

⁴⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 131.

religious women, sickness was not a burden, but an “opportunity to suffer with Christ.”⁵⁰ Marie d’Oignies was an example because she had “patience not only in persecution and injuries but also rejoiced in tribulations and she accepted the discipline of the Lord with great delight.” When she was suffering her final illness, after already suffering for forty days and nights, she was asked, “whether she found the pain which accompanied her illness in any way irksome, [and] she said ‘If it please God, I would rather begin these forty days all over again.’”⁵¹ Sister Kungund of Engelthat, as she lay on her deathbed, heard “a loud divine voice [which] announced to her: ‘Pain is a good word, pain is a sweet word, pain is a word rich in grace,’”⁵² and Angela of Foligno explained that through sharing suffering, one is able to share in Christ’s love:

And according as we do become one with Him through love, so do we likewise share in the sufferings which the soul witnesseth in God, the Man of Sorrows. And seeing that we do love according as we see and know, so doth the soul lament according as it beholdeth the sufferings of its Beloved, and doth suffer with His suffering. Likewise, the more intimately any person knoweth the Man of Sorrows, the more doth he love Him and suffer with His sufferings, and through grief is made one with Him whom he loveth. And as the soul is made one with this most sweet Christ through love, so is it likewise united with Him through suffering.⁵³

It was believed that suffering was somehow pleasing to God and while it might be argued that it was “the love revealed” by suffering more than the act of suffering itself that was pleasing, the medieval understanding was that “God seemed to attach more

⁵⁰ McGinn, 300.

⁵¹ Jacques de Vitry, 71.

⁵² McGinn, 301.

⁵³ Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, trans. Mary G. Steegman (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc, 1966), 42-43.

weight to love manifested in suffering than to love displayed in other ways.”⁵⁴ It was written that God gave Anne of Ramschwag “much suffering in her life so that she was quite sick and ill for many years....And by her suffering she was made ready to receive great grace.”⁵⁵ In one instance when God revealed himself to Mechthild of Magdeburg, He was holding in one hand a chalice filled with the red wine of suffering and in the other hand was holding the white wine of “sublime consolation.” God told Mechthild, “Blessed are those who drink this red wine. Although I give both out of divine love, the white wine is nobler in itself; but noblest of all are those who drink both the white and the red.”⁵⁶ Gertrude the Great wrote of a vision in which Christ appeared,

wearing this two-fold offering she had made him—namely, of joys and of sufferings—in the form of two jeweled rings, one on each hand. When she had understood the meaning of this, she often repeated the same prayer. After a little while, she was reciting it when she felt the Lord stroking her left eye with the ring on his left hand, which she understood to be a symbol of physical pain. And from that time, that same eye which she had seen the Lord touching spiritually, suffered so much physically that it never regained its former health. From this she understood that, just as the ring is the symbol of espousals, so any trial, whether of body or soul, is the truest sign of divine election and is like the espousals of the soul with God; so that those who suffer can say truly, and even with confidence: ‘My Lord Jesus Christ has espoused me with his ring.’”⁵⁷

For Gertrude, the “trial” of the body or soul is the most explicit sign of divine election. As she prayed, the Lord does not approach her with the ring that represented joy, but strokes her eye with the ring representing physical pain. It is those who suffer who can speak of God’s love “truly” and “with confidence.” Christ’s human mother Mary also reminded Gertrude that “As you never remember to have endured more severe corporal

⁵⁴ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 89.

⁵⁵ McGinn, 301.

⁵⁶ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 77.

⁵⁷ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 157-158.

sufferings than those caused by your illness, know also that you have never received from my Son more noble gifts than those which will now be given to you, and for which your sufferings have prepared you.”⁵⁸

Medieval Christianity sublimated concerns with the reality of this life to concerns over preparing one's soul for the next life. That earthly suffering could lessen or prevent the suffering that would occur in Purgatory also meant that women could practice suffering as a work of charity for others. One day when Marie d'Oignies was in her cell next to the church, “she saw a multitude of hands before her as if in supplication.” The appearance of these hands frightened her several more times before she begged God to explain their meaning. “The Lord's response to her was that the souls of the dead who were being tortured in purgatory were asking for the prayers of her intercession which would soothe their sufferings as if with a precious ointment.”⁵⁹ Else von Neustatt prayed that God would give great sufferings to her friend, and in explanation said, “I am doing so out of proper love, for you are dearer to me than other sisters. For whoever is spared here must do penance in purgatory or hell.”⁶⁰

Women approached their own suffering as a method of sharing in the suffering of Christ, and some historians conclude that they also saw a more active possibility of “suffering undergone to cure the pain of the human condition.”⁶¹ JoAnn McNamara makes that argument that as family and societal structures changed after the twelfth century, women “were being systematically deprived of control over their own wealth

⁵⁸ Gertrude the Great, “The Life and Revelations,” 227-228.

⁵⁹ Jacques de Vitry, 27.

⁶⁰ Lewis, 161.

⁶¹ Spearing, 12.

and reduced to further dependency upon their families or their husbands.”⁶² Without the power to help those in need through secular means, and excluded from most forms of religious life, she argues, women could take action through the acceptance of illness and suffering.⁶³ McNamara’s argument is compelling and supported by evidence showing women sometimes becoming competitive with one another in their willing acceptance of suffering as a means to free souls from purgatory.⁶⁴

In the absence of God-sent afflictions, women also practiced many forms of self-induced suffering, “thrusting nettles into one’s breast, wearing hair shirts, binding one’s flesh tightly with twisted ropes, enduring extreme sleep and food deprivation, performing thousands of genuflexions, and praying barefoot in winter.”⁶⁵ Margaret of Ypres (d. 1237) pressed nettles and stinging barbs into her breasts when she was only seven years old.⁶⁶ Lukardis of Oberwiemer (c. 1262-1309) drove her middle finger through the palm of her other hand, and Beatrice of Ornacieux (c. 1240-c. 1309) drove a nail through her hand and experienced only clear water running from the wound. Blessed Margaret of Hungary (1242-1271) shared in “the discipline in common with the other sisters,” but unsatisfied with these punishments, she insisted that she be given:

another flogging with a rod, or with branches covered with thorns. She caused herself to be beaten by another until blood was drawn. To these penances, which were habitual throughout the whole year, she added other yet more harsh during

⁶² Jo Ann McNamara, “The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages,” in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell. (Cornell University Press, 1991), 204.

⁶³ McNamara, 221.

⁶⁴ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 217.

⁶⁵ Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion,” 190.

⁶⁶ Thomas of Cantimprè, “Life of Margaret of Ypres,” in Newman, 166.

the last three days of Holy Week; and the blows with which she macerated her body each hour of the day and night caused a great loss of blood.⁶⁷

Christine the Astonishing, also known as Christine Mirabilis (1150-1224), would “torment herself in the same way with thorns and brambles so it seemed that her whole body was entirely covered in blood,” yet when she would wash off the blood, there would be no wounds on her body.⁶⁸ The supernatural receiving of the stigmata was ultimate proof of divine favor, but the marks of the crucifixion were also self-induced as part of devotional practice. The author of a nun’s book from the convent of Unterlinden in Alsace thus described that:

In Advent and Lent, all the sisters, coming into the chapterhouse after Matins...hack at themselves cruelly, hostilely lacerating their bodies until the blood flows, with all kinds of whips, so that the sound reverberates all over the monastery and rises to the ears of the Lord of hosts sweeter than all melody,” and they call these lacerations ‘stigmata.’⁶⁹

Jacques de Vitry recorded that Marie d’Oignies had a memory of a time in which she had been ill and so had eaten a little meat and watered wine. So horrified at herself for this “previous delight,” she “began to loath her flesh in comparison with the sweetness of the Paschal Lamb and in her mistaken fervor, she cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife which, because of her modesty, she buried it in the earth.”⁷⁰ Marie also performed sessions of prayer during which she would genuflect 1100 times day and night for forty

⁶⁷ Gougaud, 192.

⁶⁸ Thomas of Cantimprè, “The Life of Christine the Astonishing,” in Newman, 135.

⁶⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 132.

⁷⁰ Jacques de Vitry, 22.

days, sometimes beating herself after each genuflexion and causing "a copious flood of blood."⁷¹

In this example, Jacques de Vitry described Marie's actions as evidence of God's favor upon her, but also described her as exhibiting a "mistaken fervor." Although these practices were example of extreme piety not advocated by the church, the clergy did admit that these women were pious in nature, and perhaps more importantly, they were popular with the laity and had "good spiritual effect on the faithful."⁷² One of the reasons that the early thirteenth-century biography Jacques de Vitry left Paris to follow Marie d'Oignies and record the events of her life and followers, was that he saw her example as potentially useful to the church,⁷³ and he used these examples of holy women to "shame...more secular contemporaries."⁷⁴ His biography of Marie shows a clear respect and admiration for the women whose lives he records, and he wrote of the extreme nature of their piety "in such a way that their insights and practices could be a source of renewal for the church as a whole."⁷⁵ Another important biographer, Thomas of Cantimprè (1201-1272) was an Augustinian monk when he met Lutgard of Aywieres in 1230. He was so influenced by this meeting that he became a Dominican "and devoted his life to spreading the fame of contemporary saints, most of them women.

As Jacques de Vitry and Thomas of Cantimprè were "spreading the fame" of these holy women, they were not advising that others use their lives as a guide to pious

⁷¹ Jacques de Vitry, 28.

⁷² Giles J. Milhaven, "A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 343.

⁷³ Brenda Bolton, "Mulieres Sanctae," *Studies in Church History* 10 (1993): 146.

⁷⁴ Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," *Speculum* 66, no. 4 (October 1991): 827.

⁷⁵ Petroff, 51.

behavior. The physical feats of a few miraculous women were used as evidence of God's grace within the orthodox church, but they were not meant as examples to be imitated.

Jacques de Vitry, made a distinction between "*imitanda*" and "*admiranda*" when describing female piety. The intent of the stories was not to arouse imitation, but to "arouse more than admiration more even than wonderment: they were meant to shock the reader, to provoke in him a moral reform."⁷⁶ Jacques de Vitry clearly addresses this in his biography of Marie d'Oignies:

I do not say this to commend the excess but so that I might show her fervour. In these and in many other things wherein the privilege of grace operated, let the discreet reader pay attention that what is a privilege for a few does not make a common law. Let us imitate her virtues, but we cannot imitate the words of her virtues without individual privilege.... Thus what we have read about what those things which certain saints have done through the familiar counsel of the Holy Spirit, let us rather admire than imitate.⁷⁷

There are, of course, examples of holy and ascetic lives led by men, and examples of bodily miracles attributed to men, but these experiences are far fewer and far less extreme than the bodily experiences of women. Medieval culture viewed women as physical beings who because of their physicality had a natural connection to the physicality of Christ. Because of the somatic nature of the feminine, women had a greater "ability" to imitate Christ. As Bynum somewhat dramatically states it, "to soar toward Christ as lover and bride, to sink into the stench and torment of the crucifixion, to eat God, was for the woman only to give significance to what she already was."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, "Major Currents in Late Medieval Devotion," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988), 14.

⁷⁷ Jacques de Vitry, 14-15.

⁷⁸ Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," 205.

Chapter 3

MYSTICISM

The contemplative life was esoteric by definition and somewhat solitary by necessity, and the true mystical experience of immediate union with God was an elite privilege understood and received by an elect few. Medieval Christianity made two promises to followers. First, was the promise of immortality, and second was the knowledge that God's providence could provide real help in this world, and it may seem that the isolated ineffable experiences of the mystics would not have contributed to either of these needs.⁷⁹ The mystical experience, however, through the fact of the experience itself, provided proof that divine grace had been bestowed upon an individual. The perception of the favored relationship to the divine allowed the mystics to "provide divine aid and reassurance" to the masses.⁸⁰ Recent scholars, including Bynum, argue that female mystics acted "By Christ's own command... [as] mediators with powers to bind and loose; teachers who spoke Christ's own words and provided irrefutable evidence on that haunting concern, the afterlife; counselors and advisers to whom the convent's neighbors turned when local clergy and friars failed."⁸¹ The contemplative life by definition requires "a longing for private penance and contemplative prayer," but the physical signs of God's favor exhibited by the mystics nonetheless attracted followers

⁷⁹ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 150.

⁸⁰ Weinstein and Bell, 150.

⁸¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 251.

who sought “prayers, advice, or miraculous cures” or at the least those who merely wanted “to bask in the saint’s aura.”⁸²

As with the devotional practices already discussed, female mystics had experiences that were more physically immediate, “bodily in nature,” and more sensual than were the mystical experiences of men.⁸³ The accepted mystical theology of the late Middle Ages commonly described a gradation of levels of experience, with bodily or physical experience as the lowest, or first, level.⁸⁴ “The necessity of rising above all bodily experience, sense images, and bodily passion in order to come to any experience of God is repeated monotonously” in the mystical theologies of both the apophatic, and the affective, or so-called “love mysticism,” traditions.⁸⁵ Aquinas explained, “The higher our mind is raised to the contemplation of spiritual things, the more it is abstracted from sensible things.... Therefore the mind that sees the divine substance must be totally divorced from the bodily senses, either by death or by some rapture.”⁸⁶ The “sweetness of Jesus” cannot be experienced “through their body” but must instead be noncorporeal, through “intellect or loving will.”⁸⁷

The medieval view of the hierarchy of vision came from St. Augustine’s analysis of St Paul’s “ascent to the third heaven and paradise.”⁸⁸ The first level was the corporeal, physically seeing with the eyes. Next was the spiritual vision, which included memory and imagination. The highest level, the “supreme ideal” was the intellectual vision,

⁸² Weinstein and Bell, 150.

⁸³ McGinn, 25.

⁸⁴ Milhaven, 349.

⁸⁵ Milhaven, 353.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, xlvii, Rickaby’s translation, quoted in Milhaven 348

⁸⁷ Milhaven, 352.

⁸⁸ For St. Paul’s description, see 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

which was imageless and intelligible.⁸⁹ Women's experiences differed from men in that their experiences of union were somatic and sensual, but women did not describe these experiences as being a somehow lesser experience or a description of a gradation or quest for a higher level of experience. Women's experiences of divine union were described "without any appeal to the traditional caveat that the soul 'must transform passion into passionlessness,'"⁹⁰ and they "testify to a single experience of ...the suffering Christ." Their somatic experience *was* the ultimate experience and female mystics considered these experiences to be "ends in themselves."⁹¹ Thus, when Gertrude the Great has an experience of pressing her side to Christ's wounded side,

She perceived that through the contact with the wound of love in the Lord's most sacred side her left side had been drawn into a kind of ruddy scar. Then, as she was going to receive the body of Christ, the Lord seemed to receive the consecrated host in his divine mouth. It passed through his body and proceeded to issue from the wound in the most sacred side of Christ, and to fix itself almost like a dressing over the life-giving wound. And the Lord said to her: 'Behold, this host will unite you to me in such a way that on one side it touches your scar and on the other my wound, like a dressing for both of us.'⁹²

According to Aquinas, the sense of touch was "the lowest and least worthy of all the human senses," and bodily knowledge was thus the lowest kind of knowledge because it is sensual.⁹³ For Gertrude, however, this experience was intimate knowledge of the divine, and she neither categorized it as inferior nor does she indicate a desire to move on to a "higher" contemplation. At the moment of the consecration of the host, Angela of Foligno was raptured and experienced a vision of Christ Crucified,

⁸⁹ Longbow, 159, 162-3

⁹⁰ The origin of this idea is attributed to Gregory of Nyssa and is discussed in McGinn, 156.

⁹¹ Milhaven, 349.

⁹² Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, quoted in Voaden, 85-86.

⁹³ Milhaven, 358.

...as though he had just been taken down from the Cross; His blood was as fresh and red and flowed from His wounds as easily as though it had only that instant been shed. Moreover, there appeared such a dissolution of all the members of that blessed body that the sinews and joints of the bones seemed unto me as though loosened from their due harmony.... At this sight my bowels were so pierced with compassion that verily I seemed all transformed in the pain of the Crucified both bodily and mentally.⁹⁴

When Angela meditated on the Passion, feeling such great pain that she could not stand and then "beheld Christ, who inclined His head upon mine arms which I had stretched out upon the ground,"⁹⁵ or when she looked at the crucified with her "bodily eyes,"⁹⁶ it is truly an experience of "real knowing."⁹⁷ It is "tactile experience" yet was still a "sublime knowing of Him, a wondrous experience of Him worth seeking for its own sake, without reference to any further good achieved or achievable."⁹⁸

Ulinka Rublack demonstrates the contrast between men's and women's experiences in her study of female devotions and visions of the infant Christ. While devotion to the infant was much more common among women, there are instances of men contemplating or otherwise having an experience with the infant Christ. While women's experiences include visions of physically holding the baby, feeding and playing with him, men write of an intellectual contemplation of the wonder of the miracle of the incarnation. For example, Friedrich Sunder, a chaplain of a female Dominican convent near Nuremberg "frequently asked Mary for her permission to let his soul give birth to

⁹⁴ Angela of Foligno 209-210.

⁹⁵ Angela of Foligno, 205.

⁹⁶ Angela of Foligno, 220.

⁹⁷ Milhaven, 343.

⁹⁸ Milhaven, 359.

the infant before the Eucharist.”⁹⁹ Gertrude the Great described a very different vision of Mary that occurred during the reading of Luke 2:7 at Mass during the Feast of Purification. “She brought to me her first-born son,” wrote Gertrude. Mary held out the infant to Gertrude, and Gertrude addressed Christ, “you, the son of her virginal womb, a darling little child who made every effort to embrace me. And as I, so unworthy of holding you, was allowed to take you from her, a tiny child, you clasped my neck with your frail little arms.”¹⁰⁰ Theologians recognized these kinds of images of love and affection for their piety but nonetheless considered these visions as physical and therefore lowly. Within the male defined hierarchy of experience, physical experiences were desirable only as a starting point on a journey to more abstract spiritual experience. As Milhaven points out, it is exactly this element of “physicality of the women’s experience that makes it unintelligible and often repugnant to mystical theologians of the tradition.”¹⁰¹ Medieval theologians agreed that the bodily nature of the experiences themselves kept them from being more than a “popular kind of delusion or, at best, pious imagining.”¹⁰² As one should beware of applying modern interpretations to women’s motivations, one must be careful when discussing men’s actions as well. While some men may have consciously used the traditional mystical theology to prevent women from claiming to have “intellectual” unions with God, it is more likely that the accepted medieval view of women as intellectually inferior itself prevented this notion. It was not thought that women *should* not attempt this more intellectual path, instead it was a

⁹⁹ Ulinka Rublack, “Female Spirituality and the Infant Jesus in Late Medieval Dominican Convents,” *Gender and History* 6, no. 1 (April 1994): 41-42.

¹⁰⁰ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 117.

¹⁰¹ Milhaven, 350.

¹⁰² Milhaven, 350.

ubiquitous and deeply held understanding that women, by their physical and spiritual nature, *could* not approach God on any level other than the physical.

In her study of medieval mysticism, Grace M. Jantzen explores the interactions of gender, mysticism and authority. Jantzen makes the argument that the medieval mystical tradition, as defined by men, kept women at a “disadvantage” even as the number and visibility of women mystics was growing during this time.¹⁰³ The intellectual or apophatic strand of mysticism of Eckhart and Aquinas distanced women because of the belief that women were not capable of “intellectual ecstasy,” while the affective tradition promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux, disadvantaged women through its focus of love and will over bodiliness.¹⁰⁴ While men were capable of a spiritual love even while trapped within a physical body, women were seen as firmly connected with a physical body that created a “barrier to the spiritual love of God.”¹⁰⁵ Medieval theology in general did not believe that women had the intellectual capability to achieve the male defined “passionless” experience, but at the same time, women did not make claims or express any desire for this kind of experience. That women did not claim to approach God on the same intellectual level as men and that women were satisfied with their “lower” physical experiences allowed for male acceptance and official allowance of female mystics.

Paradoxically, it was the belief in women’s weak intellect and spirit that allowed for the belief that women were especially receptive to God’s working through them.

¹⁰³ Jantzen, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Jantzen, 110.

¹⁰⁵ Jantzen, 129.

With less strength of will, pious women could more easily act as an empty “vessel” to be filled with divine inspiration.¹⁰⁶ For example, Gertrude the Great writes that

While I was meditating attentively, if not as attentively as I ought, yet as attentive as I could, on that which was worthy of our attention, behold, there appeared the goodness and kindness of God our Savior. This was not through any good works which I have been able to do, unworthy as I am, but in accordance with His own ineffable merciful design, by adoptive regeneration, fortifying me (in my extreme baseness and unworthiness) and making me capable of this wonderful, the tremendous grace...the grace of intimate union with you!¹⁰⁷

Gertrude wrote that she was unworthy and that the experience of union that she received was based on the goodness of God, and not on any good work or value in herself. Female writing often explicitly stated that it was divine authority, not any inherent value in the person of the female mystic herself, which allowed her the opportunity to speak of her experiences. The Paris Master Henry of Ghent was asked in 1290, “whether a woman can be a doctor of theology?” He answered that women could not teach *ex officio*, but made an allowance for teaching *ex beneficio*, “from the gift of grace,” saying, “speaking about teaching from divine favor and the fervor of charity, it is well allowed for a woman to teach just like anyone else, if she possesses sound doctrine.”¹⁰⁸ The idea from Paul that God uses the weak to shame or teach the strong was often used to explain the allowance of female writing, teaching, or revelation,¹⁰⁹ and this trope of the unworthy

¹⁰⁶ Katharina M. Wilson, ed. *Medieval Women Writers*, intro. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), xvii.

¹⁰⁷ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 106.

¹⁰⁸ McGinn, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, xvii. 1 Cor. 1:26-28 “My friends, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are wise by any human standard, few powerful or of noble birth. Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.

vessel is found throughout women's writing. Mechthild of Magdeburg exemplifies this idea when she wrote:

'Daughter, many a wise man, because of negligence
On a big highway, has lost his precious gold
With which he was hoping to go to a famous school.
Someone is going to find it.
By nature I have acted accordingly many a day.
Wherever I bestowed special favors,
I always sought out the lowest, most insignificant, and most unknown place for them.
The highest mountains on earth cannot receive the revelations of my favors
Because the course of my Holy Spirit flows downhill.
One finds many a professor learned in scripture who actually is a fool in my eyes.
And I'll tell you something else:
It is a great honor for me with regard to them, and it very much strengthens Holy Christianity
That the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches the learned tongue.'¹¹⁰

According to this passage, any ability or authority that Mechthild displayed was based upon God's grace working through her. Without a strong will or intellect, Mechthild is the unlearned woman who acted as a receptacle through which the revelations of the Holy Spirit might flow. This critical understanding helps to explain why the church allowed orthodox women to share their visions and write on theologically related topics. Some scholars, Spearing, Petroff, and Bynum included, might argue that by not acknowledging their visions as inferior and by proclaiming the reality of the divine revelation bestowed through them, women gained some level of power or recognition of authority. However, many modern scholars who argue that the divine authority bestowed upon the mystic represented a potential for subverting the authority of the church often fail to discuss the fact that the holy nature of mystical experience had to be validated and

¹¹⁰ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 96-97.

declared orthodox by the church itself. Any authority bestowed upon the female mystic came “from within the institutional church” and such authorization was often given as a way to “further that institution’s end.”¹¹¹ There were no paths to religious authority outside of the Orthodox Church. The power of the medieval Church was such that a failure to obtain official authorization was equal to an accusation of heresy and punishable by death. There was no real opportunity for female mystics to subvert the authority of the church based upon their direct experiences of God when the Church itself had the authority to validate the authority and the reality of these experiences.

¹¹¹ Laurie A. Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 35.

Chapter 4

THE BODY AND EUCHARISTIC DEVOTION

In addition to ascetic practices and mystical experience, women's devotion to the humanity of Christ also manifested itself through devotion to the Eucharist. By the eleventh century, the Eucharist was replacing baptism as the "central sacrament" of the Christian Church,¹¹² laywomen, recluses, tertiaries, and by cloistered women from all orders practiced Eucharistic devotions. As a group, women were "inspired, compelled, comforted and troubled by the Eucharist to an extent found in only a few male writers of the period."¹¹³ The recognition of the extent to which the desire to imitate Christ, already discussed in terms of ascetic practices, develops into a literal desire to *become* Christ is crucial here. "The Eucharist is an especially appropriate vehicle for the effort to become Christ because the Eucharist *is* Christ."¹¹⁴ The Eucharist not only "causes grace, but it also contains the very author of grace, Christ himself."¹¹⁵ The Life of Angela of Foligno describes that when Christ, through the Eucharist, is "received by the soul" that has "been tried and hath no desire to sin....He grants remission of sins, strength against temptation, it restrains our opposers, augments grace, and heaps up merit."¹¹⁶ The Eucharistic ritual was also inherently physical. The act of receiving the host "involves eating and drinking with the belief that Christ is then in one's body."¹¹⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg explained, "Whenever we receive God's Body, the Godhead unites itself to our innocent soul and

¹¹² Walker, 346.

¹¹³ Bynum, "Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion," 181.

¹¹⁴ Bynum, "Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion," 202.

¹¹⁵ Walker, 346.

¹¹⁶ Angela of Foligno, 153. The language in this quotation has been revised to reflect modern English.

¹¹⁷ Milhaven, 346.

God's humanity mixes itself with our hideous body, and thus does the Holy Spirit make his dwelling in our faith. This blessed union we should preserve with great care."¹¹⁸ The Sacrament of Communion perfectly served both the desire to imitate Christ and the desire for union with Christ. As with other pious practices, women took to practice of Eucharistic devotion to an extreme not seen in male piety. These extreme practices were problematic, but often tolerated and accepted as pious practices that also served the interest of the Church.

The way in which the majority of the laity approached this "blessed union" was much different from the way in which holy men and women received the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Because of the preparation required to ensure that the soul was in a proper state before receiving the body of Christ, the church limited the laity's access to the Eucharist. Angela of Foligno taught that the "holy Mystery," of consecration and communion "must be considered with great diligence by those who desire to celebrate and receive this sacrifice; the soul must not pass hastily over this meditation, but must dwell upon it carefully and earnestly."¹¹⁹ The church required that the laity take communion only once a year at Easter, but even this limited access was worrisome and potentially dangerous if the participant was not spiritually prepared. The Church taught that the act of receiving communion while in a state of mortal sin was, in itself, a mortal sin.¹²⁰ If the Eucharist was received by a person with their body only, without reflecting and meditating with their soul, or if it was received "unworthily, then it bringeth eternal

¹¹⁸ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 150-151.

¹¹⁹ Angela of Foligno, 146.

¹²⁰ Rubin, 147.

death unto both soul and body.”¹²¹ The majority of the laity could not be entrusted to take the type of preparation that Mechthild of Magdeburg described as necessary “before going to God’s table.” She wrote:

Whenever I, in my unworthiness, am about to go up and receive the body of our Lord, I examine the countenance of my soul in the mirror of my sins. There I see myself as I lived, as I am now living, and as I shall live in the future. In this mirror of my sins I see nothing but alas and woe. Then I cast my face to the ground and weep plaintively, if I can, because eternal incomprehensible God is so kind that he wants to bow down to the filthy puddle of my heart. Then I call to mind that in justice it would be fairer if one were to drag my body to the gallows, like a thief who had stolen from his rightly lord the precious treasure of purity, which God gave me in holy baptism....If a person did not confess a sin and has no intention of confessing it, he should not receive God’s body.¹²²

In order to avoid the dangers of the offering or taking of communion by an unworthy recipient, participation in the Eucharistic ceremony developed into a primarily visual experience. Viewing the consecrated host did not carry the same risk of mortal sin as physically taking the host into one’s body, but it could still have a beneficial effect on the viewer. The tradition of elevating the consecrated host so that the congregation might benefit by an ocular communion began in Paris in 1200 and spread rapidly. A ringing bell would alert the crowds, which may or may not have been paying attention to the service, that they should turn their attention to the altar to witness the moment of elevation. This practice allowed the laity to participate in a visual communion that eliminated the fear and danger associated with the Eucharist, but at the same time fulfilled “a popular craving to see the miraculously transubstantiated host.”¹²³ The growth in devotion to the Eucharist was not always practiced in terms of the “liturgical

¹²¹ Angela of Foligno, 155.

¹²² Mechthild of Magdeburg, 292.

¹²³ Kieckhefer, “Major Currents,” 97.

ceremony” but also manifested as a “rapidly increasing fascination for the consecrated Host itself, whether within the liturgy or outside of it.”¹²⁴ It is during this time that churches began the practice of displaying the consecrated host on the altar within a monstrance for viewing outside of the Mass.

The consecrated host, miraculously transformed through the intercession of the priest, was also believed capable of supernatural power. The *Dialogue on Miracles*, a book of miracle tales written by Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180-c.1240), is one example of the numerous collections of miracle stories that were collected and disseminated in the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries and it includes an entire section of stories about host miracles. In one story, a priest who doubted the sacrament saw the host transformed into the appearance of raw flesh during his performance of Mass. In another, a sinful priest buried a consecrated host in the corner of the church. Afraid of what he had done, he later confided in a friend and they attempt to recover the host only to find a cross with a small man hanging from it—very small, but of real flesh and blood—in place of the host. A consecrated host that fell from the hand of another priest hand leaves an imprint of the monogram on the hard tile floor as if the floor was made of soft wax. A pyx aboard a sinking ship miraculously propelled itself through the water where another ship rescues it. The miraculous host even affected animals as was shown in stories where oxen plowing a field refused to walk over the place where a stolen host was buried, and

¹²⁴ Kieckhefer, “Major Currents,” 97.

mice that discovered discarded wafers nibbled only around the outside edges, leaving the holy monogram in the center untouched.¹²⁵

For the majority of the Christian laity in the late Middle Ages, the Eucharistic host was a magical object capable of both performing miracles and frightening the sinful, and communion was primarily a moment of visual attention within the unintelligible words of the Mass. For religious women, however, the attitude toward the Eucharist was incredibly different. Religious women, even those living cloistered lives of strict obedience, may have only received the host a few times each year although they probably observed the priests taking communion at Mass each day.¹²⁶ In contrast to the laity who were satisfied with a visual ritual, religious women so desired to participate fully in the sacrament of the Eucharist that their devotions became obsessive. Gertrude the Great expressed her concern over the exclusion of nuns from more frequent communion when she asked God what it is she receives when she takes the host. When God responded that the host contains His "whole self," she asked, what then, is the value of repeated or frequent communion if God is received wholly in every instance. Gertrude wrote that God explained to her in a vision:

'If in ancient times anyone who had twice been made consul always preceded someone who had only once held that dignity, how could anyone who had received me more often on earth not have much greater glory in eternal life?' Then, sighing, she said: 'Oh, how much greater than mine is the glory of priests, who communicate daily by reason of their priestly office!' And the Lord said to her: 'Indeed, the glory of those who come to me worthily shines very brightly. And yet, the experience of interior delight is a very different thing from the exterior glory. And so there is one reward for someone who comes with desire

¹²⁵ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, trans. H. Von E. Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1929), 110-114, 117, 119-121.

¹²⁶ Lewis, 153.

and love, another for one who receives with awe and reverence, and yet another for one who makes great efforts to be prepared for receiving. But none of these is given to a priest who celebrates merely out of habit."¹²⁷

While it might be some consolation that the attitude of the communicant is a factor in the efficacy of the sacrament, the belief remained that more frequent participation leads to "greater glory."

The church did not allow women to take communion more frequently for several reasons. There was a concern, voiced by Albert the Great among others, that "frequent communion might encourage superficiality of spiritual response in women, who were by nature given to 'levity.'"¹²⁸ Clerical resources were another consideration. Not only was a priest required to administer the sacrament, but there also had to be enough confessors available to the community to ensure that the women were properly prepared to receive.¹²⁹ Because the church "controlled access to the Eucharist and stressed scrupulous and awe-filled preparation,"¹³⁰ special days were scheduled and set aside within women's communities for receiving of communion. Time for ample preparation was planned and the scheduled days were much anticipated events."¹³¹ With such anxiety and planning leading to these highly anticipated and desired events, "recipients naturally approached the altar in a spiritually and psychologically heightened state."¹³² It should not be surprising then, that the Eucharist was so often noted as the cause or

¹²⁷ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 207.

¹²⁸ Lewis, 152.

¹²⁹ Lewis, 153.

¹³⁰ Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," 186.

¹³¹ Petroff, 14.

¹³² Lewis, 153.

¹³³ Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," 186.

occasion for visions and mystical experience. Jacques de Vitry described the desire for communion felt by the Beguine women whose lives he recorded:

When some of these women received 'the bread which comes down from heaven' (John 6:50), they did not take it only as refreshment in the heart but also received it in their mouth as a perceptible consolation, 'sweeter than honey and the honeycomb' (Ps. 18:11)

While the meat of the True Lamb filled them, a wondrous savour overflowed from the palate of the heart to the palate of the body. Some of them ran with such desire after the fragrance (cf. Cant. 1:3) of such a great Sacrament that in no way could they endure to be deprived of it; and unless their souls were frequently invigorated by the delights of this meal, they obtained no consolation or rest but utterly wasted away in languor.¹³³

In a representative example, after one instance of receiving communion, Gertrude the Great wrote that, "[I] retired to the place where I pray, [and] it seemed to me that I saw a ray of light like an arrow coming forth from the wound of the right side of the crucifix, which was in an elevated place, and it continued, as it were, to advance and retire for some time, sweetly attracting my cold affections."¹³⁴

The analogous relationship between the female and the physical body allowed for special identification with the Eucharist as physical body. "The path to salvation lay *through* the body, above all Christ's corpus embodied in the Host,"¹³⁵ and it is sometimes argued that women's ecstatic responses to the Eucharistic demonstrated a "means of endowing women's non-clerical status—their status as lay recipients—with special spiritual significance."¹³⁶ Some recent scholars have interpreted women's particular devotion to the Eucharist as "compensation" for women's "exclusion from holy orders," and their inability to consecrate the host or partake in the daily communion of the

¹³³ Jacques de Vitry, 8.

¹³⁴ Petroff, 14.

¹³⁵ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 220.

¹³⁶ Bynum, "Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion," 193.

priests.¹³⁷ Bynum argues that devotion to the Eucharist served as a type of “substitution” for a clerical role that women were denied, and she argues that, “women’s ecstasy or possession served as an alternative to the authority of priestly office.”¹³⁸ Numerous of examples of women “bypassing” clerical intercession by receiving communion directly from God or saints can be found in medieval texts. When Adelheid Ludwigin had a “great desire to receive our Lord,” she had a vision in which she was offered the chalice by a bishop who was later revealed to be St. Martin. Mechthilt von Waldeck heard the Lord speaking to her and saying “Stand up and open the mouth of your desire.” When she complied, she experienced God “as truly in her soul in all sweetness and grace, as if she received him at the altar.”¹³⁹ Through instances like these, the argument continues, women “either claimed ‘clerical’ power for themselves, or bypassed the power of males.”¹⁴⁰

To what degree medieval women were aware of the idea of “bypassing” authority, and whether this idea was ever consciously used by women in an attempt to gain some level of clerical authority is almost impossible to determine definitively. There were surely instances in which women used the concept of ecstasy or divinely administered communion to their advantage, but to argue that medieval women as a group were promoting a consciously subversive agenda is interpreting their lives through a more modern context. Scholars who argue for a kind of medieval female agency often fail to

¹³⁷ Kieckhefer, “Major Currents,” 99.

¹³⁸ Bynum, “Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion,” 192.

¹³⁹ Lewis, 157.

¹⁴⁰ Bynum, “Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion,” 193.

include a discussion of the way in which the male controlled church used women's experiences to further the church's own agenda.

In the context of Eucharistic devotion, women might have gained some authority through their unique devotion to the Eucharist, however, this same devotion was fully endorsed and promoted by the church in an attempt to control women's piety. In the late Middle Ages, the church faced dangers and temptations from numerous popular heretical movements and was also reacting to the increasing concern over the numbers of women living pious but uncloistered and unstructured lives as Beguines.¹⁴¹ Apart from the exceptional instances of divine communion, the consecration of the host required the intercession of a priest. Encouraging devotion to the Eucharist served the purpose of ensuring that women remained close to the church, keeping them within the bounds of orthodoxy and under clerical supervision.¹⁴² The church also used examples of women's devotions to the Eucharist as rhetoric in their fight against heresy, particularly against Catharism. Both Jacques de Vitry and Thomas of Cantimprè used the examples of women's devotions to Christ's body "as a counter to the Cathar view that the physical world is the creation of an evil God."¹⁴³ Holy women "whose bodies became one with the consecrated wafer suddenly turned into bleeding meat, were powerful evidence against the Cathar assertion that matter and flesh could not be the creations of a good God."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, despite recent claims for female authority based on their Eucharistic

¹⁴¹ Petroff, 171-172.

¹⁴² Bynum, "Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion," 200.

¹⁴³ Bynum, "Medieval Women and Eucharistic Devotion," 200.

¹⁴⁴ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 195-196.

devotions, these devotions served and promoted the needs of the church as much or more than it ever allowed any potential for female authority or power.

Chapter 5

BLOOD

It is in this society, in which blood is thick with magical significations, mystical claims, pharmacological prodigies, alchemistical dreams (the artificial man, the *homunculus*, is born of putrefied sperm, and feeds on blood), that the torments of Christ, along with the cult of his body and blood, becomes a collective *passio*—all but an epidemic of morbidity, a murky disease of the soul...mirroring the simultaneous horror of and attraction for the wanton destruction of life symbolized in the Blood that was spilled by the rejection perpetrated by the human being upon the Creator of all that lives and moves, through the refusal to look for one's identity in the blood of the Man-God: gory torment of the great distributor-creator, masking a sullen, unsatisfied desire for suicide, for a rejection of life, creation, and love.¹⁴⁵

This is the somewhat dramatic, but also fitting description of the attitude toward blood during the late Middle Ages that Piero Camporesi presents in his study of blood as symbol. Of all the images from the medieval period, perhaps none is as conflicted, contradictory, or powerful, as the symbol or image of blood. Considered in the various contexts of biology and theology, blood was unique in its power “to evoke elemental opposites such as life and death, fertility and violence, nurture and blight.”¹⁴⁶ Blood was a symbol of pollution, violence, and desecration, but also “a sign of a desecration that makes holy; hence it sets apart, consecrates.”¹⁴⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote of “the sinful human juice that Adam bit from the apple, that still courses through all our members because of our nature....Adam, and all men with him, retained this juice. Eve

¹⁴⁵ Piero Camporesi, *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Milan: Continuum, 1995), 54-55.

¹⁴⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁴⁷ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 16.

and all women kept this shameful blood.”¹⁴⁸ Gertrude the Great called blood “the most horrible of natural objects,” but also wrote of a wish that “the sea, turned into blood would pass over my head, so that this stink of utter vileness in which your inconceivable majesty has deigned to choose to dwell might be overwhelmed by the purifying flood,”¹⁴⁹ and wrote that “the blood of [Christ’s] fresh red wound” was “the very medicine for healing man’s soul.”¹⁵⁰

The symbolic importance of blood to medieval women deserves separate consideration from the physical or bodily devotions discussed previously. Medieval cultural attitudes toward the body were generally positive in comparison. The body was the container that kept blood properly enclosed and the body tended “to signify community, inclusion, [or] gathering in.” When Aelred of Rievaulx wrote his rule for female recluses, he urged the recluse not only to “contemplate” the body of Christ on the Cross, but also to “eat it in gladness,” and in doing so he represented the idea that the body of Christ is a symbol of nourishment and of union with Christ.¹⁵¹ The wounds of the crucifixion were part of the body and so were associated with bodily characteristics such as providing “access to home, community, refuge, safety.”¹⁵² Encountering blood, however, meant that the boundaries of the body had been broken. Blood flowing from the body was a violation of boundaries and therefore polluting.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 188.

¹⁴⁹ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 98.

¹⁵⁰ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, quoted in Voaden, 85.

¹⁵¹ Bynum, “The Blood of Christ,” 687.

¹⁵² Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 10. In contrast to fifteenth century blood piety, Bynum refers to the devotion to the body/wounds as the “sweeter, sunnier piety” Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 15.

¹⁵³ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 154.

Anthropologists studying multiple cultures and periods have found that blood is a common factor in establishing gender hierarchies, with women seen as having a “closer and obviously more direct relationship to blood.” Women’s biology and their societal role as caretakers of the sick and wounded, contributed to the belief that women had more experience with blood and therefore had the ability to “manage” blood.¹⁵⁴ Within the culture of late medieval Europe, this association both compounded the misogynistic view of women as weaker creatures more prone to sin and pollution, but also connected women to the cleansing and redemptive power of Christ’s blood. While blood in some contexts was one of the most reviled substances with which medieval people could come into contact, blood was also curative, the source of human life, and most importantly, it was the blood shed by Christ in the crucifixion that allowed for salvation. Gertrude the Great “realized that although blood is in itself an unpleasant thing, it is praised in scriptures because it is shed for Christ.”¹⁵⁵ For Gertrude, it was a testament to the power of the Eucharist that it might redeem even the foul nature of blood.¹⁵⁶

Visual depictions of Christ’s body on the cross often emphasized the body’s wounds and the blood flowing from these wounds was a central element of crucifixion scenes. In many female visions, however, specific reference to Christ’s wounds describe the liquid that flows from these wounds, not as blood, but more often as honey, milk, or water.¹⁵⁷ Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn both wrote of a “nourishing

¹⁵⁴ Brigitte Hauser-Schäublin, “Blood: Cultural Effectiveness of Biological Conditions,” in *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, ed. Barbara D. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84.

¹⁵⁵ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 196.

¹⁵⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 65.

¹⁵⁷ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 14.

and cleansing liquid from the side of Christ.”¹⁵⁸ Gertrude also referred to “torrents of your honey-sweet divinity.”¹⁵⁹ Agnes Blannbek, a Beguine from Vienna, described “a refreshing spiritual drink, very desirable and very sweet to all the sons of the promised land, as well as to those who long for it. They approach near, and even fix their mouths to the side, in order to drink at this torrent of delights.”¹⁶⁰ When the accounts of women’s visions of the crucifixion do contain the image of blood, the liquid clearly has special properties. The Blessed Aldobrandesca of Siena, had a vision of the Passion in which she “felt a great desire to taste the divine blood which she had seen welling up out of his right side.” When one drop of this blood falls she catches it on her tongue and “felt an indescribable sweetness and deliciousness in her mouth.”¹⁶¹

While female visions associated women with the sweet and nourishing blood of Christ, however, women were more commonly associated with the vile of polluting biological blood of menstruation. There is little argument regarding the level of misogyny present in medieval culture, and this misogyny is often identified as originating in the church’s interpretation of the original sin of Eve. Created from Adam, Eve was seen as “secondary, derivative, supervenient, and supplemental, [and] assumes all that is inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse.”¹⁶² The religious understanding of inferiority intertwined with the scientific understating inherited from Aristotle that women’s bodies were also physically inferior.¹⁶³ Women’s inability to contain their blood within their

¹⁵⁸ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 14.

¹⁵⁹ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 103.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Gougaud, 107.

¹⁶¹ Petroff, 17-18.

¹⁶² Howard R. Bloch, “Medieval Misogyny,” *Representations* 20 (Autumn 1987): 10.

¹⁶³ Vern L. Bullough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 486-487.

own bodies was the clearest evidence for the belief in female physical inferiority. Medieval medical theory understood that all bodily excretions, menstrual fluid, breast milk, sweat, semen, and so on, were forms of blood that the body had processed in different ways.¹⁶⁴ In women, menstrual blood flows uncontrollably from the body, while men did not experience a similar phenomenon with any male bodily fluids. A medieval medical text asks, “Why the aforementioned matter, which is a residual matter from food and drink, flows out of women, and semen is also a residual matter from food and drink. The answer to this is that woman is moist and cold by nature; and man is warm and dry by nature. Now everything moist must flow.”¹⁶⁵ Medieval medicine believed menstruation to have a cleansing effect on the female body and knew that it was required for pregnancy;¹⁶⁶ however, this state of excessive moisture was an inherent physical weakness that allowed their fluids to “easily seep out of the body.”¹⁶⁷

As shown by this brief example, the physiological and biological processes of women’s bodies were mysterious to men. In an effort to understand these mysterious processes of the female body, a text entitled *De Secretis Mulierum*, (Concerning the Secrets of Women), was widely read by men in the thirteenth and fourteenth-century. As with the female mystics who were merely vessels for receiving and repeating divine revelation, women in this context were containers for mysterious processes that they could not intellectually comprehend. The female body enclosed these processes, yet only men were considered able to understand them. Attributed to Albertus Magnus, but

¹⁶⁴ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 158.

¹⁶⁵ Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 93.

¹⁶⁶ Bullough, 489.

¹⁶⁷ Bildhauer, 91. This understanding also leads to the myth of Jewish male menstruation. Bildhauer, 94.

probably written by one of his students, the author of *de Secretis* described his text as a primarily medical and penitential guide to the secret nature of the female body. Men must have an understanding of these secrets, wrote the author, in order that, "We might be able to provide a remedy for their infirmities, and so that in confessing them we might know how to give suitable penances for their sins."¹⁶⁸ The text of the *Secretis* covers conception, gestation, birth, chastity, and the influence of the planets on the fetus. With respect to menstruation, the author explains:

[The] menses is of a double nature: one part is pure, and one part is impure. The pure menses is the proper seed of the woman, which is transformed into the substance of the fetus. The impure menses, however, is a certain superfluity and impurity caused by nondigestion of food. Because a woman is cold in nature, with insufficient heat to digest all food that is consumed, every day a certain unclean superfluity is left over, and this leaves the body every month, as will be shown.... Women are purged by means of their menstrual periods because the excess humidity is removed, and if it remained coarse humors would be formed from it. Therefore they are not suited for learning because of the coarseness of their spirits which stop up and deaden the brain.¹⁶⁹

The author claimed that the text was written in order that men might better understand and treat women's illnesses or sins, however, a medieval commentary on the text proposed the more pragmatic idea that men must be aware of women's secrets in order to protect themselves.¹⁷⁰ Men needed to understand women's hidden secrets because:

women are so full of venom in the time of their menstruation that they poison animals by their glance; they infect children in their cradle; they spot the cleanest mirror; and whenever men have sexual intercourse with them they are made leprous and sometimes cancerous. And because an evil cannot be avoided unless

¹⁶⁸ *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum With Commentaries*, trans. Helen Rodnite Lemay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 59.

¹⁶⁹ *Women's Secrets*, 68, 70.

¹⁷⁰ *Women's Secrets*, 60.

it is known, those who wish to avoid it must abstain from this unclean coitus, and from many other things which are taught in this book.¹⁷¹

If men ignored this warning and had intercourse with a menstruating woman, there was also a danger that conception might occur in which case the "fetus would be leprous."¹⁷²

The author of the *Secretis* warned that women were intentionally malicious, writing that:

When women have their menstrual periods...they wish to injure the penis of the men who have sexual intercourse with them. Since there is menstrual blood in the vagina it enters the wound on the penis and infects it with its venom, because the penis is a porous and thin member which quickly absorbs this matter; and because all veins come together there, it is quickly dispersed through the body.¹⁷³

Even talking to a menstruating woman could be dangerous "because the venomous humors from the woman's body infect the air by her breath, and the infected air travels to the man's vocal cords and arteries causing him to become hoarse."¹⁷⁴ Women could also do harm to plants and agriculture. Farmers were warned, "One must be careful to permit very little access on women's part to places where pumpkins or watermelons grow, since, generally speaking, through their contact they cause the young plants to languish; indeed, if they happen to be in their menstrual periods, they could actually kill small plants simply by looking at them."¹⁷⁵ The writer of *de Secretis* even addressed what must have been a common response to this warning, which was:

¹⁷¹ *Women's Secrets*, 167.

¹⁷² *Women's Secrets*, 131. Innocent III repeats this idea in *De Miseria Humanae Conditionis* where he wrote, "But notice with what food the conceptus is nourished in the womb: precisely with menstrual blood, which ceases to flow from a woman after conception, that with it the conceptus may be nourished in the woman. It is said to be so detestable and impure, that, from contact therewith, fruits and grains are lighted, bushed dry up, grasses die, trees lose their fruits, and if dogs change to eat of it they go mad. The fetuses conceived contract the vise of the seed, so that leprosy and elephantiasis afflicts those born of such corruption." Quoted in Camporesi, 112-113.

¹⁷³ *Women's Secrets*, 89.

¹⁷⁴ *Women's Secrets*, 130.

¹⁷⁵ Camporesi, 113.

Someone might ask why women do not poison themselves if they are poisonous. The answer to this is that venom does not act in itself but rather in its object. Therefore, since women are naturally poisoned they do not poison themselves. Another reason is that they are used to poison, for, as Averroes tells us in the prologue of his third book on *Physics*, some people were so accustomed to eat poison that it became their food.¹⁷⁶

Within her blood, the female contained the ability to produce human life as well as the potential to harm. With this understanding of the body thus established, the problem became how to reconcile this knowledge with the theological understanding of Mary's body and the Incarnation. The common belief that holy women exhibited amenorrhea distanced them from the danger of the polluting blood that flowed out of the body during menstruation. Although women were "not expected to control menstruation as a physical demonstration of their spiritual development, the cessation of menstruation can be seen to mark the female body as a holy or sanctified body," and holy women were often described as being free from "the curse of Eve."¹⁷⁷

Although it did not become doctrine until 1845, the idea of the Immaculate Conception was widely understood and accepted by the early twelfth century.¹⁷⁸ Luke's gospel said that Mary was a virgin, and medieval Christianity taught that she remained a virgin before, during, and after Christ's birth.¹⁷⁹ The medieval understanding of the Song of Songs, as with the medieval understanding of much of the Old Testament, was that it

¹⁷⁶ *Women's Secrets*, 130.

¹⁷⁷ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 4. In her study of blood in the Middle Ages, Bettina Bildhauer argues that virgins and women who did not menstruate could be considered dangerous, however, because a body that had not been penetrated and did not bleed was contained and therefore arguably more like a man's body. See Bildhauer, 104.

¹⁷⁸ Wood, 718.

¹⁷⁹ Charles T. Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," *Speculum* 56, no. 4 (October 1981): 717.

“foreshadowed” the events of Christ’s life. Thus, verse 4:7 “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee,” was understood as referring to Mary and considered proof that Mary had “no spot,” that is, no sin. It would then follow that Mary did not menstruate because menstruation was a mark of original sin.¹⁸⁰ However, medieval understanding also knew that Mary nursed Christ as an infant and that “lactation was intimately connected both with pregnancy and with those menses which made it possible.”¹⁸¹ Because menstruation was a physical necessity for human pregnancy and lactation, the idea that Mary might become pregnant and be able to breastfeed her child after his birth without menstruating, would make her somehow less or differently human. This understanding would have violated the necessity that Christ have a fully human mother as required by orthodox Christology.¹⁸²

Medieval physiological theory held that the body of the fetus was formed entirely by the mother’s blood. In the Aristotelian theory, the mother provides the matter for the fetus, while the spirit or form comes from the father, however women’s blood, as it contributes to the growth of the child in the womb, is the “fundamental support of human life.”¹⁸³ As Christ had no human father, it was essential that his body be formed solely from Mary’s blood.¹⁸⁴ The polluting nature of menstrual blood and the sinful nature of the body made this problematic for theologians, and while most people may not have been concerned with the finer points, some women writers did address it.¹⁸⁵ Mechthild

¹⁸⁰ Wood, 713.

¹⁸¹ Wood, 719.

¹⁸² Wood, 720.

¹⁸³ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 100.

¹⁸⁴ Bildhauer, 33.

¹⁸⁵ Wood, 721.

of Magdeburg allowed that Jesus was born of Mary's body, but stressed that the source of his blood and body would have been pure.¹⁸⁶ Mechthild wrote,

But, Lady, noble Goddess above all pure humans, you were also able not to sin. This you had not from yourself, for the heavenly Father watched over your childhood with the foresight of his having chosen you long before...and Jesus so passed through your body as the dew through a flower that your chastity was never touched....And the eternal wisdom of the almighty Godhead gave you, Lady, a shadow in which you kept your human life so that you could suffer pain, despite not sinning, and so that your thriving humanity would not perish under the sun of the powerful Godhead. In this shadow you carried Jesus in human fashion and, as his mother raised him. However Lady, in the message from the Father, in the conception from the Holy Spirit, and in the birth of the Son, Lady, the fire of the Godhead and the light of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of the Son were so great in you that you could hardly notice the shadow.¹⁸⁷

Exactly how these contradictory ideas might be reconciled was a concern confined to theologians, but it is clear that the theological understanding of the Incarnation allowed for Christ's body to be intimately connected to women's blood. Without any human male contribution, the human body of Christ was formed solely from women's blood.

Elizabeth Petroff makes the argument that medieval women "were sensitive to the emotional content of traditional images of masculine and feminine "and so visions of participation in the crucifixion became enormously liberating, for the opposites of passive and active, female and male, were reconciled in the single act."¹⁸⁸ Petroff continues,

Their visions have reinterpreted the image of the male bleeding Christ in such a way that the hierarchy of male dominance is subverted; and the feminine, the all-nurturing blood, is discovered to be the origin of the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ.... In the process of discovering the femininity of Christ, the female visionary gets in touch with her own masculine activity and is provided with the inner strength to act in the world.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Bildhauer, 90.

¹⁸⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 110-111.

¹⁸⁸ Petroff, 14.

¹⁸⁹ Petroff, 18-19.

Caroline Bynum expands upon this idea in her recent argument that the medieval image of the body of Jesus exhibited qualities that could be read as “female,” or as “mother.” She makes the argument that “if anything, women drew from the traditional notion of the female as physical a special emphasis on their own redemption by a Christ who was supremely physical because supremely human. They sometimes even extrapolated from this to the notion that, in Christ, divinity is to humanity as male is to female.”¹⁹⁰ Christ’s body, she argues, itself did “womanly things: it bled, it bled food and it gave birth.”¹⁹¹ Bynum writes, “Thus it was women’s bodies almost exclusively that bled as Christ bled, and this blood not only purged the woman of her sin but also saved her fellow Christians by substituting for the expiation they owed in purgatory. Holy women imitated Christ in their bodies; and Christ’s similar bleeding and feeding body was understood as analogous to theirs.”¹⁹² Bynum uses medieval paintings that show Christ’s body exuding water, wine, or blood to argue for a “visual parallels between his wound and Mary’s breast offered to suckle sinners.”¹⁹³ These comparisons between female bodies and the body of Christ appear compelling; however, the conclusion that medieval people would have read Christ’s body as feminine loses credibility when considered in context. While it may have been understood that the female body had characteristics that imitated Christ’s body, it is too much to believe that the prevalent misogyny of the Middle Ages would have allowed people to believe that Christ’s body imitated the female. It is clear that women were more closely connected to the physical and that the imitation of the

¹⁹⁰ Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion,” 203.

¹⁹¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 101.

¹⁹² Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 102.

¹⁹³ For a summary of this argument, see Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother*.

suffering Christ was central to their women's piety. To what extent women made any type of conscious connection between their own physical bodies and Christ's body, and from there "extrapolated" that Christ's body is feminine, is questionable at best. Bynum convincingly uses artistic and poetic images to make her point; however, there is no proof that medieval people of either sex made these associative leaps. Bynum's idea of reading Christ's body as feminine is fascinating, and it is tempting to make an argument for women's self-conscious acknowledgement of self-worth within their reality of ubiquitous misogyny. It is possible that medieval women saw, at least sub-consciously, some of the parallels identified by Bynum as indicators of their own worth and they clearly found comfort in the physical imitation of Christ's human suffering, but Bynum's conclusions are more a product of a modern context projected onto History than an idea actually present in the thirteenth-century.

The final context in which blood must be considered is the treatment of the blood of Christ as it appears in the ceremony of the Mass. The Doctrine of Transubstantiation,¹⁹⁴ made dogma by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, served to affirm the real presence of Christ's blood and body in the consecrated bread and wine, but the consecration of these elements within the Mass remained a mysterious function. The words spoken by the priest were purposely incomprehensible and inaudible, "lest they be caught by the profane, or worse, used for spells and evil deeds."¹⁹⁵ The elevation

¹⁹⁴ "At the words of consecration of the priest—through the divine power resident in the words themselves and also conferred upon the priest by ordination—the miraculous change is wrought, so that while the "accidents" of the bread and wine (shape, taste, and the like) remain unaltered, their "substance" is transformed into the very body and blood of Christ." Walker, 345.

¹⁹⁵ Camporesi, 59.

of the Host continued as the central moment of the Mass, and the elevation of the chalice never attained the popularity directed at the host.¹⁹⁶

As the elevation of the Host increasingly became the central element of the Mass, the offering of the chalice to the laity was slowly being removed. It is often assumed that the clergy instigated the removal of the chalice, however, the refusal of the chalice was actually motivated by the actions of the laity. While viewing the consecrated Host was beneficial, there was an element of fear associated with viewing the consecrated wine. The wine was often veiled because there was an idea that "exposure to naked blood would terrify the faithful."¹⁹⁷ A fear of "dishonoring the sacrament" by spilling the holy blood from the chalice was present as early as the seventh century, and strict rules governed the necessary actions to be taken if the wine were spilled.¹⁹⁸ Nocola Laghi, in *De' miracoli del Santissimo Sacramento*, instructed, if "the blood should issue from the chalice, at once, with all haste, let every care be taken reverently to restore it to the chalice. And if where it has fallen is upon a table, after having licked it up with his tongue, [the celebrant] is to scrape the table, as well, and burn the scrapings, thereupon depositing the ashes in the sacrarium." If in doing this, the blood gets on the priest's beard, he must wash his beard three times, shave it, burn the hair, and put the ashes in the sacrarium."¹⁹⁹ To avoid potentially spilling the consecrated liquid, the laity developed a tradition of dipping the bread into the wine instead of drinking directly from the cup. The church forbade this practice in 675, but it must have continued as a lay tradition, because

¹⁹⁶ Carline Walker Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* 71, no. 4 (December 2002): 689.

¹⁹⁷ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 16.

¹⁹⁸ Walker, 345.

¹⁹⁹ Camporesi, 63.

the church officially declared the practice as forbidden again in 1175.²⁰⁰ Robert Pullen wrote in the twelfth century that the laity should receive only the host because “he does not show himself to believe well who when he is given the flesh, dips it in blood; as if the flesh lacks the blood, or the blood exists outside the flesh.”²⁰¹

This anxiety and fear surrounding the presence of blood and the potential of dishonoring the holy blood of Christ led the laity to the practice of accepting the bread only.²⁰² The church did not require the laity to accept the chalice, and the church supported the idea of the laity receiving both the body and the blood in the form of the bread alone. If the Mass included the cup at all, it might have contained only a drop of consecrated liquid mixed with wine, or the cup might have been filled with unconsecrated wine.²⁰³ Bynum argues that the church may have had its own anxiety over the laity’s access to the chalice, and she notes that “to associate the laity directly with such a powerful symbol of violation as well as of salvation may simply have been fraught with too much significance.”²⁰⁴ The concept of Concomitance, originally indoctrinated to deny the concern over whether the consecration of the bread and wine and subsequent taking of communion divides Christ’s body into parts, was now used to explain and defend the removal of the chalice from Mass.²⁰⁵ Although excluding the laity from

²⁰⁰ Walker, 345.

²⁰¹ Rubin, 71.

²⁰² Walker, 345.

²⁰³ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 56.

²⁰⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 65.

²⁰⁵ Bynum, “The Blood of Christ,” 688.

The church cited 1 Corinthians 11:27 “whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord.” The church states, “By the words of the consecration, Christ’s Body is under the appearance of bread, and His Blood under the appearance of wine. The Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ form one indivisible Person, and must be found together.” www.newadvent.org

taking the chalice at Mass was not officially stated until the Council of Constance in 1415, the church had already given the instruction that “they will carefully...teach that under the species of bread is at once given to them the body and blood of the Lord, Christ indeed whole and real...It is only granted...to the celebrants to receive the blood under the species of consecrated wine.”²⁰⁶ Jacques de Vitry wrote in *De Sacramentis*, “Because of possible danger the Eucharist is not given to the laity under the species of wine.”²⁰⁷ Even within the structure of the Mass, the clergy and the laity treated the blood of Christ differently than the body. While the tradition of ocular Communion created a separation between the laity and the body of Christ, there was a fear and a danger associated with even viewing the consecrated wine.

This “asymmetry” between the attitudes toward blood and body evidenced in the Eucharistic ceremony are also apparent in numerous miracle stories. In contrast to the wonder-workings of the host described in the previous chapter, the miracles of the wine involved no more than the consecrated wine taking on the “appearance of blood.”²⁰⁸ The image of blood was so powerful in and of itself, that the wine did not need to “do” anything. Simply taking the appearance of blood was comparable to the miraculous actions of the host. As with the host, the miracles of the wine were witnessed by “some, like the good, as a reward for their devotion,” but in other cases the appearance of blood is a “rebuke [to] those who are living in sin.”²⁰⁹ Daniel, the abbot of Schönau was celebrating Mass “when he saw in the chalice the appearance of human blood. And as at

²⁰⁶ Archbishop Pechamin in the Lambeth Constitutions, quoted in Rubin, 72.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Rubin, 71.

²⁰⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 121.

²⁰⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 121.

that time he knew himself to be free from mortal sin, he did not think it was granted him for his condemnation, but hoped it was sent for his consolation.”²¹⁰ In contrast, the story of Heylard, priest of Wunisdorp, described him as being under the influence of the devil and doubtful of the real presence in the Eucharist. When he reached the point in the Mass “at which the uncovered chalice is generally placed upon the altar, he saw in it human blood in the place of the wine and was terrified. As if the Lord were saying to him: ‘If you do not believe in the sacrament, let this experience teach you the truth. And since faith is the road to sight, let this sight of my blood recall you to faith.’”²¹¹ In another instance, an observer at Mass who was doubtful of the Eucharist saw the liquid in the chalice overflow so that it covered the whole surface of the altar, “boiling over like a boiling vessel. He was very much frightened by this vision.... And indeed this overflowing had the appearance of human blood. It was as if the voice of Christ were saying to him: ‘I suffered on the altar of the cross for your sake and my blood was poured out like water, and do you have any doubts about your healing?’”²¹²

Although Walker writes that the Mass is “the continuation of the Incarnation, the unbloody repetition (or ‘re-presentation’) of the Passion,”²¹³ the removal of the chalice from the laity did not fully remove the presence of blood in the ceremony. When Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) received communion during one mass, she took the host into her mouth and found that her mouth filled with blood. Beatrice of Nazareth’s (d 1268) biographer recorded an instance in which she received communion and, “It seemed

²¹⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 122.

²¹¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 122.

²¹² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 123.

²¹³ Walker, 346.

to her that all that blood which flowed from [Christ's] wounds was poured into her soul, and that all the drops of that precious liquid were so sprinkled on it that it was wholly washed by these drops and most perfectly cleansed from all the dust of sin."²¹⁴ In another instance a nun from Unterlinder " 'totally dissolved in the love of her beloved [and] suddenly, in a miraculous manner, perceived distinctly that the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom she had received, flowed down like an impetuous rushing river through all parts of her body, reaching the most intimate parts of her soul.'"²¹⁵

Depending upon the context and the source, blood could be a putrefying liquid that could cause harm to other life, one of the most foul substances with which one might come into contact. Within the context of the crucifixion, however, blood is the essential element in ensuring the salvation of all Christians. Women's bodies contained the essence of blood's opposing attributes as the female body produced menstrual blood that was fouling but at the same time essential for human reproduction. Even as the presence of blood was officially removed from the Mass, women continued a close relationship to Christ's blood through the physical attributes of their own bodies. A personal prayer book from a nun at another German convent exemplifies the fearless approach to blood taken by women with an illustration "which prefaces 'a very pretty prayer about the holy, worthy Sacrament' to be said before Communion'...[and] shows the soul as a young women with a garland in her hair bathing naked in a tub of blood at the foot of the cross."²¹⁶ (Image 1)

²¹⁴ From the Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, quoted in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 4.

²¹⁵ Bynum, "The Blood of Christ," 689-690.

²¹⁶ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 18.

Chapter 6

ART

In keeping with Aquinas' famous statement that the purpose of art is to instruct the illiterate and to "keep the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the saints more firmly in our memory,"²¹⁷ Johan Huizinga makes the famous argument that all medieval art was "applied art." In the late Middle Ages, as the clergy became increasingly distanced from the laity, a more personal and private piety developed. This piety became more self-directed as people turned less to priests and more to themselves to find a path to God. Supporting Huizinga's argument that medieval people "wanted works of art only to make them subservient to some practical use,"²¹⁸ artists began to produce smaller pieces intended for use in private devotions.²¹⁹ "Specified meditational practices became an increasingly active part of the laity's daily spiritual routine and artists were routinely called upon to service this new need for subjects that would stimulate devotion and mental prayer."²²⁰ Paintings took on a smaller scale and were placed in private homes or small side chapels and Books of Hours became popular.²²¹

Although recent scholars sometimes fail to recognize the distinction between these images themselves and the theological images that they would inspire, "thereby eliding the difference between substance and appearance," to do so neglects "the play between material and mental images that was so important to the medieval

²¹⁷ Chiara Frugoni, "Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 276.

²¹⁸ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1924), 244.

²¹⁹ Ziegler, 15.

²²⁰ Ziegler, 18.

²²¹ Ziegler, 15.

experience.”²²² Medieval thought distinguished between “pictures seen by means of physical sight [and] the mental images they were intended to invoke”²²³ Alan of Lille (1128-1202) wrote that pictures “depict the image of Christ so that people can be led through those things seen to the invisible.”²²⁴ As previously discussed, however, this “highest” level of purely intellectual vision was inaccessible to all but a small circle of male mystics, and thus was an ideal that was “theoretical for all but monastic circles.”²²⁵ Theologians considered images as “at best a stimulus to devotion,” but were “more properly an aid to an illiterate populace unable to penetrate the mysteries of the word.”²²⁶

Images were important to the daily religious life of the laity to be sure, but for cloistered women images were an essential and central element of pious practice.²²⁷ For religious women, the use of devotional objects served to focus the mind and “explicitly stimulated the believer to reach ever higher, pious states.”²²⁸ Just as the Church acknowledged, but did not explicitly endorse the extreme physical aspects of female devotion, the church accepted but did not encourage the use of devotional images as a “concession to bodily, as opposed to intellectual, sight.”²²⁹ The incorporation of images into contemplation was an approach to be taken only by those incapable of imageless

²²² Herbert L. Kessler, “Turning a Blind Eye: Medieval Art and the Dynamics of Contemplation,” in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouche (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 413.

²²³ Kessler, 413.

²²⁴ *De fide catholica contra hereticos* IV Chap 12; 210:427, quoted in Kessler, 413.

²²⁵ Sixten Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety,” *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* (March 1969), 161.

²²⁶ Jeffrey Hamburger, “The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions,” *Viator* 20 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 162.

²²⁷ Sixten Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety,” *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* (March 1969), 161.

²²⁸ Ziegler, 18.

²²⁹ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 222.

devotion. Chancellor Jean Gerson wrote, "And we ought thus to learn to transcend with our minds from these visible things to the invisible, from the corporeal to the spiritual. For this is the purpose of the image."²³⁰

In his Rule, Aelred of Rievaulx echoes the same idea when he included direction for the presence of images within the recluse's cell. Although he does not explicitly condemn images, he cautions against "feasting your eyes on unbecoming fantasies." Instead, he wrote, "let it be enough for you to have a representation of our Savior hanging on the Cross; that will bring before your mind his Passion for you to imitate." The only other images that Aelred allowed were "a picture of the Virgin Mother and one of the Virgin Disciple" standing "on either side of the Cross."²³¹ Gertrude the Great was herself concerned about her own use of images; however, she recounted how she received permission and an explanation for the efficacy of images directly from God.

Have no fear, dearest, because this cannot in the least hinder what is spiritual, since I alone am the cause of your occupation. And I must say that I am not a little pleased by such devotion shown to the crucifix. When, as sometimes happens, a king cannot always remain with his beloved wife, he leaves with her some particularly dear relative of his in his place. If she shows dutiful affection for this person, her spouse will receive it as if it were shown to himself, for he knows that this is not an illicit affection for a stranger, but chaste zeal for love of him. In the same ways, I delight in seeing my cross venerated out of pure love for me. That does not apply, of course, if a person takes pleasure in the mere possession of a crucifix and does not try by means of it to mediate on the love and fidelity with which I underwent the bitterness of my passion for his sake, or in some other way follows his natural inclinations rather than striving to imitate the example of my passion.'²³²

²³⁰ Quoted in Ringbom, 165.

²³¹ Aelred of Rievaulx, 73. "For many years now, my sister, you have been asking me for a rule to guide you in the life you have embraced for the sake of Christ, to provide spiritual directives and formulate the basic practices of religious life." Aelred of Rievaulx, 43.

²³² Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 213.

Female mystics practiced a form of devotion that they considered complete, but that men considered a lowly form of devotion. With regard to the use of images, the devotional practices of women were considered allowable for those incapable of more, however, as shown by the passage from Gertrude, women demonstrated a sense of value in venerating images as an acceptable expression of love for God.

Blurring the distinctions between physical and spiritual images, medieval miracle stories contained many instances of visions that began with a crucifix or a painting coming to life. In her study of women mystics and iconography, Chiara Frugoni accurately notes that "the long list we could easily make of crucifixes that bleed or speak, display their sores or offer their wounds to be kissed. . . testifies to an almost obligatory experience in the life of a mystic and confirms the crucial importance of images for asceticism."²³³ As an example, one such story told of St. Catherine of Alexandria asking a hermit,

how she might see Christ and the Virgin. The hermit gave her a Madonna icon advising her to contemplate it and to pray to the Mary to show her the Son. During the night the Virgin appeared, but Catherine was not yet deemed worthy to see the face of Christ. After further instruction by the hermit, she had another nightly vision in which Christ 'turned sweetly towards her His glorious countenance.'²³⁴

Seemingly in defense of experiences that begin with the contemplation of an image, Gerard of Cambrai (1013-1051) had earlier argued at the Council of Arras that "the faithful do not adore 'visible images' of the Crucifixion but through them 'their interior minds are excited and Christ's Passion and death on behalf of humankind are inscribed

²³³ Frugoni, 132.

²³⁴ Ringbom, 161.

on the membrane of their hearts.”²³⁵ This defense would describe the experience of Angela of Foligno who wrote, “Whenever I saw the Passion of the Christ depicted, I could hardly bear it, and I would come down with a fever and fall sick. My companion, as a result, hid paintings of the Passion or did her best to keep them from out of my sight.”²³⁶ There is no sense of Angela attempting to move beyond, or to rise to, an imageless piety. Her reaction to the visual images of the crucifixion was a pious and holy reaction that is not treated as a “lesser” devotion.

In his book *Nuns As Artists*, Jeffrey Hamburger examines the images produced and used by nuns at the Benedictine abbey of St. Walburg.²³⁷ Hamburger argues that these drawings “implicitly mandate certain devotional practices in which seeing assumed a role no less important than reading and in which both modes of experience were related to a wider sphere of pious performance.”²³⁸ While medieval theologians and many modern art historians have dismissed the art made by artistically untrained nuns as *nonnenarbeitn*, or “nun’s work,” these images are fascinating, complex, and clearly demonstrate the importance of devotional images for the nuns, and show which images particularly resonated for cloistered women. Although they were not produced by trained artists and at first glance may appear childlike, they are truly complex images and far from “naïve.” Hamburger’s study shows that while the nuns at St. Walburg had professional artworks and copies of artworks, they were compelled to create and use

²³⁵ Kessler, 430.

²³⁶ Angela of Foligno, quoted in Frugoni, 137.

²³⁷ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 7. Although these particular drawings were completed slightly later than the scope of this discussion, (c 1500), they are illustrative of the themes discussed here and therefore appropriate to include.

²³⁸ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, xxi.

pieces that were “if not entirely independent, then at least governed by its own requirements and protocols.”²³⁹ The images are fascinating in and of themselves, but for purposes of this paper, they are significant because they provide additional evidence that women’s piety was unique, on the edge of what was acceptable to the church, but tolerated because it was consistent with the understanding of women’s natural capabilities.

The drawings found at St. Walburg are well worn indicating that they were often handled and used, and they demonstrate themes common in women’s piety, the Eucharist, the crucifixion, and the image of the heart of Christ as a sacred enclosure.²⁴⁰ (Image 2) One of the St. Walburg paintings is an image of the crucifixion with St. Bernard kneeling on Christ’s right and an unidentified nun on his left. (Image 3) The small size of this image, only 25.5x18cm, indicates that this was “not an object intended for viewing at a disinterested distance, it asks to be handled and touched, even as the body of Christ is caressed in the image.”²⁴¹ Blood pools on the ground between Bernard and the nun. As they both grasp the wood of the cross, Christ’s blood runs under their fingers, not over. “Christ’s head droops from the otherwise overscale corpus, sinking below the level of the shoulders and the stiff, twiglike arms. His body, almost entirely obscured by blood, appears as one enormous wound, with the only contrast the green band of the thorns, itself dotted in red.”²⁴² Thick pigment “obscures” Christ’s body, but careful observation shows that a single dark black outline marks the boundary of Christ’s

²³⁹ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 10.

²⁴⁰ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 16.

²⁴¹ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 1.

²⁴² Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 1.

body. His body remains enclosed and the blood does not touch the bodies of the two observers.²⁴³ Their hands gripping the cross are unmarked by the blood that runs underneath and their bodies and clothes are clean. Hamburger argues that this represents a separation in time from Christ and “bars the participants from complete immersion in the Godhead.”²⁴⁴ The image encourages compassion and identification with Christ, however, the observers are separated in space and time and “Christ’s indivisible blood reaffirms that body rather than dissolving it.”²⁴⁵ The paradox of blood here is a visual one as the blood pours out of a contained body. The “sheer livid profusion of ruddy ink...saturates the paper,” offering the observers salvation while leaving them untouched.²⁴⁶ The image is initially striking for the mass of red pigment that covers the page. The knowledge that medieval nuns produced and used this image is perhaps equally striking. That women produced and so well used this image demonstrates the importance of Christ’s blood in female piety. With a multitude of images from which to choose, this was the image that women created for themselves. Hamburger notes a separation in time, but the clean hands and clothes of the nun and the saint may also reflect some sense of anxiety around blood that existed even among holy women who were so obviously comfortable with the salvific aspects of blood.

After images of the Crucifixion, the most important medieval religious image was that of the *pietà*. The *pietà* first appeared as an iconic image at the end of the thirteenth century. A reflection of the increased focus on Christ’s humanity, the fact that the

²⁴³ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 1.

²⁴⁴ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 2.

²⁴⁵ Bildhauer, 63.

²⁴⁶ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 1.

earliest known appearance of this image was within a women's community in Germany is of special note. The pietà is the image of Mary with Christ's crucified body.

Reminiscent of earlier popular images of Mary seated with the infant Christ on her lap, in the pietà the body of the infant is replaced by the dead and bloodied body of Christ.²⁴⁷

(See, as examples, Image 4 and Image 5)

In viewing examples of pietas from this period, it is clear that Mary is depicted as secondary to the figure of the dead Christ lying across her lap. Similar to the paintings of the Madonna and Child where Mary holds the infant Christ as if presenting him to the viewer, in these sculptures Mary is often shown as looking at the viewer or otherwise away from the body.²⁴⁸ Just as these images of Mary with the child Christ are not full of "maternal pride," the pietà was not generally an image of maternal anguish. Instead, both images are primarily images of reflection, adoration, and presentation.²⁴⁹ The anguish within these pieces is not seen within Mary's expression but within Christ's battered body.²⁵⁰ It is important to note that women did not view the pietà with the desire to identify with Mary. The pietà was not an image of projected maternal longing as much as it was a visual depiction of the desire to receive the body of Christ. Mechthild of Magdeburg addresses this idea in the *Book of Special Grace*. Mechthild wrote that on one Good Friday afternoon, she had time between the celebrations of the cross and the Entombment

²⁴⁷ Ziegler 15.

²⁴⁸ Schiller, 180.

²⁴⁹ Schiller, 180.

²⁵⁰ Ziegler, 11.

to meditate on Christ's wounds as he lay dead in Mary's lap. As she was meditating, Mary spoke to her in prayer telling her not to focus on her grief, but to focus on Christ.²⁵¹

As Ziegler notes in her study of the development and use of the pietà as image, "The pietà proposes the issue of the humanity of Christ with hitherto unparalleled specificity. It joins the body of Christ at the moment of his 'intensest humanity' (the moment, that is, of his death) with the woman who gave Him that humanity."²⁵² As an image, the pietà not only meets the need for the devotional image as aid to prayer and meditation as an image of the humanity of Christ, it also has a particular resonance for women in that it echoes the devotion to the Eucharist that had such significance. Ziegler argues that the "theological intimations of the Eucharist associated with the image of a woman 'receiving' the body of the dead Christ are, in these images, indeed difficult to avoid."²⁵³ For women whose enclosure kept them physically separated from the altar at Mass, and who would have received communion through specially designed windows or grills,²⁵⁴ the pietà allowed immediate access to Christ's body. It is the image of a "woman receiving the dead body of Christ made explicit—a proper stimulus for meditation, it would seem, which could help women fix their minds upon the subject of the Eucharist without any notion of Transubstantiation introduced."²⁵⁵ Hamburger argues

²⁵¹ Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art Vol 2: The Passion of Jesus Christ*, trans. Janet Seligman (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 179.

²⁵² Ziegler, 12.

²⁵³ Ziegler, 13.

²⁵⁴ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 52.

²⁵⁵ Ziegler, 21-22.

that “the drawings depict Eucharistic desire and its fulfillment in visual terms. In effect, the drawings provide the nun with a substitute for sacramental presence.”²⁵⁶

Hamburger argues that art produced by nuns “redefine[d] ecclesiastical imagery in forms appropriate to the nuns’ situation and status,” but he does not make a claim for subversion or female agency here. He argues that while we would perhaps,

like to interpret the drawings as affirmations of spiritual autonomy or even as evidence of resistance to prevailing norms of gender and authority, we cannot construe them as ‘self-representations of female spirituality.... The claustration of nuns enforced autonomy without necessarily allowing independence; keeping out of sight did not preclude supervision.’²⁵⁷

The Church allowed the use of images because, while not ideal, it was an appropriate form of worship for their proscribed capabilities, and while their images were unique to their own needs, they were clearly within the realm of orthodoxy. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) reminded that “a holy image of God, being born, suckling, teaching, dying, resurrecting or ascending” may be present and beneficial to the prayerful person *only* because God had taken on a human body and thus allowed those “who cannot love otherwise than carnally” to love God in this way. However, he also reminded that a carnal love should be regarded only as a step to a spiritual love. “You have not reached very far unless you can, by the purity of the mind, raise yourself above the phantasms of corporeal likenesses rushing in from every direction.”²⁵⁸ When female mystics practiced their contemplation using images to focus their prayers and meditations, they were unthreatening to men because their visions and experiences of

²⁵⁶ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 20.

²⁵⁷ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 221.

²⁵⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica XX*, 6. Quoted in Ringbom, 163.

union were considered to be confined to a lower, more bodily level of devotion. Just as women were unapologetic regarding the physicality of their visions or experiences of union, medieval nuns “unapologetically affirmed the role of images in their own spirituality... [and] made them an integral, even indispensable part of their piety.

Chapter 7

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Many scholars have advanced theories regarding the reasons behind the growth in numbers of religious women after 1200, and many have made arguments for an increase in female authority and influence during this time. Historian Michael Goodich notes changes occurring within society at this time, “the rise of mendicancy, the transition from rural to urban life, the cult of the Virgin, the rise of national states, the war against heresy, the new emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the political struggles of the papacy.” He uses geography and economics to argue that societal changes may have created an “urban population prone to heresy,” and he draws connections between the amount of literature written in the vernacular and women’s level of literacy.²⁵⁹ Bynum notes that some historians have argued that the founding of new orders like the Beguines or other tertiary groups was a social protest movement. She argues that although this theory has fallen out of favor, it should still be noted that the newer orders were more open to middle or lower class women and did not require the large dowry that had restricted admission to the upper or noble classes in earlier decades.²⁶⁰ Many scholars argue for a demographic cause, arguing that there were not enough available men to allow all women to marry and that the beguine and tertiary groups evolved in turn because there were not enough established monasteries to accommodate all of the women desiring a religious life. Bynum opposes this theory, arguing that, “it seems wrong to

²⁵⁹ Michael Goodich, “The Countours of Female Piety in Later Medieval Hagiography,” *Church History* 50, no. 1 (March 1981): 20-21.

²⁶⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1988), 124.

interpret the beguines, tertiaries, and female heretics of the later Middle Ages mainly as surplus women, settling for quasi-religious roles because neither husbands nor monasteries could be found. On the contrary, the lives of individual women show many cases where beguine or tertiary status was chosen in preference to monastic life by noble women who could have afforded to enter monasteries.”²⁶¹

The increased number and visibility of religious women at this time has led to the recent claim that these centuries witnessed the first women’s movement. Historians such as Lester, Sauer, and Petroff, who wish to credit medieval women with using the claim of divine authorization, by virtue of their holy experiences, to gain an unprecedented level of religious authority, often make these arguments. However, these conclusions often fail to fully consider the contemporary culture of their subjects. A contextual consideration demonstrates that the established church hierarchy used women’s experiences to promote its own self-interest more than these experiences could ever be construed as evidence of a self-conscious or self-promoting movement.

In a paper heavily indebted to the work of Bynum, Rebecca Lester writes that women were expected to be subject to men due to women’s natural inferiority, but through visions and mystical experience women were able to break from this role and “access a symbolic system through which they could play out conflicts and concerns surrounding womanhood, sexuality, and identity.”²⁶² Michelle Sauer describes the medieval depiction of the bodies of female martyrs as being visually or physically

²⁶¹ Bynum, “Religious Women,” 126.

²⁶² Rebecca J. Lester, “Embodied Voices: Women’s Food Asceticism and the Negotiation of Identity,” *Ethos* 23, no. 2 (June 1995): 192-193.

“fragmented,” and writes that, while male martyrs were often depicted in the moments prior to their executions or tortures, female martyrs were shown in the gory moments of their martyrdom with tortured and removed body parts, and in this form, the female bodies were “presented as passive subjects of the male gaze.”²⁶³ Sauer argues that when female mystics described their own experiences of union with God, “they similarly depict a fragmented body,” but a fragmentation that focused on the heart, veins, and bones, and in this instance the woman presented the fragmentation as “a necessary part of integration with the divine essence.”²⁶⁴ Through this process, Sauer continues, the woman writes herself and so retains her “own power, voice, and sexuality.”²⁶⁵ Sauer’s conclusion is that female mystics “subvert this discourse, fashioning a gendered subjectivity that remained culturally permissible while simultaneously circumventing overt strictures.”²⁶⁶ The weakness in both Lester’s and Sauer’s arguments is that there is no clear demonstration that women were able to subvert or circumvent male authority either consciously or sub-consciously. There is also no discussion of the reactions that this subversion might have caused among other women, religious men, or the Church.²⁶⁷

Elizabeth Petroff offers a more popular conclusion regarding women’s influence.

Petroff argues that, “visions led women to the acquisition of power in the world while

²⁶³ Michelle Sauer, “Climactic Spirituality: Mystic Self-Blazoning and Female Agency,” *Magistra* 12, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 10.

²⁶⁴ Sauer, 7-8.

²⁶⁵ Sauer, 11.

²⁶⁶ Sauer, 13.

²⁶⁷ There are also recent psychological interpretations of women’s piety. One such argument, made by Michael Carroll, attempts to argue the idea that stigmata is a literal merging of the woman’s body with Christ’s and that this merging gratifies “the sexual desire for the father that develops during the pre-Oedipal period.” Carroll interprets women’s devotion to the Eucharist as the culmination of a “desire to incorporate the father” that “is expressed as a desire to quite literally swallow him.” Michael P. Carroll, “Heaven Sent Wounds: A Kleinian View of the Stigmata in the Catholic Mystical Tradition,” *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 25-26.

affirming their knowledge of themselves as women. Visions were a socially sanctioned activity that freed a woman from conventional female roles by identifying her as a genuine religious figure.”²⁶⁸ Petroff does not identify exactly what defines a “genuine religious figure,” and she does not describe how this designation would allow a woman to overcome their traditional roles to gain power or authority.²⁶⁹ This failure marks the primary weakness of her argument. Arguments that promote the idea of female agency or “freedom” must include a consideration of the society that women were overcoming or being “freed” from, in order to be effective. It is also necessary to consider McGinn’s assertion that, “within the context of the medieval church it was virtually impossible for women to create new ways of living the gospel without the cooperation and approval of men.”²⁷⁰ Effective discussions of female influence must not only address the actions of women, but must also address the question posed by Laurie A. Finke when she asks, “Why and how,” were religious women “empowered to speak with an authority that rivaled, and at times seemed to surpass, that of the misogynist male clerics who ruled the institutional church.”²⁷¹

McGinn presents a more probable interpretation of the role of women within the church by first acknowledging that, “the suddenness and the intensity with which so many women all over Europe began to follow the Magdalene’s path of mystical devotion to Jesus remain surprising and mystifying.”²⁷² McGinn then argues that one cause for the increase in women’s visibility was connected to the church’s interest in using exceptional

²⁶⁸ Petroff, 6.

²⁶⁹ Finke, 33.

²⁷⁰ McGinn, 17.

²⁷¹ Finke, 32.

²⁷² McGinn, 154.

women as a counter to current heretical movements that were attractive to women and dangerous competition to the church.²⁷³ It is important to note that much of the writing that provides evidence of the extraordinary physical practices that have been the topic of this study were captured in biographies written by men, not from women's writings about their own experience.²⁷⁴ Female-authored autobiographies focused on different aspects of religious experience than the extreme practices that were the focus of male authors. For example, Gertrude the Great's own writings focus on attempting to describe her experiences of union with God. In contrast, later books written by men *about* Gertrude focused on "paramystical phenomena."²⁷⁵ Although women's mysticism was distinguished by its extreme physicality, when women wrote of their own experience they "stressed service and the details of ordinary life." It is their male biographers and hagiographers primarily emphasized the suffering and masochism of their tortures.²⁷⁶ Male biographers, by their own admission, explicitly used the lives of their extraordinary female subjects to their own ends. Jacques of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimprè whose work has already been discussed here, are two of the best known male writers who used collections describing the miracles associated with religious women "for further didactic use, and especially in preaching against heretics."²⁷⁷

The thirteenth and fourteenth-century church faced the very real danger of people abandoning orthodoxy for one of a number of heretical movements that were gaining in

²⁷³ McGinn, 154. McGinn also cites an overall trend to *vita apostolica*, and an increase in women's education and literacy as influences.

²⁷⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 83-84.

²⁷⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 84.

²⁷⁶ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 75.

²⁷⁷ Rubin, 120.

popularity. The same concepts found in orthodox women's piety, "a concern for affective religious response, an extreme form of penitential asceticism, an emphasis both on Christ's humanity and on the inspiration of the Spirit, and a bypassing of clerical authority," were also found within many of these heretical groups.²⁷⁸ The medieval church officially prohibited women from preaching out of fear that their very being might incite lust in their audience and retained the teaching from St. Paul that "women should keep silent at the meeting. They have no permission to talk, but should keep their place as the law directs,"²⁷⁹ but against the contemporary challenges of heresy, men of the church formed an unspoken alliance with women who could validate the teachings of the church.²⁸⁰ As clerical power grew in the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries, the divide between the clergy and the laity had widened. Orthodox women whose actions were considered signs of a special God-given grace could act as a good example for the laity, but could also be used as evidence to support confidence in the clergy and to prove the presence of God's divine favor working within the church. As Elizabeth Spearing writes, "which women became well-known and widely-read must have depended not just on the value and interest of what they thought and experienced, but on which male clerics admired them and whether the women's teaching and ways of life were what the contemporary church wanted to encourage."²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Bynum, "Religious Women," 123. Bynum also makes a related argument here that women may not have been attracted to heretical movements because they felt isolated from the orthodox church. Instead, it may be that women were just more attracted to a particular form of piety.

²⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:12.

²⁸⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 9-10.

²⁸¹ Spearing, ix.

Some of the biographies, including those written by Jacques de Vitry and Thomas of Cantimprè seem to go beyond a self-promoting motive and show a deep admiration, love, and at times even an element of jealousy of their female subjects.”²⁸² Both biographers recorded women’s lives in such a way that illustrated “the intimate connection between the new styles of feminine mystical holiness and theologically trained clerics and authors.”²⁸³ While the motivations of each individual male writer cannot be determined beyond doubt, what is clear is that the misogynistic culture of the late Middle Ages allowed for men to determine both the orthodoxy and the visibility of religious women. It is thus that Cantimprè was able to take the figure of Christine, who by his own admission was commonly taken to be possessed, and through his explanation and authorization, turn her into an acceptable and admirable, even if inimitable, figure.²⁸⁴

John Coackley’s study of thirteenth-century Franciscan and Dominican friars who wrote about devout women and the women’s relationships with the friars demonstrates the sometimes-paradoxical relationship between religious women and their male biographers and confessors. Coackley argues that while the writings by the friars reflected a clear gender hierarchy, there was also an underlying theme that, while women were not intellectually capable of the “higher” levels of contemplation, at the same time women’s

²⁸² Spearing, xxi.

²⁸³ McGinn, 162.

²⁸⁴ Barbara Newman, *Thomas of Cantimprè: The Collected Saints Lives*, trans. by Margot H. King and Barbara Newman, intro by Barbara Newman (Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 7. In a separate article, Newman relates the story of another fantastical female figure. A young girl who is raised in a nunnery has the experience of every night being attacked by demons and rendered invisible. Thomas includes this story in his writing and in doing so, again gives a remarkable story a measure of respectability. “More astonishing than the tall tale itself,” writes Newman, “is the serious attention Thomas gives it.” See Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit,” 744.

particular path to union with Christ was somewhat privileged in its own right.²⁸⁵ The experience of religious women was seen as fascinating in that it was “unique and remote” from the experiences of men. Coakley argues that an element of “admiring fascination” is evident in the testimonies, and there is awareness that while the authority of the friars to preach and to administer the sacraments was conferred by nature of their office, the authority of these women was conferred directly by God.²⁸⁶ On another level, however, the friars saw women’s unique access to the divine as evidence of support for the friar’s own authority. If women’s authority came directly from God, it was reasoned, and yet women deferred authority to the monks, male authority grew that much greater. While this emphasis on divine authority created a potential danger that women could appear, or indeed could become, more authoritative, as a whole women followed the teachings of their church and submitted to male authority.²⁸⁷ In spite of the admiration of women’s unique or special path to God on the part of the friars, the dynamic of their relationship shows that authority clearly belonged to the friars.

The failure to address the idea that religious women would not have had any desire to intentionally oppose their church is often a primary weakness in arguments for female authority. Pious women believed in and had faith in the church and the clergy and would not have intentionally moved outside the boundaries of orthodoxy. While a modern analysis might conclude that women seemed to be “pushing at the male-defined” boundaries, the church would have viewed any step beyond these boundaries as

²⁸⁵ J. Coakley, “Gender and the Authority of the Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans,” *Church History* 60 (1991): 445-460.

²⁸⁶ Coakley, 449, 452.

²⁸⁷ Coakley, 456, 459.

heretical.²⁸⁸ Acting outside of the church was undesirable, both because of the very real danger of punishment, but also because it was understood that the church was a true connection between God and humanity. Another aspect of women's relations to the church was that women needed the church, in the persons of male confessors, to reassure their communities and themselves that the source of their extraordinary experiences was divine and not demonic.

The thirteenth-century viewed demonic possession as a "particular physical and mental disease of women."²⁸⁹ For this reason, appearances of para-mystical phenomenon caused immediate concern for their source. It was of chief importance to conclude decisively whether visions, ecstasies, or bodily wounds were a sign of God's favor or the work of the devil, and it was thought that the work of a demon could be disguised within the actions of a presumably holy woman.²⁹⁰ Medieval culture believed women to be more emotional and closer to the body, and so concluded that women were more susceptible to sin. Male temptation to sin was seen as coming primarily from external sources and men's ability to detect sin in the natures of others was emphasized, but women had to be on guard from the temptation of internal sources. "It was a woman's part to root out the evil within herself rather than to act as a champion of morality and censor of the hidden signs of others." Women were particularly susceptible to the sins of "vanity, lust, and frivolity."²⁹¹ Aelred of Rievaulx gave this warning,

²⁸⁸ Jantzen, 158.

²⁸⁹ Barbara Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (July 1998): 745.

²⁹⁰ Weinstein and Bell, 151.

²⁹¹ Barbara Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (July 1998): 745.

As for you sister, I would have you never rest secure but always be afraid. Beware of your weakness and like the timid dove go often to streams of water where as in a mirror you may see the reflection of the hawk as he hovers overhead and be on your guard. The streams of water are the teachings of scripture, flowing from the clear fountain of wisdom. It makes you aware of the devil's promptings and teaches you how to take due precautions.²⁹²

The best protection against these sins was a cloistered life of "penitence and austerity" and a focus on "practices that banished pride, chastised the flesh, and disciplined the spirit."²⁹³ As Petroff argues, "there was a self-fulfilling element in the common medieval assumption that the natural bent of women's religious impulses was contemplative and visionary; for the environment recommended for women, a relatively closed community devoted to daily prayer, composed almost entirely of women, is exactly the environment in which religious impulses will surface in psychic phenomena and ecstatic states of consciousness."²⁹⁴

Women whose experiences were deemed as holy and who were moved to write of their experiences were careful to make clear that their authority to write was given by God, and women's writing generally included acknowledgment that the words they used were given to them by God. Thus, Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote in the *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, "I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the part of my body the power of the Holy Spirit."²⁹⁵ Despite Petroff's claim that visions supplied a means to authority, she does note that writing about these visions was problematic. Petroff writes, "the discomfort with which each writer introduces her writing self also indicates that

²⁹² Aelred of Rievaulx, 68.

²⁹³ Weinstein and Bell, 234, 236.

²⁹⁴ Petroff, 6.

²⁹⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 156.

writing was a gender-determined activity, that writing could be considered as a usurpation of a male prerogative, and that the writing voice had to be assimilated to the male voice of God if it was to be heard.”²⁹⁶ Women writing of their own experiences of “the discovery of the self made in the image of God” was in itself was a dangerous idea for women to promote. Women thus “had to invent a very precise language to express accurately the deepest truths of their existence without being misunderstood.”²⁹⁷ Women were very aware of the potential dangers of publishing their writings and many were careful to declare that they were uneducated and that they are only “translating what they have heard and seen.”²⁹⁸

Many women who received visions or direct experiences of God kept silent, not sharing their revelations until physical illness or implicit instruction from God forced them to reveal themselves. “They are fearful about what they expect to be negative responses to their writing, yet inwardly compelled to speak publicly of what they have experienced. The resolution to their dilemma comes only when a divine voice tells them they must write.”²⁹⁹ For example, Gertrude the Great writes that it was “unsuitable” for her to publish her writing and that her conscience would not allow it. In her hesitations, God spoke to Gertrude saying, “Be assured that you will not be released from the prison of the flesh until you have paid this debt which still binds you.”³⁰⁰ Mechthild of Magdeburg expresses a similar idea, writing:

I was warned against writing this book.

²⁹⁶ Petroff, 27.

²⁹⁷ Petroff, 44.

²⁹⁸ Petroff, 27.

²⁹⁹ Petroff, 42.

³⁰⁰ Gertrude, “The Life and Revelations,” 43.

People said:
 If one did not watch out,
 It could be burned.
 So I did as I used to do as a child.
 When I was sad, I always had to pray.
 I bowed to my Lover and said: 'Alas, Lord,
 Now I am saddened all because of your honor.
 If I am going to receive no comfort from you now,
 Then you led me astray,
 Because you are the one who told me to write it.'³⁰¹

Jo Ann McNamara argues that although modesty was often given as a reason for this silence, another very real reason was fear of the power of men. Noting that "women depended on the approval of the male clergy for survival, both physically and historically," any woman making a claim, or allowing a claim for divine revelation to be made on her behalf, was accepting a certain level of danger.³⁰² By the fourteenth century, fewer women wrote and women's spirituality came to be viewed with the same suspicion that was generally directed at heretical movements.

It is necessary to remember that when studying medieval women's writings, it is almost impossible to know what was truly female authored and what a male scribe or translator may have changed. Whether or not there is a male hand in the process, the explicit recognition of women's inferior status was a requirement. Mechthild of Magdeburg acknowledged that if she were a man, her writing would be more acceptable:

'Ah, Lord, if I were a learned religious man,
 And if you had performed this unique great miracle using him,
 You would receive everlasting honor for it.
 But how is one supposed to believe
 That you have built a golden house on filthy ooze

³⁰¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 156.

³⁰² McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy," 11.

And really live in it with our mother, with all creatures and with your heavenly court?
 Lord, earthly wisdom will not find you there.³⁰³

Repeated throughout much of women's writing is this idea of the author as the unworthy recipient of God's graces. Gertrude refers to herself as a "most unworthy creature," and "no more than refuse."³⁰⁴ Thus, Gertrude wrote:

I considered it so unsuitable for me to publish these writings, that my conscience would not consent to do so; therefore I deferred doing it until the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. On that day, having determined before Mass to apply myself to other occupations, the Lord conquered the repugnance of my reason by these words: 'Be assured that you will not be released from the prison of the flesh until you have paid this debt which still binds you.'³⁰⁵

It is impossible to determine the extent to which the trope of the unworthy female was a literary device, and to what extent it was believed by the women who used it. Finke argues that women were "not nearly as disingenuous as they had to appear in order to win the church's toleration and acceptance,"³⁰⁶ but within the ubiquitous misogyny of medieval culture it would be incorrect to assume that this was purely a rhetorical device. The idea that God may use the weak to teach the strong and the accepted idea of divine authorization allowed women to write, but that these two ideas so often accompany women's words demonstrates that women writers negotiated a narrow space that was strictly under the control of men.

The Sister Books written in fourteenth-century Germany are notable as an exception to medieval female writing in that it appears that women were the sole authors

³⁰³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 7.

³⁰⁴ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 127.

³⁰⁵ Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 229.

³⁰⁶ Finke, 44.

of these books and that their intended audience was other women's communities. In Gertrud Jaron Lewis' study of these texts, she argues that the books are "proof...that medieval women did raise their voices."³⁰⁷ Based on Lewis's study, however, while these books themselves may be extraordinary in that they are one of the few examples of medieval women's writings seemingly untouched by a male pen, the contents of the books show that they were not isolated examples of writing by and for women. Much of the books are taken up with the history of the particular community and descriptions of everyday life, and Lewis writes that, "the authors deliberately cater to the readers' expectations, often interpolating the miracle stories and visions to which a medieval culture had become accustomed."³⁰⁸

By the late fourteenth and into the early fifteenth century, women's stories were increasingly told by their male confessors³⁰⁹ allowing for the words and lives of female women to be more explicitly "mediated and thus verified by a male author or scribe."³¹⁰ A woman who claimed divine inspiration, or a woman to whom divine inspiration was ascribed, would have been "immediately subject to special supervision, [and] a male confessor assigned to review her every manifestation."³¹¹ Divine ecstasy, bodily wounds or levitations might be a sign of divine election, but they were also signs of demon possession,³¹² and by the 1500's the same words that had previously been used to

³⁰⁷ Lewis, xi.

³⁰⁸ Lewis, xii.

³⁰⁹ Bynum, "Religious Women," 129.

³¹⁰ Johnson, 827.

³¹¹ Weinstein and Bell, 232.

³¹² Weinstein and Bell, 153.

describe the holy woman might now be used to describe the witch.³¹³ As with women's writing, women's devotions negotiated an increasingly fine distinction between the male controlled categories of the holy and the heretical.

³¹³ Bynum, "Religious Women," 129.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSIONS

Modern writers who make the argument that medieval women used divine experiences as a means to authority also make the mistake of ignoring the possibility of authentic religious experience and thus ignore an essential aspect of religious life. It is perhaps easier to view medieval women through our own modern context and assume a subversive agenda, dismissing the attitudes toward suffering and self-inflicted physical harm as a kind of mental illness or psychosis, however, in the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries, these events were accepted as true indicators of God's very real work in the world. Women's devotions to the Eucharist, or practices of extreme physical penance and asceticism were not an attempt to compensate or subordinate, but were considered a legitimate path to God.³¹⁴ Whether or not these so-called miracles truly had a divine source is perhaps not as important as the idea that medieval people believed that they did. There are, of course, individual exceptions to any generalization, and no doubt there were women who used the perception of a privileged relationship with God to their advantage, whether consciously or unconsciously. Jantzen captures this idea in her conclusion that "given all the other restrictions on women, along with the expectations of the time, it is not at all surprising that women might be more open than men to visionary experiences in the first place, [and] make more of them when they occurred."³¹⁵ Regardless of one's own beliefs, however, ignoring or purposely dismissing the aspect of sincerity evident in

³¹⁴ Rublack, 37.

³¹⁵ Jantzen, 169.

the art and writing of the women discussed here is denying medieval women their belief in their own experiences.

The amount of female writing from the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries is unfortunately limited. The knowledge that much of the surviving women's writing was probably actually written by a male scribe who edited and approved the work, limits direct access to women's words even further, so that it is difficult to determine conclusively the motivations of medieval women. From the surviving art and literature, and from the many surviving biographies written by men, there are some conclusions that may be reached.

It is clear that the female religious experience in the late Middle Ages was unique. Growing out of the fascination with the human body of Christ, but keeping always within the bounds of orthodoxy, women developed patterns of intense physical imitation of the bloodiest and most painful experiences of Christ's human life to an extreme not seen in male communities. Defined by the prevailing misogynistic culture as lowly physical creatures, incapable of the higher levels of spiritual and intellectual contemplation practiced by men, women not only accepted, but prayed that God might grant them with devastating illness and suffering so that they might grow closer to Christ and do penance for their own souls and the souls of those already in Purgatory.

Contrary to the claims of some modern studies of medieval women, women as a group did not consciously see their Eucharistic ecstasies or mystical visions as subverting or circumventing male authority or the established church hierarchy. The church promoted the extreme and bizarre acts of holy women as examples of piety, but only to

the extent that they benefited the church's own self-interest in the battle against heresy.

The church officially discouraged such devotions, but in practice, often promoted them as evidence of God's grace at work in the church. Medieval women worshipped through the only avenue that was available to them, that is through the identification the blood and physical pain of the crucifixion and through the physical torturing of their own bodies.

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