

WOMEN AND REDEMPTION
A Theological History

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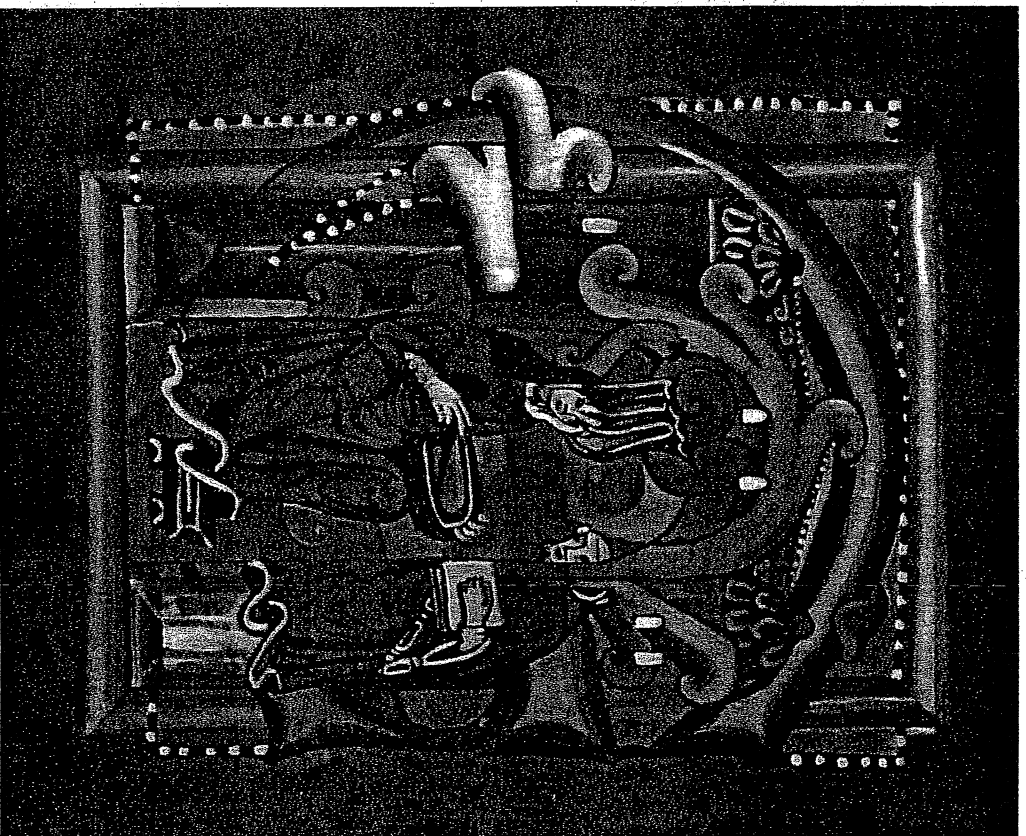
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Chapter Three

Male Scholastics and Women Mystics in Medieval Theology



THE NEW TESTAMENT AND PATRISTIC MESSAGE of the inclusion of women in the image of God redeemed in Christ, however androcentrically conceived and in dichotomous tension with women's subjugation in creation and fallenness, activated women as agents in seeking and acting on this offer of redemption. One discerns this presence of the female subject behind many New Testament and patristic male authors, either when men seek to contain and limit this female agency or when they appeal to women's particular interests; that is, promotion of asceticism to women as freeing them from the trials of male domination and childbearing.¹ But one seldom hears the voices of these women directly.

A few scraps remain of women's own words: some oracular cries from the Montanist prophets; something from the prison diary of the martyr Perpetua; the Christian story cast into the schoolbook form of lines from Virgil by the fourth-century Roman matron Proba; a holy land travelogue by the late-fourth-century nun Egeria; some letters, poems and a martyr's life by the fifth-century empress Eudocia; and a few other letters, poems, epigrams, and inscriptions.² But mostly we must try to discern the contours of female lives and thought through the eyes of their male friends. We can assume that Macrina thought about the Christian life much as her brother Gregory describes, but we can never know how key points might be nuanced by her woman's perspective.

Of the great ascetic foundresses of the fourth and fifth centuries, Macrina, Marcella, the Paulas and Melanias Elder and Younger, we have scarcely a line,

3. Hildegard of Bingen receiving her revelations. Manuscript illumination by Hildegard of Bingen. Copyright © Beltz Verlag, Weinheim und Basel, Progrām Beltz & Gelberg

even though we know from their male friends that they pursued studies of Scripture and of the church fathers and wrote extensively in the form of letters of inquiry on exegetical points, as well as interventions in doctrinal and church disputes.³ The reasons for this lack of preservation of writings of the church mothers are not hard to find. The lack reflects the limits imposed upon their authority by their brothers, the church fathers.

Women may be equal in holiness and ultimately in heaven. A woman may even be learned, so much so that priests seek out her counseling on points of Scripture, theology, and the spiritual life, as Gregory of Nyssa bowed to his sister as his mentor. But women may not teach publicly. Women's words of counsel and inspiration are to remain private. They are excluded from the public teaching of the church. Ergo, however much their memory and even their relics are venerated as saints, their writings are not preserved as official tradition.⁴

This situation of women's lack of public teaching authority in the church continued in the Middle Ages and was renewed in the Reformation. Indeed it has only begun to be overcome in the late twentieth century. But for various reasons its implications for the lack of preservation of women's writings began to change. Starting in the tenth century with the plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, growing in the eleventh century and becoming a mighty stream in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, we find more and more women's writings. These women write in a variety of genres, not just letters and saint's lives, but plays, theological treatises, guides to the spiritual life and, above all, accounts of their mystical experiences, the latter becoming women's particular genre of theological writing.

More and more women began to commit their thoughts to paper, often with the aid of a male scribe, and these writings were preserved. The reasons reflect the institutions of female religious life. There women learned elements of literacy in Latin and the vernacular. There they had libraries and scriptoria (which included painting and illumination) where their thoughts could be not only written down but preserved, copied, and sent to other readers. There through continual liturgical prayer, women might gain an extensive knowledge of Scripture and some theology, and could also express themselves in poems and plays to be put to music and performed liturgically in their communities—again to be written down, copied, circulated to other communities.

There remained from the New Testament legacy an important exception to

women's lack of public teaching authority in Christianity, an exception that women used to gain a public voice in the medieval church. Although women could not be priests, they could be prophets.⁵ God might speak directly to a woman, conveying an urgent message to the church and society of her time. Women might experience God in revelatory disclosures that could direct others on the path of holiness. In these roles as direct vehicles of God's presence and voice, women both denounced evils and pointed to the way of restored life with God.

Women's revelatory experiences were not self-validating. They had to be validated by male ecclesiastical authority—a personal counselor, an abbot, a bishop, even the Pope, the higher the rank the better. Visionary women who failed to gain such male support (or male support of sufficiently high rank and influence) could hardly gain a voice. When male authorities were divided on women's prophetic authenticity, which authorities won determined whether a woman and her writings were circulated and preserved or suppressed or even burned at the stake along with her body. When a woman claimed revelations, the critical question was from whence came these communications, God or the devil? Was she therefore a prophet or a witch? And, as in the case of Joan of Arc, which men had the power to make the crucial decision?⁶

Hildegard of Bingen

In the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen was the most notable example of a woman who received such validation from the highest authorities of church and state. Thus she was able to exercise her extraordinary creative powers to the fullest extent, within the limits of the roles available to her of abbess and prophet. Hildegard's long life of eighty-one years covered most of the twelfth century, 1098–1179. Born as the tenth child to a noble family, well connected to political and church leaders, in Bernersheim bei Alzey in Rhine-Hessen, she was given to the church as a tithing at the age of eight, being entrusted to the care of Jutta of Sponheim, a noblewoman, whose hermitage was attached to the male Benedictine monastery of Saint Disibod. There Hildegard gained a thorough grounding in the Latin Bible, particularly through the monastic office.

Although she claims that both her mentor, Jutta, and she herself remained "unlearned," it is evident from her subtle and masterful but idio-

syncretic Latin that she was able to explore a range of authorities on theology and natural history of her time. But she remained largely self-taught both in developing her distinctive exposition of the orthodox Christian worldview and in her use of imagery, music, and language. Hildegard regarded her language as itself revelatory and issued stern warnings against any editor who might revise it, beyond grammatical corrections. She also developed a secret language, based on Latin, which was used as a mystical form of communication in her community.⁷

In her *Life*, written at her dictation when she was in her mid-seventies, Hildegard recounts that from earliest childhood she had luminous visionary experiences, a second sight into hidden realities that took place while she retained ordinary consciousness. These visions were vividly pictorial, although also interpreted to her in Latin, in such a form that both the vision and its meaning were clearly imprinted on her memory.⁸ These visions were accompanied by debilitating illnesses "that threatened to bring me to death's door."⁹ When she realized as a small child that others did not see as she saw, she learned to keep silent about such experiences, communicating them privately to her mentor, Jutta. In her fortieth year the pain of suppressing these visions became so great that she divulged them to Volmar, the monastery provost, who encouraged her to write them down.¹⁰

The hermitage with Jutta and Hildegard attracted many other women members and grew into a well-endowed cloister, attached to the male community of Saint Disibod. When Jutta died in 1136 Hildegard was elected its head. It was in 1141, when Hildegard was forty-two years old, that she received visions of fiery light that gave her an infused knowledge of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, accompanied by a heavenly voice commanding her to "say and write what you see and hear."¹¹ With the editorial assistance of Volmar and her favorite nun of her community, Richardis von Strade, Hildegard began to dictate these visions, together with the exegesis of their meaning that came to her through the heavenly voice.

Over the next ten years, 1141–51, her first major book, *Scivias*, took shape. Eventually each vision in its visual form would be painted, probably at Hildegard's dictation, by women who did the illuminations in the monastery scriptoria.¹² Thus we have each of the twenty-six visions in the *Scivias* in three forms: described in words, in a painting in vivid colors, and interpreted by the heaven-

ly voice. These twenty-six visions, divided into three books, comprise a comprehensive theological cosmology, a summa theologica that touches on the entire range of topics of salvation history from beginning to end.¹³

In the *Scivias* we are led through complex pictorial images, which are then exeged: God's creation of the world; Lucifer's fall; Adam and Eve's fall from paradise; the incarnation of the Word who created the world taking human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary to heal the breach opened up between God and humans; the course of salvation history from Adam's fall, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, the patriarchs and prophets, then the apostles and martyrs of early Christianity; to the building of the church in her own day, with the struggles between faithful and unfaithful Christians, to the anticipation of the final conflicts with the Antichrist, the judgment and transformation of creation into its eschatological form, culminating in heaven and hell beyond the present temporal order.

Although Hildegard receives and exegeses this story seriatim in visions and discourses that begin with creation, go on through salvation history and end with eschatology, there is a sense both in the *Scivias* and in its redoing in her final great work (written in her late seventies), *The Book of Divine Works*, that this salvational drama is present in her mind as a unified whole, all simultaneously here and now, from the perspective of God who stands outside time, a simultaneity that Hildegard partially shares as one caught up in vision to the divine viewpoint. Again and again in her letters she will sketch this whole drama in a few powerful strokes: Lucifer's fall, the paradisaical and then fallen condition of Adam, Christ taking on human flesh in the virgins womb, the final conflict between God and Satan, all brought to bear on the present condition of the church as both the community of redemption and devil-hidden in its human weakness and strife.¹⁴

Modern interpreters of Hildegard have been particularly struck by her habitual method of affirming her prophetic authority as a vehicle of God, while simultaneously discounting herself as a "poor little female figure" (*paupercula feminea forma*),¹⁵ physically weak, unlearned, without status as fallen Eve. From a modern and feminist perspective that sees self-affirmation as crucial to women's well-being, this constant dichotomy between Hildegard's diminishment as a woman and God's authority seems either internalized self-hatred or a rhetorical trick or perhaps some of both. But this puzzle reflects modern

anthropological views that disappear once the assumptions of Hildegard and her context are taken seriously.

We should recognize at least four levels of meaning that dictate this dichotomy between Hildegard as "poor little female figure" and the divine that speaks through her as prophet. First, as indicated above, this was the only way a woman could gain a public voice in medieval Christianity. As one under subjugation in creation and domination in the fall, a woman could not publicly teach theologically or exercise authority in her own name, but only as one whose subjugation had been overridden by a God who used her as a vehicle of revelation to raise her beyond both her female condition and the human condition in general. As prophet a woman has authority not in her own name, but as one used by God despite her "weakness." Thus in utilizing this contrast between her feminine weakness and the revelatory voice of God that speaks through her, Hildegard simply accepts and conforms to the view of her church, which negates her as a woman only to allow her to speak with the highest and most thunderous authority possible as voice of God.

Once validated as a true prophet, however, Hildegard could and did speak with precisely such a thunderous voice to the greatest men of her day. And this voice of divine authority was generally accepted by these men, despite the conflicts some had with her. Many sought her out humbly, asking for her prayers, her insights about the future, whether God had told her anything about them, about the fate of souls in the next life, and about cures for the infertile and the demon-possessed. Once the authenticity of her divine voice was accepted, her female "weakness" was not so much an impediment as a marvel, a continual affirmation of the scriptural principles that "the Spirit blows where it will" (John 3:8) and "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).¹⁶

Second, for Hildegard this self-negation corresponds to the human condition generally. All humans are "ashes of ashes, filth of filth,"¹⁷ both in the created body apart from God's vivifying power and as fallen into captivity to this identity as "ashes and slime" in sin. Humans, male or female, cannot expect to speak truth or live in a holy manner unless they empty themselves and allow God to use them as a vehicle of grace. In her letter to the younger woman mystic Elisabeth of Schönau, Hildegard makes clear that not only women, but all true Christian visionaries who hope to impart God's word to their fellow humans,

can do so only if they empty themselves of any self-will. Not only she but the greatest prophets and apostles of Scripture, such as Paul, could be true vessels of God's word only to the extent that they acknowledged and made themselves "nothing," so God could be all in all in and through them.

Hildegard shows that this is the original and essential way all creation remains united with God, while the crux of fallenness is the assertion of self against God's life-giving presence:

I am but a poor creature and a fragile vessel; yet what I speak to you comes not from me but from the clear light. Human beings are vessels God has made and filled with the Spirit so that the divine work might come to perfection in them. . . . It was through the divine word alone that everything came into existence perfect. The grasses, the woods, the trees came forth. The sun too and the moon and the stars went to their appointed places to perform their service. . . . It was only humans themselves who did not know their creator. For although God bestowed great knowledge on humans, they raised themselves up in their hearts and turned away from God. . . . But God endowed some persons with insight so that humankind should not completely fall into derision.¹⁸

Hildegard alludes to Abel, to the Hebrew seers, and finally to the coming of Christ as the mending of this relation to God. But in her own day there had been a steady decline of the human grasp of this life-giving presence. It was, as Hildegard calls it, a "womanish time" (a time of lack of virtue), and so God was lifting up new prophets, even women, to be divine instruments. To be true instruments, persons such as herself and Elizabeth had to avoid the devilish temptations to claim such authority as their own, rather than making themselves humble vehicles of God:

Those who long to bring God's words to completion must always remember that, because they are human, they are vessels of clay and so should continually focus on what they are and what they will be. . . . They themselves only announce the mysteries like a trumpet that which indeed allows the sound but is not itself the source that produces the note.¹⁹

On a third level, Hildegard accepts this dichotomy between her weakness and the divine authority that speaks in her because it corresponds to her personal experience of herself. Hildegard knows herself to be physically assailed by continual illness, of inadequate learning, marginal as a woman in her church and society, and yet empowered by extraordinary energy that even in old age can make her feel like a young girl.²⁰ She has visionary knowledge that can see the whole cosmos and world history from end to end in a glance; she is endowed with gifts in music, language, sciences, and with enormous willpower to contend with the greatest powers of church and state in her day. While we might say both voices and energies are Hildegard's, she herself could explain the duality in her experience, and assure that the second voice was accepted by her society, only by assuming that the first was herself, while the second was God acting in her.

On a fourth level, subordinate to the first three, Hildegard wields the contrast between her littleness and the divine voice rhetorically, as a power tool by which she not only sets forth her visions but also contends with adversaries in her church and society and responds to humble requests from petitioners who seek her prayers and advice. Nor is she above using this duality ironically, as a put-down to the great men of her day who assume that their maleness, combined with high class and ecclesiastical status, automatically makes them the voice of God.

Hildegard's last great struggle at the end of her life was against the prelates of Mainz, who imposed an interdiction on her community because she refused to exhumate the body of a man buried in her monastic cemetery who they claimed (and she denied) had died excommunicate. Hildegard threatened the prelates with divine judgment, contrasting their own exemplification of "womanish times" with her divinely given authority as God's *bellatrix* (female warrior):

And I heard a voice saying thus: Who created Heaven? God. Who opens heaven to the faithful? God. Who is like Him? No one. And so, O men of faith, let none of you resist Him or oppose Him, lest He fall on you in His might and you have no helper to protect you from His judgment. This time is a womanish time, because the dispensation of God's justice is weak. But the strength of God's justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so that it might fall defeated.²¹

All Hildegard's writings from her forties to her seventies, following her vision of the voice that commanded her to "say and write what you see and hear," show absolute confidence in this voice as God speaking through her. Her success in having this voice authenticated by the highest ecclesiastical authorities provided an essential condition for her ability to wield it in her society. After confiding her visions privately to Jutta and Volmar, she wrote to the greatest monk of her day, Bernard of Clairvaux, in 1146, several years into the writing of her *Scivias*, to seek his approbation of her visionary authority. Bernard's reply to this appeal, from one who was at that time an unknown nun, was perfunctory but affirmative, urging her to "recognize this gift as a grace" and to respond to it eagerly but also humbly.²²

In 1146-47, by a lucky stroke of fortune, Pope Eugenius III, a Cistercian and disciple of Bernard, was meeting in synod in Trier. Volmar had told his abbot, Kuno, of Hildegard's visions; Kuno informed Heinrich, archbishop of Mainz. Heinrich mentioned this to the pope, who dispatched two legates for a copy of the incomplete *Scivias*. Bernard intervened to affirm Hildegard's authenticity to Pope Eugenius, who was impressed and read parts of the text before the assembled prelates. He then wrote a letter to Hildegard giving her his apostolic approbation.²³

So, by a fortuitous chain of male ecclesiastical approval, Hildegard was able to gain the highest validation in the church. She also gained protection over her monastery by then-emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Despite her later denunciations of him, this protection held firm throughout her life.²⁴ Hildegard's divine voice was thus credentialled by the highest authorities of her time. She would maintain this authority, despite private doubts by some, through several crucial battles with church authorities, in which she did not spare her denunciations of the corruption she saw in the lives of great prelates and princes.

In at least one of these conflicts, when Hildegard claimed divine mandate to move her community to a new site at Rupertsberg, freeing it from dependence on Saint Disibod, she reports that some questioned her authority and even her sanity:

Many people said, "What's all this—so many hidden truths revealed to this foolish, unlearned woman, when there are many brave and wise men around? Surely this will come to nothing!" For many people wondered whether my revelation stemmed from

God, or from the parchedness of aerial spirits that often seduced human beings.²⁵

Hildegard's theological anthropology of gender in creation, fall, and redemption is not easy to sort out with precision, for she was an imagistic thinker, not a philosophical systematician. But the general pattern of her thought can be summarized. First, she herself and all women, in relation to God as God's creation, are simply and completely *homo*, fully and completely equivalent to men as expressions of the image and likeness of God. Characteristically, when God speaks to her, as when she speaks to others (mostly men) in the voice of God, she is referred to simply a "O man" (*O homo*). God does not address her as woman, even in affectionate terms, such as daughter, handmaiden, or the like, but simply as a human person.²⁶

For Hildegard the original Adamic nature was dual, being made from "wet mud" (*limosa terra*) and filled with God's vivifying spirit, which Hildegard calls *veriditas* or "greening power," a term she uses for the whole cosmos as filled with God's life-giving power.²⁷ As originally filled by the Spirit, Adam was glorious, endowed with divine knowledge and harmony that expressed itself in a beautiful singing voice (a distinctively Hildegardian touch).²⁸ Eve shared in this same nature, while as woman she was also created to be mother to their joint offspring.

In the original paradisaical state Adam and Eve would have made love virginally. Lust would have been absent, but there would have been the sweetest pleasure, communicated in a nongenital embrace and "sweat" passed between their sleeping bodies. Eve would have given birth, not through her vagina but through her side, as she herself had been born from Adam's side, and thus would have remained virgin in impregnation and parturition. This original virgin impregnation and birth were restored in Christ's birth from Mary and are represented in the church born from the side of Christ.²⁹

Adam lost the fullness of this vivifying power, however, by seeking to grasp his own self-will rather than making himself simply an instrument of God's indwelling Spirit, although this life-giving Spirit remains the true life principle of humans. For Hildegard, the primary cause is not human, male or female, but the jealousy of the devil. Prior to the creation of humans, God created the angels. But part of the angelic hosts, led by Lucifer, tried to seize God's glory

and fell from heaven, becoming the source of all diabolic plotting against divine life. Unlike humans, Lucifer fell utterly, losing all capacity for goodness and becoming wholly evil.³⁰

God then created humans from clay and filled them with life. God planned that this new creature would replace the fallen angels. The devil, utterly antagonistic to Adam and his offspring (which Eve carried in her body like stars), plotted to deceive the couple. He hated Adam's sweet singing voice and the harmonious life of paradise, and so the devil sought to destroy it, to get humans into his power by deceiving them. The devil came to Eve because, in her innocence, she was more susceptible to being misled and also because Adam would accept her suggestion out of his love for her. But Hildegard sees these aspects in the primal misstep as modifying its gravity. Adam and Eve are more childish and victimized than evil. They do not fall wholly, as does Lucifer, and thus can be reclaimed by God. In a striking image, Hildegard pictures Adam as turning from God by *failing* to pluck the flower of obedience to God and so losing the indwelling spirit.³¹

Once fallen and ejected from paradise, Adam and Eve have lost their original harmoniousness, and their knowledge of God is dimmed. Their sexuality is corrupted into lust, although Hildegard sees this as more a male than a female characteristic. Women, she believes, are naturally averse to the sexual act and only experience some sexual lust after they have been introduced to it by men.³² Most of all, the fallen world is one buffeted by the constant attacks of the devil, who seeks to get God's human creature wholly in his power. But God from the beginning sends vehicles of divine grace, starting with Abel and Noah.

Hildegard's view of human nature is more that of the "two tendencies" than an Augustinian loss of free will. The vices, agents of the devil, seek to pull humans one way, while the sweet voices of the virtues (typically presented as feminine)³³ recall humans to their true glory. God's project of restoration of humans culminates in the birth of Christ, who takes human flesh from the Virgin Mary and thus restores that original form of humanity in which human flesh is a perfectly receptive instrument of the divine Spirit. All Christians share this restored human nature through rebirth in the womb of mother church and through feeding on the sacrament of Christ's eucharistic body.

Hildegard's view of woman as woman, in relation to man as male, is double-sided. Physically and socially she accepts gender hierarchy as the created order,

although she also hints that men use the claim that women are punished for Eve's sin to unjustly oppress them.³⁴ But women as women are assumed to be physically weaker than men and in need of their protection. Also, for Hildegard, the biological complementarity of the male as sower of the seed and women as nurturer of it dictates a hierarchical social order that demands that women as wives obey their husbands.³⁵

This difference in male and female roles is continued in the church in the exclusion of women as priests. These "natural" male and female social roles, parallel to males as begetters and women as conceivers, should not be confused by cross-dressing or by women taking on male roles.³⁶ In a similar way Hildegard accepts class hierarchy in her society and sees this as a reflection of natural hierarchy, the hierarchy of the angels, as well as the difference between species of animals. She bristles in defense of her own practice of admitting only women of noble birth to her monastery, when this is challenged by another abbess.³⁷

While male and female complementarity dictates female subordination socially, on the cosmic level Hildegard sees a complementarity of masculine and feminine that manifests God's design for cosmic harmony. This cosmic complementarity is represented for Hildegard on many levels. Maleness represents God and God's word, while femaleness represents earth and flesh, the matter through which God shapes all things. Here flesh, matter or earth (*terra*) is not evil, but rather, in its "virginal" form, is the bodily substance that God's Spirit fills with life, moisture, and "greenness." The beauty and delight of God's creation lie in the harmonious union of these two principles, God's life-giving power and matter or *terra*.³⁸

Wisdom (*Sapientia*) or Love (*Caritas*) is the feminine expression both of God and of creation, mediating the union between the two. Hildegard's final great work in her seventies, *The Book of Divine Works*, is a reworking of the whole drama of creation, incarnation, and redemption to focus on the role of Wisdom/Love, who mediates between God and creation. It is through Wisdom/Love that God created the cosmos in the beginning, and it is in Wisdom/Love that God will bring it to completion in the end.³⁹ The axis of this union of God and flesh mediated by Wisdom is the incarnation of the Word through the Virgin Mary, who gives the divine Word his humanness through her virginal flesh as one who is totally an instrument of the divine Spirit.⁴⁰

Finally Ecclesia, bride of Christ and mother of Christians, who receives the vivifying power of Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross as her bridal "dowry," manifests this reunion of divine Spirit and virginal matter.⁴¹ Ecclesia is pictured in many of Hildegard's visions as a towering woman, holding reborn Christians in her arms and womb, while her head is assailed by corrupt and unfaithful church leaders.⁴² In one vivid picture of the final conflict between God and the Antichrist, Ecclesia is even imaged as having the lower part of her body taken over by an ass's head protruding from her vagina.⁴³ But Christ will intervene to throw this final eruption of Satan into hell, while rescuing for paradise the faithful children reborn in the womb of mother church.

For Hildegard, Christian virgins are particular expressions of the true children of mother church. They are the reborn virgin Eve manifest in the Virgin Mary. In their holy life in community, Eden is partly restored. Hildegard even dressed her nuns in solemn liturgy in long white veils and golden crowns to symbolize their way of life as the restoration of Eden. She heard in the sweet music of liturgical chant an echo of the music of paradise.⁴⁴ In her letter to the prelates of Mainz, imploring them to lift the interdict that had silenced liturgical music in her community, she suggests that these prelates imitate the devil, who ever seeks to silence music that reminds humans of paradise.⁴⁵

Hildegard describes the music of paradise, lost in the fall but partly restored with the aid of musical instruments:

God, however, restores the souls of the elect to that pristine blessedness by infusing them with the light of truth. And in accordance with His eternal Plan, He so devised it that whenever He renews the hearts of many with the outpouring of the prophetic spirit, they might, by means of interior illumination, regain some of the knowledge which Adam had before he was punished for his sin. And so the holy prophets, inspired by the Spirit which they had received, were called . . . not only to compose psalms and canticles (by which the hearts of listeners were inflamed), but also to construct musical instruments to enhance these songs of praise with melodious strains. . . . In such a way these holy prophets get beyond the music of this exile and recall to mind that divine melody of praise which Adam, in company with the angels, enjoyed in God before the fall.⁴⁶

Hildegard has no doubt that virginity or chastity is an essential expression of redeemed nature, the restored paradise and anticipated life in heaven when all death and suffering will be overcome. She strongly supports the Gregorian reforms that imposed celibacy on the priesthood. For her the various celibate ecclesiastical orders—priests, monks, and nuns—stand on a higher level of holiness than married laypeople, although ecclesiastics can also become instruments of the devil.⁴⁷

Although she includes married laypeople in the redeemed, she sees them as a lower order who produce children for the church; she visualizes them as lying in the clouds in the lower part of Ecclesia's body, rather than in her bosom.⁴⁸ In her description of the final defeat of the devil and the gathering of the redeemed into the heavenly paradise, she speaks of prophets, apostles and martyrs, virgins and widows, anchorites and monks, and princes being gathered into heaven. Married lay commoners are too unimportant to mention.⁴⁹

For Hildegard, gender difference is not annulled by Christ, but rather virginity annuls the fallen nature and restores the paradisaical union of body and spirit of both men and women. Virginal women not only are included in equal honor in this procession of the redeemed, but they have a special mysterious meaning as representatives of virginal Eve restored in Mary, the church as Virgin Mother of Christians, and finally that divine Wisdom and Love that ever unites God and matter in symphonic harmony in its once and future form, anticipated here and now in the virginal flesh and sweet song of vowed women religious.

Thomas Aquinas

When we turn from the visionary cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen to the scholastic theology of the great Dominican master, Thomas Aquinas, writing a hundred years later (1225–74), we find ourselves in a significantly different world, intellectually and socially. Intellectually, Aquinas represents the great medieval synthesis of the Augustinian tradition of theology and the philosophical method of Aristotle. Where Hildegard reports visions, Aquinas reasons as a logician, weighing the arguments of authorities pro and contra to disputed questions. Hildegard belongs to the earlier medieval world of rural monastic estates ruled by men and women of

noble families; Aquinas to the university, mendicant orders, and emerging cities of the thirteenth century.

In the 1230s the major collection of canon law was promulgated, closing loopholes by which abbesses had exercised elements of pastoral office in the early Middle Ages. Women were strictly forbidden from public teaching or preaching, touching sacred vessels, incensing the altar, or taking communion to the sick. Spiritual guidance of nuns, including confession, and external control of finances of nunneries were more firmly put in the hands of supervising priests.⁵⁰

While such matters were disputed in Hildegard's day, she was able to employ the combination of her prophetic office and her extensive connections with prelates and princes of noble families to wrest control of her own community from the monks of Saint Disibod, moving her monastery to another site, where she both governed its external affairs and controlled its pastoral and liturgical life. Although she still received a provost from Saint Disibod's, she prevailed in claiming that the nuns had the right to appoint this provost.⁵¹

Between 1158 and 1170 when she was in her sixties and seventies, she conducted four preaching tours throughout Germany, speaking to both clergy and laity in chapter houses and in public, mainly denouncing clerical corruption and calling for reform. We have the texts of several of such sermons, such as one she preached at Cologne in 1163. Hildegard sent a copy of this sermon to Dean Philip and the cathedral chapter of Cologne, who humbly asked for it so they could reform their lives by careful study of her inspired words.⁵²

By one hundred years later it was hard to imagine such acceptance of public preaching by a woman, even a well-connected abbess and acknowledged prophet. In the mid-fourteenth century Catherine of Siena would intervene with popes, prelates, and princes to end the Avignon captivity of the papacy and Great Schism, but she did so in a more private manner, by audiences and letters.⁵³ Women's religious writing would increase after the twelfth century, but the genre would be primarily personal spiritual experiences, not the sketching of a vast cosmology. The shift of scholarship from monasteries to universities (where women were barred from study) would also bring a decline in the educational level of nuns. Although the nuns of Helffa in the thirteenth century maintained university level education for their women,⁵⁴ the Beguine mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, who ended her days at Helffa, dictated her revelations in her Low German dialect, not Latin.

This more exclusively male world of canon law and university life is evident in Aquinas' treatment of gender in his theological anthropology. Indeed, so removed was he from contact with women or sexuality, first as a young monk and then as a Dominican in the university of Paris, we have a sense that such issues are for him a theoretical abstraction, in contrast to Augustine, behind whose views one always senses the existential anxiety of his own experience. Further, Aquinas' incorporation of Aristotle's sociobiology worsened the definition of women's "natural" inferiority. His use of Aristotle's definition of the soul as the "form" of the body suggests a more integral body-soul union than that of Augustinian Platonism, but this also implies a more negative view of women's capacities of soul, as affected by the definition of her bodily inferiority.⁵⁵

For Aquinas the soul is naturally immortal and can exist apart from the body. Its essential quality is intellect, through which it also exercises sovereignty over bodily things. But the soul is also the "form" of the body and can only use the senses and exercise sovereignty through being united with the body, and so is incomplete by itself.⁵⁶ This definition of the soul allows Aquinas to maintain the Augustinian distinction between woman as *homo* and woman as *mulier*. As asexual soul in relation to God, woman possesses the image of God and is made to enjoy eternal life in communion with God in heaven.

Considered as female, however, woman was created not as an end in herself, but as helpmeet to the male in the work of procreation (not as a friend or companion to the male for which Aquinas follows Augustine in opining that another male would have been more appropriate).⁵⁷ Aquinas combines this Augustinian view with Aristotle's definition of the female as defective in her bodily, volitional, and intellectual capacities. The male seed provides the form and active power in procreation, while the female only provides the "matter" that is formed. Normatively every male seed would produce another male. So the very procreation of the female comes about through a defect in this process of formation of the female matter by the male seed, resulting in an incomplete or defective being, a female.

The female by nature is inferior or defective in physical strength, volitional self-control, and intellect and cannot exercise sovereignty over herself or others. Therefore, the social hierarchy in which the male rules and the female obeys is biologically necessary, parallel to the relation of active mind and passive matter. This definition makes woman's inferiority inner and not just a mat-

ter of her procreational role. Aquinas accepts the view that women have inferior capacities for intellect and self-control and cannot image and represent human nature normatively.⁵⁸ Contra Hildegard, Aquinas views women as more swayed by passions and prone to lust than men.⁵⁹

This view affects Aquinas' Christology and view of priesthood. Christ had to be male to represent the headship of the New Adam over regenerated humanity, because only the male possesses "perfect" (complete) humanness of soul and body. So also only males can be priests. Women are not only barred from priestly ordination juridically, but by nature they cannot validly receive this sacrament because their intrinsic defectiveness means they cannot exemplify excellence or exercise sovereignty.⁶⁰ This inferiority and subjugation of woman would have existed in paradise because it reflects biological nature, which for Aquinas has not changed with the fall. In paradise the body would have been mortal, although undying because of its perfect submission to God. Procreation would have taken place as today, including defloration of the woman. The chief difference in paradise was that there would have been a perfect submission of the body to the intellect, and of humans to God. This perfect ordering of higher over lower Aquinas calls "original justice."⁶¹ It would have meant a complete state of virtue, although not a spiritual body or face-to-face communion with God, which comes about only through grace that transcends nature.

The fall destroyed this original justice, and thus weakened but did not destroy the inclination of the soul to virtue. The body, no longer submissive to the intellect and to God, asserted its natural mortality. Eve is more guilty than Adam for the fall because she sinned not only against God in disobedience, but also against her neighbor, Adam, in seducing him—although the fall could have happened only through Adam's consent, since he, not she, possessed the higher reason that can exercise headship over humanity as a whole.⁶² Woman not only shares in the general human loss of original justice, and falls into mortality and lust, but is punished for her additional guilt by the pains of childbirth and male domination over her (worsening her original subordination that would have been by mutual assent).⁶³

Aquinas follows Augustine in teaching that original sin is passed down in the sexual act, but he changes the focus. The male seed itself cannot transmit original justice, since it no longer possesses it, so the male procreative act

generates a fallen human without this original virtue. Sexuality, which would have been pleasurable in paradise, has been worsened into disordered lust, but lust per se does not transmit sin, it simply gives evidence of the disordered, sinful state.⁶⁴

Since the male seed alone transmits original sin as an expression of its generative power, Christ born without the male seed takes mortal flesh, but not original sin, from his mother, Mary.⁶⁵ (Why women, who do not transmit original sin since they are only the passive and not the active power in generation, are more prone to lust than men is not explained. Here as elsewhere we see the fissures between Aquinas' Augustinian and Aristotelian legacies.)

Although women by nature are barred from priesthood, God can bestow prophetic gifts on them, according to Aquinas. This is possible because the prophetic gift pertains to reality, while women's lack of eminence that bars them from priesthood is a matter of symbolism; that is, they cannot *represent* excellence. But this does not mean that some women might not possess it; indeed Aquinas opines that some women are better in soul than many men.⁶⁶ Here we sense a bit of historical experience that counters Aquinas' Aristotelian anthropology, which, if strictly followed, would suggest that all women by nature would be inferior to all males, not just in body and social role, but in soul (intellect, moral self-control).

Yet, since women are barred from public teaching, women with prophetic gifts cannot impart them in public. They can only communicate them to men in authority, not only to authorize their validity, but to disclose their contents publicly.⁶⁷ Aquinas also bars women from the exercise of any temporal jurisdiction since they lack the capacity for sovereignty, although he does allow that an abbess can exercise limited spiritual authority over her community as *delegated* to her by male authorities. This view puts Aquinas at variance with other theories in his time (and later) where women are barred from spiritual authority but, as ruling queens, exercised temporal authority.⁶⁸ So woman would have been in a state of subjugation in the original creation, which expressed her inferior biological nature and procreative role, worsened into domination and painful childbearing in the fall. But when Aquinas treats salvation and its ultimate expression in heaven, gender hierarchy seems to vanish. Here woman exists simply as *homo*, made in the image of God, as end in herself, rather than procreative aid to the male.

Although for Aquinas the soul is naturally immortal and cannot die, the future state of its immortal life, whether in bliss or perdition, is a matter of supernatural grace dispensed by God to the elect, not a possession of the soul by nature.

As elect, gifted by and cooperating with grace, to be taken into finally eternal communion with God (the beatific vision), women stand on an equal footing with men. For Aquinas, there is no gender discrimination in election. In heaven, therefore, women are as likely to be in the highest ranks of the blessed as the most eminent male, since the hierarchy of the blessed is a matter of the fulfilled image of God (which woman possesses equally) and cooperation with God's gifts of grace (merit), not human hierarchies, including that of gender.⁶⁹

Here again we find in Aquinas a teaching of spiritual equality that contradicts his Aristotelian anthropology, which would suggest that women's defects, which are not only of body but include inferior capacities for intellect and virtue, should confine her to the lower ranks of the blessed, much as (as Aquinas suggests elsewhere) there is a hierarchy of rank among angels. Thus we find in Aquinas' theological anthropology a maintenance of Augustine's distinction between women's equality as image of God in her inner nature as *homo* and her subjugated status as woman in her procreative role. But this distinction has become more contradictory, due to the incorporation of an Aristotelian anthropology in which women's inferiority is a defect, not only of body but of soul, mind, and will.

Mechthild of Magdeburg

With Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210–83), we enter a world of female visionary imagination and religious life different from Hildegard's, but also far removed from the intellectual world and university life of her contemporary Thomas Aquinas. Born in Saxony to a family of knightly class, Mechthild was well acquainted with the culture of princely courts, but also with the growing urban life and the new urban preaching and mendicant orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, whom she saw as God's gift to reform a sinful age.⁷⁰

Mechthild recounts her first "greeting" by the Holy Spirit when she was twelve; it was such an overwhelming experience that she could never thereafter tolerate giving in to any sin. These experiences continued daily.⁷¹ When she was

in her early twenties she joined a Beguine community in Magdeburg, where she lived for forty years. The Beguines represented a new form of female urban religious life in the thirteenth century in which groups of women took simple vows of chastity but were free to marry. They lived together in houses in the midst of urban life, supporting themselves through handwork and also serving their neighbors through charity, nursing the sick and teaching. They fell under suspicion of heresy, mostly unfounded, through their uncloistered way of life, but were valued by city fathers for their services; these officials often furnished some of the Beguines' support.⁷²

Mechthild reflects this new context of women's religious life both in her compassion for the weak and suffering (in this life and in purgatory)⁷³ and in her sense of personal vulnerability to clerical foes who were offended by her claims of visionary authority.⁷⁴ Like Hildegard, Mechthild is certain of the truth of her visionary gifts and struggles against those who challenge it, but she lacks both the aristocratic hauteur and the access to the highest levels of power of church and state that protected the abbess.

When she was forty Mechthild received a command from God to write down her visions under the title of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*.⁷⁵ Like Hildegard, Mechthild protests her unworthiness and lack of learning but affirms that God's demands take precedence over her weakness. She too consulted with her confessor, a Dominican, Heinrich of Halle, who both affirmed the divine origin of the command and wrote and copied down what she told him. Over the next twenty years Mechthild dictated a succession of revelations, which Heinrich organized into six books. The seventh book was dictated in her old age after she entered the convent of Helfta. Mechthild recorded her visions in her own Low German dialect. Heinrich of Halle, who organized the complete German version, also translated the whole into Latin about the time of her death.⁷⁶

Although Mechthild was supported by her Dominican confessor and later by the aristocratic nuns of Helfta, she speaks often and bitterly of foes who challenged the veracity of her visions and her right to make them public through writing. When some men told her that her book should be burned, she took her complaint to God, who assured her that "the truth cannot be burned by anyone" and that her book was protected by God's own hand, which is stronger than any mans. In the vision God even identified her book with

God's trinitarian nature: the parchment on which it was written as God's humanity, the words that flew into her soul as God's divinity, and the voice of these words as the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷

God's choice of such a lowly vessel to communicate God's revelations duplicates the kenosis of God in the incarnation, just as God chose to build "a golden house in this filthy slough, to live here with your mother and all creatures." Echoing Paul's principle that God chooses the lowly to confound the wise, Mechthild is told that many a wise master is a fool in God's eyes. Rather God typically imparts special graces to "the lowest, the least, the best concealed place," just as a mighty flood "flows by nature into the valley."⁷⁸

Mechthild not only resists those who challenge her visions, but develops a general view of the state of Christianity of her day as corrupted by sinful clerics and religious. She perceives behind the facade of many spiritual people a hypocrisy and self-centeredness that not only fails to understand the true message of spiritual life, but corrupts others. Mechthild compares herself to Christ, who must drink the cup of gall created by these false Christians: "The Devil has many a cupbearer among spiritual people, cups so full of poison that they cannot drink it all alone but must pour out the bitterness for the children of God."⁷⁹ Such criticisms undoubtedly fueled some of the persecution that Mechthild experienced.

Mechthild shares with Hildegard and the orthodox Christianity of her day general assumptions about salvation history. Her theological world moves between the drama of God's creation of humanity and Adam and Eve's fall, through the faithful witnesses from Abel and the prophets to the central mystery of redemption through Mary and Christ, to the apostles and saints of mother church, to the present time when many church leaders stain the church through their corruption. For her too the coming drama of the Antichrist, the sufferings of the saints in that time, the final judgment and eternal transformation of the world loom just ahead.⁸⁰

But where Hildegard's visions survey this historical and cosmic sweep, in Mechthild the focus is on the intense, intimate drama of the soul. Mechthild's own soul, in its ecstatic flight to and union with God as its beloved, and in its suffering alienation, which imitates the kenosis of Christ in tormented flesh, as the paradigmatic center of the salvation drama. In her description of this love drama between the soul and God, Mechthild draws on the heritage of

Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs blended with elements drawn from the German *minnesinger* poetry of the love relation between a lady and her noble lord. The blending of these two traditions, the mystical reading of the Song of Songs and the poetry of courtly love, in Mechthild as well as other Beguine mystics, created a new genre of religious language, which Barbara Newman has called *mystique courtoise*.⁸¹

For Mechthild God's decision to create humanity is driven by desire to be fruitful and to love. In one vision Mechthild envisions the Trinity in conversation, deciding to create humanity as a Bride for God to love and be loved in return:

Then the Eternal Son said with great politeness: "Dear Father, my nature, too, should bear fruit. . . . Let Us pattern mankind after Me, although I foresee great sorrow since I must love man eternally." The Father replied: "Son, I, too, am moved by a powerful desire in my breast, and I hear the sound of love. We shall become fruitful in order to be loved in return. . . . I will create a Bride for Myself who shall greet Me with her mouth and wound Me with her look; only then will love begin." And the Holy Spirit said to the Father: "Yes, dear Father, I will bring the Bride to Your bed." . . . Then the Holy Trinity leaned over the creation of all things and created us, body and soul, with untold love.⁸²

Adam and Eve together were given the noble nature of the Son. To Adam was given a share in the Son's wisdom and earthly power over all earthly creatures. To Eve was given the Son's "loving honorable modesty which He Himself bore in honor of his Father." "Their bodies were created pure, for God did not create anything to make them suffer shame, and they were dressed in angels' garments." Mechthild seems to share the Origenist view of the early Augustine that originally Adam and Eve would have conceived children in some ethereal and sinless manner that would not have changed the virginal nature of their bodies: "They were to conceive their children in holy love, as the sparkling sun shines on the water without troubling it."⁸³

With sin, however, Adam and Eve lost this original sinless and incorruptible body. Their bodies became corruptible and sin-prone. In a dramatic image Mechthild speaks of the fallen body as having "sinful sap," which Adam ex-

tracted from the apple, which flows naturally through all our limbs." Eve received in addition an accursed (menstrual) blood, "which began with Eve and all other women from the apple."⁸⁴

Mechthild attributes to the fallen body both the tendency to sin—to turn from God and to indulge bodily desires—as well as finitude, pain, and illness. The soul in herself retains her natural likeness to God and thus her desire to ascend and reunite with God as her beloved. But her ties to the fallen body drag her down to the earthly realm and tempt her with desires for false loves of bodily indulgence. Yet in ecstatic experience the soul temporarily frees itself from its ties to the body and tastes its original and renewed love relation with God, which has been lost with the fall but restored through the incarnation of Christ in Mary's sinless flesh.

Mary, whose body was uncorrupted, preserved this original love relation of the soul with God during the period between the fall of Adam and the incarnation. Mary as God's bride exemplifies what God intended and continues to intend the soul to be. Thus Mary speaks:

So the almighty Father chose me for a Bride, in order to have something to love, for His beloved Bride, the noble soul, was dead. . . . Then I alone became Bride of the Holy Trinity and the Mother of orphans, and brought them before the eyes of God, so they might not sink.

Mary is a mediatrix who mothers and suckles all the faithful with the "pure, unspoiled milk of true, tender mercy," not only Christ and Christians, but also the prophets and sages before Christ was born, and Mary continues to do so until the Day of Judgment.⁸⁵

The soul can taste, at least in momentary glimpses, its true noble nature, and dance and play in heaven with its beloved. Again and again Mechthild describes this love play with its beloved in language drawn from courtly love as well as the Song of Songs. In one vision, the soul complains to *Minne*, or Lady Love, imagined as the go-between that captures and wounds her with desire. The dialogue ends with the soul acknowledging her defeat by Love, telling her to take a letter to her beloved: "Please tell my love that His bed is ready and I lovingly long for him."⁸⁶

In another vision, the soul appears in court as a timid servant girl looking

longingly at a prince. In imagery drawn from Sacred Heart and eucharistic devotions, God eagerly bares his red-hot heart to her and takes her into it. The two embrace and mingle together "like water and wine."⁸⁷ Although God is infinitely greater than the "poor soul," in the love relation they become equal. God even subjects himself to the soul and does her will, as the lord kneels to the lady in courtly love.⁸⁸ God's great love for the soul is a continual kenosis in which God pours himself out for the soul, so much so that God is as "lovesick" for her as she is for God: "She is consumed by Him and takes leave of herself; when she has had enough, He is more lovesick for her than He ever was before when He desired more."⁸⁹

Although this love quest and play, culminating in mutual dissolution into one another, is the heart of Mechthild's visions, nevertheless, it can only be momentary as long as the soul is tied to the body. The soul must not only fall back into its distance from God, but it must even embrace alienation from God as its highest self-abnegation of its own desires for the sake of love for God.⁹⁰ In this paradoxical move, Mechthild also sees the soul embracing innocent bodily suffering (although not sin) as the way to purify its attachment to the body and to participate in the crucifixion of Christ, who not only entered the flesh but suffered all the torments of the flesh to express his loving quest to redeem humanity's soul and body.⁹¹

Thus Mechthild describes her early ascetic efforts to subdue the body through fasting, flagellation, and vigils,⁹² as well as sufferings that came to her through illness and, most of all, through betrayal and persecution by her foes, as imitation of Christ's redemptive suffering. Thus Christ speaks to Mechthild not only as bride, but as one who must share in his sufferings and so become his female counterpart as dying and rising Christ:

You shall be martyred with Me, betrayed by envy, sought out by falsehood, captured by hatred, bound by slander, blindfolded so the truth may be withheld from you, slapped by the wrath of the world, brought before the court in confession, boxed on the ears with punishment, sent before Herod in court, undressed in wretchedness, flogged with poverty, crowned by temptation, looked down upon in degradation; you shall bear your cross despising sin, shall be crucified renouncing all your desire, be nailed to the cross with holy virtues; wounded by love, you shall die

on the cross with holy constancy, be pierced in your heart by constant union, removed from the cross in true victory over all your foes, buried in obscurity, and, finally, in a holy conclusion, you shall rise from the death and ascend into heaven, drawn by God's breath.⁹³

In the salvation drama of humanity's creation, fall, and redemption, Mechthild does not believe that women are in any way inferior to men in their spiritual nature. She suggests in her account of the creation of Adam and Eve that the Son apportions his gifts to the couple with wisdom and power for Adam and love for Eve. Eve receives a double punishment in the fall of cursed sap and cursed blood. Mechthild accepts women's marginalized and powerless place in society as a given but relates it, not to divine punishment, but rather to divine favor, giving women greater likelihood of sharing Christ's sufferings and receiving God's grace, which flows down to rest not on the "mountain," the powerful and learned, but in the "valley," the unlearned and powerless woman, herself.

Humanity's nature and destiny as bridal soul of God is both symbolically feminine and also more accessible to women, both in their modesty and humility in society and also because it was to Eve that Christ gave the gifts of his capacity to love and honor God. Thus the gifts to Adam of power and wisdom are, in some way, more of a temptation to pride than a means of reuniting with God, than the gifts given to women. But Mechthild can also speak of the soul as God's image as masculine as well as feminine: as virile man in battle, as comely maiden at court before her lord, and as pleasing bride in the nuptial bed with God.⁹⁴ When Mechthild speaks of Adam, or "man" collectively, it is with the male pronoun but with the assumption that women share equally in this human nature, in its nobility and its fall.

In speaking of her writing, Mechthild mentions the surprise of her scribe, Heinrich, at the "masculine style" of her book.⁹⁵ Despite her protests that she, "a sinful woman," is only following the commands of God in writing her revelations, this passage suggests that, to her foes and friends alike, Mechthild was not their notion of gentle, humble womanhood, but appeared unnaturally masculine as she battled for her right to record her visions and to follow her own course of life, responding to her critics with fierce denunciations of their faults.

Masculinity and femininity are, thus, fluid categories for Mechthild. Women possess God's image equally with men. They have in no way a lesser nobility or capacity for spiritual interchange with God. Indeed, in some way, they are in a superior position, because they are less tempted by worldly power and have a natural affinity for the love relation with God for which the soul was created and in which it finds its consummation. This consummation, although tasted fleetingly while the soul remains tied to the fallen body, will be completed after death, when the body no longer ties down the soul.

After the Day of Judgment, the soul will receive back its original unfallen body. Following the "noble youth, Jesus Christ, the pure maiden's child," as comely and full of love as he was at eighteen, God's bridal souls, adorned with the wreaths of their virtues, will be carried to the eternal wedding with the Trinity. Then "the highest dance of praise begins . . . from bliss to love, from love to joy, from joy to clarity, from clarity to power, from power to the highest heights." There they are greeted by the Father: "Rejoice dear Brides, My Son will embrace you. My divinity infuse you. My Holy Spirit will lead you always further in blissful vision, according to your will. What more could you wish for?"⁹⁶

Julian of Norwich

With Julian of Norwich we move to the fourteenth century into the thriving city of Norwich, England. We also encounter a third form of religious life for women, the anchoress. Julian (her religious name, taken from the church of Saint Julian to which her anchorhold was attached)⁹⁷ was born about December of 1342, probably to a prosperous family of Norwich.⁹⁸ She must have adopted a serious devotional life as a young person, for she tells us that she had prayed for three gifts from God: to see Christ's passion as if she were actually present; a sickness to the point of death; and three wounds, contrition, compassion, and a full-hearted longing for God.⁹⁹ Such prayers express the desire to be totally focused on the relation to God in Christ, in the presence of Christ's passion and as if at the point of the consummation of her own life.¹⁰⁰

Beginning on May 8, 1373, when Julian tells us she was "thirty and a half years old," she experienced the answer to these prayers. For seven days she lay ill to death.¹⁰¹ Beginning on the seventh day (May 13) she experienced sixteen

"shewings" of Christ's dying on the cross, as well as of God's relation to and love for us.¹⁰² Having seen Christ's suffering in vivid detail to the final point of expiration, suddenly he was transformed into risen life, so she too was suddenly restored to health.¹⁰³ Perhaps shortly after this experience, Julian wrote down these visions, the interpretations given to her of them, and her first reflections on them, in a text of twenty-five chapters. She spent the next twenty years pondering the meaning of these visions and writing a much expanded version of her *Shewings of God's Love*.¹⁰⁴ The former is known as the "short text"; the latter is known as the "long text."

It is not known when she actually entered into the life of an anchoress, but it is likely that she did so shortly after these visions, the solitude of the anchorhold giving her the space for a dedicated life of prayer, study, and reflection on them.¹⁰⁵ The life Julian chose as an anchoress attached to the Church of Saint Julian at Norwich meant that she was enclosed in a room for the rest of her life, never to emerge until her death. But it was not an isolated or miserable life. A window into the church allowed her to participate in the liturgy, and another window into an attached parlor allowed her to counsel many who came seeking her advice and prayers, such as Margery of Kempe, who records her visit to Julian about 1412–13.¹⁰⁶

Donations and local religious authorities provided for her physical needs, looked after by a servant and her assistant. It was expected that she would dress and be fed simply but adequately. So Julian's main task was to construct her own self-disciplined life of prayer and meditation.¹⁰⁷ Norwich was well-supplied with good religious libraries, including that of the Augustinian friars across from her church, and so it is likely that Julian's daily routine included the extended study of theological classics.¹⁰⁸ The church sat at a busy crossroads linking Comisford with the center of Norwich. Julian was there perhaps for more than forty years during a tumultuous time of war and plague.¹⁰⁹ Although set apart in her cell, Julian would receive the outpourings of daily troubles from those who came seeking her counsel. Such a holy woman was highly regarded by her contemporaries as one whose presence benefited the whole community.

Like Hildegard and Mechthild, Julian also felt the need to justify her extraordinary visions and her writing as a woman normally excluded from higher theological education and public teaching authority. She does so by describing herself as a "woman, ignorant, feeble and frail," yet nevertheless commanded to

write what she has experienced because God has chosen her to be a conduit of God's teachings for the benefit of the whole Christian people, and in no way simply to exalt herself. As she puts it: "Because I am a woman should I therefore believe that I ought not to tell you about the goodness of God since I saw at the same time that it is His will that it be known?"¹¹⁰ It is not she who teaches, but Jesus who teaches through her.

Her description of herself as "lenued" (ignorant) and "vnlteryde" have puzzled commentators,¹¹¹ since Julian's writing shows a woman of high literary skill in her Middle English dialect and considerable theological sophistication. It probably should be read to mean that she was self-taught beyond the elementary school level, thus not schooled in the Latin scholasticism of universities (not available to her).¹¹² It also expresses a typical self-disparagement by which medieval woman claimed their authority by claiming it not in their own names but in the name of God, who had chosen to make them God's instrument.

Yet Julian does not simply supersede her own voice with the divine voice, but distinguishes between what has been revealed to her in visions and in words by formed divine inspiration in her understanding and her own pondering on questions for which she has an as yet incomplete understanding. Thus she often qualifies her reflections by phrases such as "as I see it" or "as I understand it."¹¹³ Julian draws her theological reflection from three sources: natural reason, the common teaching of holy church (Scripture and tradition), and the inward workings of the Holy Spirit, which she sees as parts of one whole, "for these three are all from one God."¹¹⁴ There is no indication that she felt incapable in any of these three areas as a woman. Indeed, aside from the brief justifications of her authority just cited, she does not discuss herself as a woman, but operates simply as a human person fully engaged in living the redemptive life, seeking to understand it and to share the benefits of her insights with the Christian people.

The central message that Julian understands to have been revealed by Christ's revelations to her is that of absolute assurance that God's persisting love for humans will triumph over all evil, that "all shall be well."¹¹⁵ Julian's own central question to Christ is, "How can this be?" in the light of so much sin and suffering in the world and the church's teachings that many sinners will fail to repent and will be ultimately damned. The questions of theod-

icy—how an all-loving and all-powerful God could have allowed humans to fall in the first place, why evil continues and whether it will be fully overcome—fuel a lifetime of theological ponderings from which Julian emerges with a profound theological understanding of the basic categories of Christian faith, at once traditional and original.¹¹⁶

Not only is the trinitarian God all-good in every way; the God whom Julian comes to name as Father, Mother, and Lord, has created a world and formed human persons as the apex of creation in a way that fully manifests this divine goodness. For Julian all that is, is God; God is the true substance and being of all that is created. Nothing has being except through participation in the being of God. Because all that is manifests the being of God, all that is good in its true nature. Evil has no substantial reality.¹¹⁷

Yet evil surely exists; and indeed, for Julian, it is the central theological problem. How can it be reconciled with this revelation of unmixed divine goodness in which all creation participates as its true "ground of being"? Here Julian differentiates the human being as *substance* and as *sensuality*; terms we might translate as essence and existence, rather than as soul and body.¹¹⁸ As substance the human being is the image of God, the created manifestation of divine being and so is completely good, by nature united to God's being. But, as sensuality, human existence has a certain autonomy that can be grasped in its created state as an end in itself, apart from God. When humans do this they fall into alienation from God and from themselves; human psychosomatic existence becomes split from its substance or true nature united to God. Although Julian does not dwell on the story of Adam's fall,¹¹⁹ and never mentions Eve, one can infer that she assumes that this split of substance from sensuality results in a loss of an original immortality and perfection that humans would have enjoyed when their physical existence was united to their spiritual substance in union with God's uncreated being.¹²⁰

This fall into sin (alienation) is manifest in woundedness. Humans experience every distress of mind and body. For Julian, sin, while "nothing" in itself, is felt in human life as *pain*¹²¹—the pains of mental anguish, self-blame, shame, and of physical suffering of the mortal body. Significantly, Julian never describes sin in terms of either pride or pleasure. For her there seems to be neither self-esteem nor delight in the sinful state. Rather, the primary way in which humans are caught in bondage to sin is in their self-absorption in their

own distress, physical and mental. This distress leads them to forget their true nobility as God's image, and God's continuing love for them, and to slide into a despairing sense of hopelessness and worthlessness.

Julian insists that God is not angry with us and does not blame us for our fall into sin. These negative emotions are our own projections onto God from the context of our encapsulation in the fallen state where we see only our own dilemmas and fail to recognize that God continues to love us and to wish us only good. The supreme expression of God's "courtous" love is that God, the Son, from whom we have our substance, together with the whole trinitarian God, also chooses to take on our sensuality, our bodily existence. Descending not only into the body, but taking on all the woundedness to death of the fallen human condition, Christ provides the conditions for our restoration to union with God and with our own true selves, indeed in a higher form than if we had remained in our original innocence.

God permitted and continues to permit humans to fall into sin because God allows humans freedom; moreover, in order for humans to attain their full spiritual maturity in union with God, they also have to experience what it means to fall out of that union into the distressful condition of separation from God.¹²² But God has never ceased to love us and to sustain us in being, even as we became blind to this sustaining love. God, from the beginning, intended to provide the remedy. Divine Wisdom, from whom we have our spiritual substance, took on our bodily existence and bore all its woes in the crucifixion. Thereby God provides the means by which we can heal our division, "oning" our souls to God and drawing our sensuality back into union with our souls, anticipating the day when this union will be complete and every form of mortality and distress will cease.

Julian develops this theology of human fall and redemption through a parable of the fallen servant.¹²³ The servant, who is Adam and all humans, stands before his loving Lord eager to do God's will. This eagerness to obey is his true nature and impulse. But, in his alacrity to please God, he rushes off at top speed and falls into a ditch, where he becomes wounded, torn, and muddled. He then becomes so absorbed in his shame and distress that he fails to look up and see that his Lord has in no way stopped loving him. He moans in fear, imagining that God is angry with him, and so the servant is unable to recognize God's continuing love and gracious goodwill for him.

How does the servant break out of this dilemma and recognize both God's continuing love and his own continuing worth as God's true child and created image? This is possible only through God's greatest work of mercy. God as second person of the Trinity becomes the servant, "falling" into the "womb of the virgin," taking on the torn and muddled body of the fallen servant and bearing all its distresses. Christ now stands beside the loving Lord, carrying all rescued servants as his crown of glory. Through Christ's supreme act of love, the servant is restored to his position of honor before his Lord.

Christ, as creator of our soul and body, takes on the distresses of our fallen bodily condition—but without sin (separation from God). This, then, is Julian's answer to the problem of evil. But it is not simply that Christ has remedied our fall through entering our fallen bodily condition, but also that the sinful condition itself continually points us to the means of our healing. Because sin is experienced as pain, we cannot rest in sin but are continually impelled by our distress to seek to overcome it. The pains of sin purge and purify us and stir up repentance, compassion for others in pain, and a desire to find our true rest, which we can find only by resting in God.

Thus, for Julian, the wounds of sin are at the same time the medicines of sin, for our true nature remains that of God's created image.¹²⁴ We are never really separated from God, nor do we ever lose our true nature as God's created image. We have become blind and have forgotten who we are, but we have not ceased to be, in our true essence, the noble manifestation of God's loving goodness. Thus our quest to overcome the distresses caused by sin can only find its true solution as we awaken to a recognition of God's continuing love and are led back to God as the true ground of our nature and only real happiness.

The pains caused by sin, rightly understood in the light of God's continuing love, not only become means of purgation and healing, but also a means of participating with Christ in the healing of the sins of humanity. By bearing our pains in union with Christ, we become partners with Christ in redemption.¹²⁵ Thus Julian's vision of redemption is never of the isolated self seeking its own flight to God, but of a human being whose healing union with God is at the same time expressed in outpouring compassion for others, becoming a servant for others as Christ has become for us.¹²⁶

Yet the dilemma of the ultimate resolution of evil remains for Julian. How

can be it that *all* will be well, when evil and suffering continue to abound—as she herself could plainly see even from her anchorhold—in a society torn by plague, famine, war and division, even in the church? Julian does not contest the church's teaching that damnation awaits the unrepentant sinner, yet she holds out a belief that the mystery of God's love is still incomplete.¹²⁷ At the end, when our healed union with God and ourselves is completed and all sin and suffering are overcome, there will be a transformation that we do not yet fully know. We can be assured that God's love indeed means that *all* will be well, but here and now this truth must be held in faith rather than in full understanding.¹²⁸

Julian's exploration of the trinitarian nature of God as both mother and father has aroused renewed interest in modern times, especially among feminist theologians. Although both patristic and medieval theologians occasionally speak of God as mother, particularly in connection with Christ, through whom we are both reborn and fed through the Eucharist, Julian develops this maternal aspect of God the Son far more fully than any previous theologians.¹²⁹ In eleven chapters in the long text she elaborates on this union of fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship in God.¹³⁰

Thus in our making God almighty is our kindly Father and God all-wisdom is our kindly Mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord... Furthermore I saw that the second Person who is our Mother substantially, the same dear person is now become our Mother sensually. For of God's making we are double, that is to say, substantial and sensual.

Our substance is that higher part which we have of our Father, God almighty. And the second Person of the Trinity is our Mother in kind, in our substantial making—in whom we are grounded and rooted; and he is our Mother of mercy in taking our sensuality. And thus our Mother means for us different manners of his working, in whom our parts are kept unseparated. For in our Mother Christ we have profit and increase; and in mercy he reforms and restores us; and by the power of our passion, his death and his uprising, oned us to our substance. Thus our Mother in mercy works to all his beloved children who are docile and obedient to him... Thus Jesus Christ who does good against evil is our very Mother. We have our being of him, where every ground of

Motherhood begins, with all the sweet keeping of love that endlessly follows. As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.¹³¹

Julian's exploration of God's motherhood is rooted in key aspects of her theology. The persons of the Trinity are for her a dynamic relationship not just with each other, but with us. We are created, restored, and brought to fulfillment in interrelationship with God as Father, Mother, and Lord. Her identification of the Second Person with Wisdom reclaims the feminine aspect of this biblical symbol.¹³² She also uses the traditional christological symbols of baptism and Eucharist to see Christ as the one in whom we are reborn and fed, as a mother brings a child forth from her womb and feeds it from her own body.¹³³ But central to her view of God as Mother as well as Father is her understanding of divine love as incapable of real anger or rejection of God's children, no more than a mother could reject her child, even though she might need to appear stern at times to discipline it. But behind even this discipline is a love that can never cease. Julian sees this kind of divine love as motherlike, or rather divine Motherhood as its fullest reality, which we see palely revealed in human mothers.¹³⁴

While this sense of God's motherhood reflects something of Julian's experience of women as mothers (or at least her view of what a mother's love should be), her understanding of sin also reflects a significant shift in perspective that perhaps also reflects her experience as a woman. In sharp contrast to the Augustinian view of sin as overweening pride and concupiscence, Julian views our bondage to sin primarily as our entrapment in an overwhelming sense of fear and worthlessness and as manifest in pain, not pleasure. But once we glimpse God's continuing love and our own worth in God's eyes, we can become secure in our trust in God. Our wounds can become our medicines for growth in contrition, compassion for our fellow Christians, and reunion with God and with our own true selves. Or as she puts it at the end of the short text: "For God wants us always to be strong in our love and peaceful and restful as he is towards us; and he wants us to be, for ourselves and for our fellow Christians, what he is for us."¹³⁵