

ROLE AND REVELATION

by Tara Patterson

Women Mystics in Medieval Western Christianity

Religion, as it has been documented across centuries and cultures, is so often a product of its society, and the rise in Christian mysticism in medieval Europe represents no exception. The calamitous fourteenth century brought about numerous changes in the structure of Western Christianity. Faced with the Crusaders' defeat in Palestine, increasing tensions between the Crown and the Church, and the Great Schism of the papacy in 1378, the general European populace lost confidence in traditional organized religion¹. The people experienced a second age of anxiety comparable to that which occurred under the Roman Empire in the early era of Christianity². In each case, disillusionment effected a shift towards a more personal type of worship. Finding little comfort in ecclesiastical authorities, people looked within themselves for a sense of salvation, seemingly unattainable in the tumultuous mainstream society.

This inward movement corresponded to a resurgence of Christian mysticism. Although religious visionary experience was not a new phenomenon, having been documented throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, fourteenth century men and women began recording their personal visions in increasing numbers. As one author notes, "Repeatedly, mystical sects arose in an effort to sweep away the whole detritus of the material world, to become nearer to God by cutting the earth-binding chains of property."³ Great religious mystics, appearing throughout Europe, wrote accounts of their personal experiences with spirituality. Through visions, mystics claimed to achieve a direct link to God without moving through the usual, corrupt clerical channels. The mystical elite believed God sent messages of love and peace to the entire Christian community through vivid revelations to the chosen few⁴.

Although members of both sexes advanced to the forefront of the Western religious movement, women seemed particularly sensitive to mystical revelations. To explain this phenomenon, a number of authors describe medieval mysticism not as "a manifestation of the individual's internal affective states but a set of cultural and ideological constructs."⁵ More women experienced and recorded spiritual ecstasy than their male counterparts for socio-cultural reasons, rather than for any biological or emotional differences between the sexes. Just as the mystical movement was rooted in its social context, the female mystical experience had deep associations with women's social position. Medieval society placed greater constraints on female religious figures, whose visions may have served as a reaction against the prevalent sexual inequality. According to

McNamara, "Mysticism flourishes best in the silence and solitude the Church has traditionally prescribed for its female members."⁶

The differences between male and female religious experiences within the Catholic Church exposed medieval views on the inferiority and subordination of women. Men held a wide variety of clerical positions, ranging from contemplative hermits to actively political officials, such as bishops, at the top of the Church hierarchy. Women had fewer choices. Medieval culture constructed the stereotype of a passive, meditative female, naturally suited to a life of prayer, fasting, and vigils. At the same time, the Church espoused the idea that women needed protection from both the violence of men and from their own feminine sexuality⁷. To combat their inherent evils of the flesh, women required a separate, self-contained environment⁸. These beliefs kept pious women in isolation from the rest of the community and from positions of leadership. As a result, only men administered the sacraments, heard confessions, and preached to the public⁹.

Few women dared to challenge Church policies, for the social system was designed to keep women silent. Nearly every preacher, confessor and didactic writer taught women that God loved nothing but quiet humility from his female adherents.¹⁰ Women who made public statements risked humiliation at the hands of the male-dominated Church hierarchy. Male approval meant survival, particularly for the mystics. Universities excluded women from a classical education; hence, female mystics depended on men's knowledge of Latin in the recording and translation of their visions. From their authoritative position, learned men could easily discredit the mystics by labeling them foolish or hysterical. The fear of censure or worse punishment effectively discouraged women from asserting their religious convictions in many cases. Even when mystics believed they received direct messages from God, the effort to speak was often manifested as a physical strain. One mystic claimed that an angel beat her until she agreed to reveal her vision to the public. An earlier mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, concealed her visions for half of her life before an overwhelming spiritual force overcame her reticence.¹¹

Women had good reasons for exercising caution regarding their relative positions within religious sects. Although orthodox leaders rarely condemned visionary writings as heretical in themselves, the Church sometimes persecuted mystics for no other theological reason than that women encroached upon the authority of the priesthood. In one instance, the Church burned Marguerite Porete at the stake because she was a leader

in the early fourteenth-century mystical sect The Brethren of the Free Spirit. Ironically, the Church unwittingly continued to endorse her teachings after her death. Porete had written a book entitled *The Mirror of Simple Souls* that included mystic themes, such as a dialogue between Love and Reason about progressive states of grace and the soul's final union with God. The book's author, however, was mistakenly identified as a man. Porete's work circulated around Europe for centuries and was widely copied and translated into several languages before the author's true sex was discovered. Had the author been known from the outset to be a woman, the Church almost certainly would have collected and destroyed her writings.¹²

Despite the threats towards outspoken females, mysticism provided the one avenue of prestige open to religious women. The Church quietly encouraged mystics who agreed with traditional doctrine and condemned the growth of heretical sects. Women's interpretations of mystical experience therefore tended to express orthodox views and reaffirm Catholic teachings.¹³ The following passage describes the first revelation in a series of sixteen recorded by Julian of Norwich (1342-1416):

In this [moment] suddenly I saw the red blood trickle down...as it were in the time of His Passion when the Garland of thorns was pressed on his blessed head who was both God and Man...I conceived truly and mightily that it was Himself shewed it me...

*And in the same Shewing suddenly the Trinity fulfilled my heart most of joy. And so I understood it shall be in heaven without end to all that shall come there. For the Trinity is God: God is the Trinity...*¹⁴

Julian asserts her credibility by claiming that Christ himself granted her visionary experience. Furthermore, by agreeing with traditional doctrine, Julian precludes any accusations of heresy. Her account includes the familiar biblical symbolism of the crucifixion (the blood and the crown of thorns) and accepts the orthodox depictions of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, and the afterlife.

Julian is also careful to forestall any possible criticism that, as a female theologian, she may be overstepping her accepted bounds within the Church. Her writings repeatedly emphasize the value of humility, and Julian demonstrates that it is indeed a primarily feminine virtue by praising the Virgin Mary's example. Julian expressly denies that her special knowledge gives her religious authority over others. At one point she states simply, "Because of the Shewing I am not good but if I love God the better: and in as much as ye love God the better, it is more to you than me."¹⁵ Julian's humility prevented her mysticism from posing a threat to the Church; she remained within the standard boundaries of women's accepted roles.¹⁶ At the same time, however, her own statements of unworthiness as an author effectively link her with the figure of Mary. Thus, Julian's self-effacing comments allow her to simultaneously reaffirm her

subordinate role and masterfully transcend it.

Priests were often willing to confer special powers and responsibilities upon women like Julian who adhered to Church traditions. Although the women were not allowed to preach, many mystics gained loyal followers whom they instructed and reprimanded when necessary.¹⁷ Abbots and abbesses routinely asked mystics for aid, since the support of those who claimed direct contact with God strengthened ecclesiastical authority. Mystics did have some power over the priesthood, for on occasion they could—with implicit divine approval—publicly rebuke unreformed ministers. At times mystics successfully reversed the position of priest and receiver in the Eucharist ritual by developing the ability to experience mass in a mystical way. In several recorded cases, mystics distinguished between consecrated and unconsecrated hosts and corrected the priest whose timing did not coincide with the moment of transubstantiation.¹⁸ In addition, mystics became valuable sources of counsel, and their communities tended to regard them as spiritual leaders.¹⁹ A sense of respect and power grew out of the Church's sanction of the mystic as a role model and inspirational figure within both religious and lay communities.²⁰

For women connected to Western Christianity, whether they lived in cloisters or as anchorites, mysticism represented a partial escape from the patriarchal Church society. By the 1300s, experiencing visions had become a socially sanctioned activity that freed women from their traditional gender roles. More than the limited authority allotted by official religious policy, revelations identified mystics as genuine religious figures. Women's mystical experiences attracted attention that was otherwise difficult to earn in religious seclusion.²¹ Although the clergy remained generally successful in forbidding women to "invade the male preserves of theology and liturgy,"²² visions of God provided women with a public voice, influential to many in the context of medieval society. ❖

Endnotes

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Visions of God* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), xiv-xv.

² Dodds, E.R., *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety; Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

³ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1978), 36.

⁴ Armstrong, xvi-xviii.

⁵ Laurie A. Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 29.

⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 9.

⁷ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6-7.

⁸ Finke, 36.

⁹ Petroff, 7.

¹⁰ McNamara, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 3, *From*

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Muhammad to the Age of Reforms, trans. Alf Hilebeitel and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 205.

¹³ McNamara, 9.

¹⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Grace Warrick [book on-line] (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1901, accessed 4 March 2002); available from <http://www.ccel.org/j/julian/revelations/revelations.html>; Internet.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Barry Windeatt, *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181.

¹⁷ Finke, 34.

¹⁸ McNamara, 17-19.

¹⁹ Armstrong, 173.

²⁰ Finke, 29.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

Lady Angharad McIvar of Stirling is the daughter of a minor landlord in early 15th century Scotland.

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