

Feminized Christianity

AS MEN ABSENTED THEMSELVES from the Christian Churches and found their spiritual sustenance elsewhere, the churches were left with congregations that were predominately feminine. Moreover, the Christian life itself was seen more and more as properly feminine—men had to become feminine in order to be good Christians—notwithstanding that the Christianity of the New Testament and patristic era saw the vocation of the Christian as masculine. The theology and spirituality whose pattern for following Christ was masculine was transformed when Christians began seeing their life-pattern as feminine. This feminized spirituality further identified the Church as the sphere of women (or of those men who were like women) and reinforced the male desire to keep a safe distance between themselves and a religion that threatened to emasculate them.

RECEPTIVITY AS CHRISTIAN

The Aristotelian analysis of masculinity and femininity provided medieval theologians with a philosophical explanation for the relative greater resistance men showed to Christianity, as well as a basis for the clerical cautions against women taking on masculine roles: If

a woman were to become masculine, she would lose her emptiness and her openness to the Spirit. This Aristotelianism continues as the received, “traditional” explanation of the roles of men and women in Christianity. Karl Barth, accepting the Aristotelian formulation of masculinity as initiative and femininity as reception, stated: “As a living member of the church, man and all other superiors and subordinates in the community have no other option but to follow the example of women, occupying in relation to Jesus Christ the precise position which she must occupy and maintain in relation to man.”¹ Manfred Hauke says of the Church as bride: “In receiving from Christ and cooperating with him. . . . Christian tradition gives precedence to the feminine for the purposes of representing the position of mankind before God (which is also definitive for males),”² and that “in relation to God, the soul is receptive, feminine.”³ F. X. Arnold has an explanation for “the special inclination which woman has for religion”—“the truly feminine, the will to surrender, the readiness to be receptive.”⁴ The essential element in a religious attitude is a “passive receptivity,” because “in this readiness for self-sacrifice and in this cooperation of the creature, all that is truly religious in humanity is revealed.”⁵ Of Mary, George T. Montague says, “she is response and instrument.”⁶ Peter Toon writes “it is femininity rather than masculinity which symbolizes the right attitude of the whole person before God” because God wants from both men and women “a feminine response—that of humble reception of his initiative of grace and ready and willing submission to his gracious and perfect will.”⁷ Femininity is obedience, and active, assertive masculinity is an obstacle to grace. This notion has been such a commonplace that few questioned it before modern feminism.

Mary’s obedience to Christ, not Christ’s obedience to the Father (from which Mary’s obedience draws its whole meaning), takes on a new prominence as a model for Christians. The early Dominicans attempted to preserve the peace of the community by softening rough masculine aggressiveness. The common good was founded “most of all on the monks’ attempts to model their own orientation to the masculine Christ according to Mary’s example of yielding, willing acquiescence.”⁸ St. Catherine of Siena heavily influenced the

medieval Dominican Giovanni Dominici. He was characterized by “a life-long identification with women’s viewpoints: he was exceptionally close to his mother and most of his recorded spiritual counsel was written for nuns or laywomen.”⁹ St. Dominic’s warnings had not been heeded, and we see a man dissatisfied with his own masculinity, who wants to become, in a spiritual sense, a woman.

Masculinity in this view is an obstacle to union with God. The logical consequence is that Christian men must renounce their masculinity. A modern Dominican, Brother Antoninus, wrote:

*Annul in me my manhood, Lord, and make
Me women-sexed and weak,
If by that total transformation
I might know Thee more.
What is the worth of my own sex
That the bold possessive instinct
Should but shoulder Thee aside?
What uselessness is housed in my loins,
To drive, drive, the rampant pride of life,
When what is needful is hushed acquiescence?
“The soul is feminine to God.”¹⁰*

Juli Loesch Wiley disagrees with the feminist claim that women have been kept from full participation in Christianity: “It would be closer to the truth to say, however, that it is *only* women who are admitted to the Christian mysteries. You see, any man who would participate must first become, symbolically, ‘woman.’ This is because, in traditional Christian terms, *all* souls are feminine.”¹¹ In this tradition, which dates substantially from the twelfth century, the masculine humanity of Christ is irrelevant as an example for Christians. The feminine, obedient, responsive soul of Mary is the true model.

CONSEQUENCES OF BRIDAL MYSTICISM

Bridal mysticism did not disappear in the Reformation.¹² Edward Pearse follows Bernard: “God the Father gives Christ unto the Soul, and the Soul unto Christ; he gives Christ for an Head and Husband

to the Soul, and he gives the Soul for a Bride or Spouse to Christ.”¹³ Puritan sermons used the dominant metaphor of the Christian as the Bride of Christ and the relationship between Christ and the Christian as that of a man and a woman. Cotton Mather, addressing the Puritans of the late seventeenth century, spoke of God’s approach to the soul “under the Notion of a Marriage,”¹⁴ applying passages from Scripture that refer to the church as bride to the individual Christian. Mather, while recognizing that the mystical marriage first referred to the Church, applied it also to each Christian: “Our SAVIOR does *Marry* Himself unto the *Church* in general, But He does also *Marry* Himself to every *Individual Believer*.”¹⁵ The Puritan Thomas Shepard stated that “all church members are and must be visible saints . . . virgins espoused to Christ.”¹⁶

In the following century the Puritan Foxcroft in a funeral sermon spoke of the grave as a happy place in which “the Saints shall be impregnated” and from which they would arise “as some happy Bride from her Bed of Perfumes, call’d up to meet her royal Bridegroom.”¹⁷ The sweetness of Pietism, the Protestant version of the Baroque spirituality of the Counter-Reformation, has roots in bridal mysticism. Thomas Hooker preached that “Every true believer . . . is so joined unto the Lord, that he becomes one spirit; as the adulterer and the adultresse is one flesh. . . . That which makes the love of a husband increase toward his wife is this, Hee is satisfied with her breasts at all times, and then hee comes to be ravished with her love . . . so the will chuseth Christ, and it is fully satisfied with him. . . . I say this is a total union, the whole nature of the Saviour, and the whole nature of a believer are knit together; the bond of matrimony knits these two together, . . . we feed upon Christ, and grow upon Christ, and are married to Christ.”¹⁸ Hooker carries forward into New England Protestantism the central ideas of medieval mysticism: the total union of God and the soul, a union best expressed by the erotic imagery of marriage and the assimilation of eating.

Edward Taylor used bridal imagery throughout his meditations: “I then shall be thy Bride Espoused by thee/And thou my Bridegroom Deare Espouse shall bee.”¹⁹ The Christian must feel raptures toward his Savior, because “who/Can prove his marriage knot

to Christ in's heart/That doth not finde such ardent flames oreflow?"²⁰ Taylor addresses his Lover, "Thy Pidgen Eyes dart piercing, beames on Love/Thy Cherry Cheeks sende Charms out of Loves Coast,/Thy Lilly Lips drop Myrrh down from above."²¹ Erotic and even sexual metaphors for the relationship of Christ and the soul are used extensively by Puritan writers.²² Amanda Porterfield notes of Taylor and his religious culture that "God was dominatingly male in the literature and consciousness of Puritans, and in his intimate spirituality, Taylor assumed a complementary feminine stance toward God."²³

Jonathan Edwards, in eighteenth-century America, preached to young women of Christ, who "will be your lover, yea, he will be your glorious bridegroom. You are invited this day to the marriage feast of the king's son, not only as a guest, but as a bride." He pleads with women to "let him have your love who is fairer than the sons of men and is the most excellent, lovely, and honorable lover."²⁴ Wesley continued this imagery in *Jesus Lover of My Soul*. Catholic sentimental hymnology of the nineteenth century had a communion hymn, *O Lord I am not Worthy*, that referred to Jesus as the "bridegroom of my soul." Promise Keepers, a movement that is trying to bring men back into church life, has inherited this language. Its founder, Bill McCartney, claims that "we were created to be in a love affair with Jesus" and "Scripture tells us the *only* way to please God is to be passionately in love with Jesus Christ."²⁵ Evangelical Protestantism, despite its efforts to recruit men, is hampered by a tradition that not only emphasizes verbal expressions of emotion, but highly feminine emotions at that.

Alphonsus Ligouri in *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ* claims that "a virgin who consecrated herself to Jesus Christ becomes his spouse," for other Christians he is only "master, pastor, or father."²⁶ The original biblical image of the Church as the Spouse is almost forgotten, although Juan Gonzalez Arintero admits "The Church...is normally the *Bride* par excellence...the title of Bride is also to be applied to all just souls."²⁷ But Alberto Calunga justifies the modern individualist interpretation: "[I]n the Old Testament Jehovah's relations with Israel began by his relations with the nation, but gradually

these became more individual; His dealings are with souls. . . .These are then the true brides of Christ.”²⁸ This low view of the Church is more associated with American evangelicalism than Spanish Catholicism, but the reason for the popularity of St. Bernard among evangelicals should now be clear. Arintero says the highest title of Jesus is not Lord or brother (the ones used by St. Paul) but “Spouse.”²⁹ He gives a largely individualist interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, in which he finds the mystical progress of the individual soul.

The soul continues to be described by theologians as primarily feminine because it is bridal and receptive to God.³⁰ The deepest relationship between God and the Christian is therefore bridal and feminine. Hauke claims that “every Christian, of course, stands as a receiver before God and thus fulfills the bridal role.”³¹ Therefore, it is not unexpected that “women are more religious than men”³² and that the majority of Church members are women. Since she is feminine and receptive, Mary is “the first and exemplary Christian.”³³ Since he is masculine, Christ is apparently less suitable as a model for Christians. This implication, which Hauke does not articulate, may be the source of Protestant discomfort with Catholic Mariology.

The transfer of the role of bride from the community to the soul has helped bring about the pious individualism that has dissolved ecclesiastical community in the West. The Church is the bride and the object of the bridegroom’s love, and individuals are the objects of that love insofar as they are members or potential members of the society of the redeemed. The Church should yearn for the presence of her bridegroom, who consoles her and makes her fruitful in good works and in new children. This imagery was natural to the Fathers, but has been lost. Instead the individual is felt to be the center of God’s affections. For Latin Christians, the Church becomes a merely juridical community whose structures are often obstacles to real interior piety. For Protestants, the juridical structure itself largely disappears into voluntary denominationalism, and the only real concern of Christianity is “Jesus and me.”

For women there are many pitfalls. They may feel all too com-

fortable with bridal imagery, and the love they feel for Christ may be simply transferred from an earthly lover. Even worse, the combination of eroticism and the pain of the cross may produce what sounds like masochism and repel those who have an aversion to overtones of perverted sexuality.³⁴ The combination of bridal imagery with mistaken ideas of femininity forces Christian women to assume an attitude which is not really feminine and eventually provokes rebellion. Women are told they have a special obligation to obey a male clergy lest they be unfeminine and that their fulfillment as Christians should be a rapturous love affair with Christ.

For men the consequences have been disastrous. Bridal language used to describe a Christian's relationship with God has homosexual overtones to many men, unless they engage in mental gymnastics and try to think of themselves as women. "If monks wished to play the starring role in this love story," Barbara Newman says, "they had to adopt a feminine persona—as many did—to pursue a heterosexual love affair with their God."³⁵ But few boys like to be named Sue. Since normal men reject both homosexuality and femininity as incompatible with the masculinity for which they are always striving, bridal mysticism and the metaphors and attitudes to which it gave rise have placed a major obstacle to men's participation in the Church. Even among fundamentalists who have a balance of men and women in their congregations, women, not men, have religious experiences.³⁶ What is lacking in the West is a language of intimacy that expresses the closeness that men feel with men.

MATERNAL MYSTICISM

A woman relates erotically to a man not only as a husband and lover but also as a son and child. If the Christian should be feminine, as the Aristotelians maintained, he (or much more often, she) can relate as a mother to Christ. From this comes the devotion to the Christ child, and the importance of Christmas, which long ago eclipsed Easter as the greatest Christian feast in the Western church. The relationship of the Christian to the Christ child has a strong element of maternal eros. Amadeus of Lausanne described that "the

little Jesus leaned on his mother's breast, and in her virgin lap reposed the eternal rest of the saints in heaven. Sometimes, his head supported on one or another of his mother's arms, he gazed with tranquil air on her whom the very angels long to look on, and, babbling gently, called that mother whom every spirit calls upon in need. She meanwhile, filled with the Holy Spirit, held her son breast to breast and pressed his face to hers. Sometimes she kissed his hands and arms and with a mother's freedom stole sweet kisses from his sacred lips."³⁷

Gertrude had a vision of Christ at Christmas: "I took you out of your crib, a tender babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes. I pressed you to my heart where I gathered up onto a bundle of myrrh lying between my breasts all the bitterness of your childish needs."³⁸ Later Mary gives Gertrude the infant, "a darling little child who made every effort to embrace me."³⁹ This is so charming that any criticism of it looks morose and boorish. But when Gertrude sees Mary swaddling the infant, Gertrude asks "to be swaddled with you, so as not to be separated, even by a linen cloth, from him whose embraces and kisses are sweeter by far than a cup of honey."⁴⁰ The child frequently appeared to cloistered religious: "Dominican nuns typically saw the infant Jesus as a child with whom they played, joked, and kissed, who accompanied them when they were ill or dying, and for whom they cared in turn during Advent."⁴¹

This devotion took some odd turns. Many nuns in medieval convents had sacred dolls.⁴² Margaret Ebner writes of one of hers: "I was sent a lovely statue from Vienna—Jesus in the crib, attended by four golden angels. One night I had a revelation in which I saw him in lively animation playing in the crib. I asked Him, 'Why don't you behave and be quiet and let me sleep?' . . . I said, 'Kiss me, and I will forget that you have awakened me.' Then He fell upon me with His little arms and embraced me and kissed me."⁴³ Of another doll, Margaret says "I took the statue of the Child and pressed it against my naked heart as strongly as I could. At that I felt the movement of His mouth on my naked heart."⁴⁴ The problem is not the expression of suppressed maternal instincts, when the nuns cared for the dolls as if they were babies, or the occasional eroticism, when nuns felt the

child kissing their breasts or when they kissed the foreskin,⁴⁵ but the attitude inculcated: that the only way or at least the best way to be a Christian was to relate to Christ as a woman relates to him.

JESUS AS MOTHER

Caroline Bynum has, through her thorough study of the medieval devotion to Jesus as mother, restored an awareness of this forgotten devotion.⁴⁶ Its most famous exponent was Julian of Norwich. For Julian, this Motherhood is dependent upon the quasi-identification of God and the Church, our Mother: “our Mother, holy Church that is Christ Jesus.”⁴⁷ The love of a mother is one of pity, and it is the pity of God that led him to form the Church so that he could be a mother to his creatures: “A mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our precious Mother, Jesus, can feed us with Himself. He does most courteously and most tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.”⁴⁸

The devotion to Jesus as mother was based on a sound intuition about the nature of masculinity. In the pattern of masculine development, a man separated himself from the feminine so that ultimately he could achieve the degree of self-giving that a woman achieves in bearing and nursing a child. Therefore, when a man reaches that stage of self-giving, he can be described in feminine terms, although he has reached that stage in a way proper to masculine development.

This devotion focuses on the self-giving of Jesus, and it compares to the self-giving of a mother. The Church Fathers had compared the birth of the Church from the pierced side of Jesus to the birth of Eve from Adam’s side. If someone gives birth, he is like a mother. If he nourishes with his own body, he is also like a mother. Masculinity involves nurturing, but a nurturing achieved in a willingness to suffer and die. In his death Jesus nourished his people; he fed them with his crucified body. He was the pelican, which struck its breast and bled to feed its young. He was a mother, as Julian of Norwich said, feeding with his body. In the usual medieval taste for developing a metaphor into an extensive allegory, preachers devel-

oped the various ways in which Jesus was like a mother. This devotion died out, but was replaced by another one which also stressed the mother-like qualities of Jesus, the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

THE SACRED HEART

The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus flourished and has become one of the most popular in Catholicism. It too had medieval roots in the mysticism of love. The names associated with it in the Middle Ages are mostly women, St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde. For Gertrude, Christ himself, “my sweetest little Jesus,”⁴⁹ is the archer of eros, and his heart is the one we are familiar with from St. Valentine’s Day. Jesus tells Gertrude that he aims “arrows of love from the sweetness of my divine heart.”⁵⁰

In the sixteenth century, the devotion became more popular, and in the seventeenth century Margaret Mary Alacoque received revelations of the Sacred Heart, in which Jesus, “the Divine Spouse,”⁵¹ “showed me, if I am not mistaken, that He was the most beautiful, the wealthiest, the most powerful, the most perfect and the most accomplished among all lovers.”⁵² Her heart was aflame with love for him as his was for her. He unites her to him in his sufferings so that she can join with him in saving sinners. He shows her “a large cross . . . all covered with flowers” and tells her “Behold the bed of My most chaste spouses on which I shall make thee taste all the delights of My pure love.”⁵³ She desires to be united with him through frequent communion, and in praying before the Eucharist, “How made me repose for a long time upon His Sacred Breast, where he disclosed to me the marvels of His love and the inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart.”⁵⁴ Their union grows ever closer. One night, “if I mistake not, He kept me for two or three hours with my lips pressed to the Wound of His Sacred Heart.”⁵⁵ To point out the dubious eroticism in these visions is not to deny their validity. The scholastic adage, that whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver, applies here. When Christ appeared to Margaret Mary, he spoke French; she also understood him to speak the language of love, the language in which women mystics expected God to speak.

This sacred eroticism is also prominent in the visions of Josefa Menendez (1890-923). In her diary she says, "He drew me into his heart, and a stream of the precious blood escaping from it submerged me. 'For all that you give me,' he said, 'I give you my heart.' . . . 'My God, I am yours forever!'—And I went so far as to babble nonsense in my love. Then he answered: 'I, too, Josefa, love you to folly!'"⁵⁶ Josefa is so wedded to Jesus that her sufferings become redemptive; she becomes a Victim Soul. Like Thérèse of Lisieux, her prayers save sinners from hell.

Gabrielle Boussis (1874-1950) carried on an inner dialogue with Christ. He told her "I am the Ravisher. Don't struggle—and because you let yourself be caught, I will bring you into my secret garden among the flowers and the fruit. You will wear the wedding ring on your finger."⁵⁷ She lives in Christ and Christ lives in her: "I start my life on earth all over again with each one of you—my life wedded to yours—if only you choose to invite me."⁵⁸ In this wedding Christ and his bride interchange characteristics. She becomes a redeemer—and he becomes feminine. St. Catherine of Siena, in whose writings bridal mysticism is present but extremely subdued, says of a vision of Christ's heart: "She begins to feel the love of her own heart in his consummate and unspeakable love."⁵⁹ In almost all the depictions of the Sacred Heart, which became an iconographic theme at an unfortunate period for religious art, the nineteenth century, Jesus is soft, sometimes to the point of being effeminate.

The emphasis on the self disclosure of Jesus's emotions through his verbal revelations to the women mystics is itself feminine. Men disclose themselves through their actions, women through their words. Women have a greater awareness of and loquacity about their emotions; men tend to cultivate an insensitivity to them and find it difficult to talk about them. This emotional insensitivity is a form of self protection. If men have to undertake the dangerous tasks of society, a cultivation of emotions will interfere with their ability to carry out their tasks. For a man to talk freely and at length about his emotions sounds feminine, and that is what Jesus does in the visions in which he reveals his heart. Jesus in Scripture is much more reticent about his emotions; he reveals his anger, affection, and distress,

but he does not talk about them. The style of the Gospels is closer to Hemingway's or the Icelandic sagas' than the romance novelist's. The Gospels are spare, and we are largely left to deduce emotions from the facts.

The emotions that Jesus talks about in the visions of his Sacred Heart are also emotions more proper to women than to men. He reveals his distress at sin, the pain he feels because of the disruption of communion between sinners and God; he talks of his deep and tender affection for souls. What he does not talk about is his anger at Satan, the wrath of God which is also the fire of his holy love, or his comradeship with those fighting against evil, both of which are prominent in the Gospels and are masculine emotions.

The eroticism upon which the devotion to the Sacred Heart is built might have produced a masculine Jesus. But what seems to have happened is that women (in part) constructed an image of Jesus as they wished men were: sensitive, willing to reveal themselves in speech, always ready to talk about their relationship. Such men are irritating to other men and strike them as effeminate. The masculine objection is not to love, but to self-revelation through words rather than actions.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Most of all, the body of Christ in the Eucharist was the object of women's devotion. Juliana of Cornillon (1192-1258) called for the establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi. The observance of this feast grew out of the feminine piety of the city of Liège, a center of the Beguines, whom the clergy struggled to keep orthodox.⁶⁰ In 1208, Juliana had a dream in which she was called to propagate a new feast in the church, Corpus Christi. Urban IV, who was from Liège, saw the miracle of the bleeding host at Bolsena. The feast struck a responsive note, and was for centuries one of the most popular feasts of Latin Christianity. While the Eucharist had of course always been seen as spiritual food, there was a particularly feminine tone to this devotion because of women's close involvement in the preparation of food and because in nursing a woman becomes food for an

infant.⁶¹ Jesus, who feeds the faithful upon his body and blood, is on this view a feminine figure.

Women mystics lived upon nothing but the Eucharist. They saw a wounded man, or a baby, in the Eucharist.⁶² Despite the desire women had for frequent communion,⁶³ an eros that delighted in seeing replaced the eating of the body and blood. Vision became the primary means of contact with the Eucharist, as the Beatific Vision was the culmination of human life in both the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas and the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. From this period comes the custom of elevating the host and of adoration of the host in a monstrance. Communion became less frequent, as the emphasis was placed on seeing the host. The Mass was viewed as a propitiatory sacrifice offered for the living and the dead, but the act of eating essential to the completion of the sacrifice was neglected.

Perhaps men neglected communion because for men the union with Christ's body achieved in the Eucharist had taken on uncomfortably erotic overtones. In a passage from Hadewijch we can see the erotic element in eucharistic devotion, as well as the relationship of eroticism to *Wesenmystik*:

[Christ] gave himself to me in the shape of the sacrament. . . . After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported. And then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to naught and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.⁶⁴

Hadewijch is not exceptional. Miri Rubin noticed similar attitudes in other mystics: "The strong erotic tones which suffused the descriptions attributed to these women of their reception and incorporation of Christ into their bodies, drew from a long standing tradition of mystical imagery, but was also a new and direct erotic idiom of longing."⁶⁵

AFFECTIVE SPIRITUALITY AND CHANGES IN DOCTRINE

Christianity, even in its forms that emphasize authority, has always had difficulty in dealing with spiritualities that may contain distortions. The foundational dogmas of Christianity were clarified in the intellectual conflicts of the patristic period, conflicts almost entirely involving men, and the analytic, logical approach has since been used by Church authorities in their attempt to evaluate spiritualities. Yet spiritualities are more systems of metaphors than deductions of syllogisms, and logic is not adequate to deal with them. Catholic authorities knew there was something exaggerated in the spiritualities of many medieval mystics, of Quietists, and of Jansenists. But they attempted to find false, heretical statements that encapsulated the errors, a very difficult project, because feelings rather than thought are at the heart of the matter. Indeed, no church has developed procedures for a fair evaluation of spiritualities. Differences among Protestants usually lead to the foundation of new denominations; Catholics used the clumsy instrument of the Inquisition and now discipline purveyors of false spirituality only if they fall into explicitly doctrinal errors.

As the Church became more and more feminized, the predominance of feminine emotions encouraged both mystics and the theologians who counseled them to attempt a subtle change in Christianity to make it conform more to the desires of the feminine heart. A change of emphasis here, a neglect of inconvenient Scripture there, and soon a religion takes a shape that, though difficult to distinguish from the Christianity of the Gospels, somehow has a quite different effect. Pantheism and universalism, for instance, are the heretical exaggerations of feminine attitudes, but how far can one go in stressing the immanence of God and his will to save before Christianity is left behind? When does bridal receptivity become passivity, and when does passivity become Quietism? There have been differences of opinion over where to draw the line. The authorities win in the textbooks, but the mystics have often won the battle for popular influence.

THE UNITY OF THE SOUL AND GOD

Since mystics were more often women, they stressed in their visions the feminine theme of unity. Peter Dinzelbacher notes that “from the sixth to the middle of the twelfth centuries visionary experiences was almost completely a masculine matter; whereas since the thirteenth century this charismatic gift predominantly belongs to women.”⁶⁶ *Wesenmystik* (Being-Mysticism), which began among women, stressed the unity of the soul and God rather than the difference or distinction between them and was taught by the Dominican theologians Johannes Tauler, Meister Eckert, and Henry Suso, who all explained and justified the mysticism of the religious women they were directing.⁶⁷

Eckert and Tauler, because they sought to understand, elucidate, and guide the mystical experiences of Christians who were all women, began to use language that caused acute discomfort in Rome. While these Dominicans were not heretics, they taught two things in particular which sounded offensive to pious ears, at least if those ears were masculine. The first was their search for a Godhead beyond the Trinitarian God, an undifferentiated unity from which all things, including Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, came and into which they would return. The second was the identity of the soul and God. These Dominicans used the theology of exemplarism derived from pseudo-Denys, and pointed out that the ideas of all things in the mind of God, the exemplars of existing things, were themselves identical with the divine essence. The Dominicans were probably seeking a philosophical ground for the entirely orthodox doctrine of deification in this second theme, the infinitely close and transforming unity of God and man, but they used language which made the union of the soul and God sound more like a numerical identity. Pantheism is the path along which feminine religious experience easily proceeds. The Beguines and Beghards throughout the fourteenth century evinced a “latent pantheism” that “went too far in identifying the mystic with God.”⁶⁸ The first doctrine, the Godhead behind God, is of even more dubious orthodoxy, and has been revived by those who wish to escape a personal God, since it is difficult

for us to imagine a person who is not either masculine or feminine, and it is difficult to maintain that the Scriptures put forth a feminine image of God.

From the feminine religious experience of unity Quietism is an easy development. Quietism, according to its enemies prevalent among the Beguines, declared that man's highest perfection consists in a sort of psychical self-annihilation and a subsequent absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence. From this comes Illuminism, the doctrine that the perfected soul, since it is God, or so closely united with him as to be indistinguishable from him, cannot sin. Such implications made Church authorities very uneasy, especially as the antinomianism lurking in such doctrines was also directed against secular authority.

PURGATORY

Purgatory was the keystone of medieval Catholicism. Although it has patristic roots, it was not developed in the first millennium and was never developed in the East, although the universal practice of praying for the dead presupposes something like purgatory. As LeGoff has documented, ideas about purgatory were elaborated only in the Middle Ages, although it was the people, and not the hierarchy, that provided the impetus for the attention to purgatory.⁶⁹ The hierarchy attempted to integrate this belief into the sacramental practices of the church. Mass could be offered for the dead. Endowments provided numerous benefices for priests, whose sole purpose was to pray for the dead. Indulgences could be applied to the dead, and indulgences could also provide a steady income for the church.

The impetus for purgatory was not only popular, it was specifically feminine. Barbara Newman says that "of all Catholic doctrines, none has been more deeply shaped by female piety than the notion of purgatory, which filled an overwhelming place in the visions, devotions, and works of charity undertaken by religious women."⁷⁰ Margaret Ebner had a great devotion to the Poor Souls and held continual converse with them.⁷¹ The important role that purgatory played in the spiritual life of women is rooted in the femi-

nine sense of connectedness, which causes women to seek to aid others even beyond the barrier of death and also causes them to be reluctant to admit that any are lost. The doctrine of purgatory is the orthodox (at least from a Catholic point of view) version of the Universalism that was rejected, in theory if not in practice, by the historic churches. As it is obvious that most Christians are sinners, some doubt must remain about their fate after death. Purgatory explained how salvation was possible for those who obviously had a lot to answer for in this world.

UNIVERSALISM

Julian of Norwich is but one Western visionary who expresses a hope for universal salvation, since she is told by Christ that “All things shall be well,” and “you yourself shall see that all manner of things shall be well.”⁷² Julian marvels at this word of Christ’s, because she knows of the eternal damnation of the demons and unrepentant sinners, but she is reassured by Christ that “what is impossible to you is not impossible to Me; I shall save My word in all things and I shall make all things well.”⁷³ Julian has become the favorite mystic of Christian feminists.

Universalism was not in favor among orthodox clerics, but women felt its attraction. Gertrude of Helfta, like Isaac of Nineveh, was moved by compassion for all creatures: “When she saw little birds or other animals suffering from hunger or thirst or cold, she was moved to pity for the works of her Lord.”⁷⁴ She feels this way because she is “like a bride who knows all the secrets of her spouse, and who, after living a long time with him, knows how to interpret his wishes.” She is so united with God that her “soul, all on fire with divine charity, became herself charity, desiring nothing but that all might be saved.”⁷⁵ Gertrude in a way becomes God; her love is so great “she did not hesitate to play the part of an equal with God, the Lord God of the universe.”⁷⁶ Those who did not deny the existence of hell claimed that hell itself was a form of mercy to those who rejected God. Catherine of Genoa said “the suffering of the damned is not limitless, for God’s sweet goodness sends his rays there, even

in hell.”⁷⁷ He does this by not giving men what they deserve: “Even in hell the soul does not suffer as much as it deserves.”⁷⁸ Yet merely limiting the pains of hell was not sufficient for women mystics; they wanted to empty it of its denizens.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is a theologian noted for his orthodoxy, and is a favorite theologian of Pope John Paul II, who named him a cardinal just before von Balthasar’s death. Yet von Balthasar created a minor controversy with his book *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?*⁷⁹ He was influenced by the Swiss mystic Adrienne von Speyr, and in his chapter “Testimonies”⁸⁰ relies heavily on women mystics, especially of the Middle Ages. He quotes Mechtilde of Hakeborn, who influenced Thérèse of Lisieux. Mechtilde hears Jesus saying of Judas: “At this kiss, my heart felt such love through and through that, had he only repented, I would have won his soul as bride by virtue of this kiss.”⁸¹ In this sentence we see many of the themes of the mystics: the eros of the soul and Christ, the Sacred Heart, the hope for universal salvation, including even Judas. The women mystics were willing to undergo any suffering, to receive the stigmata, to go to hell, in order to save sinners. Von Balthasar notes that these experiences “stem from a fervent love of the Cross, from a wish to suffer together with Jesus for the redemption of mankind, and therefore gain a small share, in a manner pleasing to God, in Jesus’ godforsakenness.”⁸² Von Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday, in which the soul of Christ descends among the lost so that he may be also with them, and his consequent hope for universal salvation have their roots in the women mystics of medieval and postmedieval Western Catholicism.

THE RELIGION OF THE HEART

The religion of the heart flourished in both Protestantism and Catholicism, and the heart has been a feminine one. Herbert Moller characterized the popular religious atmosphere in European Christianity in early modern times.

An analysis of the spiritual and emotional content of this mysticism reveals the invasion of feminine feelings into the sphere

of religion—love of Christ as the “bridegroom” of the feminine soul being the center of this mystical cult. It took various shapes such as quietism, the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the cult of the Infancy, or a visionary intercourse with the Deity. The spiritual leadership of this religious and literary movement was assumed by men and women alike; the broad following, however, drew its strength in overwhelming numbers from among the feminine population. Mysticism was not restricted to any denomination. It pervaded Catholic Europe; it came to be the driving force of Protestant pietism; it flourished in numerous sects and conventicles; the “sacred poets” of seventeenth-century England addressed some of their deepest writings to women; finally is appeared, if only as a secondary trait, in Quakerism.⁸³

This spirituality had its roots in the Middle Ages and its branches are still bearing fruit in our time.

This complex of tendencies—bridal mysticism, being mysticism, Universalism—has heavily influenced popular Catholicism. Anne Catherine Emmerich, a Catholic mystic who lived during the Napoleonic Wars and whose writings still enjoy wide popularity, said “I very often saw blood flowing from the cross on the Sacred Host; I saw it distinctly. Sometimes Our Lord, in the form of an Infant, appeared like a lightning-flash in the Sacred Host. At the moment of communicating, I used to see my Saviour like a bridegroom standing by me and, when I had received He disappeared, leaving me filled with a sweet sense of His presence. He pervades the whole soul of the communicant just as sugar is dissolved in water, and the union between the soul and Jesus is always in proportion to the soul’s desire to receive Him.”⁸⁴ Emmerich also has difficulties with the lack of universal salvation. One of her counselors said of her

she had . . . the habit of disputing with God on two points: that he did not convert all the big sinners, and that he punished the impenitent with everlasting pains. She told Him that she could not see how He could act thus, so contrary to His nature, which is goodness itself, as it would be easy for him to convert sinners since all are in His hand. She reminded Him of all that He and

His Son had done for them; of the latter's having shed His blood and given His life for them upon the cross; and His own word and promises of mercy contained in the Scriptures. She asked him with holy boldness, how could He expect men to keep their word, He did not keep His?⁸⁵

Emmerich was told she had gone too far, and she accepted the existence of hell, albeit unwillingly.

In Emmerich, all the tendencies of medieval mysticism continue, and we can also see in her relationship to the clergy the Aristotelian idea of the masculine as initiatory or governing and the feminine as responsive. She emphasized the importance of obedience to the lawfully constituted clergy, especially amidst the chaos of the Napoleonic wars. Obedience is of course a central Christian virtue: Christ became obedient unto death. For mystics obedience is especially necessary, lest they be led astray by their own desires or the suggestions of spirits other than the Holy Spirit. Yet the stress on feminine obedience presents us with the all too familiar picture of the modern church: a congregation of females being ordered around by male clergy. The presence of obedient, faithful men in the congregation, in proportion to their presence in the general population, would change the dynamics of obedience, and not create an atmosphere of subservient femininity in the church. Much of the contempt in which patriarchy is held by religious feminists arises from this peculiar demographic situation, in which a male clergy seems to be inculcating obedience in a female congregation so as to be served and not to serve.

This perhaps overheated world of mysticism is not a matter of the past in the Catholic Church. For decades, teenage seers at Medjugorje have received regular messages from Mary. Despite the disapproval of the local bishop of Mostar and the lack of enthusiasm in Rome, Medjugorje has become one of the largest pilgrimage centers in the world. It has also spawned numerous other miracles. Marina Warner recounts the events surrounding a statue of the bleeding Madonna in Italy: "Besides the priest, I could count only six men in the church, which must seat around two hundred. . . . Many of the women were brown, crooked, and gnarled, like cruel

Renaissance allegories of Vanity. . . . Later, during the rosary, a plaster statue of Our Lady of Fatima was passed around the congregation; each person, when her turn came to hold it, recited the first versicle of the Hail Mary. A younger woman whispered to me, ‘It’s so beautiful to cradle the Madonna as if she were a baby in your arms! Oh, you must do it!’⁸⁶ We have entered the familiar world of medieval affective devotion. A priest involved in the affair is devoted to Luisa Piccarreta, who “survived on nothing but Communion wafers for sixty-five years.”⁸⁷ It is still a world of women, and is still tinted with maternal eroticism (this time toward Mary). Such devotion is perhaps better than cold rationalism, but the unbalanced atmosphere is both a cause and result of the lack of men in the life of the church.

LANGUAGE

Walter Ong, having been formed in a masculine, Jesuit, clerical milieu does not seem to be aware of how feminized Christianity had become even before the 1960s, but he saw a rapid shift in the Catholic Church in the 1960s toward even greater feminization. He identified masculinity with struggle, the “agonic.” The struggle with falsehood, for instance, has been, if not abandoned, at least toned down: “Down through Pius IX’s Syllabus of modern error (1867) a conspicuously agonistic stance has commonly marked conciliar and papal doctrinal pronouncements. Indeed it has been a commonplace of theology that the Church needs heretics (adversaries) to sharpen its understanding of the truth it possesses. . . . But the agonistic can be a central or a peripheral concern: of late, it has moved from the center to the periphery. The tone of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), while often forthright and firm, lacks the agonistic edge typical of many earlier church pronouncements.”⁸⁸ The preferred model of church life is irenic, or conciliatory, or waffling; clarity is *declassé*. Ong detects this change in the liturgy:

A statistically analytic recent study . . . has compared the sixteenth-century *Catechism of the Council of Trent* and *A New Cat-*

echism: Catholic Faith for Adults, the widely-used post-Vatican II “Dutch Catechism,” and found the former distinctively polemic in presentation of Catholic doctrine in high contrast to the less agonistic approach of the latter. The old *Breviarum romanum* had included in the round of its weekly readings all of the 150 psalms: the new *Liturgy of the Hours* (1971), which replaces the *Breviary*, omits three execrative psalms calling down God’s wrath on the psalmist’s enemies. . . . In similar nonagonistic style, instead of writing off the human city as inimical to the heavenly kingdom, the *Liturgy of the Hours* now prays, “may we work together to build up the earthly city, with our eyes fixed on the city which lasts forever” The duality is still there, but the intensely agonistic stage of consciousness has been superseded by another stage, and existence is not longer defined so utterly by polemic.⁸⁹

The contrasts of Christianity, grace and sin, life and death, have been toned down with a considerable loss of emotional power. Without this power, the popular appeal of the liturgy has declined (even with a more accessible language) and church attendance has plummeted.

The liturgical use of language can achieve emotional intensity in different ways. The Byzantine liturgy has an intensely emotional element deriving from the theological hymns of the Syriac church, in which the emotions of awe and wonder are evoked at the irruption of the divine into the human. The Latin liturgy achieved intensity in a different way. Building upon the biblical use of antithesis, the Latin liturgy evoked strong contrasts, of good and evil, of joy and misery, of hope and fear. The ICEL translators, as Ong noticed, systematically flattened these to the point that all emotional intensity is lost. The consequent emotional flatness is disappointing in what is supposed to be the central action of the visible universe, the Divine Liturgy in which the sacrificial self-communication of God is made present. The Anglican Elizabethan translation of the liturgy lasted for centuries with only modest revision because it stayed close to the rhetoric of the Roman Liturgy, especially in its use of contrasts and antithesis, and its rolling periods, clause piled upon clause to achieve

an effect of sublimity and climax. The ICEL translation, because of its use of short sentences and lack of antithesis, has lost the emotional quality of the Roman liturgy. The consequent vacuum attracts those who try to fill it by spontaneous additions but do not have the skill of the ancient authors. Two recent and public results of the feminization of the church have been the use of what is called “inclusive language,” and the use of women as priests, pastors, and ministers. If the church is composed mostly of women, women should be its rulers, according to modern democratic sentiment. The use of masculine terms to refer to Christians is also anachronistic: there are few men, and those that remain are often not very masculine.

Even the change from Latin to the vernacular was also a symptom of feminization, according to Ong. Latin had been a means of maintaining a Latin culture in the Roman Catholic clergy. A language restricted to men is common; it is a sign of masculine separation from the feminine world. After it became a learned language, Latin was learned almost exclusively by men. The system of education that used Latin and centered around Latin literature was centered around contest and disputation and was confined almost entirely to men. The disappearance of Latin was part of the demasculinization of the clergy. Ong notes that “within two years, 1967 and 1968, the School of Divinity of Saint Louis University (1) ceased using Latin as a method of instruction, (2) dropped the thesis method as a method of instruction, (3) dropped circles and disputations together with oral course examinations as integral parts of its program, and (4) admitted women students.”⁹⁰ Catholic life, including its liturgy, has given up the attitude that the Christian is separate from the world, which is his enemy.

THE TRINITY

The doctrine of the Trinity is undergoing a rapid transformation. The masculine names of the first two persons have offended feminists, and some churches (including an occasional Catholic priest) are starting to baptize in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. These names specify the actions of the godhead *ad*

extra, to the creation, while the point of the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is that the Christian is incorporated into the inner life of the Trinity. The Father is the Father of the Son, the Son the Son of the Father. The Spirit of Sonship comes upon the Son and constitutes him Son, and returns to the Father to acknowledge him as Father.

Some wish to preserve the scriptural names of Father and Son and still find a place for femininity inside the godhead. The Spirit, as we have seen, has an association with femininity, and therefore has been the recipient of the pronoun *she*. Even highly orthodox theologians are determined to make the Trinity feminine. The misidentification of femininity and receptivity provides the means. As David Schindler summarized Hans Urs von Balthasar's position, "The Father, as the begetting origin-without-origin, is primarily (supra-) masculine ([über-] männlich); the Son, as begotten and thus receptive (der Geschenlassende) is (supra-)feminine ([über-] weiblich); but then the Father and the Son, as jointly spirating the Spirit, are again (supra-)masculine; the Spirit, then is (supra-) feminine; finally, the Father, who allows himself to be conditioned in return *in* his begetting and spiriting, himself thereby has a (supra-) feminine dimension."⁹¹ It would seem that von Balthasar and Schindler would agree with feminists that the Spirit should be called *she*. Although they attempt to preserve the names of Father and Son, the feminine aspects of both persons would seem to at least allow Mother and Daughter as alternative names. If the Second Person is feminine within the Trinity because of her receptivity, and we are incorporated by baptism into the Trinity, we can rightfully call the First Person Mother and be daughters of God. Such is the result of the attempt to apply Aristotelian categories to Christianity.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S REACTIONS

If men of normal or pronounced masculinity see that religion has somehow made its professional male representatives, the clergy, less masculine, they will feel a strong desire to stay away from the church. David Martin alludes to the situation in which clergymen find themselves:

“There is the inevitable corollary that high female representation in church affects the self-image of the clergyman in a rather deleterious way.”⁹² It is not simply a matter of image. The only male group that is more feminine than the occupational group that includes the clergy (and artists and editors and journalists) in Terman and Miles’s survey is that of passive male homosexuals.⁹³

Feminism is multiform, but many strains are clearly incompatible with historic Christianity. In our time, theologians and church authorities adopt a tolerant attitude to feminist aberrations. Ironically, this may be because women are not taken seriously as moral agents; their errors are regarded as silly female notions that will pass. Nevertheless, feminism may be as much a challenge to Christianity as was Gnosticism (to which it bears a strong resemblance).

The mainline Protestant clergy is becoming a feminine profession.⁹⁴ In the Episcopal Church, since 1930 “the ratio of young male priests has dropped about 80 percent.”⁹⁵ Feminist theologians are unearthing vast amounts of literature from the medieval and post-medieval periods (only a small portion of which I have cited above) that provides a distinctly feminine twist to Christianity. The “traditional” position is weakened by its acceptance of the identification of femininity and receptivity. This error can lead to distortions even of Trinitarian theology. It also does not provide a sound basis for women to understand their own femininity and its place in Christianity. The rejection of a distorted Christianity by feminists has roots in the attempt to identify femininity with receptivity and obedience.⁹⁶

If the feminization of the Church continues, men will continue to seek their spiritual sustenance outside the churches, in false or inadequate religions, with highly damaging consequences for the church and society. Neither fascism nor criminal anarchy is conducive to Christian life. The inner life of the Church will also be weakened. The Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers will become more and more incomprehensible, and will be rewritten or ignored. Central Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity and the Atonement, are under severe attack, and may vanish from the popular

consciousness of Christians, to be replaced by a self-worship that cloaks itself in Christian language. A Dominican Prioress quotes approvingly the Statement of Philosophy from the journal *Women of Power*, which upholds “the honoring of women’s divinity.”⁹⁷ Women reject “the practice of self-sacrificial love”⁹⁸ in favor of “self-realization.”⁹⁹ Women reject obedience because they “are seeking a God with whom they can be one, not to whom they must be subject.”¹⁰⁰ Jesus’s atoning sacrifice vanishes and is replaced by “the vision that Jesus’ phantasy enkindled when he walked among us.”¹⁰¹ The Church will survive feminism as it survived gnosticism, but its life and missionary impulse will be severely weakened.

The Old Testament warns of the dangers of uxoriousness. Men, from Adam to the Jews of Nehemiah’s time, allowed their affection for women to persuade them to tolerate women’s importation of the worship of false gods into the life of the Chosen People. Not every woman did so; many were loyal like Judith and Esther, but enough worshipped false gods to bring disaster upon Israel. In the first millenium heresy came from men, not women. In the second millenium, although men continue to develop and revive heresies, women have been the sources of serious distortions of Christianity. Typology may provide a clue to understanding the Old Testament, and both Catholics and Protestants have seen events of the Old Testament as paralleled in the life of the Church. Typology requires discernment of spirits, but it appears that Christian leaders are following the example of Adam, and give free rein to those women who have listened to the serpent: “Ye shall be as gods.”