

WITH MY BODY I THEE WORSHIP  
EMBODIMENT THEOLOGY AND TRINITARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY  
IN THE WORKS OF FOUR MEDIEVAL WOMEN MYSTICS

by

LEE ANN PINGEL

(Under the Direction of William L. Power)

ABSTRACT

Although Christianity has always affirmed the goodness of creation, historically, the Church has had an ambivalent attitude toward the body, often denigrating it in favor of the spirit. Only recently has embodiment theology begun to reaffirm the importance of the body in a faith whose central tenet is the Incarnation of God in human flesh. However, although embodiment theology addresses human beings' creation in the image of God, little attention is paid to how humans might reflect in their bodies the image of a God who is triune. The twelfth-century visionary Hildegard of Bingen set out a framework that does suggest how humanity reflects the Trinity. This framework can then be expanded upon by examining the primary metaphors for God used by three other medieval women mystics: Julian of Norwich with God as Mother, Mechthild of Magdeburg with God as Lover, and Teresa of Avila with God as Friend.

INDEX WORDS: Embodiment theology, Trinitarian anthropology, Medieval, Women, Mystics, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Teresa of Avila

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LEE ANN PINGEL

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LEE ANN PINGEL

Major Professor:	William L. Power
Committee:	Carolyn Jones-Medine Jean E. Friedman

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
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*The body. What body? The uncharted body.  
The unexplored body.  
And how can one describe what is unexplored?  
Language contoured according to the lines of a map in which this territory is missing.  
The map creating the fiction that every possibility is drawn there.  
The uncharted never mentioned.  
And yet.  
Yet it is there in the borderlines, in cipher.*

—Susan Griffin, *The Eros of Everyday Life*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
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## CHAPTER

1	INTRODUCTION: The Call to Voice and Embodiment .....	1
2	EMBODYING THE TRINITY: Hildegard of Bingen .....	43
3	GODDE AS MOTHER: Julian of Norwich .....	62
4	GODDE AS LOVER: Mechthild of Magdeburg .....	78
5	GODDE AS FRIEND: Teresa of Avila .....	104
6	CONCLUSION: The Call to Prophecy and Wholeness .....	128
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....		143

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: The Call to Voice and Embodiment

*We are asking what it means that we as body-selves participate in the reality of Godde<sup>1</sup> and as body-selves reflect upon—theologize about—that reality. Why and how does the Word still become flesh? ... Why and how does our flesh become words about the Word?*

—James B. Nelson

*There are no dirty words anymore, they've been neutered, now they're only parts of speech; but I recall the feeling, puzzled, baffled, when I found out some words were dirty and the rest were clean. The bad ones in French are the religious ones, the worst ones in any language were what they were most afraid of and in English it was the body, that was even scarier than Godde.*

—Margaret Atwood

In twelfth-century Germany, a tiny girlchild of three receives a vision of incomparable light. These visions continue, often accompanied by illness, throughout her childhood, but not understanding them and fearing that her family and townspeople would react negatively to them, she tells no one. At age eight she is given into convent life, where she grows into adulthood, eventually becoming an abbess. She routinely experiences profound visions, and she is instructed by Godde to write and say what she had been taught in them, but out of humility she refuses. She is subsequently stricken with an illness that does not abate until she begins to write down the content and meaning of her visions. At that point she becomes well and devotes the next ten years to the writing of the first of many books.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwina Gately, in her book *A Warm Moist Salty Godde: Women Journeying toward Wisdom* (Source Books: 1993), relates running across this old spelling while visiting the Sisters of the Mission in New Zealand. Like Gately, I am delighted with this spelling, in that it suggests an encompassing of both masculinity and femininity. I use this spelling throughout and have taken the liberty of substituting it for the common spelling in quoted material.



A little girl in thirteenth-century Saxony receives her first “greeting from Godde” when she is eight years old, and these divine messages continue daily from that point on. When she comes of age she leaves home and family to begin a new life in religious community in a different city. Shortly after arriving, she becomes severely ill. Over the next fourteen years, her visions intensify, and Godde instructs her to write them down, which she does.

A young woman in fourteenth-century England receives, as an answer to prayer, an illness so severe that she and everyone around her believe her to be at the point of death. During the debilitating sickness, she receives a series of sixteen visions centered around an intense experience of the passion of Jesus. When the visions cease, her illness leaves her. She immediately records the visions, then spends the next twenty years in seclusion, thinking about and meditating on the revelations. She then writes a longer, more detailed, and intricately thoughtful second version of her book.

In sixteenth-century Spain, a vibrant teenager decides to enter a convent in order to escape what she views as the danger and drudgery of married life. However, woefully conflicted over whether her vocation is genuine, she despairs and becomes so ill that eventually she falls into a death-like coma for four days, after which is paralyzed for eight months. The paralysis gradually leaves her, but over two years pass before she is able to walk. She re-enters the convent, has an intense conversion experience, and devotes herself to contemplative prayer, which leads to many ecstatic mystical experiences. She then goes on to write an autobiography and a book of guidance and instruction in the spiritual life.

There seems to be a pattern here.

These stories belong, in sequence, to Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210?–1297?), Julian of Norwich (1342–1416?), and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582). Nearly all of these women mystics seed their writings with denigrations of their sex, intellect, understanding, state of grace, and ability to communicate, which at face value seem to indicate an utter lack of self-worth.<sup>2</sup> Such belittlements were, in part, truly rooted in pious humility, but they were also designed to deflect the criticism sure to greet any assertion of themselves as teachers and writers. All of the women lived in cultures that observed an “almost universal proscription against women speaking outside of the personal context,” and it was frequently the case that what these women had to say was in conflict with Catholic doctrine or was otherwise critical of the Church and its leaders. None of these women was condemned, but it did happen that women mystics were executed, so they had to be extremely careful not to run afoul of the religious authorities.<sup>3</sup> Mechthild and Teresa were in particular danger of their lives. Mechthild’s book was threatened with burning, and near the end of her life she was forced to leave her ministry with the Beguines in Magdeburg to take refuge in a convent in Helfta.<sup>4</sup> Teresa lived and worked under the close scrutiny of the Inquisition and wrote her autobiography to comply with a command that she clarify her beliefs so that the Inquisitors might determine whether they were heretical. Teresa wrote, “without doubt I fear those who have such great fear of the devil more than I do the devil himself” (quoted in Flinders, 157).

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<sup>2</sup> I say “nearly all” because Julian did so in her first book, known as the Short Text: “But Godde forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not what I mean, nor did I ever mean it; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak, and frail” (Short Text, 10–11). However, she removed the disclaimer in the second book, or Long Text.

<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Porete, for example, was burned at the stake for her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, in the late 1200s.

<sup>4</sup> Mechthild's book was not burned, but it was lost until 1860.

Regardless, Teresa and the others show a great deal of confidence in their words and work. Mechthild, for example, opened her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, with the proclamation that “One should receive this book eagerly, for it is Godde himself who speaks the words” (39). Julian regarded the truth contained in her revelations as comparable to that of Scripture. Such is their trust of themselves—of themselves in Godde—that they cannot *not* write; moreover, they feel compelled to share their knowledge for the benefit of their fellow Christians and the wider world. These women, then, traverse a period of illness that is inextricably bound up with an encounter with Godde, and emerge with a strong public voice and a sense of moral agency. That voice and agency are expressed in a theology, as I will show, with an embodied epistemology. That is, their understanding of our relationship to self, Godde, and other is foundationally relational and takes place in and through our bodies. But how, exactly, did they arrive at that place of comfort and confidence? We can’t know for certain, but we can make some guesses based not only on what they have told us themselves about their experiences but also on what we know of our own experiences as women. I turn first to the development of voice and moral agency.

### **Developing Voice and Moral Agency: Theories of Women’s Difference**

#### *Women’s “Different Voice”*

Psychologist Carol Gilligan's work arose out of her frustration with developmental theorists whose work, based solely on the study of men and boys, was regarded as universally true. By “implicitly adopting the male life as the norm,” some of the most important work in developmental psychology assumed it possible “to fashion women out of a masculine cloth” (Gilligan, 6). Thus, Gilligan takes exception to prevailing theories of moral development in children, particularly as illustrated by the work of noted theorist Lawrence Kohlberg.

Kohlberg produced a well-known six-point scale to assess the level of a person's moral development. At level one, a person behaves morally to avoid punishment; stage two involves reciprocity; at stage three a person behaves morally to win praise from others; stage four is a law and order orientation; stage five a social contractarian orientation; and at stage six a person behaves according to a universal, but internal, moral imperative. Kohlberg tested this model by following the development of eighty-four boys over a period of twenty years. Kohlberg claimed universality for his model, yet Gilligan points out that types of people not represented in his sample, especially girls, often failed to reach the scale's highest levels of maturity, rarely getting past level three. Unable to accept the premise (popularized by Sigmund Freud) that women are less moral than men, Gilligan began to look again at the theories and retest the models. Through listening to people talk about themselves and about the meaning of morality, Gilligan "began to hear a distinction in these voices, two ways of speaking about moral problems, two modes of describing the relationship between other and self" (1). Noticing that it was often women who spoke in this other voice, Gilligan began to suspect that "the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth" indicated not a problem with women's development but "a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of the human condition, an omission of certain truths about life" (2). Gilligan names the predominantly male voice the "ethic of justice"; the predominantly female voice, the "ethic of care."

Particularly illustrative of the developmental difference that Gilligan observed are men's and women's responses to a hypothetical dilemma constructed as a test question for Kohlberg's evaluation. In this dilemma, a man named Heinz cannot afford medication to save his wife's life, and must decide whether to steal the drug from the pharmacist. Boys and men typically approached the

dilemma like “a math problem with humans,” involving the valuation of life and property: valuing life over money, males recommended that Heinz steal the drug (28). This type of answer receives a score of six on Kohlberg’s scale, the highest score.

Females, however, tended to view the dilemma not as a math problem but as a human relations problem. The parameters of the problem disturbed them; rather than accepting the problem at face value, the women tended to concretize the characters and attempt to solve it in a fashion that did not entail forcing Heinz to choose between two wrongs. Women often suggested alternative resolutions, such as, if Heinz were just to explain the situation to the pharmacist, surely something else could be worked out which would preserve the human relationships. This sort of answer earns a score of three.

Once again, Gilligan points out that what the women are doing is not inferior, but different. The fault lies in the way the question is asked—it is open to interpretation. Women tend to hear a different question than the interviewer thinks he is asking. Women consider “not *whether* Heinz should act in this situation (‘*Should* Heinz steal the drug?’) but rather *how* Heinz should act in response to his awareness of his wife’s need (‘Should Heinz *steal* the drug?’)” (31). Some sort of response is a given; the only choice is which response. It appears, then, that women's moral conception indicates a

different description of development. In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. (19)

From this distinction Gilligan goes on to propose a different model of moral development better suited to the ethic of care. Hers is a three-stage model: at level one, a person's caring is directed solely toward the self; at level two the caring is directed exclusively outward to others at the expense of the self; at level three the person comes to acknowledge her own need for care while still respecting her interconnectedness with others and how they will be affected by her decisions. In her interviews with women considering an abortion, Gilligan found that women at level one often felt powerless and isolated. These women, if they chose abortion, chose it because they felt their survival to be threatened; if they chose not to have an abortion, it was often because they viewed the baby as being able to fulfill their needs for love and connection. Level-two women regarded this sort of reasoning as "selfish." These women tended to view the abortion decision in terms of their responsibility to the baby and to others in their lives. If they could not provide for a child, they named abortion as the responsible action. Level-two women were also those who tended to base the decision on the opinions of their partners, families, or wider social expectations. At level three, however, the abortion decision becomes very complex, necessitating balancing the needs of the woman *and* the baby, with consideration given also to the feelings of any others involved. Sarah, a twenty-five year old in the abortion decision study, is able to attain level three when she learns to reexamine her conceptions of selfishness and responsibility, and comes to see that the seeming split between the two can be reconciled by accepting the responsibility for the "selfishness" of retaining the power of choice. Sarah says:

I would not be doing myself or the child or the world any kind of favor having this child. I don't need to pay off my imaginary debts to the world through this child, and I don't think that it is right to bring a child into the world and use it for that purpose...Somewhere in life I think I got the impression that my needs are really secondary to other people's, and that if I make any demands on other people to fulfill my needs, I'd feel guilty for it and submerge my own in favor of other people's,

which later backfires on me, and I feel a great deal of resentment for other people that I am doing things for, which causes friction and the eventual deterioration of the relationship. And then I start all over again. How would I describe myself to myself? Pretty frustrated and a lot angrier than I admit, a lot more aggressive than I admit. (94–95)

This ability to conceive of one's self as existing in a life context together with all others, and (crucially) as being equally entitled to care as all others, is the mature expression of a morality issuing from the ethic of care.

### *Women's Ways of Knowing*

The research that resulted in the book titled *Women's Ways of Knowing* grew out of the authors' (all psychologists) interest in human development, specifically, "the intellectual, ethical, and psychological development of adolescents and adults in educational and clinical settings" (Belenky et al., 4). They "became concerned about why women students...so often doubt their intellectual competence," especially as more and more studies (over twenty cited in just one paragraph) indicated that females find it harder to assert authority than males; that they have more trouble expressing themselves in public; that they have more difficulty gaining respect for their ideas; and that they are less likely to make fullest use of their capabilities in their professional lives (5). The four authors set out to learn more about how women view their relationship to knowledge, how they came by their "way of knowing" about truth, reality, knowledge, authority. Based on their in-depth interviews with 135 women of different races and backgrounds at a variety of educational institutions, including parenting classes offered by human-services agencies, they distinguished five different perspectives from which the women described their lives and experiences (11, 12). These perspectives could be classified as stages which can be built upon in order to reach the stage with the most subtle and intricate understanding of oneself as a knower. In each stage, one speaks in a

different voice. The first stage is silence; the second is received knowledge; the third, subjective knowledge; the fourth, procedural knowledge; and the fifth, constructed knowledge.

Silence characterized primarily women with backgrounds of severe abuse and deprivation. Although this stage was the least commonly encountered in the sample, it formed “an important anchoring point for [the study’s] epistemological scheme, representing an extreme in denial of self and in dependence on external authority for direction” (24). Women in silence said they felt “deaf and dumb” and perceived words as “weapons” (24). Typical remarks descriptive of this state were “I had to get drunk to tell people off” and “I deserved to be hit, because I was always mouthing off” (24–25). These women, although of normal intelligence, were not able to transcend their immediate, practical, concrete experience in order to engage in abstract thought (26).<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, silent women feel that they do not know anything and cannot learn anything. Their own thinking does not govern their behavior; rather, they obey commands from authorities from a position of “unquestioned submission” (28). Men, particularly, are seen as powerful, active, and capable; they themselves are seen as powerless, passive, and incompetent. Silence is a state of profound isolation. Silent women want only to survive.

In stage two, received knowledge, the women do see themselves as able to learn and retain information. Although many formerly silent women were unable to describe how they made the transition to level two, it seems to be predicated on an ability to forge a profound connection with another person; for most of these women, that person was their infant child. Being able to regard

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<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this sort of inability, the authors cite Russian psychologist A. R. Luria’s study of illiterate peasants still living a “medieval” way of life in 1917. Unable to enter language enough to draw inferences about situations beyond their experience, the peasants could not solve a problem such as this: “In the far north, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the far north. What color are the bears there?” The peasants typically told Luria that if he wanted an answer to that question, he should ask someone who had been there (26).



themselves as learners greatly increases received knower's self-esteem compared to silent women, but still there is no internal voice: all knowledge is obtained through listening to external authorities. Received knowers are convinced that there are absolutes; they are literal and are "intolerant of ambiguity" (42). Women in stage two tended to be those referred from the human-services agencies or very young, new, college students. As the authors point out, this point of view is rapidly dislodged in the challenging environment of college; to retain it would seriously interfere with a student's ability "to meet the requirements of a complex, rapidly changing, pluralistic, egalitarian society" (43). Tellingly, this sort of knowing represented the lowest stage in similar studies with males: there was no silence among the men.<sup>6</sup> Further, although men in this stage easily identified with the powerful, speaking of "authority—right—we" in the same breath, women in this stage were much less likely to identify with authority, saying "authority—right—they" (44).

The third stage in women's ways of knowing is subjectivism, and it is very common, accounting for more than half of the women in the study (55). It is an important stage, because an authentic voice has arisen in subjective knowers. For many women, this shift comes about in college, when the seeming inviolate truths of their childhood family are suddenly called into question by the intense diversity of opinion in their new environment. Given this vacuum of

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<sup>6</sup> This is reminiscent of the work of French deconstructivist philosopher Jacques Lacan. Lacan reworked Freud's pre-Oedipal and Oedipal division into one between the Imaginary, when the child cannot distinguish between illusion and reality, and the Symbolic Order, the "series of interrelated signs, roles, and rituals" which regulates society (Tong, 220). To succeed fully in society the child must "internalize the Symbolic Order through language"; the more fluidly one speaks the language of the Symbolic, the more successful one will be and the more easily the Order will replicate itself (Tong, 220). But, because the Symbolic Order is represented by the father and privileges the phallus and written language, male children are able to enter the Symbolic completely and obtain language, just as they are able to resolve the Oedipal complex completely. Female children, however, according to Lacan, cannot identify with the father and, therefore, cannot fully internalize the Symbolic (Tong, 221). They remain caught forever between the Imaginary and Symbolic in a gap between silence and a language which cannot fully express them. French feminist Luce Irigaray has put forward that women are in fact able to attain language, but because it is different from male language it is suppressed and repressed, so that society does not hear it (Irigaray, 205–218).

authority, where the so-called experts disagree with each other more often than not, the young woman's natural response is to develop her own truths and find her own way. For disadvantaged women, attaining this voice seems to have little to do with formal education; rather it is engendered by a shift in the women's personal lives brought about by their sudden and acute awareness that male authority has failed them: a husband who left, a father finally remembered as a molester, the authorities who demanded "obedience and self-sacrifice" (57). From the complete crumbling of the old world view emerges one in which the woman is her own authority, in which obedience is optional and never to be observed at the expense of the self. Truth still exists, but only *her* truth; the old experts have no validity, since the absolute truth within can negate answers that the outside world supplies. By extension, subjective knowers claim that they cannot say anything about another's life, even though the other's way of doing or thinking may be diametrically opposed to theirs. They assume that the other person has her own internal truth, her own "infallible gut" (53).

The authors note that "some women will probably hold to these antirationalist attitudes and to a subjectivist epistemology for the remainder of their lives" (75). But the very nature of subjective knowing itself—listening inwardly and watching the self—is often what nudges women into stage four, procedural knowledge. This "emphasis on beginning to hear themselves think, while gathering observations through watching and listening, is the precursor to reflective and critical thought characteristic" of later stages of knowing (85). Reflecting critically on one's own thinking increases the chance that you might begin to see error therein. If at the same time there are "benign" authorities available (a counselor, an approachable professor) who can illustrate the benefits of seeing another side of an argument, the transition into procedural knowing is eased (90).

Procedural knowing has two expressions, separate knowing and connected knowing, but in all procedural knowledge form is more important than content. *Separate* knowing is characteristic of women in an academic setting. They have learned to learn by adopting a different perspective than the one that is most natural to them. This new perspective is impersonal and formal; using it yields “objective” information that can be analyzed and then either accepted or rejected on its merits. *Connected* knowing is a more personal and informal way of obtaining information, and it emphasizes interaction with other people as opposed to an object or argument. In connected knowing the procedure is empathy, not analysis. Connected knowers seek to learn about other methodologies, other ways of being and doing, by talking with and listening carefully to a representative of that way until they understand why that person thinks that way or made those choices. The voice of connected knowing is less prevalent in the academy (because it is less successful there) and therefore harder to hear, but it emerged “as at least a minor theme and sometimes the major one in the lives of even the most gifted and privileged women interviewed...Connected knowing is not confined to the poor, the uneducated, or the soft-headed...Nor is it exclusively a female voice...Separate and connected knowing are not gender-specific [but]...may be gender-related” (102).

Through procedural knowing women acquire “the power of reason and objective thought,” whether separate or connected procedures are applied (134). All the women at this stage recognized the value of reason and “the sense of control and competitive potential” it gives them (134). Likewise, they all acknowledged that truth exists—and can be shared through discourse—and that authorities, while not infallible, are generally of use. Still, procedural knowing is not without shortcomings:

Women who rely on procedural knowledge are systematic thinkers in more than one sense of the term. Their thinking is encapsulated within systems. They can criticize

a system, but only in the system's terms, only according to the system's standards. Women at this position may be liberals or conservatives, *but they cannot be radicals*. If, for example, they are feminists, they want equal opportunities for women within the capitalistic structure; they do not question the premises of the structure. When these women speak of 'beating the system,' they do not mean violating its expectations but rather exceeding them. (127, my emphasis)

Overall, the inadequacy of procedural knowing is the same whether one is a separate or connected knowing: both types suppress the self in order to understand another's ideas in the other's terms. Separate knowing "is essentially an adversarial form" (106). It pits student against teacher, novice against expert. Women who are procedural knowers learn to play by the rules of the "game" (reason, argument), but their heart is rarely in it. They speak "a public language" that is rarely their own and that is spoken "on the behest of authority" (108). In trying to remain objective, separate knowers are at pains to avoid projection; as a result, thinking and feeling are split apart and the self is suppressed (109). In a related way, connected knowers suppress their own feelings or responses to, say, a painting or a novel in trying to recreate the world of the artist or author. They endeavor to understand the work not in terms of their own interpretation, but in terms of what the other intended to express. Procedural knowers, whether separate or connected, begin to feel "fraudulent and deadened to their inner experiences and inner selves," always echoing others' words, taking on "the color of any structure they inhabit" like "chameleons" (135, 129). This realization can prompt a sudden turn inward, a distancing from the systems and structures within which the women used to feel secure. The word "selfish" enters the women's language again as a description of their attempt to protect and nurture their weak sense of identity; it is a change of direction that does not "feel entirely good, but it [does] feel necessary" (129). What the women are searching for is an integrated voice, not "a reversion to sheer feeling but some sort of integration of feeling and thinking. The task is clear, but the solution is not" (130). When they find it, they attain level five: constructed knowing.

Constructed knowledge brings the self back into consideration, creating “a place for reason *and* intuition *and* the expertise of others” (133). The constructivist women in the study

shared a number of characteristics...central to [stage five]. These women were all articulate and reflective people. They noticed what was going on with others and cared about the lives of people about them. They were intensely self-conscious, in the best sense of the word—aware of their own thought, their judgements, their moods and desires. Each concerned herself with issues of inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection; each struggled to find a balance of extremes in her life. Each was ambitious and fighting to find her own voice—her own way of expressing what she knew and cared about. Each wanted her voice and actions to make a difference to other people and in the world...[Each] had learned the profound lesson that even the most ordinary human being is engaged in the construction of knowledge. ‘To understand,’ as Jean Piaget (1973) said, ‘is to invent.’ (133)

In integrating what they know intuitively to be true and of personal importance with what they recognize as being of value in the teachings of others, women become their own stepladders enabling them to climb outside the procedural knowers’ frames of reference. They now have distance enough to see that “all knowledge is constructed,” but remain close enough to understand that “the knower is an intimate part of the known” (137). I will return to the characteristics of constructed knowing in the context of the women mystics.

Progression through the five ways of knowing involves alternating between states of isolation and connection. The profound isolation of silence gives way to the connection necessary in order to receive knowledge. In turn, received knowledge gives way to the intentional isolation of listening solely to the subjective truth of one’s own voice. Subjective isolation then is dissolved in forging the connections with discourse, authority, and the generalized other that enable viewing an issue from multiple perspectives. Finally, procedural knowledge is subsumed into the constructivist stage, which is marked by a more mature, fused expression of both isolation and connection: autonomy within community.

Each of these stages can be associated with Gilligan's levels of morality (or the gaps between them). Gilligan traces the sequence of the women's evolution through the levels by listening to how they use the "moral language"

of selfishness and responsibility, which defines the moral problem as one of obligation to exercise care and avoid hurt. The inflicting of hurt is considered selfish and immoral in its reflection of unconcern, while the expression of care is seen as the fulfillment of moral responsibility. The reiterative use by the women of the words *selfish* and *responsible* in talking about moral conflict and choice, given the underlying moral orientation that this language reflects, sets the women apart from the men whom Kohlberg studied and points toward a different understanding of moral development. (Gilligan, 73)

The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* found that the silent women in their study used a moral language centered on the self: I want, I feel, I had to, they made me (Belenky et al., 46). The severe deprivation of these women's lives leaves little room for caring for anyone other than the self. This focus on sheer survival is characteristic of Gilligan's moral level one (Gilligan, 74). This level is followed by a transitional phase in which that focus on the self is considered selfish; it is here that we find the women who are received knowers. Received knowers have a different moral vocabulary than silent women, substituting "such words as 'should' and 'ought' for the words 'want' and 'have to' when trying to solve a moral problem" (Belenky et al., 46). Seeing the level one perspective as selfish signals a conception of connection to and responsibility for others—a conception that is not surprising given that most received knowers' first connection is with their child. However, "sharp dichotomies and intolerance of ambiguity mark the moral thinking, as well as the thinking in general, of the received knowers...Thinking that everything must be 'either/or,' the received knowers assume that in times of conflict between the self and others, they must choose one or the other but not both" (Belenky et al., 46). Given that choosing the self is "selfish," these women always choose in favor of the other. This is the hallmark of moral level two, where responsibility

is fused “with a maternal morality that seeks to ensure care for the dependent and unequal” (Gilligan, 74). As we have seen, however, the “exclusion of herself gives rise to problems in relationships, creating a disequilibrium” (Gilligan, 74). At this point the woman may withdraw into subjectivism—a time of transition, it is to be hoped (but not guaranteed), between moral levels two and three, as she learns how to choose in favor of herself. The way of procedural knowing, while a positive step in many regards, corresponds to a curious “confused” understanding of the interconnection of self and other<sup>7</sup> (Gilligan, 82). Procedural knowers feel obligated to respond to others’ expectations, but they simultaneously feel alienated from them and from themselves. These women in the *Ways of Knowing* study “had treated their mothers and even their friends and lovers, as well as their teachers, as authorities whom they were obliged to please. They had never experienced active partnership in a truly equal relationship” (Belenky et al., 126). Gilligan calls this “the psychology of dependence” and identifies it as a perversion of the ethic of care:

This notion of responsibility [that the woman is responsible for others’ actions and choices and that others are responsible for her actions and choices], backwards in its assumptions about control, disguises assertion as response. By reversing responsibility, it generates a series of indirect actions, which in the end leave everyone feeling manipulated and betrayed. The logic of this position is confused in that the morality of mutual care is embedded in the psychology of dependence. Assertion becomes potentially immoral in its power to hurt...[T]he need for approval [is joined] with the wish to care for and help others. When thus caught between the passivity of dependence and the activity of care, the woman becomes suspended in a paralysis of initiative with respect to both action and thought. (Gilligan, 82)

When a woman comes to feel this tension keenly and see it clearly, she is able to step outside the structure of procedural knowledge into constructed knowing and moral level three. The moral

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<sup>7</sup> The authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* have not made this assertion, describing the moral reasoning of this stage as either an ethic of justice in the male-identified separate knowers or as an ethic of care in the case of connected knowers. However, the relationships forged by connected knowers do not take enough account of the self to qualify, in my opinion, as examples of a mature ethic of care. Moreover, the separate knowers do not completely identify with the voice of justice; rather, they maintain a sense of self that is differentiated but muted.

reasoning of constructed knowers shows a “sensitivity to situation and context” (Belenky et al., 149). The women ask questions about the moral dilemma, looking for the particularities and practicalities that will enable them to know as much as possible about who is involved, who will be affected by their decision. This orientation is the central tenet of moral level three, which

focuses on the dynamics of relationships and dissipates the tension between selfishness and responsibility through a new understanding of the interconnection between other and self. Care becomes the self-chosen principle of a judgment that remains [concerned] with relationships and response but becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt. Thus a progressively more adequate understanding of the psychology of human relationships—an increasing differentiation of self and other and a growing comprehension of the dynamics of social interaction—informs the development of an ethic of care. (Gilligan, 74).

Almost always, a move up to the next stage of knowing is occasioned by realizing—usually through crisis—the inadequacy of the corresponding moral level. Coming to see that there is conflict within and between “truths” serves as the antithesis that prompts questioning and new knowledge; synthesis of the old and new results in growth.

This is what seems to be happening in the lives of these women mystics. The alternation between isolation and connection identified above seems to underlie the pattern of the women’s exit from community due to illness and mystical turning inward and then their re-entrance into community as vital people.<sup>8</sup> These women were not born with the distinctive voices we hear in their writings; rather, they had to acquire them. This required learning certain lessons, lessons the events of their lives were particularly suited to teach them—and that bear a striking resemblance to those learned by modern women moving through their ways of knowing.

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<sup>8</sup> It also pertains to other medieval women mystics, such as Catherine of Genoa.



For most of these women, we know or can deduce from their own accounts that they were born into loving families or otherwise raised by caring elders. This is arguably the most salient detail of any when we recall that the hallmark of silent women was an unloving and abusive birth family. Given that the cultures into which they were born were virulently patriarchal, coming into their own voice would have been a great deal harder than for most modern women, making it perhaps impossible for a woman beginning in a state of silence to reach the level of development we see in the mystics. It could be argued, of course, that Godde could call anyone and grant her by grace the necessary strengths and skills, but it also must be remembered that acceptance of the call is a choice—one, perhaps, that a silent woman would be unable to make.

In addition to being loving, their families were noble or otherwise wealthy, and therefore provided their daughters with an education. This fact, when not otherwise documented, can be deduced from the quality and style with which these women wrote. At a minimum, then, they were able to see themselves as knowers. That this second level of knowledge, received knowing, is where they in fact began is supported by other details of their early lives. Clearly, all of these women were intellectually precocious girls, and most were also spiritually precocious. It is reasonable to surmise, then, that these girls all had a strong sense of self, at least inasmuch as they knew what they wanted out of life. However, it seems that they were still very much received knowers. Although several of them could be disobedient and could defy their families' wishes, there is not yet at this point in their lives any evidence that they understood themselves as participants in the construction of knowledge, even knowledge of their faith. Rather, each woman “absorbs the basic teachings of her faith through both Scripture and oral transmission: a rich and often bewildering mix of story, precept, history, lyric poetry, and prophetic vision. Eventually, when she has experienced firsthand the truth that is

at the core of her religion, she in turn draws upon that *mélange* to frame and describe her own experience” (Flinders, 77). Later still, she will be able to alter the language of the tradition to suit her purposes, but first she has to weather the crisis of meeting her self.

One way to meet one’s self is to undergo suffering. For all these women, the period of illness seems to have functioned as a sort of chrysalis, a space within which the woman could “reinvent herself” despite being surrounded by a social “setting that was not the least bit supportive of her need to do so” (Flinders, 131). Their meeting with the self—and, not incidentally, with Godde—catapults them right over stage four into stage five, constructed knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Women in stage five have what Michael Polanyi calls “personal knowledge” that is characterized by “passionate participation of the knower in the act of knowing”; the knower becomes “an intimate part of the known” (Belenky et al., 141, 137). In the intimate mystical encounter, Godde becomes part of the person and the person part of Godde. The mystic has become infused with truth, and no one can convince her otherwise, not a confessor or bishop, nor even a pope. In this we see two characteristics of stage five thinking: appreciation for but questioning of authorities, and the understanding that “truth is a matter of the context in which it is embedded” (Belenky et al, 138–39). The mystic is her own context; no matter how much the Church may object, her truth is embedded in her. Finally, women in stage five are often “seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives” and “feel they have a special responsibility to try to communicate” their views and values—even when they know it is likely that their words will “fall on deaf ears” (Belenky et al., 150, 147). The mystics have met Godde in a way that shows them that

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<sup>9</sup> Teresa, in her wonderfully normal, attainable way, would take a little longer, although the seeds were planted during her illness, as it was at this time that she undertook and made considerable progress in the practice of contemplative prayer. As a consequence of the lag time, interestingly enough, we see in her story a much longer and better defined period of procedural knowing before her “second conversion” inducts her into stage five.

the divine is inextricable from their own truest selves. Their confidence is rock-solid now, and they quickly establish themselves as ministers, teachers, and writers, as visionaries and as voices.

### *Criticisms of “Difference” Theories*

Although there is a long history in the feminist movement of recognizing and elucidating differences between men and women, Carol Gilligan’s book gained unprecedented popularity. Her work was widely cited by academics, by popular press ranging from *Newsweek* to self-help books, and in legal and public policy documents; Gilligan herself made the cover of *New York Times Magazine* and was named “Woman of the Year” by *Ms.* magazine (Faludi, 331, 327). As a result, Gilligan became an icon of relational thinking and a lightning rod for criticism of it. Some of the criticism is valid, some is not.

Part of the problem is timing. *In a Different Voice* was published in 1982, during the years of conservative retrenchment that Susan Faludi famously termed the “backlash” against the feminist movement for women’s equality. Faludi describes how the work and words of Gilligan and other relational feminists were “used and misused—by antifeminist authors and, worse, corporate lawyers battling sex discrimination suits” (Faludi, 327). Declaring women’s difference would, many feminists feared, be just the fuel needed for the anti-equality fire, and for women themselves to embrace the idea of difference would be for women voluntarily to cede all the hard-won gains of the liberation movement. “Difference” feminism was, in short, a thinly disguised relative of the racist separate-but-equal doctrine that had so insidiously betrayed African Americans.

Other criticism argues 1) that her small and nonrandom samples are not representative of the population, 2) that there is no difference between men and women, 3) that, if there is a difference, it is socially constructed rather than psychological, and 4) that associating women with caring is to

relegate them forever to subordinate status. Although Gilligan clearly stated that the different voice “is characterized not by gender but theme” and that the studies she conducted were not scientific research efforts but “empirical observations” drawn from “three little pilot studies,” it has loudly and commonly been claimed that “even if it was not Gilligan’s *intention* to make generalizations about the possible distinct moralities of men and women,” such is exactly what she conveyed by the way in which she writes about her interpretations of the data.<sup>10</sup> Other studies have found “no statistically significant differences in moral reasoning between the sexes” but did find that differences that are seen “are most often linked...with class and education” (Faludi, 330, 331). Catherine MacKinnon writes flatly, “Inequality comes first; difference comes after. Inequality is material and substantive and identifies a disparity; difference is ideational and abstract and falsely symmetrical...Difference is the velvet glove on the iron fist of domination. The problem then is not that differences are not valued; the problem is that they are defined by power” (MacKinnon, 184). Finally, it has been asserted that “in a patriarchal society, caring is often woman’s strategy for survival and not a proud celebration of feminine character...indeed, Gilligan’s entire ethic of care is a moral scheme more likely to oppress a woman than to liberate her” (Tong, 167). Women and men cannot be truly interdependent under patriarchy, and an ethic of care is no more than exercising limited strength within the male system with which carers still comply.<sup>11</sup> If this is true, one might conclude that “women must, temporarily, care less so that men can learn to care more” (Tong, 167). It is not at all apparent to me that anything about today’s world will be improved by anyone deciding to care less

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<sup>10</sup> Gilligan, 92; “Reply by Carol Gilligan” from “On *In A Different Voice*: An Interdisciplinary Forum,” *Signs*, 11, no. 21 (Winter 1986), 326, 328, cited in Faludi, 330; Tong, 166.

<sup>11</sup> William Puka, “The Liberation of Caring (A Different Voice for Gilligan’s “Different Voice”),” unpublished manuscript, 5, cited in Tong, 167.

about anything. Personally, I am tired of theory that assumes difference means division or that erects walls between people or groups of people in order to say, “I am not like you.” I do not think that this is what difference feminism does.

Although neither Susan Faludi nor Naomi Wolf subscribe to difference feminism, both of them acknowledge its merits, the academic skill and solid feminist credentials of its theorists, and the unwarranted distortion and co-optation of the ideas by antifeminist forces:

Most of the feminist scholars set out originally to investigate the origins of men’s and women’s differences, not to glorify them. They wanted to challenge the long-standing convention of defining male behavior as the norm, female behavior as deviant. And they hoped to find in women’s ‘difference’ a more humane model for public life—one that both men and women might adopt. (Faludi, 326)

The basic idea behind difference feminism is sound. The opposition calls traditionally feminine qualities... weakness, and values them less highly... Difference feminism provided a way of looking at ‘feminine’ qualities that turned them into a separate, coherent system that is not inferior to men’s... 1970s feminism had upheld an ideal of androgyny that felt sterile to many women. The opposition had been using women’s difference—particularly their role as mothers—to keep them out of positions of power. Seventies feminism, which struggled to prove that women could be ‘just like men’ in the workplace, had to play down those differences. But the more contact women had with the ‘male’ world, the more rightly critical of its shortcomings they became. (Wolf, 175–76)

We now have had over twenty years to evaluate the effect of *In a Different Voice*, and the jury is still out. Meta-analysis of psychological studies sometimes slightly favors the claims of difference theorists and sometimes does not (Jaffee and Hyde, 2000; Marecek, 2001). I include it here because I have observed a pattern in the lives of some medieval women mystics that seems to support the ideas of difference feminism. Nowhere in the literature of difference feminism have I come across the assertion that these differences are not at least partly a result of the economic, political, and social inequities that affect all women—and these inequities affected medieval women even more strongly than they affect women today. This is still a patriarchal society; women are still

subjected to the same body-killing and spirit-crushing attitudes on the part of society. In tracing modern understandings of the body, Sarah Coakley notes that in

materialist philosophy of mind...the 'body' may be everything else except the brain; in feminist analysis of pornography and cultural manipulation, it represents the female that males seek to control; in both Freudian and Foucaultian accounts of sexuality it becomes the site of either forbidden or condoned pleasures, rather than the more-or-less unconscious medium of all human existence; and in popular magazine discussions of slimming and fitness it still stands for the rebellious fleshiness that has to be controlled and subdued from some other place of surveillance.<sup>12</sup>

How sadly ironic that the view of the body put forward by fashion magazines, society's mouthpiece for egoism, consumerism, and materialism, should echo *exactly* what Christian thinkers have said about the body for 1,500 years. I want to get away from both these negative views, and I think these medieval mystics point the way. In "this literature of prayer, of visions, and the lives of the saints, which reveal something of the inner existence of Christian women, and often in their own words," we

can recover a sense of a time when women stood beside men in relatively equal numbers as the spiritual elite and models of Christian piety, a time when women's experience and the language of women's experience informed prayer and even theological formulation, a time when women and men in the religious life, partners and pilgrims in a common search for God, could relate to each other within the structures of the church as equals in a true mutuality of shared goals (McLaughlin, 97).

We see very clearly in these women the working of grace, and

grace aims at the fullest possible development of each human self. Descriptions such as autonomous and dependent, rational and emotional, initiating and nurturing, cognitive and intuitive, assertive and receptive have been split apart into gender stereotypes. But the growth and development of full personhood requires both sets of traits. (Nelson, 97)

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<sup>12</sup> *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997, 6. Cited in Isherwood and Stuart, 10.

Grace helps the mystics accomplish the acquisition of the full complement of traits so that they exhibit the mature ethic and strong voice that the difference feminists found to be characteristic of those who had achieved the highest levels of personal integration. Because the dichotomous traits are synthesized into a paradoxical whole, “fullest possible development” will look roughly the same for any human being, male or female. The women mystics treated here can lead modern men and women into full development not only by their teachings but by their lived example of wholeness.

### **The Development of Embodied Knowledge: Women in the Image of Godde**

There is a story of a little girl who, frightened by a nighttime thunderstorm, called out desperately for her mother. When the mother came to her bedroom, she hugged her daughter and comforted her, and also gently explained that the little girl was never completely alone; Jesus was always with her. “I *know* that,” the little girl replied in an exasperated tone. “I want somebody with skin on.”

As Native American leader Black Elk said, I don’t know if that story really happened; all I know is, it’s true. Like the time my college friend Teresa and I were lamenting, again, our loneliness and lack of boyfriends. “I know Godde is supposed to be enough,” Teresa said, “but He can’t hug me.”

Bodies matter. We have skin on, and we need other people with skin on. Our bodies are fundamental to who we are, not just clay vehicles for our soul/spirit/mind. Our bodies shape our personhood, the reality of our being and acting in the world, and in some respects are beyond our conscious action: we are not, for instance, willfully in control of cellular processes, nor would we choose a heart attack. It does not make sense, then, “to speak of the human agent as ‘having a body,’” as though an agent possesses a body in roughly the same sense that a person possesses a suit of

clothes... We can say that the agent *is* his body, though this will be incorrect if taken as saying that the agent is ‘nothing but’ a body... But neither is the agent something that is added to a body” (Tracy, 87). The body, in life and, perhaps, even in death, is inextricably linked with soul and mind, creating an indivisible whole that is the person. We are “psychospiritual units” (Tracy), or—the term I prefer—“body-selves” (Nelson, Heyward)<sup>13</sup>. “My bodyself is me” (Heyward, 191). It is in and through my body that I perceive and relate to not only myself but other people and all of creation. In the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Body is the very universality of things... My matter is not a part of the universe that I possess totally. It is the totality of the universe that I possess partially.”<sup>14</sup> It is necessarily through our physicality that we perceive everything, even Godde. After all, “the experience of transcendence, of divine presence, is caused by a sight, a smell, a shiver, a touch, a sound, an event. It is a bodily sensory experience” (de Haardt, 50).

And yet, bodies are problematic. They may be ugly, injured, ill, or dirty. They are limited, corruptible, fallible, and—most problematic of all—sexual. As a result, the Church throughout its history has been, as it were, of two minds about the body. On the one hand, it has always affirmed the goodness of creation, including the human body, and it consistently has condemned as heresy any teaching that associates physicality with evil or otherwise splits soul from body too radically (Gnosticism, Manicheanism, Catharism, etc.). On the other hand, a persistent tone of anxiety about the body resonates through Christian tradition like a drone.

This tone has been particularly strong in monasticism, which has tended to see the body as a hindrance to spiritual progress. In this view, in order to ascend toward Godde, one must not only

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson hyphenates the term; Heyward doesn’t. I will use Nelson’s spelling except when quoting Heyward.

<sup>14</sup> *Science and Christ*, translated by R. Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 12–13, cited in Heyward, 25.



purify the spirit but conquer the insistent and unruly demands of the body. The range and severity of ascetical practices have varied across the centuries and across the monastic orders, from limited tolerance of physical needs (one thinks of St. Francis's affectionate if derogatory reference to his body as "Brother Mule") to overt mortification of the flesh by means of self-inflicted abuse that undoubtedly brought early ends to the lives of many monks and nuns.<sup>15</sup> Despite the variation in ascetical practice, however, one practice in particular is definitive of monasticism: abstention from sex.

Of course, monastic asceticism is but a particular intensification of the broader Christian ambivalence about the body evident as early as the Pauline preference for virginity, articulated influentially by Augustine's confessional account of his turn toward Godde and away from sexual incontinence, and expounded throughout the centuries in Christian writers' association of genital sexual expression with post-Edenic, fallen humanity.<sup>16</sup> Already in the Patristic period, "marriage was affirmed for the laity, although as a spiritually inferior choice to celibacy," and by the medieval period of the Latin Church, not only was sex outside marriage "totally sinful, but sex even within marriage was degrading and to be hedged around with severe restrictions...Repression of sex even within marriage was seen as contributing to holiness, if both partners agreed to it" (Ruether, 37).

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<sup>15</sup> There were some very lax orders, however, such as the Carmelites prior to the Discalced Reform of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> Although "Augustine sought to repair the negative impression created by Jerome's intemperate defense of the superiority of virginity and continent widowhood to marriage," he "would also limit [his] affirmation in ways that made marital sex distinctly third rate, bordering on sinfulness. In Augustine's view, although there would have been physical sex and reproduction in Godde's original plan, this sex would have been devoid of the hot pleasure of male ejaculation. Concupiscence, Augustine believed, had come about only through the Fall, and expressed the loss of control of mind over body, the division in the self which expressed division from Godde. Thus in our present fallen state, sex, even in marriage, carried with it sin. Through it the original sin of Adam was passed on to the next generation" (Ruether, 41–42).

What might be the reasons behind this ambivalence toward the body and, particularly, sex? Ruether notes that our deeply split personality on this subject—what she calls the “puritan-prurient syndrome”—is not limited to Western Europe and North America:

Sex is seen as a volatile force in most cultures, to be variously used, repressed, and channeled, and this combination of use and repression is entangled with ambiguous views of women as desired virgin, honored mother, and despised whore. It is not ambiguity, but the particular configurations of the ambiguity that differ somewhat from culture to culture. (Ruether, 36)

Thus, the ambivalence is not something we in the West have inherited solely from Christian tradition. It seems to be something inherent in the body itself, its unknown and unknowable qualities. Even in our advanced technological age, “we know how to blow ourselves off the face of the earth, but we can’t even begin, from a scientific point of view, to understand what the nonanatomical differences or similarities are between men and women” (Peck, 219). But the lack of scientific and medical insight cannot fully explain our anxiety; rather, it seems deeply rooted in the psyche. We are vulnerable even to ourselves, our own bodies, and that vulnerability results in anxiety. Not wishing to be reminded of our uncomfortable feelings, we close off and close down the body as much as possible.

Aspects of femaleness that most compel attention to an embodiedness that is linked to vulnerability and feeling, menstruation and birthing, for example, are regarded...as unclean and defiling. Rejection of the body’s vulnerability is also a necessary attribute of warriors in patriarchal society, a skill taught to those in basic training in the military. Hence things that lead away from or conquer the body—a strong will, spirituality, and intellect, for example—are prized as higher ways to truth. (Brock, 13)

Moreover, we learn these ways very early: “Most early punishment is tied to bodily deprivation or pain. Children deny the feelings they receive through their bodies, especially feelings that are

associated with their earliest suffering. The adult false self tries to ignore the body, pretends it is higher than and separate from its own embodied existence” (Brock, 13).

Sex, then, is particularly confusing, with its inherent combination of power and vulnerability; we are both attracted and repelled. “Power, by definition, is not wholly managed by those under its sway, so that the power of sex comes in the puzzlement it brings to our embodiment. We act and we are driven” (McCarthy, 456). Certainly, our bodies are not entirely under our control, whether this is due to social constraints or our simple physical inability to prevent many illnesses and injuries. Similarly, there is something in sex that always eludes us; we may choose to engage in the activity, but we cannot fully control it. We cannot control the other person; we cannot completely control conception; we cannot, perhaps, control ourselves. This lack of control makes us vulnerable, aware of our powerlessness. Sex, perhaps in spite of ourselves, connects us to others and to the world, introducing further elements of uncertainty.

And, in fact, the world of the early Christian Church was fraught with uncertainty and cause for fear and anxiety. How would it justify its existence to its Jewish forbears in terms of both its similarities and differences? How would it pose a credible alternative to the refined Greek philosophies? How would it answer Roman mystery religions, and more importantly, how would it survive under the colossal, well-oiled, and periodically hostile Roman political machine?

One natural response to feeling out of control is to control what one can: the more chaotic one’s external world, the more order is imposed on internal matters; the weaker one feels, the more domination is exerted over those with less power. In the case of the nascent Church, what was internal was doctrine, and those with less power were women. As Christian beliefs were enunciated, clarified, and codified, the relative freedom, influence, and esteem enjoyed by Christian women in

the movement's early days were gradually eroded, denigrated, and virtually erased. Fear for Christianity's "reputation"—how it was being perceived by supposedly more sophisticated outsiders—led early church writers to mold the expression of Christian beliefs into a form more palatable to societal tastes and to adopt elements of non-Christian philosophy and attitudes, among which was the inferiority of women. Fear that Christian women might make Christianity "look bad" becomes hard to distinguish, in so many of these writings, from fear of women themselves, particularly women's bodies. "Women's bodies were thought to possess all kinds of power, their hair or their menstrual blood could turn wine sour, corrode iron, or cause dogs to go rabid. This power to corrupt had to be tightly controlled if women were to approach holiness" (Isherwood and Stuart, 18). Strikingly, intertwined with the fear of women *we find the fear of mysticism as well*.

One sees this fear, for example, in a section of the *Apostolic Constitutions*<sup>17</sup> concerning the behavior of Christian widows. Such a woman is to be meek and quiet even to the point that she should not answer any questions about Christianity other than those concerning "faith, and righteousness, and hope in God," referring all questions of doctrine to male authorities. She is especially not to say anything about mysticism: "For in the mystical points we ought not to be rash, but cautious...For unbelievers, when they hear the doctrine concerning Christ not explained as it ought to be, but defectively, and especially that concerning his incarnation or his passion, will rather reject it with scorn, and laugh at it as false..." (MacHaffie 1992, 19). What seems to surface here is the writer's own anxieties about the incredulous aspects of Christianity's mystical teachings.

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<sup>17</sup> A collection of church law compiled in Syria around 380. From "Concerning Christian Widows" in *The Work Claiming to Be the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Including the Canons*. Irah Chase, trans. New York: D. Appleton, 1848, 81–83. Reprinted in MacHaffie, 1992, 19–20.

Should these teachings come from the mouth of a woman, the hearer will not only laugh at the teaching and at the woman but, by extension, at Christian men.

Tertullian, in an odd little passage in “On the Apparel of Women,”<sup>18</sup> asserts that jewels and finery were gifts to women from the “sons of the gods” mentioned in Genesis 6:1–4, whom he describes as fallen angels who sullied themselves and women through lust, thereby “deserv[ing] to be judged by man” (MacHaffie 1992, 28–29). To this mystical—and unholy, in his view—association of women and angels Tertullian also attributes the transmission to women of knowledge of “several not well-revealed scientific arts,” including “the natural properties of herbs...the powers of enchantments, [and even] the interpretation of the stars” (28). That is, women’s traditional healing arts whose “mysteriousness” would generate the fear and loathing that later labeled women as witches and deserving of death.

In fact, fear permeates Tertullian’s entire essay. Although “comeliness is not to be *censured*,” he writes, “yet it is to be *feared*” (31). All modesty—all Christian behavior, in fact—should be undertaken in the hope that it pleases Godde but never in the presumption thereof, lest the Christian get cocky:

For he who presumes feels less apprehension; he who feels less apprehension takes less precaution; he who takes less precaution runs more risk. *Fear is the foundation of salvation*; presumption is an impediment to fear. More useful, then, is it to apprehend that we may possibly fail, than to presume that we cannot; for apprehending will lead us to fear, fearing to caution, and caution to salvation. On the other hand, if we presume, there will be neither fear nor caution to save us. He who acts securely, and not at the same time warily, possesses no safe and firm security; whereas he who is wary will be truly able to be secure. (30, my emphasis)

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<sup>18</sup> In *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. S. Thelwell, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. Vol. 4:14–15, 18–21, 25. Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885. Reprinted in MacHaffie, 1992, 27–33.

Jerome, another of the Church “fathers,” alludes in his Letter to Eustochium<sup>19</sup> to an understanding, even expectation, of a mystical relationship with Christ, but fear of sexuality—women’s, but, I think, more his own that he *projects* onto women—is very much in evidence. In this letter to a young virgin, he tells of how, even when practicing extreme asceticism, he still fantasized about “the pleasures of Rome” and suffered visions of “bands of dancing girls” (Clark, 56, 57). And if he, even under these conditions, could not escape “evil thoughts,” how could a young girl possibly do any better unless she forego all manner of “luxuries”? (57) Continuous mortification of the body, he asserts, is “the only way of preserving chastity,” and the only good of marriage and sex is that it produces more virgins (pp., 57, 60). He warned against touching women, and in the Pseudo-Clement Epistles he instructs “male virgins to wrap their hands in robes before giving the sign of peace in case the touch of a woman made them lustful” (Isherwood and Stuart, 18). Similarly, in another writing,<sup>20</sup> Jerome claims that “a layman, or any believer [even a priest or bishop], cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse”; therefore, priests can never marry and, presumably, married people can never pray (63).

Christianity and its proponents had less to fear—from external sources, at least, if not from the gamut of human weaknesses—after it gained political acceptance when the emperor Constantine adopted it as the religion of the state. But hardly had Christianity begun to adapt to its new status than things in the west took a serious turn for the worse: Rome fell.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, F. A. Wright, trans. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, Loeb Classical Library, 1933. Reprinted in Clark, 56–61.

<sup>20</sup> “Against Jovinian,” in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works; Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d ser., vol. 6. Philip Schaff, ed. New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893. Reprinted in Clark, 61–68.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps because Christianity continued to enjoy political support and stability in the East, fear is not nearly the leitmotif in Orthodoxy that it is in Roman Catholicism. This is *not* to say that Orthodoxy is not patriarchal, hierarchical, and rigid in its own right.

Even if the political power of Rome had caused the Christians—and many others around the ancient world—tremendous suffering, the “idea of Rome” held powerful, positive sway over the societal mind:

Rome was vast, peaceful, beautifully organized, and ruled by a great legal system; it was religiously complex, with impressive shrines and monuments celebrating its own glory and providing inspirational spaces for its people; it was distinguished by a highly developed intellectual and cultural life [and] was presided over by Caesar, a central ruling authority who stood close to divinity and who symbolized in his person the glory of Rome...Rome was a goal, an ideal to shape policy. (Weaver, 66–67)

In the power vacuum created in the wake of first the Visigoths and then Constantine’s shifting of his capital from Rome to the East, several groups were left to battle it out for the right to create the “new Rome” in the old spot. When the dust settled, the group left standing was the bishops of Rome—the popes (Weaver, 67).

The Roman Church imitated the old pagan empire remarkably well. Where Rome had Caesar, whose acts were sacred and symbolic, the Church had the pope, whose acts were sacred and symbolic. Where Rome’s military expeditions were holy, the Church had Crusades. Where Rome’s ceremonies of war were worshipful, the Church raised the cross as its battle-standard. Where pagan piety “had been a very legalistic affair...concerned not with dogma and ethics but with proper cultic acts scrupulously performed,” the Church “rallied its resources to define doctrines as precisely as possible” (Weaver, 77). Roman Catholicism, like the Roman Empire, became vast, peaceful, and beautifully organized, with an intricate legal system. And yes, it had beauty, glory, and (until the Inquisition) a flourishing intellectual life.<sup>22</sup> Much of that intellectual life, however, was “preoccupied with sin and justification”:

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed description of these imitations of the empire, see Weaver, 78–84.

In Roman Catholicism, the church is a place of justice; God has laws, people break them, and justice demands that people make reparation. The church is the place where reparation is made possible: the bishop—or his agent, the priest—determines the degree of sin and the kind of reparation necessary. Penance (which in Orthodox Christianity is more pedagogical than punitive) developed into a system very much like jurisprudence: sins, like crimes, were weighed, and punishments determined for them. The priest was the legitimate agent of divine law. (Weaver, 77)

It's not surprising, then, that the Church would come to view mysticism and its emphasis on intimate love with a great deal of suspicion, even outright hostility.

Alan Jones, an Episcopal priest, has said that “there are only two feelings: love and fear. There are only two languages: love and fear. There are only two activities: love and fear. There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results: love and fear. Love and fear.” It follows, then, that there are only two theologies: love and fear. And there is only one response: you must choose. Love and fear are mutually exclusive; you cannot choose both. This choice marks perhaps the clearest difference between the Church and its mystics: the Church has too often chosen fear; the mystics have almost always chosen love. Mysticism is, in fact, “an all-consuming, passionate love affair between human beings and God. It speaks of deep yearning, of burning desire for the contemplation and presence of the divine beloved,” a desire which is “kindled by the fire of divine love itself” (King, 8). The very essence, then, of mysticism—intimacy and bodily desire—is exactly what has caused the Church severe anxiety, at best, and is what the Church, at worst, has tried for millennia to deny, repress, and even eliminate through, if need be, the torture and murder of those who would not let society forget the unconditional love in which God holds them.

### *Fear and Intimacy in Male Mysticism*

If an invitation to intimacy is always a feature of a mystical encounter, a passionate acceptance of it is not. Even in the presence of God, fear or love remains a choice.



A subtle difference can be heard between the descriptive language of many of the early mystics and that of the medieval mystics. Early mystics tend to use a language of hierarchy and transcendence that later mystics do not.<sup>23</sup> Godde is attained by an ascent through increasingly higher stages of spiritual development. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) wrote that Godde “is to be sought...in darkness, and reached by faith, reasoning, and knowledge” (King, 32). In his view, Godde is ultimately unknowable and inexpressible, the “Divine Abyss” (King, 32). Gregory of Nyssa (330–95) also experienced Godde as recondite and hidden in darkness. He was “perhaps the first to describe the mystical life as an ascent of the soul to God, an unending journey leading to an ever greater realization of God’s ultimate mystery” (King, 52). The closer one comes to Godde, the more hidden Godde becomes. The “only One” is the “Unknowable,” the “Boundless One” (King, 52). In another example, Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) also describes three stages the soul must transcend, and the higher the soul ascends, the more it is diminished. Godde is “Darkness” in which the soul is reduced “to absolute dumbness both of speech and thought” (King, 60).

Standing in opposition to this reaction to the mystical encounter are the examples of Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, two medieval mystics who—and this point is critical—had at their core a tremendous devotion to the humanity of Christ and to Jesus’ suffering and Passion. Bernard was the first mystic of this period to use the imagery of the Song of Songs as a description of the relationship between Godde and the soul, and “urged the monks under his direction to consider *themselves* the brides of Christ—to anoint and bejewel themselves inwardly and ready themselves in every way for the kiss of Christ” (Flinders, 2). Although the Song of Songs had been used by some of the early mystics, this idea now “swept like wildfire” through the monastic

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<sup>23</sup> The sets of vocabulary are not mutually exclusive; rather, the difference is more a matter of emphasis.

communities, not only giving monks an avenue into “the gentler, more tender, and devotional modes of ‘nuptial mysticism’” but also providing women with “an unprecedented validation of their own femininity” (Flinders, 2). In fact, Bernard viewed Godde as having both masculine and feminine qualities, speaking “of Christ’s wisdom, his gentleness and kindness, his renewal of spirit and mind,” and employing a “favorite theme” wherein the Wisdom of Godde (a feminine personification) “builds herself a house” within each Christian (King, 71–72). According to Bernard’s teaching, “if we know ourselves, we are already on the way to God, because God created us in the divine image. But we cannot find God unless we have first been found and led by him so that we desire to seek him more” (King, 70).

Francis agreed that it is through the created world that one could experience and know the “uncreated Father” (King, 76). Seeing everyone as a child of Godde, Francis emphasized “compassionate service” to others and “intensive love for all God’s creatures, great and small, human and animal” (King, 74). But his great devotion to the humanity of Christ was expressed most fully in his prayer that he might suffer as Christ had, which resulted in his receiving the stigmata in an experience of “sharp stings mingled with ecstasy” (King, 76).

Returning to the theoretical framework of Chodorow and the relational feminists sheds some light on why these different interpretations of the mystical experience might exist. The process of male’s psychological individuation is an erecting of boundaries between self and other. Any sort of intimacy, whether sexual or mystical, threatens those boundaries. “Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation” (Gilligan, 8). The real-life consequences of these feelings of insecurity are illustrated by a study Gilligan conducted

in which men and women were asked to write stories about a number of pictures they were shown, some clearly indicating situations of individual achievement, such as a man sitting alone at his desk, and others indicating situations of personal affiliation, such as a man and woman sitting together on a park bench. Overall, the study corroborated other studies in that it found that men wrote stories containing violence far more often than do women: 51 percent of the men wrote at least one violent story, but only 20 percent of the women wrote about violence—and no woman wrote more than one violent story (Gilligan, 41). Most interestingly, however, there was a stark difference in *where* the men saw the potential for violence:

The men in the class, considered as a group, projected more violence into situations of personal affiliation than they did into impersonal situations of achievement. Twenty-five percent of the men wrote violent stories only to the pictures of affiliation, 19 percent to pictures of both affiliation and achievement, and 7 percent only to pictures of achievement. In contrast, the women saw more violence in impersonal situations of achievement than in situations of affiliation; 16 percent of the women wrote violent stories to the achievement pictures and 6 percent to the pictures of affiliation. (Gilligan, 41)

Intimacy involves risk and, therefore, carries with it an element of apprehension for nearly everyone, but the particularities of men's psychological development intensify that fear. However, if that fear can be met, faced, and moved through, the limitations of the ethic of justice can be transcended. Intimacy

becomes the critical experience that brings the self back into connection with others, making it possible to see both sides—to discover the effects of actions on others as well as their cost to the self. The experience of relationship brings an end to isolation, which otherwise hardens into indifference, an absence of active concern for others, though perhaps a willingness to respect their rights. For this reason, intimacy is the transformative experience for men through which adolescent identity turns into the generativity of adult love and work. (Gilligan, 164)

Gilligan contends that the convergence of the two voices of justice and care “marks times of crisis and change” (Gilligan, 2). A direct experience of Godde can surely be considered such a time, when

a human being is asked to choose between love and fear. The male medieval mystics who made an unambiguous choice for love speak in a voice in which the ethic of care is much more prominent, with the overall effect of a balanced ethic.

The ways of knowing Godde expressed by the male medieval mystics—in the joy and desire of a bride and in the bodily suffering of Christ—made an indelible impression on the medieval mind. It is also in these that we begin to see close parallels to women’s descriptions of mystical encounters. These men, and others after them, having assented to the ultimate experience of intimacy, emerged with an understanding of what women often understand from the beginning: the primacy of love, the value of flesh and blood, the curious intermingling of joy and pain, and the interconnectedness of each life with all other lives and with the Author of life itself.

### *The Body in Medieval Women’s Spirituality*

Many male theologians of the early and medieval church doubted that women reflected the image of Godde in and of themselves. Augustine granted *imago Dei* to women only when they were taken together with men; they did not reflect the image of Godde *as women* but only *as human souls*, whereas men did reflect that image *as men*, that is, in body and soul (McEntire, 15–16). Women’s bodies were seen to be in a “state of constant flux and change,” thus signifying “disorder and chaos”—a flaw inherent in all matter that placed it in opposition to “a construction of the divine as a static, unchangeable god of law and order who is ultimately pure spirit” (Isherwood and Stuart, 81).

However, as Carolyn Walker Bynum points out, this message was “not absorbed” by women in either convent life or family life (Bynum 1987, 261). They still felt perfectly free and able to approach Godde. Interestingly, they turn the fear of physicality on its head, finding it is *exactly* their

humanity that enables them to draw near to Christ.<sup>24</sup> There are several tenets of this idea, but all are rooted in the central doctrine of Christianity: the Incarnation.

First, there is the primary understanding that in the Incarnation Godde took on human flesh. If the human body could serve as “home” for Godde, then it cannot possibly be as corrupt as some felt it was. “For it was human beings as human (not as symbol of the divine) whom Christ saved in the Incarnation; it was body as flesh (not as spirit) that Godde became most graphically on the altar; it was human suffering (not human power) that Christ took on to redeem the world” (Bynum 1987, 296). Second, Christ’s flesh was formed from Mary’s flesh. This fact “led Hildegard to argue that it is exactly *female* flesh—the very weakness of woman—that restores the world” (Bynum 1987, 265). Third, the flesh of Christ in the Eucharist becomes food to sustain Godde’s children, an obvious parallel to women being able to breastfeed children. “Godde, like woman, fed his children from his own body... Thus women found it very easy to identify with a deity whose flesh, like theirs, was food” (Bynum 1987, 275). Finally, women identified with Christ’s suffering. Women suffered during childbirth but also suffered in broader, more diffuse ways from both the general oppression of women and the fact that life, particularly in medieval Europe, was simply hard. Thus, women saw Christ’s suffering as being “in continuity with, rather than in contrast to, their own ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability” (Bynum 1991, 172). In general then, religious women of the Middle Ages “reflected in their visions a general sense of body as necessary for salvation” (Bynum 1987, 254). They “saw themselves not a flesh opposed to spirit, female opposed to male, nurture opposed to authority; they saw themselves as human beings—fully spirit and fully

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<sup>24</sup> Anke Passenier cautions that “by characterizing medieval female spirituality as somatic and affective, one does not sufficiently account for...alternative strands, differing markedly from officially promoted patterns” (Passenier, 280). It should become clear that I am characterizing the spirituality of these four medieval women not solely as somatic and affective but also as reflective and rational. I regard these women not just as spiritual teachers but as theologians.

flesh. And they saw all humanity as created in Godde's image, as capable of *imitatio Christi* through body as well as soul" (Bynum 1987, 296).

For many medieval women mystics, this translated into ascetic practices, sometimes severe. Those who have studied these practices point out that they constituted "an effort to plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh" for suffering with Christ and thereby experiencing grace (Bynum 1987, 294). Such asceticism apparently

does not spring from any hatred or devaluation of the self, which must somehow be stripped away before Godde can take pleasure in the soul. It springs instead from an altogether positive evaluation of self-worth; so positive, indeed, that nothing but the best is good enough for the self, and that best is Godde himself. Because this is so, all that is of lesser worth, or anything which in a particular case would interfere with the total response to Godde (even if the thing is good in itself and would not be an interference to someone else's response) can be gladly given up. (Jantzen, 159)

Even so, asceticism, especially its more extreme forms of bodily mortification, is a highly suspect concept (let alone practice) for modern women. Interestingly, none of the women discussed here were given to ascetic practices other than chastity<sup>25</sup> and, in the case of Julian and the young Hildegard, seclusion in an anchorhold.<sup>26</sup> Hildegard, in addition to her many other talents, was a naturalist and herbalist; her interest in medicine imparted a respect for wellness that was in obvious contrast to the often health-destroying results of extreme asceticism. Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa all cautioned against mortifications if for no other reason than that one is better able to serve Godde actively when well than when ill. This extended even to prayer, as the monastic rules required a

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<sup>25</sup> "Virginity was not, however, merely a means of escape from family. It was seen by both men and women as a positive and compelling religious ideal. Set apart from the world by intact boundaries, her flesh untouched by ordinary flesh, the virgin (like Christ's mother, the perpetual virgin) was also a bride, destined for a higher consummation. She scintillated with fertility and power. Into her body, as into the eucharistic bread on the altar, poured the inspiration of the spirit and the fullness of the humanity of Christ" (Bynum 1987, 20).

<sup>26</sup> Teresa went through a period before her illness during which she practiced self-flagellation and other mortifications, but she abandoned these practices upon her recovery.

fairly rigorous prayer life; it was hard to observe the Rule if one was in a delirium from hunger or fever.

Could it be their experience with debilitating illness that made these women turn away from ascetic practices? It is impossible to say for sure, but it seems likely. Nancy Eiesland, in her work on a theology of disability, writes that

the corporeal is for people with disabilities the most real. Unwilling and unable to take our bodies for granted, we attend to the kinesis of knowledge. That is, we become keenly aware that our physical selves determine our perceptions of the social and physical world. These perceptions, like our bodies, are often non-conforming and disclose new categories and models of thinking and being.<sup>27</sup>

Disability also tends to give rise to “a liberatory realism that maintains a clear recognition of the limits of our bodies and an acceptance of limits as the truth of being human.”<sup>28</sup> It would not be necessary, perhaps, to have experienced serious and protracted illness in order to formulate a theology and religious practice that honors both the body and its limits, but that such an experience would lead to body-awareness certainly makes intuitive sense.

### **Theology from Lived Experience**

Embodiment theology is a thoroughly modern (or postmodern) project, yet like any theology, it must look forward while reaching back into tradition. Unfortunately, the tradition—at least as it is interpreted by its self-appointed authorities—is not going to be very helpful in our efforts to recover our healthy, sexual, trinitarian bodies. Fortunately, the tradition does not belong to those authorities. The gospel does not belong to those who use it to wield personal power at the expense of others. Rather, the “past and its traditions must liberate and make whole the present. All use of

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1994, 31, cited in Isherwood and Stuart, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Eiesland, 103, in Isherwood and Stuart, 93.

the past to hurt and to oppress is illegitimate, and those who are hurt by traditions have the right to decide what makes us whole” (Brock, xvii).

We need to remind the Church that each of us “is uniquely flesh made word, communicating a meaning that is written bodily into a people, a place, and a moment of history. That is why all theology needs to be a ‘Theology of the Body,’ not simply an intellectual activity” (Prokes, 82). To do this, we are going to have to draw on the submerged, forgotten elements of the tradition and—most subversive of all—our own bodily experience. The works of the medieval women mystics are an important and directly applicable source that is at once authoritative and fresh. For these women to speak at all was considered out of their place; to speak about Godde—to men as well as women—was unthinkable. Unthinkable, that is, until they did it. Their authority was their lived experience of Godde, not the authorities of their day or their status within the tradition. The unavoidable, incontrovertible reality of their lives was Godde’s self-disclosure to them in ways the world had not seen before. As a result, they convey not only new images for the divinity and new ways of relating to the holy, but new authority as well. Writing of Hildegard, Renate Craine points out that her terminology and images “rose from a deeply innate mode of being a woman who was willing to live in that unknown territory between received Godde-images and Godde’s self-disclosure to her. As a woman she speaks of Godde. She does theology not as abstract thinking but as a laboring to give birth to the Mystery in history” (Craine, 47). This is equally true of the other three women.

Of course, caution is in order in turning to women of such far-away centuries for help for modern women. It would be easy to slip into anachronistic thinking about their ambitions and interpretations. These women were not proto-feminists, and not all of their ideas are going to be



useful for liberating women today. In this, I think, their writings should be approached in a way similar to scripture: as products of their time that contain material that is both limiting and liberating.

It is important to keep in mind that the

Bible itself does not use ‘authorities,’ such as the teachings of Jesus, to assert a timeless, rigid, or legalistic basis for moral behavior. It presents them as original illustrations of covenant fidelity or discipleship which set a direction for future thought and practice without determining the latter in every detail. Authority does not preclude creativity, but evokes ongoing historical responses which define the appropriate shape of communal life and individual conduct. (Cahill, 16–17)

It is my feeling that most everyone in our society could benefit from a healthier attitude about human embodiedness, particularly women, and even more particularly Christian women. We currently have a culture that is too often deadly to women and girls, both physically and psychologically. Rampant sexism makes it nearly impossible for girls to grow into adulthood with an intact appreciation for their female bodies. The Church has been overtly complicit in this devaluation of women that makes us unsafe in our very bodies. The best way for the Church to remedy this is to reassert that women, like men, are created in the image and likeness of Godde. If it can be shown that that image is triune in a way that encompasses and affirms human—and specifically female—physicality, then women’s and men’s relationships with self, Godde, and others (including the environment) can begin to heal. Feminist theology and embodiment theology have already begun to work toward this end. Like the women mystics, we, too, need to live in that “unknown territory” between what we have received and what is being revealed. And then we need to do theology from that place, from our lived experience as women created in the image and likeness of a triune Godde.

## CHAPTER 2

### Embodying the Trinity: Hildegard of Bingen

*But a human being is also the workman of Godde; he must be the shadow of the mysteries of Godde and must reveal in every way the Blessed Trinity: he whom Godde made to his image and likeness.*

—Hildegard of Bingen

*Everything else  
can wait, but not  
this thrust  
from the root  
of the body*

—Mary Oliver, “Blossom”

Embodiment theology has worked to recover a positive evaluation of human bodiliness, arguing that human beings are created in the image of Godde in our physicality as well as our spirituality. But it remained relatively silent on what it means for humanity to have been created in the image and likeness of a *trinitarian* Godde. In the rare instance when the Trinity is mentioned, the concentration is on the relationship between the members of the Trinity at the expense of the persons themselves and how they might be reflected both in human society and, critically, human bodies.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible to construct an embodied, trinitarian anthropology that sheds some light on this? It is, but in order to do so, we must return, perhaps surprisingly, to the Middle Ages. We begin with Hildegard of Bingen.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Mary Prokes criticizes Augustine’s trinity of intellect, memory, and will because “the whole mental triad is situated in one person” and “they lack relationship beyond the individual” (Prokes, 67–68). Stanley J. Grenz asks and answers the question of reflecting the Trinity this way: “What, then, about the Creator could the creation of humans as male and female represent? The most promising possibility is divine relationality” (Grenz 2001, 294). In this interpretation, the Triune Godde is not in our bodies as a Trinity but as a single force: the drive to bond.

Hildegard (1098–1179) was born the tenth child of a noble family in Bermersheim. At age eight, she was given into the care of an anchoress, Jutta von Sponheim, attached to a Benedictine monastery on Mt. Disiboden (as tenth child, she may have been given to the Church as a “tithe”). There she was raised and spent most of her life, becoming abbess after Jutta’s death in 1136 and remaining there until 1150, when she founded her own convent near Bingen. Hildegard tells us that she received visions starting at an early age, but it was not until 1141 that she began to record them, after being told in a vision to write down what she saw and heard. Her first visionary work, *Scivias*, took her ten years to complete. Over the rest of her life, she would also write a natural history (*Physica*), a book of medicine (*Causae et curae*), and two other visionary works (*Liber vitae meritorium* and *Liber divinorum operum*), as well carry on a voluminous correspondence and compose numerous exquisite, groundbreaking musical works.

It is evident from her own writings as well as others’ accounts of her that Hildegard was a remarkable personality gifted with great intelligence, talent, and strength of character. She enjoyed great respect not only from the many lay people who traveled sometimes many miles for an audience with the “German prophetess,” as she was called, but also from the nobility and clergy. In 1147–48, Pope Eugenius III read from her works to the bishops assembled at the synod in Trier and affirmed and encouraged her visionary gifts. At the invitation of various clergy, she undertook several wide-ranging preaching tours, after which the clergy often requested that she write down what she had preached so that they might retain a copy of her words. And she did all this in a condition of chronic ill health.

Hildegard’s thought and work present interesting challenges to any effort to incorporate them into a modern theology of the body, since she was just as ambivalent about physicality and sexual

expression as we are. She, of course, lived a celibate lifestyle and held virginity in high regard, and yet “she warned that it is not for all but requires a special vocation” (Newman, 133). She “deplored concupiscence as vehemently as any, [but] seemed concerned to avoid the [Augustinian] implication that it is a punishment imposed by Godde” (Newman, 112). And “for all her warnings against the sins of the flesh, she was neither naive nor prudish” (Newman, 131). Warring with the ingrained negativity of the Church’s attitudes toward sexuality and the body were her profound interest and expertise in the workings of nature as well her lived experience as a woman.<sup>2</sup>

Because Hildegard by and large shared the antierotic bias of her Benedictine heritage, it is fascinating to watch her attempts to sidestep the antifeminist<sup>3</sup> corollaries that it usually entailed. Insofar as she succeeded, she did so partly through her sapiential theology, partly through reliance on insights alien to the Augustinian tradition—for instance, folk wisdom, medical lore about women, and theological motifs that derive ultimately from Greek or Jewish rather than Latin sources. She could also make shrewd use of her instinctual and empirical perceptions. (Newman, 90)

Instinctually and empirically, Hildegard understood creation, including humanity, to be basically good. It is important in reading Hildegard to draw a distinction between *corporeality* and *carnality* (see Garber). Physicality reflects the work of the creator; carnality reflects the work of the devil. In our physicality we reflect the image and likeness of the creator and the glory of the incarnate word. Hildegard considered humanity to be the crown jewel of creation. In explaining one of her visions, she states that “in the structure of the world humanity is at the center, since it is more powerful than the rest of Creation living there. Though small in stature, humankind is great in strength of soul” (*Secrets*, 66). We are created to be able to perceive and worship Godde. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Though referring to herself as a “weak” and “unlettered” woman, she certainly did not *act* as if these were constraints on her Godde-given ability and authority.

<sup>3</sup> The term “antifeminist” is a bit of an anachronism. The corollaries referred to are, more accurately, anti-woman and, even more fundamentally, anti-body.

hope comes through the senses, for ‘the human senses are in the power of the One True Almighty Godde, and thus people can know good and evil and grasp through their intellect whatever is useful for them.’ Human beings cannot fully comprehend Godde, but the senses offer the greatest human potential, that of recognizing Godde. (Emerson, 90)

It follows, then, that “the problem of sin lies not in the senses themselves but in the way humans use them, as the divine voice urges ‘...why do you not serve Godde, Who gave you both soul and body, for the sake of heavenly wages?’” (Emerson, 81) For Hildegard, the Fall did not result because humans are intrinsically evil; the first man and woman were by nature good, but were simply deceived, in their innocence, by Satan (Emerson, 87). Thus, despite her ingrained religious antipathy toward lustful acts, “in her more optimistic moods, Hildegard could leave the devil aside and treat lovemaking as a Godde-given fulfillment of Adam’s prophecy that ‘the two shall become one flesh’” and with “no hint of either inequality or corruption...a wholly natural and reciprocal act” (Newman, 136, 99).

Hildegard “gave practical, rather than specifically Christian advice, by letter and in person, on an extensive range of medical and physiological problems” (Maddocks, 164). In fact, there are several instances in Hildegard’s writings, in both her visionary and medical texts, in which she describes intercourse with an “absence of moral judgement” and in a manner that is “realistic, technically graphic and, intentionally or not, erotic” (Maddocks, 164):

‘When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings forth with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man’s seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman’s sexual organs contract and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way that a strong man can hold something enclosed in his fist.’ (Maddocks, 164)

And thus, since a man feels and possesses this great sweetness in himself [i.e., the love of Adam for Eve], he runs swiftly to the woman as a hart to the fountain, and

the woman to him, and she is like a threshing floor, which is flailed with many strokes and brought to heat when the grain is threshed upon it. (*Secrets*, 113)

Finally, in speaking about sexual arousal, Hildegard goes so far as to state that in the sexual organs “the gift of *rationalitas*<sup>4</sup> also flourishes, so that human beings know what to do or not to do. Therefore they find joy in the sexual act... In this way the human becomes reverent and disciplined” (Craine, 97).

Beyond her practical and, at times, sympathetic treatment of human sexual relations, one of the most remarkable results of her “instinctual and empirical perceptions” is her concept of *viriditas*, which plays a central role in her theology and understanding of life. *Viriditas* literally means “greening power” and is first shown to Hildegard in a vision wherein Eve is depicted as a cloud the color of “a tender green leaf” full of stars that signify the myriad souls of the human race whom Eve would mother (Newman, 102)<sup>5</sup>. *Viriditas* is “the principle of all life, growth, and fertility flowing from the life-creating power of Godde” (Newman, 102). It is “the fecundity that has its source in Godde and in our response to Godde” (Craine, 41). It is a power that “desires embodiment” (Craine, 46). It is, thus, an erotic force.

### **Hildegard’s Embodied Theology**

Hildegard’s theology was quite orthodox. She “believed in a Christianity that consisted essentially of the doctrines of Incarnation and Resurrection” (Schipperges, 114). In this, she was very much in tune with the thought of her age, as

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<sup>4</sup> Hildegard’s unusual term (rather than *ratio*) for reason or understanding, which “points to the human capacity to be open to Godde and to one another in the task of reuniting what had been separated” (Craine, 146, 97).

<sup>5</sup> The color of the cloud is important. While in the vision the cloud is about to be corrupted by the blackness of sin, it was not created in blackness. Its initial purity extends even to Eve’s descendants after the Fall. “Neither the cloud nor the physicality it represents is intrinsically evil. The stars within [it], which is the body of Eve, shine no less brightly than those in heaven; after passing through this life, they will replace those angels that fell from grace” (Garber, 112).

the twelfth century witnessed a growing awareness of the ‘incarnational,’ as opposed to the purely spiritual, image of Godde. Hitherto the body had played a lesser part in Western thought about the image...But a new interest in the predestination of Christ led to a recognition of Adam’s physical, as well as intellectual, resemblance to the Word made flesh. (Newman, 90)

However, Hildegard’s theological anthropology, like the rest of Hildegard’s orthodoxy, was formed in the tradition of sapiential theology, which,

whether viewed from the angle of creation or of redemption, [tends] to foster an optimistic attitude toward the world. Wisdom offers herself freely to those who love her; her theophanies render the knowledge of Godde both possible and actual... Godde is accessible and ever-present in the world, and the cosmos is suffused with healing, life-giving energies. Although sin is acknowledged, it is not understood as the sole cause of the Incarnation; Godde is not responsible for its inheritance; and the Atonement itself is seen from a sacramental rather than a sacrificial point of view... All creatures...exist from before time and forever in the embrace of Love. (Newman, 251)

This outlook on the Incarnation and Resurrection, on creation and redemption, is what underlies the surprisingly affirmative views Hildegard generally held about the body. The Godde ever-present in creation glorifies all contingent creatures. Thus, the “entire universe, the cosmos, manifests the mystery of this fiery, ever-living Light of Love that shines forth in and through matter, in and through human beings in their specific historical setting” (Craine, 60).

This Light shines particularly clearly through women due to their capacity to bear children. Hildegard sees “motherhood as theophany. Woman’s primary significance in the divine scheme of things is to reveal the hidden Godde by giving him birth. In the meantime, she gives birth to his image in every child that she bears” (Newman, 91). This understanding is in accord with the recently popular view of the body as site of revelation. Her mystical insight into women’s participation in the Incarnation implies that “woman’s work is...also a revelation of Godde’s work. Just as the

cosmos is Wisdom's vesture, or Godde's visible glory, so the body born of woman is the glory of the soul—or would be, had there been no Fall" (Newman, 96).

Hildegard's orthodoxy necessitated her preserving the centrality of the idea of the Fall, but the Christ's incarnation and redemption has mitigated its effects. "The Incarnation was, for her...the divine purpose for which the world was made," and because Christ was predestined to take on human form, his flesh imparts glory to human flesh (Newman, 55). As Hildegard wrote, "'the Mystery of Godde...appears in human likeness, because the Son of Godde redeemed the fallen human being in the service of Love when he clothed himself with flesh'" (Craine, 58). As a result, "Godde's Word glowed in the human figure, and humankind was reflected in the Word. Humanity helped to build the limbs of Godde's beautiful body" (Schipperges, 91).

Humans' reflection of the glory of the Word enables us to engage in good works that further contribute to our radiance: "'When fulfilling the precepts of Godde's commandments, people, too, are the delightful and dazzling garment of Wisdom. They serve as her green garment through good intentions and the living fecundity of works adorned with virtues of many kinds'" (Craine, 133). Thus, Hildegard's "theological paradigm for our task is the mystery of the dying and rising Christ, the Wisdom of Godde. This Christic dynamic of dying and rising in everyday life, which is forged through grace by individuals in community, on this earth, is what is meant by *viriditas*, fecundity" (Craine, 75).

Hildegard's affirmation of the goodness of the body<sup>6</sup> is, as has been said, orthodox, but it is presented in fresh, even astonishing language and imagery. This is due to the fact that her understanding derived not solely from her study of the Bible and religious texts but from her visions.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Hildegard was not given to ascetical practices, and her "attitude to food was healthy in its moderation, springing largely from common-sense notions of balance which still have validity today" (Maddocks, 45).



These visions repeatedly upheld two concepts that served as pillars supporting Hildegard's hopeful anthropology: the unity in humans of body and soul and the creation of humans in the image and likeness of Godde. Her insights on these matters give her remarkable relevance to modern theologians in our thinking about embodiment.

*"Like sap in a tree": The Unity of Body and Soul*

Hildegard's insistence on the absolute union of body and soul is in direct opposition to the tendency of the Christian monastic tradition to split one from the other, or at least radically to subordinate the body to the soul.<sup>7</sup> No doubt the source of Hildegard's courage in bucking this trend is that this truth, as with most others she asserts, was given to her in visions. Let's listen to her explain:

'The soul in the body is like sap in a tree, and its faculties are like the branches of a tree. How so? Intellect is in the soul like the greenness of the branches and leaves, the will like flowers, the spirit like the first fruit that springs from it, reason like the perfect fruit that becomes ripe, the senses like the extension of its grandeur. It is in this manner that the human body is strengthened and supported by the soul. This is why, O human, you must understand what you are because of your soul.' (Pernoud, 48)

'The soul indeed is present in the body as a wind which one neither sees nor hears blowing. Like the air, it spreads its puff after the manner of the wind, its sighs and its thoughts; its humidity, bearer of its good intentions toward Godde, makes it like the dew. Like the glow of the sun that sheds light on the whole world and that never weakens, the soul is entirely present in the small form of man.' (Pernoud, 101)

'The soul is the greening life-force [*viriditas*] of the flesh, for the body grows and prospers through her, just as the earth becomes fruitful when it is moistened. The soul humidifies the body so it does not dry out, just like the rain which soaks into the earth.' (Craine, 84)

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<sup>7</sup> Again, her insight arose not just from her visions and the interpretation of the visions by the voice of the Divine Light, but her lived experience in receiving them. Her "visions, though not perceived with the outer senses of body, are experienced while she is in the body, which...grounds her experience in her belief that body and soul are integrated" (Emerson, 78).

Thus, the soul and body support, inform, and depend on each other. The body depends on the soul in its role as *rationalitas*. Craine translates *rationalitas* as “‘bright-burning understanding in love’ because it refers not to reflexive consciousness but rather to an experience of being part of this Love, part of a mystery too vast to put into rational categories” (146). Thus, Hildegard could characterize the soul in the body as “‘the father of a family who wisely orders the affairs of his house’” or as possessing a “‘fiery nature’” that “‘warms all the life events she brings to her heart and cooks them to unity’” (Craine, 85). If this cooking to unity did not occur, that is, if “‘people pick up more knowledge with the head than their hearts can digest, they become ill” (Craine, 49). Reciprocally, the soul is dependent on the body “‘in which she lives in order to accomplish her work together with the body.’” Hildegard wrote that

‘the movement of the rational soul and the work of the body, together with the five senses that help make up the whole human being, are on a par. For the soul cannot urge the body to do more than it can achieve, and the body cannot achieve more than the soul has set into motion, just as the various senses cannot be separated from one another. Rather, they cling to one another and illuminate our entire person beneficially...’. (Schipperges, 85–86)

In fact, so intertwined are soul and body that even after the death of the body, the soul will remember its body with longing and look forward to the body’s resurrection: “‘Thus it eagerly awaits this last day of the world, for it has lost this garment which it loves and which is its own body’” (Pernoud, 103).

Clearly, then,

whenever Hildegard discussed the soul, she was also referring to the body. She did not consider the seat of the soul to be either inside or outside the body. The soul existed in every part of the human organism and gave life to the body. The body and the soul were indispensable to each other; they were inextricably intertwined and coexisted in harmony. The soul was the active principle within the body; it rejoiced in its deeds and expressed itself through the body’s activities. The purpose of the soul was to animate the body and cause things to happen. (Schipperges, 48)

In her teaching on the unity of body and soul, Hildegard prefigures Aquinas, who would come to the same conclusions by way of Aristotelian philosophy and who would have much greater influence on the subsequent course of Christian history. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas would write:

We must assert that the intellect which is the principle of intellectual operation is the form of the human body...Now it is clear that the first thing by which the body lives is the soul. And as life appears through various operations in different degrees of living things, that whereby we primarily perform each of all these vital actions is the soul. For the soul is the primary principle of our nourishment, sensation, and local movement; and likewise of our understanding. Therefore this principle by which we primarily understand, whether it be called the intellect or the intellectual soul, is the form of the body. (I, Q76, 1)

But nature never fails in necessary things: therefore the intellectual soul had to be endowed not only with the power of understanding, but also with the power of feeling. Now the action of the senses is not performed without a corporeal instrument. Therefore it behooved the intellectual soul to be united to a body fitted to be a convenient organ of sense. (I, Q76, 6)

...if the soul were united to the body merely as its motor, we might say that it is not in each part of the body, but only in one part through which it would move the others. But since the soul is united to the body as its form, it must necessarily be in the whole body, and in part thereof. For it is not an accidental form, but a substantial form of the body. (I, Q76, 8)

Being a composite of body and soul means, in other words, that “we do not know with the soul alone, nor do we feel with the body alone. On the contrary, the soul plays a role in sensory perception, and in knowledge the bodily senses provide the primary data” (González, 275). No wonder, then, that bodily ecstasy or injury can have such a profound effect on our soul.

Modern theologians engaged in embodiment theology agree on the unity of body and soul. For instance, Prokes, following Rahner’s thinking on the body as “Real Symbol,” asserts that “because there is a wholeness in body-soul being,...each ‘part’ [of the body] symbolically bears the function and force of the whole body-person...[T]he living body...manifests the whole person” (Prokes, 81–82). In this, Prokes, Rahner, and other theologians are most likely following the

tradition of Aquinas rather than Hildegard. Yet she, a “poor little woman” unschooled in theology, had expressed the same truth with as much power and greater poetry more than a century earlier than the Angelic Doctor and almost a millennium before today’s writers.

*“A mirror more perfect than the angels”: Image and Likeness*

For Hildegard, as for many other theologians before and after her, the fundamental dignity of the human body was to be found in its creation in the image and likeness of Godde. She records receiving confirmation of the Genesis creation stories in a vision:

‘I then heard the same voice. From heaven it spoke to me in these words: “Godde, the creator of the universe, fashioned man in his image and in his likeness. In him, he represented every creature, higher and lower. He loved him with such a love that he reserved for him the place from which he had expelled the fallen angel. He granted him all the glory, all the honor that this angel had lost at the same time as his salvation.’ (Pernoud, 95)

Thus, “man... is a mirror created even more perfect than the angels, for he reflects the entire cosmos, which is sealed in him” (Newman, 97). Furthermore, not only is humankind created in Godde’s image and likeness,<sup>8</sup> we are created as sexual beings. Hildegard grasped a main tenet of today’s theologizing on sexuality: as sexual creatures, we are fundamentally incomplete.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hildegard is concerned to refute the idea that whereas man was created in Godde’s image, woman was created in man’s image: “And Eve was not created from the seed of man but from his flesh, since Godde created her with the same power by which he sent His Son into the Virgin. And thereafter none were found to be like Eve, the virgin and mother.” Hildegard exhibits an understanding that most lay people lack, at least those who are limited to the English translation of the Genesis stories: the Hebrew *adam* means “earth creature” (from *adamah*, earth) and refers to a creature who is of indeterminate and probably plural sex; the *adam* is not referred to as a “man” (*ish*) until the “woman” (*ishah*) is created out of the *adam*’s “side” (not merely its “rib”). See Mary Phil Korsak, *At the Start: Genesis Made New* (New York: Doubleday), 1993.

<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that Hildegard’s thinking should exhibit a heterosexist bias in the assumption that our creation as either male or female presupposes a natural and divinely ordained longing for the opposite sex. Unfortunately, that bias is still evident in some of today’s writing on theology and sexuality (cf. McCarthy, Grenz). However, there is no need for modern readers to take the Genesis stories literally. Rather, the metaphorical truth holds that being sexual creatures entails a fundamental incompleteness that causes us to long for wholeness. Whether that wholeness is found with another of the same or opposite sex—or in celibate or platonic community with multiple others—is immaterial.

‘Woman was created for man’s sake, and man was made for woman’s. For as she is from man, so too man is from her, lest one be sundered from the other in the unity of procreation. For in one activity they perform one act, just as the air and the wind work together...The wind stirs the air and the air enfolds the wind, so that every green plant in their sphere is under their sway. What does this mean? Woman cooperates with man, and man with woman in the act of generation.’ (Newman, 99)

But Man needed a helper in his own likeness. So Godde gave him a helper that was his mirror-image, Woman, in whom the whole human race lay hidden...And the man and the woman were thus complementary, so that one works through the other, because man may not be called ‘man’ without woman, nor may woman without man be called ‘woman’... (*Secrets*, 70)

Furthermore, unlike most theologians of her time or before, in Hildegard’s “Edenic idyll [is] preserved a gentle eroticism. However corrupt the sexual attraction that we now experience, she maintained that in origin the pleasure of love is neither an evil nor a punishment” (Newman, 112). In such a reading of the Genesis stories, Hildegard is much closer than most other theologians of the preceding centuries to what was probably the mindset of the ancient authors. The crafters of the ancient Israelite stories took an unblushing look at the human condition and came up with “an etiological comment” that managed to address sexuality as a basic drive, a “dynamic that impels male and female to form a unity,” while also conveying an understanding that sexuality is not “simply a biological phenomenon limited to procreation, which humans share with the animals. On the contrary...the narrator attributes sexuality<sup>10</sup> solely to humankind, and as a consequence the designation ‘male and female’ pertains to the *imago Dei*” (Grenz 2001, 278, 273).

Hildegard also followed the meaning of *imago Dei* to its logical conclusion: considering whether our being made sexual implies sexuality in Godde. In a letter to Archbishop Eberhard of Bamberg, she asserted “that Godde must have delighted in what he had created, that despite the Fall

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<sup>10</sup> A concept broader than simple, biological sexual reproduction, which humans share with other animals.

human nature was his supreme achievement, and that Creation looks to him ‘like a lover’” (Maddocks, 107). In one of her visionary works, she wrote, “‘I, however, compare the great love of the Creator for the creature and the creature for the Creator to the love and faith by which Godde joins a man and woman together so they can have children’” (Schipperges, 102). As with much of Hildegard’s thinking, there is biblical precedent for such a view: “the biblical writers appeal to a specifically sexual bond—marriage—to indicate the relationship Godde desires to have with Godde’s people, whether Old Testament Israel (e.g., Jer. 2:2; Isa. 62:5) or the New Testament church (Eph. 22–32)” (Grenz 1996, 11). But, as with Hildegard’s other insights, her visions proved the most immediate and incontrovertible sources of understanding. It was her own lived experience of coming face to face with Godde that convinced her that “the creature could speak to the Creator as if it were speaking to its beloved. It could claim a place of quietness, a home, which Godde was prepared in his love to give...Godde wished to kiss this his own piece of work” (Schipperges, 102).

The content of the visions also explains why and how Hildegard “constantly devised new images to illustrate the life of the Trinity, its vital power and compassionate wisdom” (Schipperges, 35). Her images of the Trinity are commonly drawn from nature, especially the human body, for Hildegard recognized that if humans are *imago Dei* precisely in our bodies, then by definition our human form is trinitarian. This is a leap few theologians, even today, have been able to make.

### **The Trinitarian Body**

Hildegard’s trinitarian analogies are drawn from her perception of *viriditas* in nature: a stone has the three qualities of damp greenness, solidity to the touch, and sparkling fire; a flame has the three qualities of brilliant light, purplish fire, and fiery heat (Schipperges, 35). But she also draws some trinitarian analogies from the human body: a word is composed of sound, power, and breath;

Godde “rules over everything, just as the head rules over the whole body. For Godde makes life rational when eyes see, ears hear, and noses smell” (Schipperges, 35). Augustine, of course, early and famously compared the Trinity to the human capacities of memory, intellect, and will. However, one problem with this analogy, from the standpoint of a theology of the body, is that, “in being attributed to the ‘mind,’ the three lack reference to the whole embodied person” (Prokes, 68).<sup>11</sup>

If bodies are in the image of Godde, then how is the “three-person’d Godde” reflected in them? Hildegard saw humanity as basically tripartite:

‘But a human being has inside three paths. What are they? The soul, the body, and the senses, and it is through them that life is conducted. How? The soul vivifies the body and contains thought, and the body draws the souls and manifests thought, while the senses touch the soul and please the body.’ (Pernoud, 47–48)

And then there is Hildegard’s most astonishing analogy of Trinitarian life: human sexuality. Hildegard regarded three qualities of sex as reflecting the Goddehead. Sexual potency (*fortitudo*) was related to the Father, libido (*concupiscentia*) to the Son, and affection (*studium*) to the Holy Spirit (Schipperges, 35; Newman, 125). Thus, “sex was a reflection, a mirror image of the Goddehead”; physical union provided humans with a way of becoming “truly human and capable of comprehending Godde’s work and the reality of the spirit” (Schipperges, 35).

Thus, Augustine and other theologians “described the Trinitarian relations in highly abstract, carefully nuanced terms,” but “Hildegard’s visions are charged with the much more primitive and powerful appeal of eros” that “manifests the love not only *of* Godde but also *in* Godde” (Newman, 50). Even modern theologians are rarely as bold as Hildegard’s bodily trinitarian analogies. In Hildegard’s theology, humans’ place in the cosmic order is fixed by a triumvirate of traits: being

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, “despite the inadequacies of Augustine’s groundbreaking efforts to deepen understanding of trinitarian life,... it is to [him] that we owe the dictum that all of creation bears ‘vestiges’ of the Trinity” (Prokes, 68).

dependent on Godde, needing relationship with Godde and others, and having a responsibility toward creation. Each of these traits is rooted in our physical bodies yet reflects the revelation of Goddeself as triune.

*Dependence on Godde: Reflecting the Creator*

Beautiful as humanity may be, redeemed by and reflecting the Incarnate Word, we are utterly dependent on Godde as our creator. We have “our true root and home in the heart of Godde” (Craine, 73). “First and foremost,” for Hildegard, “the human being is the handiwork of Godde. It is simply impossible to conceive of humans as purely autonomous beings” (Schipperges, 42). Godde created and sustains all of creation, including each individual. In a vision, divine *Caritas* says:

‘I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and have breathed out nothing that can die. But I determine how things are—I have regulated the circuit of the heavens...with Wisdom. But I am also the fiery light of divine essence—I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon, and the stars I burn. And by means of the airy wind, I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all.’ (Craine, 146)

For I am life entire, which is not struck from stones, nor budded from branches, nor rooted in the virility of the male, but all that is living is rooted in me...And since all vitality blazes forth from me, I also serve; and I am life eternally the same, without beginning or end.’ (*Secrets*, 64)

Thus, Hildegard explains that “the Spirit of Godde is a living fountain that he distributes among all his works, which also draw life from him and possess their vitality through him, like reflections in water. And no being can plainly see whence it lives, but each merely senses that which moves it” (Newman, 53).

Perhaps because we cannot “plainly see” the source of our being, we tend to forget our dependence, saying, “I know that I myself can do anything!” but those who trust in themselves more than in Godde are suffering from “Godde-forgetfulness” (Craine, 74, 109). We delude



ourselves at our peril, for nothing, not even well-intentioned works, can come to fruition without the support of *viriditas*, Godde's greening power. As Hildegard cautions us, "If you wish to travel the good paths and faithfully hear my words, then persist in sincere prayer, asking Godde to come to your aid and not to abandon you, for your flesh is weak" (Craine, 108).

*Reliance on Others: Reflecting the Redeemer*

Hildegard chose celibacy, but as a nun and abbess her life was lived in profound community. Certainly she formed deep friendships, for example, with her secretary, Volmar, and a younger nun in the convent, Richardis von Stade. Hildegard knew from her own experience as well as biblical teaching that "humans could not exist in isolation, without reference to anyone else or as ends in themselves, as abstract beings" (Schipperges, 42). As we have seen, a primary source of this understanding was her reading of the creation stories:

All that [Adam] is and does is embodied in [Eve], so that by contemplating her he beholds himself and his world imbued with new radiance. Eve, too, ... 'looks to another as the angels look to the Lord.' In Hildegard's view, all salvation is contingent upon this act of turning away from self to contemplate another, for Godde so ordered the cosmos that 'the higher parts have gained splendor from the lower, and the lower from the higher.' So, by the mutuality of their gaze, Adam and Eve reflect the life of the Trinity and the unfallen angels, and escape the sin of Lucifer, who wished to be a lamp instead of a mirror. As man and woman reflect on each other and shine before each other, each grows in wisdom and the world is enriched. For the increase of love and knowledge, it is not good for man to be alone. (Newman, 97-98)

Making use of a traditional analogy for her own purposes,<sup>12</sup> Hildegard wrote that "man is like the soul and woman like the body,' and, by extension, 'man signifies the divinity and woman the

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<sup>12</sup> On the face of it, this reference to Christ's physical form would seem inimical to woman's equal participation in *imago Dei*. But for Hildegard, ... woman's role as vessel of the Incarnation was the very seal of her creation in the image of Godde... [In her use of this analogy] lies the clue to Hildegard's surprisingly radical anthropology, which would exalt not the male but the female as the representative human being. Adam symbolizes, but does not share, the divine nature. In contrast, Eve both symbolizes and bestows the divine humanity, insofar as she prefigures Mary. It is not by her appearance but by her gift that the woman represents Christ's human nature and bears the stamp of his image" (Newman, 92-93).

humanity of the Son of Godde” (Newman, 93). But, as we have seen, body and soul are utterly intertwined and inseparable, and Hildegard would have followed orthodox teaching that Christ’s humanity and divinity also could not be separated. By extension, then, only together can men and women reflect Christ.

However, this emphasis on the joining of male and female is held in tension with Hildegard’s preference for celibate community. It is evident from her life that she “had become relational and interdependent. For her this did not happen with one man but with all, men and women, who came to her seeking counsel...Hildegard’s insights into the intended partnership of men and women has to be seen against [this] background” (Craine, 94). Hildegard herself reflected that “what in other women is a capacity for motherhood had in her become a capacity for Godde” (Newman, 106). Regardless, then, of whether companionship was sought sexually or celibately, it was nevertheless true that humans “could never achieve complete joy by themselves alone. This joy had to be given to them by another human being: ‘But if one perceives the joy one receives from another person, one will feel in one’s heart a great sense of enchantment. For then the soul will recall how it was created by Godde’ (Schipperges, 54).

#### *Responsiveness to Creation: Reflecting the Sanctifier*

Not only are humans not meant to be alone, “humanity does not exist for its own sake, to find or realize itself. People have a task to perform in the outside world...They have, as it were, an ecological responsibility” (Schipperges, 42). This task has been given to us by Godde, who as Hildegard saw in a vision, “‘places in man’s hands the whole of creation, so that man can act with it in the same manner that Godde had fashioned his work, man’” (Pernoud, 94). Now, here is a new idea about humans’ relationship to the created world! We are not simply stewards but are to care for

and sustain the Earth—and ourselves—as Godde cares for and sustains us. No wonder our society and environment are in such trouble. Hildegard warns us: “‘The whole of creation would be made black if [the creature] did not use its talent correctly, but it is beautiful when it does its duty justly’” (Schipperges, 102).

We are called to share “in the work of perfecting creation,” to become “partners in the divine revelation, in the ways of creation that lead to salvation” (Schipperges, 92), but we fail when we forget our dependence on Godde and on one another. As the Son of Man instructs in a vision, “‘the great gift’” each of us has received is “‘to be used for others as well as for yourself’”; after all, the Son of Man says, “‘This is how your creator builds’” (Craine, 82, 81). In Hildegard’s theological framework,

Godde’s therapeutic powers or energies are gifts of grace that need human receptivity and cooperation to become incarnate in responsible choices in history. Set free in Christ, these energies and powers inhabit, surround, and enable human beings to become co-creators. They are spiritual energies that help in reconnecting body and soul, man and woman, individual and society, heaven and earth, Godde and human beings. (Craine, 112)

But, in our Godde-forgetfulness, we are causing injury to the creation Godde so lovingly set us in, not solely out of willful, physical pollution of the environment (not much of a problem in Hildegard’s time) but out of willful disregard for our proper, holy work in the world. In a vision, Hildegard

‘heard how the elements of the world turned to [Godde] with a wild cry. And they shouted: “We cannot run anymore to finish our course as our master willed it. For people with their evil deeds reverse our course, like a mill that turns everything upside down. We already reek like the pest and hunger for the fullness of justice.”

[Godde] answered: . . . “Now all the winds are filled with the decay of leaves, and the air spits out pollution so that people can hardly open their mouths anymore. The greening life force [*viriditas*] has weakened because of the unGoddely erring of deluded human souls. They follow only their own desires and shout: ‘Where is this Godde, whom we never get a chance to see?’” (Craine, 67).

When we deny our Godde-given work in creation, we deny the work of Christ, whose end—determined before all ages—is for humans to participate in bringing about the *basilea*, the Commonwealth of Godde.

Christ, crucified and risen, the Wisdom of Godde, is the manifestation, goal, and moving power of this Love in a universe that is meant to be an interrelated, Trinitarian energy pattern of Love. Love opposes evil and suffering. Human beings participate in this pattern of mutuality and interrelated fecundity (*viriditas*), which—in the Holy Spirit—is the work of the Son. They are called to embody it in the midst of their own struggles in a world that abounds with self-protective isolation...In other words, connectedness in mutual interrelatedness is at the heart of reality as it is meant to be. To bring the new creation about, we—and all of creation—groan in the pains of childbirth. (Craine, 144–45)

Hildegard has thus set up a framework for a trinitarian anthropology: being dependent on Godde, needing relationship with Godde and others, and having a responsibility toward creation. Each of these traits is rooted in our physical bodies yet reflects the revelation of Goddeself as triune. Unfortunately, Hildegard does not say as much as we might like about each of these traits, but for each one we can turn for amplification to another of the women mystics. Each of the other three, in her own unique language for the experience of Godde, fleshes out one aspect of the Trinity and our embodiment of it: Julian with Godde as Mother, Mechthild with Godde as Lover, and Teresa with Godde as Friend.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Godde as Mother: Julian of Norwich

*A mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest. It is nearest because it is most natural. It is readiest because it is most loving. And it is surest because it is most true. This office no one but [Christ] alone might or could ever have performed to the full.*

—Julian of Norwich

*Let's say: we are the mothers. We are mothers—see what is taking place in this country. A mother will hold the knife on the sharp end.*

—Ma Frances Baard

Almost nothing is known about the life of Julian of Norwich (1342–after 1416) other than the little she tells us herself in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which records sixteen visions, or “showings,” as she called them, that she received when she was “thirty and a half years old” (3:44).<sup>1</sup> She received these visions during an illness so severe that she and those around her believed her to be near death. When all sixteen showings had been revealed, however, she recovered almost immediately. At some point thereafter, Julian became an anchorite attached to the Church of St. Julian, from which, apparently, she took the only name we have for her. It was during her enclosure as an anchorite that she recorded her visions. In fact, she recorded them twice: first in the Short Text, which she wrote shortly after the experience, and then, twenty years later, in the Long Text, which is over twice as long and includes her complex insights into the meanings of the visions, attained after her prayerful reflection on them those many years.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from *Revelations of Divine Love* are given by chapter number plus the corresponding page number in the translation used. Unless otherwise noted, citations are from the Long Text.

It is possible that her need to pray and reflect on the showings was a large part of her reason for entering the anchorage.<sup>2</sup> There she could be assured of the time and quiet to engage in serious meditation. Most of what we surmise about the shape of her life comes from a contemporary text, the *Ancrene Riwe*, that was written as a guide for women anchorites.<sup>3</sup> Anchorages generally consisted of one fair-sized room, possibly more, with a window into the church so that the anchorite could see the Mass being celebrated and another window that opened to the outside so that she could speak with and give counsel to visitors seeking spiritual guidance. Once a person entered the anchorage, he or she was not to leave. In fact, the liturgy for enclosure closely mimicked that for burial. However, Julian did have a maid, Alice, to cook and clean for her, and would have been allowed a cat to catch mice. She also was likely to have been permitted to walk in the church courtyard or garden. Anchorites were to live simple, pious lives, reciting the full office each day, but they were encouraged to dress warmly and to eat a moderate but adequate diet. In sum, “the purpose of anchoritic enclosure was not heroic asceticism...but rather a complete openness to Godde in Prayer. Julian’s way would have been rigorous, therefore, but not impossibly austere” (Flinders, 81).

Furthermore, Julian would not have been extremely isolated. The Church of St. Julian sat on a busy thoroughfare through Norwich, a bustling port city boasting a population second only to London during Julian’s time. It also was home to a Benedictine priory that possessed one of the best libraries in England, from which Julian may have been able to borrow books or with whose monks

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<sup>2</sup> If she was not already enclosed at the time of the illness. It is not known when she entered the anchorage, and scholars debate the likelihoods of various scenarios: before or after the visions, before or after the Short Text, before or after the Long Text. See Jantzen, 21–25.

<sup>3</sup> The following discussion of the life of an anchorite and the city of Norwich is drawn from Jantzen, 15–50.

she may have been able to discuss important theological texts and ideas. And, as noted, she was expected to counsel visitors, from whom she would have undoubtedly heard of the political upheavals and other problems. During Julian's tenure in the anchorage, the Black Death hit the city multiple times with very high death tolls, agricultural failures led to famine and unrest, and John Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards, were executed at a site not far from Julian's church (Flinders, 82).

Thus, for Julian the anchorage would have served as "the room of one's own" that Virginia Woolf would advocate over five centuries later, providing her with the physical security and inner serenity to formulate her book, which, scholars agree, shows remarkable literary skill. Julian's voice is calm and reasoned, her approach to her subject matter is objective yet rooted in her experience, and the organization of her text is clear but nuanced with complexity. Her thought is marked by similarities to Augustine and shows influence from Aquinas and perhaps other great Christian writers in addition to the Bible.<sup>4</sup> She is the first woman to have written a book in English, and she wrote it masterfully. However, the quality of her thinking and the depth of her theology has only recently been appreciated. Her work languished for centuries before any real attention was paid it, and then she tended to be seen as a devotional writer more than a theologian. It was only in the late twentieth century that she began to be appreciated by scholars. No less a figure than Thomas Merton declared her to be "one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices" and "the greatest English

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<sup>4</sup> The extent of Julian's education is debated. She could possibly have been educated in the boarding school run by the nuns of Norwich's Carrow Abbey. At a minimum, she could read and write in English. She may also have had rudimentary knowledge of Latin and French (Jantzen, 18–19).

theologian.”<sup>5</sup> Feminist theologians were particularly interested in her ideas, especially Julian’s assertion of the motherhood of Godde.

The long, if submerged, history of conceiving of Godde as mother has its beginnings in the Old Testament and apocryphal Wisdom literature (Is 42:14 and 49:15, Hos 13:8, Wis 7:11–12, Sir 15:1–2) and continues in the New Testament when attributes of divine Wisdom are applied to Christ and when Jesus compares himself to a mother hen longing to gather her chicks under her wings (Matt 23:37). Patristic writings by Clement, Origen, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine, among others, all refer to Christ as mother (Bynum 1982, 126). The rise of affective piety in the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a marked increase in “descriptions of Godde as a woman nursing the soul at her breasts, drying its tears, punishing its petty mischief-making, [and] giving birth to it in agony and travail” (Bynum 1982, 129). Spiritual writers of this time capitalized on “three basic stereotypes of the female or the mother: the female is generative (the fetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid)” (Bynum 1982, 131).

What is different about Julian is the extent to which she develops the image. “For Julian, Godde is never simply ‘like’ a mother. For her, he is a mother and the most ultimate of mothers...Julian has deliberately chosen metaphor over simile for this image” (Heimmel, 51). In Julian’s conception, motherhood is the primary description of the relationship of Christ to human beings: “This fair, lovely word ‘mother’ is so sweet and so tender in itself that it cannot truly be said of any but of him” (Ch. 60, 142). Julian reminds us of the “precious blood and water which he

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<sup>5</sup> *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), 275, cited in Flinders, 234 n.4.



allowed to pour out completely for love” (Ch. 24, 76). This reference is to the spear wound to Jesus' side inflicted by a Roman soldier to ascertain that Jesus was dead before taking his body down from the cross, but those two fluids have particular significance for women: they are the birth fluids. A whole new creation has been born out of the suffering and death of the Son of Godde. Therefore, implies Julian, Christ is not merely a metaphorical mother by virtue of his tender feelings for us; he is *literally*—in so far as the mystical and metaphysical can be literal—our mother. The hole in his side has become a womb from which he has labored to bring us forth into a life that is eternal:

We know that our mothers only bring us into the world to suffer and die, but our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love, bears us into joy and eternal life; blessed may he be! So he sustains us within himself in love was in labor for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last he died. (Ch. 60, 141).

A newborn needs to be fed, and is fed from the mother's body. This, too, Christ does “most generously and most tenderly, with the holy sacrament which is the precious food of life itself” (Ch. 60, 141). And not only is his love for us not depleted after his suffering and labor, but the boundless love of motherhood has in fact “made him our debtor,” so that he gladly continues to labor on our behalf (Ch. 60, 141). Thus, Julian extends the motherhood metaphor to address more varied parental activities needed as the child grows, which Julian uses to describe the course of our human life.

Julian presents her vision of Godde in the feminine maternal role not in the isolated fragments of the tradition but in a complete connected cycle of life from before birth through after death. Julian's majestic vision proceeds through all the various stages of: enclosure and growth within the womb; the trauma of labor and birth; the suckling of the infant and feeding of the child; the care and education of the older child; the setting of examples and disciplining of the child; the washing, healing, forgiving, and comforting of the child as it matures; and the continual loving, touching, and guiding of the child even to the point of its own death which becomes in turn a rebirth and return to the original womb. (Heimmel, 55)

Also, “Julian further describes Godde...as repeatedly expressing love for humanity through touch much as a mother does with her child” (Heimmel, 65).

Another critical difference between Julian’s motherhood image and that of earlier writers is that Julian ascribes motherhood to all three persons of the Trinity, because it was shown to her in the first vision that “where Jesus is spoken of, the Holy Trinity is to be understood” (Ch. 4, 46).

I considered the operation of all the Holy Trinity, and in doing so I saw and understood these three properties: the property of fatherhood, the property of motherhood, and the property of lordship, all in one Godde...I saw and understood that the great power of the Trinity is our father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our lord (Ch. 58, 137–138).

Julian is drawing on the “more theological than devotional” example of the scholastic use of motherhood as Wisdom or Holy Spirit (Bynum 1982, 151), but in extending motherhood to the Trinity, she goes beyond what she had received from the tradition. In this, her motherhood metaphor is like other aspects of her theology, which occasionally is in tension with the teachings of “Holy Church” in important ways.<sup>6</sup> Despite the conflicts with received teaching, Julian trusts that the reality of God “is structured as it is revealed” (Bauerschmidt 1999, 33). Julian in fact considers the showings to be a “higher judgment” and church teachings to be a “lower judgment,” although still necessary (Ch. 45, 106). So, she struggles to make sense of her visions and the explanations of them that she was given. It does not appear that Julian “expected further understanding to come upon her in blinding flashes or in additional visions; the understanding was to come in years of prayerful pondering. It was only in living by what she already understood that she could hope to come to

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<sup>6</sup> Most striking is her understanding that Godde does not attribute blame to humans for sin but simply looks on us in our fallen state with love and compassion. She “could see no blame or anger in Godde”; rather, it is human blame and anger that makes us expect such from Godde (or, in modern psychological parlance, project such onto Godde). See esp. Ch. 45.

understand more deeply” (Jantzen, 92). Julian holds fast to her experience and, as a result, comes to an understanding of Godde that is as extraordinary today as it was in her time.

### **Motherhood Incarnated**

Although Julian sees motherhood in all persons of the Trinity, this characteristic is most closely associated with the second person, Jesus Christ. We are “eternally born” in Christ and yet “we shall always be enclosed” in him like a womb; we are “grounded and rooted” in him (Ch. 57, 136; Ch. 58, 138). His “giving of himself in the incarnation to human flesh [is] comparable to a mother’s giving of her bodily substance to the fetus within her womb” (Nuth, 67).

Our natural Mother, our gracious Mother (for he wanted to become our Mother completely in every way), undertook to begin his work very humbly and very gently in the Virgin’s womb...that is to say, our great Godde, the most sovereign wisdom of all, was raised in this humble place and dressed himself in our poor flesh to do the service and duties of motherhood in every way. (Ch. 60, 141)

And in taking on our human nature he gave us life, in his blessed death on the cross he gave us birth into life everlasting; and from that time, and now, and for ever until Judgement Day, he feeds and fosters us, just as the great and supreme kind nature of motherhood and the natural need of childhood demand. (Ch. 63, 147)

Thus, Julian places a strong emphasis on the biological functions of motherhood (gestation, labor, lactation) when she assigns femaleness to Jesus, with the result that the corporeality of Jesus takes on primary significance: “these distinctively female activities are clearly bodily, tied to the lower strata and replete with associations of fecundity, and thus incarnational” (Bauerschmidt 1999, 95).

It is the Incarnation that is the foundation of Julian’s theology of the body. Through the showings Julian comes to understand that “Godde has made us double,” that is, human souls have two aspects or qualities, substance and sensuality (Ch. 58, 138).<sup>7</sup> The substantive nature is “the

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<sup>7</sup> The Spearing translation uses “essential being” for “substance” and “sensory being” for “sensuality,” which accurately conveys Julian’s meaning (modern English usage differs from hers), but the more common practice in works on Julian is to use her original terms.

higher part” in that it wills nothing but Godde’s will: “so far as our essential being is concerned, Godde made us so noble and so rich that we always work his will and glory” (Ch. 57, 135). Our substance reflects the image of Godde bestowed at the moment of creation (Ch. 55, 132) and “is enclosed in Jesus, with the blessed soul of Christ sitting and resting in the Goddehead” (Ch. 56, 134). Our sensuality is our imperfect nature. It is part of the soul but includes the body and all the frailties and limitations thereof.<sup>8</sup>

Sensuality can have an animal will,<sup>9</sup> but it need not. It can be wholly preoccupied with itself, and thereby be at odds with the substance, or it can, by repentance, training, and the grace of Godde, come to focus on Godde and thereby be reintegrated with the substance and bring new wholeness to the person. (Jantzen, 151)

In fact, that reintegration is “the task of spirituality,” and it is “made possible by the incarnation” because by taking on human flesh, “Christ fully united sensuality and substance” (Jantzen, 148). For while our substance is united to each person of the Trinity, our sensuality is only in the second person, so that Christ becomes our mother doubly in response to the need occasioned by our double nature:

the second Person of the Trinity is our mother in nature and in our essential creation, in whom we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother in mercy in taking on our sensory being. And so our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways; for in our Mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again, he unites us to our essential being. (Ch. 58, 138)

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<sup>8</sup> “This distinction between substance and sensuality must not be confused with a dualism between soul and body, as though substance is soul and sensuality body. To the extent that Julian does retain a body-soul dichotomy in her understanding of personhood, both substance and sensuality belong to the soul; though without embodiment there could be no sensuality. We are made sensual, she says, ‘when our soul is breathed into our body’(Ch. 55); but the sensuality consists of the union of the two, not of either soul or body on its own” (Jantzen, 143).

<sup>9</sup> An animal will “can have no good impulses” (Ch. 37, 92).

This union between our essential being (substance) and sensory being (sensuality) results in perfect humanity (Ch. 58, 138). Thus, unlike other Christian writers (such as Augustine), “for Julian the Incarnation is fully efficacious, both for male and female humanity” (McEntire, 21).<sup>10</sup> Perfect humanity means both a perfected soul and a perfected physicality: both are saved because both are taken on by Christ, who was perfect man.

And because of the glorious union which was thus made by Godde between the soul and the body, it must needs be that mankind shall be redeemed from double death—a redemption which could never have taken place before the time when the second Person of the Trinity had taken on the lower part of humanity, the higher part having been united to him at the time of humanity’s first creation. These two parts were in Christ, the higher and the lower, one soul. (Ch. 55, 132)

Thus, the Incarnation and Resurrection reconciles us not just to Godde (from whom we’ve never really been separated) but even more dramatically to ourselves. As a result, the body can be regarded with great respect and love.

During Julian’s illness, she had experienced in her body what Christ experienced in his body while on the cross. This was an answer to prayer, but, she says, if she had known how intense the pain would be she would not have asked to undergo it, because “it was worse than bodily death” and beyond any words to describe (Ch. 18, 67). Thus,

the agony of two bodies figures prominently at the outset of Julian’s visionary experience of 1373. The first is Julian’s own...The second of these bodies is Christ’s...The drama of redemption upon which Julian will meditate for the rest of her life is performed in the space established by the intersection of these two bodies in pain. (Bauerschmidt 1999, 36)

Further concentrating Julian’s awareness of her body, much of the content of Julian’s visions are delivered in the form of “bodily sight” as well as by spiritual sight and “words formed in my

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine held that the *imago Dei* remains damaged, even after humanity is redeemed. Recall also that Augustine granted *imago Dei* to women only when they were taken together with men. See McEntire, 15–16.

understanding” (ST 7, 11).<sup>11</sup> This bodily sight is also very detailed; Julian notes many minute and passing changes in the physical appearance of Christ’s skin, lips, and blood. Even in the midst of acute awareness of her own body, Julian is also intently focused on his. She experiences all at the same time her own illness, the suffering of Christ, the wonder of receiving the visions, and the joys shown to her in them. In this way the dichotomies of body/soul and pain/joy are collapsed, or perhaps transcended. She emerges from this experience “in a new wholeness of embodied soul. She is ‘oned’ (united) in her own being as precondition of her ‘oneing’ with Christ” (Lichtmann, 270). There can be no real separation between soul and body because there is no real separation between humans and Christ, our Mother.

In Julian’s incarnational theology,

human bodiliness is important to both humans and Godde. It is not to be dismissed as useless or detrimental to human spiritual growth. In fact, its development over the course of human life in time contributes to that increase of Godde’s image in the human which Godde predestined ‘from before beginning’ and in which humanity and Godde will eternally rejoice in heaven. (Nuth, 113)

This attitude is consonant with her refusal to advocate ascetic practice or acts of mortification. She writes that “the penance which people impose on themselves was not shown to me...but it was shown especially and powerfully and most beautifully that we should humbly and patiently bear and suffer the penance which Godde himself gives us” (Ch 77, 168). Life will hand us suffering enough; we don’t need to seek it out. All we need to do is “remember his blessed Passion, with pity and love” (Ch 77, 168). In a remarkable little passage, Julian asserts that the human body is of such value that even its lowest functions are provided for:

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<sup>11</sup> “Julian kept a clear distinction between bodily and spiritual vision, so that when she says that she saw something with bodily vision, we have to take it that she means what she says, and is not talking about spiritual illumination or her own imagination” (Jantzen, 76).

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is Godde who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for love of the soul which he created in his own likeness. For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of Godde. (Ch. 6, 49)

In a similar involving of Godde in the messy physicality of human life, Julian also asserts that Christ is present with and to women in the act of childbirth: “although the birth of our body is only low, humble and modest compared with the birth of our soul, yet it is he [Christ] who does it in the beings by whom it is done” (Ch. 60, 142).

In these gentle but unblushing observations, Julian evidences what Sara Ruddick terms “maternal thinking.”<sup>12</sup> It is the language of not just mothers but of all caregivers, those who in their careers or life circumstances become intimate with the beauty and dignity and the human body but also its debility, decay, and “humblest need.” Maternal thinking knows that the one comes with the other, sooner or later, necessarily. It is a way of perceiving the world wherein “intellectual activities are distinguishable, but not separable, from disciplines of feeling”; in which there is a “unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion”; which advocates humility and not self-effacement, “resilient good humor” and not “cheery denial”; which engages in “attentive love” (Ruddick, 348, 351, 359).

Where might this way of thinking come from in Julian, the religious recluse? For one thing, she seems to have had a good relationship with her mother, who was present at her sickbed. But it is also possible that she had been a mother herself. If she was “thirty and a half” years old when she

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<sup>12</sup> “In articulating and respecting the maternal, I do not underwrite the still current, false, and pernicious identification of womanhood with biological or adoptive mothering of particular children in families. For me, ‘maternal’ is a social category: Although maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary or sufficient. Many women and some men express maternal thinking...” (Ruddick, 346).

received the showings, as she tells us, she was certainly more than old enough to have been married and had children. Given the toll that the Black Death took on Norwich, it is certainly plausible that Julian could have entered the anchorhold having lost her husband and children to the plague. It is interesting to note in this regard that

Julian never mentions chastity. At least by the time she became an anchoress, if not before, she had herself doubtless taken the vow; and it may well be that she took it for granted as a necessary condition for her own life of prayer. Yet in her repeated affirmations that she is writing for all her fellow Christians she does not once suggest that chastity is an important element in the development of deepening moral and spiritual integrity in response to Godde. It is simply not discussed. When this is taken together with her deep appreciation of Godde's creative love in our other physical functions, and in the context of a society which would be inclined to link celibacy with Goddeliness, her silence is eloquent. (Jantzen, 157)

Regardless of whether Julian was a biological mother, she did come to be seen as a mother by the people of her city, especially those who came to Mother Julian, as she came to be called, for spiritual counsel. She repeatedly stresses that the value of her showings is chiefly in their being communicated for the comfort, support, and edification of her "fellow Christians," toward whom she felt not just a responsibility but a tender concern. Any or all of these elements could be responsible for the fact that "Julian's love of the superior mother, Godde, does not cause her to reject but rather to incorporate and confirm her continued love of earthly mother and world as integral parts of that same Godde's creation" (Heimmel, 54).<sup>13</sup>

Her respect for motherhood and women is also evidenced by her general avoidance of gendered language. "While she sometimes uses the traditional 'Son,' Julian never uses the masculine 'Word' but always the feminine 'Wisdom' to designate the second person of the trinity" (Nuth, 46).

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<sup>13</sup> This is in contrast with other, earlier writers' use of the motherhood metaphor for Godde: "There is little evidence that the popularity of feminine and maternal imagery in the high Middle Ages reflects an increased respect for actual women by men. Saints' lives might romanticize mothers, but there was in the general society no mystique of motherhood" (Bynum 1982, 143)



Furthermore, “the soul that is saved and cared for by mother Godde is a genderless ‘child,’” which in Middle English, as in modern German, is assigned the pronoun “it” rather than “he” or “she” (Bynum 1991, 169). In fact, throughout her writing

Julian employs a notably equalizing choice of diction in her references to humanity. Rather than a total reliance on the typical expression of general ‘mankind’ to represent all humanity, Julian repeatedly specifies both sexes in her book. Julian constantly reminds the reader that she is speaking to both ‘men and women’ or ‘man and woman.’ She further reinforces this idea by her persistent use of the term ‘evyn cristen’ [fellow Christian] to describe in the most equating and non-sexist fashion all those who shall be saved. (Heimmel, 73)

### **Embodied Motherhood**

Motherhood is an embodied practice. Not just the carrying, birthing, and nursing of an infant, but all aspects of the care and love given a child are given and received through the body. Seeing Godde as Mother provides us with a way of seeing Godde in our bodies and our bodies as in the image of the Creator. We give birth not only to new human beings but to ourselves, to creativity in all its forms.<sup>14</sup> In Julian’s analogy between the work of Godde and the work of mothering we find “an explicit reciprocal honoring and elevating of the concrete life of real mothers” (McLaughlin, 102). This can be seen partly as a product of her time, since

maternal metaphors become prominent at a time when many spiritual writers have grown up in families, known their own mothers, and gone through puberty in the world; some may even have been parents themselves. In the twelfth century the new monastic orders, in contrast to the old, preferred to recruit adults, and the percentage of monks and nuns who had been married before their conversion appears to have become much higher. (Bynum 1982, 142)

Unlike many of those earlier writers, however, Julian does not succumb to oversentimentality in her descriptions of Godde as Mother. This is as it should be. As Eleanor McLaughlin points out, “in the

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<sup>14</sup> Although it is critical that literal mothering be revalued both within Christian tradition and larger society, I do not want to limit the concept of motherhood to the actual bearing and rearing of children. Rather, I see motherhood as representative both of other concrete caring work and of abstract creative work, as well as of “mothering” oneself.

preindustrial world the family was the economic unit of production, and the birthing and rearing of children was a task of overriding importance that dominated physically and spiritually the lives of most women” (McLaughlin, 104). As a woman in the home, Julian would have understood this, perhaps all too well. The medieval home, like that of today, was “the place of direct and intimate relations among human beings, the place where children were born, fed, and taught the mother tongue, the place of nourishment and sleep, where bodies met bodies for comfort, affection, procreation,” but it was also “the place of birth and death, and the scene of an unending struggle against squalor and confusion; women’s tasks of feeding, cleansing, and comforting demanded incessant labor and courage, demands from which men were shielded by the supposedly larger responsibilities of the public world” (Spearing, xix, xx). Thus, “the homeliness of Julian’s revelations is not a matter of coziness, reducing the divine...to what can be easily understood and controlled” (Spearing, xx). Rather, Julian illustrates that in becoming incarnate, Christ our Mother has taken on even the “squalor and confusion” of women’s lives in the medieval home.

This is theological thinking that still needs to be applied today. Mothering and other caring work is consistently devalued, and yet care is expected of women simply because they are women. Certainly men also perform caring work, but male caring tends to be that of providing for a family and respecting vows, which is consonant with the respect for rules in an ethic of justice. Moreover, men's caring is not necessarily daily, and is not expected of them *as men*—it is an offering of love or it is paid labor. Urgent care taken in an emergency is heroic, but urgent care taken daily is invisible and expected of women (Bubeck, 142). Furthermore, women may not be the only ones harmed when care is performed out of an immature ethic: those cared for may also suffer. A tired or resentful caregiver may be tempted to take advantage of the power differential which exists

between caregiver and cared-for (Bubeck, 141). Women make up for half of all physical child abuse (Wolf, 221). It is crucial that people—especially those, usually fundamentalist Christians, who tout “family values” and stay-at-home mothering—remember that

mothering and self-sacrifice are not mystically paired....Society has assumed that it could leave women and children at the bottom of the heap and some profound mammalian force would manage to overcome lack of income, health care, and day care, and somehow nurture and socialize the next generation. This evidence of the vulnerability of the maternal connection should lead us to realize that if we want civilization to continue, we cannot take women's nurturing behavior as given and expect it to somehow transcend the burdens placed upon it by the rest of society. Men as well as women will have to confront the fact that it takes not mere instinct but also a lot of steady effort to wipe away children's tears year after year. (Wolf, 222)

The fallibility of human mothers is one reason to remember that Godde as Mother is only a metaphor. Not all things that are true of mothers are things that we want to affirm as being true of God. As Sallie McFague puts it, “Godde as mother does not mean that Godde is mother (or father). We imagine Godde as both mother and father, but we realize how inadequate these and any other metaphors are to express the creative love of Godde, the love that gives, without calculating the return, the gift of the universe” (McFague, 122).<sup>15</sup> However, whatever restrictions there must be on this and any metaphor for Godde,

they are not reasons to discard the maternal model, for it is among the most powerful and attractive models have. By it, in a way we can match with no other metaphor, we can model Godde the creator as the one in whom we live and move and have our being and as the one who judges those who thwart the well-being and fulfillment of her body, our world. (McFague, 116)

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<sup>15</sup> McFague's *Models of God* explores Mother, Lover, and Friend as metaphors for Godde, but her central question is how these might illumine Godde's relationship to the world, not how human beings reflect the Trinity. Moreover, although she briefly discusses Julian in her chapter on Godde as Mother, she does not mention Mechthild or Teresa in the other two contexts.

Julian understands that human mothers are not perfect mothers; this is why she insists that Christ is our “true mother.” Our own mothers may have failed us, in small ways or great, but Christ our Mother will never fail us. Julian writes, “our kind Mother does not want us to run away from him, there is nothing he wants less. But he wants us to behave like a child; for when it is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and he wants us to do the same” (Ch. 61, p. 144).

When Christ becomes Mother, motherhood and caring work become Christ’s work and, therefore, *Christian* work. When Christ becomes Mother, “women are incorporated into the redemptive plan as persons and, as such, valued” (McEntire, 25). When Christ becomes Mother, we are all unconditionally loved and accepted, despite our flaws and failings, and we are encouraged to grow into our full human potential, able to mother both others and ourselves, and in doing so, to mother Godde, becoming *theotokos*, God-bearers.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**Godde as Lover: Mechthild of Magdeburg**

*The soul senses quite well the fragrance I possess. I cannot be completely intimate with her unless she is willing to lay herself in utter repose and nakedness in my divine arms, so that I can take delight in her.*

—Mechthild of Magdeburg

*We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,  
almost always a lectern, a book: always  
the tall lily.*

*Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,  
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,  
whom she acknowledges, a guest.*

*But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage.*

*The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent.  
Godde waited.*

—Denise Levertov, “Annunciation”

As with Julian, little is known of Mechthild’s life other than that which she tells us in her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. She was born in Saxony around 1208 to a noble family who doted on her. At age twelve, she received her first “greeting from Godde,” an experience so intense that never afterward could she abide committing even a venial sin (IV 2). These greetings continued daily for over thirty years. In her early twenties, having been denied entry into a convent,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Beer relates that the convent required that young women be presented by their parents and provide a dowry. Mechthild’s noble family likely could have afforded to provide one, but Mechthild chose to apply on her own and without a dowry. Perhaps Mechthild intended to be turned down, since she was committed from an early age to following Christ in poverty and working for social good. See Beer, 80.

she left her family home to join a beguine community in the city of Magdeburg, where she knew virtually no one.

As a beguine, Mechthild would likely have lived in community with other women who supported themselves through work, such as weaving, spinning, and embroidering, caring for the sick, or doing household chores for families of means (Tobin 1998, 1). Beguines lived a voluntary and informal religious life, promising to live piously in chastity and poverty but taking no vows. They were free to leave the community if and when they wished. Often women joined a beguinage when they would not or could not marry and did not have the wealth to provide an organized convent with the required dowry. In spirit and lifestyle, the beguines lived much as did the Dominicans and Franciscans and were often under the spiritual care of the friars.

The beguine movement had begun in the twelfth century and was at its height during Mechthild's life. The numbers of beguines and beghards (their male counterparts) could number in the low thousands in the larger cities (Beer, 80 n. 4). However, the popular movement had been criticized from its incipience for its independence from established orders and, therefore, from the church hierarchy. In 1273, a German bishop complained to the pope that women in beguinages were able to escape "the yoke of obedience to their priest" and "the coercion of marital bonds"; thus, he wrote, "I would have them marry or thrust into an approved order."<sup>2</sup> Later,

in 1312, the Council of Vienne decreed that 'their way of life is to be permanently forbidden.' Again, the note of insulted masculine authority is struck: 'Since these women promise no obedience to anyone, and do not renounce their property or profess an approved Rule, they are certainly not "religious"' (Flinders, 50).

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<sup>2</sup> R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), 329, cited in Flinders, 50.

Furthermore, because mysticism was a central characteristic of their piety, beguines were frequently, though often spuriously, suspected of heresy. This would have a direct impact on Mechthild.

In her early forties, Mechthild confessed her ecstatic experiences, probably to her Dominican friend, Heinrich of Halle. Her confessor urged her to write a book “out of Godde’s heart and mouth” (IV 2). She spent the next ten years composing the first five books of *Flowing Light*, which Heinrich collected and organized. The work was translated from her native Middle Low German into Latin and Middle High German, and it enjoyed considerable circulation. However, it was an inopportune time for the outspoken beguine, who was very critical of corruption in the priesthood, to draw attention to herself. In 1261, when Mechthild was at work on a sixth book, a synod was held during which Archbishop Rupert “declared that beguines should, like other parishioners, obey their parish priests or be excommunicated” (Tobin 1998, 3). As support for the beguines declined, Mechthild’s book drew the ire of the clergy and was threatened with burning. She may also have been threatened with excommunication. At one point her soul laments to Godde that “no one recites the hours of the office in my presence and no one celebrates holy mass for me,” but Godde reassures her that “I am in you / and you are in me. / We could not be closer, / For we two have flowed into one / And have been poured into one mold. / Thus shall we remain forever content” (III 5). Godde also reassures her that her book will not be destroyed: ““My dear One, do not be overly troubled. / No one can burn the truth. / For someone to take this book out of my hand, / He must be mightier than I”” (II 26).

Mechthild was not excommunicated and the book was not burned, but persecution from her powerful foes eventually forced her to flee to an established Cistercian convent in Helfta. In her sixties now, Mechthild was warmly received by the learned nuns of this convent, where her work was known and admired (Beer, 79). Undeterred by the opposition from her critics, Mechthild went

on to write the seventh and final book of *Flowing Light* while in Helfta, where she remained until her death.

Mechthild's book is remarkable for its lyricism and for the variety of literary genres she employs to convey her mystical experiences and understanding. It is also noteworthy for its sensual imagery. The title of her work is apt, for the text itself flows in a free-form fashion and is filled to the brim with liquid imagery: "water, milk, wine, blood, tears, honey, molten gold, and, by a visionary leap, light" (Flinders, 53). For Mechthild, love also flows among the members of the Trinity and back and forth between the Trinity and the human soul.

O blessed Love,  
This has always been your task, and still is:  
To bind together Godde and the human soul.  
That shall be your task forever.

(IV 19)

Ah, most blessed love! Where are those who know you?  
They are wholly irradiated in the Holy Trinity, they no longer live in themselves (IV 16).

Mechthild also relates a discussion among the Trinity wherein they decide to create humans in order that their love might be shared and returned by another.

The Father said: 'Son, a powerful desire stirs in my divine breast as well, and I swell in love alone. We shall become fruitful so that we shall be loved in return, and so that our glory in some small way shall be recognized. I shall make a bride for myself who shall greet me with her mouth and wound me with her beauty. Only then does love really begin.'

Then the Holy Spirit spoke to the Father: 'Yes, dear Father, I shall deliver the bride to your bed.'

And the Son spoke: 'Father, you well know I shall yet die for love. Still, we want to begin these things joyfully in great holiness.'

Then the Holy Trinity bent down to the creation of all things and created us body and soul in infinite love...

The heavenly Father bestowed his divine love on the soul and said: 'I am the Godde of gods; you are the goddess of all creatures, and I give you my solemn assurance that I shall never reject you. (III 9)



In this quotation we can see something of Mechthild's sense of love as "what contemporary theorists call *jouissance*, a kind of boundaryless sexuality in which desire and satisfaction cannot be distinguished, just as masculine and feminine cannot be distinguished" (Petroff, 61). Her experience of the divine is distinctly sexual and sexually indistinct—that is, it encompasses a polymorphous sensuality between and among the soul, a hypostatized Lady Love, the Virgin Mary, and all three persons of the Trinity. Even the title of the work imparts this: the "flowing light of the divinity is divine love that engulfs all creation. In the title all aspects of love unite and become intelligible as 'ways of turning the whole being of the creature into fluid, to a coursing wave under the fingers of Godde.'"³

Primary among the love relationships, however, is a radically reciprocal passion between Mechthild's soul and Godde the Bridegroom. In this, she certainly draws on the Song of Songs. This biblical love poem had long been interpreted as an allegory of the love between Godde and the church, but Mechthild stays much closer to the original feeling of the Song: mutual desire between two equal partners. It would not be surprising to hear Godde described as the soul's resting-place, deepest longing, or most sublime glory, but here that is how Godde regards the soul, adding that "You are an allurement to my Godhead, a thirst for my humanity, a cooling stream for my burning" (I 19). Moreover, her poetry and imagery is evocative of the language of the Song of Songs. The soul addresses Godde:

O you pouring Godde in your gift!  
O you flowing Godde in your love!  
O you burning Godde in your desire!  
O you melting Godde in the union with your beloved!

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³ Quote is from Hans Urs von Balthasar. Cited in Tobin 1995, 63.

O you resting Godde on my breasts!  
Without you I cannot exist.

(I 17)

And Godde replies:

O you beautiful rose among the thorns!  
O you fluttering bee in the honey!  
O you unblemished dove in your being!  
O you beautiful sun in your radiance!  
I cannot turn away from you.

(I 18)

Bernard of Clairvaux encouraged his monks to regard themselves as brides, but in Mechthild's writings, there is little intimation of the sweet naivete of a virginal bride. Hers is the raw language of desire: intense, bodily, and terribly costly—and this is no mere metaphor, either. It is utterly real. She offers this instruction:

Love cannot easily disappear  
Where the maiden oft pursues the young man.  
His noble nature is quite ready to receive  
Her eagerly and place her close to his heart.  
This is easily missed by foolish people  
Who are not willing to seek out the Lover.

(II 2)

In Book I, Chapter 44, Mechthild tells a detailed story of her soul seeking out her lover. The Lord Jesus, imaged as a young man, approaches the soul and asks her to dance. She replies, "I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me." They sing and dance, and the Lord says, "Young lady, you have done very well in this dance of praise. You shall have your way with the Son of the virgin...Come at noontime to the shade of the spring, into the bed of love. There in the coolness you shall refresh yourself with him." At this point, the body's five senses, which Mechthild pictures as handmaidens of the soul but who "also embody prudence and a conventional religiosity," are scandalized by the soul's wanton behavior and try to prevent her tryst with her lover by distracting her with offers of

other refreshments, even Mary's milk (Flinders, 57). The soul rejects them all with scorn, declaring, "That is a childish joy, / to suckle and rock, a Babe. / I am a full-grown Bride. / I must to my lover's side!" The soul goes to "the secret chamber of the invisible Goddehead," where "she finds the bed and the abode of love prepared by Godde." He says,

'Stay, Lady Soul.'  
'What do you bid me, Lord?'  
'Take off your clothes.'  
'Lord, what will happen to me then?'  
'Lady Soul, you are so utterly formed to my nature  
That not the slightest thing can be between you and me...  
And so you must cast off from you  
Both fear and shame and all external virtues.  
Rather, those alone that you carry within yourself  
Shall you foster forever.  
These are your noble longing  
And your boundless desire.  
These I shall fulfill forever  
With my limitless lavishness.'  
'Lord, now I am a naked soul  
And you in yourself are a well-adorned Godde...'  
Then a blessed stillness  
That both desire comes over them.  
He surrenders himself to her,  
And she surrenders herself to him.  
What happens to her then—she knows...

In this story we also see evidence of Mechthild's borrowing from the tradition of courtly love poems to communicate her experience, but with one important difference. In stark contrast to the unrequited love-from-afar that is a standard element of courtly writing, in Godde Mechthild "has found a lover who is fully, deliciously responsive" (Flinders, 44). This is a responsiveness notable not only for its physicality but for its reciprocity.

The more his desire grows, the more extravagant their wedding celebration becomes.  
The narrower the bed of love becomes, the more intense are the embraces. The  
sweeter the kisses on the mouth become, the more lovingly they gaze at each other.

The greater the distress in which they part, the more he bestows upon her. The more she consumes, the more she has. (I 21)

“Ah, Lord, love me passionately, love me often, and love me long. For the more passionately you love me, the purer I shall become. The more often you love me, the more beautiful I shall become. The longer you love me, the holier I shall become here on earth.”

“That I love you passionately comes from my nature, for I am love itself. That I love you often comes from my desire, for I desire to be loved passionately. That I love you long comes from my being eternal, for I am without end and without a beginning.” (I 23–24)

Such love is, however, costly, and the soul is not immune. “Wilt thou come with me to the wine cellar?” the soul asks of others. “That will cost thee much”:

Even hadst thou a thousand marks  
It were all spent in one hour!  
If thou wouldst drink the unmingled wine  
Thou must ever spend more than thou hast,  
and the host will never fill thy glass to the brim!  
Thou wilt become poor and naked,  
Despised of all who would rather see themselves  
In the dust, than squander their all in the wine cellar.  
(III 3)<sup>4</sup>

A fool for love. In some ways, Godde is no better off, so in love with the soul that he will grant her anything, even mercy for the prisoners of purgatory and hell (II 8, VII 2). But though Godde longs for the soul and is wounded by her, the soul suffers disproportionately the absence of her lover. Mechthild does not shy away from the fact that love opens us to suffering.

An hour is much too hard for me,  
A day is like a thousand years  
When you are of a mind  
To be far away from me.  
If it were to last eight days,  
I would rather go down to hell—  
I’m there already—

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<sup>4</sup> This selection is taken from the translation by Lucy Menzies (London: Longmans, Green), 1953. Particularly for this poetic section, I prefer Menzies’ style to Tobin’s.

Rather than that Godde be away from the loving soul.  
That is anguish beyond human dying  
And beyond the torments of hell. Believe me!  
(II 2)

The soul will know loss, feel abandoned, and hit “rock-bottom,” yet will choose faith in herself and fidelity to Godde. By grace, she is able to attain a state of constancy and peace, regardless of whether she knows ecstasy or anguish: “Love, your leaving and coming/ Are equally welcome to the well-ordered soul” (V 30). The reward for enduring the depths is deeper understanding, greater compassion for self and others, and the sweetness of a sustaining relationship. “Your childhood was a playmate of my Holy Spirit,” Godde says. “Your youth was a bride of my humanity. Your old age is a housewife of my Goddehead” (VII, 3).

### **Sexual Body/Virgin Body**

Of course, Mechthild did not mean for us to take her sexual imagery literally. She lived a life of chastity and firmly believed that virginity was a holier state of being, and she certainly would have allowed no place for any sexual expression other than in heterosexual marriage. In these respects, she is less than liberating for modern people. On the other hand, unlike commentaries by other writers on the Song of Songs, “Mechthild does not intrude exegetically into her narrative to warn her readers of its allegorical nature. Quite the opposite: fear and shame, as obstacles to love, are to be cast off...We are drawn in to the lyrical experience of the lovers, allowed to rejoice and take satisfaction in their consummation” (Beer, 95). Grace Jantzen finds it “astonishing” that the medieval mystics so “freely...use these sexual images in a sane and balanced way to express their experience of Godde. In an age of suspicion of sexuality, such usage indicates considerable liberation of spirit and personal integration” (Jantzen, 63).

No doubt she is right. It seems to me likely that such liberation and integration arise from the fact that the experience is, in some sense, real for Mechthild. Carolyn Walker Bynum, in arguing against scholars who regard such imagery as sublimated sexual desire, points out that “in the eucharist and in ecstasy, a male Christ was handled and loved; sexual feelings were...not so much translated into another medium as simply set free” (Bynum 1987, 248). But I do not think the reality of the experience is limited to handling Christ’s flesh and blood in the bread and wine. Mechthild experiences the reality of Godde as Lover in her own flesh and blood. In a short section titled “The text of this book is seen, heard, and felt in all members,” Mechthild writes, “I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit” (IV 13). In another section of the book she thanks Godde for the “visible favor with which you constantly touch me, which cuts through all my bones, all my veins, and all my flesh” (VII 50).

Interestingly, however, Mechthild is highly ambivalent about the body and physicality. As mentioned, she advocated celibacy. Additionally, *Flowing Light* contains a number of derogatory statements about the body being sinful and a prison for the soul, and when the body is given a voice, it is often portrayed as willful and petulant. Upon the return of the soul from an ecstatic experience, the body says,

‘Well, woman, just where have you been? You come back so love-struck, lovely, and vibrant, free and witty. Your carrying on has cost me my appetite, sense of smell, color, and all my strength.’

[The soul] says: ‘Shut up, murderer! Quit your bellyaching. I’ll always be on my guard with you around. That my enemy has been wounded—what do we care about that? It makes me glad.’

These seem like harsh words, and perhaps they are, but it is important to note some subtleties. The soul, when in the body, is bereft of her Lover, and all is pain and suffering until they

are reunited. It is the anguished soul who is speaking here. The soul is the one who regards the body as an enemy, not necessarily the narrator, who is both body and soul (Hollywood, 62). Also, the exchange is not without humor, and “humor is possible for Mechthild precisely because body and soul are not pitted against each other as equals in deadly combat...Ultimately [after the Last Judgement], body and soul will be partners forever, completely reconciled” (VI 35) (Tobin 1998, 16–17). Finally, neither the body nor the soul is presented very positively here. The body is rude and complaining, but the soul is uncaring and cruel. Both soul and body are human, created beings, fallible. However, they both can also learn and grow in grace. At the very end of the book, there is another exchange between body and soul. Body says:

‘When shall you soar with the feathers of your yearning to the blissful heights to Jesus, your eternal Love? Thank him there for me, lady, that, feeble and unworthy though I am, he nevertheless wanted to be mine when he came into this land of exile and took our humanity upon himself; and ask him to keep me innocent in his favor until I attain a holy end, when you, dearest Soul, turn away from me.’

The soul: ‘Ah, dearest prison in which I have been bound, I thank you especially for being obedient to me. Though I was often unhappy because of you, you nevertheless came to my aid. On the last day all your troubles will be taken from you. Then we shall no longer complain. Then everything that God has done with us will suit us just fine, if you will now only stand fast and keep hold of sweet hope’ (VII 65).

The change in tone is dramatic. This is just one example by which we can trace a decided improvement in Mechthild’s attitude toward the body over the course of both her life and book. In Book IV, Chapter 2, Mechthild relates that when she began religious life she regarded her body as being “armed” against her soul: “I saw full well that it was my enemy, and I also saw if I were going to escape eternal death, I would have to strike it down; conflict was inevitable.” Thus she begins an ascetic regimen of “sighing, weeping, confessing, fasting, keeping vigils, scourging with rods, and constant adoration” that keeps her “weary, weak, and sick” for twenty years. Still, she says, “because

of my naiveté, I had much to suffer.” She asks Godde what Godde sees in her sinful and needy body and soul.

Then our Lord got very angry with little me and asked me for my judgement:

‘Now tell me, are you mine or not?’

‘Certainly, Lord, that is what I long for from you.’

‘Shall I then not do with you what I want?’

‘Yes, Dearest to my heart, gladly; even if I should thus become nothing.’

Then our Lord said: ‘You shall obey and trust me in these matters, and you shall also become sick for a long time, and I shall take care of you myself; and everything that you need for body and soul I shall give you.’

It is at this point that her self-mortification ends and her writing begins. Perhaps the illness is designed to put her fully back into her body and force her to relinquish her control over it. As a result of the illness, Mechthild finally understands that Godde’s acceptance of her soul is not dependent on her rejection of her body. Godde is in charge of providing for the needs of both.

Mechthild later tells of encountering in purgatory the soul of a beguine “who loved our Lord from her heart and cherished this love with such superhuman exertion that her nature shriveled up and she died” (V 5). She is spending time in purging her sin of self-will, because she did not follow Christian counsel to ease her ascetic practices. Mechthild ends the story by saying, “May Godde help us to right moderation!” Elsewhere Mechthild repudiates those who “make great fools of themselves [imagining] that they are scaling the heights with loathsome, inhuman toils, even though their hearts are full of rancor” (II 1). For, as she tells us, “the elevation of the soul comes about in love, and the glory of the body comes about in baptism” (II 1). That is, the body is already glorified; acts of mortification are unnecessary and may be harmful. In fact, in Book IV, Chapter 12, Godde says that pain was “not born from the kingdom of heaven” but “from Lucifer’s heart.”

Human beings will all have to suffer pain in this world; if pain is accepted and undertaken as fellow-suffering with Christ, then the person will grow in love and Christian perfection. However,



humans do not automatically deserve pain and suffering, for the human condition is not inherently sinful. In Book V, Chapter 16, she writes, “Some people who are learned say it is human to sin,” but Mechthild argues that it is rather the Devil who causes humans to sin.

Indeed, it is the devilishness that we take upon ourselves through our selfish free will that is much more harmful to us than our whole human nature. This is human: hunger, thirst, heat, frost, pain, grief, temptation, sleep, weariness. These are the things that Christ, who was true man, bore upon his person because of us and with us. Indeed, if sin were purely human, then he should have sinned, too.

As with Julian, Mechthild’s positive regard for the body is a result of the Incarnation. Human flesh has been saved by being taken on by the Christ. Mechthild states that “the body receives its value from its relationship as brother of the Son of the heavenly Father and from the reward of his toils” (VI 31).

When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy, far beyond what I am worth. Angels are to some degree formed according to the Holy Trinity, but they are pure spirits. The soul alone with its flesh is mistress of the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him. There eye reflects eye, there spirit flows in spirit, there hand touches hand, there mouth speaks to mouth, and there heart greets heart. (IV 14)

This positive view of the body allows for the body to share somewhat in the soul’s pleasure during ecstasy. Mechthild relates that at times “my soul begins to burn in the fire of true love of Godde with such sweetness that my body floats suspended in divine pleasure” (VI 26). She also tells Godde, “But when you touch me with your most sublime sweetness that permeates my body and soul utterly, then I fear that I can draw to myself all too much of your divine pleasure” (VI 50). Still, valuation of the body is a lesson that Mechthild will continue to learn for the rest of her life. In Book VII, which was dictated when she was a blind and frail old woman in the convent in Helfta, she writes:

Alas, in my old age there is, unfortunately, much to criticize, for it is unproductive in resplendent deeds and cold as to graces. It is powerless as well, since it does not have youth with which to sustain fiery love of Godde. It also has no tolerance for pain, so that a small twinge that youth would ignore is quite painful. But proper old age is joyfully patient and trusts in Godde alone. (VII 3)

Especially as she grows old, Mechthild longs for death, that she might be rid of the body and spend eternity with her Lover. And yet, she says, “When I consider that my body shall so fade away at death that I shall no longer suffer or praise my beloved Jesus, then I feel such pain that I desire, if that were possible, to live until the last day” (VI 15). This is quite a contrast from her earlier attitude. Now, “Mechthild desires her body because desire is its own reward and body is the locus of desire. Separated soul yearns for body because it is in body that it yearns most fully for God” (Bynum 1995, 340).

Mechthild’s ambivalence about the body can, I think, be instructive to modern readers. It is the rare woman who fully escapes the tyranny of body image in Western society. And this is only one symptom of this culture’s body obsession rooted, paradoxically perhaps, in fear of and even revulsion for the body, especially the female body. Perhaps we can learn to see something of ourselves in her struggle to come into right relation with herself, body and soul, through Godde. Even though Mechthild remained a life-long virgin, her encountering Godde as Lover “tells us something specific about her relation to her Creator” (Beer, 93). It reveals something about the kind of relationship that is possible between we sexual human beings and Godde—the kind of relationship that Godde *wants* to have with us, because it expresses a truth not only about human nature but about the divine nature. Mechthild understood that sexual intercourse “reflects the inner world of Trinity in that the Trinity expresses the relationships of persons...whose fruit is the Spirit of love, and who are essentially one but are completely separate persons” (Dominian, 20). For

Mechthild, the sexual relationship never extended beyond Godde to another human being, but there is no reason that we cannot extend it. In a loving relationship, sex can provide a union wherein the lovers are one and yet remain distinct in themselves. When we begin to image and relate to Godde as Lover—and accept Godde’s reciprocal passionate embrace—we begin to realize that “God as love, God as Trinity, God as creativity are all to be found in the expression of sexual intercourse” (Dominian, 20).

### **Finding Godde in the Body**

As much as Christendom has tried to deny or forget it, the truth is that sex is a way that humans are brought near to Godde. Furthermore, “sex is the closest that many people ever come to a spiritual experience. Indeed, it is because it is a spiritual experience of sorts that so many chase after it with a repetitive, desperate kind of abandon” (Peck, 220). Eastern religions have long recognized the sacred dimension of sexual expression, as have, I am convinced, untold millions of people through the centuries who understood this from lived experience regardless of whether they would have dared to say so.

Fundamentally, our theological interpretation of bodiliness and sexuality turns on our interpretation on the Genesis claim that humanity reflects the *imago Dei*. Since ancient times Jewish thought has accepted this claim while also understanding humans to be an inseparable unit of body and soul. This is indicated by the use of the doublet, “image and likeness,” which may well be more than poetry or rhetorical style. Stanley J. Grenz notes that

in the ancient Near East the term *image* could be used to denote a physical object through which a Godde was thought to manifest itself. Yet because this role was not thought to be necessarily dependent on the image’s bearing any actual resemblance to the deity, designating humankind also as the likeness of Godde appears to add a certain clarity to the connection between the human image and the manifesting Godde. The term *likeness* suggests that the creaturely image is not just Godde’s

representative but that humans resemble the Godde they were created to represent.  
(Grenz 2001, 202)

Most later Christian theologians, however, “spiritualized this reality of the *imago Dei* right out of our flesh” (Grovijahn, 35). While it is true that Godde is spirit and, strictly speaking, beyond our limited categories of sex and gender, it is also true that “if Godde is radically asexual, human sexual distinctions have no transcendent foundation, and rather than belonging to the exalted status humans share as Godde’s image-bearers, human sexuality lies on the periphery of embodied existence” (Grenz 2001, 294). If we wish to avoid this conclusion—and I do—then we have to accept that “the creation of humankind as sexual creatures...must indicate something about the Creator. And the reality of Godde must somehow provide the foundation for our experience of sexuality” (Grenz 1996, 1).

Is Godde sexual? I think the answer is yes, at least insofar as Godde’s relationship with human beings. This is what makes an encounter with the living Godde one of *mysterium tremendum*, to use Otto’s terms again. Biblical stories show that “there was fear, even terror, in those who recognized that they were being visited by a Self-disclosing Godde. They found that in receiving divine Self-manifestation, they, too, were disclosed, known to the depths of their being” (Prokes, 77). Self-disclosure is always an intimate act, whether overtly sexual or not, and “knowing” is a biblical euphemism for sexual relations. Godde relates to us in our embodiment. Godde relates to us sexually. As Peck writes:

Shocking as it may seem, I think there *is* a genuine sexual element in the relationship between human beings and Godde...Godde could have made sex as secular as breathing or eating. But instead he brushed it with a spiritual flavor, and he did this very deliberately, I think, in order to give us a taste for him. Because above all else, he wants to lure us to him...He intends to have us, no matter how fast and far we flee. And our individual struggle is only over how long we are going to stick with

our prudish little hang-ups and our narcissistic little reticences before we finally and willingly open ourselves in surrender to him. (Peck, 229, 230, 231)

In our sexuality, we reflect Godde. This is the basic insight and assumption of modern sexual theology.<sup>5</sup> Accepting that we are created deliberately as sexual creatures enables us to understand that “to speak of the erotics of knowing Godde is...a testimony to a true dimension of communion” (Nelson, 32–33). Godde expects us to return the erotic overture in actively seeking the divine. Not to do so is “one-sided to the human experience” and “not only truncates the fullness of the body-self but also impoverishes the Godde to whom we would respond” (Nelson, 244, 32). Not to do so is to exclude Godde from our everyday life and thus to impoverish that, also. Maintaining a split between Godde and our body-selves dulls our sense of the indwelling presence, and “when immanence fades, even Godde’s transcendence becomes less real” (Nelson, 34).

The corollary is also true. Recognizing the divine in our inward being reinforces our awareness of our dependence on the transcendent Creator. It trains us, so to speak, in accepting vulnerability and, therefore, prepares us to engage others with a healthy sensuality and sexuality. We learn that our sexuality “arises from grace. I am open to trust and spontaneity, to surrender and to the involuntary, only as I am able to trust my beloved and my own body-self. But this ability to trust is not an achievement. It is a gift” (Nelson, 90).

The centrality of the divine to healthy sexual expression is asserted especially strongly by two modern Catholic thinkers:

...the chief demonstration of Godde’s love is sexual intercourse. It is the central and recurrent act of prayer in the couple’s life. The carnal becomes the manifestation of divine love. Thus the body, far from being a source of suspicion, fear, and anxiety,

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<sup>5</sup> “Resexualizing our theology does not mean putting sexuality into a theology from which it has been absent. It has always been there. It means a new level of consciousness about the ways in which our sexuality, for good and for ill, has shaped our expressions of faith” (Nelson, 236).

becomes the main instrument of conveying the continuing will of Godde in creating, redeeming, and transforming human nature. Embodiment is the channel of the divine. (Dominian, 20)

Sexual intimacy is eucharistic, a liturgy that may heal and restore loving partners to a spiritual centeredness. Those who freely unite themselves to another come to know themselves at the same time as profoundly self-possessed, rather than invaded. Here, desire becomes more than a physical urge and is discovered to be that power within us that enables us to overcome our fears of absorption. The acceptance of my body by another and my acceptance of theirs, in intimate touch and mutual delight, is ultimately transformed into a deepening sense of the wholesomeness of my *person*. (Sheldrake, 36)

Thus, developing a theology of sexuality that is affirming of sexuality, as the most theologically/historically problematic of bodily activities, makes it that much easier, by extension, to affirm the body. We are able to value or revalue the concrete goodness of our physical nature and become much more conscious of the prominent role our embodiedness plays in our thinking, theologizing, loving, relating. “Our body-selves give shape to the way in which we feel about the world and about others. If I do not realize the profound sense in which I *am* a body, if in a false spiritualization of my self-hood I deny my embodiedness, I will also tend to minimize the personal significance of activities which I carry on through my body” (Nelson, 20). Such minimizing of the significance of bodily acts poses a profound threat in our society. It is at the root of such rampant social problems as eating disorders, child abuse and other violence, and, very particularly, sexual assault.

### **Losing Godde in the Body**

Important as it is to recover the spirituality of sex and sexuality and to emphasize the goodness, joyfulness, and plain fun of sensuality, I am more concerned with the opposite problem. To my mind, the more important and troubling proof of the sacred dimension of sex is shown not by Godde’s presence in human heights of ecstasy and loving intimacy but by Godde’s absence from sex acts that are abusive and degrading.

When there is a misunderstanding (or a blurring) of the appropriate ways to express [sexual] capacity there is a devastation of persons, because the sexual capacity touches those incommunicable depths where each person is called into union with Godde as well as with other human persons. When sexuality is interpreted as the indiscriminate ability to take and be taken... it is the whole person that is violated or made into an object. (Prokes, 98)

It is not only possible to find Godde in our bodies, it is possible to lose Godde there, too.

Jane Grovijahn, from her interest in pastoral theology, has asked what it means “to do theology from a sexually abused body” (29). Asking this question means asking what happens to women, body and soul, when they are abused, particularly as children. “Perhaps we all begin in need and try to get to Godde,” Grovijahn writes, “but the need I speak of...exists because of oppression done to [abused girls] and perhaps more importantly, oppression done (quite literally) within them: inside their body-selves, ravaging and distorting the way they are body” (29). The pastoral task with regard to abuse survivors is to figure out a way to restore to them the inherent dignity of *imago Dei*, and this task can be carried out only through the body. Grovijahn has learned that “the body, in all its physicality and corporeal characteristics, is the only way to Godde. There really is no other” (30).

Thus, the development of any sort of useful theology for this situation “demands an epistemological shift, one that can fully appropriate the body as an originating site of Godde-consciousness” (30). That is, we must acknowledge the body not only as revelatory of our whole selves but as receiving revelation from Godde. There is, of course, biblical precedent for this understanding of body as a point of contact with the divine: preeminently, there is Mary’s assent to conception by the Holy Spirit, but there are also, to name only a few, Sarah and Elizabeth conceiving, Zechariah being struck mute, and the numerous men and women healed by Jesus. Such “recipients of...divine revelation were able to recognize and receive it because it was given in a manner accommodated to their bodiliness” (Prokes, 77).

Once we can see the body as revealing Godde, we can begin truly to see the consequences of sexual abuse, of which “there are many, but perhaps the most heinous...is how female abuse survivors lose a life-giving relationship with Godde...[T]he incredible witness contained in sexual abuse narratives is precisely all about bodily loss of Godde...Godde is ripped out of a woman’s body in the *very same acts* that violate her” (Grovijahn, 31).

For a young girl victimized by another’s brutalizing touch, more than just her flesh is violated. Her very self—that root of whatever we like to think makes us persons—is attacked and violated. And somewhere in that place or location of raped subjectivity, Godde is very much at risk...In its most graphic form, the rapability of women’s bodies—their visceral powerlessness and ravaged value—constructs and informs their religious sensibility...Their knowledge of and experience with Godde is inescapably woven into their horrific vulnerability scripted onto/into their bodies (Grovijahn, 32).

Psychologists have analyzed the detrimental effects of abuse on a girl’s psycho-social development. Even the “core capacities that we associate with being a person, like breathing, loving, playing, etc., can be and often are violated—sometimes beyond repair” (Grovijahn, 32). The key question for theologians that arises out of such analyses is what the interrelationship is between damage to these core capacities and damage to the ability to know Godde.

In other words, how does the sexual abuse vitiate our access to Godde, or form our understanding of Godde? How does a young girl or a grown woman construct faith when she cannot assume she is a child of Godde? Or, worse yet, in what ways does Godde become part of the problem..., actually another facet of their living that reminds them of their worthlessness and diminished power? (Grovijahn, 32–33).

Grovijahn has found that abused women often express “revulsion and even terror of Godde”; for these women, “Godde is just like the trusted adult (usually male) who abused them—someone to be feared, possibly appeased, and definitely something to be survived” (33). To find the way out, to find hope, we need to “restore the religious subjectivity of sexual abuse survivors,” that is, we need to listen intently to abused women’s bodies “speak of Godde from within their reality” as



survivors, to let them become “theological protagonists (or meaning-makers),” since such “fierce oppression and pain...invents new Godde-language and imagery” (33, 34). In doing so, pastors and theologians both “interrupt oppression and hold onto life,” a task necessary because “many childhood sexual abuse survivors...cannot choose life without others interrupting the oppression that surrounds them. Nor can they hold fast to Godde until the possibility of a different Godde exists—one different from those who do the abusing. This is work for all of us to do” (34).

I wrestled for years with the deep worry that rape was the one insult to the human body that was not taken on by Jesus’ body in the crucifixion and that, therefore, the suffering that rape causes was not redeemable. Yes, Jesus’ body was severely abused, but I could not see how physical abuse, no matter how brutal, could ever encompass sexual violation. I tried on the idea put forward by some feminists that rape is more an act of power than of sex—and, certainly, the murder of Jesus was an abuse of power. Still, this was not good enough. Rape *is* about power, but it is also undeniably about sex. It was finally the understanding that our sexuality is intertwined with our spirituality that offered me a solution. An attack on a person’s sexuality is *by definition* an attack on the indwelling divinity in that person through an attack on the body, and it was *precisely* the divinity of Jesus that was attacked in the crucifixion through the torture and murder of his body. The assault on our soul is, in my opinion, what makes sexual violation so uniquely devastating.<sup>6</sup> If we can appreciate the inseparability of sexuality and spirituality, however, victims of sexual abuse can find solidarity in the suffering and resurrection of Christ—a profound resource for healing.

Thus, the “different Godde” that survivors of sexual abuse need to find is really the same Godde who was and is eternally, the Godde in whose image and likeness we are made, but who has

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<sup>6</sup> Note that sexual violation would include not only rape but assault of homosexuals because of their sexual identities.

been hidden by humanity's deep suspicion of the body and the alienation from Godde, self, and others that results. What is new in a theology of the body is reclaiming the truth of our image and likeness, not only in terms of what that says about human beings (particularly women, and, even more particularly, abused women) but what that says *about Godde*—both Godde in Goddeself and in relationship to humanity. It means understanding that “Godde is not...above sex or gender, but rather is immersed in our gendered and erotic particularities” (Heyward, 103).

The earth...is entrusted to human stewardship not first in its immensity, but primarily in the unique synthesis of each ‘I-body’ received within the dynamics of conscious bodily existence. The extent to which any individual’s body is received and cared for as a gift (or disdained, rejected, simply ‘used’) already determines the manner in which the world-encompassing mandate of Genesis (Gen. 1:26; 28–31)<sup>7</sup> is realized or abandoned. (Prokes, 71)

Thus, “embodiment is more than an ‘issue’ exciting our compassion; rather, it points us to the performative, incarnational nature of all theology” (Graham, 109). It asks not only about our relationship to our bodies but to the Godde incarnated therein and to the places we inhabit. It asks us whether we can “recover the erotic heart of our relationship with the living world” (Burton-Christie, 14).

### **Erotic Theology**

Sexuality and the erotic are concepts vastly bigger than sex acts. This is made evident in the negative by the extensive destruction that sexual violence wreaks on the “core capacities” of human life, as mentioned above. Happily, it is also evident in positive ways.

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<sup>7</sup> In part: “Then Godde said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... Godde blessed them, and Godde said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over... every living thing... See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth,... everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ ... Godde saw everything that Godde had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

Many people know that greater acceptance of their own sexuality brings with it new richness in their responsiveness to reality itself. It brings greater openness to life's joys and delights, but it also enhances the capacity to undergo change, to feel suffering, and to be sensitive to pain. Life somehow appears less static and more dynamic, less closed and more open. That the deep sexual love of one human being for another can do this is beyond question. That the affirmation of the sexuality present in our love for Godde can affect us even more grandly with the dynamism of the cosmic Love is no less real. (Nelson, 246)

The more body and soul are felt to be intertwined, the more sexuality and the sacred are understood as overlapping, then the more physical and emotional wholeness we can bring to all of our experiences, sexual or otherwise. Our bodies become creative participants in pleasure and play.

Thus, "growth in sensuousness is...marked by the diffusion of the erotic throughout the entire body"

(Nelson, 91):

The resexualization of the entire body, the movement away from the genital tyranny in relationships, the eroticization of the world so that the environment's deliciously sensuous qualities are felt—these things are possible, faith affirms, by the grace of Godde. To the extent that I can accept my acceptance, experience my body-self as one, and know that my sexuality is richly good, to this extent my sexual awareness and feeling inevitably expand beyond a narrow genital focus. Then I will be less fearful about recognizing and celebrating the erotic dimensions in a whole variety of my interpersonal relationships. I will be able to perceive the sensuousness of shared personal communication, and of the environment's movements, shapes, sounds, and smells. (Nelson, 92)

This is what Susan Griffin calls "the eros embedded in daily and practical life" (Griffin, 18).

Eros has generally been understood solely as the name for the love we experience as sexual desire; as a result, eros has been undervalued, at least by theology, as a way of human relating.

Christian theology traditionally has held that *eros* (sexual love) and *philia* ('brotherly' love, or friendship) are at best forms of love derivative from, and less Goddely, than *agape* (Godde's love for us, and our for Godde and neighbor—'neighbor' being interpreted frequently as those who are hard to love: 'humankind' in general, 'the poor,' 'our enemies'). The moral distinction among the three forms of love is fastened in classical christian dualisms between spiritual and material/physical reality, between self and other. There is, moreover, a concomitant assumption that it is more difficult—therefore better—to express Godde's spiritual

love of enemies, strangers, and people we may not enjoy that to love our friends and sexual partners...The traditional christian understanding of love fails to value adequately the embodied human experience of love among friends and sexual partners *because* it assumes the negative, dangerous, and nonspiritual character of sensual, erotic, and sexual feelings and expressions. (Heyward, 98–99)

A number of feminist and womanist theologians and other thinkers, including Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Carter Heyward, have argued for a much expanded conception of eros and the erotic. As Lorde explains, “the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde, 54). The more we are aware of the erotic in our lives, the more “we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion,” the better we will be able to choose those activities that are in accord with eros and eschew those that diminish our fullness (Lorde, 55). Rita Nakashima Brock defines erotic power as “the power of our primal interrelatedness. Erotic power, as it creates and connects hearts, involves the whole person in relationships of self-awareness, vulnerability, openness, and caring”; it “creates and sustains connectedness—intimacy, generosity, and interdependence” (Brock, 26, 37). Finally, Carter Heyward asserts that the

erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of Godde. As such, it is the source of our capacity for transcendence, the ‘crossing over’ among ourselves, making connections between ourselves in relation. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, through our bodyselves, toward mutually empowering relation...Regardless of who may be the lovers, the root of the love is agapic, philial, and erotic. It is Godde’s love and, insofar as we embody and express it, it is ours. (Heyward, 99)

Eros calls us out of ourselves, perhaps first into communion with a specific other, but always then into community with all of creation.

Whether in the context of long-term monogamous mutual relationships or of sex play between occasional partners who are wrestling toward right relation, lovemaking is a form of justicemaking. This is so not only because, in the context of mutuality, sex is an expression of a commitment to right relation; but also because such sexual

expression generated more energy...for passionate involvement in the movements for justice in the world. Lovemaking turns us simultaneously *into* ourselves and *beyond* ourselves. In experiencing the depths of our power in relation as pleasurable and good, we catch a glimpse of the power of right relation in larger, more complicated configurations of our life together. (Heyward, 3–4)

In the same way that sexuality is a broader concept than genital sexual expression, so eros is broader than sexual desire between two people. Indeed, a correct understanding of eros makes eroticism available to everyone, whether or not her lifestyle includes engaging in sexual relations. “Single people, including those committed for various reasons to celibacy, are equally called to intimacy with other humans. Those who are withing committed relationships need to discover how to become appropriately intimate, in a non-genital way, with people who are not their partners” (Sheldrake, 34). In a context of eros, sexuality is “a human *capacity*” defined as “the ability to share the person-self”; it “is not restricted to certain bodily organs and activities, nor is it confined to a certain portion of life. It is a capacity of the whole person, pervading the entire lifetime” (Prokes, 95–96). The “ultimate goal” of sexuality, the whole point of the urge to bond, “is participation in the fullness of community—namely, life together as the new humanity, as the eschatological people in relationship with Godde and all creation” (Grenz 2001, 280).<sup>8</sup> Thus, “wherever community emerges, human sexuality understood in its foundational sense...is at work” (Grenz 2001, 303).

Eros denotes a way of being in the world, of relating to others, of taking in beauty, of making peace. It is a way of walking the dog, baking bread, planting a garden, making the bed. It is a way of overcoming alienation. “Alienation is the root experience of sin. It is always triadic in experience and manifestation. It involves alienation experienced withing the self...It also, and necessarily,

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<sup>8</sup> McCarthy puts forward a similar notion: “Many who separate from their spouses are likely to say that the marriage was already dead, and in many cases, the marriage was terminal because, from the start, the couple assumed that their marriage was only between the two of them. Marriage is a task of common life, and couples are called to a vocation in community” (458).

involves alienation from the neighbor. And, most fundamentally, it is alienation from Godde” (Nelson, 41).

In response to such alienation, erotic theology envisions a theology that is “resexualized” (Nelson, 238). That is, instead of seeing the Incarnation “as an essentially spiritual act, in which Jesus’ bodyself (‘flesh’) got spiritualized,” the Incarnation is interpreted also as a physical act in which Jesus’ spirit is materialized (Heyward, 94). Pairing such a view with “affirmation of the resurrection of the body ...frees us into fuller sexuality...Resurrection of the body as an eschatological event thus means resurrection of the present sexual body in the present day also” (Nelson, 250). A resexualized theology understands sexuality as “a sign, a symbol, and a means of our call to communication and communion,” that the “mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually” (Nelson, 18).

Erotic theology acknowledges that because sexuality is fundamental to human personhood, it is fundamental to human relationships—even when the relationships do not involve physical sexual expression. Likewise, erotic theology acknowledges that because sexuality is fundamental to human personhood, it is fundamental to our relationship with Godde. It strives to “supplement and balance the agapaic” bias of traditional Christianity:

Love as desire is affirmed as well as love as self-giving. As in Rudolf Otto’s interpretation of the Holy as mystery,...before the Holy we tremble and acknowledge our fascination, our desire, our hunger. We are drawn toward that which promises life for the whole body-self. Furthermore, we recognize that the ear alone is not the medium of salvation, as if healing came only from *hearing* the Word of Godde; a theology of the *incarnate* Word means that the body itself receives the divine presence and at the same time receives its new definition—as the means of human loving. (Nelson, 238)

## CHAPTER 5

### Godde as Friend: Teresa of Avila

*This Jesus is too good company for us to forsake Him...*  
—Teresa de Jesús

*...the aim of Godde herself [is] to create the friendship in which the cosmos is originally imaged. I mean by 'original' not simply first, but purposive: We are created originally for (the purpose of) friendship.*  
—Carter Heyward

In comparison to Julian and Mechthild, we have a wealth of information on the life of Teresa de Jesús, more commonly known as Teresa of Avila. She left numerous writings, including spiritual treatises, an autobiography, and a voluminous set of letters. No doubt we are also helped by the fact that Teresa is the most recent, historically, of the women in this study.

Teresa was born in 1515 to a wealthy family in the Spanish city of Avila.<sup>1</sup> Although by the time of Teresa's birth her family was thoroughly Catholic, her father was ethnically Jewish. Teresa's paternal grandfather was a *converso*, one of many Jews forced by the Spanish crown to convert to Christianity on pain of exile or death. He survived the humiliation heaped on *conversos* to become a successful businessman and was able eventually to procure for himself the title of *hidalgo*, or gentleman, which would position his children to marry into respected "Old Christian" families. Thus, he secured for his family not only affluence but considerable social standing, and his granddaughter Teresa enjoyed a privileged childhood.

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1. Biographical information is drawn primarily from Medwick, 1999.

By all accounts, Teresa grew into a beautiful and vivacious young woman who loved the company of friends and family and had an adventurous, even slightly rebellious, spirit. At one point a dalliance with a cousin threatened to ruin her reputation; a later, extended flirtation with a convent visitor threatened to ruin her vocation. Both relationships were ended before any real harm could be done, but they would give the mature Teresa great insight into human relationships and their limitations.

Teresa was a devout young woman but nevertheless had a distinct fondness for gaiety and pleasure. She was also not immune to vanity and was easily seduced by frippery and fine things. These tendencies made her concerned for her soul, and this fear, combined with a distaste for marriage (she had seen the toll the subordinate status and constant childbearing had taken on her mother and other women), propelled her into the convent. She had no particular desire for the religious life; it simply seemed better than the alternative. However, the Carmelite convent she entered could not have been a worse choice for a young woman pulled in two different directions by her conflicting desires for piety and sociability. The Convent of the Incarnation followed a very lax rule: accommodations were relatively luxurious, frequent visitors were well entertained in a salon-like atmosphere, and nuns frequently left the convent for extended stays with friends and family. In short, the environment in the convent was as detrimental to the health of Teresa's soul as anything she had encountered in secular life. To counter its ill effects, she engaged in rigorous asceticism, flogging herself, wearing a hair shirt, and tying nettles to her wrists (Medwick, 25). For about a year and a half she tried to make this work, trying to be true to her soul and yet please everyone else around her, but eventually the strain overtook her, and she fell ill. When conventional medieval medicinal practices failed, the convent sent her to a *curandera*, a healer. On the way, she



spent some time at an uncle's house, where she spent many hours reading works from his extensive library. One book that struck her particularly was Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a manual on interior prayer. Teresa was inspired: "I began to spend time alone, to confess often, and to start on the road of prayer, with this book as my guide" (Medwick, 27).

This new start could not have come at a better time, as it is likely the only thing that sustained her through the terrible physical trials to come.

'The medicines were so potent that after two months I was half dead, and the terrible pain in my heart, which I was there to be cured of, was much worse, so that I sometimes felt as if sharp teeth were gripping it—I was afraid I was going mad. I had no strength—the idea of eating repelled me, all I could do was drink a little—and I was always feverish, and wasted, because for nearly a month they had been purging me every day. My nerves were so shriveled that they started to contract, which hurt so unbearably that I couldn't get any rest, day or night: utter misery.' (Medwick, 30)

Teresa asked to confess, but her father, worried about the stress that would cause her, refused. Upon his refusal, Teresa "became cataleptic and remained in that state for over four days. Almost everyone thought she was dying" (Medwick, 31). At one point they thought she had in fact died and sealed her eyelids with wax. On the fourth day, however, she woke up and again asked to confess; this time, the request was granted. Teresa was alive, but only barely. She says,

'My tongue was bitten to pieces; since I was so weak and hadn't eaten, not even water would go down my throat. My bones felt as if they had been dislocated, and my brain was totally confused. I was twisted up in a knot from all those days of torture, and couldn't move my arm, foot, hand, or head, any more than if I had been a corpse. I think that all I could move was one finger of my right hand.' (Medwick, 31)

It would take Teresa years to recover, and she would suffer ill health for the rest of her life. But she was changed spiritually as well as physically. She returned to the convent, where she continued to practice interior prayer and began to have ecstatic experiences. Although her soul was thus strengthened, the favors from Godde only served to intensify the conflict between her need for quiet

reflection and the lure of the social world still readily available inside convent walls. She vacillated between these two opposing desires for some eighteen years. Then one day she glanced at an image of the wounded Christ someone had placed in an oratory, and suddenly found herself on the floor, sobbing. It was a deep and profound conversion experience for Teresa that would give her the strength and conviction to embark on an enormous and sometimes perilous project: the reform of the Carmelite order, returning it to its roots in the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and in the practice of much stricter enclosure. In order to pray, one needed time, privacy, and quiet; the seventeen convents Teresa would eventually establish were founded on this simple essential. At heart, the change in Teresa was this: away from frivolous sociability toward true friendship with (i.e., doing what was best for) herself and others and, above all, Godde.

### **The Value of Friendship as a Theological Model**

Feminist theologians Sallie McFague and Mary Hunt have both argued that friendship is a valuable but overlooked construct for thinking about the divine. An appropriate image of Godde “must come from a place deep within human experience,” and friendship is in fact a deeply human experience, but at the same time it is considered extraneous, existing as it does “outside the bounds of duty, function, or office” (McFague, 128, 159). Thus, our thinking about friendship tends to be paradoxical, as C. S. Lewis expressed: “Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself...”<sup>2</sup> By the same token, however, friendship is “of all human relationships the most free”: we cannot choose our families, and “even falling in love seems to have a kind of destiny about it, but friends choose to be together” (McFague, 159).

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2. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1960), 103. Cited in McFague, 157.

Furthermore, friendship is open to everyone, regardless of whether we were parented well or have siblings and regardless of whether we choose to marry or have children. Friendship provides “a common frame of reference within which to locate the many ways in which people find relational fulfillment without insisting on one certain form for everyone” (Hunt, 107). Friendship as a theological model is both appealing and profound in that it uses “a relationship that is familiar to us from our own experience to illustrate the deepest and most mysterious relationship of all” (Robinson, 141).

Friendship runs through Christian doctrine like a strong but invisible thread. In John 15, Jesus himself declares his followers to be on equal footing with him:

I no longer speak of you as subordinates,  
because a subordinate doesn't know a superior's business.  
Instead I call you friends,  
because I have made known to you  
everything I have learned from Abba Godde.  
(Jn 15:15)<sup>3</sup>

Jesus frequently engaged in what McFague calls “table fellowship,” inviting people to join him as friends in a meal, and she notes that “companion” literally means “together at bread” (McFague, 168). Thus, friendship is bound up even in the central symbol and sacrament of Christian life: the sharing of the Eucharistic bread. Friendship as a theological model also, therefore,

throws light on the matter of following and imitating Christ. Now we could imitate Him only if He were to share his own goodness with us. In the love of friendship we do share, and not merely metaphorically or figuratively, in that same goodness which He possesses. Thus, imitation of Him becomes a possibility and not a blasphemy. (Robinson, 143)

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3. This highly recommended translation is *The Inclusive New Testament* (W. Hyattsville, MD: Priests for Equality, 1996). The NRSV has “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

Friendship with Christ enables imitation of Christ, and imitation of Christ requires attention to the welfare of bodies. Jesus ate with and fed others. He healed the sick with his own body, using his hands and even saliva (Jn 9:6). He breathed blessings on his disciples (Jn 20:22). He had compassion on those who misused their bodies out of ignorance or necessity, such as the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4–42) and the woman accused of adultery (Jn 8:3–11). He even raised from death the bodies of his friend Lazarus (Jn 11:1–44) and of Jairus’s daughter (Mt 9:18–26). Jesus was a consummate friend, especially to the friendless, and from him we learn that being a friend, like being a mother or lover, is an embodied practice.

Though the fact is often overlooked, “friendship specifically comes into being in touching, in hearing, in celebrations, and in everyday life” (Moltmann-Wendel, 119). Mary Hunt finds that “being with friends is the clearest way to understand embodiment”:

We say things without words to friends. Gestures, glances, silence, smiles take on shared meaning with intimates. Sexual relations are usually most satisfying when carried out between close friends. A meal, sports, prayer, work, theater are all heightened in the company of friends. (Hunt, 82)

Furthermore, what one chooses to do with one’s body can have significant consequences for one’s friends. “For example, the choice to have a child influences a wide circle of friends. The choice to take up a sport or to travel or to move all have concrete implications for friends. This is part of responsible friendship” (Hunt, 103). Finally, in a culture that is harmful and hateful to women’s bodies, both figuratively and literally, friends can help us accept our own embodiment as nature intended it. Although women “are learning to reject the media hypes about body images that have led so many to feelings of inadequacy or worse,” we still “need other women’s help to reject it as the unhealthy trap that it is...Friends love each other just as we are embodied. Friends encourage one another to love themselves, to achieve healthy, integrated embodiment” (Hunt, 104).

What might happen if Christians came to know Godde as a friend who loves us as we are and encourages us to achieve wholeness of mind and body? In *Models of God*, McFague argues that shifting our concept of Godde away from patriarchal, warlike images is critical to our survival. I agree with her; however, most believers are unable simply to change their image of Godde because they decide it is a good idea to do so. Rather, such change must be an organic process of growth and grace. McFague gives no pointers on this process. In *Fierce Tenderness*, Mary Hunt provides a much-needed theo-political analysis of the life-giving and -sustaining aspects of women's friendships that should be recognized as a reflection of the divine reality, but she does not address how or why Godde befriends us or what friendship with Godde might mean for individuals. The life and work of Teresa de Jesús fills these gaps admirably, but neither author considers her at all.

### **A Teresian Theology of Friendship**

Although there is a wealth of written work on Teresa, surprisingly little of it addresses her theology. A great deal is to be found on her life and times (Ahlgren, 1996; Gross, 1993; Medwick, 1999), her faith and spirituality (Bielecki, 1994; Robinson, 1997), and especially her rhetoric (Howe, 1988; Pérez-Romero, 1996; Slade, 1995; Weber, 1990); even the few books and articles with "theology" in their titles are actually more about her rhetoric (Chorpenning, 1992) or her spiritual life (de Groot, 1997) than her theology in a modern academic sense. A notable exception is Pérez-Romero, who, going against the flow, argues that Teresa was not, in fact, the orthodox Catholic that so many writers over the centuries have been at pains to show, but posits a Teresian theology that adheres to the "new" Renaissance religion that found expression in the beliefs of Luther, Erasmus,

and Spain's "Illuminists" or *alumbrados*.<sup>4</sup> Another exception is Williams, who argues that Teresa was a theologian in her own right rather than simply a reporter on mystical experience, and that her theology involves relating to Godde as friend.<sup>5</sup>

The overall lack of treatment of Teresa's theology is, perhaps, not surprising, since most of her books were expressly intended to be descriptive—and, of course, a woman of her day was forbidden to teach. Teresa herself considered theology to be the domain of *letrados*, learned men. She does, however, reflect on the content and meaning of her revelations, obscured and fragmented though that assessment may be. Thus, the common view of her work as a sort of how-to manual for achieving ecstatic states overlooks what is most valuable for ordinary Christians seeking greater understanding of their faith and of their relationship with Godde. Teresa came to see more and more clearly throughout her life that ecstatic experiences are incidental to the progress of the soul; the important thing is that the soul learn to love. What emerges from Teresa's reflections on her experience is a theology of friendship, which involves not only friendship with Godde but friendship with oneself, with others, and with all creation.

### **Friendship with Self**

None of the categories of friendship that can be discerned in Teresa's writings are entirely discreet; rather, progress in one area of friendship often deepens one's experiences in the others.

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4. Common themes of this "new religion" that he identifies are salvation by faith; interior, direct enlightenment by Godde; a focus on the New Testament; criticism of ecclesiastical authorities; an insistence that ordinary faithful people could understand Scripture; a view of the Church as a congregation of the faithful rather than as the hierarchy; dignification of the lay life. See especially Chapters 2 and 3.

5. This excellent and apparently under-utilized book was unknown and unavailable to me during the research and planning of this chapter. As it turns out, the trajectory of his argument is the same as mine. However, he is not explicit in illustrating how Teresa considers friendship with Godde to develop, nor does he extrapolate quite as much from it with regard to Teresa's relevance to Christians—especially Christian women—today.

That said, the starting place, for most people, is friendship with oneself.<sup>6</sup> For Teresa, friendship with oneself is gained through knowledge of oneself. Self-knowledge is critical for Teresa, and she stresses its necessity repeatedly in *The Interior Castle*:

It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are. Would it not be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person were asked who he was, and could not say, and had no idea who his father or his mother was, or from what country he came? Though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are, and only know that we are living in these bodies, and have a vague idea, because we have heard it and because our Faith tells us so, that we possess souls. (*IC*, 29)

Our possession of a soul imparts to us incalculable value, and underappreciation of this leads to an injurious false humility that gives us “a distorted idea of our own nature” (*IC*, 39). Self-knowledge, however, reveals the potential beauty of the crystalline interior castle: “O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Learn to understand yourselves and take pity on yourselves! Surely, if you understood your own natures, it is impossible that you will not strive to remove the pitch which blackens the crystal?” (*IC*, 35) To doubt the beauty of our true nature is to doubt the goodness of Godde’s creation, but this is not to say that Teresa does not advocate humility. She does, and her concept of self-knowledge is closely bound up with humility, for one cannot approach the divine without an excruciating awareness of being weak, tiny, and terribly flawed in comparison with Godde’s perfection. Teresa states plainly that it “is absurd to think that we can enter Heaven without first entering our own souls—without getting to know ourselves, and reflecting upon the wretchedness of our nature and what we owe to Godde, and continually imploring His mercy” (*IC*,

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6. This is probably my greatest point of disagreement with Rowan Williams, who understands Teresa to say that friendship with Godde and others results from becoming a stranger to oneself. See page 161.

53). Thus, while “the purpose of self-knowledge is not to cripple its possessor,...[it] is hard to come by and, once come by, is not consoling” (Robinson, 159).

Still, this perception of our lowly status is not *abject* humility, for that is the work of the devil:

Oh, Godde help me, daughters, how many souls the devil must have ruined in this way! They think that all these misgivings...arise from humility, whereas they really come from our lack of self-knowledge...self-knowledge will not make us timorous and fearful...Terrible are the crafts and wiles which the devil uses to prevent souls from learning to know themselves and understanding his ways. (*IC*, 39)

Far from being a reason to despise ourselves, self-knowledge provides protection against hubris in the face of Godde and helplessness in the face of the devil. The challenge is to be able to discern between healthy humility and sinful humility. In *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa cautions the sisters to

consider carefully...for sometimes it will be through humility and virtue that you hold yourselves to be so wretched, and other times it will be a gross temptation. I know of this because I have gone through it. Humility does not disturb or disquiet or agitate, however great it may be; it comes with peace, delight, and calm...[I]f the humility is genuine, [it] comes with a sweetness in itself and a satisfaction that [you] wouldn't want to be without. The pain of genuine humility doesn't agitate or afflict the soul; rather, humility expands it and enables it to serve Godde more. (39.2; in Gross, 56)

So, while meditating on our unworthiness is of great value, “the soul must sometimes emerge from self-knowledge and soar aloft in meditation upon the greatness and the majesty of its Godde” (*IC*, 38). It is possible, after all, “to have too much of a good thing, as the saying goes, and believe me, we shall reach much greater heights of virtue by thinking upon the virtue of Godde than if we stay in our own little plot of ground and tie ourselves down to it completely” (*IC*, 38). We can never befriend ourselves “if we never rise above the slough of our own miseries,” (*IC*, 38) for “the opposite of self-knowledge is self-deception” (Robinson, 159)—and no true friendship can be built



on a lie. In short, friendship with the self is the first step toward holiness; it is what will invite Godde into the soul.

Self-knowledge is not the only avenue to friendship with the self that Teresa recommends; she also advocates patience with and forgiveness of oneself and a sensible attitude toward the body. After all, “we are not angels and we have bodies. To desire to be angels while we are on earth...is foolishness” (*Life*, 22.10). In prayer, for instance, Teresa recommends starting small, since the interior prayer of “recollection cannot be begun by making strenuous efforts, but must come gently, after which you will be able to practice it for longer periods at a time” (*IC*, 52). Furthermore, we are not to despair over our distractions while praying. To try to empty the mind was, in Teresa’s view, an unnatural act of trying to make ourselves less than human. For, “just as we cannot stop the movement of the heavens, revolving as they do with such speed, so we cannot restrain our thought...So, we suffer terrible trials because we do not understand ourselves; and we worry over what is not bad at all, but good, and think it very wrong” (*IC*, 77). She also reminds us that worldly joys—such as money well earned, a job well done, or good news about a loved one—are still joys, and “are in no way bad” (*IC*, 74).

After her early practice of self-mortification ended in her severe illness, Teresa abandoned such approaches to holiness. She had this to say about indiscriminate mortifications of the flesh: if “the devil makes [a nun] think that [she can rightly give] herself up to such a penitential life that she loses her health and doesn’t even observe what her Rule commands, you can see clearly where all this good will end up” (*IC*, 42). Teresa herself experienced debilitating consequences of her early illness and suffered from numerous and severe later physical problems, which she regarded as trials to be endured gladly for the sake of Godde, but she also lamented the limitations they placed on her:

“‘I always thought I could serve Godde much better if I recovered,’ she wrote” (Medwick, 33). We see clearly here how Teresa’s intimate acquaintance with ill health gave her a deep appreciation for a whole and healthy body.

In fact, Prudence Allen has shown that the body is central to Teresa’s experience of prayer. In the first level of prayer, mental prayer, a person has to work to keep the body from being a central concern, and in the second, the person experiences soul and body as being in conflict. However, as the person progresses into higher levels of prayer, the body becomes more and more involved. The third level, the prayer of union, is a pivotal point in Teresa’s system. She describes this type of prayer as “‘complete death to all earthly things,’” yet the result of the prayer is strengthening of virtue that leads to performing good works (Allen, 258). It is such acts, and not mystical experiences, that are the evidence of a soul in concord with the will of Godde; thus, “Teresa rejects the conclusion that the goal of transcendence is separation from the body” (Allen, 259). After all, good works cannot be performed if one is forever in a trance state. In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa teaches that absorption in the Goddehead lasts only a very short while; if the result of prayer is “‘languishing in the soul,’” the cause is not true prayer but weakness: in the prayer of union, “‘the body is not worn down’” (Allen, 260). In the fourth level, or the prayer of rapture, the person experiences “a new union so complete between the soul and Godde that there is no longer any separation,” that is, the soul “no longer has to ‘leave’ the body to be united with Godde because Godde has entered permanently into the center of the soul itself” (Allen, 263). Thus, in the highest form of prayer, the body is not abandoned; rather, “the soul/body union is intensified and completely integrated, and the person is released into ever more perfect works of virtue” (Allen, 263). As Teresa

wrote, ““This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works”” (Allen, 264).

Like the other women considered here, Teresa’s conciliatory attitude toward the body seems to stem from her appreciation of the Incarnation. In addressing the assumption that a person granted ecstatic favors can abandon meditation on Christ’s humanity because such a person will have already become “wholly proficient in love,” Teresa is adamant that this would be a serious mistake (*IC*, 171).

This is a thing of which I have written at length elsewhere, and, although I have been contradicted about it and told that I do not understand it, because these are paths along which Our Lord leads us, and that, when we have got over the first stages, we shall do better to occupy ourselves with matters concerning the Goddehead and to flee from corporeal things, they will certainly not make me admit that this is a good way...And observe that I am going so far as to advise you not to believe anyone who tells you otherwise...The last thing we should do is to withdraw of set purpose from our greatest help and blessing, which is the most sacred Humanity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. (*IC*, 171–172)

Finally, Teresa understood that, like any friendship, friendship with one’s self requires the one thing that is most crucial to all successful relationships: time spent together. One has to spend time with one’s friend if the relationship is to deepen and flourish. Likewise, friendship with oneself requires time apart, a “room of one’s own.” In the case of the nuns of the Discalced Carmelites, space and time for oneself was also space and time for Godde, and this realization is what fueled Teresa’s zeal for reforming the Order and creating small, enclosed, silent convents for her sisters. Teresa’s insistence on this brought her into conflict not only with members of the unreformed convents but even with her own patrons. When Teresa traveled to Pastrana to visit the site of a new convent funded by the princess Ana de Mendoza y de la Cerda, she “could see that the building being outfitted for them was much too small, but the princess had decided that squeezing into

cramped quarters would be a useful discipline for the nuns—a point with which Teresa disagreed. She knew that breathing space was essential to recollection and that a small group of women, however holy, could get on one another's nerves" (Medwick, 140). What was needed was enough space for the women to develop friendships not only with themselves and with each other, but with Godde.

### **Friendship with Godde**

Teresa believed that self-knowledge came by the grace of Godde, because coming to know ourselves accurately is only possible in the divine light that both sparkles off our virtues and gently exposes our flaws. She wrote, "we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know Godde" (*IC*, 38). The reverse is also true: without knowing ourselves we cannot know Godde. If, as Aristotle claimed, a friend is "another self," and "if we believe that friendship with Godde is possible, then we have to develop in such a way that Godde becomes... 'another self' for us" (Robinson, 143, 144). If our conception of self is unhealthy, by extension our conception of Godde will be unhealthy, and any hope of friendship doomed. This perception is what underlies Teresa's insistence on taking time to work on these two relationships: "Well, if we never look at Him or think of what we owe Him, and of the death which He suffered for our sakes, I do not see how we can get to know Him or do good works in His service" (*IC*, 53).

In Teresa's opinion, the best way to get to know Godde is through prayer, particularly interior, silent prayer, which she learned from reading Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. Teresa, of course, had extraordinary experiences in prayer, but she was well aware that she had begun at the beginning, with no particular piety and certainly not purity. She knew that Godde already dwelt within the interior castle of each person's soul and delighted to be there (*IC*,

28). If we can just manage to enter even into the first mansions,<sup>7</sup> we will find that Godde “becomes a very good Neighbor” (*IC*, 47). As we continue in the life of prayer, the relationship deepens from neighborliness to friendship. Already in the second mansions, “the understanding comes forward and makes the soul realize that, for however many years it may live, it can never hope to have a better friend [than Godde], for the world is full of falsehood” (*IC*, 49). This friendship cultivated through prayer will prove to be as sustaining and supportive as any close friendship, “for thinking upon Him or upon His life and Passion recalls His most meek and lovely face, which is the greatest comfort, just as in the earthly sphere we get much more comfort from seeing a person who is a great help to us than if we had never known him” (*IC*, 190).

What is more, those who are friends of Godde obviously wish to avoid offending their friend. In a quaint example, Teresa reminds us that “if a person who had a great friend knew that insulting things were being said about his portrait he would not be pleased. How much more incumbent upon us is it, then, always to be respectful when we see a crucifix or any kind of portrait” of Jesus Christ (*IC*, 190). And, as is also the case with earthly friendships, she is hurt when Godde is slighted by others: “I have been very much grieved by certain people I know, [who] have left Him Who in His great love was yearning to give Himself to them as a Friend, and to prove His friendship by His works” (*IC*, 92).

So great is Godde’s desire to befriend us that Godde willingly gives up divine power, since inequality is inherently destabilizing to friendship. In this we see that Teresa’s insists on humility not so much because Godde is lord and king but because to be humble is to imitate Christ. Who is

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7. Teresa almost always uses the plural form of this noun, *las moradas*. See Peers’s note 1, *IC*, 126.

of more noble lineage than Jesus, the Son of Godde? Yet he willingly became not just human, but a human of low birth.

To make us friends of Godde, Godde wholly abandons dignity and status: it is not that Godde simply brings us up to an acceptable standard and then deigns to treat us as friends. In the incarnation, the Son renounces all claim to ‘special’ status and comes to be identified with suffering men and women, and this renunciation expresses the desire of the whole of the trinitarian Goddehead to be present to the human world without reserve or condition. Friendship with Godde begins with Godde’s longing for companionship, or rather, longing to share the companionship of mutual self-gift that constitutes the divine life. Godde initiates this friendship by resolving to have no interest at heart but ours, and we appropriately respond by resolving to have no interest but Godde’s. (Williams, 103–4)

So radical is Godde’s renunciation of power that, when the human will is aligned with Godde’s, the distinction between human and divine power is blurred. Christ’s humility is so perfect that he “allows himself to be conquered so that He will do all we ask of him” (*IC*, 83). Teresa is very much in line here with the experience of Julian and Mechthild. This concept is perhaps more expected in the context of motherhood and intimacy, since both parents and lovers willingly put themselves at the service of the child or partner. Ceding power also makes sense in terms of friendship, since friendship cannot develop in an atmosphere of inequality and subservience. The soul whom Godde befriends “is not oppressed, for example by the fear of hell, for though it desires more than ever not to offend Godde (of Whom, however, it has lost all servile fear), it has firm confidence that it is destined to have fruition of Him” (*IC*, 91). That fruition is a further deepening of the friendship, until Godde becomes the soul’s constant companion. In fact, in writing of the sixth and seventh mansions (those closest to Godde), Teresa uses the words “companion” and “companionship” a great many times, much more often than in the previous mansions or in earlier books, where she most frequently refers to Godde in hierarchical language such as “Lord” or “His Majesty.” The shift in language is consistent with her experience that “the farther a soul progresses the closer becomes its

companionship with this good Jesus...we cannot do otherwise than walk with him all the time” (179).

As we continue in this walking, our friendship with Godde and with self will continue to perfect each other, but this is only an interim stage in the journey. The souls finds that these friendships impel it toward friendship with others, to further Godde’s work in creation and widen the circle of friendship.

### **Friendship with Others**

When one is friends with Godde, the common interest is the welfare of creation, bringing about the commonwealth of Godde. Loving Godde makes us more efficacious in this work of loving others, for in becoming our friend Godde has imparted to us some of the divine power. We can therefore be very confident of what we can accomplish, for “if there is such power in a word sent by one of Thy messengers [angels]..., what power wilt Thou not leave in the soul that is bound to Thee, as Thou art to it, by love” (*IC*, 141–42).

Teresa sees this pattern of our love for Godde propelling us out into the world illustrated very clearly by the story of the Samaritan woman Jesus encounters at the well (Jn 4:5–42). She uses “imagery she often applies to the mystical encounter, piercing of the heart and wounding by a celestial herb” to describe how the woman is transformed (Slade, 57). In her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, Teresa writes:

How well she must have taken into her heart the words of the Lord, since she left the Lord for the gain and profit of the people of her village...This holy woman, in that divine intoxication, went shouting through the streets. What amazes me is to see how the people believed her—a woman...[T]he people believed her; and a large crowd, on her word alone, went out of the city to meet the Lord. (7.6, in Slade, 57)

Friendship means, above all else, concern for friends' spiritual welfare. Teresa sees two ways of befriending others, or, more accurately, she perceives two levels on which to pursue the work of Godde: a spiritual friendship with individuals and an all-encompassing friendship with the "neighbor"<sup>8</sup>—and neither of these is to be confused with ordinary, worldly friendship.

### *Spiritual Friendship*

Teresa was by nature an outgoing, warm, and engaging person, with

an extraordinary gift for friendship. A separate volume could be written on Teresa and her friends—men and women, family and benefactors, confessors and advisors, friars and nuns, laypersons and churchmen, nobles and people of little means, and sinners and saints. Teresa's 450 extant letters are written to over one hundred different recipients. Almost eight hundred friends and acquaintances are addressed or mentioned in a remarkable collection (Bielecki, 49).

From wide experience, then, Teresa was well aware of the pitfalls in human relationships. For one thing, she learned the hard way about the dangers of power inequity. The Princess of Eboli, Doña Ana, the friend and patron with whom Teresa had entrusted a copy of "her soul," that is, her autobiography, would denounce Teresa and her book to the Inquisition in 1575.<sup>9</sup> Teresa would also be let down at crucial points by priests and others in the church hierarchy whom she had relied on as protectors and supporters.

Teresa also knew first-hand the terrible injury inflicted by the Spanish obsession with *limpieza de sangre*, the "purity of blood" so prized by the nobility who had no Jewish or Moorish ancestry. Being from a *converso* family, she knew how desperately her father and uncles had struggled to earn a respected place in society. Because they succeeded, Teresa was raised as a

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8. In the sense Jesus means in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37).

9. See Medwick, Chapter 11, for an evocative telling of this event.



noblewoman and thus also knew first-hand the frivolity and hypocrisy that great wealth so often engenders. When, after entering the religious life, she went to stay with Doña Luisa, one of the wealthiest women in Spain, and “had to settle for the luxurious accommodations that Doña Luisa had provided for her and watch the poor woman pick her way through grueling social occasions... she ‘came to hate the very thought of being a great lady’” (Medwick, 78). No wonder, then, that equality would come to play such a central role in her life and theology. The policy of convents she founded was to accept women of all social strata, whether or not they could provide the Order with a dowry.

Teresa also had personal experience with relationships that distract the soul from its true purpose and identity. Teresa could happily while away many hours in entertaining and witty but ultimately meaningless conversation, and more than once she got entangled in protracted, flirtatious relationships with men that became serious threats to her vocation. In situations like these, the friendship is based not on wanting the best for the other, but on wanting only to please or attract or gain some similarly self-serving end. Another variant is the “particular friendship,” the excessive loyalty to one over others that can be the undoing of convent harmony. Teresa calls intemperate friendships like these

a ‘shackle’ and ‘a chain that cannot be broken by any file.’ It is natural to be ‘inclined to one more than another,’ but we must be careful not to allow ourselves to be dominated by that affection. An attachment enslaves us, robbing us of our freedom. ‘Oh, God help me,’ Teresa raves, ‘the silly things that come from such attachment are too numerous to be counted.’” (Bielecki, 74)

The antidote to such silliness is the spiritual friendship, which grows from a mutual desire for the other’s spiritual perfection. Teresa was graced with several of these, including Juan de la Cruz, her fellow discalced monk, Martín Gutiérrez, the rector of the Jesuit college in Salamanca, and

most especially Jerónimo Gracián, her beloved confessor. Still, she needed some divine instruction and reassurance to help her see the difference between these friendships and superficial ones. She writes in the *Life*,

One day I was wondering if it was an attachment for me to find satisfaction in being with persons with whom I discuss my soul and whom I love, or with those who I see are great servants of God, since it consoled me to be with them. The Lord told me that if a sick person who was in danger of death thought a doctor was curing him, that sick person wouldn't be virtuous if he failed to thank and love the doctor; that if it hadn't been for these people what would I have done, that conversation with good persons is not harmful, but that my words should always be well weighed and holy, and that I shouldn't fail to converse with them; that doing so is beneficial rather than harmful. This consoled me greatly because sometimes, since conversing with them seemed to me to be an attachment, I didn't want to talk to them at all. (40.19; in Bielecki, 84)

Thus reassured, Teresa could see that spiritual friendships are based on a purer love that “does not discount the physical but integrates it into a higher selfless concern for the spiritual perfection of the other...[T]hose who love on the purer level no longer *seek* to be loved by others, yet gratefully rejoice when they are” (Bielecki, 52). Because spiritual friends don't seek their own satisfaction alone, they can help us to progress farther in our friendship with Godde. For one thing, it is of “very great advantage for us to be able to consult someone who knows us, so that we may learn to know ourselves”; for another, associating with “others who are walking in the right way” can only help us, especially since those who have entered the mansions closer to the center than we have can take us with them into the innermost rooms (*IC*, 68, 50).

Teresa had suffered so much at the hands of confessors completely lacking the spiritual depth and maturity necessary to understand her mystical experiences that she was acutely aware of the great blessings true spiritual friendships were. As she was always an emotional and expressive person, this awareness pours out in her letters:

Oh, Jesus, how wonderful it is when two souls understand each other! They never lack anything to say and never grow weary [of saying it]. (letter to Gracián; in Bielecki, 74)

I was delighted to get your letter and I should be more so still if I could see you. It would give me a special and particular happiness just now, for I think we should be very close to each other. There are few women with whom I should like to discuss so many things, for talking to you gives me real pleasure. (Letter 159 to María de San José; in Bielecki, 61)

Since your reverence went away so quickly yesterday...I remained sad and troubled for a while. Being alone...intensified this feeling. And since I don't consider myself attached to any creature on earth, I started having scruples, and worrying that I was beginning to lose this freedom. That happened last night. And today our Lord answered me, and told me not to be surprised, because just as mortal beings want companionship so that they can talk about their sensual pleasures, so the soul—when there is someone who can understand it—wants to communicate its delights and pains, and becomes sad when there is no one like that around. (letter to Gutiérrez; in Medwick, 156)

It is important to note, however, that Teresa's intense friendships did not entangle her in the paralysis that can result when a conflict erupts between friends if one's care for others is not adequately balanced by care for oneself. This would be the "psychology of dependence" that Carol Gilligan warns against (Gilligan, 82; see also p. 16 of the Introduction of this thesis). Teresa was always able to stand up for herself and what she believed was right. "When conscience enters into anything," she wrote to one Carmelite friar, "friendship does not weigh with me" (Gross, 49). Spiritual friendship presumes accountability of each to the other, and Teresa certainly never hesitated to correct and admonish friends who were straying from the ideal. In a letter to María de San José, prioress of the discalced convent at Valladolid, Teresa wrote:

You know I dislike the way all of you think no one can see things as your Reverence [María] can: that, as I say, is because you are concerned only with your own community and not with things that affect many other communities as well. As if it were not enough that you should be self-willed yourself, you have to teach the other nuns to be so, too. (Gross, 50)

Still, Teresa never achieved saintly perfection in the art of spiritual friendship. As late as 1575, when she was 61, Teresa wrote the following to María de San José:

I promise you that I'm touched at the loneliness you say you feel at my absence...I was so delighted to hear from you that I calmed down and was ready to let you off the hook. If you will just love me as much as I love you, I'll forgive you everything you've done and will ever do, because my main complaint against you now is that you had so little interest in being with me at Seville. (Medwick, 203)

In fact, “more often than not, her letters betray a longing that she struggled hard to manage and comprehend”—those in whom she confided spiritual matters also “must have known, as very few other people could have, how hungry for genuine human closeness—however narrowly she defined it—Teresa de Jesús really was” (Medwick, 157). This is a good example of how Teresa's awareness of her very human needs made her an excellent and compassionate teacher for her nuns—and us.

Williams observes that in *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa implies that

even sentimental friendships are better than none at all—a startling testimony to her conviction of the importance of sheer human support...If we are so anxious to avoid imperfect friendship that we deny our natural need for human support, we shall never learn pure love: genuine spiritual friendship builds on partly sensuous foundations, but learns at last to see the loved friend in the light of what Godde wants for him or her...; Teresa gives eloquent testimony to her indebtedness to all those who loved her in such a way. (Williams, 81)

### *Neighborly Friendship*

As with all the other kinds of love, love of neighbor is a gift from Godde, and prayer is the best way to ensure that one receives this gift. It is the prayer of union that grants the detachment necessary to love all equally, for upon experiencing union with Godde the soul “is no longer bound by ties of relationship, [particular] friendship, or property” (*IC*, 107). The further-heightened sense of Godde's goodness and sacrifice that the soul gains through the prayer of union prompts a great desire in the soul to carry that knowledge into the world through service. Teresa instructs her sisters that “true

perfection consists in the love of Godde and of our neighbor, and the more nearly perfect is our observance of these two commandments, the nearer to perfection we shall be” (*IC*, 42). In fact, these two loves are all that Godde asks of us, but the task is more difficult than it seems on the surface. We may be progressing well in our love of self and Godde, “but oh, there are always a few little worms which do not reveal themselves until...they have gnawed through our virtues,” such as selfishness and pettiness—so, “the surest sign that we are keeping these two commandments is, I think, that we should really be loving our neighbor; for we cannot be sure we are loving Godde...but we can know quite well if we are loving our neighbor” (*IC*, 114–15).

Teresa identifies two ways of loving our neighbors. The first is to have compassion on their burdens and suffering, so that when “the opportunity presents itself, [we should] try to shoulder some trial in order to relieve [our] neighbor of it” (*IC*, 117). The second, and probably harder, way is to have compassion for their human failures, keeping in mind that we all are flawed and have much room for improvement. As Teresa instructs the discalced nuns,

Let us refrain from indiscreet zeal, which may do us great harm: let each one of you look to herself. This mutual love is so important for us that I should like you never to forget it; for if the soul goes about looking for trifling faults in others (which sometimes may not be imperfections at all, though perhaps our ignorance may lead us to make the worst of them) it may lose its own peace of mind and perhaps disturb that of others. (*IC*, 42–43)

This restraint extends even to when we are insulted or offended. Although we could make much of our saintliness by withdrawing to the desert in isolation, to remain with people requires greater humility and a willingness to practice charity in response to one’s own and others’ foibles (*Life*, 7.22). Doing so requires letting go of our need always to be right and to protect our sense of honor. This is no easy thing, since “we are so very fond of ourselves and so very careful not to lose any of

our rights! Oh, what a great mistake we make! May the Lord in His mercy give us light lest we fall into such darkness” (*IC*, 121).

None of this, of course, is easy. The only way to manage it is to fall back on Godde. Fortunately, this, too, is a natural response to loving others:

the farther advanced you find you are in this, the greater the love you will have for Godde; for so dearly does His Majesty love us that He will reward our love for our neighbor by increasing the love which we bear to Himself, and that in a thousand ways: this I cannot doubt...Since this is so important, sisters, let us strive to get to know ourselves better and better, even in the very smallest matters. (*IC*, 114–15)

Really, then, friendship becomes a cycle of love, with each type of friendship increasing the other.

If her words alone are not enough to give us courage, Teresa’s life bears them out:

Teresa’s heart grew so expansive, there was always room for another love, always room to forgive one who had pained her. Where did this spaciousness come from? Teresa knew she did not have enough strength to love within herself, a lack we all share. ‘How little trust one can place in anything but Godde,’ she wrote in her last letter to Gracián. Teresa placed her trust in Christ, for ‘He is the true friend.’ ‘Oh, strong love of Godde!’ she prayed, knowing that her power to love came from the one she truly adored as ‘the very Lord of love.’ (Bielecki, 55)

Teresa’s books, especially *The Interior Castle*, are commonly regarded as road-maps of the spiritual life, which they are, but the clearest map consists not in her instructions for navigating the trials and jubilations of mystical experience, but in her instructions for navigating the triumphs and tribulations of ever-deepening, interlocking loves. Thus, the interdependent levels of giving and receiving friendship become not only a unifying theme in her life and work but a unitive framework for understanding and living the Christian life. Much more than mastery of an ascending series of mystical states, it is mastery of these different forms of friendship that infuse the soul with grace, maturity, and divine life.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion: The Call to Prophecy and Wholeness

*I learned both what is secret and what is manifest,  
For Wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me.  
...in every generation she passes into holy souls  
and makes them friends of God, and prophets.*

—Wisdom of Solomon 7:21–22, 27

*We are children of Godde, created to look like Godde—which is to say, like Christ.  
If the nature of the Trinity is to be uncreated love, then the human nature is intended  
to be created love: the love of the Trinity, shared in created human nature.*

—Brant Pelphrey

### The Call to Prophecy

We have seen that Hildegard, Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa all were called by Godde to give voice to truth. Each of them experienced this truth in the only way any of us can: as an embodied individual in a concrete and particular place and time. Thus, although the truth was, in their view, Godde-given, it was also very much their own truth, since the knowledge from Godde required understanding and interpretation before it could be communicated. In a process remarkably familiar to modern women, these four women of the Middle Ages had to overcome their fears, self-doubt, and feelings of unworthiness in order to speak out. Hildegard, Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa were called to prophecy.

That the mystics were also prophets is often overlooked. This is not very surprising. Our interest tends to be captured more by the drama of their visions and ecstatic experiences or by their inspiring piety. But, on a deeper level, we overlook their prophetic stance because it calls us to action, too. As long as we can classify these women as mystics, as “special” or “chosen,” as living

on a higher plane than we do, we can draw artificial distinctions between them and us. We can ignore Paul's insistence that all Christians are "saints"; that we also are to speak Godde's word and do Godde's work; that we also are called to be prophets.<sup>1</sup> Out of our very human timidity and smallness, we deny that we hear the same call that these medieval women heard, but to doubt that we can be prophets is to fear our own efficacy and to misunderstand the nature of prophecy.

One major barrier to our correct understanding of who or what a prophet is is our tendency to think of prophets as people who have heard a distinct, audible voice from heaven instructing them to "go and say" thus-and-such to so-and-so. These four women fit this picture, but such a view obscures the more important and comprehensive understanding of the active orientation of prophets toward justice-seeking. Justice, says Matthew Fox, "is the zone of all prophecy." It is "the first concern for those who love life, and [a person] who prophesies, that is speaks (i.e., acts) on behalf of the one who is Life...speaks against injustices" (Fox, 105–106).

Another misunderstanding regards the prophet's motivation: it is not anger but love—love of Godde and love of Godde's people. Thus, for all prophets, but especially for these women mystics, justice is much more about reestablishing right relation with Godde and with others than it is about punishing offenders. This is given its most succinct expression when Jesus sums up all his teaching in the two famous and deceptively simple mandates to love Godde with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mt 22:37–39; Mk 28–34). "On these two commandments," Jesus says, "the whole Law is based—and the Prophets as well" (Mt 22:40). This does not mean, however, that the prophet's task is not "*critical* work (from *kritein*, to judge),"

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1. See, for example, Rom 1:7, I Cor 1:2, II Cor 1:1.



namely, “criticizing the powers that dictate to others what the limits or even the definitions of their lives are” (Fox, 107–108).

A final misconception is that becoming a prophet has something to do with human qualifications—holiness, maybe, or learnedness, or even willingness—when in fact a quick review of biblical prophets proves that just the opposite is true. Godde consistently picks those *least* suited for the job: the youngest, the smallest, the poorest—even the illegitimate child of a carpenter from an obscure little town in Galilee. The Wisdom of Godde is at work in the most unlikely people at the most unlikely times, including these four women, and including us.

### *The Prophet Hildegard*

More than any of the other women, Hildegard seems to have been most comfortable with her role as a spokesperson for Godde. As discussed in Chapter 1, she was consulted on spiritual matters by lay and clergy alike, undertook multiple preaching tours, carried on correspondence with high-ranking church officials (whom she did not hesitate to criticize), and was commonly referred to as “the German prophetess” by her contemporaries. In her letters as well as her books, she “habitually wrote not in her own person...but as Godde’s mouthpiece” (Flanagan, 5). In a letter to Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor, whom she blamed for perpetuating a papal schism, Hildegard wrote, “‘Woe, woe upon the evildoing of the unjust who scorn me! Hear this, king, if you would live—else my sword will pierce you through!’” (Beer, 21). Her tone is frequently apocalyptic in such letters, and “yet often the call to justice is tempered by an appeal to mercy and moderation in all things” (King-Lenzmeier, 145).

Hildegard never uses the term “prophet” with regard to herself, but she does deliberately draw parallels between the Hebrew prophets and herself (King-Lenzmeier, 150–151). As their

primary concern was for the people of Israel, so was Hildegard's for the people of the Church. She was deeply distressed over the corruption of the high-ranking officials, especially the papal schism, and the general failure of the Church to nurture its "sheep." Hildegard commonly reminds clergy and convent leaders that their duty is to serve Godde by serving the people, but she "reserves her most strident rebukes for those abusing clerical or societal power, and the higher the rank, the harsher the words, for Godde did not tolerate laxity and corruption in the leaders of the Church or in supposedly Christian heads of state" (King-Lenzmeier, 160). In *Scivias*, Godde says,

But now the Catholic faith wavers among the people and the gospel goes limping among them, and the powerful volumes that the most learned doctors explicated with great study ebb away in shameful apathy, and the food of life of the divine scriptures has been allowed to grow stale. So now I speak through a person not eloquent concerning the scriptures, nor taught by human teachers, but I who Am speak through her new secrets and many mysteries which up to now lay hidden in the books...O fruitful teachers of good reward, redeem your souls and proclaim these words loudly and do not disbelieve them. For if you spurn them, it is not them but Me, who am the Truth, that you condemn. (*Secrets*, 36)

In addition to the Hebrew prophets, Hildegard also identified with the biblical figure of Sophia, or the Wisdom of Godde, who calls the people to repent, learn her ways, and partake of the bounteous goodness she has to offer. In choosing Sophia as a role model, "Hildegard selects for emulation an impressive, active figure of authority...as the most effective means, herself, of becoming Godde's adjutant and working his will" (Beer, 27). And, significantly, of course, that figure is female.

The call to prophecy would only intensify in later years. Whereas in middle age, Hildegard was afflicted with illness until she refused to write what was revealed to her, in her old age she was called to preaching tours. Like before, illness set in until she agreed to go. No longer was putting the revelations in books sufficient; now she was to go in person to the people and speak Godde's

word aloud to them (King-Lenzmeier, 188). Especially by the time of her fourth tour, Hildegard was quite old and frail; true to form, Godde's choice of prophet does not make intuitive sense. The tour was successful, and she writes in her *Vita* that she was "'able to get rid of some of the discord existing in the cloisters'" to which she spoke (King-Lenzmeier, 187). By her example, emerging from the seclusion of convent life to become a strident advocate for Godde's people, Hildegard "reminds us that our own situation is not the individual, standing alone, but the individual in the setting of a community and society...She calls us to see that in times of turbulence we cannot give up but must stand up for what is central to our very being" (King-Lenzmeier, 198). She calls us to be prophets.

### *The Prophet Julian*

For Julian, living enclosed in the anchorhold, preaching tours were not an option, even if she had had the status and ecclesiastical approval that Hildegard enjoyed. Nonetheless, we find much that is prophetic in her work. Like Hildegard, Julian's prophetic stance is one of criticism toward a Church that is not doing all it should in the nurture of its people, Julian's "even-christians." For one thing, Julian wrote her book in English, even though she may have known Latin and even though writing in the vernacular "carried with it the odor of heresy," due to John Wyclif's translation of the Bible into English and his later condemnation (Jantzen, 11). Some of Wyclif's followers were executed publicly very near the church where Julian was enclosed, so she is sure to have known of this and to have understood the risk of being in any way associated with Wyclif or otherwise accused of heresy. Still, "she too wrote in English,...expressly intending her writings for *all* her fellow-Christians, not just for the educated few" (Jantzen, 11).

Another aspect of Julian's prophecy is in her understanding that what she has heard from God is a corrective to at least some of the Church's teaching. She believed "that the teachings of the Church must be 'saved' through reconciliation with Godde's higher judgement because it is the visible bounds of the Church that form the arena within which one lives with one's 'even-Christians'" (Bauerschmidt 1997, 94). That higher judgement was one of love and mercy, not condemnation and punishment. Julian was distressed at the crippling fear of punishment that she must have encountered repeatedly in the people who came to her for guidance; hence, she is at pains in her work to reorient Christian's understanding of themselves in relation to Godde away from cringing supplication and toward confident joy. So, though Julian "tried her best to be a faithful daughter of the Church, that faithfulness consisted partly in recalling it to its ideals, rather than acquiescing in its current practice" (Jantzen, 10).

There is, then, a strong social commitment in the life and work of this anchoress. She has become united with Christ, body and soul, and the fruition of this unity is perfection in love. What begins in an intensely personal, mystical experience expands outward in concern for all Christians, and that concern, in turn, deepens the union with Christ: "I saw that each kind compassion that man hath on his even-christians with charity, it is Christ in him" (Ch. 28)" (Bauerschmidt 1997, 85–86). Everyone is included in her concern because everyone is included in Godde's love.

In contrast to the regulated body of christendom, which carefully purified itself from all contagion, eliminating from its geographical boundaries foreign bodies such as Jews and heretics and lepers, the body of Christ as Julian sees it has no specific territory that it must protect because its interior has been exteriorized through its rending on the cross. (Bauerschmidt 1999, 120)

Thus, following Christ's example, Julian comes to understand that "love is far more than an emotion: it is an attitude, a form of action, the supreme good, and Godde's greatest attribute"

(Garrett, 199). When we experience Godde's love, we love others, in turn. She explains that "as one of humankind in general, I am, I hope, in oneness of love with all my fellow Christians;...for Godde is all that is good, as I see it, and Godde has made all that is made, and Godde loves all that he has made, and he who loves all his fellow Christians for Godde's sake, loves all that is" (Ch. 9, p. 54). Julian calls us to take our rightful place as Godde's beloved children in the community of Christ's body, loving Godde and others. She calls us to be prophets.

### *The Prophet Mechthild*

Mechthild's prophetic concerns are in many ways similar to Hildegard's. She sees herself as Godde's mouthpiece, called to write what she has seen and heard in her visions. Also like Hildegard, she views her femaleness as an inverted asset: surely these must be Godde's words, they assert, for how else would a mere woman, uneducated and unworthy, come up with them? Both women felt that Godde has chosen to reveal Godde's words through women precisely because so many clergy and other church authorities were corrupt. In Mechthild's view, "power is dangerous, arrogance and disobedience damning. Thus she embraces her femaleness as a sign of her freedom from power. And exactly this freedom makes her a channel through which Godde acts" (Bynum 1982, 241–242).

Furthermore, a primary concern of Mechthild's is criticizing lukewarm or failed religious leaders. She writes, "There are two things I cannot condemn enough; the first, that Godde's kindness is so forgotten in the world; the second, that those in religious life are so imperfect. Because of this many a fall must occur" (IV, 16). "Imperfect," however, fails to adequately describe the extent of the problem, which she is quite clear about later: "Godde calls the cathedral canons billy goats because their flesh stinks of lust in eternal truth before his Holy Trinity" (VI, 3). Again, in a subsequent chapter, Mechthild writes:

Woe, Crown [i.e., the priesthood] of Holy Christianity, how greatly have you been sullied. The jewels have dropped from you, for you are undermining and violating the holy Christian faith. Your gold lies tarnished in the foul pool of carnality, for you have become shabby and do not have the least bit of true love. Your purity has been consumed in the lustful fire of gluttony. Your humility lies buried in the swamp of your flesh. Your truthfulness has been reduced to nothing amid the lying of this world. Your blossoms of all virtues has fallen away from you.

Woe, Crown of the holy priesthood, how utterly have you disappeared. You have nothing left but your trappings; that is, ecclesiastical authority with which you war against Godde and his chosen intimates. For this Godde shall humiliate you before you know it... (VI, 21)

At the heart of Mechthild's chastisement is concern for the people, who are suffering from the lack of righteous leadership. Godde says that the "shepherds of Jerusalem have become murderers and wolves. Before my very eyes they murder the white lambs, and the old sheep are all sick in the head because they cannot eat from the healthy pasture that grows in the high mountains, which is divine love and holy teaching" (VI, 21). It is for the sake of the sheep that Mechthild has compassion on the Church. In a vision, she picks up its filthy, crippled body in the form of a maiden and carries it before Godde.

I looked at her and I noticed that our Lord was looking at her as well. I became very ashamed. Our Lord said: 'Now just look! Isn't this maiden clearly the right one for me to love without end in my eternal nuptial bed and for me to take in my lordly arms and gaze upon with my divine eyes? She is bleary-eyed in knowledge and her hands are crippled as well. She can hardly do any good works. She hobbles on the feet of her desires, for she seldom and listlessly thinks of me. Her skin is filthy as well, for she is impure and unchaste.' (V, 34)

Godde then promises to help the Church/maiden by washing her in Christ's blood—and by giving her Mechthild's book.

'I hereby send this book as a messenger to all religious people, both the good and the bad; for if the pillars fall, the building cannot remain standing. Truly, I say to you,' said our Lord, 'in this book my heart's blood is written, which I shall shed again in the last times.' (V, 34).

Another similarity to Hildegard is Mechthild's identification with certain Hebrew prophets. In the title of Book III, Chapter 20, Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel, David, and Solomon are said to "illumine" the book (Andersen, 162). Mechthild considers David a prophet because in his psalter he "instructs us, laments, begs, admonishes, and praises Godde" (III, 20). Solomon is considered a prophet because his "words illumine—but not his deeds, for he is himself darkened—from the book of songs, where the bride is found to be so drunkenly bold and the bridegroom says to her so passionately, 'You are so exquisitely beautiful, my Darling, and there is no flaw in you' (III, 20). The psalms and the Song of Songs clearly are heavily influential in Mechthild's writing. She adopts the role of the psalmist in several characteristic ways, such as castigating enemies and asking Godde how long she must endure, as well as praising Godde lavishly (Andersen, 166–170). From the Song of Songs, she adopts the role of the bride, as we have seen. In this, Mechthild understands her role to be that of revealing knowledge about the nature of Godde.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, Mechthild intends her book to be a source of information about Godde that, as the Dominican author of the prologue to the Latin version of her book would write, could be equated with Holy Scriptures (Andersen, 164, 132). Mechthild calls us to a life of praise and of intimate love in and with Godde. She calls us to be prophets.

### *The Prophet Teresa*

Given the cultural strictures of her time, especially those of the Inquisition, Teresa would never have referred to herself as a prophet nor even, I think, have articulated such in her own mind. However, that she understood herself to be called to prophecy is quite clear. Teresa's descriptions of the soul's

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2. "If we are to understand Solomon as a 'prophet' it is perhaps necessary to have recourse to another, extra-biblical interpretation of the term 'prophet' that became current in the early history of the Church. Ambrosiaster states: 'Prophets may be understood in two ways: both those foretelling the future and those revealing the Scriptures' or 'interpreting the Scriptures'" (Andersen, 165).

progress follow very closely the sequence of events implied in Wisdom 7:27 (see the passage at the opening of this chapter). The grace inherent in spiritual growth “is not a thing that we can fancy, nor, however hard we strive, can we acquire it, and from that very fact it is clear that it is a thing made, not of human metal, but of the purest gold of Divine wisdom” (*IC*, 83). Wisdom’s independent action is the source and instigation. Human qualifications are irrelevant, for “here is this soul which Godde has made, as it were, completely foolish in order the better to impress upon it true wisdom,” and this wisdom “without any effort on the [the souls’s] own part, has overcome [the soul’s] stupidity; and for a certain space of time [the soul] enjoys the complete certainty that this favor comes from Godde” (*IC*, 101, 108). The coming of Wisdom is what makes possible friendship with Godde, a favor that illumines the soul and spirit with “the power of the heat that comes to them from the true Sun of Justice” (*IC*, 161). This power and heat are what drive the prophet: the prophet’s soul longs “to plunge right into the heart of the world, to see if by doing this it could help one soul to praise Godde more” (*IC*, 164). It is exactly this longing, or, in Teresa’s case, the frustration of that longing, that fuels the prophet’s critique of the social order: “a woman in this state will be distressed at being prevented from doing this by the obstacle of sex and very envious of those who are free to cry aloud and proclaim abroad Who is this great Godde of Hosts” (*IC*, 164).

Friendship with Godde propels us out into the world, for “spiritual growth does not mean loving excessively and exclusively but universally and freely” (Bielecki, 77). Modern people live in a world that cries out for justice, between sexes, races, and creeds, and between humans and the earth. Teresa’s life and work comment on all these types of justice. She moved through her male-dominated world with confidence and courage, and her dearest friends were men. In her relationship with Jerónimo Gracián, Teresa



was more than the Mother Foundress. She was a woman. And she needed a confidant and friend, one she could cherish, someone in whom she could delight and find comfort. Her enemies were suspicious of her love for Gracián, and like today's cynics, gave it a bizarre [and, in modern parlance,] Freudian twist. Without sufficient integrity, purity, and spiritual sensitivity, we cannot recognize the possibility of such simultaneously passionate and chaste love between man and woman. Yet our world is desperate for a new model of how men and women can love each other without lust, cooperate without competition, and serve one another without subservience (Bielecki, 72).

Teresa's model also extends to all human relationships. She was convinced of the inherent worth of each person, created as we are in the divine image. She was confident that "the more we know of His communion with creatures, the more we shall praise His greatness, and we shall strive not to despise a soul in which the Lord takes such delight" (*IC*, 206). Further, this inherent worth extends to all of creation: "I believe that in every little thing created by Godde there is more than we realize, even in so small a thing as a tiny ant" (*IC*, 81). In fact, a vision revealed to Teresa "how all things are seen in Godde, and how within Himself He contains them all"; this shows us, she says, "how wrongly we are acting when we offend Godde, since it is within Godde Himself—because we dwell within Him, I mean—that we are committing these great sins" (*IC*, 194). To harm anything, then, is to harm Godde's very self.<sup>3</sup> Teresa calls us to friendship with Godde, self, and others, including all creation. She calls us to be prophets.

### **The Call to Wholeness**

Paralleling the call to voice and prophecy in the lives of Hildegard, Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa is a call to embodiment and wholeness. Although each of them would be troubled with ill health throughout their lives, the initial illnesses served to bring about some measure of healing of the rift between body and soul. Those who had engaged in physical self-mortification gave up the

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3. This has obvious similarities to eco-feminist theologies that posit the world as Godde's body.

practice. For all four women, disability deepened their respect for the body, both its capabilities and limitations. They emerged from their trials as more complete human beings more in command of all their faculties, despite the fact that their physical abilities were somewhat diminished. They were never fully cured, but they were fully healed.

The words *whole*, *hale*, and *holy* are all cognates (Flinders, 226). The sense of this becomes clear when we consider these women's lives. We are most whole, most healthy, when we are becoming who we are created to be, that is, people created in the image of the trinitarian Godde. It is no accident, I think, that the result of each of these women growing into the *imago Dei* was their development of embodied theologies that help us understand how we reflect the Trinity. Hildegard, as we have seen, developed a trinitarian anthropology that illustrates three necessities for Christian life: dependence on Godde, reliance on others, and responsiveness to creation. We can do nothing without the Creator who makes and sustains us; we are moved to seek relationship with our fellow human beings through relationship with the incarnated Christ; we are propelled by the Spirit into the world to serve all the Earth. All of these elements can also be found in the teachings of Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa, yet each emphasizes a different strand. Julian focuses on the peace and joy that result from trust in the nurturance of our divine Mother. Mechthild concentrates on the rapturous intensity of the love-bond between the soul and the Son that is the perfected example for human sexual relating. Teresa brings to light the care and concern for other people and all of Godde's creation that the Spirit engenders in those who are friends of Godde. All of these are orientations that serve to heal our relationships with Godde, with other human beings and the planet as a whole, and with ourselves. These ways of imaging Godde both mirror and model positively women's embodied

connections. Envisioning Godde as mother, lover, and friend revalues those roles on the human scale, infusing them with divine import.

Hildegard, Julian, Mechthild, and Teresa teach us that we reflect the Trinity when we are generative, connected, and reaching out, and we can do none of these without our bodies. Therefore, we are most whole, most healthy, and most holy when our souls and bodies are in full partnership. We see here, again, the stark contrast between the theological anthropology developed by these women and that of some male mystics and writers discussed earlier. When the attitude toward the body is one of fear and repression, the spiritual is split from the erotic, “thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation” (Lorde, 56). But “when our trust in God is a trust with the body as well as the mind, the body can become the means of our liberation” (Nelson, 97). The body becomes the means of our liberation when we allow ourselves to experience love, which is the agent of liberation, in our bodies.

The all-encompassing, overflowing love that permeates the life and work of the women mystics studied here offers an alternative to self-abnegation and a world of flattened affect. Though each woman experienced an intense dyadic love with Godde, that love was expressed fundamentally and primarily through loving others. Even though all the women were at least partially cloistered, all of them were profoundly connected to the world through preaching, counseling, and/or serving those in need. Community became the outward expression of their inner commitment to relationship. They demonstrate that we cannot be both embodied and isolated. As Carter Heyward writes,

I suspect nothing is more heartbreaking to Godde herself than the denial of our power to recognize, call forth, and celebrate right relation among ourselves. Locked within ourselves, holding secrets and denial, we embody not merely the fear of our relational possibilities; we also embody the rejection of the sacred ground of our being, which is none other than our power to connect. (Heyward, 21)

But if we open ourselves to love and community, we begin to understand that “our values, obligations, and visions are created and recreated constantly in our relational matrix” (Heyward, 95). Community is the birthplace of the struggle for justice. In community, we begin to understand that our lives and fates are inextricably interwoven with the lives and fates of others. We begin to see “that the liberation of *anyone* depends on the tenacity of the connections and coalitions we are able to forge together” (Heyward, 3).

Community and justice are simply love put into practice. In this sense, then, “love today means before all else justice” (Fox 1976, 105). If justice is about the practice of love, then justice is also about the practice of prophecy, that is, speaking and acting “on behalf of the one who is Life” and who calls us to health, wholeness, and holiness (Fox 1976, 105). For if justice involves love and prophecy, then justice involves compassion. Compassion, as an expression of embodied love, is not about feeling sorry for others, because in interdependence there is no other (Fox 1990, 96). Rather, compassion is about “struggling to right relationships,” struggling to see “the balance of things restored when it is lost” (Fox 1990, 96). It is, literally, to “feel with”—to be in community.

Finally, justice means bringing the body back in. It is about collapsing all the dichotomies that separate the body from the mind, immanence from transcendence, women from men. It is about restoring the value of pleasure and nature and sensuality, and returning them to their rightful place at the center along with discipline and rationality. This should be only natural for a religion that

claims that “the embodiment of Godde in Jesus Christ is, in faith’s perception, Godde’s decisive and crucial self-disclosure” (Nelson, 8).

All four of the medieval women studied here had a deep and transformational understanding of the meaning of the Incarnation for the healing of the rupture between soul and body. This is an understanding that we have mostly lost, to our incalculable detriment. Over centuries and still today, the Incarnation continues to invite us “to adopt a balanced approach to human nature and especially to its material dimension, the body”:

The Incarnation is more than a defense of the reality and importance of the human nature of Jesus Christ. It is a governing principle of Christian living; of Godde’s way of relating to creation and our way of response. This means that the Christian vision of Godde, and Godde’s self-disclosure, forces spirituality to accord a fundamental importance to material existence and human relationships. (Sheldrake, 29)

Moreover, taking the Incarnation seriously means realizing that it is not simply a historical event. It means belief in Godde’s “continuing manifestation and presence...The Word *still* becomes flesh. We as body-selves—as sexual body-selves—are affirmed because of that” (Nelson, 8). The Incarnation is an experience before it is a doctrine. It was and is the experience of Godde in Jesus Christ, and it is the experience of each of us. The medieval women mystics began with their lived experience—as women, as beloved of Godde—and used it as the foundation from which they altered, amplified, and reconstructed received doctrine. There is much in their example that is worthy of emulation, but if we follow them in only one thing, it should be in this. If we do, we may find that we, too, are becoming whole, hale, and holy.

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