

The Foundations of Feminization

MEN AND WOMEN, as far as we can tell, participated equally in Christianity until about the thirteenth century. If anything, men were more prominent in the Church not only in clerical positions, which were restricted to men, but in religious life, which was open to both men and women. Only around the time of Bernard, Dominic, and Francis did gender differences emerge, and these differences can be seen both in demographics and in the quality of spirituality. Because these changes occurred rapidly and only in the Latin church, innate or quasi-innate differences between the sexes cannot by themselves account for the increase in women's interest in Christianity or the decrease in men's interest. In fact, the medieval feminization of Christianity followed on three movements in the Church which had just begun at the time: the preaching of a new affective spirituality and bridal mysticism by Bernard of Clairvaux;¹ a *Frauenbewegung*, a kind of women's movement; and Scholasticism, a school of theology. This concurrence of trends caused the Western church to become a difficult place for men.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX AND BRIDAL MYSTICISM

Like the light pouring through the great windows of Chartres, the

brilliance of the High Middle Ages is colored by the personality of Bernard of Clairvaux. Like many great men, Bernard contained multitudes. As a monastic who united prayer and theology, he looked back to the patristic era, especially to Augustine. A monk who renounced the world, he set in motion the Crusades, whose effects are still felt in the geopolitics of Europe and the Middle East. A celibate, he introduced into Western spirituality an eroticism that developed into spiritualities he would have condemned.

Hence, Bernard was, at the same time, the instigator of religious war and the propagator of a spirituality that cultivated the affections, including the affection of eros, cleaving, if only in a small way, masculine and feminine spirituality. How men responded to his teaching I will discuss later. But Bernard's use of erotic language to describe the relationship of the soul and God was very appealing to women. Of Juliana of Mount-Cornillon, a thirteenth-century biographer wrote, "Since the writings of blessed Bernard seemed to her so full of mighty flame and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, she read and embraced them with very much devotion, honouring this saint with the privilege of an immense love. Her whole mind was absorbed with his teaching; she took pains to learn it by heart, and fix in her memory, once and for all, more than twenty of the sermons in the last part of his commentary on the Song, there where he seems to have outstripped all human knowledge."²

The use of erotic language to describe the relation of the believer to God was not unprecedented, but Bernard, for reasons that will become clear, did not choose to acknowledge his intellectual debts. Bernard claimed that "if a love relationship is the special and outstanding characteristic of bride and groom it is not unfitting to call the soul that loves God a bride."³ Realizing that this application needed defense, Bernard explained that

although none of us will dare arrogate for his own soul the title of bride of the Lord, nevertheless we are members of the Church which rightly boasts of this title and of the reality that it signifies, and hence may justifiably assume a share in this honor. For what all of us simultaneously possess in full and perfect manner, that each single one of us undoubtedly pos-

esses by participation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your kindness in uniting us to the Church you so dearly love, not merely that we may be endowed with the gift of faith, but that like brides we may be one with you in an embrace that is sweet, chaste, and eternal.⁴

Having established the principle for the use of such language, Bernard then elaborated. He referred to himself as “a woman”⁵ and advised his monks to be “mothers”—to “let your bosoms expand with milk, not swell with passion”⁶—to emphasize their paradoxical status and worldly weakness.⁷

Bridal mysticism has its patristic precedent in Origen, whose heterodoxy makes him a dubious authority. Probably for this reason, Bernard neglected to acknowledge the source of his ideas in Origen. Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* was “the first great work of Christian mysticism.”⁸ Following rabbinical tradition that saw the bride as Israel, Origen saw the Bride as “the Church”⁹ or “the whole rational creation”¹⁰ and also (with no explanation for the extension) as the individual soul. One suspects unexamined Platonic assumptions.¹¹

The individualism of this interpretation was contrary to the original image of the community as bride discussed in the previous chapter. Yet Origen was very influential, and the ecclesiological interpretation of the *Song* slowly gave way to the individual interpretation in which the soul of the Christian is the bride: “the individual soul of the mystic takes the place of the Church collective.”¹²

Origen recognized the dangers of sensuality in his interpretation: “Do not suffer an interpretation that has to do with the flesh and the passions to carry you away.”¹³ The *Song of Songs* for Origen is about “the soul that seeks nothing bodily, nothing material, but is aflame with the single love of the Word.”¹⁴ The soul as the bride of God is an allegory in Origen and Bernard, but the allegory cannot be extended to the individual soul precisely because it is individual. In the New Testament, the bride is the Church. Even worse, this allegory was taken up into the increasing humanization of the relationship of the Christian and Christ, and the *individual* Christian person, body and soul, came to be seen as the bride of Christ. Thus,

sensuality and spirituality joined hands. Female mystics took the language to heart, and developed “the sensual imagery” in the *Song of Songs* “much more openly than ... in the official interpretation.”¹⁵ As Barbara Newman points out, “women with a talent for sublimation need not even give up their eroticism. Beginning in the twelfth century and increasingly thereafter, the brides of Christ were not only allowed but encouraged to engage in a rich, imaginative playing-out of their privileged relationship with God. Christ as a suffering, almost naked young man, was an object of the devotion of holy women.”¹⁶ This bridal status of holy women gave them an added cachet in the male imagination. As Abelard wrote to Heloise, she began to outrank him “on the day she became the bride of his lord while he remained a mere servant.”¹⁷

Because of this extension of the metaphor of the *Song of Songs*, Bernard and the mystics who followed him used the language of marriage to describe the conformity of the soul to Christ, the transformation into Christ, and the deification of the Christian. Bernard believed that marriage was the highest type of human love and was therefore an apt symbol for the love of God and the soul. Likewise, Beatrice of Nazareth felt that “the divine Spirit modeled her soul according to his own image, and conformed it very appropriately to his own likeness with some proportional harmony” and speaks of this process as a “divine embrace and union.”¹⁸ Bridal mysticism with its implicit eroticism came to be the principal way in which the union of Christ and the soul was expressed, and it united with penitential practices. Ernest McDonnell summarizes the medieval development: “Without ceasing to be a means of expiating sins and suppressing unruly passions, penitential practices were more and more inspired and illuminated by the idea of *conformatio* or *configuratio* with the suffering leader of mankind, with the crucified Christ. With literal following of His acts and words as the basis of everyday life, these *mulieres sanctae* desired not merely to conform but actually to relive the passion, in all its excruciating horror.”¹⁹

The language that expressed the union of the soul and God in erotic terms was highly congenial to women. As Valerie M. Lagorio in her survey of mystical literature concludes, “in the works of the

women visionaries, one notes the prevalence of *Brautmystik*, the love affair between Christ and the soul, leading to espousal and marriage.²⁰ Birgitta of Sweden usually referred to herself in the third person as “the bride.”²¹ After 1300 in Germany, “It was chiefly among women . . . that the *Brautmystik* was received with fervor.”²² Mechtilde had a vision of Gertrude of Helfta: “[Mechtilde] saw the Lord Jesus as a Spouse, full of grace and vigor, fairer than a thousand angels. He was clad in green garments that seemed to be lined with gold. And [Gertrude] for whom [Mechtilde] had prayed was being tenderly enfolded by his right arm, so that her left side, where the heart is, was held close to the opening of the wound of love; she for her part was seen to be enfolding him in the embrace of her left arm.”²³ Medieval eros, which delighted in bright colors and knights who received wounds of love, is prominent here. Christ had revealed himself to Gertrude “a youth of about sixteen years of age, handsome and gracious. Young as I then was, the beauty of his form was all that I could have desired, entirely pleasing to the outward eye.”²⁴ Hildegard of Bingen carries the erotic imagery a little farther in her song “O dulcissime amator,” in which she addresses Christ: “O sweetest lover, sweetest embracer. . . . In your blood, we are joined to you, with nuptial rites, scorning men, and choosing you.”²⁵

For Hildegard, and many others,²⁶ the bridal union of the soul and Christ is not simply higher than earthly marriage; it replaces it and takes on some of the physical eroticism of the missing sexual union. Margaret Ebner feels Jesus pierce her “with a swift shot (*sagitta acuta*) from His spear of love.”²⁷ She feels her spouse’s “wondrous powerful thrusts against my heart,”²⁸ and she complains that “[s]ometimes I could not endure it when the strong thrusts came against me for they harmed my insides so that I became greatly swollen like a woman great with child.”²⁹ Jesus spoke to her these words: “Your sweet love finds me, your inner desire compels me, your burning love binds me, your pure truth holds me, your fiery love keeps me near. . . . I want to give you the kiss of love which is the delight of your soul, a sweet inner movement, a loving attachment.”³⁰ She had learned of this kiss from Bernard: “I longed for and greatly desired to receive the kiss just as my lord St. Bernard had received it.”³¹

Henry Suso, whose writings were known to Margaret, demonstrates the convolutions that men had to undergo to adapt this language to their spiritual situation. In the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, the Servitor (an aspect of Suso) speaks of the “strange longing”³² he feels for Wisdom, whom he sees as feminine, Sapientia. But then the Servitor says of himself that “the heavenly Father created me more lovely than all mere creatures and chose me for his tender, loving bride.”³³ Wisdom then addresses the Servitor: “I place the ring of our betrothal on your hand, clothe you in the best garments, furnish you with shoes and confer on you the engaging name of bride, to have and to hold forever.”³⁴ Revelation becomes a love affair. Wisdom says to the loving soul, “every sentence of Holy Scripture is a love-letter written by me exclusively for her.”³⁵ The Eucharist becomes a love-union with the “beloved Spouse,”³⁶ “the table of divine sweetness where lovers are nourished by love.”³⁷ The Servitor says, “my heart would be satisfied,” “if I were granted the grace to receive into my mouth one single drop from the open wounds of my Beloved’s heart.”³⁸ The connection between bridal mysticism, Eucharistic devotion, and the devotion to the Sacred Heart are all present in this passage, which has sexual overtones that sound peculiar to the masculine ear.

This tone stems from the *Song of Songs*, the “Book of Love,” as Suso refers to it, and dominates in his writings.³⁹ On occasion, Suso uses other metaphors, but the blood and flowers of his mystical eroticism of suffering suffuse everything he writes. The soul languishes for love of God; God suffers for his love of the soul. Suso prays to Mary to “spread over me your rose-colored mantle, dyed with the Precious Blood of your dear child.”⁴⁰ Although it is difficult to grasp the personality of a medieval writer, Suso may not have been a fainting, languishing *dévo*t in reality. His ability to switch suddenly from raptures to sober scholastic distinctions gives the impression that he was a stolid German soul, but that he thought he ought to be like the Servitor, ravished with love-longing.

In the few later mystical writings by male writers, the bridal metaphor is not dominant, but nothing of equal emotional intensity replaces it. Catholic mystics, such as Theresa of Avila and John of

the Cross, employed bridal metaphors through the Counter-Reformation. John of the Cross was a great poet, and he handles the metaphor of the soul as bride with great skill. Thus, the incongruity of the metaphor is softened, but remains nonetheless.⁴¹ Denys Turner summarizes the result of the predominance of bridal mysticism: "The Western Christian has traditionally been a female soul in love with her Bridegroom."⁴²

THE MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Male mortality in almost all societies is consistently higher than female mortality, despite the dangers of childbirth; but in the high Middle Ages the ratio of women to men may even have increased.⁴³ Society was confronted with the problem of a large number of unmarried women who had to support themselves, who did not live in households headed by men, and who developed a culture that had a feminine character. This was the *Frauenbewegung*, the women's movement.⁴⁴

Women also had a new freedom of movement. After the twelfth century, society was orderly enough to allow women to live and travel on their own. Chivalry, the Peace of God, and growing commerce provided women sufficient security that they could visit famous shrines, such as the tomb of St. Thomas of Canterbury, and travel to hear famous preachers. But these preachers were often heretics. The Cathars were a constant danger, and new heresies threatened the church: "For the thirteenth-century Guglielmites, women were the only hope for the salvation of mankind."⁴⁵ The influence of such heresies among women drew the attention of church authorities to the lack of pastoral care for women not members of a household.

Women also responded in great numbers to the new spirituality preached by Bernard, but the Cistercians were appalled. R. W. Southern observes that "no religious body was more thoroughly masculine in its temper and discipline, than the Cistercians, none that shunned female contact with greater determination or that raised more formidable barriers against the intrusion of women."⁴⁶ Never-

theless, “the Cistercians’ efforts to limit the number of nunneries joining the order proved unavailing.”⁴⁷

The new mendicant orders were also caught in this tidal wave of women. St. Francis of Assisi, in a somewhat uncharacteristic tone, observed, according to Thomas of Pavia, “the Lord has taken away wives from us, but the devil has given us sisters.”⁴⁸ St. Dominic tried to keep his followers away from women. The earliest constitutions, written before Dominic’s death in 1221, prohibit Dominicans from undertaking the *cura monialum*, the spiritual direction of women.⁴⁹ This prohibition seems not to have been based on Dominic’s concern with preserving the Dominicans’ celibacy, but on his fear that his followers would be overwhelmed by women’s demands for attention and neglect their preaching to men.⁵⁰ In the end, the Papacy commanded the new orders, their reluctance notwithstanding, to take on the spiritual direction of women.⁵¹ The secular clergy were generally corrupt, unlearned, and unimpressive; the monastic and mendicant orders were zealous, learned, and well respected. Women, despite the wishes of Francis and Dominic, became the main audience for the new mendicant orders. When Henry, the first Dominican prior of Cologne, died, he was mourned by “the women of Cologne.”⁵²

Even the veneration of saints was affected. The saints of the central Middle Ages, dominated by the Benedictines, tended to be men.⁵³ “Eleventh- and twelfth-century Christendom was a man’s world.”⁵⁴ This changed rapidly in the thirteenth century. The saints of the High Middle Ages, after 1250, tended to be clerics or women,⁵⁵ but “by the end of the Middle Ages, the lay male saint had virtually disappeared.”⁵⁶ In the thirteenth century, the proportion of women anchorites also suddenly increased.⁵⁷

This massive influx in the thirteenth century of women into religious life, whether in association with men’s orders or as Beguines, did not escape notice. Caroline Bynum notes approvingly that

in contrast to the central Middle Ages, in which few female monasteries were founded, the twelfth- and thirteenth-century search for the *vita apostolica* attracted so many women to a spe-

cialized religious life that contemporary chroniclers themselves commented upon the phenomenon, sometimes with admiration and sometimes with trepidation. Women flocked to wandering preachers, like Norbert of Xanten and Robert of Arbrissel, and these preachers founded monasteries for them, never intending to establish bands of itinerant female evangelists. The number of Praemonstratensian and Cistercian houses for women grew at a speed that alarmed their orders.⁵⁸

All classes were affected by this change: “The most spectacular manifestation of the sociological transfer of spirituality ... is the transformation of an almost entirely male monopoly to an ever-increasing minority, sometimes even a majority, role for women.”⁵⁹ Berthold von Regensburg noticed that women were more at church than men and preached to “you women, who are more merciful than men and go more willingly to church than men and say your prayers more willingly than men and go to sermons more willingly than men.”⁶⁰ The feminization of the church was underway.

SCHOLASTICISM

Scholasticism revived Aristotle, who supplied both a new way of thinking about the Christian faith and a new approach to the relationship of masculine and feminine. Scholasticism’s locus was the university rather than the monastery, but did not differ simply in locale from the older monastic learning. Its very purpose, training clerics in the service of the Church and state, not monks to read the Scriptures and sing the praises of God, was different. Prior to the rise of the schools, theology was based in the monasteries and united prayer and thought; it was part of the *lectio divina* and aimed at contemplation of God. The Scholastics thought according to the rules of logic and prayed according to the rules of faith, which was more and more a matter of the heart and emotions rather than the mind. Spirituality was thenceforth divorced from academic theology.

Thomas Aquinas, for example, is far more detached and logical than Augustine. In Augustine, the thirst of the soul for God is always present. In Thomas’s theological writings all sense of a per-

sonal love for God is excluded. A skeptic or a religiously indifferent person could have argued from Thomas's premises and reached the same conclusions: "Theology henceforward claimed to be a science, and according to the Aristotelian ideal took on a speculative and even a deductive character. Like all sciences, it was disinterested; it was no longer concerned with nourishing the spiritual life, as the monastic theologians would have it do."⁶¹ This split harmed both theology and the spiritual life, for neither profited by "the divorce between theology (now definitely a science) and mysticism, or at least the spiritual life. The province of the latter would then be purely religious sentiment."⁶² Medieval theologians were of course believers, but a rift had been created, and the chasm would eventually open so wide that it is no longer surprising to have unbelieving professors of theology who leave religious practice to the simple *dévo*t, who prays and pays the bills.

THE FEMININE AS RECEPTIVE

The Scholastics, as Prudence Allen has shown in *The Concept of Woman*, rediscovered and Christianized the Aristotelian analysis of the female. Aristotle followed Pythagoras in organizing reality into polar opposites, qualities that implied the existence of opposite qualities inferior to the first. As Aristotle observed in the *Metaphysics*, in a pair of contraries, one is the privation of the other: limit implies absence of limit, odd implies even, right implies left, rest implies motion, good implies bad, light implies dark, and male implies female.⁶³ Aristotle was especially interested in the contraries of form and matter, and he placed the male on the side of form, the female on the side of matter: "The female always provided the material, the male that which fashions it."⁶⁴ As the giver of form, man rules; as the matter that is given form, the woman obeys.

In the order of nature, the woman is therefore inferior to the man. Nevertheless, in the order of grace, Christian Aristotelians taught, the woman is above the man, precisely because of her natural inferiority: "Mary . . . herself became a kind of material for the formative power of God. Her perfect identity as nonresistant material

for the working of the Holy Spirit led to her complete absorption of the wisdom of God. Therefore [for St. Albert the Great] it followed that Mary knew everything that God knew. She was the perfect philosopher, theologian, lawyer, physician, scientist, and so on.”⁶⁵ What is true of Mary is true of women in general. Precisely because they are more like the raw material on which form is imposed, they are more open to the formation of the Holy Spirit. Men have a form already—a form which gets in the way of the shape of Christ that the Holy Spirit wishes to imprint on the human person. Women, relatively lacking in form, are more open to receiving another form. This analysis eventually permeated all medieval discussion of gender. As Ann Astell says, “In the metaphysics of sexuality, every person, male and female, is more feminine than masculine in relation to God—because receptive, dependent, and small.”⁶⁶ The philosophical and theological explanation for women’s greater devotion to Christianity was in place.

Thus, the Middle Ages saw the rise of a new, feminized piety. Caroline Bynum observes that women propagated “the most distinctive aspects of late medieval piety” and that “for the first time in Christian history we can document that a particular kind of religious experience is more common among women than among men.”⁶⁷