

WOMEN AND THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY¹



The history of Christianity may seem the last bastion against the changes brought about by the feminist-medievalist scholarship of the past two decades. Yet I would argue that there have been sweeping changes in my field, changes which have developed in tandem with, and have been greatly influenced by, feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages. Many shifts in the academic world have brought about this change: the entrance of women into Ph.D. programs in greater numbers than ever before; the dogged persistence of the women scholars in the first generations of feminist medievalists; and now the technology of information exchange which has led to the formation of such e-lists as Medfem-L and Sister-L. Whatever did it, I think the doing is permanent. These changes are not just the result of the personal preferences of great scholars, but reflect a shift of focus in the study of Christianity. The results can be most clearly seen in the history of Christian women, an area in which I have witnessed a revolution.

When I was an undergraduate, there was very little interest in women's history, even very little concept of medieval women as a subject of investigation. One excuse given for this situation was that there was so little evidence available. Certainly, women's voices were muted: the original sources were badly edited (if at all), English translations were woefully inadequate, both technically and conceptually. Although it could be argued that this was the case with most medieval texts in the 1960's (and is, lamentably, still the case with too many), the difficulty of finding good critical editions of works by even very important literate medieval Christian women (Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude the Great) is compounded by the number of other textual problems. Many works, for example, were conceived by medieval women thinkers, but mediated into print by others, male and female (the writings of Elisabeth of Schönau, Mechthilde of Hackeborn, Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, Margery Kempe). In the early seventies, there was hardly anything to get one started. Perhaps in consequence, secondary scholarship, with a few notable examples such as the works of Lina Eckstein, Mary Jeremy Finnegan, Herbert Grundmann, and Eileen Powers, limited itself to stereotypes about women's roles.²

Obviously, part of the etiology of this situation is the assumption that women's voices and experiences were not as important as men's. This seems especially true if the definition of medieval theology and literature is limited to the works that shaped the official world of the medieval hierarchy, a male construction. The reconstruction of women's roles in the medieval church, begun under the influence of feminist historiography, has led to an understanding of women's contribution to the discourse of medieval Christianity. Noted scholars have contributed to this enterprise: Caroline Walker Bynum, Penelope Johnson, Jo Ann McNamara, Susan Stuard, Suzanne Wemple.³ The research of these and many others has allowed us to paint a new picture of medieval Christianity, a picture that is not fixated on the official acts of the hierarchical elite, but makes a more honest attempt to consider the religious experience of the wider Christian community. This new perspective on Christian history helps us to see some traditional elements of piety, for example, the passion of Christ, in a new light. The inclusion of women has led to a dramatic shift in the foreground and background of medieval Christianity. We find ourselves in a new landscape.

And when we look closely at the new landscape, we see a number of medieval men who were also insufficiently accounted for, or interpreted only as deviants from the consensus. The last two decades has witnessed a revival of intellectual interest in Christian spiritual traditions, orthodox and heterodox, elite and popular. The Paulist Press series *Classics of Western Spirituality* began in 1978 with the writings of Julian of Norwich, and continues to produce several volumes a year.⁴ Because so much of our evidence for women in medieval Christian culture fits into this broad definition of “spirituality,” the two movements of historical rediscovery have strengthened and complemented one another. Mystics, prophets, and spiritual leaders, male and female, are now a part of the portrait of medieval Christianity, even part of the portrait of the medieval Church. We now have the resources, both primary and secondary, for a whole new story about medieval Christianity. To borrow a term from Hans Robert Jauss, we are creating a new “horizon of expectations.”⁵ The rest is up to us.

E. Ann Matter, *University of Pennsylvania*

1. This essay is a much-shortened adaptation of “The Future of the Study of Medieval Christianity,” in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. John Van Engen (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) pp. 167-179.

2. Lina Eckenstein, *Women under Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896). Mary Jeremy Finnegan, O.P., *Scholars and Mystics* (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), reprinted in a new edition as *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1991). Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden, und der religiösen Frauenbewegung in 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (1935; reprint, with additions, Hildesheim: Olms, 1961). Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922); *Medieval Women*, posthumously edited by M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

3. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: Haworth Press, 1983); co-editor with Barbara J. Harris, *Women and the Structure of Society: Selected Research From the Fifth Berkshire Conference* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1984); editor and translator, with John E. Halborg and E. Gordon Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Susan Mosher Stuard, editor, *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976); editor, *Women in Medieval History and Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987). Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

4. Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

5. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p. xii and *passim*.