

WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN HERITAGE: CHALLENGES OF AN ALTERNATIVE STORY (Glasmacher Lecture, March 8, 2007: Mary T. Malone)

Introduction:

All my life, it seems to me, I have been searching for the women of history, trying to find them and get some understanding of their lives, trying to hear their voices, trying to enter their worlds, trying to assemble the littered fragments that remain of lives that were almost wholly disvalued by their contemporaries, and almost completely disregarded today. The search is much more difficult in the Christian tradition because women were a “marked category”. They were the “other”, the obverse of what men, the normative human beings, represented. The women of Christian history have to be extricated from layers of patriarchal stereotyping, and centuries of asymmetrical typecasting, that have made it so perilous to try to assert the “historical truth of women’s lives”. But a new key has been presented in the *corpus* of writing by women that has survived condemnation and misrepresentation, and is now freely available on religious booklists. For about three hundred years in the Middle Ages (1150 – 1450), we have access to some thousands of pages of mystical literature from the hands of over one hundred named women.¹ For the past twenty years or so, I have been immersing myself in the writings of these women, and I now have some small sense that I can feel with them across the centuries, that I can enter their world emotionally, and that I can experience with them and because of them the mingling of humanity and divinity that gives meaning to my life.

During my time of journeying with these medieval women mystics, I have been deliberately and with exhilarated intentionality, and following their lead, reconfiguring

my religious symbology. I have been cleansing my religious imagination of the symbology of what I have come to call “men’s church”. I have taken a leap sideways into their religious world and tried to appreciate the value and significance of their spiritual bequest to us. I had come to realize that everything in Christianity was articulated and symbolized in the male voice. It has always been men who theologised, liturgised, formulated doctrine and law, and created the “big words” that have carried the meaning of the Christian tradition, based on reflection on male experience: words like Incarnation, Trinity, God, Christ, Redemption, Grace, Holiness, Sin, Sanctity and so many others. This continues today. If one were to read the first encyclical on *Christian Love* by Pope Benedict XVI, one might easily get the impression that both the churches militant and triumphant were peopled only by men and Mother Teresa, (who alone among women is mentioned four times), and that all other women both historical and contemporary were wholly unnecessary to the understanding of Christian Love and the reality of the Christian church.

As you may remember, I was featured some years ago in the goldfish bowl of contemporary Canadian Catholicism because I had “left the Church”. What had actually happened to me was that my *lex orandi* was no longer being inspired by my *lex credendi*, in other words, that I was no longer able to pray. As friends and others tried to understand what was happening to me, they often asked “Do you at least still believe in God?” I realized that that was a question I could not possibly answer, because more than likely, the God of the questioner differed from my God. But I could answer the question: “Does the symbolism of God still work for you?”, or even more importantly: “What religious symbolism works for you?” To me, this is the most important religious question that one

could possibly ask. In the writings and spirituality of the women mystics, I am beginning to find a diverse Christian religious symbolism of God that works for me. I have found a genuine and legitimate Christian tradition of women's theology and spirituality that not only can, but must be placed alongside the Christian religious tradition of men. For I am not saying that the male Christian tradition, or "men's church" is wrong or in error, but that it is partial. Nor I am saying that the female Christian tradition or what I have come to call "WomanChristianity" is the only possible form of Christianity – it too is partial. But I am saying that until both partial expressions of Christianity come together in dialogue, "mainstream Christianity" will continue to decline, and I am not at all talking about numbers here, but significance. I should also add that I do not expect this rapprochement to happen in my lifetime, if ever. Meantime, far from having a dark night of the soul, as some people have suggested to me, I am having a delightful dawn of my female spirit. I have dispensed myself from the obligation of being sure, of being right, of being orthodox, and have joined the women mystics in their fluid and fragile journey of intimacy towards the WomanGod of their hearts.

I needed to put my own stance before you as I come to the title of tonight's presentation about women's Christian heritage and its challenges for us. The fact is that for about 99% of believers, women's Christian heritage is the male church. Think of the curriculum of practically all theological colleges, including those most recently established. The students, often a majority of women, are presented with more or less the old seminary curriculum, with the odd "special interest" course on women thrown in at the end, if there is time. There is another story, however, and although, in my title it is

called “alternative”, I want to present it as a completely legitimate expression of the Christian inheritance, and not at all an alternative to the “real” male story.

What is most significant about the Christian story of medieval women mystics is that they lived in a world that was one of the most misogynistic of our history. Women were seen as the obverse of male normative humanity in every way. They were the “other”, the marked category, the ones whose very existence needed constant explanation because of their intractable female physicality. Female flesh was seen as the weakest link in the chain of creation, the part that made the whole structure vulnerable. While men were seen as spirit, intellect, activity, rationality, reason, self-control, judgement, order, initiative and power, women were seen as body, flesh, passivity, emotion, lust, mercy, disorder, receptivity (the favourite word of John Paul II and his “new feminism”),² weakness and powerlessness. It was assumed by all then and now, especially by most contemporary historians, that women had internalized this description of themselves, but as we shall see, this was not always the case. But this understanding of women led to the conclusion that there was absolutely no need of any contribution from women on the religious front, except as symbols of sin and weakness.

So what I want to do tonight is to speak about this heritage from the medieval women, to explore who they were and their contexts, to share with you some of their truly amazing insights, to speak briefly about their mysticism, and to look at the challenges to us today. There is also something I want to add in a completely contemporary context. Because of being immersed in the writings of these women, I have neglected much contemporary feminist Christian writing. I have been collecting the writings of today’s ecofeminists, and recently started to catch up with their work. All

through the reading of these contemporary texts, I have been stunned by the similarity of creation-centered thought over the centuries. I want to end this presentation with a few words on the unexpected resemblance between the two sets of insights. What seems extraordinary to me is that the work of the medieval women seems wholly unrecognized by their twenty-first century sisters.³

The Medieval Women Mystics:

Between c.1150 and 1450, there was an extraordinary explosion of spiritual, visionary, and mystical writing by women in the medieval Christian church. Many historians describe this event as the “most extraordinary intrusion of women ever on to the Christian scene”. The word “intrusion” is very revealing – they were intruders, invading someone else’s turf, and definitely not welcome. In this section, I want to describe who they were and to speak briefly of their mysticism.⁴

First of all, there were the convent mystics, Benedictine, Cistercian, Dominican and Franciscan, women who were from the aristocracy, whose convents were often endowed and protected by their own families. These women were comparatively safe in their religious communities, with access to libraries, religious formation, and some recognition as part of the religious structures of the day. Such women were Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179), Clare of Assisi (1193 – 1253), and the extraordinary community of nuns at Helfta which included Gertrude of Hackeborn, her sister Mechtild, Gertrude the Great, and eventually Mechtilde of Magdeburg. These four span the whole 13th century and between them have left us over one thousand pages of mystical writing. At the other end of the spectrum, in terms of safety and stability, were the Beguine mystics,

who include Mary of Oignies (1176 – 1253), Marguerite Porete (burnt at the stake on June 1, 1310), Hadewijch of Brabant (middle third of 13th century), and Angela of Foligno (1248 – 1347). Marguerite, Hadewijch, Angela and Mechtilde are known as the four women evangelists, because they firmly believed that, since their writing was dictated by God, it could take its rightful place beside the other four gospels. The Beguines were wanderers, driven by the call to preach, to engage in the public exercise of compassion, to support themselves by the work of their hands, and to find religious sustenance wherever they could. And finally there were lone lay mystic such as Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380), and the recluse, the amazing Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1415).

These women landed on the male medieval church like a thunderbolt. No one quite can account for their appearance at this time. But over three hundred years such medieval women created a unique Christian heritage of theology and spirituality which has been almost completely ignored, except by some scholars. At this medieval period, women outnumbered men for the first time in European history. The crusades had decimated the male population and had acted as a real watershed in the history of Christianity, as we are discovering even today. On the other hand, the minority of crusaders who returned from their calamitous adventure, brought with them the new experience of the historical Jesus encountered in the land of his birth. A wave of enthusiasm for the *vita evangelica* swept across Christendom, bringing with it a new longing for the simple life of poverty and a new desire for the preaching of the Gospel in the vernacular. Latin had long been considered the domain of the clergy and the new vernaculars were to be a particular characteristic of the writings of the women mystics in their efforts to communicate to as many as possible.

The centralizing of the church in a new and more powerful papacy, evidenced also in the four Lateran Councils culminating in the pivotal Fourth Lateran in 1215 under the papacy of Innocent III, created a new sense of legalized conformity. Future religious orders of women were forbidden – there were already too many female religious, who were seen as taxing the abilities of the male clerical and religious structures in their demand for spiritual guidance. The development of the universities side by side with the centralized papacy created the huge corpus of scholastic theology and the powerfully influential theologies of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance. For two centuries, the imposition of celibacy on the clergy had been meeting with limited success, but with the new definition of Transubstantiation as central to Eucharist theology, the status of the clergy rose immeasurably. Priests were now seen as almost semi-divine in their new powers of “confecting” Christ and “forgiving” sin. All of this produced a hugely centralized and powerful male dominated Christendom, which was being served by the new religious orders of men, as well as by the secular clergy. In every instance, each of these developments led to the lowering of esteem for women and the effort to render them even more invisible in the church. Throughout the history of Christianity, it has always been the case that every reform of the clergy is rooted in increased misogyny.⁵

It is precisely at this moment and in this context that the explosion of women’s mysticism occurs, and each aspect of this extraordinary phenomenon parallels and contradicts one element of the new reform. As the clergy claim complete control of the avenues of grace and the absolute need by the laity of clerical mediation, the women are claiming direct access to God in mystical union, thereby bypassing the whole clerical

structure. As the universities come to scholastic agreement on the relationship of faith and reason, the women opt for love. As the clergy practically monopolise prayer to Christ and prescribe devotion to Mary as most appropriate for laity and women religious, the mystics opt for the humanity of Jesus, and mount a kind of counter offensive to the clerical control of the Eucharist, in their unprecedented charismatic devotion to the Eucharist presence. And just as the Lateran Councils forbade the founding of any more religious communities for women, the Beguines arrived on the scene and were perhaps the most influential counterforce to the church's fear and hatred of women. And even more significantly, as the bodies of women were newly condemned in the powerful propaganda in favour of clerical celibacy, these mystical women discovered that their female bodies, sharing as they did in the Eucharist humanity of Christ, constituted their most powerful allies in their journey to God. In this medieval Christendom which was essentially dualistic in every way, but especially in its male/female dualism, these women collapsed the dualisms of body and spirit, earth and heaven, and discovered a new sense of mystical unity with the divinity and the divinely created cosmos. And finally, just as the male church seemed to be able to "manage" God in their central principle of power over the avenues of grace, the women decided to free God and demonstrated the pretentiousness of male clerical claims to be able to speak of God and the things of God with absolute certainty. Even though there is no evidence that the women quoted their female ancestor Miriam, the sister of Moses, the words of Miriam very aptly describe the situation: "Does the Holy One speak only to Moses?" (Numbers 12,2) The medieval women mystics would have responded with a chorus of "No".

It is time now to be a little bit more explicit about the notion of mysticism. The experience of mysticism sits uneasily in a revealed religion, where the implication is that all has been revealed, that no new revelations are to be expected, and the channels of God's communication with humanity are strictly defined. We know when, where and to whom God is going to speak and has spoken. Nevertheless, mysticism has always been part of the Christian tradition in a highly controlled way. Here, I shall mention just a few characteristics of this particular branch of female mysticism in Christianity.⁶

Mysticism is the experience of direct access to and direct union with God, in a way that is essentially impossible to describe.⁷ The language, forms and stages of mysticism had been pretty well described, from a male perspective, but the whole point of this fascinating and rich vein of female mysticism, is that it spills over the prescribed boundaries in almost every sense. Mysticism is a double consciousness of God and the self in a way that, for the women, blurred the distinctions between the human and the divine. It is a search for an experience of a crystallization of the self, for a sense of oneness within and with the whole cosmos. As the Eucharistic prayer prays *ut unum sint* – that all may be one - these women prayed *ut unum sim* – that I may be one. Mysticism is then, an aspect of the spiritual journey that always seeks more, more union, more understanding, a more experiential sense of God's presence, and a deeper participation in the life and very being of the divinity. They sought the experience of becoming *capax dei*, of participating in the very being of God.

In this process, enormous changes occur both in the individual's sense of self and in one's sense of God, and so a new language and symbology are required in order to express this new experience. Here, it will be possible to indicate just a few aspects of

this.⁸ First of all, for the medieval women mystics, the notion of intimacy seems to have replaced the notion of redemption. It is startling to discover that, for these women, the long tradition of Eve and Original Sin seems not to have been a significant part of their self-consciousness. If one experiences oneself as a woman sinner, whose life was to be given over to repentance as a daughter of Eve, the cause of sin in the world, then this is definitely not a starting point for the mystical journey. Instead, these women seem to have taken the *imago dei* as their starting point – “just to be born is grace enough”. They had no sense of distance from God; indeed the constant repetition of the statement “my real me is God” would indicate that they felt Godlike, and as we shall see, this meant Godlike in their female bodiliness. And finally, for this section, such a new experience and awareness of God required a new form of expression. They struggled to find their “own appropriate form of inner discourse”. They sought a new language and new images that would convey their experience of divine/human intimacy in a new way. Hence we can appreciate the variety of literary forms in their written works – poetry, drama, letters, personal reflection, prayers, music, art, liturgy, community discussion, and the huge variety of metaphors and images used to make this writing among the most brilliant collections of Christian writing accessible to us. The new vernacular languages also lent them a new freedom of expression, and made their writings distinctly different from clerical writing in Latin, and much more available to all the laity.

Before entering a little more deeply into the writings of the women, I want to suggest a distinction between the mysticism of these women and that of their male mystical contemporaries, whom the women outnumber by about one hundred to one. The male spiritual journey at that time was full of drama and catastrophic conversion. For

men, undertaking this more intense spiritual journey, entailed abandoning the world of power, success, reputation, military prowess, clerical advancement and entitlement and sexual adventure. It was a clear break, a separation, a shattering of the male ego, in order to undertake what up till then had seemed to be the women's virtues of humility, poverty, obedience, submission and hiddenness. It meant withdrawal from the world. The traditional three stage spiritual journey fitted this task admirably: purgation, illumination and union. The goal of unity that was the core of every male spiritual journey was a unity especially with the will of God, a union of wills.

Women seem to have undertaken a different journey. From their writings we find no sudden conversions, but a gradual awakening to the presence of God from a very early age, and a continuous unfolding of their God –created selves toward an experience of real identification with God: *Tu es ego et ego sum Tu*. For the men the imagery entailed going up and out; for the women, the imagery was about going inward and downward. In the core of their being, the women found God. Their female humanity was Godlike. Freedom was the goal of female mysticism and was often expressed in the wonderful phrase “living without a why”, that is there was no need for any external impetus, but simply the radical unfolding of what women “were before they were”.⁹ For men the spiritual journey involved continuous separations; for the women, this same journey entailed the task of embracing the universe in a “cloak of love”. Finally, for many men, the goal of the spiritual journey was solitude; for the women, the whole point was that this journey enabled them to speak publicly for God, to preach, and to engage in the “public exercise of compassion”. For men, the spiritual journey seemed to be one of exterior disabling; for women it was a journey toward public power, in the sense of being

enabled to speak for God to all in the marketplace. For men, the mystical journey was a dangerous enterprise and the invitation to embark on this journey was extended only to a chosen few; for women, this journey was available to all without exception, because none can be excluded from love.

The Voices of Women: Our Woman Christian Heritage:

I want to be a little more specific now about some of the content of women's mystical double awareness of God and self, and the place to begin must be the Eucharist.¹⁰ The celebration of the Eucharist was central to the lives of these women and their writings are full of complaints about the infrequent liturgical celebrations allowed them. The central fact of their Eucharistic celebration was their immediate experience of contact with the sacramental physicality of Christ. They marveled at the availability of God in an enfleshed way. The phrase of Scripture that most explained the Eucharist for them was John 1:14, "The Word was made Flesh". The enfleshment of God in the Eucharist opened for them a new experience of their own female flesh. Through the humanity of Christ, they discovered their own humanity at a time when continuous discussion was taking place about whether or not women were, in fact, fully human. Through the Eucharist, women learned to claim their full enfleshed humanity as women. At a time when the dominant theological discussion centered on the dichotomies of flesh and spirit, and especially of female flesh and divine spirit, these women discovered an enfleshed God in their femaleness. Traditional images for union with God – used by both women and men – included light, water, rain, and to these, the women mystics now added female flesh. This constitutes an extraordinary experience in the history of Christian spirituality. Even today, it is femaleness that is at the core of many continuing

theological and ethical controversies – abortion, contraception, and the ordination of women. Femaleness is also central to imposed priestly celibacy and continues the medieval conviction that the female body is antithetical to divine presence. Hence in some contemporary minimal attempts to make the male symbolising of God more inclusive for women, God is feminised and becomes a kind of new age man. But mainstream theology, for the most part, still cannot cope with the reality of female bodies.

Participation in the Eucharist, then, was a tangible form of mystical union open to all. God had become available to all in the human flesh of Jesus. The symbol of food is also intrinsic to the mystical experience of women. In a world where most women had no control at all of the disposition of their lives, food represented the one area where they were powerful and could make decisions about their own lives. This is a huge topic, but time and again in the life stories of women mystics, one of the main forms of resistance to male and parental control was fasting, and this was especially so, as the woman tried to negotiate family pressures during her adolescent years. The link to contemporary problems with anorexic is not hard to make.

Before leaving the Eucharist, which demands a much more nuanced and intricate development than I have time for here, it is necessary to speak about the women's use of the image of blood. To me, this has become a main source of wonder and sadness at the loss of a whole theological development that simply has not happened in mainstream traditional Christianity. Blood is a central image for Christians, linked traditionally to the understanding of the Crucifixion as the redemptive suffering of the innocent. It is associated with death, violence, rage, vicarious pain and suffering, bodily torture and the

necessity of participating in this suffering through either willed or unwilled suffering in the life of the believing Christian. The extraordinary popularity of the recent film *The Passion of the Christ* shows the persistence of these ideas, and the profound influence they have had on the Christian imagination. For me, this film represented the absolute low-point in Christian theology and pastoral care. It is clear that some women participated in such self-inflicted torments at the early stages of their spiritual journey. What is also clear, however, is that for many women, this was an entirely different experience than the male interpretation of it. For male commentators, the main spiritual task of women was repentance and suffering, and the more the better. When they describe such self-inflicted suffering the male commentators always describe it as appropriate to the state of women. In some cases, this may also have been the woman's motivation. But three points need to be made. First, what male commentators describe as external sufferings is often described by women as internal – such language denotes their inner feelings, not their external bodily pains. It is possible to see this clearly when we have both a female autobiography and a male biography. Secondly, for many of the women, such self-inflicted suffering represents an exploration of the boundaries of their humanity. For many, the most human thing about Jesus was the fact that he was tortured and murdered as a result of the life he led. As the women explored the meaning of their humanity, such actions seemed, at one stage of their journeys, to open a new door of understanding to them. Most women abandoned such practices as they advanced on the spiritual path and the community of nuns at Helfta refused to tolerate such behaviour in their nuns. For women such as Margueite Porete, such behaviour was absolutely unthinkable. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the image of blood in the writings of

these mystics has much more to do with the blood of birth-giving and new life than with the blood of suffering and death. The women mystics are often credited with turning symbols upside down, and this is one instance where the symbol of the blood of new birth adds a whole new dimension to the spiritual journey, focused exclusively in the experience of women. In the whole Christian theological corpus, there are hardly any positive reflections on the role of the mother/wife, and absolutely no theological reflections by mothers and wives become part of the mainstream tradition. On the contrary the femaleness of the wife/mother is looked on with horror and disdain. The whole experience of conceiving, carrying a child, delivering and nurturing a child as a woman was looked on - and still is – as antithetical to the notion of divinity. In other words, as we have said, femaleness is not Godlike. If the mother image is used, it is in the tradition of femininity, denoting a sense of self-sacrifice, hiddenness, obedience, and the acceptance of what God sends. So the mystical use of the life-giving blood of childbirth and new life as an image of God provided a whole new avenue for female reflection, art, poetry and theologising.

The mystical journey focuses on experiencing direct access to God. But who is this God? My overwhelming response to my recent involvement with these women is that they let God out to play. Their experience of God led them to create a new symbolic language in order to convey their experience more accurately. Here also they collapsed the old dichotomous symbols of divine purity as opposed to human evil and sinfulness, and communicated a God who was implicated in all aspects of the human and the cosmic. Their greatest fear was that God would be captured inside a language that would give the impression that we knew exactly what we were talking about. They accused many of the

male theologians of being “merchants” of God; of reducing God to a commodity that could be handled and manipulated. As Julian of Norwich expressed it, their experience of God was of one “closer than hands and feet”, and at the same time, beyond all imagining. Their language was both kataphatic and apophatic. The Roman Catholic tradition, in particular, is brilliant in its kataphatic exposition of who God is and what God does. The Catholic Catechism, speaking intentionally only of male believers, is a wonderful example of the kataphatic tradition at work. There is a sure definition of everything in words that have not been much altered for centuries. God is captured in traditional expressions that are beginning to break down only in recent decades.

The apophatic tradition, on the other hand, always leaves the door open to mystery. The apophatic mystics (nearly all of them at one time or another) insist that God is no-thing, that God cannot be captured. As Hadewijch says; “I swim toward the shore only to find that you have enlarged the sea.”¹¹ The experience of this no-thing God beckons us also to experience our own no-thingness, and to learn to return to “where we were before we were.”, as Marguerite Porete says. This fluidity of experience and language leads us to explore our own God-thoughts and to ask ourselves, perhaps, what human experience lies behind our notion of Trinity. These medieval women did just that and produced brilliant poetry where God is addressed as LadyLove, LadyWisdom, Mother, WomanSpirit, in a vast variety of imagery that demonstrates their search for a new language to communicate their new experience.

One of the struggles of many of the mystics was with the symbology of good and evil. For them good and evil were not dichotomous but part of the notion of being human and being divine. It was Julian, especially, who challenged constantly the notions of hell

and punishment for sin, and who in turn, was constantly assured by God that “all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of thing will be well”. Julian was quite conscious of the radical nature of her teaching about love and sin. She lived in the territory of a bishop who was, to say the least, bad-tempered, and so she devised the parable of “The Lord and the Servant “ to illustrate her own sense of sin. For her, sin was a question of forgetting who we are, forgetting our being, but was also inevitable. No matter how pernicious the sin, there was for Julian a core of the human that would never be God-less. God was implicated in the sinner’s life, and, in Julian’s theology, there was to be no place for a final condemnation.¹²

Our Christian heritage then, from the writings of the medieval women mystics is one of a wholly expanded experience of God and of femaleness. These women were engaged - all unconsciously of course – in the practice of theologising defined as *fides quaerens intellectum*, an experience of faith seeking understanding. Their experience of faith differed in so many respects from what was traditionally prescribed for them, and so they had to seek new ways of understanding and communicating their experience. In this they felt themselves to be God-led, even God-driven. Four of the women in particular, Angela of Foligno, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Brabant and Marguerite Porete, have been entitled the “four women evangelists” because these women considered their writings to be the equivalent of the canonical gospels, since they were all equally inspired by God. Despite all the contemporary dangers, they did not hesitate to act as God’s spokespersons. This courage cost Marguerite her life on June 1, 1310.

The Challenges of Doing Women’s Christian History:

It is appropriate here to take some time out to comment briefly on the difficulty of doing women's history in any context, but especially in a Christian context. The fact is, of course, that women have been almost completely written out of the story. For 2000 years it has been possible to tell the Christian story without any mention of real women. To judge by the recent papal encyclical on Christian Love – of all things! – it is still officially not only possible but necessary to do this. This means that the women, their lives, thoughts, writings, theology and spirituality have to be sought, contextualised, analysed and presented in a way that can be understood today. It is a question of connecting the dots – a fragment here, a clue there – and trying to create some kind of sense from such disparate pieces. In “normal” history, it is accepted that in connecting the dots, the male imagination will come into play. This is evident today, for example in our historical theology of the papacy, the priesthood and the Eucharist, to name but a few items. In no case do we have complete sources, but the tradition has provided a framework within which, for example, today's Eucharist can be traced back to the Last Supper, and the papacy can be seen as one unbroken line in apostolic succession. Where the dots are missing, the Christian theological imagination fills in the blanks.

In the case of women's Christian history, the dots are even more disparate. When the dots are connected in the traditional way, women are put into the dichotomous framework of the male dominant story, and they enter history only where they illustrate a point of use to the male centered story. Hence, for Pope Benedict XV in his first encyclical, the whole of women's contribution to Christian Love can be reduced to Mother Teresa, who is mentioned four times, and Louise de Marillac, mentioned once in a list of saints. There is no mention of mother's love, no mention of mystical love, and

remarkably, no mention of the outpouring of love from thousand of nuns and lay women and men in missionary and apostolic work.

That is why it is important for me, as a historian, to do some historical and symbolic affirmative action. What I have been doing for the past few years is joining the dots that most challenge the conventional story. Certainly, there is much in the mystics that supports the traditional mainstream story. But there is also an extraordinary amount that challenges it to its very roots, and that is the part that I have been emphasizing, because that is the part that has been hidden, ignored or burnt out of existence. The fact is that these women experienced God differently and tried to express that experience. The fact is that there is a corpus of women's theology waiting to be explored. The fact is that not only do feminist theologians today add enormously to our Christian experience and understanding as women, but there is also a historical theological corpus that has never been fully explored. This is above all, I think, a challenge to our imaginations, to our fidelity to our own religious insights, to our willingness to search for a new language and symbol structure to express this, and to bring all of this to our understanding of the Christian story. For me, it is the discovery that the Christian story, as told, is a partial understanding of the story. The WomanChristian story is also a partial understanding of the story. Eventually, we may be willing to attempt an integration of these and the many other partial stories. That will not happen in the foreseeable future and so I have chosen to immerse myself in the WomanChristian story and cleanse my mind of the other for the moment. I am also aware that such complete cleansing is impossible. There is also a new awareness that the whole story could be told a different way, that the whole is much more diverse, more fragile, more pluralistic, more fluid that we had ever imagined.

Ecofeminist Theology:

Recently, as I said, I took a short break from the mystics and tried to catch up with the advances in ecofeminist theology, especially in the work of Rosemary Ruether and Ivone Gebara. I am going to speak especially of the latter – all too briefly. Gebara brings her ecofeminist sensibility to bear on the central tenets of the Christian faith: the understanding of the person, of God, of the Trinity, of Jesus, and especially of epistemology – how we know what we know. I was fascinated that in each case I had already learned some of her conclusions from the women mystics. It would take a whole book to explicate this, but I just want to highlight a few points here. I will start with a description by Mechtilde of Magdeburg of a vision she had of a priest saying Mass. The priest, she said, was wearing vestments that were covered in samples of every leaf, every flower, every feather, every hair of every creature that had ever lived. He was clad in the flora and fauna of the universe. And she concluded that the whole universe was present and was celebrating and being celebrated at every Eucharist. That is the kind of interconnectedness that is central to ecofeminist theology. Julian of Norwich's sense of the dance of what we call good and evil in our lives is also central to ecofeminism. When Catherine of Genoa says "My real me is God", she is expressing the sense of cosmic relatedness that is part of ecofeminism. When Marguerite Porete describes the Seine entering the sea, mingling water with water, she is expressing the sense of divine-human interaction that is part of ecofeminism. When so many of the mystics call God their mother, sister, Lady Love, Lady Wisdom, they are attempting to express the same

inexpressible truth that ecofeminist theology tries to express in its expansion of the symbolism of divinity. When all the mystics describe their spiritual journey as going inward and downward as well as outward and upward, they are dealing with the same mystery of immanence and transcendence that the ecofeminist theologians are exploring, and all the mystics would agree that transcendence is within. When the mystics marvel at the mystery of humanity, of being enfleshed, especially as females, and when they know their female flesh to be an essential symbol of their divinisation, they are at one with the ecofeminist spiritual journey toward a connected wholeness. The mystics join with the ecofeminists in a new sense of awe and humility before the mystery of humanity/divinity, and could teach the ecofeminists a thing or two about the marvels of apophatic theology. To my knowledge, none of the ecofeminist theologians have entered this territory, and it is, I think, to their loss.

Conclusion:

I want to conclude with another statement of my choice as a historian to immerse myself in the writings of these women. It is a prejudicial choice, a choice to focus on a particular part and not on some other parts. Since most Christian history and theology is still written by men, the assumption is that they can speak for all. The result of this is that the perspective of women has all but disappeared and cannot be retrieved by the often minimal efforts at inclusive language. The difference is that I am not claiming to speak for all, to tell the whole story, or claiming that this is the only story, or the real story, or the orthodox story. I know I have made a prejudicial choice. But the women's story and women's theology is a part of the Christian story that has been ignored and silenced. It is not an alternative, an unnecessary frill to be tacked on or chosen at a whim. The

WomanChristian heritage is a legitimate telling of the Christian story, a legitimate part of our heritage. The fact that it is unknown to almost every Christian is more and more astonishing. The seeds of all the contemporary “woman’s issues” in Christianity are to be found there, with usually a more creative solution than anything we have come up with.

These women were not fighting for their rights. They were not early feminists. They were much more interested in expressing their female humanity than in entering into male-female battles. They simply ignored that dimension. They experienced the spiritual journey as a journey inward and downward into their enfleshed humanity and there they discovered that their “real me is God” – something infinitely more radical than any contemporary woman might dare to say. Catherine of Siena prayed to be a man so that she could say Mass. God said to her (this, of course is Catherine entering into symbolic thought) “I can make an angel as easily as an ant. I made you a woman. I want you to preach as a woman”. When Gertrude of Helfta complained that the nuns of Helfta were not seeing priests often enough, God ordained her a priest. It is the religious expansion of the imagination that is so refreshing. All the time I am reading these women I am struck by a new model of what I would call priestliness. Each time they long to be a priest in the male model, their attention is directed not away from priesthood, but back to themselves, to a completely new kind of female priestliness. God could just as easily have said: “Listen. I can make a male priest as easily as an ant. You are a priestly woman – act like one.”

So these women journeyed to their God by allowing their humanity, their femaleness, to unfold. As Marguerite Porete said so often: “We carry our why within”. Their understanding of their humanity started from John 1.14 “The Word was made

flesh”, and from their experience of the enfleshed God in the Eucharist. For the medieval mystics, the flesh of women was as close to divinity as one can get.

¹ The most accessible introduction to the writings of centuries of women Christians up to the Middle Ages is in Andrew Kadel, *Matrology: A Bibliography of Writings by Christian Women from the First to the Fifteenth Centuries*, Continuum, New York, 1995.

² A fairly exhaustive collection of recent papal statements about women, mostly in the context of their inadmissibility to priestly ordination, can be found in Deborah Halter, *The Papal “No”: A Comprehensive Guide to the Vatican’s Rejection of Women’s Ordination*, A Crossroad Book, 2004.

³ See for example Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Fortress Press, 1999; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, Seabury Press, 1975; and Anne Primavesi, *Making God Laugh: Human Arrogance and Ecological Humility*, Polebridge Press, 2004.

⁴ One of the most comprehensive commentaries on the mystical writings of these women is in Bernard McGinn’s *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200 – 1350*, which is Vol. 111 of his series on Christian Mysticism, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, A Crossroad Herder Book, 1998. Many of the individual texts are now published in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, as, for example, Marguerite Porete’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated and introduced by Ellen L. Babinsky, Paulist Press, 1993.

⁵ For examples of these developments, see Mary T. Malone, *From 1000 to the Reformation*, which is Volume 11 of *Women and Christianity*, The Columba Press, (Also Novalis and Orbis Books), 2001.

⁶ For a much more complete discussion of medieval mysticism, see Bernard McGinn, *op. cit.*, and also the Introduction in Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (Editor), *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁷ Phrases such as “unmanifest nothingness” suggest well the lack of an adequate language to describe the mystical experience. See Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁸ For a more systematic discussion of this, see for example, Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body & Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁹ These are frequent phrases in the writings of both Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, the later being, in general, more akin to the women mystics than to his brothers. See the discussion in Bernard McGinn (Editor), *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, Continuum, 1994.

¹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum has written extensively on these matters and has also edited several volumes. See especially, *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, Beacon Press, 1986; *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Zone Books, 1992; and on the complex relationship of women with food, see *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, University of California Press, 1988. For comparisons with the modern phenomenon of anorexia, see Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

¹¹ An accessible selection of the works of Hadewijch can be found in Emilie Zum Brunn & Georgette Epiney – Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, Paragon House, New York, 1989. A very good overview of Beguine mystical thought can be found in Fiona Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality*, Spiritual Classics, Crossroad, 1990.

¹² The bishop of Norwich in Julian’s time was Henry Despenser, a cruel and violent man. Julian returns to the problem of sin and evil throughout the *Showings*, but see especially chapter 27 and the Parable of the Lord and the Servant in chapter 55.