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# "CLASSICS OF WESTERN SPIRITUALITY", II: THREE MEDIEVAL WOMEN THEOLOGIANs AND THEIR BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

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A review article of: *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, by Caroline Walker Bynum. 444pp with 30 plates. The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, ed. Stephen Greenblatt. University of California Press, 1987.

*Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, translated and introduced by Mother Columba Hart, O.S.D., with a preface by Paul Mommaers. 412pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1980.

*Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, translated and introduced by Suzanne Noffke, O.P., with a preface by Giuliana Cavallani. 398pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1980.

*Julian of Norwich: Showings*, translated and introduced by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and James Walsh, S. J., with a preface by Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. 369pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1978.

## I

One major impulse behind the contemporary interest in medieval mysticism is feminist. For the last thirty years or so many intellectuals have been engaged in a quest to pinpoint distinctively female traditions of thought and writing, and to examine all aspects of Western culture from the viewpoint of women. But it is still only beginning to be understood that one of the largest and most absorbing bodies of evidence so far uncovered to assist in this quest is the mass of writings by, about, and for medieval religious women. Most of the research into these writings has been done by religious conservatives, working a good way from the worlds of theoretical feminism and the major academic and popular presses. In North America, the journals *Mystics Quarterly*, *Studia Mystica*, and *Vox Benedictina*, which are rallying points for much of this research, are published in Iowa, Sacramento and Saskatoon respectively, all by local presses — the last is also responsible for the *Matrologia* series of translations.<sup>2</sup> The closest European equivalents of these publications are the series *Analecta Cartusiana*, with spin-offs, published mostly in English from Salzburg, the IRIS colloquia run by Roland Maisonnewe (mostly in French) and the series of conferences on the English mystics held at Dartington Hall in Devon.<sup>3</sup> Only gradually have scholars and readers outside the small circle of participants in these projects become aware of the importance of the material with which they are concerned. Medievalists have recently had their horizons much expanded by the publication of Peter Dronke's study, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*.<sup>4</sup> In England, Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* has increasingly been singled out for special

attention;<sup>5</sup> in Germany and Holland, the study of Hildegard of Bingen, the nuns of Hefta, and the beguines is now of established importance.<sup>6</sup> A glance along the shelves of recent publications concerned with religious and medieval studies seems to suggest that a small but important revolution is in progress.

This article is a discussion of four books that constitute a significant part of this "revolution". Three are translations of works by women writers, all of whom deserve to be read by those interested in Christian spirituality. They make a dramatic contrast to the male writers I discussed in an earlier article (see note 1), Eckart, Tauler and Ruusbroec — writers of sermons, commentaries and treatises, whose work has always, if sometimes uneasily, formed a part of the tradition of mystical theology; intellectuals and priests, whose preoccupations pulled them alternately towards the lofty abstractions of Christian Neoplatonism and towards the pastoral realities of the religious life. Hadewijch<sup>7</sup> and Julian have not until this century been widely recognized as parts of any tradition. Hadewijch's highly personal reflections on the passionate love of God, in the form of visions, poems and letter, were evidently written both as subjective effusion and as guidance for her younger contemporaries. She was persecuted in her lifetime and forgotten after her death; at one stage there were no less than 111 religious women called Hadewijch to choose from in establishing her identity, and all that is certain even now is that she lived during the thirteenth century, and that her works were known to Ruusbroec in the fourteenth century, before disappearing until their rediscovery in 1838. Julian's brilliant work of original theological speculation has no specific pastoral function. It seems to have been little read during the Middle Ages, was copied during the seventeenth century, perhaps by the English nuns at Cambrai and possibly with the encouragement of their director Augustine Baker, was published in Paris in 1670 by Baker's "disciple" Serenus Cressy, but has reached a substantial audience only since the publication of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* in 1911. It survives in two versions, one of which is assumed to be a first draft; these give us most of the little information we have about Julian's life.<sup>8</sup>

Only Catherine's life and work — the latter consisting of the *Dialogue* and several hundred letters, some to friends, some to ecclesiastical and political figures — was widely appreciated during her lifetime and after her death in 1380. Memories of her hectic but disciplined devotion, of her naive support of the Papacy through the labyrinthine windings of Italian politics, and of her championship by powerful and educated Dominicans, such as her confessor and disciple Raymond of Capua and the English hermit William Flete, led to her canonization in 1461. She went on to be one of the main Counter-Reformation role models and the Siennese saint *par excellence*; in 1970 she was one of the first two women — the other was Teresa of Avila — to be declared Doctors of the Church, by Pope Paul VI.<sup>9</sup> Even if one does not get the impression that her writings have in truth been closely studied, Doctor or no, her success is nominally as great or greater than that of Eckhart *et al.*

And yet for her, as for Hadewijch and Julian, the fact that she wrote as a woman made obvious and radical differences to what and how she wrote. Not being a

priest, her authority to teach was confined to the world outside the pulpit and confessional, to general (even though often very pointed) didacticism, and to ecstatic utterance; if Julian was able to develop an original theology in similar circumstances, it was by dint of endowing her visions, as she expounded them, with the results of several decades of hard thought. Not having a formal Latin education, Catherine, Julian and Hadewijch all worked largely outside the abstract categories of Christian Neoplatonism, created their own literary forms, and lived and thought as much through metaphor and vision as through logic. We shall see, in short, that as writers and theologians these women experienced a set of constraints very different from — and surely more daunting than — those operating on their male “counterparts”, and consequently adopted different sorts of language and structures of ideas for their expositions of the life of perfection.

I have used the word “constraints” to describe these women writers’ lack of priestly authority and formal education. Yet it is the aim of the fourth book discussed here, Caroline Walker Bynum’s brilliant new study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, to show that, far from always feeling constrained by their circumstances, medieval religious women occupied their own special ground and wielded their own authority in the Church. Bynum explores the sources and possibilities of this female religiosity through the lives and writings of dozens of thirteenth — and fourteenth — century “holy women”. At the heart of its distinctiveness she finds, time and again, ramifying into almost endless combinations and complexities, the symbolism of food: the acceptance and sharing of nourishment; the suspension and refusal of nourishment. Instead of a more obviously feminist focus on the ways women were circumscribed or marginalized by male structures of authority, Bynum insists on viewing female religiosity positively, expounding it in terms of its possibilities not its imposed limitations. As a result, we are presented with a view of late medieval western Christendom in which many of the old polarities — the institution versus private devotion; priestly authority versus lay ignorance; orthodox versus heretical — have suddenly disappeared, to be replaced by something more variegated, more shifting, and far less abstract.

Bynum’s argument is polemical, in the sense that it consciously stresses one, positive, viewpoint at the expense of others equally possible. It is also based on a far wider range of documents than she can hope to have understood with total clarity. There will therefore be disagreements both with the overall thesis of her book, and with some of its details. Nonetheless this is a work of the first importance to students of religion and medieval history, and equally to anyone concerned with the place of women within western society. More particularly for my present purposes, a brief outline of her book makes a fine introduction to the way Hadewijch’s, Catherine’s and Julian’s thought works, and enables us to generalize with a certain amount of confidence about writers in three languages whose lives spanned up to two centuries.

## II

A first look at the spirituality of late medieval women,

through Saints’ Lives (usually written by men) and through the writings of the women themselves, is likely to be startling and to attract dismissive charges of neurosis and hysteria. Astonishing and often distasteful stories and legends abound. Women fast for months or years until their bodies swell up, in memory of Christ’s passion and in expiation of the sins of the world (Catherine of Siena, like a more recent mystic, Simone Weil, literally starved to death). They take to their beds in a sensual ecstasy of longing for Christ, and are transported for days by a single sight or taste of his body in the Eucharist, so that they can absorb no other food. They have visions of drinking from the wounded side of Christ, of burrowing deep into Christ’s body to unite with his Sacred Heart; in literal antithesis and realization of this, they kiss and drink pus from the sores of beggars, while the saintly corpses of some lactate or exude fragrant oils. Virgins who imbibe Christ in the Eucharist see the host bleeding, turning into a beautiful young man, flying into their bodies across the church; they have visions of giving birth to Christ, of giving him suck, of marriage to Christ, of mystical and sensual union with him (some of Hadewijch’s accounts of visionary joinings with Christ seem to describe physical orgasm). Christ talks to women with an authoritative intimacy; women sometimes talk to Christ in the same tone, and extract remarkable promises of forgiveness and blessing. As well as being lover, ruler and child, Christ can himself be a woman, feeding humanity from the breast-like wound in his side with blood which is milk as well as wine; conversely the Virgin’s nursing of Christ, and mystically of the faithful, can be a Eucharistic image, and can be generalized so that holy women themselves are seen as nursing and feeding the Church. Christ is the Church; the Church is Ecclesia, a lovely virgin. Christ is the head, the Church the body, thus in one of Hildegard’s visions, *Woman is the body of Christ*. With all the rich confusion of Christian doctrine and metaphor to draw on, words can metamorphose into their opposites, categories grow, diversify and change in a profusion of ways: man can become woman, and woman Christ; eating be fasting, fasting bring repletion; spiritual fulfilment can coalesce with bodily deprivation, but also, and quite frankly, coincide with bodily and sexual fulfilment. As Bynum says, looking at how medieval women saw their own place in relation to the world and to God, we could often not be further from the patristic strictures against women and the misogyny of medieval anti-feminist satire — nor, at least on the face of it, could we be much further from the Neoplatonist abstractions of Eckhart.

The elucidation of this complex of behaviour, belief and symbol presents tremendous problems, even discounting those caused by the amount of material and its inaccessibility.<sup>10</sup> Much of the material is fanciful in nature, some of it clearly fictional; how is it to be treated? Bynum argues (p.8) that the question of its literal “truth” is a red herring, and that the stories point to medieval beliefs and practices whatever their roots in fact; but she also insists that with respect to these beliefs and practices it is facts, not fantasies, that are in question. Thus she comes to her texts with a combination of the attitudes of the historian, the sociologist and the literary critic. One can describe the aim of her study as the historical-social contextualization of a religious metaphor (this is the “New Historicism” espoused by the series to which her book is a contribution). But she also writes as a feminist

with a clear sense of the relationship between her scholarship and contemporary concerns, and with a conscious desire to put modern women in some sense "in touch" with their medieval forebears. The result is a book which breaks important new scholarly and methodological ground yet is intended for general readers as well as scholars, and so is written with a lively sense of narrative and an almost fussy concern with the reader's response.

The book is divided into three parts, respectively entitled "The Background", "The Evidence", and "The Explanation", with an introduction and epilogue which explain Bynum's working methods and try to assess the contemporary importance of her findings. The first part sketches the expansion of opportunities for the religious life available to women in the late Middle Ages, explores the patristic background to food symbolism and scepticism, and then describes how the meaning of food and of the refusal of food changed — with the development in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of the doctrine of Transubstantiation, with the parallel developments in the theology of the Passion, and with consequent shifts in the meaning of the Eucharist. The religiosity of the late Middle Ages was increasingly focussed on the humanity of Christ, and on the need for an individual, affective response to his life and Passion. It expressed these new concerns by laying great emphasis on the "real presence" of Christ in the sacrament, and on personal adoration of and meditation on Christ's life and death. His body and blood became the food and drink of salvation in a more tangible, literalistic way than ever before. (Here is the proximate source of many of the governing metaphors of post-Reformation pietism, as expressed in Bach's Passions, Victorian hymnody, and even, torn from its eucharistic context, in the modern evangelical emphasis on "a personal relationship with Christ"). Bynum argues that not only was this a distinctive and suitable spirituality for a newly-articulate laity, it was particularly championed by and associated with women.<sup>11</sup>

The second part shows in detail how food symbolism and eucharistic devotion were especially female concerns, first negatively by indicating the limits of male interest in these matters, and the positively through detailed accounts (80 pages of them) of the lives and writings of medieval women.<sup>12</sup> The pattern that emerges here — through instances derived from all over Europe and from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries — is of women abstaining from food or being unable to eat, while at the same time endowing the idea of food with a complex spiritual significance. Thus in a typical (albeit extreme) case, such as that of Catherine of Siena, there is an inversion of the dichotomy between flesh and spirit: the life of the flesh is spiritualized by near-total abstinence, while that of the spirit is lived in rich and sensual intimacy with carnal, incarnational and eucharistic language; indeed, in Catherine's life the dichotomy breaks down altogether. The results are sometimes beautiful, as when Catherine writes of God as a nursing mother (p.173), but often shocking, as when she "thrusts her mouth into the putrifying breast of a dying woman" (p.170). I particularly admire Bynum's handling of this material — how she allows it to speak for itself in all its deeply alienating oddity, while somehow also describing it with such sympathetic understanding that alienation

cannot turn into simplistic dismissal. It is quite clear, by the end of this part, that the cultural phenomenon she is describing is not an aberrant instance of a kind of mass perversion, but a spirituality requiring a sympathetic and respectful evaluation.

In the third part of her book, Bynum proceeds to this evaluation, by way of five chapters of "explanations". She begins with the simplest: female religious concern with food was related to the fact that food preparation was a female preserve — and so a matter with which women were naturally preoccupied and, more importantly, over which they had almost complete control. By refusing to eat (and by distributing food to others, as some insisted on doing even when they themselves were starving), women could exert maximum control over themselves and their environment, while their manipulation of both literal and symbolic foodstuffs provided them with their best opportunity for creating and exploring spiritual truths in their own lives. There is an obvious link here, discussed at length (pp. 194-207), with the condition modern medicine calls *anorexia nervosa*, and associated with the female adolescent's need for differentiation and self-determination. But Bynum rejects the easy, patronizing explanation, that this struggle for control was no more than a pathological response to institutionalized male supremacy and misogyny, self-hatred expressed as hatred of the flesh: "The extreme asceticism and literalism of women's spirituality were not, at the deepest level, masochism or dualism but, rather, efforts to gain power and to give meaning" (p.208). Women did refuse food as a way of making themselves sexually undesirable, of avoiding excretion and menstruation, and of giving their bodies pain; in a culture that always tended to think of asceticism as self-justifying, forcibly submitted married women to the sexual control of their husbands while simultaneously idealizing chastity, and denied the eucharist to menstruating women, this was inevitable. Yet the accounts such women give of their behaviour, in their own writings and through those of their male biographers, stress more value-bearing explanations which celebrate female physicality rather than denigrating it. Through a woman's body, God became incarnate and humanity was saved. By suffering deprivation, women attempted to continue God's redemptive work by identifying themselves with the suffering Christ — crucifying themselves on their own bodies, which were "eaten up" for the world's salvation. Hence many starving women received the stigmata and had visions of being literally united with Christ on the cross. The fact that the refusal of food was so often the means chosen for heightening pain made an even more physical kind of identification possible: "Closing herself off to ordinary food yet consuming God in the eucharist, the holy woman became God's body" (p.274), and thus a channel for divine power. However macabre such a self-transformation may seem, it involved a heroic act of choice, in which women wrenched themselves out of an environment in which they were subject to social and to ideological coercion by secular and religious authorities (such as husbands and priests), and asserted control over the meaning of their lives. And to a degree they did so successfully. Although there was debate in the late medieval church about the place of the holy woman, and some had to face tremendous external pressures, Bynum argues convincingly that they were a potent force, often

regarded with awe and adoration, and influencing the religious climate of their age in ways we have only begun to grasp. For many of their contemporaries they did indeed incarnate Christ.

In this short summary I have been able to convey scarcely any of the complexity of Bynum's argument, or of the rich theological elaborateness that underlies the medieval metaphors of food. I hope it is obvious by now that this is an important book, which challenges its readers in ways that scholarly works can rarely hope to do — if for no other reason, then because of the way the language of the body, of chewing and excreting and the body's fluids, flows through its pages with an intimacy that will alarm the squeamish. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* provides some of the palpability and sense of immediacy with the women it describes (strange though they are) that we expect of a historical novel. But it also gives access to a tradition of theological thinking that has real importance and vitality, and which is still little understood. It is time now to turn to three major representatives of that tradition.

### III

In this discussion of the imagery of food we have never been far from another way of talking about the religious life, the imagery of sex. The sensual language of eating, chewing and swallowing has tended to occur alongside references to touching, kissing, embracing, and penetration; indeed, many metaphors, such as those of desire and thirst, absorption and satisfaction, derive resonance from their applicability both to sex and to food. The strength of this combination becomes apparent when we look at the writings of Hadewijch, who must be accounted one of the great poets of love in European literature. By the time she completed her book (made up of four carefully-ordered groups of works: thirty-one letters, forty-five stanzaic poems, fourteen visions and sixteen poems in couplets), perhaps around 1240, Europe had been inundated for nearly two hundred years with lyrics, romances, sermons and treatises extolling personal passion directed at a lover or at God. The language of love, even when it was overtly sexual, had become formulaic and automatic, and could be used quite impersonally by a biblical exegete or a poetic technician. Yet in Hadewijch's writing love is a physical force, a pressure that compels response; her love of God is not a mere set of sentimental metaphors, but a fierce and (here is the food metaphor) hungry reality, which she recreates for the reader with an intimacy that is, and is supposed to be, highly disturbing. This sense of God's palpability is a direct consequence of the fact that, for Hadewijch, God is not only available to be embraced metaphorically, but can be touched, tasted and swallowed in carnal reality. In what we might call the "masculine" traditions of love-centred spirituality, there tends to be an emphasis on purity of feeling, so that the advanced contemplative loves God with the highest and most detached part of his soul, and the ascent to this love is represented as a progressive moving-away from the things of the world and the body. The emotional range of Hadewijch's relationship with God makes this sort of deliberate progress to ecstatic union seem abstract and

thin, an emptying, not a fulfilment, of the personality:

"Love is truly a chain, because she binds  
And grasps everything within her power...  
Her chains encircle within me so tightly  
That I think I shall die of pain;  
But her chains conjoin all things  
In a single fruition and a single delight.  
This is the chain that binds all in union  
So that each knows the other through and through  
In the anguish or the repose of the madness  
of Love,  
And eats his flesh and drinks his blood:  
The heart of each devours the other's heart,  
One soul assaults the other and invades  
it completely,  
As he who is Love itself showed us  
When he gave us himself to eat,  
Disconcerting all the thoughts of man."  
(pp.352-353)

The love that expresses itself in this image of two hearts eating one another is indeed "disconcerting"

If the image of eating love most naturally suggests a wondering satisfaction (as in George Herbert's lines, "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat;/ So I did sit, and eat"), the contrary image, that of being eaten by love, suggests pain. Pain is a major theme in all medieval love-literature (think of Tristan and Isolde), which so often focuses on deprivation more than on fulfilment, and describes fulfilment itself in terms of pain; union with the beloved is always short-lived, and the pleasure it brings is suffused with remembered and anticipated suffering. The love of which Hadewijch writes is painful on many levels. First, it seems to have led directly to what she calls "persecution". Reading between the lines of her letters, it seems she was at one time leader of a group of beguines (see note 7), but was deposed and prevented from continuing to give spiritual direction — she may have been regarded as heterodox, or simply as too overpowering. In a letter she refers to her deposition as depriving her not only of human comfort, but also of a vital token of God's love, the opportunity to serve:

Alas, dear child! although I speak of excessive sweetness, it is in truth a thing I know nothing of, except in the wish of my heart — that suffering has become sweet to me for the sake of his love. But he has been more cruel to me than any devil ever was. For devils could not stop me from loving God or loving anyone he charged me to help forward; but this he himself has snatched from me... Now my lot is like his to whom something is offered in jest, and when he wishes to take it his hand is slapped, and he is told: "God's wrath on him who fancied it true!" And what he supposed he held is snatched from him. (p.48)

Here the human agents of her predicament are ignored in the complexity of her feelings about God. First she says, conventionally enough, that all she suffers is for love, and that this fact ought to make suffering sweet though I think the implication of "wish" must be that it is not yet so. Then she asserts startlingly that God has

behaved cruelly towards her and deprived her of the possibility of loving him. Yet this angry outcry is itself transformed by the end of the letter, where she has become the ruefully amused recipient of an unpleasant, even Chaplinesque, practical joke; she manages, that is, to treat her pain as *funny*, a feat for which I can think of hardly any parallels in mystical or profane love-literature (perhaps Herbert's "The Collar" is one). God has "disconcerted" her.

Some of Hadewijch's other variations on the theme of pain are equally startling. In another letter she writes of two painful but useful kinds of fear: the fear that we do not love God enough, which humbles us and spurs us on, but also the "fear that Love does not love us enough, because she binds us so painfully that we think Love continually oppresses us and helps us little, and all the love is on our side" (p.65). This second fear, which she calls "unfaith", is useful because it "greatly enlarges consciousness", for it "never allows desire any rest in fidelity but, in the fear of not being loved enough, continually distrusts desire". Here Hadewijch seems to treat God as a human lover, in relation to whom all emotions — including that of distrust — can be appropriate; an orthodox reader might argue that such an attitude is the reverse of the childlike confidence and patience that ought to characterize human approaches to God. But on a more careful reading, it becomes apparent that Hadewijch's real suspicions centre on herself, on the tendency of her "desire" to fantasize an anthropomorphic and limited God into existence, who will allow her to settle into an unworthy complacency. In order to deal with this temptation, she urges that we give rein to another kind of fantasy, that we are deserted by the one who ought to love us; this causes us to make greater and greater demands on Love, and to distrust superficial satisfactions. So doing, it is possible to come to a "perfect fidelity" (pp.65-66) which no longer needs to distrust because it is in contact with God himself, not with a mere projection of his love.

The soul who reaches "perfect fidelity" might be thought to attain the peace and joyful union that most mystics regard as the end of their journey. But there is little peace in Hadewijch. The faithful soul may at any time be called away from the enjoyment of love to minister to the needs of another, and dishonours love by refusing such a call (p.65). Moreover, for her love itself is far from restful:

For I am a free human creature... and I can will as highly as I wish, and seize and receive from God all that he is, without objection or anger on his part — what no saint can do. For the saints have their will perfectly according to their pleasure; and they can no longer will beyond what they have. I have hated a great many wonderful deeds and experiences, because I wished to belong to Love alone, and because I could not believe that any human creature loved him so passionately as I — although I know it is a fact and indubitable... But in striving for this I have never experienced Love in any sort of way as repose; on the contrary, I found Love a heavy burden and disgrace. For I was a human creature, and Love is terrible and implacable, devouring and burning without regard for anything. The soul is contained in one little

rivulet; her depth is quickly filled up; her dykes quickly burst. Thus with rapidity the Godhead has engulfed human nature wholly in itself... As for persons who failed God and were strangers to him, they weighed heavy on me. For I was so laden with his love and captivated by it that I could scarcely endure that anyone should love him less than I. And charity for others wounded me cruelly... I would gladly have purchased love for them by accepting that he should love them and hate me. (pp.291-292).

When Hadewijch wrote this Vision 11 (a kind of manifesto), she had since received a "consolation" which changed her state to one of reposeful union with the "abyss". But it is the frenzy preceding repose that dominates her writing, and that here she contrasts, seemingly favourably, with the repose of the saints. In this state, she cannot believe anyone loves so well as she; yet she also cannot bear that anyone should love less. The two feelings pervade her writing; most of her energy seems to go either into refusing anything less than everything for herself, or into demanding the same of others. This is an extraordinarily assertive and aggressive form of mysticism, which runs terrible risks to reach its goal (risks of persecution and charges of pride, but surely most seriously of psychic self-destruction), but which, by Hadewijch's account, is irresistibly successful in doing so. Not surprisingly, even God is impressed by her:

The Voice said to me: "O strongest of all warriors! You have conquered everything and opened the closed totality, which never was opened by creatures who did not know, with painfully won and distressed Love, how I am God and Man! O heroine, since you are so heroic, and since you never yield, you are called the greatest heroine! It is right, therefore, that you should know me perfectly." (p.305)

For many Christians then and now, anyone who can experience and record a vision in which she is praised as "the greatest heroine" must seem to totter on the brink of spiritual megalomania. But such extremism is a hallmark of medieval women's spirituality — and here it is coupled with a generosity, a breadth of feeling, and a humane intelligence that there can be no question of dismissing as mere self-obsession.

#### IV

Turning to Catherine of Siena we skip a century and the eight hundred miles between the Netherlands and Tuscany to find ourselves in a somewhat different theological world. Hadewijch, as a beguine, probably thought and taught in a mainly female and non-institutionalized environment. Catherine, a tertiary (i.e. lay sister) of the Dominican foundation that still dominates a quarter of Siena, who spent her life surrounded by learned and cosmopolitan priests, was naturally influenced by and involved with the ecclesiastical institution in a way Hadewijch was not. Where the motive force behind Hadewijch's letters was pastoral concern for her "younger sisters", the focus in Catherine's letters is often the grandly general theme of the state of the Church. Much of her life was occupied with Church politics — mediating between the Papacy and Florence (and being

humiliatingly manipulated by the latter), persuading the Pope to return from Avignon to Rome — and her death by starvation was very likely a direct response to the beginnings of the “Great Schism”. The source of much of the power she exercised over her contemporaries (and especially over men) is probably to be found in a felt link between her holiness and prophetic powers and the mystical figure of Ecclesia herself; she was thought of as embodying the Church, the vessel of God’s merciful wisdom (*sophia*, another feminine figure), in her own life and utterances. Working out her thought in this heady but intensely pressured environment, it is to be expected that Catherine should be more firmly centred in a particular (Dominican) tradition of theological thought, and display less theological and literary individuality than does Hadewijch.

But given the differences between the two women, the remarkable thing is how much they share. In Catherine’s writing we again encounter a theology of passionate love, of restless internal and external activity, and of pain; one of her chief preoccupations is with the power of tears. For her too God is not only to be obeyed, but to be questioned and even coerced — although it is characteristic of her writing that these truths emerge as abstract doctrinal statements, where for Hadewijch they were not primarily theological issues but part of the texture of experience. Both are spiritually ambitious, and see the religious life in thoroughly extremist terms; the *Dialogue*’s first section (pp.28ff.) begins by stating that an infinite God demands an infinitude of repentance and love before he can forgive even the smallest sin, so that humanity must suffer infinite sorrow and infinite desire to achieve forgiveness. (Again characteristically, Catherine then spends several pages putting this statement in a theological context that makes it apply to ordinary Christians as well as spiritual athletes like herself.) Both Catherine and Hadewijch, lastly, combine spiritual rapture with commitment to active charity; neither fits the stereotyped picture of the mystic cut off from all the pressures and concerns of the everyday world.

Catherine wrote the *Dialogue* in 1377–1378, a hectic period of her life by the end of which the consuming energy that was to kill her two years later, aged thirty-three, had clearly begun to take its toll. The method of its composition is interesting. It was dictated to secretaries whenever there was time to do so, with Catherine always remembering where she had left off, but apparently also being in a state of “ecstasy” (a sort of prophetic trance?) while uttering. Since God does almost all the talking in the work (the soul’s part in the “dialogue” is limited to a few questions and a number of passages of rapturous praise), it must have seemed to her secretaries, as they scrambled to get her words down, that God was actually speaking through her. This was her belief too. Yet there is evidence that after these sessions she did not regard her text as finished, but revised it extensively with her own hands. This suggests a complicated view of the relationship between the work’s divine and human authors; there is at once a remarkable intimacy between them (Catherine can edit God’s words) and a distance (she does not get them right straight away).<sup>13</sup> Probably Catherine’s thinking was pragmatic; written as a spontaneous effusion, her book was doubtless in a messy state, full of ambiguities and unclarity, in its first form.

The *Dialogue* is not, indeed, a model of clarity even in its final form. The prologue has the soul making four petitions, for herself, for the Church, for the world, for an unspecified individual; God’s responses to these take up chapters 3–25 of the work.<sup>14</sup> After this point, Catherine requests an expansion of an image God has produced earlier, of Christ as a bridge; God’s long answer (chapters 26–87) gives rise to a further question, and so it goes on. This rhapsodic structure makes for a good deal of repetition, so that the work’s dominant themes — the relationship of love and knowledge in the soul’s spiritual journey, the state of the Church, the centrality of obedience and holy tears to the spiritual life — are explored in all their aspects, as discussions weave in and out of one another. But it does not make for easy reading. As we will find again with Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation*, the work is full of expositions which seem to lead to summaries and definitive conclusions but which fail to stop there, sweeping on to new arguments which may themselves return to the original starting-point; structures of ideas continually present themselves, only to be snatched away at the last moment.<sup>15</sup>

Both the work’s mode of composition and Catherine’s lack of a formal education can be cited in explanation of this phenomenon. But there is also a less negative way of thinking about it. What we might call the outermost circle of ideas in the work concerns the way truth and love must interact — the former including self-knowledge, doctrinal and political knowledge, and all that pertains to the reason; the latter consisting of love for God, neighbour, Church and world. The truth about ourselves drives us to humility and passionate desire for pardon; the truth about God sweeps us up into exultant awe, and makes us love him; the truth about the Church and the world fills us with passionate desire to turn both back to God. Truth and love activate one another. Catherine’s focus on truth is part of her Dominican inheritance,<sup>16</sup> and is unusual among medieval women writers, who tend to subsume their doctrinal stances into expressions of passionate love, rather as Hadewijch does. Like them, Catherine also emphasized passionate love for God in her life and writing, as the *Dialogue* and contemporary biographies make clear; for her well-educated male disciples, her access to the inner world of uncontrolled feeling must have constituted a large part of her fascination and authority. This combined emphasis on the superabundance of passionate love with a rational sense of theological truth is above all what makes the *Dialogue* distinctive. But the combination does not only function as part of the argument of the *Dialogue*, it also determines its form; for in the demands it imposes on the reader, the work enacts the way knowledge and love must be joined together. On the one hand, to read the work carefully is to give assent to its emphasis on knowledge, as time after time the soul’s subjective rapture and concern for its own state turn into demands for knowledge of God, and for the truth about the world. Catherine’s relationship with God is a starting-point, not (as with Hadewijch) an end-point of her work; unlike Julian of Norwich’s constantly-anthologized *Revelation*, her book does not exude a warmth that makes her enjoyable to read thoughtlessly. Yet on the other hand we cannot read the work only for knowledge, for it does not present its doctrines in a way the closure-seeking logical mind can grasp, but in the dramatic and emotional



context of a conversation between the soul and God; any attempt to abstract one set of arguments from the work will involve damaging the tissue of inter-connections between them. A reading of the *Dialogue* must involve a difficult combination of rational and affective attention, a willingness to think of ideas in a dynamic rather than a closed way. Such a reading learns the same lesson from the example of the text as it does from its precepts. If Hadewijch writes disconcertingly about a disconcerting God, Catherine's writing is a portrayal of what she regards as the supreme quality of discernment, in which love is grounded in rational truth, and truth in love.

## V

If Catherine of Siena's emphasis on the reason makes her an exception among medieval women writers, then her contemporary Julian of Norwich must be regarded as another. The original impetus for Julian's *Revelation of Love* was the three requests she made for affective experience of Christ's suffering, and the visions she was given in answer to those requests (see note 8). These visions, many of which are of scenes from the Passion, have parallels in the writings of other women (such as Margery Kempe), who saw in ecstasy what they had already imagined in meditation. But the theological and literary structure that Julian builds on her visions has no such parallels, and develops far beyond the expression of personal devotion, into one of the finest explorations of God as love in religious literature. Julian treats the Passion not only as the suffering and death of the incarnate Christ, but as an expression of the nature of the whole Trinity, the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son and the love of the Holy Spirit; she responds to it with all the three powers of her soul, memory, reason and love, which constitute her creation in the likeness of God.<sup>17</sup> Her style and thought is insistently Trinitarian, to the extent that clauses and phrases tend to come in groups of three, so that there is a kind of triple rhythm to the whole work. Yet even more important for her is the fact that the Trinity are a unity, a single and self-consistent being. Her application of this fundamental theological truth to her visions of Christ's redemption of humanity leads her into a powerfully taut and difficult argument about the love of God, which runs great risks of incoherence and heterodoxy, but which, after a quarter of a century of work on her part, at least comes close to achieving its goal.

The goal is to show that the whole of Christian history from Creation to Fall to Judgement is an expression of God's love. God himself sums up the purposes of her revelation in the last chapter of the work:

What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end. (p.342)

The incantatory quality of Julian's prose (which speaks, like Catherine's, to the rational and the emotional faculties at once) should not occlude the theological point: the three questions invoke each person of the Trinity in turn

(the revealer, the one revealed, and the quality that the one revealed reveals), and assert that the nature of each and the unity between them all is love. The other qualities that are ascribed to God, such as justice, might, wisdom, are subservient to this, and we cannot speak, for example, of God's judgement of sin at the Fall or on the Last Day unless we also speak of what occurs as expressions of his love. Thus in her visions, Julian saw the love of God but did not see sin or its punishment, or God's anger on account of sin.

Even while her visions were in progress, Julian was aware that their meaning was problematic, and responded with doubts and questions, which were incorporated into the revelation and influenced its direction, giving it something of the quality of a dialogue. It is her anguish at the harm that sin has done her and the whole world, expressed in the thought that without sin "all would have been well" (p.224), that evokes Christ's famous "Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well" (p.225);<sup>18</sup> and she promptly challenges his misquotation of her words by using them again, with "Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well, because of the great harm which has come through sin to your creatures?" (p.227). After the revelation, she was still so puzzled that in the first version of her book she left out a number of important statements (including "all will be well") and one entire vision. The main problem, of course, is that the absence of any sense of the wrath of God and mention of damnation in her revelation is difficult to reconcile with traditional Christian teaching. Christ was insistent that she adhere to the Church's beliefs, and she knew she must take the revelation with full seriousness:

Our faith is founded on God's word, and it belongs to our faith that we believe that God's word will be preserved in all things. And one article of our faith is that many creatures will be damned... And all this being so, it seemed to me that it was impossible that every kind of thing should be well, as our Lord revealed at this time. And to this I had no other answer as a revelation from our Lord except this: What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. (p.234)

Julian's attempt to solve this crucial difficulty takes up much of the middle third of her book (chapters 27-51) and elides with the difficult last third, which develops the doctrine that Christ is our mother out of the preceding theological discussions. Part of her answer is a version of "wait and see." She receives a glimpse of a "great deed ordained by our Lord God from without beginning, treasured and hid in his blessed breast, known only to himself, through which he will make all things well" (pp.232-233). But she also argues some more specific points. First, "in every soul which will be saved there is a godly will which never assents to sin and never will" (pp.241-242); the Fall did not corrupt the essential goodness of the human will. Second, "Our Lord was never angry, and never will be" (p.259); humans merely project anger onto God out of self-disgust and despair. Third, God does not, therefore, forgive our sins, since in his unchangeable nature he is never angered by them (p.259), and in our unchangeable nature we remain essentially unfallen. Fourth, that sin is nothing: "I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can



it be recognise except by the pain caused by it" (p.225). These claims are summed up in the great vision of the Lord and the servant (the vision suppressed in Julian's first draft) in chapter 51, which sees Adam's fall and Christ's incarnation as expressions of the same love.

There will continue to be differences of opinion as to how impressive these arguments are; they are both more cogent and more problematic than I have had the space to show. Yet Julian does deserve to be regarded as a serious theologian, worth reading not merely for an occasional spiritual pick-me-up, but for her entire religious overview. Reading *A Revelation of Divine Love* is not easy. As with the *Dialogue* and indeed with the writings of Hadewijch, we encounter much that is alienating or frustrating: arguments that are half logic, half metaphor; assumptions about the nature of revelation and claims for personal revelation that are fascinating, yet fall outside contemporary categories; imagery that is bizarre and perhaps repellent. But if we can give these writings the proper kind of attention (and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* is full of graphic illustrations both of the difficulties and of the possibilities inherent in this task), much of value and interest comes into focus. All three of the writers I have discussed display a sharp religious intelligence, an ability to synthesize not only different traditions of thought, but different areas of human experience into a strong and individual theology. In some respects these women writers, with their compassion and their willingness to reinterpret old orthodoxies, are of more obvious interest than their male contemporaries. After hundreds of years of relative neglect, it is to be hoped that their hour has come.

## NOTES

- 1 This article is the second in a series of reviews of parts of the Classics of Western Spirituality series published by SPCK/Paulist press; the first, which was subtitled "Eckhart, Tauler and Ruusbroec," appeared in KTR, vol XI no 1 (Spring 1988). I would like to thank the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada for their financial support during the period in which I was working on both articles.
- 2 *Mystics Quarterly* is edited by Valerie Lagorio and Ritamary Bradley, and is run from the Department of English, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242, USA. It carries some articles, but is mainly useful as a disseminator of information about work (in progress and published) or Christian mysticism, with a particular emphasis on women writers. *Studia Mystica* is edited by Mary Giles, Dept. of Humanities, California State University, Sacramento, California 95819, USA. It carries articles, reviews, poems and "appreciations," and is as much devotional as scholarly in intention. *Vox Benedictina* is edited by Margot King, 409 Garrison Crescent, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7H 2Z9, Canada — though a move to Toronto is contemplated. It carries more articles than reviews, but seems to be written very much for the inner circle. Of far greater importance is its spin-off, the *Matrologia Latina*, published by Peregrina Publishing Co. (same address), which consists of translations of medieval works by and about women. These are issued at cost price, are variable in quality but competent, and make available works of considerable interest and sometimes rarity; for example, the brilliant religious plays written by the ninth-century Ottonian nun Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, several of the lives of thirteenth-century women saints by Jacques de Vitry, and Heinrich Seuse's (Henry Suso's) *Little Book of Love*.
- 3 *Analecta Cartusiana* is, in effect, a multi-volume series of books and article-collections, founded, run and soon to be closed by the indefatigable James Hogg, of the Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, University of Salzburg, A-5020 Salzburg, Austria. Although many of the volumes investigate the specific matter of the history of the Carthusian Order, a number of them (and of another Salzburg series, the inappropriately-named Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies series) consist of studies and editions of mystical works, many written for or by women. A fatal

tolerance for indifferent and sometimes bad work has given Hogg's publications a mixed reputation, and driven him again and again to the brink of bankruptcy; but he has still not toppled, and many of the recent volumes have been indispensable. IRIS colloquia and publications, under the direction of Roland Maissoneuve (27 rue Laplanche, 01100 Oyonnax, France), explore the boundary between religion and science, and tend to the headily rhapsodic. The four Dartington symposia on the English mystics, run by Marion Glasscoe of the Dept. of English, University of Exeter, have generated much good work, which can be consulted in the Proceedings (entitled *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*), the first two volumes of which (1980, 1982) were published by the University of Exeter Press, the others (1984, 1987) by Boydell and Brewer.

- 4 Subtitled, *A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Porete (+1310)*, Cambridge 1984.
- 5 See e.g. *Love was his meaning: The Theology and Mysticism of Julian of Norwich*, by Brant Pelphrey, Salzburg Studies in English Literature (Salzburg 1982) and *Julian of Norwich, Mystic and Theologian*, by Grace Jantzen (London 1987). The form of Julian's title used in this article (*A Revelation of Love*) is the one she herself gives in the first sentence of the work ("This is a revelation of love..."), not the conventional *Revelations of Divine Love*, nor the title invented by Colledge and Walsh, *A Book of Showings*.
- 6 See e.g. *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter*, edited by Peter Dinzelbacher and D. Bauer (Ostfildern 1985) for bibliographical information. Hildegard is the most important of all medieval women theologians, and I hope to be able to give her special attention in a later article. A beguine is a religious woman living in informal association with others, sometimes under a written "rule," sometimes not. Large numbers of beguines, and a few beghards (male equivalents) formed an important part of the religious life of northern France, Belgium, Holland and Germany — they seem to have been unknown in England — in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Their existence is to be explained partly by the fact of what historians refer to as a contemporary "surplus of women," partly by the male religious orders' refusal to found enough houses for women, partly by a mass of female (and "feminist") enthusiasm for a certain style of religious devotion. Alternately praised, suspected, persecuted and condemned as heretical by the ecclesiastical and civic authorities, they were gone before the middle of the fifteenth century. A good brief introduction to their history is chapter 7 ("Fringe Orders and anti-Orders") of R. W. Southern's *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, vol.2 of the Pelican History of the Church (Harmondsworth 1970).
- 7 For convenience and modern accuracy, pronounce Had-e-vitch.
- 8 Both versions tell us that Julian had her visions on May 13th 1373, when she was thirty years old and seriously ill; she describes them as given in answer to three requests she made to God much earlier, for bodily sickness, for a true recollection of Christ's passion, and for three wounds, "the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of longing with my will for God" (p.127). From details in the short text, it is clear that at the time of her visions she was a laywoman or a nun. We know from one of the manuscripts of her work, and from the evidence of several Norwich wills, that later on she became an anchoress (at which time she may well have taken the name "Julian" or "Jelyan"). Whether this was before or after writing her work is unclear, but the long text was still unfinished in 1393, twenty years after her vision; only then did she understand the most puzzling of the revelations she had received. She was certainly an anchoress when she was visited by a fellow-mystic, Margery Kempe, who recounts what Julian said on this occasion in her wonderful autobiography (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, recently published as a Penguin Classic). She was still alive in 1413.
- 9 A great deal is known about Catherine of Siena, from her own writing and the memoirs of her contemporaries. Most useful and accessible is Raymond of Capua's *Legenda Maior*, translated by George Lamb as *The Life of Catherine of Siena* (New York 1960) — a work that until recently did more to keep Catherine's memory alive than anything she wrote.
- 10 Bynum mostly avoids manuscript sources, but must still go far afield for her bibliography and work in half a dozen languages.
- 11 For this part of her exposition, Bynum is indebted to another fine book in the New Historicist vein, Brian Stock's *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton 1983), chapter three of which expounds the development of eucharistic theology. A major event at the end of this process of development was the institution, in 1264 — the result of a vision revealed to and tirelessly promoted by Juliana of Cornillon — of

the feast of Corpus Christi, in which the humanity of Christ was for the first time a specific object of liturgical devotion.

- 12 The first chapter of this part, "Food as a Female Concern," is the least satisfactory in the book. It does achieve its major purpose, to place some bounds on the subject by showing that food and women were more closely associated in the Middle Ages than food and men — so that, for example, eucharistic miracles generally happen to women, and warnings about the perils of "the flesh" usually refer to sexual temptations with a male audience but to food and drink with a female one. But men wrote the eucharistic hymns Bynum quotes in chapter 1, as well as much of the hagiographic material on which she bases her accounts of the lives of women; food symbolism must have mattered to them too, in ways the book seems to brush aside. Moreover, Bynum does not mention one major, and predominantly male, literary genre in which food symbolism plays a crucial role, non-liturgical religious poetry; John of Hoveden's *Philomela* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* are as concerned with the metaphors of food as any of the women she discusses.
- 13 The relationship is still more complicated if we suppose that her "secretaries" — who were probably also at once her confessors and her spiritual disciples — had some hand in the revision. This may not be so, and in any case everyone was in such awe of Catherine that she must usually have had the last word. But it seems likely that she solicited their opinions, as educated men, on doctrinal matters.
- 14 The chapter-divisions do not originate with Catherine and are sometimes misleading. This part of the *Dialogue* is more clearly structured than Noffke's introduction (p.16) makes out.
- 15 For this reason too, it is impossible to quote the *Dialogue* in practicable quantities. Catherine has none of Hadewijch's skill in making pregnant and pithy statements, but always thinks a thought over several pages.
- 16 Dominicans argued that the highest faculty of the human soul was the reason, and that God was therefore to be attained through passionate knowledge; Franciscans and other argued that only love was high enough to attain to God. (Much of the history of the two orders can be explained in relation to their positions on this issue.) But it was agreed on all sides that knowledge on its own (*scientia*) was useless or even harmful unless it was imbued with love (*caritas*), and so became wisdom (*sapientia*).
- 17 Augustine, in the *De Trinitate*, argues that the three parts or powers of the soul were created in the image of the persons of the Trinity — a doctrine that pervades subsequent theological thought in the West.
- 18 Julian's cause is not helped by her translators' refusal to use "shall" here. While not attaining to nearly the sublime banality of the Penguin Classics translation ("everything's going to be all right"), this does sound disconcertingly like "All wibbly-wobbly" etc.