Self-actualization in the lives of medieval female mystics: An ethnohistorical approach

Cherel Jane Ellsworth Olive
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN THE LIVES OF MEDIEVAL FEMALE MYSTICS:

AN ETHNOHISTORICAL APPROACH

by

Cherel Jane Ellsworth Olive

Bachelor of Arts
Mills College
1960

Master of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1977

Master of Education, Special Education
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1978

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Cherel Jane Ellsworth Olive

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Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

An Ethnohistorical Approach to Self-actualization
In the lives of Medieval Female Mystics

by

Cherel Jane Ellsworth Olive

Dr. John J. Swetnam, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Anthropology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This dissertation explores the cultural and psychological factors that permitted six medieval female mystics to assume positions of leadership and innovation in a world marked by extreme gender inequality. Women religious have often been charged with being neurotics, hysterics, narcissists, and nymphomaniacs whereas males with similar experiences are rarely subject to the same degree of criticism. It is argued here that the women may well have been seeking to achieve the form of self-actualization described by humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow, as a result of the “conversion” experience analyzed by William James. Furthermore, applying modern categories of mental illness to these women ignores the opinion of their contemporaries who felt that dedication to union with God was the ultimate form of social heroism.

This case study approach examines the lives of six women exemplars. Extended case studies include Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Marguerite Porete (d.1310), and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). The records of Joan of Arc (1412/13-1431), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717) are provided as comparative cases. The lives of these women span six hundred years and illustrate ways in which
societal reaction to their revelations, doctrines and behaviors changed over time from high regard to suspicion or dismissal. This is a change that reflected major modifications in society as a whole wherein women suffered a general loss of power and prestige and monastic life-styles faded from the mainstream society.

Psychological explanations for the various phenomena of mysticism are of particular interest to this study in as much as they overlap the anthropologies of consciousness, psychology and religion. The dissertation examines the historical development of the fundamental cognitive concepts that influenced the lives of women mystics. Furthermore, each woman's life is assessed relative to the environmental, political, economic and religious factors with which they dealt. Emphasis is placed upon those cultural elements that may have provided motivation for their spiritual efforts and served as keys to their drive toward self-actualization. The importance given cultural factors clarifies the rationale for some of their behaviors that trouble modern students of religion and psychology.
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The job of writing this dissertation was totally unlike the coursework, which I always found to be both exciting and invigorating. However, it is one thing to read anthropology and history; it is quite another to write it. The loneliness of the research and writing process brought me to the conclusion that I am a much more social animal than I had hitherto realized. Thankfully, my committee members continued to ignore my moans and urged me on with humor, food, and no-nonsense requirements for writing style and detail. My committee chairman was Dr. John Swetnam. It was not unusual for him to verbally shred a week's effort while feeding me at the Student Commons and regaling me
with absurdist stories that enlightened the flaws in my work. All the entertainment ended when John retired, moved to Oregon, and continued heading this committee from afar. Dr. George Urioste has been a stalwart voice on the committee who has unfailingly encouraged this effort. Dr. Joseph (Andy) Fry of the UNLV history department read the work and edited every small detail. Dr. Barbara Roth also served on the committee. An archaeologist with background in gender studies, she edited my work with care and interest in structure and detail. She comes from a Catholic background and the members of the committee with that perspective helped me feel my way through a culture about which I knew very little when I began. Dr. Willard Rollins originally served on the dissertation committee as well. During the first years that this dissertation was underway, Dr. Rollins fought a great battle with cancer. His courage and grace under hardship inspired us all. I owe these fine people a great debt of gratitude for their support, interest, criticisms and suggestions.

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Finally, the true inspiration for this effort rests with Elmo and Charlotte Rowberry Ellsworth. The sacrifices they made to educate a “girl child” in the 1940s and 1950s were tremendous and far beyond the requirements of parenthood at the time. Despite financial hardships and the long hours they worked, they never withheld music lessons, art lessons, or great books from their children just to save some money. This effort to complete my education is for my father, and honors his passion for fairness and honesty. He taught me a woman had great worth and was just as smart and spiritual as any man. This work is for my mother because she lived her life as a brilliant, gracious, generous and beautiful woman who never doubted her strength or value. I would not have traced the position of women in Christian society had it not been for their enlightened examples. These two individuals stood so solidly against the follies of misogyny that I felt impelled to join the effort for gendered justice and historical clarity.
PREFACE

Fifty years ago there would not have been a place for this study in the field of anthropology; in fact, it would not have been feasible. Pioneering efforts in the history of religion, gender studies, medieval history, translation, psychology, anthropology and neuroscience made this dissertation possible, one which pertains to women in western culture who frequently experienced altered states of consciousness and for whom there existed a specific place in their society, that of a “holy woman” or “spiritual” warrior. The religious women of the Middle Ages often appear unrealistic to us in our materialistic age, an age in which poverty is shunned, suffering is abhorred and physical pain eschewed. However, there is growing evidence that the “holy women” of earlier Christian ages knew exactly what they were doing; they were committed to a standard of excellence that, no matter how difficult to achieve, they believed could result in self-fulfillment here and in worlds to come. Recent developments in several academic disciplines now make it possible to argue that those women were self-actualizing mystics who lived in a world far different from ours, and that they sought what they considered the most important thing in life, namely to rise to the standard of “saints” and “martyrs” of the past and to know God personally. To fail in this effort was for them, to fail in life itself (Johnson 2008:1). In this dissertation it is argued that the intensity of the women’s belief system was the result of enculturation combined with their own experiences of visions and other altered states of consciousness (ASCs) generally referred to as “hallucinations,” or perceptions that are not based upon empirical information.
Fortunately or unfortunately, the word "hallucinations" has acquired a negative connotation associated with mental illness. This perception did not exist in the world these women knew. In the Middle Ages altered states of consciousness were considered to be the result of demonic possession or divine inspiration. In either case, the cause was spiritual and defined by the society's zeitgeist.

The religious worldviews of groups is an area of research that has drawn the attention of scholars in several disciplines, particularly anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the history of religion (also referred to as "comparative religions" or "religious studies"). This dissertation relies indirectly upon the foundations laid by theorists who have influenced these disciplines, including Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). They were followed by other scholars who tested early assumptions and came to many new conclusions. Rudolf Otto is particularly recognized for his analysis of the "numinous" or mystical experience in *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1958 [1923]). Another eminent researcher was Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). A historian of religion and prolific writer, two of his books were particularly helpful. They were *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959). Anthony F. C. Wallace wrote two books that demonstrate the important relationship between individuals who experience "mazeway reformations" or transformative ASCs and the religious organizations that often develop as a result. His books are *Culture and Personality* (1970) and *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966). Daniel L. Pals' book, *Seven Theories of Religion* (1996) was helpful because in it he traces the major theoretical approaches of Tylor, Durkheim

Recent developments in the discipline of gender studies are of importance to this dissertation and, therefore, the prior of the academic areas examined. The window of opportunity for this work was opened by the scholars, both male and female, who pondered the enculturated and biological natures of women. In 1949, Simon De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, thus triggering an energetic dialogue about the roles of women in western society. Her existentialist critique drew great attention in the United States when it was published in English in 1952. Other authors entered the fray and enjoined the U.S. feminist movement that began in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment. Triggered by the freedom provided by “the pill” and the period’s social revolution, female academicians researched and wrote about the unrecognized contributions of women. Their writings stretched across the disciplines from art history to music to math and science. In every field they challenged the androcentric priorities of their male peers. Even evolutionary theory was subjected to feminist criticism. For example, Elaine Morgan’s 1972 book, the *Descent of Woman* challenged “man-made” notions about the nature of women relative to evolution and
social development. In 1988, Antonia Frazer published *The Warrior Queens: The Legends and Lives of the Women who have Led Their Nations in War*. The heretofore generally ignored contributions of women exploded into a new discipline of its own, that of gender studies. By the year 2000, women’s studies were solidly ensconced in academia. Judith Lorber (2001) was able to trace the developments in gender issues and coordinated them with a collection of influential articles in *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*.

Whether or not the establishment liked it, women were not only reclaiming a role in history, but they were also restoring their roles and rights in the arena of religion. Merlin Stone’s (1976) very controversial book, *When God was a Woman*, tossed the gauntlet to the academics of ancient history and religion. The door was opened for discussion that was soon led by Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, Rita M. Gross, Nancy Auer Falk, and Rosemary R. Ruether. These and other scholars brought to light the roles of women in religions around the world. One of the earliest publications was Sharma and Young’s collected papers on *Women in World Religions* (1987). This was followed by six equally scholarly volumes that continued an examination of the subject. They furthered the dialogue in 1999 with the book, *Feminism and World Religions*. Meanwhile, more books dealt with the history of women within the Christian tradition. One controversial work was authored by Karen Jo Torjesen (1995) and entitled, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, both students of Mircea Eliade, Charles H. Long and Joseph Kitagawa, published *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives* in 2001. The same year, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
published *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Her historiography and quest for egalitarian interpretation of scriptural references calls for an intensification of understanding of the cultural milieu that originally created religious traditions. Anne M. Clifford carried the women’s movement’s interest in religion one step further in her work, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (2005). Clifford finds her place in both the Catholic tradition and the modern feminist theological movement. A “feminist theology” developed, and it was further explored in Rosemary Radford Ruether’s most recent work, *Feminist Theologies: Legacy and Prospect* (2007). In it, Ruether’s contributors review the past thirty-five years of progress and change in the field of women’s religion studies from that of very little material on the subject to a rich, diversified, and growing literature. Although this dissertation is not directly indebted to many feminist sources, it is nonetheless indebted to the spirit and quality of scholarship within the movement.

The next field of study that made this dissertation possible is that of medieval history. For the past several decades scholars have succeeded in accessing and publishing a plethora of materials on the women of the Middle Ages. Had I begun this research fifty years ago, I would have found mention of very few women save occasional queens, mistresses, and saints. As a result, my fears that I would not find enough materials in English for a dissertation rapidly changed to fears that I could never keep up with the growing literature in this field. Not only was the general topic of medieval women being explored, but the lives of female mystics were of growing interest. Within the past few decades, scores of books on the Middle Ages, Christian mystics, and the lives of female
religious have become available. Many of the best sources have been published in just the last few years.


Given that anthropology is a holistic enterprise, the study of women in the Middle Ages soon led to research on Christian mysticism because the women in this study were mystics, those who sought to serve God and achieve *unio mystica* with God within their lifetimes. Early in the twentieth century, Evelyn Underhill was among the foremost scholars in the field. Two of her books were particularly helpful; *The Mystics of the Church* (1925) and *Mysticism*, which has only recently been republished (2005). Peter
Brown’s *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (1981) provided me with a far better picture of early Christian principles that influenced the roles of women religious throughout the centuries. Herbert Grundmann’s important work in this discipline, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism* has only recently been translated by Steven Rowan and published in America in 1995. Bernard McGinn has written a very important series of books on mysticism, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, the last of which was completed and published in 2005.

Scholars able to translate works written in medieval languages or dialects and still make them readable in English also facilitated this study. Within the past few decades, linguists have provided English translations of works by Christine de Pizan, Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete and many other female medieval writers. Peter Dronke’s *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (1984) was the first of these books to emerge and was followed in 1986 by Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff’s *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley edited and translated *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (1992). It was followed by the combined work of Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx’s *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (1992), Marcelle Thiebaux’s translations for *Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology* (1994), Shawn Madigan’s *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women’s Spiritual Writings* (1998), Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace’s edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval...*

The development of humanistic psychology was also essential to this dissertation. The mental states of female mystics who practiced extremes of asceticism have been speculated upon for the past several centuries. The debate on their mental health is discussed in detail in chapter 2 of this dissertation. The position taken here argues that the women's behaviors were generally understandable in the light of cultural expectations and models, personal goals for self actualization, and episodes of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) that were experienced by the women as "conversion" experiences. This position is based upon the work of William James (1987) and the "peak-experience" model developed by Abraham H. Maslow (1964, 1968). Both authors argue that creative and pragmatic individuals are often inspired to greater heights by these subjective and unexplainable events. Over the past several decades, their approach has been supported by humanistic psychologists, transpersonal psychologists, and logotherapists.

The humanistic position is not necessarily accepted by all authors who deal with female mysticism; some adopt Freudian approaches to the more extreme behaviors of the women. A few such works that examine the women's psychic events include two books by Amy Hollywood, the Soul as Virgin Wife (1995) and Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History (2002). Ulrike Wiethaus also explores this topic in her book, Ecstatic Transformation: Transpersonal Psychology in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1996). Italian anthropologist, Ida Magli surveys the subject in her book, Women and Self-Sacrifice in the Christian Church: A Cultural History from the
First to the Nineteenth Century (2003). Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach's *The Mystic Mind: the Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics* has been most helpful with this subject matter (2005).

Many of the books referred to for this research do not fall into a specific category. The nature of the subject includes cultural facets of medieval history, mysticism, women's religious practices, Catholic theology, psychology and the relationships the women had with other individuals. Caroline Walker Bynum wrote a number of books with this holistic approach that have become classics in the field. Two of her works have been referred to extensively in this dissertation. They are *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (1982) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987). Mary Beth Rose edited a collection of papers concerning *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives* (1986). Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff examined female spirituality in *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (1994). Barbara Newman's writings proved very helpful, particularly *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (1995). Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi emphasized the cultural environment in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (1996). Marie-Florine Bruneau (1998) examined the changes that occurred in Europe with the Enlightenment and its altered perceptions of female mysticism in *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717)*. Kathleen Jones (1999) explored the lives of individual women within the traditions of martyrdom and sainthood in *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage*. The role of hagiographers who formed the traditions that

Strengthened by the prestige of Margaret Mead, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Hortense Powdermaker, a new generation of anthropologists and archaeologists delved into gender and feminine aspects of culture that emphasized the roles of women; they did this from an anti-misogynist perspective. Within the field of anthropology Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (1974) edited *Woman, Culture, and Society*. This work included articles such as Jane F. Collier’s “Women in Politics,” wherein she demonstrated that political power does not rest with men in all societies. Their book was followed by Rayna Reiter Rapp’s 1975 anthology, *Toward and Anthropology of Women*. Ernestine Friedle (1975) examined the division of labor in various foraging groups. Her book, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist’s View*, shattered notions that the division of labor is universally similar to the patterns established in western patriarchal societies. In 1976, Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman explored the long ignored role of women in evolutionary theory. Sherry B. Ortner (1974), Sally Slocum (1975), Eleanor Leacock (1983) and Ann L. Stoler’s writings (1989) were among the many solid academic works that pioneered the feminist critique of the social inequities existing between genders.

Women anthropologists also investigated the roles of women in religious rites and rituals.
For example, in 1989 Janice Patricia Boddy wrote about the women who practice the Zar Cult in Africa. Between 1989 and 1995, Nancy Scheper-Hughes carried gender studies into the very heart of social injustice in the lives of women and infants in a series of articles about the cane-field workers of Brazil. Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher edited a collection of papers in their 1990 work, *Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender*. By 1995, Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon brought much of this effort together and published *Women Writing Culture*.

Anthropology's sister discipline, archaeology, also embraced the emerging field of gender studies. In 1984, Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector's article, *Archaeology and the Study of Gender*, had far reaching influences on the women's movement in that discipline. Response to the paper was immediate and indicated that the dearth of archaeological material on the lives of women reflected the androcentric emphasis in the field. In 1986 Joan Gero and Margaret W. Conkey organized a collective effort to rectify the situation. They called upon researchers to develop a new methodology that emphasized evidence pertaining to women. The result of that effort is the 1991 compilation of papers in *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*. In that work, Janet D. Spector called for a reformed approach to artifacts that pertained to the lives of women. A decade later, more books on the subject began being published. In 2002 Jeannine Davis-Kimball and Mona Behan traced the legends and archaeological evidence of Amazon women and other priestess-warriors across the Asian Steppes in their book, *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines*. During the same year, Sarah Milledge Nelson and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (2002) edited the works of female archaeologists *In Pursuit of Gender: Worldwide Archaeological Approaches* and
examined the phenomena of gender on a global scale. In 2003, Sarah Milledge Nelson edited a publication that dealt with elite power structures and women’s place in them. It is entitled *Ancient Queens: Archaeological Explorations*. Sarah Milledge Nelson also authored *Gender in Archaeology: Analyzing Power and Prestige* (2004). In this book she reviewed the pertinent aspects of gender as a concept as well as its development and applications in the field of archaeology. Several works written by archaeologists proved to be particularly helpful. Roberta Gilchrist explained the physical structures of convents throughout England. Her book, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*, helped me visualize the environments in which women religious lived (1994). Lana Troy’s article, “She for Whom All That is Said is Done: The Ancient Egyptian Queen” (2003), provided historical background for the dissertation, as did Susan Pollock’s article, “Women in a Men’s World: Images of Sumerian Women” (1991).

Finally, recent changes in the field of anthropology itself have greatly influenced the approach to this dissertation. New perspectives created by anthropologists insist upon forgoing western ethnocentrisms wherein the practices and belief systems of native peoples had formerly been subject to a certain amount of sophisticated scorn. For example, sociologists and anthropologists often adopted the philosophy of unilinear cultural evolution. They argued that human beings were progressing to more sophisticated levels of culture and that this process moved from “savagery” to “barbarism” and then to “high civilization.” The window of opportunity for this study emerged from the efforts of courageous participant observers who began to explore, rather than deplore, the native practices of “spirit experience.” Their studies centered on
the behaviors, herbal knowledge, healing practices and cognitive systems of spiritual practitioners or shamans, within native cultures. For example, botanist Richard Evans Schultes spent decades of his life studying plant life in the Amazon. His student, the ethnobotinist Mark Plotkin, continued Schultes' work and even went so far as to study under shamans themselves in order to learn the medical uses of various plants and animals. In 1993, Plotkin published a best-selling account of his work entitled *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*.

During the same period, a similar process was taking place in anthropology. In 2006, Edith Turner addressed the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) at the annual meeting in San Jose, California. In her paper, "Advances in the Study of Spirit Experience: Drawing Together Many Threads," Turner traced the gradual transformation of anthropologists' attitudes that pertain to shamanic altered states of consciousness (ASCs). She reviewed the circumstances surrounding the work of her late husband, Victor Turner (1920-1983), who developed the concept of *communitas*, or shared experience by a group during ritual activities that may also produce altered states of consciousness in its members. Edith Turner argues that Victor Turner’s research on *communitas* challenged the structuralist and positivist positions held by the vast majority of anthropologists. Moreover, Mircea Eliade’s 1952 studies of shamanism, Michael Harner’s full participation in the shamanic practices of the Javaro tribesmen (1972, 1980), and Paul Stoller’s personal experiences with sorcery resistance (1984) moved some anthropologists from an etic observation of mystical practices into full emic participation in the spiritual perceptions of their host cultures. The field was further jolted by the successes and failures of Carlos Castaneda’s work (1968) on the “transpersonal,”
wherein he “smashed through the barriers of positivism” (Turner 2006:52). Together, Edith Turner postulates that the concepts of the “transpersonal” and the “liminal” dealt a “double whammy” to positivists and “atheist Durkheimianism” (Turner 2006:52). These ideas inspired such enthusiasm that they resulted in the founding of the Association for Transpersonal Anthropology (ATA) in 1978. This organization divided over philosophical differences and resulted in the creation of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC), which was incorporated in 1986 and became officially associated with the American Anthropological Association in 1990.

An increase in publications on “psi” phenomena grew exponentially during the last century. Turner provides a chronological bibliography that lists sixty-three books and articles written by the growing number of anthropologists who did not spurn the spiritual practices of the peoples they study, but often participated in the rituals of their subjects, a practice referred to as the “anthropology of experience.” She finds that there were five publications on the subject from 1900 to 1950, four in the 1960s, six publications in the 1970s, eleven in the 1980s, fifteen publications in the 1990s and fifteen more in the five years between 2000 and 2005. She concludes that, “Although this may not seem the case to some, shamanism has won its place in anthropology and is the fastest growing field within it. There is no way that Western rationalists can shake the rise of spiritual studies. Spirits are no longer ‘metaphors’” (Turner 2006:45).

The development of this phenomenological approach to the study of shamanism suggested the possibility of research about the mystics of the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic faiths, past and present, since they also enter into altered states of consciousness. They have visions, hear voices and prophesy; they too move into what they consider to be
other realities. Margaret Mead argued that such "sensitives are a special type of people and they occur with about the same frequency in every culture whether they pick them up or not" (Schwartz 2000:7). Mead believed there must be a recognized social position in a culture that acknowledged the experiences of spiritually "sensitive" individuals. "That’s why you seem to get a lot of sensitives in places like the Kentucky mountains, or the Scottish mountains…because the culture expects them to be there; recognizes them when they do occur; and teaches them how not to be destroyed" (Schwartz 2000:7). There was such a place for mystics in the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, and females as well as males found opportunities for self-fulfillment and prestige within that model.

On the surface, the "realities" mystics describe are not measurable and are often ineffable. Is there opportunity for a positivist approach to these phenomena? Margaret Mead believed it could be done. According to Stephen Schwartz, Mead encouraged the investigation of psi episodes and sponsored the "affiliation of the Parapsychology Association with the American Association for the Advancement of Science" (Schwartz 2000:7). In fact, as valuable as Edith Turner's observations are, she may have underestimated the tenacity of positivist philosophy. Recent developments in neuroscience and psychiatry have returned measurement to the fore in the examination of altered states of consciousness.

Neuroscientists have developed new tools to explore the human psyche with its various phenomena of mental health and disease. Computer-assisted imaging machines are being used to measure activity in the brain during cerebral events including those involved with ASCs. Positron emission tomography (PET) measures metabolism and neuron activity in the brain using radioactive glucose or oxygen. Computerized Axial
Tomography (CAT or CT) scans use x-ray images in order to create three-dimensional pictures of blood flow in the brain as human subjects perform various tasks. Electroencephalography (EEG) is used to record electrical activity that occurs in the cortex. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) employs magnets to create soft tissue images of the brain. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is another method that indicates which areas of the brain respond to oxygen. The very new, and very expensive, magnetoencephalography (MEG) technology also measures magnetic fields in the brain and provides much more detailed information than previous machines.

Physical anthropologists also study the human mind and benefit from the new information acquired by neuroscientists. Recognized as "medical" anthropologists, scholars in this growing field base their work not only on the physical condition of individuals and groups, but also on the concept of culture, which makes possible the study of any aspect of human experience and survival. In 1996, Carolyn F. Sargent and Thomas M. Johnson's edited work, *Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method*, demonstrated the range of possibilities for study in this field. They include ethnomedicine, ethnopsychiatry, disease ecology, ASCs, and the activities of shamans. Michael James Winkelman (1990, 2002, 2003) is particularly noted for his investigations of shamanic practices. When the latest knowledge of brain functioning is employed within anthropological contexts, the results are informative. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1979) wrote a major work on *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland*. James David Lewis-Williams, a cognitive archaeologist working from Johannesburg, has written about southern African rock art. He and his
associate, T. A. Dowson (1988, 1990), have asserted that rock art was created by shamans who illustrated their trances on those surfaces.

At first glance, shamanic rock art may seem to be a far cry from the experiences of female mystics. However, there is growing evidence that altered states of consciousness are common experiences, so much so that they may come to be seen as another universal human characteristic and not necessarily either a hoax or a sign of mental illness. Some individuals may be more prone to them than the majority of people, but whether ASCs are perceived of as symptoms of pathology or manifestations of the divine is often a matter of the cultural climate in which “sensitives” live, their controllability, and the purposes to which the individual and the group employ their ASCs toward survival and well-being. This new approach to ASCs is founded upon the courageous scholarship of many individuals in a number of fields including comparative religions, psychology, history, mysticism, neuroscience and anthropology. The work of those scholars as well as the witnesses of mystics past and present has made the holistic efforts of this dissertation possible. This research was undertaken in order to add yet another piece to the puzzle of human experience, and to further understanding of the human condition as well as the universal human potential for self-fulfillment.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Another world I have in mind, which together in one heart bears its bittersweet, its joyous grief; Its heart's joy, its longing's woe; its joyous life, its painful death; its joyous death, its painful life. To this life let my life be given: this world I will make my world, to be lost or blessed with it." (Gottfried of Strassburg as quoted by Barbara Newman in From Virile Woman to WomanChrist, 1995:161)

This dissertation explores the cultural and psychological factors that permitted six medieval female mystics to assume positions of leadership and innovation in a world marked by extreme gender inequality. Women religious have often been charged with being neurotics, hysterics, narcissists, and nymphomaniacs whereas males with similar experiences are rarely subject to the same degree of criticism. Female mystics have been particularly denigrated during the past few centuries and relegated to classifications of mental illness by modern theorists like Simone du Beauvoir (1908-1986). Beauvoir’s judgments were preceded by those of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and Henri Legrand du Saulle (1830-1886) both of whom perceived all mystic females as suffering from mental illnesses even when they did not manifest hysterical symptoms (Mazzoni1996).

It is argued here that the women may well have been seeking to achieve the form of self-actualization described by humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow as a result of the “conversion” experience analyzed by William James. Furthermore, applying modern categories of mental illness to these women ignores the opinion of their contemporaries who felt that dedication to union with God was the ultimate form of social heroism because the saint pled with Jesus on behalf of their families, friends and
all who came to them for help. This dissertation asserts that many of the female mystics sought to achieve the highest ambition afforded to them within the constraints of their milieus, particularly that of union with God in their own lifetimes, and that they pursued this goal through their experiences, intellects, lives, and bodies. Nearly two thousand years of Christian history and hagiographic accounts of the lives of Christian saints and martyrs abound with admiration for those who dedicate their lives to God and test their resolve by means of poverty, chastity, suffering, and martyrdom. Indeed, medieval religious culture encouraged the degree of involvement experienced by many women, individuals whose intellects and creative talents were otherwise constricted within the parameters of that very culture.

This case study approach examines the lives of six women exemplars. Extended case studies include Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Marguerite Porete (d.1310), and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). The records of Joan of Arc (1412/13-1431), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717) are provided as comparative cases. The lives of these women span six hundred years and illustrate ways in which societal reaction to their revelations, doctrines and behaviors changed over time from one of high regard to that of suspicion or dismissal. This is a change that reflected major modifications in society as a whole wherein women suffered a general loss of power and prestige and monastic life-styles faded from the mainstream society.

The examples of these women permit an examination of idealistic determination versus pathology, the latter being a condition that is often a matter of degree of intensity on a culturally created continuum, one wherein the actions of individuals are judged, valued or rejected over time as societies change. The records of the subject women’s
experiences suggest their behaviors were culturally conditioned and that they manifested the heights of religious “heroism” in their milieus. It is argued that female mystics need not necessarily be hysterical or pathological personality types, and that these women actively sought to develop themselves to the highest degree possible, to fully “self-actuate” themselves within the cultural framework of Christian martyrdom and the quest for mystical union with God. The argument is indebted to the work of modern psychologists William James and Abraham Maslow and is comfortably situated within the positions of humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, logotherapy and theories of phenomenology.

This study interprets the personal exercise of agency practiced by these women as a result of their abilities to exemplify the religious ideals and structures of their times, most especially that of a personal relationship with divinity. It is personal spirituality that is explored in this work, not formal or institutionalized religion. It is personal spirituality rather than “spiritualism” or appeals to the occult that characterized these women’s lives. Anthropological approaches to the psychology of personal religious experience, consciousness and gender are woven throughout the work in as much as elements of each discipline are critical to an understanding of the personal spiritual phenomena expressed through the lives and words of the women. The work furthers an understanding of the tension between structured religious institutions and individual agency manifested through personal experiences, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. In addition it contributes to the exploration of those altered states of consciousness expressed in the mystical traditions of Europe.
Medieval Mysticism: Some Basics

In this dissertation mysticism is defined as the practice of acquiring those altered states of consciousness (ASCs) that are experienced as oneness with God or unity with the universe. Such states are experienced within the body or outside it. According to Teofilo F. Ruiz (2002:48), mystic experience may produce the sensation of emanation which is felt as an upward and outward movement toward oneness with God. Or, the occurrence may be one of immanence, an inward consciousness that God inhabits everything. Immanence has social dangers in that it may be considered to be one of two traditional forms of heresy, that of “autotheism” or the sense that the individual himself is God. The other danger is that of “pantheism” or the sense that all things are God.

Whether experienced as emanation or immanence, the effect is so profound that it is both unforgettable and ineffable; in other words, it is impossible to describe in words (William James 1987:343). Sexual metaphors are often used in an effort to describe the experience as climactic. A powerful sense of God’s love accompanies the sensation, the intensity of which is so powerful that uncontrollable weeping is often the result due to extreme joy or awe. Mystics report that such occurrences are often life changing and generally considered to be for the individual’s betterment (James 1987:435).

Jerome Kroll, Bernard Bachrach and Kathleen Carey discuss two forms of mystic practice. One is contemplative and the other is affective. Amy Hollywood (2002:7-8) asserts that contemplative mysticism is in fact gendered masculine in regard to its rational and disciplined approach to the divine. In their article entitled “A Reappraisal of Medieval Mysticism and Hysteria,” they note the differences in these approaches. “Contemplative mysticism refers to the pursuit of the presence of God by progressively
deeper meditation centered about prayer, spiritual exercises and the readings of scripture and suitable exegetic texts. Contemplative mysticism does not lend itself to suspicions that its practitioners are hysterical" (Kroll et al., 2002:84). The training of a mystic is generally based upon contemplative discipline, but affective experiences may also occur during contemplation or without the more structured practice. Hollywood (2002:7-8) points to the practice of referring to the affective form as feminine mysticism and notes that it is often denigrated because of the emotional component. The records of the case studies used in this dissertation illustrate both types of mystical episodes. This is not unusual. During the Middle Ages men and women frequently described both their contemplative practices and their affective experiences. In the context of their culture this discipline was considered the ultimate personal challenge. To them these activities led to the heights of self-actualization, not pathology (Kroll et al., 2002).¹

Kroll et al contrast contemplative mysticism with affective mystical experience wherein the latter “refers to the overwhelming expression of love in its carnal as well as its spiritual form as the soul approaches union with God” (Kroll et al., 2002:85). The mystic 1) identifies with the suffering of Christ, 2) practices poverty, and 3) exercises self-denial (Kroll et al., 2002:85). In so doing mystic asceticism reaches “heroic” proportions. One heroic practice is a form of love which identified the suffering of the individual mystic with the suffering of Christ. Barbara Newman describes this form as “violent charity” which “often took the form of penance on behalf of sinners or the dead,

but any form of pain could mold the lover’s body into an image of her crucified Love” (Newman 1995:161).

During the Middle Ages affective mysticism was strongly identified “with Christ’s passion, service to God, renunciation of the flesh, penance for the sins of others or for all of mankind, penance for one’s own sins, and combat with the devil” (Kroll et al., 2002:86). Those who practiced this form of mysticism felt any type of sin, no matter how trivial, was an obstacle that could prevent them from uniting with God in this lifetime as well as the in the next. As a result modes of “heroic asceticism” developed over the centuries that reached proportions considered extreme to modern minds. However, it is consistent with anthropological theory and practice to take an “emic” approach in our explorations of their experiences and view their accounts within the historical and cultural context of their own cultures.

Western mystics followed a developmental path that varied with individuals but generally includes five steps which are described by Teofilo F. Ruiz (2002:57-60) and are based on the work of Evelyn Underhill (2005:116-299). The first step is referred to as the “awakening.” At this time the individual becomes aware of the possibility of yet another reality beyond the physical realm and enters upon the mystic quest. In the second stage, known as “purgation” or “purification,” the mystic attempts to reform in every way possible in order to be worthy of a relationship with God. This purgation of the self may involve rigorous practices of prayer and contemplation as well as ascetic activities that include fasting, the rejection of all sexual activity and deliberately self-inflicted bodily pain. At some point the mystic may experience the third step in development, namely a brief period of “illumination.” The mystic senses the presence of God without the
experience of union with the deity. This illuminating experience often involves psychic phenomena. Voices are heard, visions are seen. Another manifestation of this stage is found in the ability to write automatically or "by the spirit."² Ruiz and Underhill both use St. John of the Cross's term, the "Dark Night of the Soul," to describe the fourth stage. During this period the mystic withdraws into contemplation and quiet. This state is preparatory to the fifth or final stage which is that of "union." Union cannot be forced by the mystic but when it occurs it is often referred to as being "one with God," or a union in a sense of oneness resembling the unity of physical marriage.

Barbara Newman (1995) provides a second description of mystic process. She outlines Richard of St.-Victor's explanation of a mystic passage wherein he uses the symbolic image of stages of love. Spiritual love is unlike physical lust which often begins with a paralyzing desire for the beloved, one that may eventually turn to hatred of the object of such passion. However,

True spiritual love moves the mystic into four stages of divine love that correspond to meditation, contemplative vision, ecstasy or ravishing, and the descent from glory into humble love. In the third state the soul is liquefied, or as Marguerite [Porete] would say, "annihilated." She passes entirely into God and has no more will or self to call her own. But for Richard — as for Hadewijch and Mechthild— this is not the summit. In the final stage, the soul now "conformed to the humility of Christ" leaves her glorious union for her neighbor's sake and sinks below herself in works of compassion. Alternatively, having died with Christ in the third stage, she rises with him in the fourth to a life that is no longer hers but God's. This in itself is standard monastic teaching: charity takes precedence over ecstasy (Newman 1995:160).

The preeminence of charity and good works over ecstasy is exemplified in the lives of many mystics. Mystic development demands time for meditation and self-

² See Underhill 2005[1930]:181-201 for her perspectives on these phenomena.
purification, but it is manifested pragmatically in daily life. For example, Hildegard of Bingen was a successful abbess who presided over two convents, corresponded with kings, popes and bishops, wrote music and books as well as a medical encyclopedia, and spent her life in the service of God as a prophet of God’s word. We know nothing of Marguerite Porete’s personal activities other than the book she authored, but we know Catherine of Siena by her writings, prolific correspondence, political activities and charity to the poor, the sick and lepers. Joan of Arc is recognized for her amazing military and political feats in response to her many visions and voices. Teresa of Avila founded sixteen reform convents throughout Spain and wrote five books noted for their spiritual insights. Madame Jeanne Guyon managed to marry, bear five children, spend years in prison, and still write forty books about the spiritual quest for God.

These women joined other European mystics in the use of cultural symbols for the expression of their experiences. Underhill points out the frequent occurrence of symbols that fall into three categories: pilgrimage and transcendence, mutual desire and love, and finally, divine immanence and transmutation (2005:89). Within those categories the soul is perceived as lost and wanders ever in the quest for the divine “other” wherein the soul finds fulfillment. The soul is perceived as feminine, and thus both men and women mystics may become the “Brides of Christ.” The Church itself is the Bride of Christ. Death is frequently alluded to in its many aspects, be they physical, mental or spiritual. It is by means of the fulfillment of spiritual yearning that the soul eventually finds its state of peace and bliss.

Facets of love as a symbol were very much influenced by the courtly literature of the twelfth century. According to Ruiz (2002:45) mysticism itself was for many
centuries a luxury enjoyed by the nobility and upper classes. This was due to the fact that mystics either wrote or dictated their experiences to those who were literate. Literacy was not a privilege the poor enjoyed. This is not to say the common individual did not experience altered states of consciousness or a love of God; it is only to draw attention to the fact that, until the heresies and millenarian movements of the High Middle Ages and Renaissance, religion existed on two levels: first, the educated group of elites and second, the religion of the mass of people, a religion that combined both Christian and pagan elements (Ruiz 2002:41).

Bernard McGinn points out that until the past century, mystics around the world saw themselves not as “mystics” per se, but as practitioners of their religious faiths (1995: xvi). Thus mysticism must be understood within its cultural context (1995: xv). Second, he reminds students of this topic that “mysticism is always a process or a way of life” and that few of its practitioners actually achieve a state of union with God (1995: xvi). Third, monastic life-styles provided its “most noted embodiment” (1995: xii). Women of record participated in monastic houses from the fourth century until the present. Monasticism was a powerful force in the development of European scholarship, culture and arts.  

Finally, McGinn notes that in the twelfth century a new form of mysticism emerged that was not exclusively gendered, but its flowering in the following centuries allowed for the creative outpouring of female expressions in literature and theology, an expression of experience that found its voice in the local vernaculars of Europe as well as in Latin (McGinn 1998: xii). McGinn argues that by the thirteenth century three new

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3 For more on the development of monasticism see Cook and Herzman 2004:132.
lines of mystic practice had been created. They included Franciscan mysticism, female mysticism and the “speculative mysticism associated with Meister Eckhart and his followers” (McGinn 1998: x). Women were enthusiastically involved in each of these movements and the women whose lives are examined in this dissertation participated most notably in the second one as exemplified in the lives of Marguerite Porete and Catherine of Siena.

Mysticism is cousin to but not synonymous with theology, or the intellectual study of the nature of God and His creations, the elements of faith, and systems of religion. However, a mystic holds beliefs about God and the world that are based upon the mystic’s own spiritual experiences. This form of belief is referred to as theosophy. Underhill describes the differences as threefold; those that pertain to “natural theology” or that of the natural world, the “dogmatic theology” based upon religious history, and finally, “mystical theology” or theosophy. The last is based upon “the soul’s secret and direct experience of the divine” (Underhill 1925:14-15). Mystics and their convictions often become foundational to both heresies and religions. This was the case with Catharism, Quietism, Islam, Mormonism, and Christianity, each of which in turn developed theological systems of its own.

Justification for an Ethnohistorical Approach to Female Mysticism

Ethnohistorians rely on a holistic approach to their research. They use the historical records of the times under investigation as well as the analyses of scholars in various disciplines that pertain to the subject matter under examination. During the past several decades many scholars have investigated the lives of medieval women and have
discovered far more information than had been expected. There is an abundance of historical materials such as legal documents, correspondence, and the records of biographers or hagiographers. This is true in the case of the women in this study, several of whom wrote about their own experiences. Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon were themselves authors. In many instances they left personal correspondence that provides an added dimension to a study of their lives and experiences. In the case of Joan of Arc, there are the records of two of her three trials. Joan's own words of defense were documented in the second trial. During her third posthumous trial, over a hundred individuals bore witness to her character and the falseness of charges of witchcraft levied against her by her enemies.

These six women were active participants in the social currents of their day and therefore it is important to place them within the context of those dynamics. For this reason the development of their lives and works are studied in relation to major religious principles of the period. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the historical development of the fundamental cognitive concepts that influenced the lives of women mystics. Furthermore, each woman's life is examined relative to the environmental, political, economic and religious factors with which they dealt. Emphasis is placed upon those cultural elements that may have provided motivation for their spiritual efforts and served as keys not only to their drive toward self-actualization, but also clarify the rationale for some of their behaviors that trouble modern students of religion and psychology.

For example, generally speaking, motivational factors center on hopes for pleasure or fear of suffering. This is not always the case with mystics who may often transcend fear of pain, suffering, or death in order to attain the pleasure of *unio mystica* or
union with God, the anticipated joys of a heavenly afterlife, and assist Christ in works of redemption for others through their own human suffering. The self-inflicted pain of many medieval mystics seems abhorrent to modern men and women due to a notable reversal of attitude about the value of suffering. Modern avoidance of pain was clearly established at least a century ago as noted in the work of William James, who, at the turn of the twentieth century spoke for many of us today. “We can no longer sympathize with cruel deities, and the notion that God can take delight in the spectacle of sufferings self-inflicted in his honor is abhorrent” (James 1902:328). A review of the medieval and renaissance milieus suggests that whether or not the women suffered from mental illnesses, they nonetheless sought to express what the ultimate form of social heroism within their milieus. This they did through their ascetic experiences and by means of their lives as well as their bodies.

Medieval cultures provided a concept of reality that included a standard for heroic excellence, one in which martyrs and suffering saints were perceived as “holy men and women. They performed the function of spiritual warriors, combatants against the forces of evil. Indeed, in their society, those who truly dedicated their lives to religious orders did it not only for themselves but for their families and communities as well (Wheeler 2002:30). The witnesses of female mystics need to be examined in the light of their own cultures, not ours. An anthropological approach calls for a position of cultural relativism, one wherein the emic or “insiders” point of view is honored irrespective of the etic or “outsider” perspective of the researcher. Several schools of psychological and philosophical thought support this position.
Psychological Approaches to Female Mysticism

Psychological explanations for the various phenomena of mysticism are of particular interest to this study in as much as they overlap the anthropologies of consciousness, psychology and religion. Female mystics have often been represented as neurotics, hystérices, or narcissists. Simone de Beauvoir (1971) used these terms and that of erotomania as she analyzed the lives of women like Madame Jeanne Guyon and Angela of Foligno. Christina Mazzoni (1999) has written about this pattern of critique in her recent work, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture*. Mazzoni suggests that elements of female mystical experience are so complex that one might well ask, "Was the saint hysterized, then, or was hysteria canonized instead?" (Mazzoni 1999: x)

In answer to this query, a cultural anthropologist would suggest that pathologies are a matter of degree of intensity on a continuum which is itself culturally created and therefore valued or rejected. When Roman patriarchy united with Christian dogmatism, highly motivated women's lives became more and more constricted within the parameters of that very culture. Yet hagiographies inspired the thought that women could prove their worth and even become ranked with men if they could only live lives of remarkable chastity and purification through suffering. St. Jerome (c.342-420) had tremendous influence on Christian perspectives toward the role of women in the faith, and his opinion remained in effect for well over a thousand years. "As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be woman, and will be
called a man." A woman seeking spiritual salvation would be well aware of the fact that much depended upon her ability to remain a virgin, but there was also the sense that pain and suffering would further one’s ability to reach spiritual heights.

The works of two psychologists are especially important to this study, namely William James and Abraham Maslow. Pragmatist William James is considered to be one of the most influential philosophers and psychologists of his day. The series of lectures he presented at the University of Edinburgh in 1902 became one of his seminal works, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The principles James advocated for the analysis of mystics and sainthood became classics that have withstood the ravages of time. This is because James found an open-minded balance between material reality and that of a transnatural or “unseen world.” James is also quick to point out that his investigation is limited to personal spiritual experiences rather than to various forms of institutionalized religions (Barnard 1997:305). His approach to those individuals who profess having mystical experiences is that they are the experts on the phenomenon although they may indeed be exceptional, extreme, and eccentric. James suggests that we can best understand mystic phenomena by studying the records of those who were most extreme in its manifestation (1987:43). Western Christendom is replete with the records of

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individuals who actively sought "conversion" experiences. It is for that reason that he researched the life histories of many recognized Christian "saints."\footnote{Yet for all that James' objectivity was remarkable for his day, he sees some of the moral positions and mystic claims of two women as bizarre. He simply cannot accept the positions of Catherine of Siena demanding war against the Turks (1987:312) and Teresa of Avila (1987:316) wherein he discovers a nature he describes as "shrewish." Nowhere does he censure male mystics, no matter how extreme, in this fashion, nor does he condemn them for encouraging crusades.}

Abraham Maslow also dealt with the spiritual experiences of individuals rather than institutionalized religious ritual and dogma. His position is set out in several books and articles. The four used for this dissertation are *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), *Lessons from the Peak-Experiences* (1961), *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (1964), and *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968). Maslow explored human experience in the light of "deficiency needs" and "being needs." The second group concerns individual efforts toward self-actualization and self-transcendence. Where James suggests mystics are exceptionally sensitive to spiritual sensation, Maslow explores the likelihood that these efforts are based upon one's own inner direction toward self-fulfillment. Both agree that altered states of consciousness producing a sense of union with God may be spontaneous and happen only once or twice in a lifetime. Both recognize that some individuals strive to develop that state of exhilaration through personal practice and discipline over a prolonged period of time.

Maslow's theories of "self-actualizing personalities" deal with individuals who seek to transcend basic needs and reach the highest forms of personal development and spiritual transcendence through what he describes as "Peak-experiences" in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968). The quest for such spiritual peak experiences would have
been highly regarded in medieval society. Wheeler posits that "a high percentage of the population of that era became monks and nuns [and] did so passionately and willingly" (Wheeler 2002:30). These individuals were regarded as heroic for living a lifestyle that was considered more important to society "even than the calling of the holy warrior" (Wheeler 2002:30). Wheeler notes that churchmen and churchwomen were important members of their communities and were sought out for advice on matters both worldly and spiritual. This observation leads to the possibility that the subject women were among those who sought to achieve the most esteemed life goals of their societies. Their behaviors were perceived as being rational to many of their contemporaries. Motivation to achieve value in one's society depends upon the means to success that are deemed acceptable to the group as a whole.

William James and Abraham Maslow's models set the stage for the development of several psychological schools of thought that continue to be of great importance today. Humanistic psychology follows from Maslow's perspective. This discipline allows for an approach that is based upon the culture as well as the values and meanings sought by those being studied. As such it is an appropriate tool for this investigation. Humanistic psychologists argue that values are not enough. They assert that the "conception of man which is devoid of meaning is less than human" (Coward and Royce 1981:114). These theorists oppose any psychology that "de-humanizes or demeanes" those studied. In order to understand the actions of the women whose lives are reviewed in this work, the meanings they attributed to their experiences and behaviors are of paramount importance.

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Transpersonal psychology is another school of thought that furthers the investigation of "peak-experiences." These phenomena are referred to as ASCs or "altered states of consciousness." This late twentieth century school builds upon the work of Maslow and other humanistic psychologists. It includes the paths of mystics in the East as well as the West and insists that such states of consciousness are universal and thus natural to human beings. Holistic in its approach, the phenomena are seen within the context of cultural expectations.

Phenomenologists of religion also support the principle of objectivity. Their position is succinctly expounded by both Arvind Sharma (2001:279) and Ulrike Wiethaus (1996:128-129). These scholars call for an attitude of "epoche" or the suspension of judgment in order to understand the phenomena and behaviors of individuals. To this end they also hope researchers will employ a form of "detached immersion" or an "eidetic vision" which provides genuine insights into the cultural lives of those studied.9

The school of Logotherapy suggests an added dimension to the value of transpersonal experiences. Viktor Frankl is the most famous proponent of this line of thought. He stresses the importance of finding meaning in one's life despite desperate circumstances. A survivor of Nazi concentration camps, Frankl found that individuals needed to perceive some meaningful purpose in order to justify their survival in deplorable situations. In his seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1984) explains his experiences and the importance of an individual's need to find meaning in

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order to maintain one's humanity. In the second part of that book he introduces and explains his existential approach to logotherapy. The latter is based upon helping patients find the meaning in their situations, including the quest for and belief in the help of divine forces. It is possible that female mystics behaved in unusual ways because their enclosed lives allowed no other access to meaningful self-fulfillment.

Each of these schools of thought remind the ethnohistorian to be cautious of one's own enculturation and seek to enter into the minds, values and world of the people being studied in order to comprehend the meaning of their lives to them. Humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, logotherapy as well as phenomenological perspectives lead to the direction taken for this dissertation. But here an extra dimension is added. Self-fulfillment is based upon enculturated ideals, ideals that may lose their appeal with the passage of time. That which once was highly esteemed may become abhorred. Self-actualizing heroes of one era are not necessarily the heroes of another later civilization, one that has created its own new theories of reality. Such is the dynamic power of culture.

Enculturated Gender: Motivating Female "Virility"

The dissertation covers a period of six hundred years ranging from 1,100 to 1,700 A.D. During this period, female mystics lived in a world of monasticism, asceticism, mysticism, courtly love, and various forms of social experimentation. The events of their milieu include ongoing famine, plagues, crusades, wars, religious rebellions, pilgrimages, millenarianism, apocalypticism, flagellantism, heretical movements, mysticism, reformations, urbanizations, inquisitions, astrology, alchemy, and witch hunts as well as the development of modern empiricism, humanism, proto-capitalism, and nation-states.
The period studied begins in the last few centuries of the Middle Ages. These years are referred to as the "high middle ages" and are held to be between 1,050 and 1,350 (Gies and Gies 1978:5). The centuries between 1,350 through 1,700 blended into the period generally referred to as the Renaissance. This name was given to the period by Jacob Burckhardt in his 1860 work, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. In recent decades his use of the term has come under criticism. Many scholars now argue that the Renaissance is actually an extension of the Middle Ages.\(^{10}\) Indeed they would contend that the real "renaissance" began in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Cook and Herzman 2004:271-272).

The women whose lives are the subject of this dissertation had no such classification for the times in which they lived. They struggled within the limits that contemporary cultural pluralism imposed upon the roles of all women and grappled with the social positions allowed to them as members of various groups. Several theories have been advanced as to why these women may have chosen mystical union with God. Simone de Beauvoir (1956) suggested they were narcissistic. Wheeler (2002) proposes that they found the only venue available to strong and imaginative women. Indeed, female mystics were recognized as not only honorable but also as heroic by their contemporaries and later generations.

The roles of women in Medieval and Renaissance societies relate to women's activities as mystics, visionaries, prophetesses and heretics. Single women of the period may only have been able to exercise their powerful personalities through the religious

systems of their time, whether within the establishment or in movements against it. While their actions may seem exaggerated to modern minds, medieval women proved to themselves and to their contemporaries that they were worthy of becoming “virile women” and thus individually compensating for Eve’s sin and their own reputed inferiority (Newman 1995:121).11

Motivation to action comes in both positive and negative forms. A woman might well look to the advantages of religious life-styles and seek to emulate her peers as a form of positive motivation. Conventual lifestyles provided many opportunities for good works and the hope of salvation in the next life. Powerful abbesses and mystic females set examples for younger women to follow. The greatest motivational example was the Virgin Mary whose virginity and acquiescence to the will of God was credited with the creation of a new era for mankind by means of the sacrifice of her Son. Women religious could imitate her qualities and bless others in this world while achieving salvation for their own souls.

Individuals are also motivated to prove themselves as a preventative against negative concepts, such as a fear of eternal punishment in the next life. Despite the honor bestowed upon the Virgin Mary, mortal women continued to be constrained by the concept of Eve’s seduction by the serpent and her act of having tempted Adam. “Through woman’s mouth death had proceeded; through woman’s mouth life was restored” (St. Ambrose (c. 339-397) in Alcuin Blamires 1992:62). And again according to St. Jerome (c.342-420), “Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift

11 See Newman 1995: 3-4, 31, for further discussion on a “virile mind in a feminine body.”
of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman” (St. Jerome in Blamires 1992:76).

New era or not, women remained the paradigm for the tempter, not snakes. As such women were to remain submissive to men, be they fathers, brothers, husbands, or ecclesiastical authorities. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not seduced but the woman was seduced and fell into sin” (I Timothy 2:13-14). St. Thomas Aquinas argued that “The sentence pronounced by God gave this power [to rule] to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master”12

To Rosemary Radford Ruether (1987:207-265) this “theology of subordination” resulted in an attitude toward women that perceived them as “morally, ontologically, and intellectually the inferior of the male” (Ruether 1987:208). Worse yet, “her inferiority leads to sin when she acts independently” (Ruether 1987:209). She is the temptress that lures men to the sin of lust. Although women had defenders, the general view of feminine nature was negative, often in the extreme. Consider the angst expressed in Jean de Meun’s (c. 1240-c. 1305) very popular medieval work, *Le Roman de la Rose*. “It is through you, lady slut, and through your wild ways, that I am given over to shame, you riotous, filthy, vile, stinking bitch. All you women are, will be, and have been whores, in fact or in desire, for, whoever could eliminate the deed, no man can constrain desire” (Quoted in Blamires 1992:156-157). A medieval woman may have sought to prove her

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intrinsic worth despite or because of a cultural construct wherein all women were condemned as the inferior other.

It is critical to this investigation of motivational factors to understand the negative aspects of the milieu in which women were raised and the psychological influences upon their lives and spiritual perceptions. The disapproval of women as a sex had several sources. One degrading perception of women was based upon a fundamental form of human reasoning, that of binary opposition. The opposite of male is female; the opposite of good is bad. The opposite of nature is nurture. A second form of reasoning followed from what was considered to be the flawed character of women due to their biological natures. Biological differences were duly noted by the ancient Israelites and menstruating women were considered taboo. Old Testament verses declared women to be unclean during menses or after giving birth as well as anything they touched (Leviticus 15:19-24). These Biblical concepts were studied and well understood during the Middle Ages.

Medieval negative perceptions of women were also founded upon the perspectives of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. For example, Aristotle perceived man as the perfect creation, one who is more “disposed to give assistance in danger, and is more courageous than the female” (Aughterson 1995:44). Furthermore, man’s generative seed was active, woman’s seed was passive (Aughterson 1995:43). Aristotle “effectively continued to assign woman an inferior physiological state to that of man,” (Aughterson 1995:43). For example the Greek Father of Science wrote that “deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in
an impure condition: i.e. it lacks one constituent and one only, the principle of soul” (Aughterson 1995:47). Aristotle’s perception prevailed for centuries and was upheld by Galen whose medical treatises were fundamental to the healing arts until the eighteenth century. “Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the primary instrument...[and] less perfect than the man in respect to the generative parts” (Aughterson 1995:47). Perceived as flawed from birth, it took a strong willed woman to overcome the cultural bias that underlay so much of daily praxis and consciousness.

It may well be that misogyny and the “medieval sport of woman-baiting” (Blamires et al 1992: viii) contributed to the subject women’s drive for excellence as well as their profound desire to overcome the body with all its then perceived imperfections. An overview of male establishment attitudes toward women and their bodies is especially important because medieval religious women expressed themselves physically as well as intellectually through their bodies. Those bodies became the basis of their spiritual experiences as well as metaphorical expressions of the phenomenon they attempted to describe (Petroff 1994:204-224). To that end, strongly motivated women achieved altered states of consciousness that produced visions and prophesies by means of extreme fasts, starvation, self-flagellation, and self-mutilation. These practices could even produce a cessation of menses. In that case, medieval women proved to themselves and to their contemporaries that they were worthy of becoming “virile women” and thus individually compensating for Eve’s sin and their own reputed inferiority (Newman 1995:121). A woman could overcome her innately “flawed nature” and become a “man” only by overcoming her biological endowment through denial of her sexuality, perfect integritas. 
or chastity, and heroic suffering. Excessive suffering was seen as an opportunity to achieve both the *imitatio Christi* and the *imitatio Mariae*. As noted earlier, if sufficiently dedicated one could even help Christ release souls from purgatory. It was the martyred Perpetua (d. 203) who first considered the possibility of sacrificing her service to the living by serving the dead instead. Prayer and suffering on behalf of the dead later became a form of apostleship. Perhaps it seemed a logical progression from caring for the living, as well as caring for the familial tombs, but “Long before scholastic theologians finished systematizing the doctrine of purgatory, it caught the imagination of devout women, who found in the apostolate to the suffering dead a continuation of their traditional role as mourners and a channel for their gifts of visionary outreach and vicarious suffering” (Newman 1995:11).

During the Middle Ages, issues of sexuality, childbearing, family, and celibacy were undergoing dynamic changes; so also were the opportunities for property ownership and the roles of women in production. At that time, women went from positions of relative power and prestige to loss of control of property, production opportunities and actual physical danger if unable to conform to the expectations of those in civil and religious governance. This decline in position is evidenced over the same time in the lives of the women under study. These changes may be attributed to factors as diverse as demographic effects of famines, plagues and constant warfare. Furthermore, the growth of guilds and capitalism added to the wealth and empowerment of national rulers.

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Extreme religious conservatism intensified the cruelties and fanaticism of all parties before, during and after the Reformation and Counter Reformation as one heresy after another was crushed under the powers of church and state.¹⁴

Thousands of women were involved in the heresies and the reforms. They shared in and promoted the causes and ideas of their times. Control of the minds and bodies of women became important to the political, economic, and religious leaders of their period. Teofilo F. Ruiz (2002) describes many of the ongoing ideological struggles. Powerful heretical efforts of reformers, dissenters, eccentrics, reactionaries, and intellectuals challenged the Church, as did movements such as the Cathars, Anabaptists, Huguenots, Lollards, Waldensians, Humiliati, and Beguines; all were perceived as threats to the established yet constantly challenged elite power structures of Europe.

The lives of the women in this study provide insights about the exercise of agency within the structures and strictures of European society during the High Medieval Age and the Renaissance. We have inherited much of the culture they experienced yet many ideological differences now exist between their milieus and ours. The differences manifest in matters that concern the life of the spirit, the functions of institutions, aesthetics and ideology. Modern disinclination toward ascetic suffering has already been mentioned. In *The Medieval World View*, William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman (2004: xiii) note several other differences that are off-putting to modern tastes, but were culturally solid factors in the Middle Ages.

First, exaggeration was such a common form of emphasis that it almost discredits writings of this period in the eyes of modern readers. There was a general “disregard for historical accuracy” (Cook and Herzman 2004:50) that flows freely through literature and hagiographies alike. Second, truth itself was perceived differently in the Middle Ages. Truth was thought to have existed in the past, not the future nor the present because the past was nearer the actual events (Cook and Herzman 2004: xvi). Today we tend to distrust the past and see truth as being discovered in the empirical present and scientific future. Modern students of history see the past as rife with bias as well as blatant untruths.

Third, the same portions of the Bible are no longer thought to be meaningful. For example, the books of the Apocrypha were considered to be of far greater importance in the period under study than they are today (Cook and Herzman 2004: xvi). The lives and writings of the early Church Fathers and various martyrs were also held in extremely high regard (Cook and Herzman 2004:23-37, 50, 60-85). They influenced the accepted procedures for raising virtuous and virginal daughters as well as the appropriate behaviors for women in general. Finally, Church Fathers set the standard for women who might transcend their flawed feminine natures and ascend to the status of males through chastity and suffering (Wilson and Margolis 2004:925). 15

Mary Ann Frese Witt, Charlotte Vestal Brown, Roberta Ann Dunbar, Frank Tirro and Ronald G. Witt (1989) suggest that the people in the Medieval Ages were highly influenced by Greek and Roman traditions. Cook and Herzman concur. They point out

that the “fabric of philosophical thought in the Middle Ages” (Cook and Herzman 2004:25) was Platonic in nature. The influence of Rome manifested in several forms. The most powerful of those influences include the universal use of Latin, the concept of empire, Roman law, as well as the few classical histories and philosophies that were available at the time (Cook and Herzman 2004:23-37). More sources emerged during the later period of the Renaissance. The practices of the Middle Ages are best understood in the light of these influences.

The concept of personal revelation permeates the writings of and about the women in this study even as philosophers and churchmen such as John Duns Scotus (c. 1270-1308) intensely debated the relationship between reason and revelation\textsuperscript{16} Women religious believed that the effort to become one with God was not only vital but also achievable. There is an erotic element in much of their writing which also sometimes leans toward pantheism or mystical dualism.\textsuperscript{17} Some of the women wrote in expectation of the apocalypse and the millennium although these expectations are more typical in the lower classes (Ruiz 2002). Several of the women represent the elite in their societies. The mystical elements in their writings are more prone to the quest for union with God. In each case their writings were influential long after their deaths. Some of the women and their works remained highly revered for centuries. Now that their efforts are being brought forward for study they are influencing modern historians and theologians.


Criteria for the Selection of Individual Mystics

The diverse social, economic, and geographic backgrounds of the six women under investigation indicate that feminine religious achievement was a pan-European phenomenon. The individual women in this study lived in five western European countries. Hildegard of Bingen was German. Joan of Arc and Madame Jeanne Guyon were French. Marguerite Porete lived in Belgium. Catherine of Siena was Italian. Teresa of Avila was Spanish. Each woman lived during a separate century. This allows the dissertation to trace aspects of the development of female mysticism in western religious systems over a period of six hundred years and facilitates a temporal perspective on the evidence of motivational factors in their lives.

The six women were members of different social classes. Madame Guyon was an elite Frenchwoman who counted the Queen of France as one of her supporters and a personal friend. Joan of Arc was a remarkable but uneducated village peasant girl. She represents a dynamic example of individuals who did not follow the elitist quest for unio mystica. Her visions and voices were on the level of daily counsel for the living of her life and the effective completion of goals for France. Catherine of Siena came from a very wealthy family of the emerging Italian middle class. Hildegard of Bingen's German family was well to do, aristocratic, and socially well connected. Teresa of Avila's father was an extremely wealthy converso who bought and married his way into the nobility of Spain. Little is known of Marguerite Porete's background. As a mendicant Beguine she chose a life of poverty, but her writings show knowledge of literary and scriptural classics to a degree that suggests a well educated woman of the upper or middle classes.
These case studies were chosen for elements of mysticism, leadership ability, and writings, which were either personally written or dictated to others. The lives of Hildegard, Catherine and Teresa were elaborated upon by their hagiographers or biographers; nonetheless writings of these women themselves are extant. The written records of witnesses and documents from trials strengthen research possibilities. The abundant accounts of their lives and times provide sufficient research material to allow an assessment of their motivations for action, beliefs and praxis within their cultural milieus. These six women represent “winners” and “losers” in the battle for the freedom of ideas and, to their way of thinking, the salvation of souls.

Although they rose to positions of spiritual power and influence during their lifetimes, the fates of these women varied considerably. Hildegard, Catherine, and Teresa represent the established Catholic Church and fought for reforms within the system. The Church has honored all three for their spiritual efforts and miracles. Catherine and Teresa have been canonized or ranked as saints. Joan of Arc was also honored as a Saint, but she and Marguerite Porete both burned at the stake for their presumptuousness. Madame Guyon lost her fortune and spent fifteen years of her life incarcerated. Four of those years were in solitary confinement in the Bastille.

**Overview of Chapters**

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to explore basic concepts relative to the hypothesis that the extreme content of medieval female mysticism was heavily influenced by the ideals promoted within their cultures and the obstacles to other avenues for self-actualization (Frances and Joseph Gies 1978:64). More detail about the
psychological approaches to mystical phenomena as well as female mystics is presented in chapter 2. It reexamines the previous perspective that female mystics were suffering from various pathologies. Some examples of their unusual behaviors are presented and a general description of life in a convent is explored. The approaches of William James and Abraham Maslow are examined in detail, as is the theory of self-actualization.

In chapter 3 the religious heritage of the women is reviewed as part of the cultural milieu in which they lived their lives. The work of hagiographers is explored, as are the educational processes to which females were exposed. Positive motivational factors that contributed to the choice of religious lifestyles are examined in detail. These factors included the criteria for sainthood, the social status of saints and the importance of relics, virginity, martyrdom and “heroic” ascetics. It is argued that women religious found a means to self-respect, authority and power through their lives in the Church.

Chapter 4 explores the historical misogynistic concepts that constrained the lives of women and their developmental opportunities. In the western world the medieval perception of females grew out of the social customs of three groups of people, the Jews of the Fertile Crescent, the Greeks and Romans, and the Germanic peoples. As the traditional attitudes of these groups merged into European society, so also did their invalidating perspectives on the nature and roles of women. It is argued that these factors contributed negative motivational impetus for self-actualizing women to prove their worth by living lives of “heroic” suffering, chastity, and sacrifice in the face of great gender discrimination.

The climate of both faith and fear that enveloped the intellectual and spiritual lives of women as well as men is explored in chapter 5. The roles of women in the early
Christian Church are examined in relation to the development of monastic life-styles, enclosure, power and the loss thereof for women religious. Over time the ideals of monastic life were corrupted and many women abused the purpose of those establishments. A variety of factors played into this process including Canon Laws that were created in order to control the women, reforms, counter reforms, the Inquisition and witch hunts of the Renaissance. These social events and processes effected the subject women's lives to one degree or another.

The following three chapters explore the religious lives and writings of three medieval mystics within the context of their milieus. Hildegard of Bingen's life and works are explored in chapter 6. Not only was she recognized throughout much of northern Europe as a woman with prophetic gifts, but she also explored many of the intellectual and artistic developments of her era. The Beguine writings of Marguerite Porete are examined in chapter 7 as well as her connections with the heretical movement known as the “Free Spirits.” Chapter 8 presents the life and writings of Catherine of Siena as an example of a woman who practiced extreme asceticism yet was actively influential as a religious exemplar and political agent.

The findings of the previous chapters are reviewed in chapter 9. The lives of Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon are also explored in order to provide additional examples of the revelatory experiences and activities of female mystics. The chapter documents the decline of female mysticism, which was related to the changes occurring in society in general and the position of women in particular. In chapter 10, the Holistic Model of Mystic Experience is presented as an illustration of facets of altered states of consciousness within cultural milieus. Recent developments in the anthropology
of consciousness and the field of neurotheology are introduced in order to provide further information pertaining to the experiences of all mystics as well as the Christian female exemplars in this study.

**Intent and Significance of This Research**

This research is important for two reasons. First, it is valuable because it recognizes a great oversight in the history of the west. The roles of influential women have largely been ignored for generations and have only re-emerged for intense examination in the past thirty-five years. Brilliant and heroic women did live during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Their recorded experiences with mystic phenomena will contribute understanding to this aspect of the human personality.

Second, similar efforts to achieve oneness with God or connection with the supernatural continue to be manifested among groups around the planet. This study will contribute to the anthropologies of gender, consciousness, psychology and religion by gathering evidence that pertains to the human trait of mystic practice through the experience of altered states of consciousness. What were these women experiencing? Were those experiences purely biological? Do their testimonies of spiritual experiences have relevance to today’s growing religious fervor around the world? Does their devotion to what they perceived as God’s will add to our understanding of the cultural climate that may produce fanaticism to the point of terrorism?

Why does such an enterprise matter? It matters because our lives and those of future generations are still influenced by many of the concepts with which the women wrestled. Their struggles to find meaning in life, a higher purpose, direction and security
in very insecure times suggest coping strategies that reemerge in our societies. Today individuals and groups are experiencing rapid social change and economic angst. The roles of women and of men are being reexamined and undergoing social reformulation. Society seems especially violent and unstable due to worldwide crises and rapid methods of contemporary communication.

Many people are dissatisfied with their situations. Modern education has not resulted in the prosperity for all it appeared to promise. Secularization and technology have not created personal satisfaction or a sense of meaningful existence for millions of people. Instead many individuals experience relative deprivation and a frustrating state of status discrepancy (Crapo 2003:263-268). Masses of unhappy individuals are turning to new religious movements as well as politically active and radical forms of established religions, many claiming to know God's will. Old and new mysticisms are influencing international and local communities. Those mysticisms are employed in the quest for meaning, security and strategies that provide adaptive possibilities for survival.

These factors are similar to those faced by the six women whose lives are examined in this study. They participated in the dialogue and social action of their times. An anthropological exploration of that dialogue is worthy of study, not just for their sakes but also for ours. The answers to our quests for meaning often lie in the roots of our cultural pasts. An ethnohistorical exploration of the lives of female mystics has bearing on an enlightened understanding of motivational aspects of self-fulfillment in general.
CHAPTER 2

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO FEMALE MYSTICS

Was the saint hysterized, then, or was hysteria canonized?


*No one is psychotic if the group is psychotic.*


How are we to understand the personal drive and dedication to the ideals of Medieval Christianity that were exhibited by many female religious? Was their passion pathology or culturally encouraged, or both? For the past several centuries, scholars have presented various answers to these questions. Historical and philosophical approaches suggest the women were mentally ill due to the behavioral “excesses” of many medieval female religious, including some of those in this study. These modern opinions are reexamined, but first, a general overview of the physical environment in which cloistered women lived is described. Second, some religious “fashions” are presented along with several examples of individuals who carried ascetic “fads” to such extremes that mystics came to be perceived as mentally ill. This is merely a preview which will be followed with detailed explanations of the development of their world view in the next three chapters.
Third, the pragmatic approach of William James is reviewed because he presents a balanced view and an historical approach to the experiences of both female and male mystics, many of whom were not members of organized religious groups. Next, the model of self-actualization developed by Abraham Maslow is presented in relation to individual self-actualization and peak-experiences. These approaches may explain many of the women’s behaviors in the light of their cultural milieu; in other words the women may have been following culturally valued patterns of behavior considered “heroic” in their times. Finally, the basic theories of logotherapy, humanistic and transpersonal psychology are reviewed their fundamental premises hold that culture and the quest for meaning in life are vitally important features of all human experience, including that which is deemed spiritual.

**The Fundamentals of Conventual Life**

The subjects of this dissertation lived long ago and in a culture markedly different from ours today. Participant observation is not an option here, but it is possible to briefly describe their world of enclosure and imagine to some degree how their lives felt to them and why some medieval nuns developed the behaviors for which they have been so severely criticized by later historians and philosophers. The following description is offered in order to refresh our minds on the praxis of conventual life and a cultural environment that allowed some women to attain status and influence as well as social power despite being cut off from the general community.¹

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¹ A more complete description of conventual life is provided by Gies and Gies in their work, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1978). The following portrayal relies heavily on their description, particularly pages 63-76.
Medieval and Renaissance Europe was dotted not only with monasteries for men but also with monastic convents for women. Some convents were small and poorly funded, but others were large and not unlike the great manor houses or small castles of the era. Inside the convents cold stone walls created a sense of quiet dignity while bearing symbols of the faith that were everywhere present. Crucifixes, altars and images of Christ, Mary and various saints all served as constant reminders of the spiritual endeavors expected of the women whose lives were to be spent in emulation of these heroic figures. Mirrors were noticeably absent, lest the women see themselves or become subjects of vanity.

The confinement of women religious, or enclosure, had always been encouraged but resisted so actively that it was only loosely enforced until the Council of Trent which was convened between 1545 and 1563. As a result of the reform efforts of this council enclosure was so strengthened that the convents were literally women’s prisons. Silvia Evangelisti asserts that “The ideal of perpetual enclosure, as formulated in Trent, meant that nuns crossed the threshold of the convent door, took the solemn vows, and never went out again” (Evangelisti 2007:49-50). From this point on the nuns were not even to be seen nor were visitors allowed in. Walls were heightened and strengthened in order to seal off any views outside the confines of the buildings. “All existing windows, gates, grilles, or holes facing the public street were to be walled up, including the doors connecting the convent to the church” (Evangelisti 2007:48).

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The women who lived in these buildings were loosely attired and covered from head to foot. The plainness of their appearance belied their true identity.\textsuperscript{3} For the most part they were the daughters of the nobility or very wealthy bourgeoisie. This changed over the centuries as more and more of the socially unfortunate were enclosed with the elites in the cloisters (Magli 2003:85), but originally nuns were daughters of the highest social orders of the land: former queens, duchesses, countesses, princesses and ladies of the court. Many of these women were related because families tended to send their women to the convents they supported financially. In certain instances the women continued to have servants as well as slaves and for long centuries maintained their connections with the outside world if not physically then by social visits and their letters. Eventually their correspondence was discouraged and censored as were all visitors including family. Children were sent to convents to be trained and educated in the faith. Some were given to the convent to live consecrated lives as nuns and they spent their entire lives within the convent walls. Their training was rigorous and the rod was not spared.\textsuperscript{4}

Church bells tolled the times for prayer and gathering and periodically the chapel resonated with the sounds of women’s voices united in chanted song that echoed though the chapel and lingered in the vaulted ceilings. Young or old, the women rose to perform prayers in the middle of the night and five other times throughout the day. These cycles of prayer provided the ordering of their lives. Scriptures were read during mealtimes and


\textsuperscript{4} For a description of corporal punishment as part of conventual training, see Bruce W. Holsinger, \textit{Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer}, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001) 270-72.
studied daily, as were the words of the Church Fathers. The women were admonished to be mindful of their every thought and inclination toward evil. Any lustful impulses or failed attempts at poverty and obedience were to be confessed to male clerics or chaplains and corrected through acts of penance. It was the practice for even very young women and widows who join the orders to become consecrated as “Brides of Christ” (Magli 2003:126). Their lives were dedicated to His service and the symbolic meaning of this commitment was as intense as was their love of and admiration for His mother, the Virgin Mary. The structure of the women’s lives was based upon the *vita contemplativa* of the divine and all that served that end, yet the *vita activa* was very much a part of their lives as well (Garber 2003:98).

The women had work to perform and many were busily occupied for at least six hours a day. Convents required maintenance and financial support. Granaries, stables, fish ponds, outbuildings and bakeries had to be maintained. Animals including those in dovecotes required care. Accounts had to be kept as well as food and clothing provided not only for the members of the group and the “obedientiaries,” or staff servants, but also for the poor, the elderly, the social misfits given into their care (Gies and Gies 1978:64-70). Most convents employed local citizens to assist in these efforts as well as private servants for some of the nuns. Still, there was work to be done by all and titles existed for each responsibility.

Abbesses and prioresses supervised the work as well as enforced discipline. Many of these women were powerful and influential leaders although efforts were regularly made to control and limit their authority. The abbess was often aided by not only the prioress but also by a subprioress as well as a treasureress. Chantresses led the choirs and
services. The sacrist cared for all the physical artifacts of the liturgy. The fratress repaired furniture and saw to the setting of the tables while the cellaress and kitcheness saw to the meals. All clothing and bedding were under the care of the chambress, the sick were cared for by the infirmaress and the novice mistress saw to the instruction and supervision of the children (Gies and Gies 1978:70).

Some monastic orders such as the Benedictine houses limited the nuns themselves to creating works of embroidered art or to the scriptorium copying texts and in many cases illustrating them, at least until women were forbidden to do so (Gies and Gies 1978:73). These tasks were of great importance to many women for before strict enclosure. “The nunnery was a refuge of female intellectuals” (Gies and Gies 1978:64). Here they enjoyed access to at least some library materials that included the scientific, artistic, religious and philosophical content of the past and their present. While many nuns produced works of their own in the visual arts, literature and music, the wealthiest houses also commissioned works by the masters in these fields. Until enclosure was strictly enforced, nuns produced plays and musicals which were performed throughout the religious calendar year for themselves, their families and friends as well as the community (Holsinger 2001). Guests sat in the parlor and the nuns performed on the other side of a divider referred to as a “grate” (Evangelisti 2007:42, 111; Magli 2003:2, 115). Hildegard of Bingen is noted for one such production. It is the Ordo Virtutum or Play of the Virtues which was performed by the nuns under her supervision.

The Fashions of Asceticism

This overview of the basic structure of conventual life was but one aspect of the confined religious world wherein individuals exercised their agency. There were also religious fashions (Eliade 1976) which effected the lives of these women. Fad's or fashions crossed Europe then as now and influenced the artistic works of nuns as well as their ascetic efforts. For example, the movement recognized as “flagellantism” swept across Europe between 1260s and the mid-1300s. This was a millennial form of religious passion wherein groups of thirty-three individuals publically flailed their bodies. It was contemporaneous with terrible wars, plagues and famines. The poor were particularly effected by these conditions and in their desperation they hoped that through acts of physical penance their repentance and sincerity would be recognized and found acceptable to God. The purpose of this painful practice was to urge God to usher in the Second Coming of Christ or the long awaited millennium (Ruiz 2002:141-142).

During the centuries under study, women mystics came to exercise a form of devotion that included extremes of suffering and self-abasement. For example, even as some women practiced extreme fasting they also developed the practice of ingesting filthy food, excrement, vomit, and the puss from the wounds of the sick as proof of their love for others as well as for their God-husband (Magli 2003:203, 208-209). These expressions of devotion to the ideals of their society were but one aspect of their spiritual practices. Their ecstatic adoration of their spiritual husband was based upon a love theme that began in the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the excitement engendered by courtly love (Magli 2003:120) and was eventually expressed as a loving acceptance of every aspect of life and its sorrows. All this was done in the name of their Lord.
Often the leaders of the Church discouraged extreme asceticism, yet certain men and women religious exercised their personal agency and continued these rigorous practices even after the flagellant movement had generally subsided. In particular, women religious believed their active suffering was spiritually productive and aided Christ in the redemptive process of all mankind. Patience was developed through the suffering produced by self-inflicted pain or by illness and as such were perceived "as a type of active labor" (Garber 2003:99). Men religious were able to express their active nature in the secular world, but cloistered women transformed "passive endurance into a joyful labor: illness becomes the Passion in the active imitatio Christi. Again, because men had other outlets for this ideal, they did not use or conceive of illness in the same fashion; illness as labor is gendered feminine" (Garber 2003:99).

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) is particularly noted not only for her political and religious influence, but also for her ascetic behaviors and suffering. It was her habit to self-flagellate several times a day. Catherine also participated in practices of extreme fasting and, following the death of her father, ate only a few herbs daily and no bread save the Host. She died at the age of thirty-three in part as a result of self-imposed starvation (Commire and Klezmer 2002, vol. 3:544-547).

Another example of ascetic agency is provided by Madre Juana de la Cruz, a Spanish Franciscan superior who died about 1534. She was wracked with illness that manifested itself with chills among other symptoms. One day, as she warmed stones to place in her bed she believed she saw a soul in one of the rocks crying out to her from Purgatory. She felt impressed that this soul and many others could be released from Purgatory by means of her suffering. To that end she had her associates place the heated
rocks upon her body as she lay in bed. "While she groaned in this vicarious pain for weeks on end, her sisters fortified her by reading Christ's passion at her bedside" (Newman 1995:121). All understood that by this means she had saved many souls from their spiritual imprisonment. They considered this to be a form of spiritual action they could assume even within their highly structured and enclosed world.

Ascetic practices were prevalent throughout medieval society, therefore women were not the only individuals who abused their bodies in order to serve God and refine their souls. Men practiced these hardships too. For example, the famous German mystic, intellectual and student of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso (1295-1366), wrote about his own austerities; ascetic practices which William James refers to as psychopathic "self-torture" (James 1902:281). Suso, much admired in his era, exercised both his agency within the religious structure as well as his creative ingenuity by devising forms of self-torture that included privation of liquids, hair shirts with iron chains, undergarments to be worn at night with sharp brass nails attached that would pierce his body and prevent him from sleep as well as a cross with nails and needles that protruded into his back day and night. His acts were penitential and their purpose was to achieve a relationship with Christ. At the age of forty he felt these trials were no longer required of him (James 1902:281-284).

Another male religious ascetic was Saint Louis of Gonzaga (1568-1591). Frequently referred to as Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, this aristocratic Italian ascetic is thought to have set his sights on a celibate life when he was but nine years old and later insisted upon becoming a Jesuit. Louis sought such purity of mind that he would have absolutely nothing to do with individuals of the opposite sex. He walked with head down
in order to avoid eye contact with them. He refused to converse alone with his own mother or her ladies. Louis practiced silence whenever possible in order to avoid the sins of the tongue and shunned all pleasure including that of perfumed flowers (James 1902:318-321). This man died of a plague at the age of thirty-three and was beatified by the Church only fifteen years later. He remains the patron of Christian youth and those suffering from plagues.

These are but a few of the many possible examples of dedicated men and women who pursued their personal agency within the extreme modes of expression extant in the religious fashions of their eras. Protestantism has found no reason to admire these activities and many modern scientific minds altogether scorn the mystic experiences they produced. Learned men and women have since argued that these behaviors indicate pathological conditions that include classifications such as hysterics, neurotics, and schizophrenics. The development of that point of view, especially in relation to women, has a long history.

Pathology versus Heroic Passion

In her exploration of female mystics and hysterics, Christina Mazzoni (1996) points out that the association of the word “hysteric” with women, illness, and the supernatural has deep roots in medical parlance. It is described in two Egyptian manuscripts which are dated respectively at about 1900 B.C. and 1500 B.C. (Mazzoni, 1996:7). Indeed the root word “hystero” is borrowed from the Greek and means “uterus.” Mazzoni suggests that “in Hippocratic gynecology all diseases are hysterical because the uterus is regarded as the source of all women’s diseases...and thought by
many...endowed with a life of its own” (Mazzoni 1996:7). Today hysteria is described as uncontrollable laughter or weeping that appears to be irrational, probably to the point of frightening those around the disturbed individual. As a psychoneurotic disorder, it is “characterized by violent emotional outbreaks, disturbances of sensory and motor functions, and various abnormal effects due to autosuggestion.” These behaviors were generally despised by more stoic Romans. Their medical practitioners suggested sexual or masturbatory orgasm as a cure.

Early Christians saw such weeping and emotional behavior as hearts touched by the Holy Spirit. Christians took it up first as a sign of suffering for Christ, a form of divine ecstasy. If accused of madness, so be it, for even Christ was thus accused by his family in Mark, Chapter 3 (Mazzoni 1996:10). Should the sufferer propose alternative doctrinal views, the outpouring of spirit was interpreted as a sign of the Devil. The ongoing development of vast numbers of dissenters from orthodox Catholicism, both male and female, all claiming to be guided by God himself, was a position that could not be tolerated by the religious and political elites of Europe. “The Catholic Church was in its usual bind of having to denounce the false miracles without denying the true ones” (Mazzoni 1996:13). Eventually this interpretation of hysteria came to legitimate trials for heresy and witch hunts whereby demonic possession could only be purged by torture or the flames (Mazzoni 1996:7-9).

As the Renaissance continued and religious persecution of the female mystic became established, another transformation took place. With the Enlightenment and the development of modern scientific models to explain phenomena, mystic excesses came to

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be seen as manifestations of neurosis and psychosis. Mazzoni quotes the hysteria expert, Henri Legrand du Saulle (1830-1886), who saw all mystic females, those who manifested hysterical symptoms or not, as suffering from mental maladies.

Many women Saints and Blessed were nothing other than simple hysterics! It is enough to reread the life of Elizabeth of Hungary, in 1207; of Saint Gertrude, of Saint Bridget, of Saint Catherine of Siena, in 1347; of Joan of Arc, of Saint Teresa, of Madame de Chantal, in 1752; of the famous Marie Alacoque, and of many others: one will be easily convinced of this truth (Mazzoni 1996:34).

Critics have pointed out that du Saulle's dates are incorrect and that neither Chantal nor Elizabeth exhibited hysterical behaviors (Mazzoni 1996:3-4). Nevertheless, Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) continued this approach by “interpreting witchcraft and demon possession as unrecognized forms of hysteria. Lombroso underscored the predominance of women among those accused of witchcraft and among hysterics” (Mazzoni 1996:32). He insisted that, “There is no doubt, anyway, that witchcraft and demon-possession were hystero-epileptic phenomena.”

By the nineteenth century not only were female mystics perceived as manifesting illness, but any woman who exemplified even the virtue of service outside the home might be subject to suspicion of evil or madness. Indeed, Lombroso insisted that religious women who spent time in service and good works were manifesting signs of their illness. “Sacrifice is for them the opportunity for a necessary expenditure; therefore they are

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virtuous out of sickness” (Mazzoni 1996:34). This phenomenon is well described by Mazzoni who notes that

Virtue is somehow transformed into illness, and religiosity supposedly becomes dangerous for the woman’s own health if it escapes the narrow confines of her predestined sphere of action. If married, she is to be the angel of the household, not of the streets and certainly not of the unattainable and forbidden “place” of ecstasy. The woman who neglects her household chores to help the poor is definitely diagnosed as hysterical (Mazzoni 1996:34).

Lombroso, among other authors, went on to rank the behaviors of female mystics as criminal. Mazzoni notes that “Mystics are somewhat strangely nestled in Lombroso’s list between prisoners and epileptics” (Mazzoni1996:32). Cesare Lombroso was only one of many late nineteenth century writers who continued the theory that mystics, especially female mystics, were manifesting deviant behaviors so great that they were classifiable as criminally insane. Mazzoni quotes Nancy Harrowitz (1994) who observes, “The idea that prostitution is criminal behavior is, of course, problematic, but the fact that Lombroso views it as unequivocally so, and that in his analysis prostitution is the female version of crime and all women are latent criminals, makes it likely that it is really women’s sexuality that is on trial” (Mazzoni 1996:31).9

Other diagnosticians detect a strong strain of masochism in the sufferings and ecstasies of mystic heights. For example, Teresa of Avila is seen by male analysts as in a state of masochistic delight as portrayed in the statue by Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s work, the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1652).10 Male analysts such as Krafft-Ebing insist that

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10 For a further discussion of the sculpture, see Mazzoni 1996:38.
female sexuality requires voluntary subjection to the male partner. This in turn is then seen as a “masochism, so aberrant and even pathological in men as to require a new nosological niche, is but a normal expression of woman’s very essence, and as such, inherently feminine, even when it affects men” (Mazzoni 1996:40).

Having traced what she describes as the “movement from saint to witch to patient” (1996:14), Mazzoni notes that “mystic hysteria” then received other diagnoses of mental illness. One such is that of “nymphomania.” Some see in the erotic metaphors and descriptions of medieval female mystics as abnormal sexual desire that is as uncontrollable as the hysterical weeping and ecstasies of others disconnected from physical reality. Saint Teresa of Avila is often thus accused of this “hysteria-nymphomania-erotomania” (Mazzoni 1996:39) which is then traced once again to the “cause” of all female illness, the uterus.11

In the Second Sex: Woman’s Life Today, Simone de Beauvoir (1971) continued the exploration of what was wrong with female mystics. Beauvoir saw the problem as being one wherein

Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and when she directs it toward a man, she is seeking God in him; but if human love is denied her by circumstances, if she is disappointed or over particular, she may choose to adore divinity in the person of God Himself. To be sure, there have also been men who burned with that flame, but they are rare and their fervor is of a highly refined intellectual cast; whereas the women who abandon themselves to the joys of the heavenly nuptials are legion, and their experience is of a peculiarly emotional nature” (Beauvoir 1971:697).

To Beauvoir female mysticism was in truth a manifestation of woman’s state of subjection. She argued that women desire to be subject to men, even as Madame Guyon

so admired her confessor, Father La Combe, that she insisted, “It was not merely a
complete unity; I could not distinguish him from God” (Beauvoir 1971:672). Beauvoir
suggests that the erotic intensity associated with such passion is erotomania, which may
manifest as platonic or sexual. In any case, Beauvoir judges erotomania as obsessive and
manifesting physically in the body of the woman.

Beauvoir extended her argument to the belief that it is now the woman’s
manifestation of love for herself that she so desires.

“Woman seeks in divine love first of all what the amoureuse seeks in that of a
man: the exaltation of her narcissism; this sovereign gaze fixed attentively,
amorously, upon her is a miraculous godsend...she feels her soul created,
redeemed, cherished, by the adorable Father; it is her double, it is herself she
embraces”(Beauvoir 1971:674).

At this point female mystics are diagnosed as narcissistic and sado-masochistic;
but not all female mystics. Beauvoir does give credit to those who refrain from self-
immolation, women with goals and plans like Joan of Arc and St. Theresa. “Mystical
fervor, like love and even narcissism, can be integrated with a life of activity and
independence” (Beauvoir 1971:678). Nevertheless, her achievements are tainted because
the mystic “lacks any grasp on the world; she does not escape her subjectivity; her liberty
remains frustrated. There is only one way to employ her liberty authentically, and that is
to project it through positive action into human society” (Beauvoir 1971:678).

Ida Magli (2003) argues that the women religious experienced lives of
imprisonment within a social setting that became more and more constricted during the
Middle Ages and Renaissance. As enclosure increased the women became cut off from
families, friends and intellectual stimulation of all kinds (Magli 2003:160, 172). For all
 intents and purposes the women were expected to experience life-long imprisonment. So
severe was their confinement that Magli believes a form of group delirium resulted, one that was based upon their particular group logic, a logic encouraged by the males who had jurisdiction over their lives and histories (Magli 2003:182-183).

Were their behaviors psychotic or were they merely culturally encouraged? Magli argues that the nucleus of psychosis is “the concretization of the symbolic” (2003:137) and that behaviors become abnormal once they pass the border from symbolic to concrete (2003:119). In a world of confinement, surrounded by symbols, in possession of nothing but their bodies, Magli suggests the women sanctified their lives as victims to the social values of their milieus by means of their actual bodies. Aspects of their religious lives encouraged the sacrifice of their physical bodies for the spiritual and psychological goals of the group in the only ways available to them (Magli 2003:119, 193). Magli argues that “no one is psychotic if the group is psychotic” (Magli 2003:181) and that the particular circumstances of life within a convent forced women “to live outside reality as if it were ‘real’” (Magli 2003:181).

Thus far the research presents a picture that suggests women religious cannot produce an individual who achieves great works on behalf of her community and from love of her conceptual God. Whatever she does, the female’s efforts are tainted with demonology, witchcraft, hysteria-epilepsy, nymphomania, sado-masochism, criminal insanity, and narcissism or group psychosis. If women who accomplished as much as Hildegard of Bingham, Joan of Arc or Teresa of Avila are delusional and suffering acute states of hallucinosis, how are their achievements to be explained?

Kroll et al question the prevailing approach of viewing medieval mystics from within a twentieth century medical model. The authors note that our society views pain of
any sort, let alone self-induced, as a very negative factor in life. It is to be avoided, not sought as in the case of asceticism. While affective mysticism is still suspect, “Eastern models that stress quiet meditative and contemplative techniques...[have] become respectable and even fashionable” (Kroll et al 2002:95-96). Kroll and his associates continue a rather stringent critique of modern psychiatric and ethnocentric approaches to the travails of affective mystics.

While a psychiatric model probably encompasses a certain number of deviant individuals, there is something circularly unsatisfactory and ethically objectionable about defining all behaviorally deviant persons (i.e. deviating from statistical norms) as having mental illness. Psychiatric diagnoses are not value-free, and when the ration of information conveyed by a diagnosis shifts from primarily empirical to predominantly judgmental, as has become the case with hysteria, then we are better off without the diagnosis. The question still remains as to how far the continuum of normality has to be stretched to encompass heroic religious behavior. Our answer is that the deep context within which pursuit of religious ideals occurs should make us cautious in applying psychopathologic categories. Nor can we use judgment by contemporaries, since these are notoriously conventional, or judgment as measured by worldly success, since these are not the values of the committed religious person. If such criteria were used, Peter, Paul and the early Christian martyrs would all qualify for psychiatric diagnoses (Kroll et al 2002:96).

Anthropologists insist that perceptions of behavior must be based upon the enculturated cognitive models for the period in which the women lived. In other words, historical particularism may enlighten the study of medieval mystical phenomena. This approach opposes earlier examinations of the lives of these women because they were done after the fact and without consideration of the contemporary cultural environment of Europe. Whether or not the women were mentally ill, all of the suggested pathologies are etic observations created by individuals who were not present, did not know the individuals personally, and are judging them by a cognitive model developed centuries after the fact.
Using the anthropological approach, we can allow for the possibility that these women and others were extreme manifestations of cultural cognitive modalities that were much admired for well over a thousand years. Do modern psychological schools of thought have theories that make a fuller, richer evaluation possible? Alternative and or complimentary explanations for mystic behaviors and expressions of belief do exist and that they permit the application of culture to the study of mysticism. It is to the work of William James, Abraham Maslow, and the schools of humanistic and transpersonal psychology as well as logotherapy to which we now turn. These models provide another paradigm that stresses factors in culture to explain the altered states of consciousness achieved by mystics, particularly those whose pragmatic abilities to function creatively belie a total dependence upon a model based solely on mental illness.

*The Pragmatics of Sainthood*

The philosopher and psychologist, William James, is best known for introducing a balanced approach to mystic experiences and exploring them in depth - particularly in his major work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James argued that behaviors must be tested for pragmatic value and if they result in enhanced lives then they are useful and not to be scorned as mental illness. Several years later he reexamined and strengthened his position in an essay entitled, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” This work was published on February 17, 1910 in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*.¹²

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Throughout these works James shares scores of written accounts of fully functional and articulate individuals, both male and female, who experienced mystical states of consciousness, experiences which they insist have altered their lives for the better. James is noted for his generally open-minded, balanced approach to the several hundred records he gathered from the journals, letters, and autobiographies of individuals who experienced life-altering transcendent states of conscience. In some cases those individuals were converted to formal religions they had never before considered. In other cases the individuals became converted to atheism. But in each instance, their lives were changed and they never denied the intensity or the reality of those non-material experiences.

In the subjects of the experience the “emotion of conviction” is always strong, and sometimes absolute. The ordinary psychologist disposes of the phenomenon under the conveniently “scientific” head of petit mal, if not of “bosh” or “rubbish.” But we know so little of the noetic value of abnormal mental states of any kind that in my own opinion we had better keep an open mind and collect facts sympathetically for a long time to come. We shall not understand these alternations of consciousness either in this generation or in the next (James 1987:1,280).

Several of James’ observations have importance for this study. Those include his analysis of behaviors within their culturally defined “fields of consciousness.” Here James suggests that at any one point in time we function in a relatively narrow field of consciousness. The depth or breadth of that field varies from individual to individual. For James himself, the field seems to be quite narrow and he has only rarely had non-material experiences. He suggests that other individuals have far wider fields with thresholds that are lower than average and thus allow for many more sensations of the “trans-marginal” consciousness. Here, trans-marginal is synonymous with subliminal (James 1987:1,272). The subliminal range of experience is subject to a number of
influences including fatigue, drugs, extreme danger, pain and stress. On the other hand some transcendent experiences may be spontaneous and without the other factors. He considers these moments to be "very sudden and incomprehensible enlargements of the conscious field, bringing with them a curious sense of cognitions of real fact" (James 1987:1,274). James suggests that the elements of the experience include long forgotten memories and impressions that influence both the experience and the interpretation thereof (James 1987:1,273). Those influences must be evaluated within their context "for we make it appear admirable or dreadful according to the context by which we set it off" (James 1987:346).

James' second observation is his insistence that neurosis must be judged by the quality of the mystic's life works. This point is based upon his application of the principle of pragmatism and tempered by his requirement that the experience be seen within its context. James' pragmatism allows for a certain degree of neurosis. Whatever the state of mind, James holds that it is neurally conditioned (1987:22) and that religious individuals are indeed often neurotic or at the very least, eccentric (1987:15). This need not be a bad thing, for it is "by their fruits ye shall know them, not their roots" (1987:26). In other words, "when a superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament coalesce...in the same individual, we have the best possible condition for the kind of effective genius that gets into the biographical dictionaries" (1987:29). For William James, the test of a mystic's mental and physical life must be based upon pragmatic results. If the individual functions in society and produces good works and service, the cause of those deeds need not merit derision.
In James’ third observation he makes a strong distinction between formal institutionalized religions versus personal spiritual experience. He, like the author of this paper, discerns between formal institutionalized religion and personal spiritual experience. Both are called “religious” in his work; however, in this dissertation “religion” refers to institutionalized experience and “spiritual” refers to individual experience. Certainly one can have a shared spiritual experience during an institutionalized gathering, but in the case of this study, it is the individual in relationship to experiences of the divine that is emphasized. James defines and qualifies the religious as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1987:36). Furthermore, James explained that “The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest” (1987:42).

James concludes that because religious experience inspires more enthusiasm than standard philosophy (1987:48) it has the ability to transform individuals and ignite them with greater happiness in this life. “Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the subject’s range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power...This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion” (1987:50). He suggests that there is a biological precedent for the faculty of mind to experience dramatic widening of fields of consciousness or a sense of the presence of the divine and that religion is the “essential organ of our life...performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill” (1987:53).
Fourth, James analyzes two basic personality types and their reactions to mystical experiences, again, the individuals may be male or female. The first type manifests "Healthy-minded-ness" and enthusiastically positive attitudes toward life and religious experiences. The second type of individual is more solemn, sees the hardships of life and develops a "morbid-minded" approach to life's experiences. Insisting that "happiness is man's chief concern" (1987:77), James compares the personalities of those who are throughout life "healthy-minded" and basically of a positive disposition. In contrast, there is the "morbid-minded" individual who finds much of life disagreeable and suffers disproportionately. Those who suffer thusly are best suited to institutionalized religions that offer deliverance thus allowing "the man to die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life" (1987:154). So-called healthy-minded souls "need to be born only once, and of the sick souls, who must be twice-born in order to be happy ...in the religion of the twice-born...there are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other" (1987:155). Many saints fall into the latter category and are beset by despair over both the sorrows of the world at large and their own sins in particular.

Fifth, James explores "conversion" through an extremely powerful mystic experience the intensity of which cannot be forgotten and has a permanent effect upon the life of the individual who experiences it. For James this requires the resolution of a "heterogeneous personality" which is often healed through a mystic experience or "conversion" that is so dynamic that the individual, like Saint Paul, is reborn or has a second birth of a spiritual and unifying sort (1987:159). Conversion of this magnitude is his fifth point. There appear to be two types of conversion. One is voluntary and
consciously decided; it is volitional. The second is more obtuse. It is "involuntary and unconscious" and results from a painful process of self-surrender (1987:192-193). Gradual or sudden, the conversion experience is thought by James to be the result of subconscious motives that have been developing within the individual over time (1987:192-195).

Sixth, James gives scores of accounts from journals and letters wherein sane and functional individuals attempt to describe their mystical experiences. His witnesses often describe instances of frightening darkness that give way to light and are then followed by visionary or auditory experiences, or a sense of union with that which is universal (James 1987:226-227). A condition of memorable love is felt, and as a result, lives are changed. Many if not most find the experience so overwhelming that words are inadequate to convey it (James 1987:352, 366). It is the ineffability of the occurrence that is common to that which is mystical (James 1987:367); thus a truly mystical experience is somehow illuminating but not truly describable. To James, "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else" (1987:366). Furthermore, James insists that, "The state of consciousness becomes then insusceptible of any verbal description. Mystical teachers are unanimous as to this" (1987:367). James differentiates these states of consciousness of illumination from other phenomena such as "levitation, stigmatization, and the healing of disease" (1987:368 n. 2).

Seventh, James analyzes the saintly life and its characteristics and whether or not it ultimately has value for the individual and society as a whole. James goes to great lengths to analyze saintliness and discusses it in two sections. First, he analyses the many
characteristics of saints. Second, he considers whether or not all the sacrifice and suffering, the discipline and excesses of saints are pragmatically viable for the individuals themselves as well as society as a whole. In as much as four of the women in this study are honored as either “blessed” or “saints” by the Catholic Church, and in as much as the other two women were considered saints by their fellow heretics, it is important to give his appraisal serious consideration.

James’ seven observations culminate in his unique interpretation of saintliness. “The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character is Saintliness. The saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy; and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions” (1987:249). Those characteristics are explained by James as

1. a sense of a greater power or presence as well as a sense of “a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests” (1987:249)
2. a sense of communion with that greater power which is achieved through “willing self-surrender to its control” (1987:250)
3. a sense of freedom and joy that results from the surrender of self (1987:250)
4. freedom from the concerns of the ego results in a more positive and loving attitude or “harmonious affections” (1987:250).

These traits may develop into practices that include (1) asceticism to the degree that individuals practice self-immolation and find pleasure in the pain and sacrifice as an expression of loyalty to the higher power, (2) incredible strength of soul that replaces fear with patience, fortitude and “blissful equanimity...Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!”(1987:251), (3) an emphasis on purity that demands continual efforts to eliminate all weakness in the character: “The saintly life must deepen its spiritual consistency and keep unspotted from the world. In some temperaments this need of purity of spirit takes an ascetic turn, and weaknesses of the flesh are treated with
relentless severity” (1987:251), and finally, (4) a profound shift in consciousness engenders charity, “tenderness for fellow-creatures... The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his brothers” (1987:251).

James points out three other qualities and practices of self-mortification that appear to be required of saints or those who are associated with ecclesiastical orders (1987:284). The first is mental as well as physical chastity. The second is the practice of perfect obedience to those holding leadership positions in the order. Not only must the saint submit constantly to the will of the divine power, but also to one’s superiors. James quotes a Jesuit authority, “one of the great consolations of the monastic life... is the assurance we have that in obeying we can commit no fault... you commit no fault so long as you obey, because God will only ask you if you have duly performed what orders you received” (1987:286).

The third practice is that of poverty, the willing abstinence from the accumulation of material goods and physical comforts. The mystic’s fundamental rejection of worldly wealth identified those who chose to live as had the early Christian apostles and fathers of the Church. “In short, lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being, and in the interest of action people subject to spiritual excitement throw away possessions as so many clogs. Only those who have no private interests can follow an ideal straight away” (1987:292). Here then is the immemorial “opposition between the men who have and the men who are” (1987:291).

James continues his analysis of saints with an examination of many of those whose lives bore testimony of extreme ascetic practices and testimonies of their divine guidance even unto death if need be. His rationale is that
We learn most about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form. This is as true of religious phenomena as of any other kind of fact. The only cases likely to be profitable enough to repay our attention will therefore be cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable and extreme” (1987:43). At their extreme of development, there can never be any question as to what experiences are religious. The divinity of the object and the solemnity of the reaction are too well marked for doubt (1987:42).

James attempts a dispassionate evaluation of a number of saints who practiced extreme asceticism. He is less kind to concepts of the divine. He admits a degree of bias when he reminds his readers that “We shall see examples of the cruelty and paltriness of character of the gods believed in by earlier centuries from the annals of Catholic saintship [as well] which make us rub our Protestant eyes” (1987:302). He advised that “The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another” (1987:303).

According to James the test of the experiences of mystics is to be the overall pragmatic fruits of the manifestations of saintly lives whatever their weaknesses, as we in later times might perceive them. Those weaknesses include devoutness carried to the point of fanaticism which is “only loyalty carried to a convulsive extreme” (1987:310). “We find that error by excess is exemplified by every saintly virtue…Spiritual excitement takes pathological forms whenever other interests are too few and the intellect too narrow” (1987:310). Here James condemns notions of “saintship based on merits. Any god who, on the one hand can care to keep a pedantically minute account of individual shortcomings, and on the other can feel such partialities, and load particular creatures with such insipid marks of favor, is too small-minded a god for our credence” (1987:317).
Next, the philosopher-psychiatrist condemns purity taken to its extreme. This phenomenon is marked by renunciation of family, friends, all light-mindedness, and amusements. Seclusion from others is a strategy to avoid sin. “The lives of saints are a history of successive renunciations of complication...to save the purity of inner tone” (1987:318). “Is it not better,” a young sister asks her Superior, “that I should not speak at all during the hour of recreation, so as not to run the risk, by speaking, of falling into some sin of which I might not be conscious?” (1987:318). So also is the early renunciation of contact with those of the other sex lest one be contaminated by touch, conversation, thought or deed as in the case of Saint Louis of Gonzaga who refused even the association of his mother in order to guard his virginity (1987:319). James admits that it was not then counted a sin for saints to “leave the world to the devil whilst saving one’s own soul” (1987:322), but he condemns this extreme quest for purity because it makes any social usefulness impossible for the individual; therefore it does not pass the test of pragmatism.

Even excessive tenderness and charity are examined in the light of Herbert Spencer’s theory of social Darwinism (1987:323). Saints upset the theory. They interfere with the natural order of things because they choose to love and seek to help thieves, the ill and the poor, those who should be condemned and forgotten, nay, allowed to die for the betterment of society as a whole. James and other scholars of his time contended that the saint may lack balance between the “intention, execution, and reception” of conduct which should be suited one to the other (1987:323). In this they lack practicality.

It is at this point that James finds value in the cognitive models of the saints. Their prophetic ability to see worthiness in the least admirable of society’s victims is
known to turn lives around, to save the unsavable, and to value all as sacred. James admits that the saint is ill adapted to the world, yet he or she raises the level of the social environment and is “an effective ferment of goodness, a slow transmuter of the earthly into a more heavenly order” (1987:326-327). Saintly efforts are “creative energies” with regenerative powers (1987:325). “This practical proof that worldly wisdom may be safely transcended is the saint’s magic gift to mankind” (1987:326).

As for asceticism and its extremes, little of pragmatic value appears to be evident, at least not to modern sensibilities. Yet James does note that the older the ascetic became the more there was a tendency toward moderation. Furthermore, “Catholic teachers have always professed the rule that, since health is needed for efficiency in God’s service, health must not be sacrificed to mortification” (1987:328). Self-control and self-discipline have their place in an individual’s life. A moderate asceticism may serve as the “essence of the twice-born philosophy” (1987:329). It is a hard world. Evil does abound. The twice-born knows that “it must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul’s heroic resources and neutralized and cleansed away by suffering” (1987:329). In this, the twice-born individual excels over the once-born optimist, for he or she who knows suffering is alive to all the facets of this life (1987:329). Poverty and suffering do exist. It is a strenuous life, yet we are cowards if we are afraid to be poor. Wealth is preferable (1987:333), but a steadfast soul that can deal with all life’s vicissitudes is heroic. It is the intelligent saint who models heroism for us all. They may well “see truth in a special manner. That manner is known as mysticism” (1987:341).

James has provided a detailed study of the personality patterns associated with mystics and saints. His descriptions of fields of consciousness, insistence that neurosis
must be judged pragmatically by the quality of the mystic's life works, as well as his
focus on individual spirituality rather than organized religious ritual and dogma, all form
the foundational approach of this dissertation. James' position is strengthened by the
research of Abraham Maslow. This mid-twentieth century psychologist gathered
information from many more "normal" individuals who also experienced the
transcendent. His analysis of the motivational factors typical of self-actualizing persons is
also pertinent to the study of medieval female mystics.

Abraham Maslow and the Phenomenon of Self-actualization

The witnesses of medieval female mystics may be explained at least in part by
means of the psychological model outlined in 1968 by Abraham H. Maslow in his
humanistic work, Toward a Psychology of Being. Maslow analyzed the case records of
many modern individuals who experienced transcendent states of consciousness and were
at the same time fully functioning citizens. They were not hysterics, but they did
experience hallucinations of either auditory or visual categories. He then investigated the
lives of many outstanding persons of historical note who also recorded their unusual or
extraordinary experiences. Maslow concluded that these altered states of consciousness
assisted those individuals to solve their problems and achieve their goals; in other words,
the "peak-experiences" helped them self-actuate.

Maslow outlined a series of needs that included first those he termed "deficiency
needs." These were basic physical requirements for survival, including food, shelter,
clothing, safety, love, esteem and a sense of belonging in a group. Maslow maintained
that the effort to supply these needs can be so demanding that some individuals might
have neither the time nor the energy to concern themselves with needs he termed “Being needs.” These latter needs were those of a more psychological nature and concerned individual efforts toward “Self-actualization” and “Self-transcendence.” In his later years Maslow admitted that many struggling to succeed in securing their deficiency needs also had self-transcending experiences.\textsuperscript{13}

In Maslow’s paradigm, drives toward self-actualization and self-transcendence are based upon “a biologically based inner nature, which is to some degree ‘natural,’ intrinsic, given and in a certain limited sense, unchangeable, or, at least unchanging.” (1968:3). Inner nature is both unique to each individual and yet “part species-wide” (1968:3). It is possible to discover one’s inner nature, although Maslow suggests it is often weak and pre-moral or neutral in the beginning. Nevertheless, he argued that it was available to all persons although it may become repressed for any variety of reasons. Frustrated, thwarted, violated, the inner nature may then become distorted and exhibit a number of behaviors either passive or aggressive, yet it remains “forever pressing for actualization” (1968:4). On the other hand, if encouraged and allowed to develop, that natural inclination will result in an individual who is then able to move toward the instinctive drive for self-actualization and finally, self-transcendence.

\textit{The Need for Self-actualization}

Maslow employed Kurt Goldstein’s term, “self-actualization,”\textsuperscript{14} to define the state of being wherein an individual is able to reorganize his or her capacities after an


\textsuperscript{14} Kurt Goldstein, \textit{The Organism} (American Book Company, 1939).
injury (Maslow 1968:23). As no one is exempt from trauma, pain, disappointment and injustice, it is important to reorganize and return to a sense of one’s inner direction. Growth and improvement can follow any number of sorrows which may have even proved so debilitating that the person became physically ill, and, thereafter moving into a desired relationship with the inner nature, may even find health returning. A frustrated dancer, musician, writer, may forever hear the call of the talent which was theirs to develop. Cloistered women of talent would also have inner drives toward self-fulfillment despite their situations. Given any degree of ambition or personal drive they would be forced to find personal satisfaction within the confines of conventual life. Acknowledging that innate drive and nurturing it is a form of “health psychology.”

So far as motivational status is concerned, healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs for safety, belongingness, love, respect and self-esteem so that they are motivated primarily by trends to self-actualization (defined as ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities and talents, as fulfillment of mission (or calling, fate, destiny, or vocation), as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person’s own intrinsic nature, as an unceasing trend toward unity, integration or synergy within the person (Maslow 1968:24).

Maslow contends that “What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization” (Maslow 1954:91). Once on the course of self-actualization, the individual finds the satisfactions self-rewarding. “Wanting and desiring continues but at a ‘higher’ level (1968:30). Growth is, in itself, a rewarding and exciting process, e.g., the fulfilling of yearnings and ambitions, like that of being a good doctor, the acquisition of admired skill…or, most important, simply the ambition to be a good human being” (1968:30-31). Although the activities leading to a goal may or may not be enjoyed, self-actualizing people tend to find growing satisfaction in the process of becoming (1968:30-
31) even if the goals are distant or even unattainable as in the case of *unio mystica* with God.

Maslow was well aware of the importance of role models to self-actualizing individuals. "Every age but ours has had its model, its ideal" (1968:5). The heroes of the medieval ages were often as not "saints" whose lives were said to be models of every virtue. Willing to endure any torture, poverty, and death itself, suffering, penances, and an ongoing quest for the greater good, all marked the path of a would-be saint. So it was for those who sought to be heroes themselves by casting off earthly, materialistic goals, and seeking the achievement of sainthood. Given the inner compulsion to this exquisite perfection the self-actualizing individual would feel any failure as an inadequacy of the first order, and agonizingly painful.

The serious thing for each person to recognize vividly and poignantly, each for himself, is that every falling away from species-virtue, every crime against one’s own nature, every evil act, every one without exception records itself in our unconscious and makes us despise ourselves...Theologians used to use the word "*accidie*" to describe the sin of failing to do with one’s life all that one knows one could do" (Maslow 1968:5).

One of several consistencies in the words of the women under study is their continual concern over their "sins." One is hard pressed to think they were out robbing or murdering others. What might those harassing errors have been and why were the women so concerned about what were probably trifling mistakes? Was it a loathing of a fellow nun or abbess? Perhaps it was a difficulty in surrendering all possessions or acquiescence to the constant requirement for obedience. Was it guilt due to a thoughtless gesture or harshness in the tone of voice, a sexual thought or impulse? Did the nun emit
monastic curses in her frustration? Anything less than a perfect control of mind and body that would be consistent with the goal of union with God might be perceived by a would-be saint as a grievous sin (Magli 2003:44). Furthermore, the concept of the power of the devil and of his agents was an ever constant threat, indeed a motivating factor for conformity to the counsels of the Church lest one's soul be condemned to eternal damnation.  

Transformation through Peak-experiences

Yet there was hope, and that hope was reinforced by those moments referred to by Maslow as “peak-experiences.” Love, or “Being-love” as Maslow refers to it, is a critical element of peak-experiences. He describes it as a basic “cognitive happening” or something similar to “The parental experience, the mystic, or oceanic, or nature experience, the aesthetic perception, the creative moment, the therapeutic or intellectual insight, the orgasmic experience, certain forms of athletic fulfillment, etc. These and other moments of highest happiness and fulfillment I shall call the peak-experiences” (1968:73).

Peak-experiences are not unique to the rich and famous or professional clergymen. Anyone, anywhere, anytime, for any reason can experience a moment of illumination, understanding, heart-touching beauty, and enlightenment. In other words, some transformative moments are mild, while others are very dramatic and described by

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William James as "conversion" experiences. In either case, such moments are fleeting but unforgettable and often life-altering. One transcends the ego, the self, and for brief moments, sees "all" and one’s place in the "all." For individuals whose religious indoctrination suggests the possibility of union with God, the peak-experience may be interpreted as movement toward that union.

According to Maslow, peak-experiences provide a sense of self-transcendence or Being-cognition (B-cognition). He describes the characteristics of typical transcendent moments in Toward a Psychology of Being (1968). Maslow believed peak-experiences can be studied and applied in situations such as an analysis of the witnesses of the women under our investigation. In that case, the women might be expected to relate their experiences in terms somewhat similar to Maslow’s characteristics of B-cognition.

Maslow’s witnesses experienced a certain number of sensations during a peak-experience that are similar in nature, but difficult to describe. When a peak-experience begins individuals often find it frightening because they are surrendering their personal will or ego to the sensation, one that requires a passive rather than active effort (1968:78). At this point emotions are triggered that resemble a fear of possible dying into the experience (1968:88), yet one moves willingly into it. The individual recognizes it as a distinct event what provides a sensation wherein all beingness is “synonymous with the universe” (1968:75). There is an “endlessness” that exists simply to exist, without knowable purpose (1968:76). Time and space become disoriented (1968:80). The sense of unity may be on a macro or micro level, in other words, centered outwardly into the expanse or centered within one’s heart, which is often the case with the experiences focused on a sense of love or beauty (1968:88). There is an increase in love to a degree of
elation, while at the same time the individual experiences a loss of all fear and anxiety (1968:94). A sense of intense love for and fusion with the object of attention often occurs (1968:78). All dichotomies are fused into a sense of oneness wherein binary oppositions fall away and everything feels resolved into one “good” (1968:81-82).

After a peak-experience, individuals indicate that it had a “self-validating, self-justifying” (1968:79) value as if it existed for its self and had no other purpose. This feeling comes with an intense sense of awe and creates concern that the spirituality of the peak-experience may be devalued by discussing it. Although frightening, these events are also highly desired by those who have undergone them. There is a non-judgmental or godlike quality to the sensation that results in fearless joy and an increased sense of love which then passes away after the experience. These occasions are rare and may only occur once or twice in a lifetime (1968:79).

For Maslow, the clinically observed characteristics of his contemporary self-actualizing subjects included a number of characteristics that made them more effective individuals following their peak-experiences. They became more spontaneous, more accepting of others, themselves and the natural world. These individuals were better able to express appreciation for and recognize the good in life and others. They experienced rich emotional reactions and had more frequent peak-experiences including milder ones such as a greater sensitivity to beauty in life. As a result they were better able to improve personal relationships and identify with and empathize with others. In other words, their values underwent changes. Their “superior perception of reality” (Maslow 1968:26) in turn produced better problem-solving skills, including a more democratic approach to challenging situations. This trait was enhanced by “greatly increased creativeness”
There was another change in character. These individuals were less dependent and became more detached. They wanted more privacy and autonomy. They became sensitive and resistant to situations that they recognized as propagandizing. They became more independent thinkers (Maslow 1968:26).

Maslow came to these conclusions after interviewing modern, psychologically healthy, individuals (1968:25). If the six women in this study describe similar experiences, the conclusion may be that they underwent peak-experiences and became self-actualizers. As such they would have felt highly motivated to meet the heroic ideals of their milieu. By whatever means, they may have been experiencing a process of self-fulfillment that can now be described within the psychological models suggested by William James and Abraham Maslow. This would stand in stark contrast to, but not exclusive of, descriptions of them as hysterics, neurotics, and schizophrenics as noted earlier in this chapter. It would also explain their successes as gifted writers, theologians, organizers, and leaders. Further support for this position is provided within the more recent disciplines of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies.

*Humanistic, Transpersonal and Logotherapies*

The work of James and Maslow does not stand alone; it inspired several modern and successful schools of psychology, beginning with humanistic psychology. It is appropriate to note that the roots of humanistic psychology can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the origins of the philosophy of humanism wherein the value of the individual came to be stressed. In the first instance the philosophy was a reaction against religious dogmatism and an attempt to promote reason and science among the developing
university systems of Europe. In its modern form it began in the mid-twentieth century and emerged from the work of men like Abraham Maslow, Kurt Goldstein, Carl Rogers, Frederick “Fritz” Perls, and Eric Fromm.

These humanistic psychologists reacted against the behaviorist and psychoanalytical schools of psychology. Considered to be a “Third Force” in psychology, humanistic psychologists insist upon studying the individual not only as a series of subconscious reactions (First Force or Psychoanalysis) or conditioned responses (Second Force or Behaviorism), but as a total human being who reasons and reacts to the challenges met in life. The humanistic school of thought combines both existential and phenomenological approaches to understanding the human psyche.

Humanistic psychology insists upon a holistic approach to the individual within his or her environment. That environment includes the social setting and peers of the individual under study. Self understanding is stressed as it is believed that free will is a vital component of agency and personality, and that individuals will make better life choices when they have achieved a greater degree of self-understanding. The highest levels of that understanding are through self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-realization.

The approach of this school of thought is holistic and as such must include the “zeitgeist” of the individual being studied (Arons 1999:339). It is in the “spirit of the time” that we may comprehend much of that which motivates the behaviors exhibited by men and women. This perspective harmonizes with the cultural approach fundamental to anthropology. It is consistent with the perspective advanced by a classic anthropological theory, that of historical particularism. At the present time, humanistic psychology has
morphed into many other sub-disciplines. At their core is a “shared set of values” which include “dedication to the development of human potential” as well as “an appreciation of the spiritual and intuitive.”  

Humanistic psychology has influenced another dimension of analysis, that of “transpersonal” psychology. Known as “The Fourth Force” its practitioners study “transpersonal experiences and phenomena – their nature and implications” (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993a:197-198). This school of thought emphasizes the analysis of those experiences defined today by the term, “altered states of consciousness.” Here the boundaries of normal ego states are overcome in ways that resemble the experiences of meditators and mystics. Such experiences are variously referred to as “peak-experiences” as per Maslow’s work, or “transpersonal,” “mystical” and “spiritual” (Walsh and Vaughan 1993a:198). No longer considered confirmed signs of mental illness, practitioners of transpersonal psychology consider such intense experiences to be common to all people and see them as positive or desirable aspects of life necessary to a fully developed individual (Hastings 1992:198). The models of James and Maslow have been strengthened by the developments in humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, and it is now possible to reevaluate the accounts of medieval mystics as they struggled to explain their transformative experiences.

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**17** For more information see the web-site for the Association for Humanistic Psychology at [http://ahpweb.org/aboutahp/whatis.html](http://ahpweb.org/aboutahp/whatis.html).

Another group of therapists accept not only the existence of, but stress the necessity of, a sense of the transcendent for normal and healthy human experience. Borrowing the word “logo” from the Greek symbol for “meaning (Gould 1993: xii). practitioners of “logotherapy” insist that individuals must find meaning in their lives, meaning that extends to a belief in a source of strength greater than they themselves. This school of psychology was founded by Viktor Frankl who argued that all individuals have a religious or spiritual sense whether or not it is recognized as such. Furthermore Frankl posited that “this sense may break through unexpectedly even in cases of severe mental illness such as psychosis” (Frankl 1975:10-11).

Most noted for his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1984), Frankl’s approach is related to existentialism as well as phenomenology in that it goes “beyond all dogma and denominationalism as well as institutional religion” (Frankl 1975:141). The goal is to help individuals heal their spiritual lives (noōs) based upon the belief that individuals can find meaning in their lives despite desperate circumstances. In other words, logotherapists believe that when a person is unable to change their circumstances (as Frankl was in several Nazi concentration camps) they can still alter their attitudes and maintain their humanity as well as find meaning in their lives. Frankl’s personal experience of surviving life in several Nazi concentration camps shared some of the limitations of the women who were confined for life in conventual settings; as a result he also believed that spiritual benefits could result from isolation, cruelty, and hardship. Most medieval women religious had no choice in the matter of enclosure. Life held few options for them. The religious fashions of their era encouraged illness and suffering. It also promoted extreme obedience to ecclesiastical authority. Nevertheless, they appear to
have made the best of a difficult situation and in so doing a number of women did
achieve power and influence in their societies despite confinement and the restrictions put
upon women in general. Hildegard of Bingham, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila
lived conventual lifestyles and still managed fulfilling lives that included transformative
experiences. Marguerite Porete, Joan of Arc and Madame Jeanne Guyon were influenced
by the religious fashions of their periods although they did not take religious vows.
Despite restrictions on women, they too were very active individuals who claimed
experiences with the divine and contributed to the religious dialogue of their times. Like
Frankl, they transcended their difficulties.

Conclusions

The approach to mysticism suggested by James and Maslow is supported by more
recent developments in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology as well as
logotherapy. Given these newer perspectives, it is now possible to reevaluate the
accounts of medieval mystics as they struggled to explain their transformative
experiences. It is not outside the realm of the possible that men and women in the
medieval ages would desire to overcome the limitations of their cultures and develop
their full potentialities by following the models for achievement provided for them by
their enculturation processes. If a man or woman were to be inundated with constant
religious indoctrination and had leisure to pursue spiritual ideals, then they might
reasonably be expected to internalize the qualities of sainthood as defined in their milieu
and turn their ambitions and drives to achieving that which they would have been taught
was the highest possible earthly good as well as one’s only hope for eternal safety.
Although Maslow recognized that “the sources of growth and humanness are essentially within the human person” he also insisted that “a society or a culture can be either growth-fostering or growth-inhibiting” (Maslow 168:211). In this dissertation it is argued that the social environment as well as the development of major concepts about the place of women in the world shaped the lives, behaviors and writings of female mystics who found themselves in confining social situations yet struggled to create meaning for their existence within that sphere of reality. Cultural content changed over the centuries and the rights and status of religious women were affected by those changes. As a result, the behaviors of some female mystics might well be considered extreme if not neurotic and psychotic, but in their minds they sought the heroic heights of the human experience within the religious climates of their eras. Their power and lack thereof, as well as their manipulation of whatever influence was available to them, had consequences. How their world and its values developed over several millennia and the exercise of female agency within the context of that cultural milieu is examined in the following three chapters.
CHAPTER 3

THE WOMAN RELIGIOUS

*Religion reinforces the values of the society of which it is a part by elevating those values to sacred ones. The reflection of the social order in religious symbolism is illustrated dramatically in the portrayal of women in medieval writing (Richley H. Crapo, 2003:255).*

In the year 1522, two youngsters headed out together on a road leading away from Avila and toward the wars with the Moors. Their plan was to join the forces of Christian Crusaders and there to die as martyrs to the faith (Boulay 2004:5-6). Both had been raised on the stories of Christian heroes, those saints and martyrs who had achieved eternal salvation and reward through their lives and deaths, and now the children were resolved to emulate those honored souls. Not only would their own souls be saved, but also as martyrs, there was a good chance that their names would be revered for generations. Perhaps shrines would be built in their honor. Henceforth pilgrims from all over Europe might gather there for blessings. The poor, the powerless, the sick and the dying, all could be blessed through association with the miracle producing sites that would house relics of the children’s bodies and possessions (Young 2000:6) Such were the dreams and plans for the highest order of medieval success and self-actualization. One could do no better with one’s life.

The lad was eleven-year-old Rodrigo who, with his seven-year-old sister Teresa, were the children of the powerful and wealthy Don Alonso Sanchez y Cepeda and Dona Beatriz de Ahumada. Their Uncle Francisco found the children and returned them to
their parents without praise or honor. Undaunted, the children then built cells of stone in order to become religious hermits. Alas, the cells fell in on them. The little girl was then reduced to imaginary play as a prioress in a nunnery.¹ She eventually fulfilled her ambitions and is known today as Saint Teresa of Avila. Not only is she canonized as a saint, but she also has the distinction of being one of only three women honored as a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church.

**Heroic Hagiographies and Enculturated Consciousness**

Children in Teresa’s milieu grew up in a world filled with stories about spiritual heroes, both male and female. The records of their spiritual prowess were contained in hagiographic texts, stories of saints and martyrs that immortalized their lives. Not unlike myths, the hagiographies perpetuated a “religion’s master narrative” (Young 2000:19) and informed the “collective consciousness, the mental structures of society” (Schulenburg in Rose 1986:46). The tradition of male as well as female martyrs and saints, rich and poor, powerful and weak was strongly established in the cult of the saints.²

Saints and martyrs were heroes of the Dark and Middle Ages. They were the spiritual virtuosos of their cultures (Young 2000:5-6, 28). They set the standard of excellence in that they were considered “holy” and their lives sacred because of their

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extreme sacrifices, suffering, and even deaths as martyrs. Holy men and women were believed to be able to make miracles on occasion, and to be competent opponents against the powers of darkness. Yet for the most part, “Readers and audiences for saints’ lives, whether Latin or vernacular, were urged to wonder at, not imitate, the power and extravagant asceticism of holy men and women” (Bynum 2001:43). Those who sought similar missions ignored this counsel but for the most part the saints were highly valued by young and old alike in that the “holy” ones were perceived as personalized advocates in times of trouble. This was true not only of the middle and upper classes, but also by those who tilled the soil and labored in the villages (Ladurie 1979:279).

Hagiographies were a constant in the Christian faith and used purposefully as a means of inspiring upcoming generations as well as for adults who needed inspiration for their own lives. As such they were “extraordinarily popular in the Middle Ages. The stories were colorfully written with much action and adventure...The heroes and villains were as easy to spot as they are in old white-hat/black-hat cowboy movies” (Cook and Herzman 2004:50). Religious writers of high standing wrote or rewrote hagiographies including those of outstanding clerics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure. “They were often incorporated even into secular literary genres by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer” (Cook and Herzman 2004:50). All this was accomplished with little concern for accuracy\(^3\) and often a great deal of exaggeration which was used for emphasis (Cook and Herzman 2004: xiii). In most instances the lives of female saints were constructed by their male biographers with gendered agendas that varied according to the vicissitudes of

\(^3\) See Young 2000:15 for a comparison with the standards of biography as well as Cook and Herzman 2004:50.
later eras. Hagiographers paid no price for exaggeration and inaccuracies, nor did they write with the fears of plagiarism that mark modern historiography.4

Hagiographic stories “were not attempts to provide biographies of holy people but rather were attempts to edify, instruct in the virtues, and present idealized models for imitation” (Cook and Herzman 2004:50; Mooney, 1999:13-14). Parents as well as teachers and nurses for the children of the wealthy saw to it that the education of their offspring included the hagiographies and the writings of Church Patriarchs such as St. Jerome or St. Augustine.5 For many individuals the works of the great Christian apologists and theologians as well as the stories of saints were taught orally since it was “commonplace that young girls should not be taught to read or write unless they were destined to be nuns” (King 1991:88).

Yet many upper class women did read and write, and often they wrote well. Their letters are particularly informative. They generally avoided religious subjects and yet there are letters between priests and nuns, ladies and their confessors that indicate interest in and knowledge of religious and theological topics (McGuire 1989). The correspondence between Abelard and Heloise is the most famous of epistolary friendships. Thiebaux notes that literate women liked to spend time in libraries and often “commissioned for their own benefit explanatory books on, say, the Bible” (Thiebaux 1994: xii-xiii). There are paintings of women with their books and illustrations of women


as teachers (Fox 1985). Queens such as Amalasuntha wrote in order to preserve her
kingdom (Thiebaux 1994: xv) and female visionaries wrote to reprimand kings and
popes.

There are many examples of women who did receive formal educations. Teresa of
Avila was basically educated at home (Boulay 2004:10-11). Daughters of the rich were
frequently sent to convent schools as was the case with Madame Jeanne Guyon.
Hildegard of Bingen was sent to a monastery at the age of eight, there to be raised and
educated as an oblate (Maddocks 2001:17). Marguerite Porete's educational background
is unknown, but her book, the Mirror of Simple Souls reveals a woman who knew
classical literature as well as the scriptures (Wilson and Margolis 2004:761). 6

Children who did not attend religious institutions were trained in the faith at local
churches and by their families. The hagiographies were regularly part of the church
service and liturgical readings (McNamara 1992:3). The saintly milieu was transmitted
through daily practice of prayer and through the spoken word at chapels and in homes of
the rich and the poor (Gies and Gies 1978:70-71). Those who could not read were taught
about the saints and martyrs by means of sermons, pictures, and stained glass windows at
their churches, as was the case with Joan of Arc. By one means or another hagiographies
"forged a powerful didactic instrument for the training of new recruits, peculiarly suited
to bridge the gaps between classes and races" (McNamara 1992:12).

A child predisposed to dreams of excellence might well incorporate these values
into his or her personal processes of self-actualization, especially in as much as they were

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6 See Elissa Weaver in Rose 1986:173-175 for a description of conventual
curriculum for women. See also Gies and Gies 1978:64.
reinforced constantly throughout their young lives. It would be unusual for an impressionable child not to internalize some of those stories along with the values that they exemplified. It was recognized that only life-long inculcation and intense education could ensure the hope that women would be obedient and cling to their integritas. Education to that end began in infancy.

Setting the Spiritual Bar for Women

Women, and especially women religious, were expected to follow the submissive example of the Virgin Mary. For centuries many women made that effort while still finding ways to express themselves as individuals within their cultural milieux. Their self-actualizing processes took place within well-defined parameters that began for many in their youth. The world of women religious was influenced by many sources and one of the most influential was St. Jerome (Kramer 2004:167). An early Father of the Church, Jerome lived from about 342-420 C. E. He is most famous for having translated the Bible into the Latin version known as the Vulgate. Jerome counted many aristocratic Roman women among his friends. His correspondence with them became highly influential throughout Western Christendom for nearly fifteen hundred years.

One of his letters gave detailed instructions on how to raise a little girl who has been consecrated to God from the time of her birth. It set a standard for the rearing of a virgin to the glory of God and outlined the ideal educational process for centuries to come. The letter appears to have been written in the year 403 C. E. and was addressed to Laeta whose mother and grandmother were living in a monastery near the one he founded for men. The child's grandfather was the non-Christian Roman pontiff Albinus, but the
rest of the family had converted to Christianity. The little girl, Paula, was the first born of her mother and father. She had been long awaited and, considered to be the result of a miracle, her parents resolved to raise her up to the Lord.

Jerome’s letter is lengthy and its complete transcription is in Ross Shepard Kraemer’s seminal sourcebook, Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World (2004:167-177). The following points are taken from Kraemer:

1. A soul so consecrated “must have no understanding of unclean words, and no knowledge of the world’s songs. Its tongue must be steeped while still tender in the sweetness of the psalms” (170).

2. The child must be kept from boys and “even her maids and female attendants must be separated from worldly associates” (170).

3. All her play must be educational including learning her letters (170).

4. All her training must be positive and the little students with her must also be praised so that she will desire to learn too (170).

5. Paula must be trained in memorization from her earliest years by mastering the names of the apostles and patriarchs (170).

6. Her instructor should be humble but learned; her nurse must be well-spoken and not indulge in wearing expensive apparel or silliness. She “must not be intemperate, or loose, or given to gossip” (171).

7. The child must be kept simply dressed; no ornaments, pearls, rouge, or henna (171).

8. She must be baptized (172).

9. When she is older she may go to the temple with her parents; otherwise, “at no time let her go abroad, lest the watchmen find her that go about the city, and lest they smite and wound her take away from her the veil of her chastity, and leave her naked in her blood” (173).

10. Young Paula may have baths but her foods are to be simple, some meat is allowed as is a very little wine with her meals (173).

11. She is to hear no music, no “organ, pipe, lyre or cithern” (174).
12. The child is to memorize scriptures in Latin and Greek (174).

13. Her parents are to set perfect examples when she is present (174).

14. She is never to go to shrines or church without her mother (174).

15. She is not to have any special friend or confidant except perhaps an elderly virgin (174).

16. As for the child's schedule, it is based upon the rituals of the faith. She is to "rise at night to recite prayers and psalms; to sing hymns in the morning, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours to take her place in the line to do battle for Christ; and lastly, to kindle her lamp and to offer her evening sacrifice. In these occupations let her pass the day, and when night comes let it find her still engaged in them. Let reading follow prayer with her, and prayer again succeed to reading. Time will seem short when employed on tasks so many and so varied" (174).

17. Paula is to learn how to spin wool in all its facets (174).

18. Although the child is not to fast, she should always leave her meals hungry "and able on the moment to begin reading or chanting" (174-5).

19. The parents are not to travel without her (175).

20. She is to feel frightened if alone and not to "converse with people of the world or associate with virgins indifferent to their vows. Let her not be present at the weddings of your slaves and let her take no part in the noisy games of the household" (175).

21. Jerome insists that Paula is not to bathe with eunuchs or married women who may be pregnant. In fact, "For myself, however, I wholly disapprove of baths for a virgin of full age. Such an one should blush and feel overcome at the idea of seeing herself undressed. By vigils and fasts she mortifies her body and brings it into subjection. By a cold chastity she seeks to put out the flame of lust and to quench the hot desires of youth. And by a deliberate squalor she makes haste to spoil her natural good looks. Why, then, should she add fuel to a sleeping fire by taking baths?" (175)

22. Her treasures are to be religious manuscripts and the grammar thereof, not the decorations. She is to know the Psalter, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles and finally the various Epistles (175). Then she is to learn the other books of the Bible and finally the writings of several saints (176).
At the end of these admonitions, Jerome suggests the poor mother must indeed find it impossible to personally raise a consecrated child and still fulfill her duties as a married woman and as the manager of an elite household. Therefore Jerome counsels the parents to surrender their little one to “her grandmother and aunt...to be brought up in a monastery...It is better to regret her absence than to be forever trembling for her...Hand her over to Eustochium [the baby’s grandmother] while she is still but an infant and her every cry is a prayer for you” (Kramer 2004:176-177). Little Paula’s parents were to remember the barren Hannah who gave her child Samuel to the Lord and was later rewarded with five children of her own.

Jerome’s detailed outline for the upbringing of a virgin daughter presupposes a willing child, one who is submissive to the rigors of her training. Little Paula was an oblate as was Hildegard of Bingen who was given to the Church when she was eight years old. Hildegard was the tenth child of the family and therefore given as a tithe. Jerome’s letter also introduces us to the tremendous emphasis placed on the importance of female virginity in the fifth century and already a hallmark of the young religion. Chastity and female submissiveness were established as major criteria for female religious; indeed these qualities were promulgated as ideal attributes for all Christian women. Motivated by this indoctrination some women used their virtue to achieve a certain power in difficult situations, the power of saintliness.

Sacred Spaces and Revered Relics

Saints were venerated in literary genres, by the shrines built in their memory, and at fairs and calendrical events held in their honor (Ladurie 1979:279-280). Time itself
was sacred as well as secular in that time was marked not only by the cyclic round of
seasons, but by the ecclesiastical round of religious events, many of which honored a
multitude of saints (Ladurie 1979:270-280). At the shrines of the saints Heaven and Earth
were joined and mortals could seek aid and comfort through the intercession of these
revered souls (Brown 1981:4, 56-58, 60-63). Pilgrims traveled to shrines that existed
throughout Europe in the hope of being healed or to do penance. Most shrines contained
highly regarded relics of the saints. Contact with them was believed to be beneficial to
supplicants. The possession of “relics of saints” was a quotidian occurrence as was the
presence of local saints throughout European villages and towns. Cathleen Medwick
suggests “saints were as common as stones in Avila” (1999: xiv). The strength of this
belief was powerful indeed, especially in the centuries of crisis endured by those who
lived in medieval Europe.

To a civilization with such a dark cast of mind, saints were the ultimate
heroes. They had lived in the world but overcome its temptations through heroic
piety. Their valor bought them eternal life. They had passed the test, beaten the
system. Even their mortal remains were holy: a piece of hair or a sliver of bone
could mediate with the world beyond and help the soul get a grip on salvation.
King Philip himself had a massive collection of relics from around the world,
including a hair from Christ’s beard and the head of Saint Jerome (the king’s
collection boasted 103 heads in all). Relics were sanctity incarnate, points of the
spirit’s war with the flesh (Medwick 1999: xiv).

As a result of the intense cultural presence of sainted men and women in every
youngster’s upbringing, it would be very difficult for an impressionable child not to
internalize some of those stories along with the values they exemplified. For those who
wished to achieve heroic stature, retirement from secular life offered a route to a social
role that was highly valued in the Middle Ages. It was an open road to greater
possibilities of self-actualization that provided greater intellectual and personal freedom
for the development of talents and leadership capabilities that were too often closed to
women in marriage (Gies and Gies 1978:64). Catherine of Siena and Hildegard both
chose religious lifestyles during their early childhoods, as did many other women. 7

**Historical Traditions of Sainted Women**

Over the centuries various traditions developed honoring outstanding female
religious, and as a result several venues to sainthood were available to women. As highly
honored as martyrdom and monasticism were, they were not the only roads to spiritual
success. Females achieved the status of sainthood through several other venues including
Jones classifies them into eight categories. Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena
are among those listed as “visionaries.” Jones includes St. Agnes (? 292-305) among
“martyrs,” Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) with other “collaborators,” and St. Margaret of
Scotland (c. 1046-1093) as an example of dedicated “wives and mothers.” The
“penitents” include St. Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297) while St. Odilia (? d. 720)
represents those who became “outcasts” for their faith. There are also women like Hilda
of Whitby (614-680) who are noted as spiritual “innovators” and Anne-Marie Javouhey
(1779-1851) an exemplar of “missionaries” (Jones 1999: v, vi). The particular women in
Jones’ review span the centuries from the time of St. Helena (c. 250-330) to that of St.
Katharine Drexel (1858-1955). The common attributes of these women include
charismatic gifts that generally appear early in life. They also had leadership abilities and

7 However this was not always the case. Chapter 5 deals with the conditions of
girls and women forced into conventual confinement. See Margaret L. King 1991:86 and
were altruistic. Miracles were attributed to them. They mastered the ability to make personal sacrifices and accepted suffering that even transcended death if necessary.

A few of the earliest and most notable Christian women are those who lived and knew Jesus including his mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Elizabeth and Anne. They were followed by Justina (d. 64), Priscilla (fl. 1st c.), St. Anastasia (fl. 54-68) and St. Basilissa (fl. 54-68). Early converts include Felicitas of Rome (d. 162?), St. Helen (c. 250-330), St. Agnes (d. c. 304), St. Macrina the Younger (c. 330-379), St. Monica (332-387), St. Mary of Egypt (? 344-421), St. Olympias (? 361-408), and St. Pelagia the Penitent (fifth century).

Some dedicated Christian women were the friends or relatives of early Church Fathers. Such is the case of Paula, her daughter, Eustochium and granddaughter, Laeta. St. Jerome’s (c. 342-420 C. E.) letter #107 to Laeta establishes his correspondence with Paula in particular and his admiration for her (Kraemer 2004:167). Paula and Eustochium provide an example of Christians who established some of the first monasteries for women thereby escaping from the world and its distractions in order to dedicate their lives to their faith. Jerome also expressed high regard for the ascetic and theologian, Marcella (d. 410) (Wilson and Margolis 2004:881). St. Olympias (c. 365-408) founded a monastery next to the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Swan 2001:120).

Early Christian women were often drawn to the ascetic life, either at home or in the deserts of the Middle East. They set the standard for asceticism as another form of sacrifice, one that demanded virginity or at least celibacy as well as poverty and

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dedication in order to emulate the life of Christ. The fourth century ascetic, Pelagia the Actress, also known as Pelagia the Penitent, fled to Jerusalem to live the life of an ascetic recluse (Kramer 2004:26-40). Little is known of other ascetic Christian women long called “Desert Mothers” (Chryssavgis 2003:89; Swan 2001:5-19). However, where there are records of their lives or sayings we learn of Amma Sycletica c. 380-c. 460 (Chryssavgis 2003:29; Swan 2001:43-63); Amma Theododra (Chryssavgis 2003:66; Swan 2001:63-70), Amma Dionysia (Chryssavgis 2003:129-130) and Amma Sarah. The latter was especially recognized by her contemporaries for her spiritual strength and asceticism. Unafraid to mingle with the Desert Fathers, she felt free to reproach them and said, “It is I who am a man; and you are like women!” (Chryssavgis 2003:91; Swan 2001:37-41).

Amma Sarah’s harsh reproach is reflective of a pattern in the male-female relationship of early and late medieval Christianity. Women were perceived by men to be the weaker gender, not only physically but also morally. There were occasional exceptions to this view but even complements were couched in terms of female inferiority. When Theodoret of Cyrrhus (fifth century C. E.) honored the desert mothers over men, he insisted that “they are worthy of still greater praise, when, despite having a weaker nature, they display the same zeal as the men and free their sex from its ancestral disgrace” (Kramer 2004:404).

Rosemary Radford Ruether agrees that a woman could only prove herself worthy if she put off her femininity and became as men were before the fall caused by Eve’s disobedience - in other words, cease functioning as women. “Redeemed life is perfected spiritual masculinity. Women can become ‘perfect,’ whole, and spiritual, only by
rejecting everything about themselves that, both culturally and biologically, was identified as specifically female” (Ruether 1998:30). Absolute purity in mind as well as body made possible a quality known as integritas (Schulenburg 1986:31). The critical factor was in the protection of one’s virginity. Newman asserts that “Virginity, then, was the first and most consistent means by which a religious woman might not only equal but surpass her brethren” (Newman 1995:6).

*Virginity, Valor and Martyrdom*

Martyrdom and asceticism were frequent elements of saintly careers. Indeed, they were the most noted means whereby females could become “transcendent women” (McNamara 1985:104). Martyrdom and asceticism both represented forms of death, the first being an actual physical death, the second a death relative to the ways of the world. Female Christians pursued both paths to spiritual victory from the earliest days of the faith. *The Encyclopedia of Women in World History* lists over two hundred female saints in Eastern and Western Christian traditions as well as some Islamic mystics (Commire and Klezmer 2002. vol.17:522-523). Among those saints are the martyrs.

The names of women martyrs who died under horrific circumstances are part of the Christian record. For example, the Carthaginians, Perpetua and her maidservant, Felicity, are best known because of the diary kept by Perpetua. They were martyred in 203 A.D. (Madigan 1998:13-15). Eusebius (c. 263-c.340) testified of the torture and death of a woman named Blandia in the persecutions of 177 C. E. (Kramer 2004:348-356). Eusebius also related information about a certain Potamiena who lived during the third century C. E. She and her mother, Marcella, nobly endured “tortures that were
terrible and fearful to relate, boiling pitch being poured slowly and little by little over
different parts of the body from head to toe” (Kramer 2004:368-369).

From the very earliest centuries of the church, some Christian women chose death
rather than lose their chastity because they believed they had consecrated themselves to
Christ. The willingness to die rather than marry or be raped became a powerful theme
among female Christian martyrs that lasted well into the Renaissance. St. Ambrose (340-
397) mentioned a young girl named Pelagia who lived in the fourth century. She became
an early exemplar of the philosophy of “death before dishonor” theme because she chose
to jump to her death rather than lose her virginity (Jones 1999:157). St. Catherine of
Alexandria was another virgin whose legend asserts that she chose death rather than
marriage. A very popular saint in the Middle Ages, and one of the voices heard by Joan
of Arc, Catherine’s remains are said to rest in the famous monastery located at the foot of
Mt. Sinai. St. Margaret was a second, and equally important, martyr for virginity. She
was also highly regarded in medieval times, and was one of the voices referred to by Joan
of Arc. Joan, herself, wore men’s clothing in order to preserve her chastity. She did so
because she understood it to be essential for her credibility and the successful completion
of her mission (Jewkes and Landfield 1964:39, 51).

In her article on the Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial
Mutilation, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg explored Christianity’s “disproportionate
admiration for female virginity” (1986:31). Schulenburg found that throughout Christian
history, and especially among women religious, suicide was a highly regarded
preventative against rape (1986:36, 38). Determined women also practiced “sacrificial
self-mutilation” and disfigurement in the hopes of making themselves unappealing to
their would-be rapists and thereby protecting their bodies from defilement by men. Noses were cut off, faces lacerated. The result saved them from rape but they were generally murdered instead which then placed the women in the company of saints and martyrs (Schulenburg 1986:40, 47).

In the case of actualized rape, female survivors were often held accountable for their own disgrace in as much as there seemed to be a subtle accusation of their complicity in the act given their sensual natures (Newman 1995:25). A woman who had been raped by raiding barbarians could no longer be held in the same high regard as that of her undefiled sisters. Fortunately, if she was sufficiently shamed, the soul was considered intact even if the body was defiled (Schulenburg 1986:36-37; Mate 1998:5). Nevertheless, the victims of rape were generally “ostracized; they no longer dared to compare themselves to virgins, nor were they to be considered as widows” (Schulenburg 1986:37). Once again, they would have to prove their integritas over a long period of time in order to be considered worthy of a place in the religious community.

Monastic and Anchoritic Sanctity

When Christianity became the state religion, there were fewer opportunities to die for the faith. Monastic devotion became recognized as another form of martyrdom. The sacrifices demanded by a monastic life enhanced a woman’s chance to achieve her spiritual goals. In a sense, enclosure from the world symbolized a “death” to the actual world. This lifestyle choice offered possibilities as well as challenges that required rigorous self-discipline but it was one of the few options that extended rewards in this life and in the next. Professor Bonnie Wheeler states that
To most twelfth-century West Europeans, as far as we can tell, the monastic life was the most heroic lifestyle, more heroic even than the calling of the holy warrior. Worldly people of power and wealth, definitely including some of the most sinful of them, seem to have desired association with monastics, not just for their prayers but often for their advice and consent on worldly and spiritual matters (Wheeler 2002:30).

The desire to achieve the heroic goals of Christianity may help explain why Wheeler argues that as improbable as it may seem to modern minds, during the Middle Ages a “high percentage of the population became monks and nuns” (Wheeler 2002:30). Jo Ann McNamara concurs and explains that, “Those who embraced the celibate life were deliberately and self-consciously entering a new social structure in which some women, by Clement’s definitions, ceased to be women. What, then could they be? They could be classificatory men” (McNamara 1985:104) and this could best be achieved by martyrdom or by living lives of great sanctity by means of a pseudo death.

Death by “sacrificial sanctity” is illustrated in its most extreme form by the lives of anchorites and anchoresses. Both male anchorites and female anchoresses sacrificed their lives in a fashion that made them symbols of the living dead. Anchoritic practice was based upon the example of John the Baptist and was an extreme form of the hermetic lifestyle that was practiced in the early centuries of Christianity, particularly in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. Anchoritic solitaries lived lives that were even more secluded than those of hermits. They chose to live enclosed in one or two room cells that were generally attached to churches in towns or villages (Gilchrist 1994:177-181). For example, Theodoret testified of two Syrian Christian women who espoused the anchoritic way of life. Marana and Cyra sealed themselves into a small enclosure next to their house and never left it for forty-two years. In so doing these women were believed to have overcome the basic evils of their gender, and to have relinquished the entrapments of the
flesh. They became what Barbara Newman refers to as the “virile woman” or a woman who has become a male through her sacrifice and unpolluted life style (Newman 1993:4). St. Jerome stated the requirement succinctly. “As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from a man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man” (Newman 1993:4).

Female anchorites found various ways to become dead to the secular world and all its temptations by means of a life-long symbolic death. In the preface to Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works (1991), Benedicta Ward notes that individuals chose different degrees of solitude, but one facet of their vocation was a constant everywhere. “Almost every anchorite shared at least one primary definition of their vocation: that their way of life was a living death” (Ward 1991:16). She describes the ritual that preceded their enclosure and notes that “at the climax of which the officiating priest administers extreme unction to the postulant, and recites the prayers for the dying as she or he enters the anchorhouse - never, in theory, to leave it alive - through a door which is then blocked from the outside” (Ward 1991:16). This abandonment to the extremes of cold and hardship, poverty and solitude were referred to as the “desert” or being in a “prison.” The scriptural justification for this practice was based upon the words of St. Paul who declared that conversion to Christianity was symbolic of death to your own being and a new existence in Christ (Colossians 3:3 and Galatians 2:20).

According to Ward, the meaning of the anchoritic life is that it was “meant to embody these spiritual transformations in a highly physical and public way” (Ward 1991:16). Anchoritic practice reached its apex during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In
general, more women than men chose this form of sanctity, but it appears never to have been practiced by more than a few hundred highly regarded individuals at any one time.9

**Spiritual Service and Self-actualizing Lay Women**

Whereas monastic life generally provided the security necessary to preserve feminine virginity it was not an option for all women. Those forced to marry or not temperamentally suited to the ascetic life found other venues of service within their family circles and communities. The records of early Christian matrons reveal facets of their lives that continued to be practiced throughout the Dark Ages and well into the Middle Ages. First, the women cared for the family tombs and sepulchers that were originally Roman patrician sites for familial feasts and rituals (Brown 1981:26-27). Even in antiquity, “The chapels and tombs of sainted relatives were transformed into focal points for family prestige” (McNamara 1992:8). From the earliest period of Christian ascendancy women could appear at the cemeteries that contained the family tombs as well as at shrines that honored various saints and martyrs. In this setting, women took on a public role. Not only did they visit and care for others at those revered places, but they “founded shrines and poorhouses in their own names and were expected to be fully visible as participants in the ceremonials of the shrines” (Brown 1987:46).

Once Christianity became the established state religion, hagiographers recorded the lives and works of a new form of saintly woman. These were the powerful mothers, wives and sisters of emperors and kings. For example, St. Helena (c.249-329), the mother

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of the Emperor Constantine, is credited with influencing his conversion to Christianity. Helena traveled on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in quest of the Cross and there she officially “identified” many of the sacred sites of Christendom (Lawler 2001:73; Butler 1995:284-285).

The female saints of the Dark Ages continued the charitable practices of earlier Christian women. They endowed and served at religious shrines. They mediated on behalf of the poor, the stranger, the sick and the dying. Even as male rulers practiced forms of patronage, powerful women viewed charity “as an adjunct of noble lineage” (McNamara 1992:8). Many withdrew to conventual lives as soon as it became possible. “Thus Merovingian Gaul produced a new model of sanctity: the great monastic lady, withdrawn from worldly power and worldly comfort but not from the world’s misery and strife” (McNamara 1992:8). These women were masters of hospitality and credited with miracles among the poor and suffering. “Miracles assured the reader that a sainted woman was a powerful friend and a dangerous enemy, even against armed and violent men” (McNamara 1992:9). Their authority lay in the fact that they exercised influence in two dimensions; the world of the spirit and the political powers of their communities (Young 2000:20).

Women established monasteries for several reasons. There they could protect their inheritances as well as “liberate themselves from the violent secular world” (McNamara 1992:10) wherein their virginity was more vulnerable as were their lives. While ostensibly inactive in the dangerous secular world, they were quite capable of protecting their wealth even while they lived their lives in monastic poverty. They did this by transferring their lands and valuables such as their dowries, by creating new
monasteries, or by bequeathing their wealth to established houses of God. The Frankish queen, Radegund (567-568), forsook her marriage to Clothar I and established a monastery at Poitiers where she continued a life of good works and spiritual devotion (Swan 2001:148-149). “In the monastic life, they could use family wealth to create prestige on earth and favor in heaven [and] preserve that same wealth through a line of related abbesses” (McNamara 1992:8).

The exercise of earthly power by religious women was an exception to the natural social state of women. This exception was founded upon the principle that “their rejection of the carnal act made it possible for them to do many things that most laywomen could not: swear legal oaths, own property, manage their own farms, even broker political treaties and work miracles” (Bitel 1996:168). The decision to live conventual life-styles did not exclude hard work for the establishments required constant financing, maintenance, and provisioning of the needs for the inhabitants therein. The presence of relics required care and drew needy pilgrims to the establishment. The poor in the communities added to the requirements of aid and hospitality expected of the women religious. Moreover, the women also “worked hard to feed, clothe, and keep house for other ecclesiastics. They were muimmi or nurturers to abbots and saints” (Bitel 1996:169). Lisa Bitel argues that the women chose “Jesus and his clerical representatives, rather than husbands” (Bitel 1996:169).

It was the status of nobility that lent authority to the powers of many female religious until their original privileges became restricted over time. Abbesses were known to exercise their powers in a number of ways. In Castile, the abbess at Las Helgas “held her own general chapter, attended by six abbots, three bishops and seven abbesses, and in
1210 actually assumed the functions of a priest” (Gies and Gies 1978:88). Eva M. Synek observes that “The abbess of Las Helgas was granted full jurisdiction, in temporal as well as in spiritual affairs...she nominated pastors, gave faculties for celebrating the Eucharist, and preached and heard confession in the abbey...It was she who had to decide upon marriages and ordinations, censures and dispensations” (Synek 2000:606-607).

St. Brigid of Kildare was also a powerful abbess as were Hilda of Whitby and the abbess of Quedlinburg (Synek 2000:606). One of the most famous and influential abbesses was St. Brigitta, a fourteenth century abbess who supervised a double monastery in Sweden (Synek 2000:607-608). She, along with Catherine of Siena worked diligently to end the conflict over the authentic pope during the Avignon Papacy.

Abbesses with the rank of nobility ordered military forces into the field if necessary. The abbesses of royal nunneries in Saxony who reigned over vast tracts of land reached “the apogee of [their] authority in the tenth and eleventh centuries. As barons of the king they summoned their own armed knights to war, and they held their own courts. The abbesses of Quedlinburg and Gandersheim struck their own coins” (Gies and Gies 1978:65). In 1266 the feisty Abbess Odette de Pougy led “an armed party that drove off the workmen and demolished the work” (Gies and Gies 1978:89) at a Pope’s project that was being imposed upon her property. She armed to oppose the Pope again two years later. This time her entire convent was excommunicated, but she did not back down and the Pope’s church “was not built until long after her death” (Gies and Gies 1978:89). The fact that abbesses had the power to marshal men at arms reflects their responsibility for the safety of the nuns in their care. Periods of warfare required provisions for defense of both property and virginity (Schulenburg 1986:59).
Motivation and Spiritual Self-actualization

Not all women religious were afforded such power, and male authority eventually superseded much of it in the second millennium. Still, enough women proved themselves to be such excellent administrative examples that their successful exercise of authority was obvious to young women who sought venues for their own self-development and the actualization of their own abilities. Thousands of women sought the goal of religious excellence given that The Encyclopedia of Women in World History lists over two hundred recognized female saints in Eastern and Western Christian traditions as well as some Islamic mystics (Commire and Klezmer 2002. vol. 17:522-523).

How many other women went to the limits of this self-actualizing model is unknown. However many there were, it is true that the Church provided a very structured means whereby determined women could establish their own life-styles and seek “their own spiritual self-realization” (McNamara 1992:10). Bitel suggests that the “women themselves might have viewed their aims and lives not as rejections or revisions of traditional social roles, but as a series of positive choices” (Bitel 1996:169). McNamara stresses the importance of the women’s goals for their own survival, spiritual lives, and self-actualization. “The saintly abbesses in our stories remained astonishingly free to invent their own way of life through the application and interpretation of rules written by men” (McNamara 1992:11). One example of this independence is that of St. Lioba, the eighth century Abbess of Bischofsheim. She is credited as having been the first among other German nuns and abbesses who became outstanding intellectuals (Gies and Gies 1978:66-67). Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila followed in her tradition.
opportunities to learn and to develop one's intellect and talents provided valid reasons for a woman to seek a life in a monastic venue. There were other motivational factors as well (Wilson and Margolis 2004:69). Virginity was more likely to be preserved in a conventual setting, thus increasing the chances of achieving salvation. One did not have to be married to an oppressive or despised husband. The dangers of childbirth were avoided. There were ever-present reminders of other women who had made their lives valuable to society, women who had achieved a certain degree of fame in their own right. On occasion female religious exercised considerable power as "patron saints." They interceded with God on behalf of individuals and their communities.\textsuperscript{10} The memory of Catherine of Siena has continually been elevated to the position of patron saint for various political regimes, a process that will be explored later in this dissertation (Parsons 2004:861-885).

Finally, most importantly, the spiritual life-style provided favorable circumstances wherein one might focus on service to others and on the world of the spirit. McNamara insists that we must not just focus on the women's opportunities for status. "It would be foolish to become so fascinated by their structural position that we forget their own agenda" (McNamara 1992:10). That agenda included a rigorous life of poverty, chastity, humility and obedience to ecclesiastical authority (Magli 2003:44). By this means a woman could overcome the weaknesses attributed to her gender and attain the stature of a "male" or that of a "virile woman" (Newman 1995:3-4). It was the revered St. Jerome who most succinctly expressed this opportunity and challenge. "As long as a woman is

\textsuperscript{10} Cook and Herzman 2004:140, 156, 174; Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:2-3, 5, 24, 87).
for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man" (Newman 1995:4).

The virile woman expressed herself as either a martyr or “Iron Virgin,” as was the case with Perpetua and Felicitas, or as a “Demure Virgin.” In the latter case her worth was established by means of an exemplary lifetime of chastity and obedience (Blamires 1992:13). Early church fathers categorized women in terms of their virginity. Three “tiers of perfection” existed for the women, “with faithful wifehood at the bottom, and chaste widowhood and virginity higher up the scale” (Blamires 1992:13).

For women religious their agenda to prove their worthiness was rigorous. It required total dedication to God’s service and included life-long virginity if possible, sacrifice, and suffering as well as service to others both on earth and in purgatory. Indeed, women contrived to suffer and glorified in it in order to join Christ in His effort to save souls in purgatory. One of the first recorded instances of this practice was that of the martyred St. Perpetua who was executed in Carthage during the state persecutions of Christians during the early third century. She confided in her diary that she was sacrificing her life with her family and the opportunity to raise her dear infant but hoped to join Christ in purgatory in order to save the souls therein (Malone 2000:106-112).

Newman sees this concept as allowing enclosed women to perform in the role of an apostle, an apostle to the dead if not the living. She argues that “in their apostolate to the suffering dead a continuation of their traditional role as mourners and a channel for their gifts of visionary outreach and vicarious suffering” (Newman 1995:11). In their belief that their prayers had potency they found “yet another way to transform the pain of
the lives, self-inflicted or otherwise, into free and constructive acts of love” (Newman 1995:11). This the women did by means of sacrificing their own health and comfort and enduring what they perceived to be Hell in order to consecrate their lives and rescue others from damnation (Hollywood 2002:242).

One extreme case is that of a Christina (1150-1224) who lingered in icy water or in the tombs of the dead, and even rolled herself in fire or entered vats of boiling water in order to perform acts she believed would help her relieve souls from purgatory. Hollywood suggests that as pathological as this all seems, Christina provided “a theatrical depiction of both purgatorial suffering and post-resurrection bodily lightness and joy, thereby teaching through her deeds” (Hollywood 2002:242).

Although not as noticeably dramatic in their sacrifices, many other religious women willingly practiced self-inflicted distress such as extreme fasting or self-flagellation. The motivation for these behaviors was complex and based upon the symbolic meanings of both the body and food. Caroline Walker Bynum has provided a detailed analysis of these practices in her 1987 seminal work, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women. Women religious were known to rejoice in their hunger, pain and illnesses for they perceived these afflictions as opportunities to draw closer to God by means of suffering. According to Rebecca Garber, “The suffering of innocent flesh was long considered a means of redemption, of one’s self, or of others in imitation of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity” (Garber 2003:99). This concept reached a point wherein some saw illness “as a type of active labor; illness as labor is gendered feminine” (Garber 2003:99).
There were other rewards for this redemptive effort as well. Through ascetic practices, obedience, poverty, service, submissiveness and suffering one might achieve sainthood. Women could overcome their innate feminine weaknesses and achieve salvation through the *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ’s life (Newman 1993:3, 180; McAvoy 2003:15). One might even experience the divine, or *unio mystica* (Kroll and Bachrach. 2005:112; Hollywood 2002:70, 113). This was the direction indicated by Jesus to his followers at his last meal with them, the Passover Supper, as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17. In John 17:20-26 Jesus focused upon “oneness;” oneness with Him and with His Father in Heaven. It is within this state of oneness that a woman could find the perfection promised by Jesus. Fasting was perceived as an especially efficacious means to achieve that union with God (Bynum 1987:132-3).

The religious vocation was often seen as a divine calling and came to many women at an early age. Bynum notes that the determination to abstain from sex accompanied the calling, indeed, “A disproportionate percentage of female saints were certain of their commitment to virginity before age eight” (Bynum 1987:24). Hildegard began having visions of light when she was only three years old and took her vows at the age of fourteen (Newman 1987:7-8). Catherine of Siena’s first visions occurred when she was only five or six years old (Flinders 1993:107). She vowed to live a virginal life at the age of seven and opposed all her parents’ efforts to coerce her into marriage (Cavallini 1980:4). Joan of Arc began hearing her guiding voices when she was thirteen years old. Tradition suggests that she also refused to marry despite her parents’ wishes (Pernoud 1982:30).
Throughout the long centuries, one great saint stood above all others, and that saint was Mary, the mother of Jesus. This woman did not lock herself in an anchoritic cell in order to avoid the ways of the world, or waste away by means of fasting, or harm herself physically, or suffer martyrdom, or willingly surrender a child. Nevertheless, with the single exception of Christ himself, Mary was the most revered and possibly the greatest exemplar to medieval men and women. Although not official church doctrine until the nineteenth century, the cult of the Virgin was a constant reminder of the highest ideals for those who sought role models in the realm of the spirit.

_The Salvatrix: Mary and Martyrs, Saving Souls_

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was highly revered even in the early centuries of Christianity. Her virtue and submissiveness to the will of God was seen to have broken the curse caused by Eve’s disobedience to the commandment not to partake of the forbidden fruit. St. Jerome himself (c. 342-420) explained that “Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman” (Blamires 1992:76). Indeed, “Jerome argues that, whereas under the Old Law celibacy was confined to ‘sons of prophets’, the transition from Eve to Mary has inaugurated a glorious new era of female virginity” (Blamires 1992:75).

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as it continued throughout the Early Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Mary is the supreme saint and ranks higher than any angel (Wilson and Margolis 2004:617-626). It is Mary who succors those who appeal to her for influence.
with the divine. There were times during the Middle Ages when her popularity “rivaled that of Christ” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:617). The high esteem in which Mary was and continues to be held is encapsulated in artistic images. Her acts are expounded in literature, her praises sung in religious music. Hildegard of Bingen built upon Marian concepts to such a point that Mary “figures as gracious mother and even savior (salvatrix) [author’s Italics] of the Church” (Newman 1987:188). Wilson and Margolis note Mary’s importance during the Middle Ages as the “recipient and vessel of the hopes and prayers of those who worship her” (2004:617). The Virgin “was elevated to an extremely powerful position, and that further, despite the fact that she is a woman, her authority and her right to exercise it are simply never questioned” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:617).

Mary earned her position in Roman Christianity by means of two qualities, her submissiveness to the will of God and her virginity. She was a powerful cultural exemplar and it was especially important to follow her example of virginity by the practice of the imitatio Mariae (Newman 1995:45, 71, 198). Mary was perceived to have been a virgin and so untainted by sin that some argued she herself was the product of an Immaculate Conception (Wilson and Margolis 2004:618). Her virginity permeated medieval values and women were expected to follow her example for the honor of the family and especially for religious reasons. Barbara Newman strongly argues that the “virile woman and the womanChrist ideal” were dependent upon a woman’s ability to remain chaste and untainted by any sexual contact (Newman 1995:7). Furthermore, women were to practice integritas, total purity in both body and mind (Rose 1986:31). Integritas stood as the criteria for true consecration.
Non-virgins who “entered the religious life...had to seek tortuous routes indeed if they wished to seek holiness” (Newman 1995:9). The quest for holiness induced behaviors that resulted in some women “abandoning small children or even acquiescing in the children’s deaths in order to take religious vows” (Newman 1995:10). In this way the “renunciation of her children becomes a form of holy poverty, enabling her to identify with the grief of Mary at the Cross” (Newman 1995:10). Indeed true motherhood “does not consist in giving birth or even caring for a child, but in grieving over one” (Newman 1995:83).

The English mystic, Margery Kempe (c. 1373-c.1440) was able to walk away from her husband and the rearing of fourteen children in order to pursue her goal as a Bride of Christ and thus imitate Mary’s chastity (McAvoy 2003:3, 18, 35). Her actions were not unique but were a variation on the theme of married women who forsook their children to please God or to placate difficult husbands as was the case in the literary classic, Griselda. Here was the culturally accepted “heroine who sacrifices her children not for God, but for her husband” (Newman 1995:10). In either case, it was in emulation of Mary’s example of obedience. First, the women demonstrated submissiveness in similitude of the willing acquiescence of Mary to the will of God. Second, sacrifice of a dear child was offered as was the case with Christ’s mother. Finally, mortal women also grieved as Mary had for the death of her son. A path to holiness for once carnally active women did exist, and it was comprised of two parts. One was by means of martyrdom through the sacrifice of a woman’s children and motherhood. Second, in order to acquire holiness, such a woman must follow a life of chastity throughout the remainder of her life and spend her days in good works.
Summation

Sacrifices like those of mothers who relinquished their children for monastic celibacy were idealized in medieval culture and thereby influenced the lives of young girls as they chose their life-paths. It is no wonder then that Teresa and her brother set out to fight and die against the Moors. The actions of Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila and Jeanne Guyon may also prove more rational to modern sensibilities when later examined within the light of their own cultural perspectives and personal standards of excellence, views which were engendered by the traditions of hagiography and the cult of the saints as well as the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Young women were provided with the examples of hundreds of successful females, including anchoresses, martyrs, and the mother of Jesus. It was natural to emulate the heroes of the culture. These role models provided pragmatic means to self-actualization that were highly respected in their communities.

A number of benefits have been offered to explain why thousands of medieval women chose a religious life-style despite the challenges of this vocation. As spiritually active individuals they were given the opportunity to reach the highest standards of excellence within the medieval milieu. By this means women could exercise a certain autonomy and safety lacking in marriage. Integritas was a real possibility. They could develop talents and intellectual abilities rarely offered to them in a conjugal setting. They could practice forms of poverty, silence, sacrifice and above all the virginity that would prove their “femina virilis” or “virago” (Newman 1995:3). As spiritual leaders they achieved a degree of power and influence that was rare for women in their societies. They were given time and opportunity to practice the imitatio Mariae as well as the imitatio
Christi. In due time they might secure their eternal souls and they could even achieve *unio mystica*. This was self-actualization of the highest order (Newman 1995:121).

Each of the women in this study was well aware of these opportunities and responsibilities. Their lives took different routes according to their social class, education, and the demands of their eras. Hildegard, Catherine and Teresa were reformers within the Roman Catholic Church. Marguerite was a mystic who insisted upon a personal relationship with God that made her impervious to the demands of the state or the Church. Joan became a warrior in response to the call of her voices and visions. Jeanne Guyon risked her freedom as well as all her wealth and influence in order to achieve and teach others how to attain a constant *unio mystica*.

Indeed, there were powerful reasons why women chose a religious vocation. However spiritual devotees had much to overcome beyond their own individual physical, mental, emotional and spiritual limitations. For all women were daughters of Eve, and as such stood condemned as morally weak, dangerous creatures capable of destroying the souls of men. The only hope of mankind lay in efforts to control feminine powers. It is to those strategies we now turn and the very real possibility that women religious were also motivated to transcend the misogynist perceptions that permeated medieval culture, pejorative prejudices existing in both praxis and clichés that created a constant undercurrent, "a kind of ground bass – always present" (Newman 1995:2) in their lives.
CHAPTER 4

TRANSCENDING THE "INFERIOR OTHER"

"[Woman] you live here on earth as the world's most imperfect creature: the scum of nature, the cause of misfortune, the source of quarrels, the toy of the foolish, the plague of the wise, the stirrer of hell, the tinder of vice, the guardian of excrement, a monster in nature, an evil necessity, a multiple chimera, a sorry pleasure, Devil’s bait, the enemy of angels. " (From Jacques Olivier’s 1617 pamphlet, An Alphabet of Women’s Imperfections, p. 1 as quoted in Aughterson 1995:41).

In the Western world the nature of womankind has been the object of discussion for far more than two millennia. Women who sought to achieve lofty goals rose above the continual drum of negative condemnation and challenged the perceptions of the age. Powerful and influential men argued that women were simply incomplete males and as a result inferior to men. Woman’s inferiority was made evident by her menses, a manifestation of nature or the Devil that was believed to pollute men and therefore rendered menstruating women taboo (Morris 1973:2). Woman’s mind was also considered inferior as made evident by mythological traditions that included Pandora and Eve. Finally, women were believed to be temptresses who lured men to their ruination (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:43-48).

The perception of woman’s guilt for initiating all human sin and her basically "flawed" nature is the subject of this chapter. The discussion is pertinent because it sets the stage upon which self-actualizing women contended not only for their own personal fulfillment and self-respect, but for honor in their communities as well. To that end the chapter begins with an examination of the nature-nurture debate from the anthropological
viewpoint of several modern theorists. Second, it briefly explores the “lesser” position of women in societies that reach back to the lands of the Fertile Crescent wherein foundational perceptions of women evolved into the Judeo-Christian traditions. Third, the latter constructs of woman’s place found support within Greek philosophy and Roman social mores, the milieu from which Medieval Christianity evolved. The fourth portion of this overview continues with the efforts of Celtic and Germanic tribes to constrain and control women and their generative powers. These cultures also influenced the perceptions of the rights of women in medieval societies, especially in the folklore that dealt with the healing arts and witchcraft (Magli 2003).

Moving from cultural developments per se, the fifth section surveys several influential literary works that illustrate aspects of the “ideal” medieval woman. The phenomenon of Courtly Love is related to the idealization of women, one that was eventually condemned by the Church. It is followed by instances of literature wherein women were defended for there were men and women who stood against the crowd and argued powerfully for a more just and realistic evaluation of women.

**Nature, Nurture, Sin and Salvation: Does Woman Have a Soul?**

For thousands of years, sages, theologians and philosophers of many cultures pondered the riddle of woman’s nature and physiology. Even distant clerics in Gaul debated the question of womankind’s humanity (Bitel, 1996:18-19). The pollutional factor that accompanied menstruation rendered women taboo in many cultures (Morris 1973:105-112). Ian MacLean (1980) provides an extensive review of the arguments that dealt with the riddle of womankind from the Greek philosophers to theologians and
philosophers of the Renaissance. The differences between men and women gave rise to many questions that were discussed though the ages past and were of keen interest to the citizens of Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

MacLean found some of the questions that concerned women’s nature included the following. Because woman is obviously physically different from men, is she the same species as man? If mankind represents the soul, and woman the body was she really a human being with a soul, or was she a monster? Is she merely a defective or incomplete version of a male? Will she be resurrected? If so, will she take the form of a man or as a woman? After all, I Corinthians 15:24 suggests women “must be changed into men in order to be equal to men” and again, Ephesians 4:13 states that “the saved are resurrected as perfect males.” And finally, does woman even have a capacity for moral virtue? (MacLean 1980:12, 14, 27, 30-31, 51, 70-71).

The treatment of women by medical practitioners and those of the law depended upon the answers to these and similar questions. Medical discoveries of the Renaissance helped open doors for the understanding of her physiology, but the symbol of woman as evil temptress remained as did the general perception of her as less than men (MacLean 1980:44). The general view was that “In theological terms woman is, therefore, the inferior of the male by nature, his equal by grace” (MacLean 1980:27). This perception still influences the dispensation of ecclesiastical appointments and powers within many Christian religious groups. How then did women compensate?

Modern gender studies in symbology present a perspective that helps explain the symbols used by medieval women wherein they stressed their bodies and achieved various degrees of self-fulfillment and even power. It begins with an examination of the
seemingly timeless debate of the ascendancy of either nature or nurture. Lorber explores the debate and notes that bodily characteristics “have different meanings in different cultures” (Lorber 2001:218). The body is not just physical, it is also socially constructed. “Gender is one of the most significant factors in the transformation of physical bodies into social bodies” (Lorber 2001:218-219). Kathy Davis agrees and explains that feminist scholarship must emphasize the body as embodied experience “for women’s bodies have been subjected to processes of exploitation, inferiorization, exclusion, control and violence” (Davis 2001:219). Carolyn Brettell and Carolyn Sargent use a cross-cultural perspective to examine the ongoing controversy of nature versus nurture (2005:1-7). They conclude that “biological differences between men and women have no uniform and universal implication for social roles and relations...biology, for humans, takes on meaning as it is interpreted in human culture and society” (Brettell and Sargent 2005:5).

It is the meaning attributed to one’s body that takes on cultural value. Meanings attributed to female bodies were of extreme importance in medieval societies. Like all individuals, medieval women were classified according to their gender and roles were assigned to them within their groups. Women religious attributed important meanings to their bodies and often endured exquisite pain and suffering for symbolic power. Women’s bodies were culturally threatening too. It is not an exaggeration to state that, “In medieval thought, women were bodies (men were characterized as mind or spirit), and bodies were dangerous-dangerous to men and, therefore, to society as a whole” (Petroff 1994:205). In this case women were perceived as the polar opposites of males; spirit was masculine, corrupt nature was feminine. Men were physically strong and rational; women were physically and mentally inferior. The sensual attraction of
womankind and warnings against sexual temptation was a constant during the period. Woman presented dangers that "naturally obsessed the early Church" (Blamires et al. 1992:3). The moralists of the Middle Ages equally abhorred her.

Even individual women can be placed in this either-or dichotomy. Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that the "bifurcated image of woman in Christianity" (1987:209) may be seen as a continuum that extends from Eve who was disobedient, to Mary who exemplifies obedience. In its most extreme form it becomes the witch, or the very negative "view of woman as the handmaiden of the Devil, in contrast to Mary, the handmaiden of the Lord" (Ruether 1987:209). The remainder of this chapter deals with the dynamics engendered by these dichotomies.

Perceptions of Women in the Fertile Crescent

Archaeologist Susan Pollock investigated the gradual loss of power and prestige of women in the city-states of ancient Sumer and Akkad during the Early Dynastic III period, ca. 2600-2350 BC and the Sargonic periods which followed (Pollock 1992:336-387). Pollock examined the representations of women in literary compositions, economic texts, burials at the Royal Cemetery of Ur, and in iconography. She concluded that as Sumerian society increased the glorification of warrior heroes and struggles for political dominance, women were gradually restricted to "ritual attendance" (Pollock 1991:383). The Akkadian myth that tells of the victory of Bel Marduk over his female adversary, Tiamat, is symbolic not only of his cunning victory over chaos, but of man's victory over women.
Pollock argues that this process gradually became reflected socially. “Fewer women than men attained recognized, represented positions of political and economic power. When they did, their possibilities were often circumscribed” (Pollock 1999:384). She notes that, “Women were able to attain positions of high status and power mainly through ritual rather than ‘secular’ political domains” (Pollock 1991:383). She concurs with Irene Silverblatt (1988) and concludes that “The undercutting of women’s sources of power seems to be a common strategy and product of the formation of states, although neither the form nor the degree of women’s subjugation is uniform from case to case” (Pollock 1999:383).

Another example of this process may be seen in the development of the ancient state of Israel. The Israelites of the Old Testament were originally members of the Semitic or Habiru tribes that came out of the Mesopotamian milieu. They were semi-nomads who practiced a pastoral life-style until they resided in Egypt (Anderson 1957:22). Now referred to as Israelites, they were situated squarely in the middle of the Fertile Crescent, an area that functioned as a highway between warring states in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was necessary to produce warriors if Israel was to survive. Like Pollock, Peggy Sandy (1981:181) suggests that male dominance generally occurs when problems of warfare exist, thus creating a warrior class and elite In the books of Kings and Chronicles, the Old Testament record indicates that this may well be the case. It was upon their return to Palestine that many of the tribes combined herding with agriculture and village life. The concept of “The Nation of Abraham” developed and warriors were needed to defend what became the kingdom of Israel.
The women of the Old Testament represent women in a society that evolved over thousands of years from that of pastoralists, villagers, agriculturists and urbanites. In each case, the typical patriarchal order of pastoralists and agriculturists prevailed. Women were under the rule as well as the protection of the male members of the family. Over time there developed a "theology of subordination" with male leadership as the natural and divinely ordered nature of existence (Ruether 1987:208). This concept retained its power well into the Middle Ages and beyond. Its elements were well known and understood by women religious including Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila. Women found ways to work around the subordination factor, but its roots were planted deep in the soil of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The call for female subordination evolved from the Genesis myths of creation, most specifically the creation of men and women. Justification for the bifurcated image of women began here and intensified over the centuries. For thousands of years the two stories of Creation in Genesis had powerful impact on the lives of both Jewish and Christian women. While Genesis 1 outlines the configuration of the creation in general it is Genesis 2:21-3:24 that describes the creation of Eve and the fall of mankind. It is Eve who listened to the tempter because she desired to know good from evil and become like God. It was she who first tasted the forbidden fruit and then offered it to Adam. These are the original verses that have been used to justify the subjection of women to the rule of men over several millennia.

Yet the women of the biblical records are not weak nor are they timid. Eve set the example. It was her willingness to choose life, to learn and to dare that was blamed for the whole problem of sin and suffering, or so the story has been interpreted. Because she
was first to be tempted to gain knowledge all woman kind was relegated to a submissive social position, one that seemed not to affect the matriarchs of the group. Sarah had a mind of her own, and Rebecca was a woman of action who saw to it that the birthright continued within the family and was not spread among outsiders. Rachel was quite capable of lying to her father and stealing the family idols (Genesis 31:30-35). Tamar was not fainthearted when her situation required that she pose as a prostitute and lured Judah to her bed so that she could bear a child within the family line (Genesis 38:6-30). Virtuous also are the deeds of Ruth and Esther, Hannah and Susannah. Moses’ mother, his sister Miriam, Deborah and Jael each stood her own ground and played recognizable roles as prophetesses and leaders in the stories of the Jewish people. The prophets abhorred the powerful Queen Jezebel because she supported alien priesthoods, but there is no question about her strength of will or her ability to exercise power (I Kings 16:31).

Prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel, the women did not hesitate to use their own discretion when faced with a problem. The matriarchal women were decisive and industrious and helped preserve the group, although later male critics condemned those very qualities.

As the culture developed the secondary position of women increased. Grace I. Emmerson (1989:371-391) presents a very balanced picture of the role of women in the evolving state of ancient Israel. Emmerson deals with perceptions of them in the law, the prophets and literary genres. She suggests that following the Babylonian Exile the most virulent elements of misogyny occurred in the record. Emmerson concurs with Trible (1976:966) that it was Ezekiel who uses “sexual metaphors demeaning to women” while
Ezra argued for racial purity that results in "the development of misogyny which sees woman as inferior and impure" (Emmerson 1989:391).

In general most of the verses that pertain to women in the Old Testament refer to wives and the care of widows. Such is the case in Genesis 2:24, Exodus 20:17, Exodus 22:22, 1 Kings 11:3, Ezra 10:2; Proverbs 18:22; and Psalm 146:9. However, a bifurcated view of women becomes evident in several places. Although Proverbs 6:24 refers to "the evil woman" Proverbs 31:10-31 lauds the capable and virtuous woman in a series of acrostic verses referred to as the "Alphabet of the Good Woman" (MacLean 1980:7). Ecclesiastes recommends "live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity" (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Then he declares, "I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her" (Ecclesiastes 7:26). In Ezra 9:1-15 the prophet rails against those who have married foreign women during the exile in Persia and insists they give those women up in order to purify the people and rebuild the temple.

Verses that place restrictions on women generally refer to the issue of racial purity in the temple ritual as in the case of Leviticus 20 and 21 which provide rules against concupiscence in general but specifically for the marriage of Levitical priests, preferably with virgins of their own tribe. (Ezekiel 44:22). In Zechariah 5:7, 8 a woman in a basket is symbolic of the wickedness that must be removed from the land. Two other women proceed to take the basket to Shinar or Babylon for the building of an edifice (New Oxford Annotated Bible 2007:1361). These verses probably refer to the goddess worship practiced in the area. The very fact of the existence of matriarchal religions
appears to have been an affront to the patriarchal Israelites. Amos refers to the women of Samaria as “kine” or cows (Amos 4:1-3). Although lost in the passage of centuries, the antipathy towards women in general may partially be explained by the competition between religious practices.

Perhaps the verses most offensive to modern sensibilities are specified in Leviticus 12:2-5. These verses pertain to women following childbirth.

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean...Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.

If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. (Leviticus 12:2-5. The New Oxford Annotated Bible. 2007:158 Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests the 66 days for a female child is observed “once for herself and once for her girl-child, to take the place of what would have been milah, had the infant been a boy” (Hirsch 1986:416). Rabbi Hirsch also suggests that this ritual restriction aids a woman in the practice of subordination and for training in purity of character.

In contrast to the Hebraic traditions, the bifurcated view of humanity may have been somewhat modified in ancient Egypt, at least in so far as it pertained to royal women. Lana Troy (2003) examines the fall of women from Egyptian power in her analysis of the ancient Egyptian worldview. She makes a series of strong arguments for the coexistent powers of royal men and women in the early dynasties. Troy sees ancient Egyptian power as an “androgynous realm” (Troy 2003:93) wherein women exercised considerable power as the “cosmic life source.” The universe was perceived as a continuum of male and female attributes with both extremes “incorporated into the
authority of the kingship to such a degree that female rulership could be legitimiz\(\text{ed}\)” (Troy 2003:113).

Egyptian kinswomen of the king were afforded privileged access to the ruler, often co-ruled with the king, occasionally ruled in their own rights, served as regents, and as high priestesses. Despite other changes that occurred when the Greeks and Romans conquered the Egyptians, yet “The tradition of female authority, in its many variations, continued into Hellenistic times, as the wives of Ptolemaic rulers struggled to establish their own areas of political influence in ways sometimes bordering on the macabre” (Troy 2003:103). Any power remaining with Egyptian queenship as well as the “history of ancient Egypt” was brought to its final close with the death of Cleopatra VII and the conquest of Egypt by patristic Rome in 30 BCE (Troy 2003:104).

\textit{Patriarchal Cultures Merge: Gender, Equality, and Submission}

Even as the power of Egyptian queenship fell under the mighty arm of Rome, the infant Christian religion was born and sought to survive within the empire. It did so by becoming a compound of its Judeo-Semitic heritage and the patriarchal consciousness of the early Roman Republic. It was the republic that most restricted women, as was the case in the world of the Greeks. At that time a woman was always under male guardianship and her decisions depended upon male approval; in other words, she ranked with children. She, like a child or slave, could be put to death without public trial if her male guardian so declared (Hecker 1971:1-7).

In the Greco-Roman worldview woman was seen as man’s inferior, a perception perpetuated by philosophers of Aristotle’s stature. The basic premise of this view was
founded upon the very human practice of perceiving the world in terms of binary opposites. “It has been seen that much discussion about woman is governed or underlain by a theory of opposites and of difference. Aristotelian taxonomy of oppositions are Pythagorean dualities, which link, without explanation, woman with imperfection, left, dark, evil and so on” (MacLean 1980:87-8). Alcuin Blamires (1992) asserts that “Aristotelian physiology had considerable impact from the late twelfth century onwards...He reduced the role of woman in procreation to that of ‘prime matter’ awaiting the ‘forming’ or ‘moving’ agency of the man’s semen. He defined the female sex in terms of its ‘inability’ to emulate male functions” (Blamires 1992:39) Although Aristotle indicated women were equally perfect in their sex (MacLean 1980:29), he still insisted, “Silence is a woman’s glory” (Aristotle’s Politics, 1:13 [1260a20] in MacLean 1980:54).

Aristotle’s perceptions were taken up and expanded upon by the Greek physician Galen who lived between 131-201 C. E. He agreed with Aristotle’s hierarchal approach to the male-female dichotomy but gave women a greater share of the action in human reproduction because he was more familiar with female anatomy than the philosopher had been. Galen was a very famous man of antiquity and his views were highly regarded. He attended to the medical needs of important Romans including the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Blamires 1992:41). Galen suggested that men were at the apex of perfection because of the heat they generate. Indeed, “the female is less perfect than the male by as much as she is colder than he...and is less perfect in respect to the generative parts” (Blamires 1992:41). This physician’s medical theories and practices were studied by Arabs and Christians alike throughout the Middle Ages. They remained the height of
medical practice until the scientific expansion of knowledge that began during the
Renaissance.

The writings of the Roman satirist Ovid (43 BC-AD 18) were also well known in
the Middle Ages as well as in antiquity. While much of his work could be interpreted as
misogynistic, he is equally hard on the mischievous males who try to entrap the ladies
(Blamires 1992:17). On the other hand Juvenal (early second century AD) differed from
Ovid by “cultivating not so much the conspiratorial grin as moral outrage at the sordid
animalism and chill cynicism he ascribes to women” (Blamires 1992:25). A few titles
from his writings will suffice to illustrate his attitude, titles that combined humor with
more than just a jibe at women. Juvenal suggests that “Suicide Beats Marriage,” and that
there is a “Scarcity of the Chaste Bride.” A good woman is “The Unendurably Perfect
Wife” and others become “Capricious Domineering Wives” (Blamires 1992:25-28).

Whether or not females were perceived as inferior physically, morally or
intellectually, they had always had a place in religious ritual and temple activities even
when those rituals were segregated by gender. Throughout the countries that bordered the
Mediterranean Sea communities sought the benevolent blessings and promised fertility of
the soil and the womb from goddesses often by means of fertility rituals. The rituals often
included sexual performances, but it appears that the women were free to leave the
temples and marry at any time (Stone 1976:155).

Prophecy was recognized as a proper religious act for women as was the case of
the famous Delphi Oracle. According to Fiorenza, “Ecstatic frenzy in oriental cults was a
highly desirable spiritual phenomenon and a mark of true prophecy” (Fiorenza
1994:227). Moreover “unbound hair was necessary for a woman to produce an effective
magical incantation” (Fiorenza 1994:227). “Disheveled hair and head thrown back were
typical of the maenads in the cult of Dionysos, in that of Cybele, the Pythia at Delphia,
the Sibyl…and in the Isis cult” (Fiorenza 1994:227). The exception that proved the rule
was established with of Rome’s six Vestal Virgins. Virginity was demanded of these elite
women who watched over Rome’s eternal flame on the altar of Vesta and were
responsible for the emperors’ wills as well as the sacred relics of the state. They were
highly honored and participated in various rituals and at the most solemn rites. In
addition to their religious responsibilities they had the rare privilege of having rights to
property and could make wills. Lictors preceded them in public and even Roman officials
made way for them when they passed. Should they forfeit their virginity certain death
awaited them including death by stoning and scourging by members of the senate.1
Despite poetic and philosophical criticism, women gained a number of civil liberties
during the Empire period and the bonds of enclosure that had held them were loosening
their grip. “As Rome became a world power, the Romans likewise grew in breadth of
view, in equity, and in tolerance. The political influence wielded by women was as great
during the first three centuries after Christ as it has ever been at any period of the world’s
history” (Hecker 1971:3-4) Perhaps Christianity could not have survived in a less open
society. The religion flourished, but the newly won freedoms for women quickly ended
when the Empire became Christian.

1 William Ramsy in John Murray’s A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities.
Early Christian Perceptions of Women and the Foundations of Medieval Values

Women flocked to the early Christian churches in the various cities throughout the empire. “In all the history that we know, the spread of Christianity represents virtually the only case in which women participated en masse in a cultural revolution on an equal footing with males...acting personally in all its aspects: theoretical, political, economic, and institutional” (Magli 2003:45). Perhaps female enthusiasm for the new religion was due to three factors. First, women had been friends and family of Jesus and as such were well treated by him. Magli argues that “it is through Jesus himself, and through his actions, that things change radically for women” (Magli 2003:9). This is because he dealt with them as subjects, individually, on a you-I level that surmounted even the “impurity” of conversation with a much-married Samaritan woman (John 4:6-42) (Magli 2003:9). Women were addressed as adult thinking beings. Hecker agrees that Christ was busy teaching ethical principles and that “Of any inferiority on the part of women he says nothing...For the rest, his relations with women have an atmosphere of rare sympathy, gentleness, and charm” (Hecker 1971:53).

Second, the initiatory rite of baptism marked all converts as equal before God. This position was established in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians wherein he wrote, “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28). This verse created what Ruether refers to as a “theology of equivalence” (Ruether 1987:209). Those who defended equality in
the faith referred to this verse over the fruitless centuries for both allowed women the same privileges and stature as men in the sight of God.

Finally, the Second Coming of Christ was expected to be imminent. Early Christians saw themselves as being on the cusp of a utopian age that promised equality. Ancient prophesies foretold an age of peace and justice. One of the most important was that of Joel. “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28-29). The importance of this verse lay in the fact it was recognized by the early Church and the Apostle Peter referenced it on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21). These lines in both Galatians and Joel were referred to even in the Middle Ages in order to argue for gender equality. Joel’s prophesy also lent credence to the beliefs of those who expected the apocalypse at any moment.

Christians were encouraged to prepare themselves for the end of the world as they knew it (Magli 2003:45). As a result, the early churches discouraged marriage and motherhood as there was no need to procreate just to bring more souls into this world of suffering. A new model supplanted the traditional emphasis on marriage for both men and women. Marriage was a distraction from a focus on God. Virginity made possible a life-long concentration on the spiritual life (1 Corinthians 7:32-34). Christians could now see themselves in a special connection to God. The Church took on the symbol of the bride of Christ. This symbolism was based upon the marital relationship described in the
“Song of Songs,” a book in the Old Testament that had profound effects upon the
development of mysticism.

There is no sign of bias against women in the Song of Songs, a work better known
as the “Song of Solomon” and popularly attributed to that king. While practically ignored
in modern society, the Song of Songs was very popular with both Jewish and Christian
mystics in the early centuries of the Christian era. The great Rabbi Akiva (early second
century C. E.) insisted that “The whole world is not worthy of the day on which the Song
was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of
Holies” (McGinn 1991:20). The Christian churches took it as their own symbol for the
Church in relation to Christ. “A poem charged with sexual imagery that celebrates the
physical relationship between a bride and a bridegroom, the Song of Songs was one of
the most commented upon books of the Bible in the Middle Ages, most frequently treated
allegorically, with Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride” (Cook and
Herzman 2004:8).²

² More personal interpretations existed too. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153)
created eighty-six sermons based on the Song of Songs. He perceived the “kiss of the lips
[as] union between the soul and Christ, the direct experience with God himself” (Cook
and Herzman 2004:198). Mystics soon saw the soul as the bride, not the Church per se.
Perhaps the equality of the lovers gave confidence to both the men and women who saw
their individual souls as the “brides” of Christ (McGinn 2007:166).

G. I. Emmerson suggests the “ideal of equality” in the Song of Songs allows for
“no subservience of woman” (Emmerson 1989:390-1). Mystics loved the book and were
influenced by it in both the early centuries of Christianity and during the Middle Ages.
The English mystic, Margery Kempe, was influenced by the metaphor of the dove in
Song of Songs 2:14 which is also referred to in Richard Rolle’s Meditations on the
Passion” (McAvoy 2003:38, n 9, 121). Hildegard of Bingen based a section of Vision Six in Scivias on verse 1:13 in the Song of Songs (Hildegard of Bingen. Scivias. 1990.
Madame Jeanne Guyon wrote an entire commentary based upon this work (Jeanne
The Song of Songs, Galatians 3:27-29, and Joel 2:28-29 were used by generations of Christians to justify the position of women as equals and as ministers in the Church. Yet as time passed it became obvious that the Second Coming of Christ was not as imminent as had been hoped in the first century after Jesus’ crucifixion. The churches were growing and order needed to be established. Leaders fell back on the traditional concepts of male authority, as this was the familiar model in both the Judaic and Roman societies. Because “baptism confers no power over others; the orders, instead, establish hierarchies of power” (Magli 2003:23). Sipe clearly states the relationship that existed between power and sexuality. “As the celibate system took shape, power had to be limited by one factor: sex. Women cannot have power. The male virgin – the celibate – is one not defiled by woman. Sexual defilement and the threat to power are inextricably bound to a concept of woman as the weaker sex and as the spoiler” (Sipe 1995:106).

Christian attitudes about the inferiority and immorality of women are based in no small part upon the assigned “guilt” of Eve as portrayed in Genesis 2:18-25 and 3:1-24. It was an old argument given new prominence by early Christian leaders. Garber notes that “The sexual nature of the Genesis transgression was prominent in Jewish writings prior to the composition of the New Testament” (Garber 2003:45). These verses from the Old Testament provided fodder for misogynist fervor from the early Church fathers to modern fundamentalist vitriolic. Two examples will suffice. Christian apologist, Tertullian (c. 160 - c.225) admonished the women in his flock that they should

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4 It is only in recent decades that the version of creation given in Genesis 1:27 is becoming more established (Ruether 1987:209).
Go about in mourning clothes and even neglect your appearance, giving the impression of a mourning and repentant Eve so that, by adopting all the clothing of the penitent, you might atone more fully for what derives from Eve, namely the disgrace of the first sin and the hatred which followed because of the fall of the human race. 'In sorrows and care you will give birth, woman, and be dependent on your husband; and he is lord over you'. Do you not know that you are Eve? (Blamires 1992:51)

A second example is taken from the teachings of John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) and pertains to the state of marriage. “It is not good to marry! What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fine colors?” (Sipe 1995:106) Chrysostom’s position against marriage was based upon Paul’s admonition about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34.

But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband (The King James Study Bible. 1988:1773-1774)

Paul’s position and Chrysostom’s concern were often reiterated during the Middle Ages as was the case in The Corbaccio by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375). He felt free to portray Eve as the “one and only woman in the world, whose gluttony, disobedience, and persuasions were the cause and origin of all our miseries” (Blamires 1992:172)

Boccaccio’s assignment of gluttony to Eve was somewhat creative, but the vitriolic had a history that went back to the early Church Fathers. These examples support Sipe’s contention that, “The idea that the place of women is subordinate to men runs deep not

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only in the history and culture of the church, but also in the conscious fiber of many men and women who accept this bias as natural and sanctioned by grace” (Sipe 1995:106)

It was necessary to find arguments to support this position and educate women as to their proper place in society and the next life. Stronger voices opposed the orientation of gender and economic equality suggested in Joel and Galatians. Those voices employed alternative scriptures to validate their position that women were to be submissive to men, silenced in the Church, and that they were to be recognized as temptresses and dangerous to the souls of men. In so doing debates took place based upon interpretations of various apostolic writings.

For example, because women were perceived as inferior mortals, there arose the matter of the shape and form in which women would be resurrected. It was argued that since Corinthians 15:24 stated there would be no subjection in heaven and Ephesians 4:13 suggested a time wherein the “perfect man” would be accomplished within the Christian community women would be resurrected as men. Maclean notes that the prominent philosopher and theologian, Duns Scotus, dissented from the majority who did believe women would be resurrected as men with the sole exception of the Virgin Mary. It took many centuries to disabuse theologians of this view, but by the Renaissance it was generally agreed that “woman will be resurrected as a woman” (Maclean 1980:14).

**Christian Customs and Consequences for Women’s Lives**

There were many Christian scriptures based on Judaic customs, ones that also argued against the position suggested in Galatians and for the submission of women. One of the most powerful verses was and is 1 Corinthians 11:3-13. These lines reify the
concept that woman is inferior to man and should have her head covered when she prays or prophesizes. “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (Aughterson 1995:14). The covered head became symbolic of the secondary position of the woman, but that may not have been its only intent. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests that The Apostle Paul may have not only wished to continue the Jewish tradition wherein loose hair was a sign of uncleanness (Fiorenza 1994:28; refer to Numbers 5:18), but more importantly, to distinguish Christians from the women in other prophetic religions. Unbound and flying hair was associated with ritual frenzies by groups of female worshipers such as the Isis cult and the cult of Dionysus. The Apostle Paul saw these behaviors as signs of madness. He objected to the Corinthians “pneumatic worship” and the erotic behaviors of the women (Fiorenza 1994:227).

Traditionally Jewish women kept their hair bound and their behaviors sedate. Many of Paul’s later admonitions and those of the early Church Fathers represented their determination to separate Christianity from competing pagan religions and rituals. The dress and behavior of Christian women was to be exemplary, even by the standards of the old Republic. They would be held to the standard of virtue represented by the Vestal Virgins. Women became symbols of the new faith in contradistinction to the women of the Greco-Roman world against whom the philosophers and humorists railed.

Paul lent more power to the concept of female submissiveness in Ephesians 21:22-25. Although he admonished men to love their wives, Paul also insisted that women submit themselves to their husbands. “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the
head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Aughterson 1995:15).

One of the most influential scriptures used to justify the domination and silencing of women is found in 1 Timothy 2:9-15. In this Pauline epistle the young Christian communities are advised to “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety” (Aughterson 1995:15).

Paul’s position on the requisite silencing of women is reiterated in 1 Corinthians. “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (I Corinthians 14:34-35). These particular scriptures resulted in later admonitions that women were not to sing at church or in religious services at home on the charge that even their voices could lure men into sin.6

Admonitions like these are particularly arresting since the gift of prophecy, which demands speech, excluded no one because of their gender (Acts 2:17) and because Paul explicitly writes of female local leaders, and traveling evangelists. Ruether lists the examples of this practice and concludes that “Paul received from the early Church both a practice of thus including women in the ministries of catechesis, prophecy, local Church

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6 See Wilson and Margolis 2004: 692-710 for an informative discussion of this situation and the various forms women's musical talents expressed in the Church and society at large despite this prohibition.
leadership, and traveling evangelism (the role Paul calls that of ‘apostle’)” (Ruether 1987:212). It appears that the “theology of equivalence” waned as the young church grew within the greater Roman culture.

Writing also came to be forbidden to women if it had anything to do with religious matters except within conventual walls. McAvoy explains that the act of writing was perceived as an extension of speech. “For many medieval writers the act of writing was a speech act rather than an activity undertaken with pen in hand” (McAvoy 2003:10). Therefore women were forbidden to write as a form of preaching or teaching. “The act of writing for a woman was considered synonymous with teaching and preaching and as such constituted a similar misuse of the female voice and direct contravention of the proscriptions of Saint Paul and other patristic teachings” (McAvoy 2003:2).

As a result, women commonly practiced self-abnegation when they wrote as well as when they spoke publicly. They admitted themselves to be merely flawed and simple women who would never have spoken up under less pressing circumstances. Erler and Kowaleski refer to this custom as “the modesty topos of formulaic authorial self-deprecation” (1988:9). They claimed that some other individual or authority ordered the women to write. Women religious insisted they spoke or wrote under the authority of God’s gift of prophecy. Whatever their intellectual talents and leadership abilities, they first admitted their inferiority and then proceeded on their course of self-actualization.7

7 Humility was a highly regarded virtue in Christian societies. Although both male and female authors expressed humility, it was mandatory for women. Petroff refers to these practices as “formulas of submission,” and they had a history as old as Cicero. “In medieval literature, secular as well as religious, formulas of submission and protestations of incapacity are found side by side and are often reinforced by a statement that one dares to write only because a friend or patron or superior has expressly commanded it” (Petroff 1986:24-25).
Even the brilliant and aristocratically connected Hildegard carefully reminded those with whom she corresponded that she was but a mere woman who was forced by God to speak and write on His behalf. She completely acceded to her inferior position in society, but, by first proclaiming her "feminine frailty" she was then able to validate her efforts. She also accentuated the "feminine aspects of the divine" (Newman 1987:35) and created her own "theology of the feminine" (Newman 1987:36) which she expressed in both music and the written word. Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila also wrote voluminously, but humbly insisted they too were instructed by God to do so or they would never have considered being so bold. Marguerite Porete and Madame Jeanne Guyon were admonished to cease and desist from their literary efforts. Their respective refusals cost each of them dearly.

From the early centuries of Christianity women did write as was the case with the martyred Perpetual. It appears that more women were literate than has generally been supposed, especially in elite groups. Wealthy women wrote within their family circles and friendship groups. Sometimes they wrote to entertain. Their letters were purposeful and because they wrote on personal matters about which they were the authorities, they did not need to use formulas of submission. Thiebaux notes that their letters often turned into treatises and were didactic as in letters to sons and daughters (Thiebaux 1994: xiv-xvii). Otherwise women generally avoided writing on political or theological topics unless they felt impelled by God to do so or had the confidence of the medieval apologist for women, Christine de Pizan (c.1365-c.1430).

Societal demands of this nature might well motivate strong women to do all in their power to overcome the perceived weaknesses of their gender, to prove their own
worth, and to become “virile” women (Newman 1993:3-4). As the religion faced persecution a new opportunity arose wherein women could prove their worthiness and match men. For women of the early Christian centuries there was equality in martyrdom. Martyrdom proved both one’s devotion to the faith as well as one’s love of God above all others. It also provided an experience wherein notable early Christian women proved themselves the equal of strong men in the ability to endure torture and death with courage and stoicism. Women who became sainted exanimators to the Church were also expected to have been virgins.

Christian women of the first centuries were not the last to renounce their sensuality for their faith.⁸ When physical martyrdom was no longer an option, women religious chose virginity, personal suffering through self-inflicted pain, starvation and illness in order to overcome the stigma of their womanhood. Some practiced other forms of death such as enclosure and the anchoritic life-style. By these means they hoped to achieve “virago” or the honor of manliness, to become a “virile woman,” the *femina virilis* (See Newman 1995:3-6).

The creation of the collective consciousness of medieval attitudes toward women rested heavily upon the traditions of ancient Semitic peoples, Greek and Roman cultural mores, and the positions of early Church Fathers. In each of these groups there existed power structures that insisted upon the subordination of women. In so doing, the traditional position of women in the old Roman republic and the traditional Judaic household continued quite naturally into subsequent centuries despite the new world order suggested by baptism and Galatians 3:27-29. These were not the only influential

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⁸ See Magli 2003:49-53 for the development of this phenomenon.
forces that shaped the world of medieval women. During the Dark Ages Germanic and Celtic elements entered the mix.

Celtic and Germanic Praxis and the Role of Women

Although the majority of Celtic social elements disappeared from continental medieval society, certain facets of that culture reemerged from time to time. Celtic husbands and wives matched each other in contributions to the dowry and both shared equally in the family wealth, but as was the case with Roman practice, “the husband had full power of life and death over his wife as over his children” (Hecker 1971:78).

Male children were more valued than females as is evidenced by the custom wherein both male and female children enjoyed equal social value or “honor” prices until the age of fourteen, at which time a girl was accorded only half her father’s honor price. Bitel explains that a free male adult was the standard of value in old Ireland. “Once she had become a female, a girl or woman was always defined socially in relation to her male guardian and always retained a legal value of, at most, half of her guardian’s honor price” (Bitel 1996:19-20). In other words, women were regarded in relation to the men who controlled their lives.

The Celts also perceived the rights of women as “by analogy to other underdeveloped humans. From a legal perspective, early Irishwomen behaved predictably only when they behaved like men - more specifically, pre-adult men, criminal men, insane or outcast men, but men nonetheless” (Bitel 1996:22). Legendary women who practiced male roles were common in Celtic lore. There were mythic and historical female warriors (Wilson and Margolis 2004:732). In addition the legendary Airmid and
Binn were recognized as herbalists and physicians (Ellis 1994:213). As the centuries passed women continued to be associated with poetic legends of powerful shapeshifters and beautiful but dangerous otherworldly figures as well as goddesses capable of spells and trickery (Bitel 1996:25-26).

A number of similarities existed between Druids and early Christians who attained the stature of saints, most especially the tradition of "soul-friend," a role often filled by women (Ellis 1994:182). Thomas Cahill credits the popularity of female abbesses such as Brigid of Kildare and Hilda with the charismatic traditions of Celtic druidesses and goddesses (Cahill 1995:172-179, 195, 204). When Druids, both male and female, converted to Christianity they carried with them traditions of magical powers. Their magical powers were condemned unless "in the service of Christianity" (Ellis 1994:248-249). The terror of those professing magical powers manifested itself throughout the history of Europe and reached its heights during the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In all, Ellis refers to Iron Age traditions that speak "not only of women warriors, but women prophets, Druids, bards, doctors, and even satirists" (Ellis 1994:96). Celtic scholar Jean Markale notes that there is a correlation between the periodic rises of Celtic culture and higher esteem for women. One such example occurred during the high Middle Ages when "Courtly Love," Arthurian legends, and chivalry were at their peak. It is also well established that "the great sanctuaries dedicated to the worship of the Virgin Mary...are mostly sited in places consecrated to a female Celtic divinity" (1975:16).

Germanic traditions also appear to have held women in somewhat higher regard than those of Mediterranean peoples. Legends indicate that Germanic women were
categorized as "the warrior, the prophetess or sorceress, the avenger, and the inciter" (Wilson and Margolis 2004:732). The essence of these traditions is reflected in the reception of Hildegard's prophetic abilities, Joan of Arc's military expertise and visions and Marguerite Porete's spiritual perceptions. Tacitus understood that the various Germanic tribes believed that "something divine resided in women; hence their respect for them as prophetesses...no battle was entered upon unless they had first consulted the lots and given assurance that the fight would be successful" (Hecker 1971:79-80). Female gifts of prophecy were never totally rooted out by the Christian ecclesiastical authority, but prophetesses were cautiously honored and carefully controlled.

As with the Romans, Germanic women lived under the guardianship of men who arranged their marriages, yet in some ways women enjoyed more property rights as wealth was generally expected to go to the children of the union. In the case of a divorce women could keep their property. Marriages were arranged and men were not expected to restrict themselves to their wives. They often availed themselves of concubines as well as wives, slaves and servants (Wilson and Margolis 2004:733). It would take centuries of Christian indoctrination to strengthen the practices of virginity and celibacy. Furthermore, physical and sexual violence was not unusual despite the efforts of the Christian Church to root out the abuse of women (Wilson and Margolis 2004:734).

A richness of cultural traditions merged into the medieval and Renaissance milieus, each of which insisted upon the control of women to one degree or another. Despite the fact that elements of the Semitic, Greek, Roman, Germanic and Celtic cultures insisted upon a subordinate position for them, women still found the means to express themselves and their innate abilities within a very androcentric world. Over time
the parameters of freedom tightened around women religious wherein extreme value was placed upon submissiveness and virginity. The debate over the nature of women raged throughout the second millennium, and the *querelle de femmes* produced literary works that ranged from the ludicrous to the great. Theater and literary genres were very popular in the Middle Ages. Wandering poets created new forms and carried popular stories from town to town. The plots were often based upon religious themes such as the lives of saints. Just as often they were bawdy, humorous, short stories called *fabliaux*. These tales featured treacherous, cheating women, who always outwitted their foolish husbands (Gies and Gies 1981:178) A few examples of popular literature follow in order to illustrate the two extreme perceptions of women that were a part of every woman’s life.

**Women in Medieval Literature: The Ideal and the Real**

The story of Griselda was a favorite of the Middle Ages. Many poets of stature including Giovanni Boccaccio (c.1313-1375) as well as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), who is better known as Petrarch, recounted it. According to Wilson and Margolis (2004:376-382) the tale has been told in twenty-two European languages since the fourteenth century. It has also served as the plot for operas by Scarlatti, Vivaldi and Massenet. Geoffrey Chaucer’s (c. 1343-1400) English version is a classic. There Griselda’s story is recounted as the *Clerk’s Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*.

A simple shepherdess, Griselda married a powerful marquis named Walter who insisted that she swear total submission to him and his every whim. Unfortunately Walter was subject to dark depressions and deep jealousies, especially of his wife’s virtues and popularity with his people. Therefore he resolved to try her patience and loyalty to her
vow of total submission. Despite his every demand Griselda was cheerfully and lovingly obedient. This infuriated him and he commanded that their infant daughter be taken from her and given to others to raise. Griselda wept but lovingly accepted her lord's will. Next, she was told falsely that the little girl was dead. This Griselda accepted with tears but no complaint. A second child was born, a son. Again he was taken from her and falsely pronounced dead. The stoic mother accepted all this with a grace that infuriated her husband so he then had Griselda confined to her quarters in the palace. Her jewels and raiment were stripped from her and she was reduced to rags. Again, Griselda accepted without complaint and continued to love and praise her royal husband. The marquis' dark mood continued despite his wife's virtue and submissiveness. Walter decided that there was nothing left to do but to return her and her father to the woods and the simple life from whence they came so he sent her home in her nightshirt (Wilson and Margolis 2004:376).

After some years Griselda was called back to the palace and commanded to attend to a twelve-year-old beauty who was to be the new bride of the marquis. Her younger brother came to court with the princess. Again, the ideal Griselda accepted her lord's demand and with loving tenderness prepared the young girl for marriage. The marquis could no longer bear Griselda's virtue. He revealed to all present that the young bride and her brother were in truth Griselda's children. By her steadfast love and patience Griselda had proven victorious. She was returned to her former high position with its entire attendant wealth and honors. Their daughter married a young prince whom she loved and all ended happily.
Here then is Griselda, a master of self-effacement, of detachment from all the normal emotions of lesser mortals. More amazing yet is her ability to return steadfast love to the tyrant who deliberately and irrationally created her condition. At this point we might be forgiven if tempted to delve into the sadistic tendencies of her lord and master, to point our feminist fingers and rail against the injustice of thousands of years' of existence that demanded female submissiveness. But that is not the point of this study. The story of Griselda was a metaphor for the perfect woman of that age, a woman who was to be obedient and submissive to her husband and lord. It was a popular fiction that typified some of the ideals to which children were raised to accept as the social models for their lives, namely “a glorification of victimization, heroic martyrdom and endurance” (Phillips 2000:114).

Behind the didactic character of the Griselda tale rest two other possible meanings. First, Griselda’s story may be analyzed as a metaphor for humankind’s relationship to deity, a deity who, like the marquis, demands uncomplaining fealty – nay, adoring love – despite all the sorrows employed to test our unworthy souls. Griselda is the female Job. Phillips discussed the folktale pattern “of a mortal married to a supernatural spouse” (Phillips 2000:115). Is this the Virgin Mary and the Holy Ghost? In both cases there is a merging of both love and trust within a test of faith and constancy to the lover and or lord. Yet the Griselda story strikes us as an offense to fairness. It is one so great that even Boccaccio observed “that the marquis behaves with ‘senseless brutality’ rather than generosity” (Phillips 2000:118). Here we recognize in a very human sense that the ways of the gods are indeed inscrutable and that mere mortals must trudge
on with only the hope of eventual reconciliation for the suffering and sorrows of this earthly adventure.

Second, there is the issue of power. Griselda may not be so sweet and powerless as one suspects upon first hearing the story. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski propose that Griselda had a strategy, one wherein she accomplished the mystical and "paradoxical achievement of power through its renunciation" (Erler and Kowaleski 1988:9). The more perfect her obedience, the more irrational and cruel Walter's behaviors become. Hansen agrees that Walter "is goaded into unexpected and irrational cruelty by the very virtue of this woman that he himself discovered, the unacceptable power of the female that he unwittingly unleashed in an attempt to demonstrate and protect his own power" (Hansen 1988:235). These authors suggest that this is the very power of Christianity; the professed humility and self-abnegation of a Hildegard, a Catherine or a Teresa each of whom admit to being inferior, weak women and then proceed to cry repentance and reform to the great male powers of European Church and State.

Chaucer has another tale about women, and this one is about a good, solid, lay woman of a feistier sort than Griselda. It is the story of the Wife of Bath. Briefly it seems that the man was the good woman's fifth husband and a gentleman who enjoyed reading after a day's work. Unfortunately he insisted on reading aloud to his wife and his choices of material proved irritating. First he read to her about Eve and the sorrows of life that resulted to all mankind due to her disobedience to the word of God. Then he read the story of Delilah's betrayal of Samson. Next he read about Socrates' abusive wife. This was followed in turn by the tale of the lecherous Pasiphae of Crete. Then
there were stories about women who poisoned their husbands. All this she took until she could stand no more, whereupon she tore pages out of the book and began pummeling him in the face until he fell over into the fire. Once up he hit her on the head so violently that she seemed dead. When she was able to get up they argued until the problem was resolved. The book was burned, she was given complete management of the house, and he let her do whatever she pleased “for the rest of her life” (Gies and Gies 1978:58-59). As a result she adored him and saw to his constant pleasure.

In these two tales we see the social conditioning that Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as a “bifurcated image of women” (Ruether 1987:209). There were two other women whose mythological qualities were metaphors for all that threatened, yet inspired the hearts and bodies of men. The opinions about women that were based upon the temptress model of Eve have been explored thus far, the demeaning manner of which provided adequate challenge to women in their battle for a sense of self-worth. Fortunately there were individuals who defended women and admired them based upon the positive qualities ascribed to the Virgin Mary.

Women Glorified and Defended

There were voices that rose to the defense of women and in fairness it is gratifying to illustrate their efforts with a few examples. These individuals argued against centuries-old machismo misogyny that manipulated the power of Church and state as well as the authority of scripture and tradition. Some defenders wrote about individual women within the standard topos and patterns of hagiographies. Others wrote on behalf of women in general. These writers tried to go beyond the usual portrayal of womankind.
They argued against the good-bad, either-or topos of binary opposition concerning the natures of Eve and the Virgin Mary. The *querelle des femmes* played a powerful role in love, thought and theology for well over a thousand years. One social movement, Courtly love, and a few of those authors are explored here in order to give some sense of the debate.

*Courtly love, fins amour (fine or courtly love), fine amour (refined love), amor de lonh (love from afar) the grand chant courtois, minne (Lady Love), Mystic courtoise, Minnemystik, Brautmystik (Bride of Christ),* each have several things in common. First, they were used to express an all consuming interest in love; in one case forbidden passion and service on behalf of the unattainable lover and later for the all encompassing love of God. Second, these terms were used in the praxis of the courts and then by mystics. Influenced by contact with the Islamic world, many poetic forms and concepts of love evolved following the first crusades and originated largely in southern France. William IX is the first historically recognized poet-musician or troubadour. William was the grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine who was herself a great patron of the arts including that of the troubadours and their female counterparts, the trobairitz (Rowbotham 1895:45).

Tremendous social changes were created by the troubadours and trobairitz (Wilson and Margolis 2004:902-3), especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. According the Ruiz, these changes were in the form of a “broad cultural phenomenon which leads not only to the emergence of Gothic as an architectural form, but it leads essentially to a new culture” (Ruiz 2002:42). This was made possible by the fact that the

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9 See Newman 1995 and Wilson and Margolis 2004:663-665, 902-903 for more detailed information on these terms and the roles of women in this movement.
men were of the high nobility, and as such "were expected to have passed through all the
degrees of knighthood, and to have attained the dignity of the first degree, which entitled
them to the designation of Cavalier or Chevalier" (Rowbotham 1895:97). These kings,
dukes and princes practiced chivalry, traveled widely with their servants, and composed
in local vernaculars.

Love between the ladies and knights of the courts was of such importance that
"courts of love" were presided over by the queens, duchesses, and ladies of the court in
order to decide upon the justice of certain amorous behaviors and love contracts created
between individuals. The women were at all times in charge of the love affairs and the
courts. During the same period the cult of the Virgin Mary was gathering strength and the
manner of expressing love for her was influenced by the topos of Fine amour as were the
Courts of the Virgin (Ruiz 2002:43). The tropes of Courtly love greatly influenced the
forms of mystical expression that became most evident at the time the Beguines gained
considerable strength in numbers and thereafter. Amazingly during the same centuries
there was a paradoxical movement wherein women were simultaneously losing some of
their actual political power (Erler and Kowaleski 2003:12).

On the surface it would seem that women had tremendous power due to the
literary topos wherein the elite women become the all encompassing passion of the men's
lives. According to Ruiz there is a very real sense in which the "women come to replace
God and the Lord" (2002:43). In the culture of courtly love, women become idealize,
even in the sense of providing salvation. This beloved woman is never the knight's wife;
she is the wife of the knight's liege lord. Passion becomes entangled with danger and new
ways are found to address "your Lady in a language which is charged with religiosity, in
which religious ideas are now transformed into a kind of sexual romantic play” (Ruiz 2002:43). Needless to say, the Church perceived heretical notions in this movement. As a result the fourth Lateran Counsel of 1215 condemned courtly love as a heresy.

There was another literary form that did receive the approval of the Church. The writings of hagiographers were valuable to their contemporaries because the *vitae* of the women were used as didactic exemplars of virtue managed even by women. Today the work of the hagiographers has become important to theologians, historians and students of women’s history because these biographies provide the names of, and some facts about, women who actually lived, information that is obscured and omitted in other histories of the past centuries. While the biographies give some indication of the relationships between the women religious and their confessors and clerics, there are gross limitations in the hagiographies.¹⁰

First, the hagiographies are didactic tools and so biased one must search for truth within them. This is due to the second reason of concern, namely that the hagiographies became patterned and formulaic and employed the use of standard religious topos.

Joanne E. Ziegler (1993) suggests that the prototype for this genre was written by Jacques de Vitry (c. 1170-1240) who served as confessor to Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213). Marie was the first known lay penitent who is recognized as a Beguine (Petroff 1994:147). As described by a later biographer, Thomas de Cantimpre, Vitry and Marie immediately recognized their importance to each other. Both hagiographers vividly portrayed her spiritual gifts as well as her prophetic knowledge which included the foretelling of

¹⁰ For a thorough examination of hagiographic materials on women, see Catherine M. Mooney’s 1999 edited work, Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Vitry’s future brilliant ecclesiastical career (Petroff 1994:147-151). Vitry’s description of Marie set the standard for spiritual behaviors that was imitated by many other women including the Beguines of the following century. Vitry portrayed Marie as inwardly joyous while outwardly veiled, head humbly lowered, slow and even in her gait, all of which reflected her inward calm and the self-assurance of her faith (Ziegler 1993:112-126).

In several of his sermons Vitry was willing to call for the fair treatment of women as marriage partners. Men were not to leave starving wives at home and then return drunken and beat them. Furthermore he insisted that men be true to their marital vows and cease their promiscuity. That was as far as his defense of women went, for he followed these councils with the standard reminder that although woman was created from man’s rib and thus his companion and worthy of good treatment, she must nonetheless be submissive to him. A husband is to guide and rescue his wife, “for hers is a slippery and weak sex, not to be trusted too easily” (Blamires 1992:144-146). Vitry then provides examples of the contrary and duplicitous behaviors of some women.

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) is most noted as one of three great Italian poets of his era, the other two being Dante and Petrarch (Blamires 1992:166-76). Among Boccaccio’s efforts is an influential book on the history of women entitled De claris mulieribus (Famous Women) and a second work with a few biographies of influential females entitled De casibus virorum illustrium or the Fates of Illustrious Men which appears to have been written between 1355 and 1360. These works catalogue the lives of 106 historic women. The catalogue is influenced by Greek and Latin literature of the same genre. Wilson and Margolis suggest that the books, especially De claris mulieribus,
reflect his attitudes toward specific women. For example he admires “deserving women” be they queens, scholars, wives, painters, writers, and others recognized for their contributions. All this sounds encouraging but, according to Wilson and Margolis, “the work is more often misogynistic, however subtly and amusingly, than not; yet less misogynistic than other medieval treatments of women. It remains one of the first catalogues of women to posit feminine fame based on women’s deeds” (2004:107). Boccaccio’s work was very influential throughout Europe and stimulated much of the debate on the nature of women in the years that followed.

One individual who knew Boccaccio’s books well was a woman whose name was obscured by later historians but has re-emerged in the research of feminist authors during the past several decades. She was the first known professional female writer to concern herself with the roles of women (Petroff 1986:299) and as such receives great credit as a skilled medieval defender of womanhood. Her name was Christine de Pizan and it is believed she lived from c. 1364 to c.1430. Christine was of Italian descent but she was raised in the courts of Charles V of France where her father served as the royal “physician,” or councilor, a position that was based upon his knowledge of the sciences of the era (Wilson and Margolis 2004:187-191). Christine was privileged to read widely in the royal library and her readings included works in mythology, philosophy and history (Thiebaux 1994:413-440). Christine married when she was fifteen, but at the age of twenty-five she was widowed and became the sole support of herself, her mother and her three young children.

Given her connections and intelligence, Christine’s abilities as a writer were quickly recognized and she was sponsored by wealthy and powerful patrons including the
Duke of Burgundy as well as the Duke de Berry. Christine’s literary output included nearly four hundred poems based upon the dance forms that were part of the troubadour and courtly milieus (Thiebaux 1994:414). She also wrote histories, including one about the life of King Charles V, several books on moral teachings, the military-scientific *Livre des Fais d’armes et de chevalerie* as well as the anti-civil war treatise, *Livre de la Paix*. In both these latter works she “sought to educate the French nobility to survive, perhaps even end, the Hundred Years War” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:189). Christine also greatly admired Joan of Arc. In 1429 she wrote her last known literary effort in which she defended the “warrior maid sufficiently to celebrate and affirm the Maid of Orleans’s authenticity in the *Ditie de Jehanne d’Arc* (Wilson and Margolis 2004:191).

As fine as those books were, her efforts to oppose the misogynistic writings of European males and relate her perceptions on the lives of women are of greater importance in today’s world of feminist scholarship. Christine joined the debate over the nature of woman and wrote against the arguments of “those male authors she found informative but evil, precisely because of their seductive gift for teaching misogyny as truth” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:189). Christine took on the task of defending womankind and she did it powerfully (but only after carefully self-abrogating). Her most noted efforts on behalf of women include the *Livre de la Cite des dames* and its accompanying *Livre des Trois vertus*. In these books she “developed a theory on women’s solidarity as means to survive in a harsh, misogynist climate” (Wiethaus 1993:93). Christine also brilliantly recorded the common practice of women of all classes who successfully replaced their men on the home front while the males were away at war or on pilgrimage (Petroff 1986:305-306).
Christine’s seminal work was her dispute with the position popularized in the very popular misogynist book, the Roman de la Rose, a composite composition by first Guillaume de Lorris and then Jean de Meun. She actively participated in the querelle des femmes, a series of literary debates that continued between authors during the years of 1401-1404 (Wilson and Margolis 2004:189). Blamires notes that she did avail herself of old arguments that males had used in defense of women, but she did it “rationally and constructively, rather than by descending to the kind of squabbling which the dogma promoted, this was the great task, and Christine rose to it” (Blamires 1991:278-279).

Popular as her works were, Pizan’s reasoned and erudite positions had little effect on the actual lives of women although the debate over their nature changed somewhat during the Renaissance. The most famous of the early defenders of womankind was Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), or Cornelius Agrippa, a man who wrote several treatises in defense of women. Barbara Newman (1995) presents an informative examination of his very popular work, De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus (On the Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex). She notes that his approach avoided many of the pitfalls of earlier works in that Agrippa refused to exhibit defensiveness or vindictive and his writing style is vastly entertaining (Newman 1995:224-225). Linda Woodbridge argues that he went to absurd extremes in his arguments, extremes that ridiculed any attempt to insist that one sex was better than the other (Woodbridge 1984:42).

A few of Agrippa’s positions demonstrate the skill with which he promoted his cause on behalf of women. For example, Agrippa declared that Christ was born in the guise of a male because men were inferior to women and thus it was a sign of His
humility (Newman 1995:244). Some of Agrippa’s arguments reflected his kabbalist background wherein he was able to associate Sophia or “wisdom” in the Bible with the Shekina, then with Mary, and finally all women (Newman 1995:231). As for Eve, she was the last of God’s creations and thus the apex of His work for which all else was merely preparatory. Adam was created of dirt and Eve of finer matter. Adam’s name means “earth” hers means “life” (Newman 1995:230). Agrippa insisted that woman’s body is not simply sensually beautiful but superior in classical proportions as well as more important to the development of new life than the male seed (Newman 1995:232-233).

As for women in the Christian Church, Agrippa argued that women of the early Church were its strength and that they served as both priests and teachers (Newman 1995:238). Finally, Agrippa blended theology with kabalistic materials, utilized Christian Neoplationisms as well as the topos of courtly love to prove the equality of the sexes, thus “calling for a gender-blind, equal-opportunity Church or a form of woman-worship” (Newman 1995:227). In all this, Agrippa’s skill at paradox resulted in the great popularity of this text, one that was frequently printed in various European languages.

In the 1969 work, Swetnam the Woman-hater: The Controversy and the Play, Coryl Crandall provides an interesting example of how one lengthy misogynist pamphlet backfired on its author. In 1615 a certain Joseph Swetnam wrote and published the Araignment of lewde, idle, froward, and vnconstant women. Its author declared a desire to warn young men against the dangers of the opposite sex. The pamphlet must have been too virulent because it appears to have stirred up a great deal of controversy in what was by then Puritan England. A Reverend Mr. Grosart declared the pamphlet to be “without a
spark of wit or salt of pungency” (4) and other critics objected to its lack of organization. Within five years of its publication the controversy resulted in the staging of a play wherein Swetnam was portrayed as both a fool and a fraud. Swetnam the Woman-hater was a great success because it probably reflected the attitudes of most middle class English Puritans (Crandall 1969:1-4).

Perhaps Poullain de La Barre (1647-1723) was familiar with these early efforts for he was a well educated man. His book, De l’egalite des deux sexes, was published in Paris in 1673 then translated and published in England in 1673 as The Woman As Good as the Man. Poullain was an educator who espoused Cartesian rationalism to the end that he often found himself investigated for heretical and subversive tendencies (MacLean 1988:12, 13). Poullain was “accused of Socinianism – the view that Christ was human and not divine” (MacLean 1988:1). While he eventually convinced the authorities that this was not the case, Poullain did insist that women were not inferior, were just as capable of learning as were men, and that any of their limitations were due to the culture that bound them, not to their own natures. Gerald M. MacLean strongly argues for the importance of Poullain’s work and suggests that, “the extent to which our notion of woman is a social construct based upon vulgar prejudice rather than historical fact constitutes one of the most important contributions to feminist thinking in the era before Mary Wollstonecraft (MacLean 1988:13).

Poullain de la Barre died only five years after the death of Madame Jeanne Guyon, yet the nature of women would continue to be debated even as the witch hunts of Europe began to draw to their close. For thousands of years women had to rise above their negative enculturation in order to develop their abilities and contribute to their
communities in any but the most structured ways. The perceptions of females did have slight variations depending upon social status, cultural groups and the period of time in which women lived. By the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the *querelle des femmes* raged not only in the minds of churchmen, philosophers, poets and writers, but female self-actualization also faced the additional challenges of forced enclosure and the powers of the Inquisition. In the world of religion control of the temptress and the preservation of chastity of both men and women continued to permeate the laws, the customs, indeed the very minds, of the period. The lives of millions of women, including those in this study, were affected by those efforts.
CHAPTER 5

WOMEN, CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS, AND HERESIES

"Hope and love keep us in this pleasant prison."


Between 1,100 and 1,700, female mysticism experienced a great florescence and then decline in Europe. Despite the restrictions placed upon women, their spiritual endeavors manifested in two social arenas. First, female religious developed conventual life-styles within the structures of the Roman Catholic faith. Second, female mystics often dissented from the mainstream religious milieu. They participated in the many religious movements that either called for reforms within the church or struggled for independence from it. The dissenters were often labeled as “heretics” or worse – the disciples of the devil.

Women, because of their weaker social position, were particularly vulnerable to accusations of heresy and witchcraft. Their lives and behaviors, as well as those of the exemplars in this dissertation, are best understood in the light of their participation in conventual settings, reforms of the church, heresies, and inquisitional witch hunts. Hildegard of Bingen’s prophetic gifts continually called for church reforms. Marguerite Porete was inflexible in her determination to be free of any restrictions other than her own conscience. Catherine of Siena was tireless in her efforts to unite the Church while
Joan of Arc’s prophetic talents were employed in patriotic fervor on behalf of France. Teresa of Avila established sixteen convents and struggled for reforms. Madam Jeanne Guyon considered herself a devout Catholic but came under suspicion as a heretic due to her insistence upon being directed by conscience only.

The Origins and Early History of Convents

The conventual life-style evolved during a process that took centuries to achieve and then maintain. During that time the women who entered the convents did so for various reasons; some chose that lifestyle, others were forced into it. The perceptions, laws, and authority of men determined the parameters for the lives of the women who lived within the convents. Nevertheless, women exerted many manifestations of their own creative wills within, against, and despite the structures assigned to them by men. This chapter examines the origins of the monastic traditions in which women’s convents developed and the revolutionary opportunity they afforded women, particularly female mystics, who sought to fulfill themselves outside the limits of marriage. The conventual life-style developed as a means to that end.

The evolution of convents matured during a long process that began soon after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. McNamara (1985:26-27) suggests that women found comfort in the consideration Jesus afforded them. She believes his associations with women were congenial and were in a real sense a revolutionary call to fairness. Hecker concurs in that “His relations with women have an atmosphere of rare sympathy, gentleness and charm” (1971:53). Women were with him when he taught. They fed him in their homes. They stood with him beneath his cross. Jesus talked with a Samaritan woman. He did not
condemn an adulteress, but he did condemn divorce as practiced in his milieu, a tradition wherein the women were powerless. When Jesus healed the woman with the issue of blood he ignored the tradition of pollution and inferiority that had surrounded women theretofore. Known to later generations of Christians as "Veronica," her condition would have "rendered her untouchable according to the laws governing ritual purification for women after menstruation and childbirth. Not unlike lepers, she was considered polluted and dangerous" (McNamara 1985:26-27). McNamara argues that all who knew this woman soon heard of her miracle, a miracle not only of healing but, equally miraculous, that Jesus was not repelled by her illness and instead blessed her for her faith.

Here in the Gospels was a social revolution against the worst examples of misogynistic cultural practice, and women quickly embraced the new religion. This opportunity was short lived for as Hecker notes, "as soon as we leave the Gospels and read the Apostles we are in a different sphere" (1971:53). Because Jesus' followers lived in a world of Greco-Roman traditions as well as Jewish custom, they continued many of their former practices and adapted in order to survive. As a result the roles of women in the faith diminished, but only over time.

The presence of women was noted in the records of the apostles. Women accompanied early Christian apostles in their travels as was the case with the Apostle Peter's wife and perhaps his daughter (McNamara 1985:16-17). Priscilla and Aquila, Linus and Claudia, Junia and Andronicus are associated together as Christian couples. Other women opened their homes to early Christian gatherings and became "leaders in service of the others" (Morris 1973:2-3). Joan Morris lists a number of such women,

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1 See McNamara 1985:31 n. 37 for a discussion on the authenticity of the name "Junia."
including Chloe, Lydia, Mark's mother, a woman named Nympha, and Priscilla who is named before her husband, Aquila (Morris 1973:1). Paul appears to go to some lengths to honor a certain Phoebe. Morris (1973:100) suggests she may have been an ordained deaconess.

Ida Magli argues that from an historical and anthropological point of view the "witnessing" of women to the new religion and their willingness to become martyred and "equal to males" in courage and devotion had a powerful effect on the growth of the young religion (Magli 2003:41). Paul's comments in I Corinthians 11:5 indicate that women did speak in church, and he seems not to be troubled by it in this portion of his letter. The power of the women's testimony of the new faith matched that of the male converts and, according to Magli

"In all the history that we know, the spread of Christianity represents virtually the only case in which women participated en masse in a cultural revolution on an equal footing with males, acting personally in all its aspects: theoretical, political, economic, and institutional. Not only did women spread the message by living it and making it live in daily life, but they also faced torture and death in such a way as to arouse the admiration of judges and executioners" (Magli 2003:41).

The tradition of some female leadership is also noted in the writings of Pliny the Younger in a letter to Trajan. Morris (1973) argues that the presence of "women overseers (episcopae) of churches and Christian communities was a common practice from apostolic times and that it continued throughout many centuries and was only very slowly suppressed" (Morris 1973:3). Indeed, female heads of double communities of men and women lasted from early Christian times into the early Middle Ages. Women

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2 Joan Morris, 1973:2 m 59 n.8 Epistles 96 and 97.
associated with the urban centers were ordained virgins known as “canonesses” (Magli 2003:29) and are believed to be of apostolic origin (Morris 1973:10).

There were both secular and regular canonesses. “The seculars lived in private apartments; the regulars lived in community” (Morris 1973:7). The Canoness Institute of Saint Waudru in Mons, Belgium, illustrates one example of their work. The women chanted the Divine Office from the seventh century until the French Revolution (Morris 1973:10). Some women were ordained as deaconesses and served in the rituals as at the Basilica of Hagia Sofia (Morris 1973:7). Nevertheless, female leadership and participation was a matter of concern, especially regarding the approach of women to the sacred altar and the Eucharistic services. This was due to female menses and the issue of pollution.

Morris believes abbesses “would not have considered it necessary to refrain from hearing confession” even if they were not allowed to say Mass “for reasons of ritual impurity” (Morris 1973:142). In *The Lady was a Bishop*, Morris concludes that women from earliest times were ordained to an administrative position within the Church. They at times received the titles of *Episcopa, Sacerdota Maxima, Praeposita, and Custos* of churches. They had all the powers of a bishop with regard to the jurisdiction of churches and people within their territories. It cannot be concluded, although they were called *sacerdos*, that they were consecrated for the celebration of the Eucharist, at least not until past fifty or sixty years of age. Even if the ordination was the same as that of men, as women they would have of their own accord withheld from touching the Eucharistic species. Although the idea of women’s impurity was based on a completely mistaken understanding of genetics, which has been the reason for withholding her from full priestly ordination, it nevertheless stands as witness to the belief in the true presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. It was the fear of contaminating so holy a thing that led to all the precautions, such as staying at a distance from the altar and not going to Communion during menstrual periods. That has brought about restrictions that today no longer make any sense (Morris 1973:139)
These examples of female leadership were not the norm because the issue of impurity generally affected women's opportunities to hold church offices. Ranke-Heinemann quotes Theodore of Balsamon (d. c. 1195) who explained the situation clearly.

"At one time deaconesses used to be ordained in keeping with the laws of the Church. They were allowed to approach to altar, but because of their monthly impurity they were ousted from their place in the liturgy and from the holy altar. In the honorable church of Constantinople deaconesses are still selected, but they no longer have access to the altar" (Ranke-Heinemann 1991:25).

Despite the compassion of Jesus, it is generally believed that women did not consecrate the Eucharist, as there remained an issue of pollution during menstruation due to both the Jewish and Greek customs. Menstruating women continued to be perceived as dangerous and "even to be under the domination of the devil" (Morris 1973:2). It was considered unconscionable for menstruating women to partake of Holy Communion even into the Middle Ages (Ranke-Heinemann 1991:24).

During the earliest centuries of Christianity there is little evidence that women were being forced into religious communities; they chose that life-style for reasons of their own. Those reasons included an aversion to the dominance of males and the dangers and rigors of motherhood as well as notions of the equality of all Christian converts and the impending Second Coming of Christ. According to McNamara (1983:1-5) even the tremendous emphasis of the early Church Fathers upon the "virginal life was only fully sanctioned by orthodox writers after women had made it a practical reality" (McNamara 1983:1).

McNamara argues that the Christian women of the Roman Empire found the means to create "a new niche for themselves in the social structure" (McNamara 1873:1).
They put off the traditional roles of women as sexually active wives and mothers in order to live independently among other like-minded females. This in turn created a new relationship between the women themselves, one of friendships that existed beyond the familial patriarchal structures. Friendships developed into groups that followed two basic forms. First, there were the women who served their respective communities through their associations with local cathedrals or *Domus-Ecclesiae*. Morris suggests that women were the first to live in such communities as evidenced by the fact that “St. Peter found a group of widows surrounding Tabitha (Dorcas). St. Basil interprets this passage in the Acts to mean that Tabitha belonged to the Order of the Widows” (Morris 1973:9-10). Morris indicates that Tillemont believed there to be fifteen hundred consecrated widows who were members of the Order of Widows and Virgins in Rome in A.D. 260 (Morris 1973:7).

While some women chose to remain in urban centers and self-actualize their spiritual goals in that location, others fled the confusion and distractions of city life for the wilderness, a traditional location for ascetic life-styles which was well established in Judea, Egypt and Syria. The women who followed this regime became hermits and anchoresses. It is estimated that by the fourth century there were twenty thousand nuns living as hermits and anchoresses in the desert while only ten thousand monks practiced the austerities of asceticism (Morris 1973:12). Over time, these solitary ascetics formed religious orders, and their monasteries began without clerical authorities or elected and ordained individuals (Morris 1973:9).

Women may actually have preceded men into the monastic life-style. The first recorded example of a monk’s life is found in Athanasius’ account of the life of St.
Anthony (251-c. 360). Yet Jo Ann McNamara points out the fact that before Anthony could remove himself from the world he first had find a place for his orphaned sister to live and be cared for. This he did by placing her in “a house of consecrated women” (McNamara 1985:1). His action suggests that Christian women had already separated themselves from the general population in order to follow a religious vocation, that being dedication to the goal of achieving unity with God (Swan 2001:13). To this end women practiced poverty and silence in the austerity of small “cells.” “Solitude could be found in the city as well as in the desert. It was not uncommon for these women to move between their monastic communities and the desert” (Swan 2001:13). There the women studied and prayed, following the rounds of the Divine Office, occasionally partaking of the Eucharist, and creating lives of simplicity.

Whether the women lived in urban centers or in “wilderness” areas, they became legendary figures if they were martyred. Magli argues that suffering unto death was considered a form of “witnessing” (Magli 2003:37), one in which a woman was just as capable of amazing crowds of coliseum participants with her refusal to fight to the death, but rather to allow herself to be killed with as much courage and dignity as men who upheld the Christian faith unto their deaths. Death in this manner made women “equal to males” (Magli 2003:41). When physical martyrdom was no longer an option, women continued their ascetic practices as a form of sacrifice and death to the ways of the world. In so doing women found a new power in the ascetic life-style; one that allowed them to exercise their own talents and abilities without the constant presence of males (Magli 2003:69).
Thus in the early centuries of Christianity there were advantages for religious women in group houses. Those women had opportunities to gain an education, to read and write, and to develop their talents, intellects, and spirituality (Evangelisti 2007:67). Removed from the authority of men, they enjoyed a certain independence and could exercise the power to vote for their leaders within the group. They could participate in the decision making process as it pertained to landholdings and other matters of economic administration (Laven 2002: xxxi). As Laven points out, feminist writers have stressed these aspects of this life-style and the strengths of the women who willingly enjoined it. It is this position that has been emphasized thus far in this study, but there is another aspect that must be examined as well.

In the alternative scenario, nuns have been presented as helpless victims of a male authoritarian system. In truth, the original privilege of celibacy eventually developed into forced virginity and enclosure. The severity of that state took centuries to evolve and centuries more to enforce. What began as an opportunity for an independent life-style and spiritual quest became embroiled in processes that involved economic exigencies as well as political necessities. Daughters of elite households became the nuns and abbesses of Europe, women who slowly lost power and freedom, and whose dedicated efforts to achieve the ideals of Christianity eventually became entangled with scandal and institutional incarceration. By the sixteenth century, the situation in nunneries had become more complex and far less utopian (Laven 2002: xxxii). The development of those complexities changed the perception of convents from establishments of noble endeavor, to institutions that were highly criticized and symbolic of the need for reform.
The Conventual Lifestyle and Its Advantages

As Christianity spread from regions of the Mediterranean into the Germanic kingdoms, there arose the need to house women who could no longer be kept in polygamous settings. From the mid-fifth century until the reign of Charlemagne (crowned in 800) the Merovingian dynasties of Frankish and Germanic kingdoms encouraged the development of nunneries. These establishments were designed to provide a climate wherein female spirituality could prosper and at the same time house the single women of the elite class that resulted when German polygamy was outlawed (Wilson and Margolis 2004:740-741).

It was natural to extend the practice of cloistered women in homes or in monastic institutions that already existed in the Church. The practice of female claustration was an ancient device designed to achieve several ends. It was based upon two needs, the first being to protect daughters from violation and harm, the second, to protect the family’s honor. Marriage among the aristocracy was political as well as economic and the establishment of beneficial alliances was created through marriage (King 1991:29). It was the work of daughters to maintain their integritas at all costs (Wilson and Margolis 2004:929). It was the work of fathers, brothers and uncles to see to it that the family honor was upheld. “The honor of an entire family and of the men responsible for it revolved about the conservation of a daughter’s virginity” (King 1991:29). The critical factor of legitimacy of succession was made more certain if the mother’s chastity was established.

Elite society had no place for an unmarriageable woman. If a daughter would not or could not marry a man, her only other alternative was to become a bride of Christ. Most
daughters "internalized the needs of their families and responded to the call to act in accordance with the family honor" (Laven 2002:43). As celibate nuns they were honored for their good works and virtue while at the same time bringing honor to the family by means of those efforts. The women served through prayer and counsel on behalf of benefactors and members of the community. They also provided medical assistance, teaching, scriptoriums and various charitable acts. In all this they and their families were accorded respect.

The political tradition that combined spiritual dedication with prestige and power drew various types of individuals to this life-style. As a result, some teenage females chose to become the brides of Christ as was the case with Catherine of Siena. Occasionally married couples chose to take their vows and entered religious orders together, but this was rare (Lawler 2001:41-42). Unhappy wives and widows frequently chose this lifestyle in order to avoid the dangers that attended the marital state. Some women chose the conventual life in order to remain unmarried but connected to their natal families. In fact, during the early centuries most convents were connected to families of the nobility, physically as well as financially. Claustration was not severe and families stayed in close touch with the nuns who often lived together with sibling sisters, aunts and other female members of their families (Evangelisti 2007:18-19).

Intellectual women who wanted the freedom to develop their talents sometimes chose the enclosed life. As a result nuns comprised the greater portion of literate European women. Many nuns used their time and talents creatively. For example, they wrote devotional works and plays which were often written in the local vernacular. Although the nuns were separated by grates, audiences attended the plays which were
presented at various festivals locally and elsewhere (King 1991:88). This "contained" visibility allowed the women an indirect access to power and influence. Their convents became centers of culture in the community and their performances, musical and theatrical, were very popular thus affording many women personal recognition (Evangelisti 2007:118-121). Moreover, the nuns were believed to serve as intermediaries between heaven and earth. Thus the choice for claustration may be perceived as a satisfactory one for those who desired the advantages offered by service in the Church.

In as much as nuns were the daughters of the nobility and the extremely well to do, their dowries were given in exchange for the women's life-time care. The dowries were generally substantial and contributed to the maintenance of monastic life. The costs of the convents were also met through a variety of means including the dowries, gifts, and sale of burial sites on the grounds of the churches. While some convents practiced poverty, others were richly endowed and housed wealthy canonesses who lived quite comfortably in their apartments with their furniture and servants. Other convents were attached to palaces and were also well endowed. Convents often kept quarters for important visitors (Evangelisti 2007:18, 24-25,183).

In another effort to raise money, institutions promoted individual saints not only for their examples, but also for economic reasons. The lives of saints were promoted by means of hagiographies as well as through the support of cultic groups connected with the sites devoted to their saints. Pilgrims crossed Europe in order to visit sites associated with saints and to observe their relics which were believed to have healing powers (Gies and Gies 1981:148). Feast days and celebrations were held in the honor of local saints (Cook and Herzman 2004:48). As John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (2000) note, the
practice of pilgrimage resulted in greatly increased income for the entire community and thereby aided the local economy. One of the most long lasting and most successful of such efforts has been in honor of Catherine of Siena. In recent centuries she has been venerated as one of the two patron saints of Italy and now of Europe (Parsons 2004). Economic advantages did indeed accrue to localities noted for their saints, including those of exemplary women. In the case of female saints, male hagiographers wrote the lives of these women in largely formulaic patterns. Male clerics were required to be associated with the female houses in order to hear confessions and administer the Eucharist to the nuns. The priests were often schooled in Latin and therefore able to observe outstanding nuns and abbesses and write official accounts of their lives. In *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Catherine M. Mooney presents a detailed analysis of both “female self-representation and male representations of female sanctity” (1999:1), representations that illustrated different points of view, the women themselves, or their biographers. As a result, it appears that “Most medieval holy women are known to us solely through texts written by men” (Mooney 1991:3). Their *vitae* provide more evidence of the “hagiographic agenda and spiritual theology” (Mooney 1999:167) of the biographers than of the lives of the women themselves. This aspect of the accounts of women’s lives complicates the study of their lives and experiences whatever the rule and type of conventual practice they chose or was chosen for them.

*The “Rules” for Women Religious*

The lifestyles of women living within the convents varied. Wilson and Margolis (2004:811) provide clarification on the many forms female religious life-styles
encompassed. The categories often reflected the various degrees of enclosure entailed. For example, wealthy "canonesses" did not have to renounce their property and did not live the lives of strict enclosure experienced by "nuns" in cloisters. There were several categories of recluses. "Hermits" chose to live alone but were still able to go out into the world when they desired to do so, whereas "cenobites" and anchoresses were confined to their "cells." The nuns living in convents followed the customs of their various orders, such as the Benedictine and Dominican rules. Until the High Middle Ages, double monasteries housed both men and women but in separate quarters. The administrators of these enterprises were often abbesses.

Whichever form of lifestyle the women chose, there was always the fact that times were violent and the physical bodies of women as well as their virginity needed protection and control. Thus there is a long history of Canon Law that pertains to women. The Canon Laws of the Church dealt with not only ecclesiastical orders but many facets of daily life for the laity such as marriages, births, and deaths. Thus canon law established the daily parameters of life for women as well as men (Wilson and Margolis 2004:527-541). In the case of women, various councils and synods considered questions of women's menses, their "dress codes, hairstyles, cosmetics, bathing, and diet" (Wilson and Margolis 2004:529) as well as restrictions on their sexual life practices. Matters of ascetic lifestyles and marriage were both considered under law. Laws were written that pertained to the roles of abbesses, deaconesses and widows as well as restrictions of the roles of women that pertained to the liturgy with its various aspects of prayer, discipline and purity (Wilson and Margolis 2004:530-539).
Communities of women were organized around sets of rules or guidelines that were designed to keep order in the daily lives of the members and to help them achieve their spiritual goals. There were various “rules” most of which were originally designed for male monastic groups. Those rules were adopted by female houses and modified according to the differing needs of the women. Some of the guidelines include the Rule of Saint Augustine, the Rule of Saint Basil, the Rule of Saint Benedict, and the Regula prima of St. Francis (Wilson and Margolis 2004:811). One of the earliest such rules was written by Casesarius of Arles (470-542) for his sister and her group of monastic sisters. A few rules were written specifically for women. For example, the Ancrene Riwle or Ancrene Wisse was written in England for female anchoresses (Wilson and Margolis 2004:815).

One of the most moderate and successful set of rules was that of Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-547). Benedict’s Rule was flexible enough for conventual use “from the early Middle Ages till the present” (Cook and Herzman 2004:139). It emphasized a balance between scheduled services for prayer, or “offices,” manual labor and rest. It also encouraged learning and this reinforced scholarship among the women who followed the Rule in monastic settings. As a result it made possible the broad spectrum of learning exemplified by the writings of the Benedictine abbess, Hildegard of Bingen (Cook and Herzman 2004:134-140). Some of the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise explored their efforts to adapt the Rule of St. Benedict for the women in her convent. As an abbess, Heloise followed the tradition of powerful abbesses and adapted rules for male houses to accommodate the needs of the women who lived within her domain (Wilson and Margolis 2004:811-818).
Because of their relationships to wealth and the nobility, abbesses exercised considerable influence and power well into the Renaissance. Morris provides a detailed examination of the episcopal jurisdiction of abbesses (1973:17, 131). She argues that the power of these women was strongly related to the fact that abbesses themselves were of the nobility and their roles were similar to the roles of queens in that they were supported by traditions of both authority and jurisdiction. Indeed, the stature of abbesses endured by means of their powerful kinsmen. Although abbesses did not ordain, they did have “quasi-episcopal” prerogatives. That power was reified by the various symbols and insignia they used to signify both their priestly and episcopal responsibilities. The symbols of their authority included the “alb or rochet garment, a stole worn by deaconesses, the crozier, the pectoral cross, the ring, gloves and miter” (Morris 1973:131).

King argues that the “most splendid years of female monasticism were the early ones. In the first Benedictine convents of the Middle Ages the nuns enjoyed great autonomy, and nobly born abbesses wielded considerable power” (1991:101). Over time the issue of the polluted and unworthy state of fallen womankind affected their rights and powers in the Church and there was a slow evolution away from giving ritual authority to women. The issues of both consecrating the Eucharistic Sacrament as well as the worthiness of women to approach the sacred alter were central to the debates as was the ordination of canonesses as deaconesses. This was an ancient practice, one wherein “it took literally centuries for the tradition to die” (Morris 1973:15). It was not until the Council of Trent in the 1560s that bishops were permitted to interfere in the jurisdiction
of abbesses, although some abbots and bishops tried to do so as was illustrated by an unfortunate experience late in the life of Hildegard of Bingen (Maddocks 2001:244-247).

Hildegard and Teresa were abbesses of high social status sustained by wealth and social position. Both women had the burdens and the self-actualizing opportunities provided by the office of abbess. They inherited what remained of the original authority afforded the leaders of female religious houses. Despite the fact that they accepted principles of simplicity and poverty, they were women of great wealth and were of the noble class, a condition that aided them in their lives' work. They benefited from long traditions that connected the powers of Rome with the developing kingdoms of Europe.

Conventual Lifestyles and Perceptions of Imprisonment

There were other reasons for women to live conventual life-styles, reasons that were less fulfilling. The decision to give a child to a monastic order was often a simple fact of economics; too many children in a family resulted in a tremendous financial burden, so "extra children were sent to a monastery" (Laven 2002:26). Lawler notes that "It was often cheaper to purchase entry to a convent than to provide a dowry for a daughter" (Lawler 2001:41-42). This was particularly the case with unmarried daughters. Many future nuns spent their childhoods in the convents as educande, their education beginning there at about the age of seven. By this means they would not have experienced enough of the outside world to resist taking the veil (Laven 2002:37). Indeed, King asserts that parents frequently acted out of greed based upon a social tradition, one that would continue until the eighteenth century. The practice of forced
claustation finally abated due to Napoleonic reforms whereby women were also provided with the right to receive inheritances from familial testators (King 1991:92).

Sometimes babies or young children were given to monasteries to be raised. These children were called “oblates.” Hildegard was one such child. As the tenth child born to her mother, she was given to the monastery at the age of eight as a tithe. Later in life Hildegard openly opposed this practice. Often oblates were disabled or simply lacked physical beauty, which made it difficult for them to survive in the outside world (Lawler 2001:41). These children were raised within the conventual system and were expected to live there as women religious throughout their lives.

Convents were also used to confine socially erring or undesirable women, both secular and religious (Magli 2003:196; King 1991:86). Common criminals and “dishonored” women were imprisoned within the same monastic establishments as dedicated nuns and female elites. This was due to the fact that state operated prison systems had not yet been created, and thus convents became a combination of idealistic elitists, resistant sacrifices to Christ and the socially undesirable. Magli argues that there were “prostitutes, repentant and otherwise; thieves, heretics, women who performed abortions, old women abandoned to alcohol or begging, [and] adulteresses who had managed to escape capital punishment” (Magli 2003:196). There were also political exiles, “cast-off mistresses, inconvenient wives and former empresses” (Lawler 2001:42-43), each put away for the convenience of their more powerful lords. In addition, convents housed “inconvenient claimants to the throne” (Lawler 2001:43) and female heretics of various orders.
Convents held not only political prisoners but also convicted nuns and clerics who were given prison sentences within monastic walls. One such case is that of Benedetta Carlini (Magli 2003:187-189, 192, 195). Benedetta was an Italian nun and mystic who lived from 1590 to 1661. She was convicted of sodomy with another nun and was condemned to solitary confinement in the monastery dungeon where she remained for thirty-five years until her death. In the case of Sisters Margherita Angela Portinai and the lay sister Elizabetta, they also were condemned to life imprisonment for their association with a monk. Life imprisonment was applied to a number of sisters who did not keep their vows of chastity. Several were known to have been walled in alive and kept on a diet of bread and water (Medioli 2001:170-171).

Over the centuries the rules demanding total enclosure became more and more strictly enforced with the result that more women were punished with closer supervision and confinement. There is no record of how the nun jailers felt about their calling in what Magli refers to as “a prison within a prison, a most secret, terrifying dungeon” (Magli 2003:196), one that was ostensibly cut off from all communication with the outside world. How nuns were expected to supervise and control this combination of women is unknown. The task must have been daunting, especially for women who sought a serene life-style for spiritual fulfillment.

Silvia Evangelisti (2007:5) agrees with King’s statistics on the actual numbers of women in convents. “In sixteenth-century Florence, as many as half of the women of some elite families resided in convents, and in a seventeenth-century Venetian noble clan, one out of three daughters was persuaded to ‘monacar’ rather than ‘maritar’” (King 1991:6). There were fewer convents and nuns in England than on the continent, but all
their numbers varied with the frequency and virulence of the plague. There were 3,419 nuns in Venice in 1552 or 13 percent of the female population including the *conversae*, or conventual servants (King 1991:9). King asserts that the number of nuns and *conversae* in Milan swelled to include one-half to three-fourths of the daughters of the nobility in the late seventeenth century (1991:83-84). There they found themselves within the conventual walls with aunts, sisters and cousins as well women forced to the monastery literally as prisoners.

Many women fought their claustration by all means available including running away from the convent as did Suor Crestina Dolfin in 1561 (Laven 2002:37-40). The efforts of Caterina di messer Vieri di Donatino d’Arezzo serve as an example. She was sent to a convent by her widowed mother when she was eleven years old. Caterina ran away only a few years later. A literate and determined woman, she was eventually able to secure an annulment of her vows and have the children she bore legitimatized by a papal act in 1403 (King 1991:87). Another example is found in the life of Charlotte de Bourbon. She “filed a witnessed deposition of protest” in 1559 when she was forced by her father to enter a convent. At the time she was about twelve years old (King 1991:86). Her story is made more amazing by the fact that she was ordained an abbess only a few years later. She fulfilled this role for twelve years, at which time she rebelled and “left for a new country, a new religion, and a husband – William the Silent, organizer of the Dutch Republic” (King 1991:87).

The fact that so many women were reluctant participants in the claustration process may have resulted in the low morale and, in some cases the low moral state of some who lived in convents. By the late Middle Ages and Renaissance there are
accounts of luxurious excesses, lax discipline, and little attention paid to vows of chastity (King 1991:85) by numerous nuns, probably those confined against their wills and with no desire to obey the strict rules of claustration.

If some late medieval nuns relished ample rations, enjoyed domestic service, conversed gladly with foreign visitors, played the lute and embroidered elegantly, entertained their lovers openly and gave birth covertly, one reason is surely that they had never entered the convent walls to seek spiritual things. They had been placed there because they could not or would not marry and they could not be left free. The history of female monachation is at least in part the history of female imprisonment (King 1991:85-86).

Canon Law, Reform and Enclosure

The excesses of the women created such scandals that convents and the women therein achieved the reputation of bordellos and prostitutes (King 1991:85-86). Determined nuns beat the system of enclosure by whatever means possible. In both Milan and Venice, citizens called upon the popes and civic leaders of various eras to reform the convents and to close them if necessary. According to King’s research on the situation in Venice, “In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, thirty-three convents were involved in one or more prosecutions for fornication with nuns. Nine of these had between ten and fifty-two prosecutions” (King 1991:85-86). Yet there was more to come. King notes that, “scandalous above all was the Benedictine convent of Sant’Angelo di Contorta, populated by women of Venice’s most lustrous families. Between 1401 and 1487 it faced fifty-two prosecutions for sex crimes” (King 1991:85-86). As a result reforms consistently concluded with more efforts to control and confine the women; in other words, their quest for freedom only resulted in more strictures and structuring of their environments.
Officially, the policy of strict enclosure for women began in 1298 with a section in Boniface's *Liber Sextus* which is referred to as *Periculos o.* *Periculos o* required convents to adhere to the principle of claustration, either by beginning the practice or reinstituting it if it was no longer in force (Laven 2002: 86). Elizabeth Makowski (1997) gives a detailed examination of the law and its interpretation from 1298 to 1545. She notes that it originally applied exclusively to nuns, not to women who lived in convents as canonesses (Makowski 1997:1). In the beginning there were some exceptions to the rule, but Pope Boniface’s effort was reinforced a few years later by the *Apostolicae sedis* of 1309 which insisted upon the perpetual cloister of all nuns (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:67). For the nuns, the strictures were severe. “All nuns, no matter what rule they observed and no matter where their monasteries were located, were to be perpetually cloistered” (Makowski 1997:2). Even abbesses were to conduct the business of the convent through proctors. This restricted the contributions of the convent to the local communities as well as the contributions of the local communities to the convents.

Women did not simply acquiesce to the restrictions of claustration. Ulrike Strausser (2001) argues that enclosure caused many difficulties not only in matters of daily practicalities but also with social networking. Often the women religious argued against the strict rules or simply ignored the regimentation until it was impossible to continue doing so. Male clergymen assumed greater roles of guardianship and supervision (Strausser 2001:211). Gradually, the enclosed women and their convents lost their importance and influence. Strausser contends that “already existing dependencies on male authorities in church and society became more pronounced. Female liberty appears to have been the price of enclosure” (Strausser 2001:208).
Nancy van Vuuren (1973:50-51) indicates the difficulties Church authorities experienced when they tried to enforce _Periculoso_ which was renewed and strengthened by the Council of Trent and again by Pope Pius V who issued the _Circa Pastorialis_. By these means religious women were forced into highly restricted enclosure. Nuns were not to leave the monastery up until the time of their deaths (Makowski: 28-29). Enclosure would be enforced by arms if necessary and any woman who did not adhere to strict claustration would be excommunicated. Yet it was “not until the 1560s that the Council of Trent, the great reforming council of the Catholic Church, set about devising a coherent policy for regulating the conduct of monks and nuns. The council decreed that all nunneries should be subject to compulsory enclosure, and its decision was reaffirmed by Pope Pius V’s bull _circa pastorialis_ in 1566” (Laven 2002: xxvi). In 1572 Pope Gregory XIII continued to fight for strict cloistering. When he issued his _Deo sacrīs_, it specified that all clergy, including bishops, must be accompanied by additional religious persons when they visited a convent (van Vuuren 1973:50-51).

Over time the activities of the nuns within the cloister became more and more restricted. There were further regulations relative to the practice of silence, the access to books and certain works of art, as well as the music to be sung by the women. According to Laven, “prelates did their best to root out additional stimulants to the nun’s spiritual imagination. Suspicious of the emotive power of Baroque music, they forbade the nuns from singing elaborate anthems and from playing musical instruments.” (Laven 2002:14) Heretofore, nuns had always sung in convents, but now they were restricted to plainchant. The end result was that “Nuns were free to pray, or study, in their little cells, and they were free from the entangling demands of families. But they were not free to seek God in
any but the prescribed way, nor to serve their neighbor, nor to imitate Christ” (King 1991:103).

“The absolute insistence on enclosure and the zealous attention paid to implementing it sought to place nuns in a vacuum, sealed off from human relations” (Laven 2002:103). No longer were women allowed to go out, or visitors to come in. Conversations with visitors took place if at all, with the nuns secured behind grills (Medioli 2001:170). After the reforms, all persons “associated with the convents were subjected to the rule of enclosure” (Medioli 2001:165). The enforcement of these strictures applied not only to the nuns but their families as well. Whereas family members had traditionally kept in contact with their daughters and sisters in the convents, visitors were now taken to court. One mother, a Paulina Coreggio of Venice, defended her visits with her daughter during her trial and argued that “Such a law, although just and holy, has never been used against mothers, whose incaution is not derived from scandalous intent; but rather, on account of love for their children, they have acted by most excusable and involuntary motives (Quoted in Laven 2002:117). Laven argues that the bounds of love never totally surrendered to the law, nor did friendship expire, for as Brian Patrick McGuire shows in his article, despite all restrictions letters continued to connect women to outsiders including men who were friends (McGuire 1989:343-353).

Much of our information about life in the nunneries comes from the interrogations of those sent to investigate violations of the enclosure restrictions. Although many women were forbidden or unable to write; they could nonetheless testify of their experiences. As Laven explains, much has been learned from their statements when considered along with those of
Convent employees, priests, neighbors, nuns' friends and relatives – anyone, in short, who was in any way connected with the nunneries. These diverse accounts have survived in careful transcriptions, and registering the variations in language that reflected status and education. Every case sheds new light on the lives of nuns in the age of reform. Enclosure sought to keep out the curious. And yet, it is through the records of its implementation that we are granted entry to the convents of Venice (Laven 2002: xxxii-xxxiii).

Francesca Medioli finds that within a century after the reforms of the Council of Trent (1560s) women had largely accepted their fates. They objected to total enclosure, but they simply knew no other lifestyle. “By the mid-seventeenth century, enclosure constituted a well-established tradition” (Medioli 2001:167). Despite some conflicted feelings, dedicated women like Sor Isabella Rose, Cecilia Gonzaga and Queen Sancia (King 1991:95-96) considered life in a convent a sanctuary in an otherwise violent world. Following the death of her husband, Barcelonan Sor Isabella Rose wrote Ignatius Loyola of the peace she had found in a cloistered life. “We are 52 nuns here, and there reigns among us so much love and blessedness, that one can only give thanks to our Lord God” (King 1991:96). In 1481, Camilla da Varano expressed her joy as a nun in St. Clare in Urbino Convent. “I found the sweetest singing of pious prayers, the beauty of good examples, secret chambers of divine grace and heavenly gifts” (King 1991:97-98). For such women the words inscribed on a plaque above what was once the entrance to the chapel of the convent of Santa Maria delle Vergini in Venice and dated May 2, 1557, still applied, for it read, “Hope and love keep us in this pleasant prison” (Laven 2002: xxx).

The reforms and enforced attention to enclosure were not only in response to the demands of civic groups and Church reformers, but they were also a reaction to the ridicule of various heresies and most especially the Protestant movement wherein parents were urged to liberate “their daughters from the cloister (and from the sexual wiles of the
predatory male clergy) (Laven 2002: xxvi). With the advent of Protestantism the situation changed dramatically for dedicated nuns. The Protestant revolution insisted not only upon reforms, but on the eradication of the convents themselves. Margaret L. King provides an account of the setting for what would prove liberating to some nuns and traumatic for others.

Secure in their female communities, engaged in the task of prayer unquestioningly valued by their contemporaries, skeptical of other forms of women’s work, many nuns feared nothing more than a change in their condition. But with the advent of Protestantism, earnest male reformers set out to liberate the nuns from their convents. Martin Luther himself led the way, opening up the convent doors in his city of Wittenberg, and espousing the former nun Katharina von Bora. (80ff) [whilst declaring] “a woman is not created to be a virgin, but to conceive and bear children” (King 1991:97-98).

As the Protestant movement expanded across Europe many nuns and conventual orders resisted the changes. King notes that “at least one convent in Strasbourg refused to disband” (King 1991:98). Those in Strasbourg would not go home even though they could no longer participate in the mass. “Here, as throughout Protestant lands, determined sisters remained in their convents until death, sometimes sole residents of the moribund institution in which they had sought salvation” (King 1991:98). Nuns in different settings but with similar vexations did all in their power to continue their conventual life-styles. Sister Jeanne de Jussie wrote of the conflicts she experienced between 1526 and 1535. Jussie honored the lay Catholic women who did not convert to Protestantism. Those women were subject to beatings and imprisonment by their husbands who were now active Protestants. “Refusing to attend Protestant services, they escaped from their houses to attend mass. They armed themselves and their children, ready to attack Protestant wives as male Catholics attacked Protestant men” (King
One solution was to remove oneself from the conflict, which is what Sister Jeanne de Jussie eventually did, moving from Geneva to Annecy, France.

In Nuremberg, one patrician abbess named Caritas Prickheimer wrote of her heroic efforts to maintain the integrity of her convent during the years of 1524-28. According to her testimony only one of the sixty women under her direction chose willingly to depart with the Protestants. She describes mothers demanding their daughters leave the convent with them lest they be under the “maul of the devil” (King 1991:99). Now, the young, consecrated daughters “cried that they did not want to leave the pious, holy convent, that they were absolutely not in hell, but if they broke out of it they would descend into the abyss of hell, and that they would demand from them their souls on the Day of Judgment before the Strict Judge” (King 1991:100). Despite their arguments, the young women were eventually “dragged out of the convent and brought home, after years of separation, to the families which had given being to flesh but not soul” (King 1991:100).

Personal accounts like those of Sister Jeanne de Jussie and Caritas Prickheimer humanize the toll taken on lives as a result of conflicting religious views. Religious discord within Christianity was not a new phenomenon. Dissenting voices were heard from the earliest centuries of the faith. The history of dissent is a witness to the resolve of individuals to be true to their convictions despite slanderous opposition and physical danger. The religious wars of Europe were also political. Women participated in the conflicts and, when branded as “heretics,” were often accused of witchcraft. The intensity of their persecution has been referred to by Margaret L. King as a “war against women”
Faith and Fear: Religious Conflict, Heresy, Reform, and Witchcraft

A survey of the history of Christianity tells a disturbing tale, one wherein different beliefs and dissident cries for reform often resulted in dangerous accusations of heresy and witchcraft. The record of religious discourse is also a record of impassioned disputation; one that is marked by violence between Christians over the concepts they embraced as "truth." Religious enthusiasm was frequently accompanied by political and economic expediency. As a result, throughout the centuries a troubled sense of risk existed, one that affected all those who thought for themselves and entered into the religious dialogue of their times.

The opinions of those who lost in the theological conflicts have long been called "heretical," but to the student with a culturally relativistic approach to religious studies, heresy appears to simply be a matter of disagreement with some facet of a dominant religion's dogma. Those branded as heretical were and are individuals or groups who lacked the force and fortitude, persuasion and wealth, to triumph in the doctrinal conflict. Newman reminds us that "We forget too easily that neither 'orthodoxy' nor 'heresy' - much less 'Christianity' or 'the Church' - was ever a monolith. In pretending otherwise, we merely perpetuate the inquisitors' program of defining Insiders and Outsiders, even if we praise what they damned and damn what they praised" (1995:246).

Despite the might of political and ecclesiastical forces, Church interdicts, excommunication, repression and torture, individuals as well as groups of all social
classes persisted in following their own convictions. Even in the thirteenth century, when the Church was at the peak of its strength, the burghers of the cities and villages had grown disillusioned with many aspects of the Church and often resisted its authority. This may have been due not only to growing scholasticism and humanism, but also to fact that “The weapons of excommunication and interdict are not as effective as they used to be, partly through overuse” (Gies and Gies 1969:132). Over the long centuries the process of controlling opposition became institutionalized and by the Middle Ages it was organized into the Inquisition. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Inquisitors, heresy itself “was never overcome: and in the heresy of the Hussites, and to a lesser degree the English Lollards and the Waldensians, passed into the Reformation” (Leff 1999:47).

Accusations of heresy and witchcraft with their attendant penalties created the climate of fear and fury in which the women of this study lived. In each case their very character, courage and resolve were tested in a milieu of fear that made possible immanent accusations of great danger. Not only might they be tortured and suffer excruciating deaths, but they faced the fear that, if proved wrong, they would suffer eternal damnation as well (Lambert 2002:5). Their concern was based upon the perception that ideas represent the forces of good or of evil. Malcolm Lambert argues that dissenters, as seen by Catholics or Protestants, are not just individuals with a different point of view, but rather that each one is an agent in a heresy that “was the work of the devil” (Lambert 2002:4) and each heretic a willing servant of that entity. Thus Lambert suggests “It takes two to create a heresy: the heretic, with his dissident beliefs and practices; and the Church, to condemn his views and to define what is orthodox doctrine” (Lambert 2002:5).
Even from Christianity's earliest beginnings there have been recognizable elements of dissent. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself foretold the possibility of persecution (Matthew 5:11-12) and of "deceivers" who would come in his name (Matthew 7:21-23). Disputations and theological differences were arising even as the Apostle Paul traveled around the Mediterranean preaching his new religious beliefs (Titus 3:10; 1 Corinthians 11:19). The human proclivity to perceive differences of opinion and belief as personally threatening soon resulted in not only the persecution of Christians by Rome's authority, but also the persecutions of Christians by other groups of Christians.

Religious persecutions and their accompanying witch-hunts did not originate in the Middle Ages. They have an ancient history, particularly between religious societies that compete for social dominance. Roman pagans accused early Christian sects of practicing the standard rituals considered to be common among groups of witches. These included "extinction of light, orgies, incest, and ritual infanticide followed by cannibalistic communion, using the child's flesh and blood" (Eliade 1976:87). As the Christian movement grew in numbers and strength, the Churches used the same slanderous tactics first against the pagans and then against competing Christian sects, the losers being renounced as "heretics."

The list of heretical opponents and the horrors perpetuated upon various Christian sects by other Christian groups goes on ad nauseum. Some of the early losing factions include Apollinarianism, Arianism, Donatism, Ebionites, Gnosticism, Nestorianism, Marcionism, Montanism, Marcionism, Manichaeanism, Messalians, and Pelagianism. These groups were followed in the second millennium by the Bogomils, Anabaptists,
Cathars or Albigensians, Fraticellis, Free Spirits (Beguines and Beghards), Huguenots, Hussites, Lollards or Wycliffians, Waldensians, Quietism, and various reformist movements.

Once again orgiastic accusations were hurled against these later heresies and even against reformist movements within the Church itself (Eliade 1976:86). During the Middle Ages a new dimension developed in that there were also charges of participating in witches “Sabbaths.” These gatherings were said to include appearances by Satan and sexual orgies with the Devil or his attendants. Although there may not have been themes of satanic elements before the late Middle Ages, they “became the principal indictment in the denunciations made during the witch crazes” (Eliade 1986:91).

As Margaret L. King (1991) points out, the participation of women was a constant in heretical movements. Herbert Grundmann reports that women entered into religious movements by the thousands. Their participation is well documented in the Cathar and Albigensian groups of southern France (Ladurie 1979). Women actively contributed to the development of the Waldensians and the Humiliati of Lombardy as well as the heresy of the “Free Spirit” to the north. The activity of women in heretical movements was so frequent that women were interrogated for heretical beliefs no matter how sincerely they disclaimed any association. This was the case with the fourteenth century English mystic, Margery Kempe (McAvoy 2003:5, 11), who was accused of Lollard leanings (McAvoy 2003:16-18). Madame Jeanne Guyon was actually incarcerated under suspicion of the heresy known as “Quietism” (Commire and Klezer 2002, vol. 6:649-650).

One of the most notable heresies, the “beguines,” was comprised totally of women and Marguerite Porete is thought to have connections with this group. Men of
similar persuasions were called “beghards” but lived separately from the beguines. This thirteenth century movement was largely located in northern and middle Europe, an area wherein thousands of women created their own religious communities, practiced charitable works, and supported themselves in the weaving trade or other similar occupations. The women insisted they needed neither pope nor clergy, nor were they reliant upon husbands although they were free to marry and leave their communal setting if they so desired (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996: 8-9; King 1991:104-107). The group became associated with the heresy of the “Free Spirit” whose adherents believed “that divine grace could create a state that placed the subject above all human authority” (King 1991:115).

Over the many centuries there were reform movements within the body of the ecclesiastical organization itself. Herbert Grundmann explains the fact that new orders within the Church emerged during the same periods that new religious sects and heresies arose. He notes that “Both the new orders recognized by the Church and the condemned and persecuted sects had elements in common and have some common ties” (1995:209). These social movements responded to the societal needs and pressures of their eras. Some of the most notable reform efforts were sponsored by popes who also saw the need for change (Cook and Herzman 2004:184-188; 193-201). Three women in this study were involved in those reform movements. Hildegard of Bingen was associated with the reform efforts of Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153). She called for a celibate priesthood and for the elimination of the Cathar heresy. Catherine of Siena not only campaigned for the crusades of her era, but also worked tirelessly to bring the papacy back to Rome from Avignon and resolve the Great Schism of the Church’s ecclesiastical authority. Despite
strong opposition and inquisitional pressure, Teresa of Avila established the Discalced Carmelites, a reformed branch of the Carmelite Order.

*The “Holy Women” of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*

Throughout the Renaissance the difficulties of discerning the dangers created by reformers, heretics and witches were compounded by similarities in traits and behaviors that were attributed to female religious as well as to the practitioners of witchcraft. The problem is illustrated by the record of those women who were known as “living saints” or “holy women,” individuals who took on political and religious influence that was based upon their “spiritual” skills as per the religious fashions of their day (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:219-303)

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Italians endured not only plagues and famines, but also the several Wars of Italy and threats from the Turks (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:220). Those were desperate times and governments sought divine intervention to survive. Thus they turned to women who devoted their lives to God and prayer in the service of their communities. The “holy women” of various Italian cities were honored within the political establishment as well as by the citizens of their communities because the spiritual gifts reputed to them were badly needed, particularly the gift of prophecy. As the “holy women” achieved varying degrees of fame and celebrity, cultic associations grew around them, and they were often invited to court to help make political decisions of great importance. “Colomba of Rieti and many other emulators of Catherine of Siena became counselors to princes, while astute noblewomen
were able to uncover political secrets by feigning saintliness” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:221).

These women demonstrated charismatic gifts and their prophetic pronouncements were often based on supernatural, apocalyptic or reform concerns wherein they called for community, Church, or personal repentance and renewal (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996: 240-243). The women were credited with the ability to work miracles and were considered particularly effective in spiritual battles against medical practitioners and magicians (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:219). Like Catherine, they engaged in spiritual combat and even “greased for battle with Satan” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:244, 246).

Of most notable importance was the ability of these “living saints” to transport themselves through space. According to their hagiographers, “they passed in and out through closed doors; they were carried to Jerusalem in spirit or in the flesh” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:245).

The new holy women “embodied the current religious ideology” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:219) within a culture that basically distrusted women religious. “Holy women” were carefully observed by their confessors who not only interpreted the women’s lives in hagiographies, but also guarded against any diabolical influences. Teresa of Avila’s visions were so startling that her confessors suggested she take care lest she be possessed by a devil (King 1991:129). Most importantly for the economic and political advancement of the religious community in which the women lived, their hagiographers served as personal apologists or public relations managers. They wrote vitae about the women from the formulaic point of view of male churchmen (Mooney 1999:167). As biographers, they documented mystical gifts that included raptures of
ecstasy, the stigmata and even confirmed the belief that the women “received communion
miraculously from God or angels” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:237).

Bornstein and Rusconi point out that the “living saints” largely based their
behaviors on the examples of earlier saints as described by their hagiographers. Accounts
of St. Birgitta and St. Catherine of Siena were particularly admired as exemplars as was
Jesus. Ascetic practices, chastity, poverty, penitential activities, and extreme fasts
regained importance and became a “religious fashion” during the Renaissance. 3 In many
respects, the “‘holy women’ of the Renaissance followed the example of Catherine of
Siena by observing extreme fasts, self-flagellations, and bodily mortification that
included wearing hair shirts over spiked chains wound about the torso. A century later,
Madame Jeanne Guyon would continue to exercise similar austerities upon her own body
in order to achieve states of sanctity. Francesca Bussa de’Ponziani burned her genitals in
order to avoid the pleasures of congress (King 1991:122-123) and the courtly beauty,
Margaret of Cortona, purposely disfigured her nose and mouth when she converted to a
conventual life (King 1991:123). Angela of Foligno was renowned for her “wild and
uncontrollable screaming” (King 1991:123). Margaret d’Oignies followed the fashion of
excessive weeping and wailing often at the merest suggestion of Christ’s suffering as did
Margery Kempe (McAvoy 2003:7, 15, 36-41, 93).

Such conduct created problems. The “holy women” often exhibited the same
behaviors and skills normally attributed to witches. It was understood that supernatural
events originated from three sources: natural, demonic or divine (Bornstein and Rusconi

3 See Mircea Eliade for a critique of religious behaviors that appear to be
“fashionable” at any given time in a culture. Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural
Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,
1976.
Counter-reformation reforms, the Reformation itself, and Wars of Religion made everyone acutely aware of possible deception. False prophets, corrupt churchmen, and heretics were all suspect, and, as social disruptors, they were thought likely to be disciples of Satan. In all this, both the magical and miraculous elements in the behaviors of the "living saints" appeared to support the sacred, but were "in reality helping to further blur the already thin line separating magic from religion in the culture of early modern Europe" (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:248).

Periodically, it was found that a living saint had either performed objectionable acts or was actually deceptive or fraudulent, in which case the punishments for duplicity were severe. Benedetta Carlini of Pescia was imprisoned for thirty-five years for her mistake of seducing another nun and pricking herself with a needle in order to exhibit the signs of the stigmata (King 1991:129). Maria de la Visitacion also was discovered to have deceived those around her by falsifying the signs of the stigmata. "For her crime she was condemned to perpetual imprisonment, unbreakable silence, twice-weekly flogging, and humiliations in feeding and treatment by her fellows" (King 1991:129). It was indeed dangerous to practice such deceptions and the risks increased when the desperation of the political situation abated.

After 1530 the social setting changed dramatically. With the decreasing threat of war between Italian cities and states, the need for the prophetic abilities of the female "living saints" decreased. Their mystic qualities were no longer required because of alterations in the cultural and religious setting which had enabled them to flourish in the arts, in the political arena, and in theological debate. Now all women were to return to their houses and conventual enclosures. Bornstein and Rusconi conclude that, "In the new..."
age then dawning, the only activity open to nuns was contemplation, which long
continued to be pursued in a precarious equilibrium between mystical illumination and
diabolical possession” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:254).

The Inquisition: Warring Against Heretics, Witches and Women

The lines demarcating the differences between saints, heretics, and witches were
often blurred. Nevertheless, the Church saw it as its duty to root out what ecclesiastical
leaders perceived as unholy influences upon the souls of men and women. The process of
controlling opposition became institutionalized in the early thirteenth century when it was
officially organized by Pope Innocent III in his effort to suppress the Provencal Cathars
in the Albigensian Crusade (Leff 1967:34-47). The effort was extended by Pope Gregory
IX when, in April of 1233, the Dominican Order was given the responsibility to conduct
a general inquisition in southern France.

The officers of the Inquisition held courts wherein the inquisitors themselves were
both the judges and the prosecutors. These ecclesiastical courts insisted upon procedural
rules and that care be taken to record the words of the accused and witnesses. As a result
modern historians are privy to many aspects of the lives of medieval Jews, peasants,
villagers, scholastics, priest, nuns, and elites. In Montaillou, the Promised Land of Error,
Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie (1979) made use of those valuable records to study the
Inquisitional process in Provençe. His research illustrates the effects of the investigations,
punishments and wars, all of which altered not only individual lives, but the lives of
families, communities and the entire region.
Yet persecution as such did not end. It moved into a new dimension, one that was largely waged against less powerful adversaries. King refers to the persecutions as a “war against women” (King 1991:155), a war wherein the opponents were “wholly identified with evil” (King 1991:155). Both those accused of heresy and of witchcraft became the objects of a religious, political, and often economic crusade wherein remarkable official procedures for interrogation and torture were devised, procedures that were repeated upon the unrepentant until the accused confessed whether guilty or not. Although the numbers of deaths due to the witch hunts of the Renaissance are uncertain, the most conservative estimates suggest 100,000 individuals died in this process, 80,000 of them women (Crapo 2003:255).

Perceptions of witches themselves were not the same as those of modern times. Anne Jacobson Schutte (2001) explains some of the difficulties involved. First, witches were not considered to have the modern commercial appearance currently attributed to them. In earlier centuries European witches were not perceived as being scary, old crones riding broomsticks. According to Schutte, “Relatively few of them fit the stereotypical northern European age profile of the witch. On the contrary, most were young: many engaged for fun or profit in extramarital sex” (2001:160-161). Second, even in sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy, few of the “women prosecuted for witchcraft fit the classic profile: selling their bodies and souls to the devil, flying to the Sabbath to engage in feasting, sex, and worship of the Evil One” (Schutte 2001:160-161). Those who were condemned as witches were often heretics, eccentrics or peasant practitioners of the old pagan traditions. In the latter case Schutte describes them as “garden-variety sorceresses who cast spells, often enhanced by the employment of holy words and consecrated
materials, which were designed to heal or cause illness, find lost objects, and win or
regain sexual partners” (Schutte 2001:160-161).

The handbook used to identify witches was The Malleus Maleficarum which was
first published in 1487. Also known as “The Hammer of Witches,” it was written by
Jacob Springer and his associate Henry Kramer. Both men were Dominican inquisitors
who had been directed by Pope Innocent VIII to seek out the witches of northern
Germany (Crapo 2003:255). By 1490 it had been officially renounced by the Inquisition;
nevertheless for at least two centuries it was one of Europe’s best selling publications,
surpassed only by the Bible. The Malleus Maleficarum is a monument to misogyny and
superstition. In it instructions are given to inquisitors on the procedural details of
identification, torture, trial and execution.

In order to achieve its goal of prosecuting witches the Malleus Maleficarum is
divided into three sections. The first section lists various proofs of witchcraft and then
outlines the weaker character of women (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:43-48). In Part I
Question 6, the female sex is described as being feeble both in mind and body and that as
intellectuals women rank with children. Females are guilty of having brought down all
the great civilizations. They are liars and vain, duplicitous and deceitful, in all a
“wheedling and secret enemy” (1971:47). Females are presented as more carnal than men
are and women’s lusts are insatiable and therefore they consort with the Devil. Proof of
her flawed nature is woman’s participation in heresies, especially that of witchcraft. The
book goes on to outline various types of witchcraft and the last section deals with the
identification of such persons, attaining their confessions by means of torture, and
methods for their execution. As a result thousands of men and women, but particularly
women, guilty or innocent, suffered and died because of the many heresies in which they may have actively participated and for far less certain connections with the devil.

Conclusions

The foregoing chapters have presented important aspects of religious life in the Middle Ages as they pertained to female religious, including the six women exemplars in this study. Eve's independence and curiosity, her so-called lack of submissiveness and obedience was projected upon all of Europe's women. One is left wondering how any woman resolved the tremendous guilt that was placed upon her for all the hardships and sorrows of mortality. Only though virginity, obedience, poverty and outstanding moral fortitude could a woman be redeemed from the burden she bore as a daughter of Eve. Only then could she be considered of equal value to a man.

Several elements in the world of medieval women required examination in order to understand the development of her place in society. First, saints and martyrs presented the role models for both men and women in the Middle Ages, models of suffering and sacrifice that explain many behaviors that seem extreme to modern sensibilities. Second, the advantages of conventual life-styles for women suggest many reasons for that lifestyle choice. Third, androcentric bias and misogynistic attitudes towards women required that self-actualizing females achieve the stature of "males" by overcoming their own femininity. Fourth, the social position of women paralleled that of children in each of the societies that contributed to the cultural milieu of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Fifth, the control of women and their bodies presented ongoing challenges to institutions of the state, the Church, and the family. Finally, despite heavy social pressures to practice
mindless obedience, women did participate in many aspects of religious conflict, including movements of reform and heresy within an environment of suspicion and fear.

Both Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila provide examples of personal concern lest their visions prove to be of the Devil. Like the other women in this study, their willingness to risk all in order to be faithful to their personal revelations is best seen as an essential element which they accepted in the process of self-actualization, a process that was for them based upon devotion to the service of God no matter the personal cost. It is in the same spirit that the beguine, Marguerite Porete, was burned at the stake for refusing to renounce her mystic writings or stop the dissemination of her book. Catherine of Siena was a tertiary; lay groups such as hers eventually became suspect and were brought under the control of the Church. Joan of Arc was tried by political enemies as a witch and burned at the stake. Teresa of Avila was constantly under surveillance by the authorities of the Inquisition. Her associate, St. John of the Cross, was tortured by his Spanish inquisitors. Madame Guyon always considered herself to be a devout Catholic. Nevertheless, she was accused of being associated with the heresy known as “Quietism.” As a result, Guyon was imprisoned and spent years of her life in various convents as well as in the Bastille.

The purpose of this dissertation is to note evidence of how medieval female mystics overcame the gender biases of their eras and the religious innovations that evolved though their efforts. It is also the goal of this work to investigate indications that women religious experienced the altered states of consciousness referred to as “conversion” experiences by William James or “peak-experiences” by Abraham Maslow. The first example of such an individual is the German prophetess, Hildegard of Bingen.
CHAPTER 6

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

"Hildegard of Bingen still confronts us, after eight centuries, as an overpowering, electrifying presence — and in many ways an enigmatic one. In the Middle Ages only Avicenna is in some ways comparable: cosmology, ethics, medicine and mystical poetry were among the fields conquered by both the eleventh-century Persian master and the twelfth-century ‘Rhenish sibyl.’" (Peter Dronke, Women Writers of the Middle Ages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984:144).

Doubtless the nobles, villagers, peasants and slaves living along Germany’s beautiful Rhine River Gorge heard the news with amazement. The seventy-two year old abbess of Bingen and Rupertsberg was leaving for her fourth preaching tour in the past ten years. Once again she would travel on the river by boat and then on land by horseback, carriage, or foot in order to reach Maulbronn, Hirsau, and Zwiefalten. She had already preached in Mainz, Wurzburg and Bamberg ten years earlier. Then she had taught in Trier and Lorraine. Another journey was made to Boppard, Andernach, Cologne and Ruhr (Schipperges 1998:59). Yet despite the difficulties there was Hildegard, once again touring and preaching against the Cathar heresy and demanding that the clergy practice the reforms of the church for celibacy (Wheeler 2002, I:34).

Clad in her black Benedictine robes and known as the “Sibyl of the Rhine,” Hildegard of Bingen made four tours between 1158 and 1171. Despite the long-held Christian custom that forbade the preaching of women, contemporary authors claimed that Hildegard was called to this duty by papal authority because of her inordinate stature
among the people of northern Europe (Wheeler 2002, 1:34). Her outspoken courage was based upon her unusual position as a prophetess. She worked within the religious system of her day to support the legitimate popes, reform the clergy, and argue against the Cathar heresy.\(^1\) Hildegard well knew the place of women in her society but, despite being a “mere female,” the power of her prophetic gifts, the conviction that they were from God, and her exemplary life, garnered her great prestige and influence.

Hildegard carried in her presence and actions, both the constancy of cultural stability and the energy of social change. Born in 1098, Hildegard of Bingen’s long life spanned much of the Twelfth Century Renaissance. At the time of her death in 1179, she was a towering presence whose life’s work embodied the essence of that period’s renewal of scholarship and classical knowledge. Not only had she founded and administrated two monasteries for female religious, but Wilson and Margolis extol her as “a renowned visionary and prophet and the first great female theologian of the Catholic Church” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:431). Hildegard’s multitude of talents and administrative abilities as well as her ongoing visionary events qualify her as the first of this selection of female mystics who disprove by example any accusations of psychological defectiveness or gender ineptitude.

\(^1\) The Cathar heresy was one of the most famous heresies of the late Middle Ages. Their name was not chosen by them, but indicated that they thought themselves to be the “pure ones.” Although they flourished in the Rhineland, their origins lay in Armenia and Bulgaria. They are identified with other similar groups such as the Albigensians in Languedoc. Cathars rejected all forms of power in order to attain states of pure love. Fiona Maddocks notes that they opposed both the church and state; indeed, “They regarded the Catholic Church and the state as equally satanic, being part of the material world and thus evil” (2001:217). Cathars did not oppose suicide but they did reject the sacrifice of Jesus, sacraments and ritual, hell, resurrection, marriage and sexual union.
Although Hildegard was an accomplished individual in her own right, she was also a daughter of her culture and times. In order to appreciate her prolific achievements it is necessary to examine not only the tremendous changes occurring during the twelfth century renaissance in which she lived, but also the participation of other noble women in the events of the period, the corruption, cruelty and bloodbaths of the era, as well as the beauty and fecundity of the land which is often reflected in her creative works and the theology she developed. These aspects of her environment manifested themselves in her visions, prophesies, and scientific works as well as in her music and artistic endeavors. Hers was an age of vital reinvigoration and revival. Truly a “renaissance woman,” Hildegard fully participated in that revitalization while supporting the stability of Church authority and traditions of monastic life.

*Hildegard’s Life in Twelfth Century Europe*

Hildegard of Bingen spent her life along the margins of the Rhine River Gorge in Germany. The area surrounding Bernersheim is known not only for its beauty but also for the plethora of castles between modern Koblenz and Bingen. Hildegard’s love of nature is reflected in her visions, music and theology, as well as in her knowledge of plants and animals, their symbolic meanings, and medicinal applications. Her affection for the “glories of creation” may well have been inspired by the area of Germany in which she lived. The land is arable but not extremely fertile. Nevertheless it has been and continues to be intensely cultivated. Once covered with primeval forests of deciduous beauty, cultivation has resulted in reforestation based upon fast-growing conifers. The forests are home to a variety of European wildlife, much of which would have graced her
aristocratic associates' tables. They include pigs and fox, hare, wild boar, deer, quail and pheasant.²

Bernersheim was a beautiful agricultural area. In that era, 90 percent of the population was engaged in agriculture. Peasants and animals involved in farming would have been visible all around Hildegard. Life was closely connected to the land, for those of the aristocracy as well as commoners. This connection to the earth and its bounty eventually became manifest in Hildegard's knowledge of plants and herbs for healing. It is also a constant element in her visions as well as in her appreciation for the bounty and goodness of God and the power of viritiditas, the life force (Schipperges 1998:29, 95,156).

Those who lived in Europe during the twelfth century benefited from the fact that nature had provided them with a four hundred-year warming trend called the "Medieval Warm Period." Brian Fagan outlines the changes that occurred during the period between 900 and 1300, during which the growing seasons lengthened thus allowing greater harvests and flourishing vineyards even in southern and central England. He explains that "compared with previous centuries and what lay ahead, these centuries were a climatic golden age. True, local food shortages were not unknown, life expectancy was short, and the routine of backbreaking labor never ended. But crop failures were sufficiently rare that peasant and lord alike believed that God was smiling upon them" (Fagan 2004: 211). This period of mild weather and prosperity ended in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and profoundly affected the lives of all Europeans as will be discussed in later chapters.

It is no longer held to be invariably true that those living in Europe during the late Middle Ages lived lives of simplicity and isolation. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were dynamic periods wherein there were dramatic changes that included economic, religious, political and intellectual revival. Populations enjoyed a greater sense of security for several reasons. First, castles were well-established fortresses throughout Europe. Second, the invention of new agricultural techniques and tools resulted in greater food reserves. These in turn resulted in a profound population increase. No longer was everyone needed to till the earth. Some could move to the small towns and villages that began to dot the landscape. The average village appears to have had about two thousand inhabitants. Silver was beginning to be used again as a unit of currency, and trade expanded throughout the regions of Europe (Witt et al. 1989 vol. 1:197-205).

Hope for stability was strengthened by the so-called “Peace of God” which had come into being around 990. It was followed by the Truce of God around 1025. These acts discouraged fighting during seasons like Lent, on days like Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and encouraged the nobles to stop killing innocent women and children, pilgrims, and peasants. They were also implored to cease damaging the cattle, crops, churches, monasteries and even farm implements wherever they chanced to go; all this came much to the relief of the remaining members of society (Reither 1957:167).

Although continental warfare continued, these peace efforts did result in some lessening of the local slaughter, a phenomenon that was aided by the distraction of grander wars further from home. While crusades periodically depleted Europe’s population, there remained uncounted battles and struggles for power between nobles and kings, kings and emperors, emperors and kings with popes, and popes with all classes of
civil authority. As a result of the constant conflict, the German state itself suffered and was weakened. Thus local dukes gained more power, among them Stephan von Sponheim with whom Hildegard’s family was associated. This occurred at the same time that the economic revival was strengthening the ties of trade within territories. The growing prosperity resulted in the solidification of kingdoms and the power of princes over the nobility.

Today, the best known names of Hildegard’s contemporaries are those of warriors. Among the most famous are Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and England’s Henry II, both of whom eventually found themselves being admonished by Hildegard. Others include Thomas Becket as well as the king of France, Louis VII, and the Emperor Conrad, the latter two being leaders of the second crusade of 1147. A number of lesser wars, as in Spain, were also referred to as “crusades” (Riley-Smith 2005:117).

Politically, the First Crusade secured Jerusalem during the entire period of Hildegard’s lifetime. Nevertheless, opportunities for “holy wars” were frequent. In the late spring of 1135, “Pope Innocent II presided over a council at Pisa. At that time it was decreed that those who fought against the pope’s enemies ‘for the liberation of the Church on land or sea’ should enjoy the same remission of sins as that granted to the first crusaders by Urban II at the Council of Clermont” (Riley-Smith 2005:117). As a result, the papacy was constantly involved in military struggles as with those members of the South Italian Normans. This contest was “accentuated by Roger of Sicily’s support for the anti-pope Anacletus” (Riley-Smith 2005:117). Then there were the military conflicts perpetuated by Fredrick I (Barbarossa) who became the Holy Roman Emperor in 1152 and, among his other duties, met with Hildegard the following year at Ingelheim.
Fredrick (reign 1152-1190) was a member of the German Hohenstaufen Dynasty (1125-1250), which, along with the Salian Dynasty (1024-1125), sought to extend the Holy Roman Empire as far south as Italy, and in the end did extend its eastern borders.

Still, the eleventh and twelfth century exodus of the warring class to the East for various crusades sustained social improvements because it gave the instinct to pillage and plunder a new direction. Many crusaders sold off their lands in order to finance their journey and the drive to participate in blood feuds now turned to a distant people, not of the European brotherhood (Riley-Smith 2005:20-21). The various wars also encouraged the flow of surplus goods from the north to the lands of the East. In the reverse, goods and slaves taken from the eastern embattled societies further augmented trade. Penitential crusaders and pilgrims who left on and generally returned from journeys to the exotic east expedited this trend. Survivors brought with them new energy, new ideas, new customs, and change that would forever effect European culture.

Women of Hildegard’s elite class also participated in the jostling for power. There were queens who reigned and warred in their own rights. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122?-1204) is the most famous queen of the period. At various times, Hildegard’s contemporary reigned as queen of both France and England as well as the duchy of Aquitaine. Matilda of England (1102-1167) was both Queen of England and Holy Roman Empress although she spent much of her life battling to secure her position (Lawler 2001:119). Constance of Sicily (c. 1154-1198) was also empress of the Holy Roman Empire. Her efforts to secure her right to the throne of Sicily lasted until 1194 when she finally succeeded (Lawler 2001: 40).
During Hildegard's youth, Queen Urrace (1081-1126) ruled and warred throughout Galicia, Leon and Castile (Lawler 2001: 156). We know of the notorious Bertrada of Montfort (d. c. 1114) who forsook her kingly husband to run off with the king of France, Philip I. They remained unrepentant lovers despite the pope's interdict on all of France (Lawler 2001:25). Another of Hildegard's ruling contemporaries was the Byzantine empress, Mary of Antioch (d. 1183) (Lawler 2001:118). Many of these and other women of various social positions reigned and occasionally led armies in order to secure their husbands' estates while the men warred around Europe and in the lands of the Middle East.

A second dynamic was at play in the various political maneuverings, and that one was at work in the religious arena. The Church in Rome was reasserting its local powers and extending it in ways that affected the political and economic life-styles of all Christendom. The diversion of manpower to far away battlefields made much of this change possible (Cook and Herzman 2004:190-193). Hildegard herself joined with St. Bernard of Clairvaux to encourage the Second Crusade in the late 1140s. By moving into the social vacuum created by the crusades, the Catholic Church increased its wealth, power and influence throughout the land. It strengthened its ecclesiastical authority in every locale. The papacy was intent upon a policy of removing ecclesiastical appointments from the reach of the nobility (Reither 1957:158-159). There were also calls for priests to refrain from marriage and to practice celibacy. Hildegard was in the thick of the debate. She wrote and preached for these reforms. Despite the continual strife, basic stability remained, while population and economic growth continued. As a
result, the privileged classes increased dramatically. This contributed to dynamic social, artistic and intellectual change; changes in which Hildegard of Bingen fully participated.

*The Twelfth Century Artistic and Intellectual Florescence*

The increased power and leisure of the privileged classes allowed a flowering of creative activities in the arts and architecture. Romanesque design in all its rational simplicity would soon give way to the Gothic. Both reflected the enthusiasm of the newly developing scholasticism (Cook and Herzman 2004:200, 224-227). The cathedrals of the era seemed to crave more and more light and space, reflecting both the spiritual and mystic elements of the age. Yet the names of those who created these monuments to God are often found wanting. The artistic efforts of the majority of individuals had long been dedicated to God and to the Church; there was no need to publicize or build upon one’s ego for a sense of worth. It was the contribution to God’s glory that mattered, not the individual’s fame. In the light of the cultural emphasis upon humility and the general practice of self-abnegation, it is amazing that we know the names of the few whose works were recorded so long ago. Fortunately, Hildegard’s name is listed among that number. Through her authority as a prophet and by writing her visions, she was enabled to manifest her many talents and self-actualize in the arts, theology, and science. This is indeed fortuitous because her life’s work may be seen as a synthesis of some of the most dynamic social changes of the twelfth century renaissance. She may honestly be referred to as a true “Renaissance Woman” centuries before the “official” renaissance occurred.

Hildegard was not the only woman who embraced the opportunities this cultural florescence provided. Many women found their creative wings during the twelfth century
renaissance. Women of the elite class had long been creating masterpieces of embroidery and tapestries. If not permitted to pursue professions as artists, writers, or composers themselves, they nonetheless supported the efforts of those with talent. For example, Eleanor of Aquitaine is noted not only for her explosive relationships, but also for her patronage of the arts (Wilson and Margolins 2004:46). For example, she gave generous support to the Abbey of St. Denis, Fontevrault, and the Royal Abbey. Matilda of Canossa and Tuscany (1069-1115) not only reigned over portions of Italy, but also contributed significantly to the rebuilding of Modena’s great Cathedral (Wilson and Margolins 2004:46).

Men and women illuminators and scribes generally worked in the peaceful atmosphere of their convents and did not normally sign their works, as was the case with Hildegard herself. Yet some of Hildegard’s artistic contemporaries were women whose names are known. Ermengarde of St. Adrian, a German nun, illuminated the Sermons of St. Augustine and identified herself. A woman named Guda both painted and wrote the Homelary of St. Bartholomew wherein she “painted and signed her self-portrait” (Wilson and Margolins 2004:43). So also did the lay woman, Claricia of Augsburg, who “signed her self-portrait on a manuscript produced in the late twelfth century” (Wilson and Margolins 2004:43).

In literature we are fortunate to know the names of several great male authors of the era. Those names include Pierre Abelard (1079-1142), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090-1153), Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-c. 1155), Otto of Freising (c. 1114-1158), Peter of Blois (c. 1135-c. 1203) and the unidentified but famous “Archpoet” (fl. 1159-1167). In the intellectual excitement of the era, women also put pen to parchment as did
Hildegard. Ermengarde, Guda, and Claricia were three of a number of twelfth century women who were educated and able to write. Perhaps the most influential contemporary writer was Anna Comnena (1083-1153). Anna was a Byzantine princess who failed in palace intrigues and was exiled from her homeland. As a result she became a nun and wrote the *Alexiad*. This is a “prose epic history of her father’s reign and of the First Crusade. It is held to be one of the most famous and important histories of the Byzantine Empire” (Lawler 2001:17).

The most famous of the twelfth century female writers was Marie de France. Although little is known about her, she wrote twelve short story poems or *lais* and a collection of fables that showed her knowledge of the genre from Greek and Latin sources as well as those from Germany, France and as far away as the Middle East. She demonstrated knowledge of French, English and Latin, and all this with a great sense of humor (Lawler 2001: 110). She is credited with having made the musical *lai* into a written literary form (Wilson and Margolis 2004:238).

Of all the arts, music appears to have been most appreciated by Hildegard. She believed music allowed the soul to reach spiritual heights unattainable by intellect alone. This concept was accepted by educated individuals throughout Christendom and was based on the fifth or sixth century work of the foundational Boethius. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090-1153), whose twelfth century clerical reforms included musical efforts, based his work upon the contribution of Boethius who had established three categories of music.

Hildegard is not the only woman associated with music. A few other women are noted for their musical efforts. The most outstanding of those women was the abbess...
Herrad of Hohenburg who lived about 1130-1195/96. According to Wilson and Margolis Herrad’s encyclopedic *Hortus deliciarum* included “sixty poetic works, some accompanied by musical notation, are interspersed throughout the collection” (2004:426-427). Whether or not these were her original compositions we do not know, but the work en total is credited to her.

Those who composed outside religious orders were only occasionally named, be they male or female. Among those men whose names have survived are Guillaume de Poitou (1070-1127), Marcabru (d. c. 1150) and Bernart de Ventadorn (d. 1195), all of whom were contemporaries of Hildegard. These troubadours of southern France, as well as the many *touveres* of northern France and minnesingers of Germany enlivened the courts and fairs of Europe. Monophonic, their chansons laid the foundation for the next century’s *Carmena Burana* as well as primitive efforts at polyphony and notation.  

Eleanor of Aquitaine’s name is also associated with the musical arts. As a patron of musicians, she supported a number of troubadours and *trobairity* (female troubadours). Eleanor’s daughters, Marie and Aelis, were actively engaged with the arts. Blanche of Castile, the granddaughter of Eleanor, was herself a *trouvere*. Another of Hildegard’s contemporary musicians was the so-called “Countess of Dia.” This female troubadour is thought to have been born around 1140. Four of her *chansons* are extant (Lawler 2001:47). Marie de Ventadorn (c. 1165-1221) was a *trobairitz* who also is noted for the support that she gave various troubadours (Wilson and Margolis 2004:695-697).

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The fact that Blanche and Marie were *trobairitz* is a monument to their persistence against cultural traditions that sought to repress the voices of women. Those traditions went back to several of the early church fathers. Wilson and Margolis quote Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386) as having written, "The virgins should sing or read Psalms very quietly during divine worship. They should speak with their lips alone so that nothing is heard" (2004:693). Gregory of Nazianus (c. 329-c.389) and Arsillos of Iberia "advocated that even in private worship at home, only men should sing" (Wilson and Margolis 2004:693). These admonitions were adopted in general practice and by the end of the fourth century choirs were comprised of men and boys only.

As irrational as this practice may seem today, Wilson and Margolis (2004:693) suggest that it may be seen as both a reaction to the more general equality of the sexes promoted by the Gnostic heresy as well as an extension of Roman patriarchal values. This notion was backed up by the admonitions of Paul, namely that women were to remain silent in the church (I Corinthians 14:34, 35). Women of the privileged classes were able to escape this form of domination within the confines of their nunneries. There neither their bodies nor their voices could be held responsible for the seduction of men. Within those walls women developed their intellectual and artistic abilities. They sang, composed, and were led by a *cantrix* (chantress).

This was not the case for women living in the secular world who often ignored the admonitions of the patriarchs. According to Wilson and Margolis (2004:693-704, 864), they are described in literature and art as singers, dancers, composers and musicians. Women were also referred to as minstrels, jugglers, tumblers, recitors, magicians, acrobats, and animal trainers. As musicians they played the organ as well as string, wind
and percussion instruments. There were *cantatrix* (female conductors) in the courts of Louis IX (1239). Furthermore, many combined songs with work as in the case of female spinners who sang the *chanson de toile* or *Song of the Cloth*. However, by the fifteenth century women were discouraged from playing percussion instruments and by the Renaissance wind instruments were considered unseemly for women.

Intellectual thought underwent profound alterations during the twelfth century. A change in thinking had been created that began about the year 1000 when copies of Aristotle's texts dealing with logical thought began to circulate. By the middle of the twelfth century European elites, both secular and religious, were arranging their thoughts according to more logical procedures (Cook and Herzman 2004:26-37). The great theologians of the era included Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141), Peter Lombard (c.1100-1160), and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). It was Bernard who corresponded with Hildegard. He then sponsored her and her visions to the courts of Pope Eugenius III. The pope gave Hildegard permission to continue her visionary efforts thereby lending his invaluable prestige to her spiritual authority.

During the same period theologian and philosopher Peter Abelard wrote *Yes and No* wherein he sought to use logic to answer hundreds of perplexing questions. Heloise (1101-1164) was the Benedictine Abbess of the Paraclete and wife of Peter Abelard. She authored thirty-six sermons and corresponded with her distant husband in what is a collection of one 121 letters and poems that dealt not only with their relationship, but also with the theological issues of the day (Wheeler 2002:10-25).

At this time the jumbled laws of the land and Church were also being placed in order. Gratian wrote his *Decretum* or digest of the canon law in 1150 and the study of
Roman law began again at Bologna in 1130 (Cook and Herzman 2004: 228-30).

Hagiographies were placed in order, as were many commentaries on the Bible.

Beautifully illustrated encyclopedias were created. By the end of the twelfth century the great Cathedral schools were so crowded that teachers opened their own schools, eventually producing the university systems of the cities such as the University of Bologna which was officially recognized in the year 1158. The universities emphasized a Socratic approach to learning, one that implied “no conflict between the conclusions produced by reason and those accepted on faith, that the two sets of truth were compatible” (Witt et al., 1989:197-201).

This sense of there being no conflict between the new science and religion exists in the works of Hildegard as well. Her encyclopedic efforts included two books, both of which were completed during the years 1151-1158. The first being Natural History, also known as the Physica or the Book of Simple Medicine, or better yet, Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures (Wilson and Margolis 2004:432). The second was Of Causes and Cures, which is also known as the Book of Compound Medicine. Hildegard was not the only woman setting the world in order. Her contemporary, Herrad, Abbess of Hohenberg, (c. 1130-1195-6) is credited with having written and illustrated or directed the illumination of the Hortus Deliciorum or Garden of Delights. This manuscript, which was created between 1175 and 1185, is considered to be one of the finest medieval encyclopedias of the era.4

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4 A few modern skeptics refuse to give Herrad or Hildegard full credit for their illuminations or Hildegard’s authorship of her music and plays. They seem to believe that one cannot be administrator, author and artist all in the same person. This flies in the face of renaissance and mystic mentalities of all ages from Leonardo de Vince and William Blake to Kahlil Gibran.
In later centuries female literacy in the German monasteries came to be more and more under the control of male authorities. Today it is thought that growing control was designed to discourage the intellectual efforts of females in all the northern monastic orders and to have resulted in the lack of female identification on their work as scribes (Wilson and Margolis 2004: 833). Hildegard lived before the severe constraints of enclosure were enforced. In many ways, Hildegard’s life itself is a synthesis of the florescence of her era. She did not emerge out of the earth culture-free. Yet her remarkable gifts as well as her determination to use them resulted in an individual with an ability to self-actualize and live a demonstrably productive life.

The Life and Works of a Prophetess

It is likely that Hildegard was born in 1098 at Bernersheim near Alzey Castle in the Rhineland. We know quite a bit about Hildegard’s early years because she described them in her writing. Her correspondence and biographers also give some indication of her background, including the social class of her family and their stewardship of the land and people thereon. One of her most prestigious modern biographers is Heinrich Schipperges whose 1998 work, The World of Hildegard of Bingen: Her Life, Times and Visions, provides the basis for this outline of her vicinity, family, and early life.

Her parents were Hildebert and Mechthild, both of freeborn nobility. According to Schipperges Records of this family and their estate indicate that it had existed from at least the late eighth century (Schipperges 1998:29). The records of this family and their estate also indicate that, as long time residents of Bermersheim, they would have been of “Rhenish-Franconian” stock. Hildegard came from a “household” of nobility. It was a
household rather than a family because her father was head of a communal group of
kinsmen who lived, worked and produced together as was a common practice at the time.
Growing up on the estates of her wealthy clan, she would have been well aware of the
tasks involved in communal efforts to supply the basic needs for the group. There were
gardens and animals to care for and survival was based upon cooperative responsibilities.

Heinrich Schipperges gives a picturesque account of life in that place and era. He
also explains the communal social structure of society. “The head of the household
provided for the care and welfare of all those entrusted to him” (Schipperges 1998:29).
He was expected to exercise wisdom on behalf of the entire group, dispense justice, and
control the gathering and distribution of goods within the custom of “usage” which
required consent and consensus about appropriate behaviors.

A “family” of this kind was a community that offered its members all the
necessary procedures of life and development, from which they benefited as law,
usage, and wisdom dictated. Accordingly it was also an educational community
and one that handed on its inheritance. This meant not only immovable property,
goods and chattels, but tradition and honour. It offered protection from poverty
and need and to do this had to shape its own particular forms and ways of living
and coping with the demands of existence. The medieval kin-group in the
foregoing sense was the basis from which that smaller civil entity, the family in
the more modern sense, eventually developed (Schipperges 1998:29).

Hildebert and his wife set examples of what would later be expressed as the
metaphors for “fatherhood”, “motherhood” and “love” in Hildegard’s works. In as much
as her father was the leader in this clan and considered a member of the nobility, she
would also see many examples of communal leadership and responsibility.⁵ Hildegard
evidently absorbed the lessons of her childhood well, for, as an adult she spent years of
her life as an abbess of extremely good repute and, according to all accounts, the dozens

⁵ See Schipperges 1998:29 for a more detailed description of the practice of such
communal associations.
of women under her care held her in the highest regard, especially after her convents became established. It was recognized that her love and care for them was foremost in her mind at all times despite her busy life (Schipperges 1998:35).

Hildegard’s training in community living continued when she was sent to live at the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg. Hildegard was frequently ill and it was not uncommon for sickly, handicapped or unmarriable children to be sent to convents to be raised. Moreover, she experienced visions and was able to predict things such as the color of a yet unborn calf (Newman 1987:8). Because of her visions, which began when she was only three, and because she was the tenth child of her parents, it was decided to give her as a tithe to the Church. According to Hildegard, this occurred when she was about eight years old. Here is her account which is taken from her Vita. “And in the third year of my life I saw so great a brightness that my soul trembled; yet because of my infant condition I could express nothing of it. But in my eight year I was offered to God, given over to a spiritual way of life, and till my fifteenth I saw many things” (Dronke 1984:145).

The child oblate entered into the religious life with another young noble woman, Jutta von Sponheim (1092-1136), who was only six years her senior. There is some dispute over their exact ages at the time they entered the anchorhold at Disibodenberg. Barbara Newman (1998:4-8) gives an account of recently found materials on the life of Jutta. The Vita domnae Juttae (ca. 1140) was discovered in 1992 and tells a story that differs from Hildegard’s testimony. According to this record, Jutta was aged twenty and Hildegard was about fourteen years old when they entered the enclosure. Hildegard may have been living with Jutta for some time before she officially took her vows due to the
fact that the monastery was under reconstruction and Jutta’s cell had to be prepared for them.

Jutta’s father was Count Stephan II of Sponheim, a very wealthy aristocrat who supported the monastery during the period between 1108 and 1143. Jutta’s mother was Sophia of Formbach (Bavaria). She was a cousin of the Duke of Saxony, later Emperor Lothar III. These elites were pro-papal and pro-monastic (Wilson and Margolis 2004:508-510). Their associations gave Jutta and then her protégé access to powerful people, access that would certainly not have been afforded commoners, connections that would later garner additional support for Hildegard’s credibility and authority as a prophet.

Jutta was a very spiritual and intelligent young woman whose visions and insights eventually allowed her a degree of renown and the opportunity to serve others, male and female, as a beloved counselor and comforter. She was attracted to the Hirsau reform, which was the current revival of the eremitic life style. After years of arguments with her parents, Jutta had her way and became an anchoress at the age of twenty. “Thus on All Saints’ Day, November 1, 1112, the young noblewoman was formally enclosed as a recluse and took her monastic vows, together with Hildegard (then fourteen) and one or two other girls who also bore the name of Jutta” (Newman 1998:5).

Hildegard’s education became part of Jutta’s responsibilities. Doubtless Hildegard learned the Psalter and some Latin from her mentor, but Hildegard would insist throughout her life that she received very little formal education in her youth. She may have held to this point in order to emphasize the strength of her heavenly given knowledge, rather than pushing her earthly education. In any case the \textit{vita} on the life of
Jutta stresses the intellect of the older woman who was praised for her intelligence, education, and work as a teacher of the youngsters who eventually came to learn from her in the women’s hermitage which is referred to as a *schola* (Newman 1998:6).

Jutta proved to be an advocate of extreme asceticism. “We are told that Jutta devoted herself to prayer, fasting, vigils, nakedness, and cold; she tortured her body with a hairshirt and iron chain, which she removed only on great festivals; and she refused meat for eight years in defiance of her abbot, who urged moderation. At least once a day she recited the entire Psalter, which in wintertime she often said barefoot” (Newman 1998:6). Jutta was beloved by many and her fame was extensive in the region. However, her brutal lifestyle resulted in her death at the age of forty-four. Her ascetic practices were rejected by Hildegard in her own life. As Newman notes, “Hildegard, though of fragile health, prized the classic Benedictine virtue of moderation and lived to be eighty-one” (Newman 1998:7).

Upon Jutta’s death in 1136, Hildegard was elected by the sisters to become leader of the monastery at Disibodenberg. Peter Dronke suggests that this position soon gave her more self-confidence and for the first time she felt healthy. Furthermore, “The decade 1137-47 saw her progressive acceptance in the more powerful male world around her – first in the ambience of the archbishop of Mainz, then in that of the pope himself” (Dronke 1984:148). Their acceptance followed several progressive steps that finally forced Hildegard to disclose her visions and write them to share with others.

Hildegard’s visions began when she was only three years old but she learned quickly to keep them to herself when she realized no one else around her saw the light or heard the voices. Jutta was one of the few people she eventually told about them. Then, in
her early forties, Hildegard had an exceptional visionary experience, one wherein God commanded her to write out her visions and share them with the world (Newman 8:1998). This was a pivotal moment in her life and one that filled her with fear and resembles a “conversion” or “peak-experience” in its intensity and affect upon her life. Gathering her courage Hildegard related these experiences to her confessor and future biographer, the cleric Volmar. According to Hildegard’s *Vita*, “Astonished, he bade me write these things down secretly, till he could see what they were and what their source might be. Then, realizing that they came from God, he indicated this to his abbot, [Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg] and from that time on he worked at this [writing down] with me, with great eagerness” (Dronke 1984:148.) Next, Hildegard wrote to the famous abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, for his evaluation of her visionary experiences, be they good or evil.

Bernard recommended her to the Pope and, at the Synod of Trier in 1147, Archbishop Henry of Mainz gave an account of Hildegard and her visions to Pope Eugenius III. Hildegard then recounts that, “With joy he had them read out in the presence of many people, and read them for himself, and, with great trust in God’s grace, sending me his blessing with a letter, he bade me commit whatever I saw or heard in my vision to writing, more comprehensively than hitherto” (Dronke 1984:148-149). Indeed, the Pope is quoted as having exclaimed, “Who is this woman who rises out of the wilderness like a column of smoke from burning spices?” (Schipperges 1998:11) Later, he wrote to her “you are the one who has become a life-enriching perfume for so many” (Schipperges 1998:17).
From that point on, commanded by God, reassured by Volmar and Bernard as well as endorsed by the pope himself, Hildegard's manner and personality changed. No longer reticent to express herself, she burst forth to perform her duties, proclaim God's word, and create the many works she heard and saw in the visions of light. The power of her creativity, influence, and personality exerted itself without hesitation or apology for the remaining four decades of her life.

Over and above her duties as leader of her nuns and administrator of their physical environment, Hildegard began seriously writing her visions as well as creating the music for religious services. Nancy Fierro's outline of Hildegard's life clearly demonstrates that outpouring of creativity. From 1141 through 1150 Hildegard began writing her first book of visions, the Scivias. She also initiated the composition of music for the nuns at their religious services. She began the impressive correspondence that would accumulate throughout the remaining forty years of her life (Fierro1994:10).

Then, early in the next period from 1150 to 1159, Hildegard was once again stricken with a severe illness that resulted in visions requiring her to leave Disibodenberg and establish a separate woman's convent at Rupertsberg. Once she was granted the opportunity, she was back on her feet and busy financing and building the new establishment. During this period, she completed the Scivias and began writing the Book of Life's Merits. There is some debate pertaining to the illustrations in her manuscripts, particularly the Scivias. It is generally agreed that she supervised the illuminations and did not actually do the art work personally, although it is not possible to know at this time as they were not signed.
It is generally thought that it was at this time that Hildegard wrote the first known musical drama, the *Ordo Virtutum* or *Play of the Virtues*. Barbara Newman posits that Hildegard probably wrote the drama as a festival play for the profession of novices (1998:14), or it may have been first used to celebrate the opening of the Rupertsberg convent as is thought by Nancy Fierro (1994:23). This verse drama is considered by some to be “the best, most vigorous musical drama of her age” (Wheeler 2002:48). Wilson and Margolis suggest that the *Ordo Virtutum* “has no medieval parallel” (2004:701). It preceded the beginnings of opera by one hundred years, and her musical efforts were recognized as far away as Paris (Wheeler 2002:32).

It was also during this period that she compiled and wrote her scientific and medical books (Fierro 1994:10). Her love of nature and the pragmatics of running an institution that cared for the sick and dying demonstrates that she saw no conflict between the sciences of her era and her religion. Hildegard’s encyclopedic efforts included two books, the first being *Natural History*, also known as the *Physica* or the *Book of Simple Medicine*, or better yet, *Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures*. The second was *Of Causes and Cure*. Both were completed during the years 1151-1158 (Wilson and Margolis 2004:432).

From 1159 and into 1167 Hildegard truly became the “Sibyl of the Rhine.” It was during this period that she took her first, second and third preaching tours. She began writing the *Book of Divine Works*, continued her correspondence and agreed to have her sermons copied and disseminated to others (Fierro 1994:11). During the same period, she remained engaged in the leadership of her group of nuns. Her duties increased during the next period or the years between 1167 and 1179. At that time she founded yet another
new abbey at Eibingen. Hildegard made twice weekly trips between the two monasteries in order to see to the spiritual and physical needs of the women and the facilities. Over the decades Hildegard was responsible for anywhere between ten to 50 women at any given time. Well into her seventies, Hildegard’s health again began to fail her, yet she completed the *Book of Divine Works* and wrote two hagiographies, the *Life of St. Disibod* and the *Life of St. Rupert*. At this point she compiled her musical compositions under the heading of the *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum*. 

Hildegard considered music to be a branch of the natural sciences as well as a critical aspect of the divine office. To that end, the abbess created her own system of musical notations, experimented with new musical forms, and wrote over seventy liturgical compositions which she collected in *The Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations* (Holsinger 2001:87-136). Fierro notes that Hildegard was “one of two composers of the medieval period to attempt the completion of a work of such large dimensions. The other was Peter Abelard.” (Fierro 1994:23) 

Hildegard’s correspondence was copious. Over 140 letters are available for study today (Fox 1987: xiv). They include copies of some of her sermons as well as epistles to four popes, ten archbishops, ten bishops, twenty-one abbesses, thirty-eight abbots and other individuals of various social standing (Wheeler 2002:35). Her correspondence to rulers included letters to King Conrad III, Henry II of England, Queen Bertha of Greece and Empress of Byzantium. She is particularly noted for her several letters to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (Fox 1987) in which she roundly criticized him for selecting a series of antipopes in a battle for power against Rome’s authority. Hildegard’s reputation

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See Bruce W. Holsinger for a musicologist’s analysis of Hildegard’s music, music which Holsinger finds somewhat homoerotic, 2001:128.
as a prophetess of God was respected even by the most powerful popes and kings of Europe, although they often seemed disinclined to accept her call to repentance and spiritual revitalization.

Given the breadth of Hildegard’s interests and the depth of her writings, the question arises as to the truth of her claims to a most inadequate education. Schipperges suggests that she had mastered theology and contemporary philosophy, the natural sciences and medicine. He also notes that she was “an expert in husbandry and fish breeding and in the properties of precious stones” (Schipperges 1998:12). Furthermore, he indicates that her knowledge seemed not to be for its own sake, but valued for its practical applications for healing and successful husbandry. Schipperges concluded his examination of her writings and insists that over the years she must have acquired much more formal learning than she suggests, and that her background in theology was well grounded in the church fathers and contemporary theologians.7

There appear to be only three episodes in the life of Hildegard that make her judgment suspect. The first incident was due to her high regard for her assistant Richardis of Stade. Hildegard’s tremendous efforts to keep the younger woman at Rupertsberg failed, but not for lack of trying. Indeed, Hildegard’s insistence that the Richardis remain with her reached embarrassing proportions and when the archbishop of Mainz insisted that Richardis leave, Hildegard accused him of simony (Commire and Klezmer 2002, vol. 7:306).8

7 (See Schipperges 1998:51 for the depth of reading suggested by Hildegard’s theological writings).

8 Also see Holsinger 2001:128 who thinks her music is homoerotic thus implying undue affection for Richardis. For more of the debate see Wilson and Margolins 2004:702).
The second incident was based upon the criticism levied against her by Abbess Tengwich of Andernach (Dronke 1984:166-67). It seems that Hildegard allowed her nuns, all of them aristocrats, to dress more ornately on days of religious celebration. They could let their hair flow down under white veils held in place by bejeweled tiaras. They were also allowed to wear rings on their fingers (Newman 1998: 36-37). This was done in defiance of the Benedictine Law, the customs of the time, the opinion of outsiders, and the condemnation of St. Paul (I Tim. 2:9). In Hildegard’s mind, these women were the Brides of Christ, and, like all brides, were entitled to glorify God with their own beauty and joyous celebration; no drab drudges these ladies.

The third difficulty occurred in the last years of her life. Hildegard and her nuns were placed under interdict by an abbot who temporarily replaced Archbishop Christian during the latter’s travels. Hildegard had buried a man who had once been excommunicated as a heretic in the convent cemetery. He had reformed, and, according to some accounts, had been wounded while on crusade. He returned to Hildegard’s care until he died from those wounds. Hildegard refused to dig him up and get him out of the church graveyard, as the clergy required. In fact it is said that she blessed the gravesite with her abbatial staff and scraped the ground around his gravesite with her baculus (Schipperges 1997:26) in order that it might not be found (Fierro 1994:39). Therefore, she and her nuns were put under an interdict. This was a particularly harsh punishment in as much as they were not allowed to celebrate the Mass, “partake of Communion or sing the Divine Office” (Fierro 1994:39). Had Hildegard or one of her nuns died, they would have been refused the final rites of the Church. Hildegard finally prevailed. The interdict was lifted in March of 1179. She died on September 17, 1179. She was 81 years old.
Despite, or perhaps due to the great efforts she applied to her responsibilities and accomplishments, Hildegard was frequently ill and was known to experience paralyzing bouts of great pain (Wilson and Margolis 2004:431). This seemed to happen most frequently when the visions and voices were upon her. Matthew Fox notes that there were three periods in Hildegard’s life when she fell especially ill. “The first was immediately before her move to Disibodenberg. The second time fell between the years 1158-1162. Her third period of illness was from 1170-1173. Hildegard’s attitude toward and use of these times of sickness are an integral part of her spirituality” (Fox 1987:320).

Some have thought she suffered from a particular form of migraine headache, such as “scintillating scotoma”. Certainly her descriptions of falling stars, geometric forms, and piercing lights lend some credence to this diagnosis (Dronke 1984:146). Carl Singer first suggested this possibility. British neurologist, Oliver Sacks, agreed and argued that Hildegard’s frequent visions and illnesses may be due to migraine headaches. Others disagree and maintain that she was exhausted by the power and energy required by her frequent visionary experiences. Hildegard did not mention headaches and maintained that, in general, she had her visions at any time and place, when she was fully conscious, and only once entered into a state of ecstasy as a result (Dronke 1984:147).

We are fortunate to have three accounts of Hildegard’s spiritual experiences. One is in her Vita. The other two are found in letters that she wrote at the beginning and near the end of her calling as a prophetess. The first was to the great and politically powerful reformist cleric, Bernard of Clairvaux. The letter was sent to him in 1147 when she was about forty-nine years old and after she had struggled for six years with the impression
that she was commanded by God to begin writing her visions and various religious
experiences (Fox 1987:271). Hildegard was well aware of the prohibitions that prevented
women from writing. She also knew the possibility existed that her visions might be
perceived as coming from the devil because she was a woman and therefore suspect. The
depth of her concern was reflected in the sincerity and humility of the following letter. It
has been numbered and portions italicized specifically as they may relate to the research
of this dissertation. Otherwise the letters appear as they were in their source, which is the
edited work of Matthew Fox (1987), Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works: with
Letters and Songs. We begin with the letter she wrote in 1147 to Bernard of Clairvaux
wherein she sought his guidance as to the credibility of her visions.  

(1) Most praiseworthy Father Bernard, through god’s power you stand
wonderfully in highest honor. You are formidable against the indecent foolishness
of this world. Full of lofty zeal and in ardent love for God’s Son, you capture men
with the banner of the holy cross so that they will wage war in the Christian army
against the wrath of the pagans. I beseech you, father, by the living God, hear me
in what I ask you.

(2) I am very concerned about this vision which opens before me in spirit as a
mystery. I have never seen it with the outer eyes of the flesh. I am wretched and
more than wretched in my existence as a woman. And yet, already as a child, I
saw great things of wonder which my tongue could never have given expression
to, if God’s spirit hadn’t taught me to believe.

(3) Gentle father, you are so secure, answer me in your goodness, me, your
unworthy servant girl, whom from childhood has never, not even for one single
hour, lived in security. In your fatherly love and wisdom search in your soul,
since you are taught by the Holy Spirit, and from your heart give some comfort to
your servant girl.

(4) I know in Latin text the meaning of the interpretation of the psalms, the
gospels, and the other books which are shown to me through this vision. It stirs
my heart and soul like a burning flame and teaches me the depth of interpretation.
And yet this vision doesn’t teach me writings in the German language; these I

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9 Excerpts from Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works: With Letters and
Songs by Matthew Fox, Copyright © 1987 by Bear and Company, Santa Fe, NM.
don't know. I can simply read them but have no ability to analyze them. Please answer me: what do you make of all of this? I am a person who received no schooling about external matters. It is only within, in my soul, that I have been trained. And that is why I speak in such doubt. But I take consolation from all that I have heard of your wisdom and fatherly love. I have not talked about this to anyone else, because, as I hear it said, there is so much divisiveness among people. There is just one person with whom I have shared this, a monk [Volmar] whom I have tested and whom I have found reliable in his cloistered way of life. I have revealed all of my secrets to him and he has consoled me with the assurance that they are sublime and awe-inspiring.

(5) I beg you, father, for God's sake, that you comfort me. Then I will be secure. More than two years ago, I saw you in my vision as a person who can look at the sun and not be afraid, a very bold man. And I cried because I blushed at my faintheartedness.

(6) Gentle father, mildest of men, I rest in your soul so that through your word you can show me, if you wish, whether I should say these things openly or guard them in silence. For this vision causes me a lot of concern about the extent to which I should talk about what I have seen and heard. For a time, when I was silent about these things, I was confined to my bed with serious illnesses, so intense that I was unable to sit up. This is why I complain to you in such sadness: I will be so easily crushed by the falling wooden beams in the winepress of my nature, that heavy wood growing from the root which sprang up in Adam through Satan's influence and cast him out into a world where there was no fatherland.

(7) But now I lift myself up and hasten to you. I say to you: you will not be crushed. On the contrary, you constantly straighten the wooden beam and hold it upright; in your soul you are a conqueror. But it's not only yourself that you hold upright; you raise the world up towards its salvation. You are the eagle who gazes at the sun.

(8) I ask you by the radiant clarity of the Divine and by the marvelous Word and by sweet tear-gifted repentance, the Spirit of truth, and by the holy sound which echoes through the whole creation: by him, the Word, from whom the world has come to be. By the majesty of the Divine, who in sweet greening power sent the Word into the womb of the Virgin, from whom he took flesh, as the honey is built up around the honeycomb.

(9) And may this sound, the power of the Divine, strike your heart and elevate your soul, so that you do not grow stiffly indifferent through the words of this woman [Hildegard], since you yourself seek out everything with God or with human beings or with any mystery until you press so far forward through the opening of your soul that you discern all of these things in God. Farewell, live well in your soul and be a strong warrior for God. Amen. (Letter 1, Fox 1987:271-273).
In paragraph one, Hildegard approaches one of the most powerful churchmen of the century. The topos of elevating the stature of the great one seems like blatant flattery to modern minds, but there is a sincere element in Hildegard’s address that denotes her admiration for him as well as her great desire to gain his opinion. In paragraph two, she expresses her wretchedness as a woman and that from childhood she could only understand what God gave her. Paragraph three again appeals to his honor and spirituality. In paragraph four she explains that the meaning and interpretations of divine books are given to her in her visions, but not in German. She again appeals to his wisdom and adds that Volmar believes her experiences to be sublime. In paragraph five Hildegard continues to beg for his help and explains that she saw Bernard himself in one of her visions. Paragraph six clarifies what she wants. She believes he can give her the counsel she needs to know whether or not she should disclose her visions or continue to keep them to herself. Evidently the vision that commanded her to write and speak her revelations caused her such concern that it made her ill and she was confined to bed. She compares her fragility to the “wooden beams in the winepress of my nature.” In paragraph seven we learn that Bernard has the soul of a conqueror and can straighten the beam and hold it upright. He is after all, “the eagle who gazes at the sun.” In paragraphs eight and nine, she asks for his counsel by all that is holy, and pleads that he will not with hold his wisdom just because she is a woman.

Thus in this one letter we see forms of deference to the elites, particularly to an elite male, the self-abnegation and lack of confidence enculturated in women, descriptions of her visions, what she learns in them, the fears they stimulate in her and the illnesses that follow, particularly the one that admonished her to begin writing and
speaking publicly despite the cultural and scriptural restrictions of those very behaviors. The visions of light had been life-long experiences, but the powerful, life-changing one wherein God called her to write and speak was traumatic and placed her in a very insecure position.

This may well have been a peak-experience as described by Maslow. Although we do not have every detail of the vision, we do know it set Hildegard on a path to a personality change of the first magnitude. This suggests the models of both James and Maslow. Furthermore, her great output of creative work follows this vision, a fact that supports James' and Maslow's argument that great spiritual experiences are followed by creative output and pragmatic endeavors. Hildegard's vision did not render her mentally ill. It created what was to become a woman who exercised great power, the power of a prophet in the tradition of the Old Testament.

On a second occasion Hildegard provided a more mature and detailed explanation of her visions. When she was 77 years old, she corresponded with Guibert of Gembloux who asked her to describe her experiences. In her response she indicates that, long before she was able to describe it to others, she had seen an intense and extraordinary light in which there were figures.\(^\text{10}\)

(1) From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves, and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time, when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. I do not hear them

with my outward ears, nor do I perceive them by the thoughts of my own heart or by any combinations of my five senses, but in my soul alone, while my outward eyes are open. So I have never fallen prey to ecstasy in the visions, but I see them wide awake, day and night. And I am constantly fettered by sickness, and often in the grip of pain so intense that it threatens to kill me; but God has sustained me until now.

(2) The light that I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud that carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it “the reflection of the living Light.” And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam within it.

(3) Now whatever I have seen or learned in this vision remains in my memory for a long time, so that, when I have seen and heard it, I remember; and I see, hear, and know all at once, and as if in an instant I learn what I know. But what I do not see, I do not know, for I am not educated, but I have simply been taught how to read. And what I write is what I see and hear in the vision. I compose no other words than those I hear and I set them forth in unpolished Latin just as I hear them in the vision, for I am not taught in this vision to write as philosophers do. And the words in this vision are not like words uttered by the mouth of man, but like a shimmering flame, or a cloud floating in a clear sky.

(4) Moreover, I can no more recognize the form of this light than I can gaze directly on the sphere of the sun. Sometimes—but not often—I see within this light another light, which I call “the living Light.” And I cannot describe when and how I see it, but while I see it all sorrow and anguish leave me, so that then I feel like a simple girl instead of an old woman.

(5) But because of the constant sickness that I suffer, I sometimes get tired of writing the words and visions that are there revealed to me. Yet when my soul tastes and sees them, I am so transformed that, as I say, I forget all pain and trouble. And when I see and hear things in this vision, my soul drinks them in as from a fountain, which yet remains full and unexhausted. At no time is my soul deprived of that light which I call the reflection of the living Light, and I see it as if I were gazing at a starless sky in a shining cloud. In it I see the things of which I frequently speak, and I answer my correspondents from the radiance of this living Light. (Newman 1987:6-7)  

In paragraph one, Hildegard once again describes the onset of her visions in early childhood but now she provides more detail. She sees in her soul which rises and spreads through the heavens thereby allowing her to view distant peoples and places. All this takes place in her soul alone and not by means of her five senses. Furthermore, Hildegard is awake during the entire experience. It is in her soul that she attains understanding and she does not feel the sensations of ecstasy. Again Hildegard mentions her constant state of illness and the fact that she often experiences intense pain. Paragraph two clarifies that essence of the visions which are not spatial. It is a light without measurement. Information comes to her and takes form within the light. Paragraph three describes the ineffability of the vision. She remembers and does not forget them. Understanding is instantaneous. Words shimmer in the light and are not uttered. The “living Light” that Hildegard sees is described in paragraph four. It appears within another light, and while she is in this state she feels youthful and free of sorrow and anguish. In paragraph five she complains of her ongoing illnesses and that she often tires of the visions and the requirement that they be written. Yet during the visions she is transformed and free of pain and her exhaustion lifts. The light is constantly with her and she answers her correspondence with what she sees in the light.

In contrast to the letter to Bernard of Clairvaux this letter allows us to see the mature and confident Hildegard. There is no deference to anyone save God. She is at more leisure to describe the visions in more detail. She is anxious to explain that she “sees in her soul” and that the experience is an emanation wherein she rises above the earth yet learns in her soul and not by her senses. Her visions sound very much like altered states of consciousness and Hildegard is wide awake throughout them all.
Hildegard again relates her lifelong state of illness and the fact that she is often in pain, yet those burdens are lifted during her altered states of consciousness. There is no sense of ecstasy in these visions, rather they are didactic in purpose; they are to be written and shared. They result in books, music, art, and science as well as sermons and correspondence. In other words, here is the pragmatic result so essential to James' theory. Moreover, there is no spatial sense of dimension. This is also typical of peak experiences as described by both James and Maslow. The visions are ineffable. She does not forget them. Again, this supports the positions of James and Maslow.

Once Hildegard had received not only the approval of Bernard of Clairvaux but also the commendation of Pope Eugene III, her manner of thinking altered considerably. Thereafter she spoke with the authority of the Pope's support as well as by the command of God. Her's is the voice of a prophet that commands in the uncompromising mode of the Old Testament sages. Consider these portions of the letter she sent to Pope Anastasius IV in 1153. This pope was not exercising the power and authority she perceived he needed in order to effectively meet the challenges of the times. In point of fact, he was a good man but his health was failing and he was unable to control the corrupting powers in his court. Anastasius IV died in December of 1154. While the epistle is lengthy, these portions demonstrate the prophetic power of her words.  

O shining bulwark, peak of guiding power in the lovely city prepared as Christ's bride, hear him, whose life is without beginning and never dissipates into fatigue.

O man, the eye of your discernment weakens; you are becoming weary, too tired to restrain the arrogant boastfulness of people to whom you have trusted

your heart. Why do you not call these shipwrecked people back? They can be rescued from serious danger only through your help. And why do you not cut out the roots of the evil which chokes out the good, useful, fine-tasting, sweet-smelling plants? You are neglecting justice, the King’s daughter, the heavenly bride, the woman who was entrusted to you. And you are even tolerant that this princess be hurled to the ground. Her crown and jeweled raiments are torn to pieces through the moral crudeness of men who bark like dogs and make stupid sounds like chickens which sometimes begin to cackle in the middle of the night. They are hypocrites. With their words they make a show of illusory peace; but within, in their hearts, they grind their teeth, like a dog who wags its tail at a recognized friend but bites with his sharp teeth an experienced warrior who fights for the King’s house. Why do you tolerate the evil ways of people who in the darkness of foolishness draw everything harmful to themselves? They are like hens who make noise during the night and terrify themselves. People who act like this aren’t rooted in goodness.

List then, O man, to him who loves exceedingly sharp discrimination. For he has put in place a strong instrument of uprightness, one that should do battle with evil. But that is precisely what you aren’t doing when you don’t dig out by the root that evil which suffocates the good. And you tolerate even more than that, allowing the evil to raise itself up proudly. And why? Because of your fear of the evil men who lay snares in nocturnal ambush and love the gold of death more than the beautiful King’s daughter, justice.

Therefore hear him who lives and who cannot be pushed out of the way. Already the world is full of aberration, later it will be in sadness, and then in such a horrible state that it will not matter to people if they are killed. But from the heart comes healing, when the red sky of morning becomes visible, like the light of the first sunrise. Words cannot express the new longings and enthusiasm that follow.

And you, O man, who have been placed as the visible shepherd, rise up and hasten quickly to justice, so that you will not be criticized by the great Doctor for not having cleansed your flock from dirt and for not having anointed them with oil...And so, O man, stand upon the right way and God will rescue you. God will lead you back to the fold of blessing and election and you will live forever (Letter 2, Fox 1987: 273-276).

If Hildegard could reprimand a pope, she could also demand the best of abbots and bishops. Nor did she hesitate to admonish kings and rulers. She wrote to Bertha, Queen of Greece and Empress of Byzantium (Letter 9 in Fox 1987:292) as well as to King Henry II of England (Letter 10 in Fox 1987:292-293). Four letters have been found
from Hildegard to Frederick Barbarossa and one from the king to her. The following
letter was sent to him in Aachen on March 9, 1152.  

It is wonderful that a man should acquire such an attractive personality as you, O king. Listen: a man stood on a high mountain, looked down into all the surrounding valleys and observed what everything in the valley was doing. He held a staff in his hand and administered everything justly, so that whatever was dry began to grow green and whatever slept was awakened. But the staff also took the burden of apathy from those who found themselves in great dullness. When the man failed, however, to open his eyes, a dark haze come that covered the valleys; and ravens and other birds tore everything all around to pieces.

Now, O king, pay careful attention! All lands are clouded by the plots of the many people who though the blackness of their souls put out the light of justice. Robbers and vagrants destroy the way of the Lord. O kin, control with the scepter of compassion the slothful, changeable, and wild habits of men. For you have a name of renown, since you are king in Israel. For your name is of high repute. Make sure, then, when the highest Judge looks at you, you will not be charged with not having rightly grasped your office, for then you must indeed blush which shame. May this be far from you! It is a well-known truth that it is right that the ruler imitate his predecessors in all that is good. For the idle morals of the princes are black indeed, since they run about in negligence and filth. Flee from this, O king! Be rather an armed fighter who bravely withstands the Devil, so that God doesn’t strike you down and thereby scandal come over your earthly kingdom. God protect you from eternal destruction. May your times not be dry. God guard you and may you live in eternity! So cast off all greed and choose moderation. For that is what the highest King loves (Letter 7, Fox 1987:289-290).

Hildegard’s relationship with Frederick was continued in correspondence that began optimistically, but when the emperor chose to select a series of antipopes in a schism that divided the Church for eighteen years. Hildegard accused him of an unsuitable stubbornness in the face of the warning sounded by the God who spoke through her visions, “If you want to go on living, heed what I say. Otherwise my sword will pierce you through!” (Schipperges 1998:59) Bonnie Wheeler suggests that, although Barbarossa treated Hildegard with deference and did her no harm, he did not heed her

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advice and was soundly defeated at the Battle of Legnano in northern Italy eight years later; whereupon, he “promptly made peace with Pope Alexander III” (Wheeler 2002:35).

Hildegard could also be gentle and use the word of her God to help individuals and comfort those in despair. She wrote two letters to Gertrude, a troubled acquaintance who had been “the wife of a count, the sister of a king, and the aunt of an emperor” (Fox 1987:336). Evidently, she and the count had never had children but compensated for their loss by giving generously to various religious establishments. Widowed in 1156, Gertrude moved to a convent. She had difficulties making the adjustments required and wrote to Hildegard for advice as to the possibility of moving elsewhere. The following letter is the second of two that were sent by Hildegard to the widow.14

O daughter of God, deep inside you bear a troubled soul. O Gertrude, beloved child of God, you are continually restless of spirit. Regarding your question about a place where you can stay and find pasture for soul and body, that is something about which God has given me no sign. Nevertheless, I have heard the following words with great clarity:

Through consulting your own intuition and with the wise counsel of others as well, inquire into and choose for yourself a place to live that meets your needs, but not such as offers an incompatible mixture of religious and secular society. For God has set you the task of finding those things you need for your life, while at the same time avoiding empty luxury. For that person can find God everywhere who seeks the Divine with a sincere cry for help.

Therefore, O daughter of God, that wisdom which is won in holy knowledge does not despise God, for God created humankind in the divine image. Yet I see your living place glowing, wherever the dwelling is which God provides for you. So now be happy again and hold fast to your purpose in God (Letter 32, Fox 1987:336-7).

It appears that the prophetess threw the decision making process back onto the widow. In point of fact, the concerned Hildegard did more for Gertrude than just send her

counsel and comfort. Ever the pragmatist, the prophetess proceeded to write the
following letter to Bishop Eberhard of Bamberg suggesting he offer the widow shelter in
his area. This he did and evidently provided the countess with a successful placement.¹⁵

A man rose at daybreak and planted a vineyard. Afterwards, he turned his
attention in other directions for a variety of reasons. Thus his zeal for the vineyard
passed. Now, father, look at this homeless daughter, Gertrude, who like Abraham
was called from her native soil and left her fatherland. For she gave up everything
to buy the pearl of great price of which the gospel speaks (Matthew 13:44). But
her heart now is greatly distressed, pressed like a grape in the wine press. Help
her, then, as much as you can, for the love of the One who existed before all
beginnings and who has filled all things in divine compassion, so that the
vineyard in this daughter will not go to ruin (Letter 33, Fox 1987:337).

**Hildegard's Theology**

In her teaching and writing Hildegard emphasized the Incarnation and atonement
of Christ. Hers is a holistic emphasis on the creation and purpose of this existence. The
holistic aspect of her work extends to her medical writings, which are encyclopedic. She
places the feminine aspect of creation right with the male aspect of creation and this from
the beginning of time. For Hildegard the feminine principle of Wisdom and Love
mediates between God and His creations. As such, the feminine is also divine. "As
consort of the masculine Creator, she is the divine Mother of all living" (Newman
1987:250). Although Hildegard's theology centered upon the Incarnation, it is highly
gendered, so much so that it never became a part of mainstream Catholicism. She places
great emphasis on the practice of virginity but she placed little credence upon self-
inflicted pain in order to approach God thus bypassing the "virile woman" topos.

Teofilo F. Ruiz suggests that Hildegard's mystical visions are unusual and interesting for several reasons. First, she insisted upon the importance of Eve and Mary and argued for the importance of women in the church. Second, she emphasized the importance of the female body as it pertained to mysticism. This concept would be further developed in the following centuries when female mystics practiced extremes of purgation. Third, Hildegard insisted that Eve was "the true mother of mankind" and that females were as important as males in the act of conception. Fourth, Ruiz notes how very intellectual her mysticism was both in her use of metaphors and in that she wove many of the great "figures of the Old and New Testament into an affirmation of God" (Ruiz 2002:18).

According to Barbara Newman, "Instead of seeing herself as masculine, she developed a paradoxical self-image combining two different versions of the feminine: the 'weak woman' (whom God had chosen to shame strong men) and the exalted virgin. Hildegard's ideal of feminine chastity united virginitas with viriditas, the gracious fertility that bloomed in both flesh and spirit" (1995:6). This concept was derived from the Latin word for green. Perhaps she was inspired by the beauty of her homeland, for she used the concept to signify the life-force of the world, freshness and fullness in life, vitality and fecundity. "It is also a metaphor for virtuous living and a spiritual existence. She also applies it to Christ, Mary and the Church as a symbol for life" (Schipperges 1997:156).

This ideal was embodied in the Virgin Mary and each individual virgin, but also in diverse instantiations of the "queen of heaven" – the cosmic Ecclesia, the feminine Virtues, the divine figures of Wisdom and Charity (Sapientia and Caritas). Such a powerfully articulated theology of the feminine furnished her nuns with a religious ideal that did away with female inferiority while retaining the structure of an impeccably orthodox piety. At the same time, the model of the
"weak woman" as a vessel of prophecy enabled the abbess to perform such quintessentially masculine acts as preaching, teaching and writing without overtly threatening the ideology of male dominance (Newman 1995:6-7).

Hildegard’s theology also places tremendous emphasis on the catastrophic consequences of Eve’s act in the Garden of Eden. From her writings one would surmise that nothing has been right since. Mortals should never have been conceived through the sexual act. Mary started a new creation through the virginal birth of her son. Although motherhood is not condemned, it is certainly secondary in value to virginity in Hildegard’s worldview, and that same virginity is required of males, especially priests, if the world is to be saved from sin. Her insistence on celibacy along with that of other reformers may have influenced the final requirement of the Church to that end.

The Unique Qualities of Hildegard of Bingen

Carolyn Walker Bynum provides a brilliant synopsis of Hildegard’s place in the history of medieval female mysticism. The prophetess is not typical of the types of female mysticism that developed in later centuries for hers was a unique gift. The differences between the Sybil of the Rhine and other great mystics are condensed and quoted from Bynum’s conclusions as stated in the Preface to the Scivias (1990:2-6).16

(1) “Hildegard is in no way typical, either as a nun or as a visionary or as a female writer...Hildegard was profoundly different from such later figures as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, the only women taken seriously as theologians or as mystics by the Catholic church until recently.”

(2) “Nor is Hildegard, who is in any case an extremely difficult writer, made easier to understand by isolating her from her twelfth-century German,

monastic context and relocating her in a tradition of female spirituality running from Perpetua (d. 203) to Therese of Lisieux (d. 1897).

(3) "A Benedictine abbess, Hildegard advocated a monastic life of obedience and communal prayer, not the extravagant and individualistic asceticism of some later medieval women."

(4) "A proponent of Gregorian reform, Hildegard proselytized for clerical purity and power, and argued that women should not hold priestly office, although she (virtually alone among medieval women) undertook preaching missions with ecclesiastical approval."

(5) "Authorized to write by God’s command (as were many other medieval women), Hildegard dominated her confessors, scribes and illustrators in a way not common with female saints some of whom were so controlled by their confessor-scribes that it is indeed hard to know whether their piety and even their words represent truly the divine message they heard in the inner recesses of their hearts."

(6) "Moreover, Hildegard was a prophetic seer whose visions had political content and were based in a physical experience of light and pain.

(7) "She wrote in Old Testament images of precious stones and noble buildings, of agriculture and organic growth, of courts and war and beautiful garments – images radically different from” those of the fourteenth century.

(8) "A visionary who took her revelations as a text for exegesis, not an experience for re-living, Hildegard was not, technically speaking, a mystic at all.

(9) "She wrote not about union but about doctrine”

(10) In her works there is a “virtual absence of nuptial imagery- usually thought, quite incorrectly, to be characteristic of women writers – and by the lack of a spirituality of imitatio Christi and self-punishing asceticism”

(11) “Recent studies of medieval saints have suggested that certain themes such as the religious significance of illness and the need for charismatic authorization do characterize women’s religious experience.”

(12) “Certain fears shaped women’s intellectual efforts, and indeed the act of writing itself was often for a woman both service to others and audacious self-integration."

(13) "Research on medieval medical texts has established that learned and folkloric traditions shared an emphasis on the threatening physicality of females; some historians would argue that such traditions underlie the extravagant physiological imagery in women’s writing as well as the
extraordinary bodily miracles such as stigmata, miraculous lactation, and so forth performed by women from the thirteenth century on.”

(14) “Readers who expect to be moved or inspired as Bernard of Clairvaux moves and inspires may be initially disappointed [by Hildegard’s work]. But if one pauses for a moment while reading and looks beyond the elaborate and often confusing details of Hildegard’s revelations, one realizes one has been shown the structure of salvation.”

(15) “With Hildegard one does not feel; one sees. Hildegard’s visions are in fact one vision: a primer and a summa of Christian doctrine.”

(16) “Indeed she believed God had called upon a weak woman to rage against evil only because humankind had turned away from heaven and bent its will toward the dust from which it had been created. But rage she did, with confidence and power.” (Bynum 1990:2-6)

Self-actualization in the Life of Hildegard of Bingen

This study has placed Hildegard of Bingen within the dynamic era in which she lived. Many of the differences in the experiences noted by Bynum between Hildegard and later female mystics are due to cultural changes and religious innovations that developed in the centuries that followed the life of the abbess of Eibingen and Rupertsberg. They are also due to the fact that Hildegard herself was a very unique and talented individual who gave all credit for her efforts to the visions that were a constant element in her life. Hildegard had a great thirst for knowledge whether it was for scientific, aesthetic or spiritual benefit. This was certainly within the spirit of the twelfth century renaissance. However, Hildegard then made that information available to others due to the prompting of her visions. Hildegard’s prophetic gifts were utilized for and in behalf of rulers, churchmen and individuals, some of whom were very powerful and active participants in the history of their age.
The writings and activities of the prophetess provide a good deal of information that supports the argument that she was a self-actualizing female mystic. In Hildegard’s case her most productive period followed the pivotal conversion experience of 1141. It had the effect described by both James and Maslow in that there is no evidence of her great output before that seminal vision and the command to write, this despite the fact that she had been experiencing visions since her early childhood. This factor correlates with the models of both James and Maslow who observed that individuals who had peak experiences became more productive and creative. Hildegard was subject to her altered states of consciousness throughout her entire life time. Perhaps that accounts for the immense productivity that occurred during the last forty years of her life when those abilities were unleashed due to the authority of the pope.

Second, the history of Hildegard of Bingen gives no evidence of a hysterical, narcissistic individual. The visions sometimes occurred while she was physically ill or weakened, but they did not render her mentally ill or ineffectual in her life’s work. Her effort seems to truly be that of one who tried to serve God, obey the promptings of her visions, and tend to the needs of the women under her care. Although she did provide biographical materials to her clerics upon request, her own works are for the scientific, artistic and spiritual edification of others.

William James suggests that saints do something to leave the world a better place. Certainly the abbesses’ artistic and intellectual efforts provide ample evidence of this factor. James also noted the propensity of those who experienced conversion to perform acts of kindness on behalf of the “losers” in this world. Hildegard’s care for the dying crusader and his burial exemplifies that major hallmark of the saints, a Christian concern
for the underdogs of society. For a year she opposed the most powerful ecclesiastical authority in her area and defended the right of a single, scorned individual who could no longer protect himself. This she did despite the interdiction placed upon her and all her nuns.

The prophetess never denied her experiences, a point typical of those who experience peak experiences and conversions as noted by both Maslow and James. Hildegard of Bingen followed the dictates of her conscience. She did not waver from that inner guidance. She completed the tasks the voice of the visions gave her to perform throughout the last forty years of her life. Also, her efforts to explain the ineffable were so difficult for her that readers find them somewhat confusing. Hildegard’s determination to explain what she heard and saw drove her to illustrate her revelations or direct others to illustrate them for her. This was possible in the case of the *Scivias* because those revelations came to her in visual form.

There is a very strong pragmatic problem solving aspect to Hildegard’s efforts. She was an administrator with scores of women to direct and serve. Visions sometimes came to her when she needed solutions to problems. This was the case when she needed to leave Disibodenberg. At that time her inability to fulfill the directives of her revelations sent her to her sickbed. She returned to health when given permission to proceed with the development of the Rupertsberg property. Indeed, Hildegard’s health fluctuated when she was thwarted and kept from fulfilling the demands of her visions (Newman 1987:9-10). Hildegard’s many musical compositions are believed to have been in response to her efforts as a spiritual educator for she maintained that music was not only beautiful but critical to spiritual growth and development. Her play, the *Ordo*
*Virtutum*, is also perceived to have been in response to a need to fulfill the ritual calendar of her community. The scientific writings were a pragmatic effort to strengthen the healing work of the convent's infirmary. In other words, Hildegard of Bingen was so creative and pragmatic that she produced solutions to her challenges albeit often by the direction by the voice of God within her.

Hildegard's life illustrates several more of James' observations about saints. First, she experienced revelations from a "greater" power and surrendered to the requirements of its demands. Second, she made and kept vows of poverty, charity, and obedience with but one or two exceptions, the most notable being that of the crusader's burial. Hildegard emphasized virginity in her teachings and there is no reason to believe that she did not practice what she preached. However, she is not noted for the extreme asceticism other female mystics often practiced. She does describe a lifetime of illness produced either by or in connection with the visions, visions that were evidently constantly with her.

The constancy of the abbess of Bingen's revelations are somewhat unlike experiences that might be called "peak." Yet several aspects of Maslow's model of peak experiences are described in Hildegard's letter to Guibert of Gembloux. First, all her visions take place in the "vault of heaven" and among the various peoples of the earth and in distant lands. This is one of the aspects noted by Maslow's study wherein his subjects often reported a cosmic or holistic view of the entire creation. Second, they are perceived "inwardly" and are not spatial but take form in the light of the vision. Even the words of the revelations are not corporeal but shimmer and float. Third, the visions are such that through them she transcends all her pain and exhaustion. Despite the debilitating effect of her spirituality, Hildegard felt strengthened to write and do all that
the visions of light required of her. The results were an outpouring of activities that
demonstrate an individual quite capable of pragmatic self-actualization.

Conclusions

Hildegard of Bingen was a towering presence who embodied the essence of the
Twelfth Century Renaissance. Her influence did not end in the twelfth century but it did
decline for several hundred years. This was due to the complexity of her writing, the very
feminist aspects of her theology, “as well as her passion to synthesize diverse realms of
knowledge in an overarching whole” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:434). Hildegard was not
easy to read or to understand. Religious fashions changed, and readers of the thirteenth
century would “prefer the drier, more analytic genres of systematic theology or the more
intimate, confessional style of mystics like Bernard and his imitators” (Wilson and
Margolis 2004:434). Indeed, during her lifetime “her books enjoyed a modest circulation
and a widespread notoriety” (Newman 1990:10, introduction to Hildegard’s Scivius). Her
Vita was written over a period of time by several individuals including her secretaries,
Volmar and Guibert of Genbloux. It was completed by the combined efforts of Gottfried
of St. Disibod and Theoderich of Echternach who wisely included some of Hildegard’s
own autobiographical materials. Eventually her prophesies were passed on, then altered,
and new unauthentic ones were credited to her.

“By later medieval generations she was remembered primarily as an apocalyptic
prophet. Her fiery but enigmatic writings about the Antichrist and the last stages
of world history were collected by a Cistercian monk in 1220 and continued to
circulate until the Reformation, when she was perversely hailed as a proto-
Protestant because she had prophesied the confiscation of ecclesiastical wealth by
princes and dissolution of monasteries” (Newman 1990:10).
Today there is a strong and functional German cult that promotes Hildegard as a saint. The abbey at Eibingen has been revitalized by visits from tourists and scholars alike (Newman 1990:10). With the advent of feminist and gender research her life is again a subject of intense interest and Hildegard’s accomplishments are being rediscovered. Contemporary New Agers are reviving her medical works in light of the renewed interest in alternative medical practices and herbology. Her plainsongs are being performed again and the Ordo Virtutum, was produced for the British Broadcasting Corporation.17

The life of Hildegard of Bingen was chosen for this study because it provides an excellent example of an individual whose visionary experiences inspired her to many accomplishments. Hildegard’s altered states of consciousness began during her childhood, but the visions that caused her to publicly acknowledge her insights and enter the public area did not occur until she was about 40 years old. This was the “conversion” experience noted by William James and one of the “peak-experiences” studied by Abraham Maslow. Far from being a hysteric, Hildegard’s life works included self-actualizing behaviors in the arts and letters as well as in medicine and theology. As a successful abbess and lecturer, this woman’s life demonstrated that her visions strengthened her pragmatic abilities. Other women of the Middle Ages believed that the quests for visionary experiences and unio mystica were the most important goals in one’s life. Marguerite Porte was such mystic, and a woman who willingly paid the ultimate price for that opinion.

CHAPTER 7

MARGUERITE PORETE: ANNIHILATED SOULS

"This Soul, says Love, takes account of neither shame nor honor, of neither poverty nor wealth, of neither anxiety nor ease, of neither love nor hate, of neither hell nor of paradise; for the will is dead which gave desire to her. Thus this gift is given from the most High, into whom this creature is carried by the fertility of understanding, and nothing remains in her own intellect. And this Soul, who has become nothing, thus possesses everything, and so possesses nothing; she wills everything and she wills nothing; she knows all and she knows nothing." (Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls. Ellen L. Babinsky, translator. 1993:84-85).

It was June 1 in the year 1310 and crowds gathered at the Place de Grève in Paris to witness the burning of an unrepentant heretic, the woman Marguerite Porete. Recognized as a "beguine," or one of a growing group of independent religious lay women who were eventually declared to be heretical by the Church, Porete had been excommunicated and imprisoned for nearly a year and a half (Porete 1993:20-26). Despite offers of absolution and opportunities to recant her beliefs as presented in her book known as The Mirror of Simple Souls, she refrained from cooperating in any way with the process that led to her condemnation. Porete refused to answer questions from the inquisitor himself, nor had she signed the official papers required for her examination and so she was tried anyway. Convicted of heresy and contempt during the inquisitional court, she withstood all temptation to plead for her life or to modify her theology, and now, as she approached the pyre she remained stoic, unbending, self-contained. Witnesses later wrote of her serenity and decorum throughout the ordeal of her death (Wilson and Margolis 2004:761). Indeed, "A contemporary witness tells that her nobility
of bearing and her devotion as she went to die made many who were present weep” (Dronke 1984:217).

According to the witness, Porete’s behaviors exhibited no signs of hysteria in a most horrifying situation, one wherein emotional reaction would be an expected behavior. Furthermore, documents of the inquisition indicate that it was Porete who actually controlled the process of her imprisonment and trial, even if it was to her own physical detriment. One wonders what it was she stubbornly sought to prove. If she was relentless, it may have been to illustrate through her own death the state of self-actualized individuals who care only for the will of God as they know it; those victorious individuals who overcame the illusions of the physical world, “noble” souls who annihilated all desire and self will. The path to that state of mind was the subject of her book, *Le Miroir des Simples Ames Anienties et qui Seulement Demourent en Vouloir et Desir d'Amour*, or *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls Who Remain Only in the Will and Desire for Love* (Wilson and Margolis 2004:761).

Yet the *Mirror of Simple Souls* did not emerge out of nothingness. Its content and destiny were linked with many individuals who participated in the thirteenth century milieu; a period wherein there evolved a new female mysticism based upon Courtly Love, as well as the beguine movement, the Heresy of the Free Spirit, and the violent end of the once-powerful military Order of Knights Templar. Each of these developments were related within the spirit of the times, and eventually came together at the end of Marguerite Porete’s life. Therefore each of these elements is enlarged upon in turn in order for Porete’s story to unfold clearly.
During the Late Middle Ages, the socio-economic situation was changing dramatically. Crops continued to provide sufficient food for a general increase in population. Feudalism was declining and villages and cities were rapidly growing. As a result skilled craftsmen organized themselves into guilds thus increasing their wealth and opportunities for political influence. In so doing "a new class of people arose in urban communities. This group was made up of urban merchants and tradespeople who appeared during the transition from a feudal economy, in which goods and services were exchanged, to the market economy, in which things were expected to have an assigned value" (Peters 1991:1). The changing economy was largely necessitated by the tremendous growth in trade that was stimulated by crusaders and penitential pilgrims who opened European minds to many heretofore unknown delights - wonders that included mirrors, spices, rice, garlic, muslin, damask, and perfumes (Reither 1958:173).

The crusades of this period followed upon the heels of the initiatives taken during the twelfth century. Crusaders lost Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, an event that was closely followed by the Third Crusade in 1190-1192. It was followed in turn by the Fourth Crusade in 1201-1204, during which the crusaders captured Constantinople. The first crusade against a Christian heresy began in 1208 and was organized to root out the "Cathar" or "Albigensian" groups of Southern France. This effort quickly expanded into the Inquisition. The disastrous Children's Crusade was undertaken in 1212. Various minor crusades continued throughout the entire period.

It is generally unrecognized that women often accompanied the men on the crusades and acquitted themselves bravely. That courage was noted by historians of the
period in particular with regard to the women who fought in the Third Crusade (1189-1193). Their participation in these wars was outlawed but largely ignored until Pope Innocent III decreed in 1210 that women could go on campaign with their men; however, their participation as soldiers was officially banned until the reign of Louis IX (r. 1267-1270).  

Wars abroad were not the only military and political strivings of the era. European kings and rebellious nobles also struggled for positions and wealth as is demonstrated by the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215. During the early part of the thirteenth century The Holy Roman Empire itself was under the dominion of the Church. Emperors and kings now no longer chose the popes, but the popes anointed them. At this time popes had such influence and power that they were, for all intents, “the real heads of Christendom [indeed] Pope Innocent III was the most powerful ruler of his day” (Reither 1958:169, 170). Reaction to the power of the Church eventually resulted in many attempts by kings as well as heretics to free either the state or individual spirituality from official ecclesiastical authority. However, by the last decades of the century the powers of popes were crumbling. Kings like Philip IV, of France (1268-1314) exploited the weaknesses of the popes and opposed their special forces such as the Order of Templars.  

The flowering of medieval civilization took place during this century, one that produced the great Gothic cathedrals and art. For example, Chartres Cathedral was undertaken in 1194 and was not completed until 1260. The universities of Paris and of Oxford were founded in 1200. These institutions quickly spread throughout Europe and became the site for the work of schoolmen like Albertus Magnus (c. 1208-1280), Thomas

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1 (For more information on this little known aspect of history see Wilson and Margolis 2004:897 and Riley-Smith 2005:15, 17-23, 148, 154, 165, 174).
Aquinas (1224-1274), and Roger Bacon (c 1214/1220-1292). It was during this period that Dante degli Alighieri (1265-1321) produced the *Divine Comedy* (Reither 1958:181). Although Latin was the official language of the Church and state as well as scholars, vernacular writing emerged and rapidly spread amongst the middle classes despite all opposition by those in power.

The perceptions of women during this era were almost schizophrenic. At this time there was an abundance of artistic creations dedicated to the Virgin Mary. They ranged from great cathedrals to vast quantities of Marian literature (Wilson and Margolis 2004:621-623). The admiration for the Virgin was in some respects replicated in the courtly love ideal of *Fine amours*. Yet despite these two cultural forces, theologians spewed their most vindictive tirades against the evils of womankind. Uta Ranke-Heinemann considers the thirteenth century to be the “Golden Age of Theology-and Peak of Misogynistic Slander” (1991:177-185). Using both Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, as her exemplars, Ranke-Heinemann relates their venom to the revival of Aristotelian thought. Again, “woman owed her existence to a mistake, a slipup in the process of birth. She was, in other words, a ‘misbegotten or defective man’” (Ranke-Heinemann 1991:185). The theologians were joined by the literati who wrote books about the complexities and evils of female nature. This was the era of misogynistic literature as exemplified by the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Tournoiement des Dames*.

Not all women were intimidated by the opinions of men. Some women, like Porete, ignored their detractors and proceeded with their own thinking. One of the most creative innovations of the century dealt with love, and its perception influenced female mysticism for the next several centuries. When the formidable Eleanor of Aquitaine died
in 1204, her political skills and interests in the arts were carried on by her daughters, one of whom was the queen and regent of France, Blanche of Castile (1188-1252). Another one of Eleanor's daughters, Marie of Champagne (1145-1198) authorized her chaplain, Andreas Capellanus, to write a handbook on the rules for courtly love called, *On the Art of Honest Loving* that was very popular at court during the thirteenth century (Wilson and Margolis 2004:598). During this period, an anthology of two hundred poems was written in Latin and a German dialect. The collection is known to us as *Carmina Burana*. This was the era of *Fine amours*, or “high love.” Jongleurs and troubadours entertained the nobility with poems and songs of unrequited courtly love and idealistic self-sacrifice for the beloved, a concept which quickly translated into a more intimate love for Christ, the distant groom, whose aristocratic brides lived within conventual settings.

By the late thirteenth century *Fine amours* was banned as a heretical doctrine because it had become equated with the area of its origin in southern France, the home of the persistent Cathar heresy. Nevertheless, courtly love lived on. It found its place in the hearts and minds of those with a mystic bent. For centuries to come men and women would see its similarity between the soul and a relationship with Christ.

*Mystic Innovation from Hildegard to Marguerite Porete*

The thirteenth century was a period of tremendous religious excitement and innovation, a period of change that altered female mysticism for centuries to come. The major aspect of change pertained to the soul as the bride of Christ. This was first seen in the twelfth century theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux and was based upon the relationship of love suggested by the *Song of Songs*. The romance of courtly love and literature also contributed greatly to the thirteenth century innovations on spirituality. As
result of both trends, the soul came to be seen as a bride and with it grew the quest for union with God, a search that reached the proportions of individual fulfillment and self-actualization. This enthusiasm for union with God “permeated and dominated female piety in general in the thirteenth century” (Grundmann 1995:175). According to Herbert Grundmann, “the degree of spiritual intensity passed through all the possibilities from a purely allegorical phrase to an illusory physical experience [including] expression of female erotic mysticism” (Grundmann 1995:175). The beginnings of those changes are evident in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen’s associate, Elizabeth of Schönau.

Barbara Newman points out that Hildegard never had a school of disciples as did Meister Eckhart or St. Bernard of Clairvaux. However, she did mentor a younger woman, Elizabeth of Schönau (1129-1165), a German Benedictine nun whose visions began about a year after Hildegard had the *Scivias* published (1990:45-48). Only twenty-three years old when her visions began, she was well aware of the older woman and sought her wisdom and comfort, acknowledging her as spiritual mother. Elizabeth so admired Hildegard’s work that she was somehow able to arrange to leave her convent and travel to visit with the older woman. Thereafter, they corresponded for some years, particularly between 1152 and 1156 (Maddocks 2001:139).

Like Hildegard, Elizabeth “felt herself called to preach reform” (Maddocks 2001:46). Over the years, Elizabeth also corresponded with those in powerful positions and warned of the onrushing apocalypse. Both women endured powerful spiritual gifts despite often debilitating illness, the same tendency toward physical suffering that became a hallmark of female spirituality in later centuries. Both viewed themselves as “ancilla Dei, or the “handmaidens of God.” They did not see themselves as the Brides of
Christ or in the German Brautmystic image which would shortly become common to so many female mystics seeking to achieve a mystical union with Him (Wilson and Margolis, Vol. 1, 2004:306).

Yet there were striking differences between the mindsets of the two women. Where Hildegard was the classical scholar of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Elizabeth was the bridge to the female mystics of the following generations. According to Barbara Newman, Hildegard’s intellectual works were Platonic, her review of Christian doctrine was systematic, her books were carefully structured, and her interests were so broad they included the sciences as well as the arts of her era. “In short, it is the complexity, variety and sheer intellectual difficulty of Hildegard’s opus that mark her and not Elizabeth as a woman of the twelfth-century Renaissance” (Newman 1990:46).

The application of their spiritual talents also differed and indicates other aspects of innovation. Hildegard was not the same sort of female “mystic and ecstatic” familiar to those of later ages (Newman 1990:46, 47). Hildegard was pragmatic to the extreme and would scarcely have recognized the forms of mystic endeavor that would follow upon the heels of Elizabeth’s generation. Hildegard’s visions were oriented to community and were shared through the arts; Elizabeth’s were “private mystical conversations with the angels and saints” (Newman 1990:47). It is Elizabeth in whom “one finds ecstasies, deliberate cultivation of mystical experience, a highly developed subjectivity and deeply personal (as opposed to communal) relationships with the saints” (Newman 1990:46).

There were other differences as well. Newman points to the fact that their relationships with their male spiritual advisors were polar opposites; Hildegard dominated her male secretaries while Elizabeth was more dependent in her relationships
(Newman 1990:46, 47), the latter being a pattern that would develop over the ensuing centuries. Elizabeth's brother, Ekbert, sacrificed his own career to promote the visions and writings of his sister. At times he served Elizabeth "as scribe, translator, editor, censor, publicist and publisher" (Maddock 2001:142). As a result of his efforts, Elizabeth eventually became even better known than Hildegard and there were many more surviving manuscripts of Elizabeth's Book of Visions first, Second, Third), the Book of the Ways of God, and letters (Wilson and Margolis 2004:305). While there are only a handful of copies of Hildegard's voluminous opuses, 145 manuscripts remain of Elizabeth's less challenging and shorter efforts. The younger woman's works were translated into Provencal and Icelandic and reached England long before Hildegard's did (Maddocks 2001:142-143). Although the two nuns were contemporaries, one senses that Elizabeth would have been equally at home in a community of consecrated women a century later, while Hildegard would have been an anachronism (Newman 1990:46).

Indeed, it is Elizabeth who models the mysticism of women in the following centuries; one of the most notable of those women was Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210-c.1282).

Mechthild of Magdeburg was an orthodox German religious who delighted in her experience of union with God (Lerner 1991:18). In her work, the Flowing Light of the Godhead, she describes moments of union with God in terms that are often interpreted as ecstatic or erotic. Although Mechthild did not attack either the Church or the moral law, she did believe those who could "reach God in an extrasacramental way" are freed from sin because, "When the soul begins to rise, the dust of sin falls away and the soul becomes a god with God, because what God wills the soul wills, otherwise the two could not be united in perfect union" (Lerner 1991:19). Indeed, Mechthild argued that God says
to the soul: “thou art so natured in me that absolutely nothing can stand between thee and me” (Lerner 1991:19). Mechthild’s desire for and efforts to experience the unity of the soul with the divine expressed the motivating factor in mystic self-actualization. Her early writings are considered fundamental to the independent women’s spiritual movement known as the “beguines.”

Marguerite d’Oingt (c. 1177-1213) of France was the prototype for the beguine movement which had its centers in northern Europe. Other women associated with this group include Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232-1292) and Gertrude the Great (1256-1301/2) who created one of the finest establishments of female intellectual and mystical endeavor. Among that number were the Middle Dutch mystic, Hadewijch (d. 1260), Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207-1282/94) and Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-1299). The changes in female spirituality that resulted from their efforts came to the fore in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror*, a work that showed the influence of beguine religious perceptions then went on in an entirely new and creative theological direction. The handbook for achieving union with God was written by Marguerite Porete who is recognized as the most notable of the beguine women and their ultimate martyr.

*Beguines: the Independent Holy Women of Northern Europe*

Although the women known as beguines were somewhat liberated by the economic and social changes of the period, there was another force at work among the new classes. Religious revitalization and a drive for spiritual independence from the Church resonated across the states of Europe. Women as well as men were active in the excitement that force generated. From the late twelfth through the thirteenth centuries
female passion for the religious life grew dramatically. Unfortunately, there was no place for common women to go because only the very wealthy and the nobility could afford to enter convents. Herbert Grundmann notes, “Despite their astonishing number and their being filled to overflowing, women’s houses of the Cistercians, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans, were in no position to include all the women swept up by the religious movement and to find them a place in the life of their orders” (Grundmann 1995:139). In 1215 new forms of the *vita religiosa* were banned, an act which then forced determined women and men to form their own communal houses.

The physical logistics that made it impossible for recognized orders to house all those who sought to enter monastic lifestyles did not impede the religious revitalization that continued to sweep across Europe. Some of its momentum was based upon successes in the wars against the Muslims, but it was also fed by the desire of many who sought to imitate the apostolic life-styles of simpler, less organized religious practice, particularly those of the early Christian apostles of Jesus. In large part, the movement was for reform, individual as well as social. Some groups would later be accused of heresy (Bynum 1982:9-13) but that was not the original intent. These were reformers who supported the Church’s efforts to eliminate simony and require celibacy of the clergy, but they also sought a penitential life of spirituality for themselves as individuals. They chose the *vita apostolica* of the early Christian church which included vows of poverty and chastity as well as the opportunity to go actively into the world as representatives of Christ.

It is not yet possible to pinpoint the origins of this movement largely due to the fact that no leaders are named. Throughout northern Europe many groups of such men
were known as *beghards*, the women were recognized as *beguines*. Even the beghards
produced no great charismatic captains. Had there been powerful leaders, a new religion
might have resulted from this spiritual revitalization. As for the beguines, Joanne
Maguire Robinson concludes that, “they were flourishing by 1200 in areas that included
Liège, the Rhineland and south to the Alps, and into northern France and Bohemia”
(Robinson 2001:29). She notes that both the cities of Cologne and Paris were vital
centers. Although they were never formally organized, beguines and beghards were
generally referred to as one of many groups known as the heresy of the *Free Spirits*
(Lerner 1991). In southern Europe similar unauthorized groups in Lombardy were
referred to as the *humiliati*. One exception to the trend was a group that was successfully
organized and authorized by the Church. It was the Franciscan Order whose leader was
the charismatic St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and his associate, the abbess St. Clare
(1212-1253).

Despite this exception, the movement was largely an irrepressible force of change
that simply effected large numbers of the general population. Marygrace Peters refers to
this trend as “a kind of democratization of the mystical way” (Peters 1991:7). She
suggests that it was due to the growth of the *bourgeoisie* with all its attendant leisure and
increased educational levels. As always, women were particularly drawn to opportunities
to develop spiritual perfection and actively participated in the various religious factions.
Lerner points to the severity of the lives of women at that time and suggests that “their
relegation to an inferior status was as severe as their material problems. Women could
not become priests, but Free-Spirit doctrine offered them something better than that: full
union with divinity” (Lerner 1991:230). This was maximum self-actualization.
Why the name “beguine” was chosen is uncertain. Some scholars believe it was related to the great Cathar heresy that originated in Southern France (Dronke 1984: 228). This group was also known as “Albigensians” and in the early years of that movement women were given many ecclesiastical opportunities denied to them in the Roman Catholic Church (Dronke 1984:228). This changed as the heresy grew, but “beguine” may have begun as a reference to those Cathar women who exercised some degree of authority. According to Grundmann (1995), “In 1215, it still raised suspicion of heresy for a woman to be called a ‘beguine,’ since that was the name of the heretics of Southern France, but as early as 1223 the Cologne town council records speak without hesitation of religious women as beguines” (Grundmann 1995:81). The meaning and implications of the name continued to change for “In the 1230s, the charters begin to speak of the women ‘called beguines by the people,’ and after 1245 the women called themselves that name. The old meaning of the word had been forgotten, and the new had lost all hint of heresy” (Grundmann 1995:81-82).

The beguines were originally called “holy women” or *mulieres sanctae* who occupied themselves developing their spirituality. Many lived at home with their families. Other thousands of individuals joined likeminded friends and set up their own houses known as a *beguinage* in order to practice chastity, poverty, and public service while seeking a spiritual union with God (Amt 1993:263). As Wilson and Margolis point out, by the early thirteenth century they began “to organize themselves into congregations centered on spiritual discipline and common tasks” (2004:172). In this they imitated the religious orders of nuns without the restrictions of growing enclosure. They practiced poverty and were known for their various austerities (Amt 1993:265-266).
Beguines took no formal vows and were free to leave the beguinage and marry if they wished. Moreover, beguines continued to live in the larger world. Some were mendicants who actively preached in public as did Marguerite Porete. For the most part beguines occupied themselves with good works such as the care of the sick and the dying and feeding of the poor. They successfully supported their enterprises by manual labor such as weaving and other crafts related to the production of cloth. The admiration they engendered often resulted in gifts and financial support of citizens. Thus they were self-supporting despite being single women of the less wealthy classes unlike nuns who were elite members of the nobility.

Perhaps this independence contributed to the almost arrogant sense of being spiritually elite that has been noted as characteristic among the beguines. Both Robinson (2001) and Newman (1995) have remarked upon this less than humble attitude of the women. As the beguines synthesized the allegories of courtly love to the quest to create themselves in a new *Imago Dei*, they came to perceive themselves as the possessors of a special esoteric knowledge. Gradually they created a model of spiritual “nobility” to which they alone were privy. Porete frequently demonstrates this attitude in the arguments of *The Mirror*. Newman explains this paradox, for despite their good works on behalf of the sick and the poor, the beguines demonstrated “contempt for the uncomprehending masses [one that] is discernable in all the extant beguine texts. Their striking elitism is in part a simple transposition of the courtly ethos into religious terms. But more important, it sets a limit to the democratization of mystical piety that beguines themselves were promoting” (Newman 1995:142).
The attitude was due in part to the fact that beguinages were largely comprised of women from groups that were prosperous, including the landed aristocracy and from the newly rich or "urban patriciate" (Lerner 1991:231). They may have joined the movement not only to fulfill their spiritual goals, but also because they either chose not to marry or found themselves without potential spouses due to the shortage of men that resulted from constant warfare and the dangers of crusades. Since there were no occupations for women of their period other than marriage or the nunnery, the beguinages offered a wonderful alternative for single women to live productive lives both in the physical and spiritual worlds.

The fact that they were not necessarily of the nobility does not mean that beguines were poor or part of the "ignorant rabble" (Lerner 1991:233). Although they were not necessarily Latinists, Robert E. Lerner notes that, "A startling number of our heretics were authors, many of those who were not could still read, and almost all seem to have had a well-developed theological vocabulary" (Lerner 1991:233). Female authors counted among the beguines include not only Marguerite Porete but also Hadewijch of Brabant (d. 1260), Beatrijs of Nazareth (1200-1268), and Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1210-c.1282). These and other beguine authors had a profound influence on mysticism which, according to Barbara Newman, "would never be quite the same." (1995:137-38). The beguines adapted fine amour to the eroticized contemplative practice of Brautmystik and a new perception of the soul's relationship to God was born.

Wilson and Margolis (2004:172) describe the process whereby the independence of the beguines eroded. As their groups increased in size and prosperity, their freedom

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2 (See Wilson and Margolis 2004:346-347 for a discussion of the Frauenfrage or the "woman problem" of the late medieval Europe).
and growing wealth were perceived as a threatening social anomaly. Ecclesiastical authorities insisted they be brought under the dominion of existing religious orders, but none of those groups wanted to deal with women who lacked valuable dowries, nor did they choose to deal with working women as such. At this point Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160/70-1240-1244) came to the women’s defense and suggested a system whereby they received papal consent as self-regulated communities (Wilson and Margolis 2004:172). They would also receive spiritual guidance from clerics who would preach to them and listen to their confessions. These efforts to control the women did not hinder the growth of the movement. In the beginning beguinages were quite small, but as time passed the pattern changed and they became more and more enclosed. Eventually beguinages became complete communities and very similar to monastic establishments. They might even be surrounded by moats and walls as was the Great Beguinage at Ghent (Wilson and Margolis 2004:172).

_The Heresy of the Free Spirits_

Beguines participated in the overall religious movement of the age. In Northern Europe it is collectively referred to as the “heresy of the Free Spirits” (Lerner 1991). In his seminal work on the beguines and Free Spirits, Robert E. Lerner verifies that those proclaiming themselves as Free Spirits sought to achieve union with God while on this earth. They believed this could be achieved by means of physical austerity and spiritual abnegation. “Thus their heresy was not a medieval anomaly but was closely related to the orthodox mystical movement of the later Middle Ages and grew out of a concern for a life of spiritual perfection” (Lerner 1991:3).
Yet Free Spirits carried this doctrine of union between the individual soul and God to a degree that threatened the power of both Church and State. A soul united with God answered to no one else and could not be controlled by threats of excommunication, interdicts or the laws of the land. The independence of the lay mystics created a problem relative to their relationship with the ecclesiastical authorities. For members of the Swabian Ries group, located in the diocese of Augsburg,

Identification between God and the soul was so immediate and complete that there was no need for any mediation on the part of the clergy or any need to seek counsel from learned men. They saw no reason to worship the saints and rejected prayers, fasting, and confession as useless and unnecessary for the deified. Indeed, some of their most extreme tenets maintained that prayers, fasts, confessions, vigils, and other good works actually stand in the way of the good man...Since he was possessed by the Holy Spirit he could exceed the traditional bounds of charity and arrive at a state beyond good and evil (Lerner 1991:14-17).

The position of dependence upon God alone for direction led to a perception that Free Spirits stood against the leadership of the popes and priesthoods. Enemies of these lay groups insisted that they were nihilists and megalomaniacs, but, as usual, these are the charges of their enemies who followed the age-old tradition of accusing dissidents of all forms of ungodliness. “Examination in fact shows that heretics of all stripes were simply assumed to be immoralists throughout the thirteenth century. This is shown by the sermon literature of the age” (Lerner 1991:22). The assumption of evil was also applied to groups opposed by the kings of the age; an accusation that had nothing to do with true heresy as was the situation with the Knights Templar.

The Knights Templar and the Struggle for Wealth and Power

The crusades were a major undertaking during the Late Middle Ages. The value of crusading was “reinforced by the support of a succession of men and women
universally regarded as saints” (Riley-Smith 2005: xxxiii). These influential individuals included Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena. It was in response to that enthusiasm that the Knights Templar organized between 1119 and 1120. They were highly supported by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Originally their purpose was to protect Christian pilgrims on their journeys to and from the Holy Land, and, in order to do that, they were directly under the control of the popes. As time passed they became a small but select and powerful Christian order of warriors, the first of its kind. Despite the fact that there were never more than 20,000 Knights Templar at any one time, and only 10 percent of those were actually combatants, Jonathan Riley-Smith argues that the Templars were as “permanently at war as those in other religious institutes were at prayer [indeed] warfare as a temporary act of devotion became warfare as a devotional way of life” (Riley-Smith 2005:79).

Although the knights were a religious group sworn to chastity and poverty, the order itself quickly became wealthy. Christian Europe embraced the Templars and supported them with land and treasure. Their leaders were often brilliant business men and their properties provided them with growing wealth, power and influence. They developed the first form of banking by using paper contracts on behalf of elite pilgrims, thereby protecting their assets until they could return from their pilgrimages and battles. As the Templars answered only to the pope, they were not subject to local governments and were able to transact business or travel anywhere in Christian territories. In effect, they were “arguably the world’s first multinational corporation” (Sean Martin 2004:5).

During the late thirteenth century, the Templars and Christian forces suffered a series of loses against Saladin and his armies. This eventuated in a loss of power and

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prestige which enabled one of their debtors to destroy the Templar Order. Their enemy was the king of France, Philip the IV (12568-1314) who was also known as Philip the Fair. Philip pressured Pope Clement V to investigate the Templar leaders on false charges, namely the usual accusations of heinous behaviors traditionally ushered against enemies of the church and heretics (Lerner 1981:68-69).

Arrests of Templar leaders began on Friday, October 13, 1307, and their assets were officially subject to seizure on November 22, 1307 (Martin 2005:118). Many were tortured into confessions. By 1310 some Templars resisted the inquisitorial processes, but the archbishops of both Sens and Reims had the sixty-seven who insisted upon their innocence burned at the stake. Historians generally discount the charges against the Templars, nevertheless the order was suppressed on April 3, 1312, at the Council of Vienne. According to Riley-Smith, “The destruction of the Temple has been treated as a good example of what early state machinery could do at a time when a crown, short of cash and with its eyes on rich pickings, controlled the inquisition and when the papacy was on the defensive” (Riley-Smith 2005:249).

According to Babinsky there were three possible motives for Philip’s repression of the Templars. The first had to do with the confiscation of their great wealth and the elimination of his debt. The second motive may have been due to Philip’s genuine piety and abhorrence of anything related to heresy. Finally, Babinsky suggests that the third motive might well have been the advantage of propaganda that presented Philip as the great defender of orthodoxy (Babinsky 1993:19-20). In the end, Philip’s cunning

\[ ^{3} \text{For a detailed account of this episode in history see Sean Martin 2005:123-125, 140-142.} \]
proceedings against the Templars secured his own political power but in the name of the Church itself.

Marguerite Porete, the beguines, Free Spirits and Knights Templar all became subject to the whims of royal and ecclesiastic powers. By some strange twist of fate, Porete’s death seems connected to the demise of the Order of Templars, for as Ellen L. Babinsky notes, “Promotion of the theme of sacred king and holy country, centralization of authority in the crown, loyalty to the king on the part of the clergy, and the image of the king as tireless defender of the faith in opposition to heresy: all these factors came together in the trial of Marguerite Porete” (Babinsky 1991:20).

*The Mirror of Simple Souls*

Evidently Porete’s book was written sometime between 1285 and 1295 (Dronke 1984:202). It is organized around a dialogue between the Soul, Lady Love, Reason, and miscellaneous entities. A combination of prose and lyric poetry, *The Mirror* is written in vernacular French (Orcibal) and is believed to be the “oldest surviving mystical work in that language” as well as “one of the few book-length writings composed by a woman before 1300” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:761). Despite the fact that the Church attempted to burn all copies and threatened excommunication to those found to possess it, *The Mirror* was widely distributed for several hundred years as evidenced by over a dozen surviving manuscripts in Old French, Latin, Middle English and Italian (Dronke 1984:217, Wilson and Margolis 2004:762). Indeed, Dronke considers this text to have been highly cherished, and, in the light of modern scholarship, the *Mirror* is of great value not only for its originality and expression of self-awareness, but also in relation to
the doctrines of various groups classified under the heading of “Free Spirits” (Dronke 1984:217, 218).

Marguerite’s own voice in The Mirror differs from other mystical works in that it is not autobiographical as was the common genre of the era. The author’s presence is hidden in the character of the “Soul” whose goal it is to explain the process of one’s journey to unity with God. Porete does not describe visions or her personal experiences, but rather the efforts of the Soul to explain the journey to the other characters in the text. Those characters are almost all female and include Reason, Love, and the Virtues. Yet, even as the Soul argues for the need to attain unio mystica in order to help the other characters spiritually, she is paradoxically destroying each of them in the process. Ultimate spiritual success requires the annihilation of every value and even the will in order to merge with the divine in peace and happiness. Everything is eliminated, including the need for sacraments, Eucharist, or the ecclesiastical authority of organized religion. There is only one need and that is the return of the Soul to the will of God.

The Mirror is a combination of theological discussion, allegories and poetry. Paradoxes permeate the work illustrating that reality and our cognitive constructs may be true and yet self-contradictory and, thus, untrue thereby leading us away from God. The very use of the word, Mirror, in the title indicates that all we know is illusory yet reflective; in this case it deals with self-reflection and self-knowledge. However, one must remember that in medieval times, glass was not as clear as it is today and had a more deceptive quality. As Amy Hollywood points out, “Perhaps a result of the poorer quality of mirrors generally available before the Renaissance, always implicit in the image was the idea that the mirror offered only the illusion of reality and that the
reflection seen in it was deformed” (1995:87). The purpose of the text is to provide the means whereby the “soul is clarified, thereby becoming a mirror without blemish or obscurity” (Hollywood 1995:87).

Much of the text explains seven steps of development through which the Soul must go in order to change herself and surrender totally to the will of the divine. In general those transformative steps are not unlike the traditional process of mystic growth outlined by Underhill (2005 [1939]) and Ruiz (2002) in chapter 1 of this dissertation. In Porete’s description the first step requires that the Soul be touched by grace and all temptation to sin must be removed leaving the Soul with only the desire and capacity to love (Babinsky 1993:28). In the second stage the soul practices mortifications in order to achieve evangelical perfection. During the third stage, the Soul experiences such love that she desires greatly to serve and persevere in the “works of perfection” (Babinsky 1993:28). Yet the Soul realizes that her love for those works is a hindrance from further development and so she relinquishes the pleasures of these works in order to destroy the will with which she is still willing actions.

The fourth stage is more complicated, for as Babinsky notes, the soul is, “consumed in an ecstasy of life in which she is deceived into thinking that God has no greater gift in store for her” (Babinsky 1993:28). The soul must not believe that this delightful experience is the same thing as total unity with God. She must move on in her quest to stage five. Now the soul must ponder what God is and what she, Soul, is not, namely pure being. At this point she recognizes that she has been given the gift of free will by God, and that now she must return her will to Him. In the sixth stage the soul

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4 The following section is deeply indebted to Ellen L. Babinsky’s 1993 translation of The Mirror and to her interpretation of Porete’s theology of the Soul’s progress.
crashes into devastating humility. At this point God sees himself in her for she is empty, her soul is transparent. The seventh stage occurs at death and can only be known at that point in time (Babinsky 1993:28).

During this process, the soul experiences three kinds of death: the death to sin in stage one, to nature in stage two, and to the soul’s own spirit and loss of personal will in stage five (Babinsky 1993:29). Next, Porete discerns between two types of souls: the “lost” and the “sad.” The lost souls attain the second stage but go no further. There they obey Reason and the Virtues thinking that in this they will be saved. Porete agrees that they and all souls are saved, but being saved is not the same thing as surrendering the will in order to unite with God. Only those who strive to continue on the seven stage path will know full spiritual actualization.

These are the “sad” souls whom Porete considers to be the “nobility” of the spiritual world. All others, no matter what their stations in the physical world, no matter their wealth or power in the Church or the state, are merely “lost” souls (Babinsky 1993:29). In Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls, Joanne Maguire Robinson provides a detailed examination of Porete’s concept of spiritual nobility, a perception held in common by all beguines and one that certainly approaches the arrogance of many medieval aristocrats (2001:99). As for the sad souls, the Trinity imprinted their spiritual path within them before their births. They are those who will be led to the state of annihilation that receives the fullness of divinity in the fifth and sixth stages (Babinsky 1993:30). Porete perceives herself as one of those spiritual elites.
This position was bound to offend Church officials as well as the officers of the state. However, the element in *The Mirror* that attracted the greatest attack was Porete's position on the virtues, one where her points were taken out of context. They are italicized below.\(^5\)

Chapter 21: Love answers the argument of Reason for the sake of this book which says that such Souls take leave of the Virtues.

*Reason*: Now, Love, says Reason, I still have a question, for this book says that this *Soul has taken leave of the Virtues in all respects, and you say that the Virtues are still with these Souls more perfectly than with any other*. These are two contradictory statements, it seems to me, says Reason, and I do not know how to grasp them.

*Love*: Let me calm you, says Love. *It is true that this Soul takes leave of the Virtues, insofar as the practicing of them is concerned, and insofar as the desire for what they demand is concerned. But the Virtues have not taken leave of her, for they are always with her, but this is from perfect obedience to them*. By means of this intellect, the Soul takes leave of the Virtues and they are always with her. For if a man serves a master, it is he whom the man serves, and the master does not belong to him. Yet the time comes when the servant has gained all the wisdom of the master and perceives that he is richer and wiser than the master, and the servant leaves the master for a better master. And when the one who had been the master sees that his former servant is more worthy and knows more than he, he arranges to remain with the one who had been his servant in order to obey him in everything. So you can and must grasp everything about the Virtues and such Souls. For at first this Soul did whatever Reason taught her, whatever the cost to heart and body, since Reason was the mistress of this Soul. And Reason constantly told her to do all that the Virtues wished, without resistance, until death. *Thus Reason and the Virtues were the mistresses of this Soul and this Soul was truly obedient to all that was commanded, for she wanted to live the Spiritual Life.*

*So this Soul has gained and learned so much with the Virtues that she is now superior to the Virtues, for she has within her all that the Virtues know how to teach and more, without comparison*. This Soul has within her the mistress of the Virtues, whom one calls Divine Love, who has transformed her completely into herself, is united to her, and which is why this Soul belongs neither to herself nor to the Virtues.

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Reason: To whom does she belong then? Says Reason.

Love: To my will, says Love, which transformed her into me.

Reason: But who are you, Love? Says Reason. Are not you one of the Virtues with us even through you be above us?

Love: I am god, says Love, for Love is god and God is Love [I John 4:16], and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by righteousness of Love. Thus this precious beloved of mine is taught and guided by me, without herself, for she is transformed into me, and such a perfect one, says Love, takes my nourishment (Porete 1993:105-106).

In more modern terms it is evident that Porete believes Reason and the Virtues have nurtured the Soul over such a long period of time that those values have become integrated into the personality. Here in chapter 21 we understand that Virtue and Reason are habituated and have become traits such as kindness, fairness, obedience, courage, and self-discipline. In other words, Reason and the Virtues have been established as part of the individual’s character. It is difficult to see such an individual as a threat to anyone unless they had innovative religious or political views, in which case they wouldn’t be too attached to them anyway. Or would they? Porete was stubbornly determined to stand by her opinions.

Porete continues her paradoxical arguments by means of “apophasis,” a rhetorical device whereby one argues for the existence of something through negation, by examining but not examining, or by mentioning but not mentioning. In other words, one affirms a concept through its negation as in the case of God wherein He is limited by definitions of divine qualities, therefore God is known best by attributing no qualities to Him. Its opposite is “cataphatic” language which develops the attributes of God in order to define the deity, particularly by means of scripture. Both cataphatic and apophatic language occur within mystical texts; however, only medieval men had authority to use
and interpret scripture; women did not (Hollywood 1995:97-98). Portions of chapter 130 demonstrate Porete's use of apophasis in her theological exposition.6

Chapter 130: Here the Soul speaks of three beautiful considerations, and how she does not understand the divine power, wisdom and goodness, except as she understands her own weakness, ignorance, and wretchedness.

And so I pondered and said: “Lord God, I do not know whence you are, for only your supreme divine eternal power comprehends this. Lord, I do not know what you are, for only your supreme divine eternal wisdom knows this. Lord, I do not know who you are, for only supreme divine and eternal goodness comprehends this.”

Lord, how much do I comprehend my weakness, my ignorance and my wretchedness? Only as much as I comprehend your power, your wisdom, and your goodness. And if I could comprehend one of these two natures, I would comprehend them both. For if I could comprehend your goodness, I would comprehend my wretchedness; and if I could comprehend my wretchedness, I would comprehend your goodness: this is the proportion for it. And as I understand nothing of my wretchedness, compared to what it is in itself, so I understand nothing of your goodness, compared to what it is in itself. And as little as I understand, Lord, of your goodness, it gives me what understanding I have of my wretchedness. And as little, Lord, as I understand of my wretchedness, it gives me what understanding I have of your goodness. And yet truly, Lord, this is so little that one could say better that this is nothing compared to what remains than that it is something compared to what remains. And thus you are all: your Truth confirms it in me, and so I understand it. (Porete 1993:210)

In as much as this dissertation concerns the self-actualizing experiences of female mystics, it is well to examine portions of the chapter in Porete's Mirror that indicate she experienced unio mystica. She first presents her dilemma as one formerly subject to fine amour, the Virtues and Reason as well as the demands of desire, will and affection. Now all that had changed. Notice that she emphasizes her position by a switch to several

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poetic forms and that she realizes her union with the will of God separates her even from her fellow beguines.  

Chapter 122: Here the Soul begins her song.

Now has Divine Light
delivered me from captivity,
And joined me by gentility
to the divine will of Love,
There where the Trinity gives me
the delight of His love.
This gift no human understands,
As long as he serves any Virtue whatever,
Or any feeling from nature,
through practice of reason.

O my Lover, what will beguines say
and religious types,
When they hear the excellence
of your divine song?
Beguines say I err,
priests, clerics, and Preachers,
Augustinians, Carmelites,
and the Friars Minor,
Because I wrote about the being
of the one purified by Love.
I do not make Reason safe for them,
who makes them say this to me.
Desire, Will, and Fear
surely take from them the understanding,
The out-flowing, and the union
of the highest Light
Of the ardor
of divine love.

Truth declares to my heart,
That I am loved by One alone,

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And she says that it is without return
That He has given me His love.
This gift kills my thought
By the delight of His love,
Which delight
lifts me and transforms me through union
Into the eternal joy
of the being of divine Love.

And Divine Love tells me
that she has entered within me,
And so she can do
whatever she wills,
Such strength she has given me,
From One Lover whom I possess in love,
To whom I am betrothed,
Who wills what He loves,
And for this I will love Him.

I have said that I will love Him.
I lie, for I am not.
It is He alone who loves me:
He is, and I am not;
And nothing more is necessary to me
Than what He wills,
And that He is worthy.
He is fullness,
And by this am I impregnated.
This is the divine seed and Loyal Love.
(Porete 1993:198-200)

Here are the physical illusions of unity with God, a union that then separates
Porete from other mortals. Not even the select souls of the beguines will understand her
experience of the joy found in annihilation. Love, the Virtues, good works, all were
choices of the will and had to be eliminated in order to permit only the will of God into
the heart and actions of the soul. The Mirror of Simple Souls reflects not only several of
the positions of beguines and free spirits, it is “a book of an uncommon insight into the
possibility of transformative union between God and individual human souls” (Robinson
2001:101). It is argued here that Marguerite Porete internalized her beliefs to such a
degree that they became the criteria for her personal standard of self-actualization. *The Mirror* is Porete's witness "of the fact that she achieved her goal and that indeed, "She is living out deeply personal experience" (Robinson 2001:99).

*The Trial of Marguerite Porete*

We know very little about Marguerite Porete save that which is retained in the records of the Inquisition and that which is inferred from her book, *The Mirror*. In the absence of additional documents, the following are the facts as we have them. The date and place of Porete's birth are unknown. However, Dronke (1984:217) believes Valenciennes, France, was probably Marguerite's city of origin for it is there that she was publicly condemned around the year 1300. The area was associated with the beguines and the Free Spirit movements that were so much a part of the religious fervor of the thirteenth century. It is thought that Porete was an activist or mendicant member of that persuasion and that she ignored the prohibitions against women preaching in public and writing on theology.

Despite these prohibitions, Porete was one of the most accomplished female writers in an era that saw an "astounding proliferation of writings by religious women, in Latin and vernacular, prose and verse" (Dronke 1984:202). Judging by *The Mirror*, she was an educated woman indicating a somewhat upper class origin and the possibility of an education in a conventual setting. She refers frequently to various scriptures and her poesy includes canzone and rondeaus. These forms demonstrate familiarity with the
courtly lyric literature of the time. Furthermore, Marguerite pursues her arguments in carefully outlined dialogue wherein one thought logically follows the other. This lends additional strength to the position that she was well educated due to the fact that this was an era wherein classical reasoning and philosophy were highly valued and logical argumentation was a mark of the scholar.

Certain events in her prosecution can be pieced together with the elements of her trial and death. Just as Hildegard of Bingen sent her work to Bernard of Clairvaux for approval, so also Porete sent *The Mirror* to three orthodox Church leaders, one of whom, Godefroi of Fontaines (fl. Paris 1285-1306) “cautioned her on her language and ideas in certain passages” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:761). However, she received no caveats from the others. The beguine first encountered formal Church opposition in 1300 when her book was publicly condemned at Valenciennes (Dronke 1984:217). By 1306 *The Mirror* and its author had drawn the attention of Guy de Colmieu who was the bishop of Cambrai. He insisted that all copies be burned and that Porete witness the event. Undaunted, she refused to forsake her personal beliefs nor would she follow the proscriptions of the clergy. She continued “to circulate it among beghards and other unschooled people” (Grundmann 1995:183). “The free souls, she believed, must never be cowed by what she called ‘The little Church’ or Sainte Eglise la Petite” (Dronke 1984:217).

In 1308 she and her defender, the beghard, Guiard de Cressonessart, were both arrested under orders from the Dominican inquisitor, William of Paris, who accused her of heresy. According to Babinsky (1993:20-21) Porete had ignored a number of summons

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8 For more information on the difficulties involved in an analysis of her education and background, see Dronke 1984:318 n48.
to appear before the commission; therefore, William of Paris was forced to bring her before the court himself. Inquisitional procedures demanded that the defendant swear an oath which Porete refused to do; so the inquisitor had her as well as Guiard imprisoned and placed under major excommunication. The two were held in prison for a year and a half. “During this time she had been frequently exhorted to swear and to respond, the inquisitor himself offering her the benefits of absolution, but Marguerite did not care either to ask for or to accept this absolution” (Babinsky 1993:21).

The next step in her trial pertained to a counsel of canonists whose work it was to decide what to do with her and Guiard and to direct the inquisitor as to how he should proceed. The counsel was held on April 3, 1310. “The canonists judged her to be contumacious, rebellious, and deserving to be condemned as a heretic...unless she should repent immediately before or after the sentence. In the latter case, they judged that she should be perpetually imprisoned” (Babinsky 1993:21). The verdict applied to Guiard as well. A second consultation was held on April 9, 1310, because by now Guiard had recanted. Nevertheless he was judged to be a heretic in that he still refused to recognize the total authority of the pope and thus he was sentenced to spend the remainder of his life in a monastic prison.

On April 11, 1310, William of Paris led the deliberations of 21 theologians who examined *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. It is suggested that the opinions of such a large number of experts seem excessive when evaluating a woman’s book. Paul Verdeyen suggests that it may have been due to the fact that the work had been examined earlier by three venerable theologians including Godfrey of Fontaines, a doctor of theology at the
University of Paris. He had not condemned it nor had the others. On May 9, 1310, the 21 met again and determined that the beguine was indeed a heretic who had not only refused to cooperate with the inquisition but had also continued preaching as a mendicant. She had also continued distributing her book in defiance of ecclesiastical demands. Therefore all copies of The Mirror were to be handed over to the Church authorities for destruction and its author was ordered to be remitted to the secular powers for execution.

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake on June 1, 1310. The counsel announced its reasoning and its decision in the following statement:

The case is as follows. From the time that Marguerite called Porete was suspected of heresy, in rebellion and insubordination, she would not respond nor swear before the inquisitor to those things pertaining to the office of inquisitor. The inquisitor set up a case against her nevertheless, and by the deposition of many witnesses he found that the said Marguerite had composed a certain book containing heresies and errors, which had been publicly condemned and solemnly burned as such on the order of the Reverend Father Lord Guy, formerly bishop of Cambrai. The above said bishop had ordered in a letter that if she attempted again to propagate by word or writing such things as were contained in this book, he would condemn her and give her over to the judgment of the secular court. The inquisitor learned next that she had acknowledged, once before the inquisitor of Lorraine, and once before Reverend Father Lord Philip, the next bishop of Cambrai, that she still had in her possession, even after the condemnation mentioned above, the said book and others. The inquisitor learned also that the said Marguerite, after the condemnation of the book, had sent the said book containing the same errors to the Reverend Father Lord John, by the grace of God bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne. And she had not only sent this book to this Lord,
but also to many other simple persons, Beghards and others, as if it were good (Babinsky 1993:23-24).

This official document reflects Marguerite Porete’s non-cooperative stoicism and the mystic discipline that bolstered her resolve. Her behaviors are symbolic of the thirteenth century passion for independence from ecclesiastical and state authorities. Porete was a product of and participant in the tremendous religious enthusiasm for mystic endeavor that began in the late twelfth century and continued until the enlightenment, a movement that resulted in the eventual “democratization” or spread of mysticism to the middle classes of Europe. Her death was not an isolated event. It was quickly followed by further action against the beguines and the demise of the Order of Templars.

**Church and State Crush the Social Revolution**

There were passages in *The Mirror* that indicated Marguerite perceived royalty in a negative light. Indeed, she wrote, “that certain people are called kings in a country where all are one-eyed but those who have two eyes know that the former are serfs” (Lerner 1991:77). This may have been an allusion to the King’s one-eyed minister, Pierre Flote. Porete also compares kings “to the owl who mistakenly considers its offspring to be the most beautiful in the forest” (Lerner 1991:77). Furthermore, Porete insisted that those who became one with the will of God owed allegiance to God alone and therefore need not accede to the demands of social institutions such as the Church.

The beguine believed that souls who had become one with the will of God belonged to the true “Holy Church.” The rest of Christendom belonged to the “Holy Church the Little” (Babinsky 1993:122; Porete, Chapter 43), or “Sainte Eglise la Petite” (Dronke 1984:217) whose sacraments and ordinances are no longer required by those in
the true Holy Church (Babinsky 1993:160; Porete, chapter 85). Porete’s arguments reach a point wherein the “Unencumbered Soul” even becomes free from the “debts which she owed to Jesus Christ and therefore she owes Him nothing, however much she may have been obligated” (Babinsky 1993:217; Porete, chapter 134).

The official 1309 condemnation of Porete notes these and similar concerns in two of their articles. First, “That the annihilated soul is freed from the virtues, nor is she any longer in their service, because she does not have them as far as their practice is concerned, but the virtues obey according to her good pleasure” (Robinson 2001:109). In the second article Porete was censured for the belief “That such a soul has no concern for the consolations of God nor for his gifts, and she neither ought nor is able to care, because her total intent is toward God, and otherwise her efforts toward God would be impeded” (Robinson 2001:109). Taken out of context, each of these articles imply the possibility of social anarchy in that a soul united with God must answer to deity rather than the social norms. In other words, Porete’s theology was seen to be antinomian, although Porete also argued that a soul perfected in God’s will would have no inclination to sin or disturb the social order.

The Mirror contained yet another concept that may have been perceived as a danger to the established political order. Porete saw the victory of the Soul in its union with God as a form of nobility that did not depend upon bloodlines, skill in battle, wealth or ecclesiastical maneuvering. Her position, if taken seriously, posed a social threat to the established nobility of Europe, most of whom had no desire to become annihilated in God’s will. Robinson (2001) argues that Porete saw the true “nobility” as those who had surrendered their wills and became established in a state of Imago Dei.
Barbara Newman explains that the author of *The Mirror* was not alone in her confidence. She writes that beguines had no problem asserting "contempt for the uncomprehending masses" and notes that "their striking elitism is in part a simple transposition of the courtly ethos into religious terms" (Newman 1995:142-143). Yet there is a paradox here, for the beguines were not officially monastic and they originally lived and served among the masses. Their doctrine was for "insiders" but those insiders could be anyone given the nobility of the spirit. In other words, beguines were democratizing mystical piety (Newman 1995:142). They did this by adapting the courts’ metaphor of *fine amour* to the mysticism that had heretofore belonged only to the elites of society.

With these aspects of Porete’s theology in mind, and, in as much as Guiard did not believe there should be only one religion, the two might have been seen as not only heretical but anti-state as well (Lerner 1991:77). At that time the bonds between the Church and the state in France were such that defiance of the Church was as good as defiance of the king. Babinsky argues that however anxious to eliminate heretics as the king’s minions might be, “Philip and his ministers were not so much anti-papal as pro-crown” (Babinsky 1993:22). Dronke agrees and argues that Porete’s connections to the Templar suppression cannot be established, but the beguine “was put to death because she was a symbol of a threat, real or perceived, to the established order intimately connected with the strengthening of royal power” (Dronke 1991:25).

Given Porete’s eloquently argued position on spiritual nobility, her dismissal of ecclesiastical authority, her implied denigration of rulers, and her total lack of cooperation with the inquisitorial process, it is no wonder that she was executed. In the
light of the thirteenth century’s impassioned history, it is clear that Marguerite Porete was very much aware of the religious fashions of her era and demonstrated them in both her theological writings and in the way she lived her life. Porete was at the forefront of the liberated women of northern Europe, one who expressed the opinions of many beguines and Free Spirits in her deeds as well as by her spoken and written words.

Beguines saw themselves as new elites at a time when kings and ecclesiastics were both fighting to secure their positions. Neither elite group could be expected to tolerate threats to their power. At a time when misogynistic fervor was approaching its height, Porete and the beguines were women who asserted themselves without the controls of organized monastic orders. They broke tradition and did the forbidden; they taught in the vernacular languages of the people and even wrote in those forms. They did so without official sanction and they claimed no authorization from God as had Hildegard of Bingen and Elizabeth of Schonau.

Furthermore, the beguine enterprises were so successful they came into conflict with the guilds of the towns and cities. Beguine wealth was augmented by the beneficences the women offered the community such as prayers and the healing arts (Peters 1991). Their vita apostolica mission to teach others placed some of them in the public eye as female mendicants, a highly questionable and forbidden position for women who were considered immoral if not sheltered and enclosed. The beguines broke the social modes by being both secular and monastic at the same time. Because they were unrestrained by monastic rules, they were distrusted by the hierarchy (Makowski 1997:27). Marguerite Porete’s fate may have been used as a warning to other beguines.
that they too were suspected of heresy by both Church and king. The warning was followed by action.

Porete was burned at the stake and her books thought to be destroyed in June of 1310. By 1311 and 1312 Church leaders met in Paris and produced two bulls that struck at the heart of the beguine movement. The first was the *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* which "castigated women for discussing the Holy Trinity and for offering opinions to others regarding the sacraments, yet it contained an 'escape clause' to allow those women living an upright life in the community to do so" (Robinson 2001:31). This was directed at the beguines and early in 1317 "authorities began to harass and dissolve orthodox beguinages all over northern Europe (Lerner 1991:47). By 1318, any who could be identified in any way as beguines were excommunicated in major cities such as Mainz (Lerner 1991:48).

The second bull known as *Ad nostrum* basically condemned the heresy of the Free Spirits. The bull appears to address eight of the major points contained in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (Robinson 2001:30-31). For this reason some scholars have speculated that Porete may have been the "founder" of the Free Spirits, but Lerner discounts that position. Instead, he argues that the *Ad nostrum* was the "birth certificate" of the Free Spirit movement where there really wasn't an organized movement as such (Lerner 1991:145). Furthermore Lerner points out the activity of women in the heresy of the Free Spirit. He argues that "it is impossible to make a head count of Free-Spirit heretics, but one has the feeling that if one could, the women would outnumber the men" (Lerner 1991:230). The women accused of this heresy were persecuted with the men throughout Europe. Despite
their difficulties, the heresy continued well into the fifteenth century and laid the foundation for the later religious movements that became Protestantism.

It was during that same period that the Council of Vienne dealt a final blow to the Knights Templar. The papacy was too weak at that time to defend the Order. Pope Boniface VIII had been kidnapped four years earlier by the troops of a minister of the French crown. The shock resulted in the pope’s death. Pope Clement followed Boniface, but he was of French extraction. He moved the papacy to Avignon in 1309 and ordered the first inquiry into allegations against the Templars (Riley-Smith 2005:248-249).

On April 3, 1312, the leaders of the action against the Templars were the same inquisitors who brought about the end of the beguine freedom, the demise of the cult of fine amour, and initiated the inquisition against the Free Sprits. One wonders if Guiard and Porete had other strikes against them, even perhaps some relationship to the Templars. This is conceivable given several coincidences. First, William the Fair was King Philip’s personal confessor. He was also in charge of the proceedings against the Templars. Marguerite was sent to Paris by the Bishop of Cambrai, whose brother, Enguerrand of Marigny, was the first minister of Philip the Fair. It was the Bishop of Cambrai who later became the Archbishop of Sens and called the Council of 1310 which was held in order to ferret out and condemn the Templars (Lerner 1991:76).

**Self-actualization in the Life of Marguerite Porete**

Marguerite Porete’s beguine and Free Spirit milieu as well as her writings provide enough evidence to argue that she was a self-actualizing individual whose goals were well established within the ideals of her cultural setting. First, the information at hand indicates that Porete was strongly motivated and followed through on her resolves. There
is evidence that she committed to the life-style of a beguine and did not leave it. She committed herself to the *vita apostolica* and did not willingly leave it. Porete resolved to write a book on the experience of the soul. She completed it. This mystic not only wrote the book but also made copies again and again even when much of her work was burned in her presence. Just writing a book by hand is a feat driven by inner compulsion, but to recopy and distribute it again and again is a feat that requires daunting determination and resolve, a resolve based upon an inner sense that one has this work to do. If one also has the sense that it is the will of God for you to perform certain actions, then that conviction serves to strengthen one's resolve.

Second, the author of *The Mirror* provides no evidence of hysteria. Nor does she appear particularly narcissistic; indeed, Porete did not even write autobiographically. Hers is a reasoned argument for the development of the soul to a stage of mystical union with God. This is a handbook. Her mystical experiences are implied but *The Mirror* is not a journal of ecstatic moments. Did she experience mystical union? She doesn't tell us except through the experiences of the Soul, which certainly indicate that Porete had the experience of *unio mystica* as is indicated in chapter 122 above. Hers was the witness of an individual who has not only overcome desire and personal will, but the values of society as well.

Furthermore, Porete was willing to make her own life and body a didactic tool to consecrate her message. She is an exemplar. Her arrogance is an indication of her belief in herself as a spiritual elite. By the means of her stoic endurance and death she made her personal behaviors a didactic tool whereby she demonstrates the courage and determination of an individual who has reached the state of annihilation of the will. Her
behavior was in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets such as Ezekiel who was called upon by God to bring Israel to repentance through his own physical suffering and example. “I am your sign: like as I have done, so shall it be done unto them” (Ezekiel 12:11). The prophet was commanded not even to weep when his wife died, for, “Thus Ezekiel is unto you a sign: according to all that he hath done shall ye do” (Ezekiel 24:24). Porete acted out what she described in *The Mirror*. She believed she knew the will of God and had no other desire but to fulfill that will. Twentieth century psychological modalities may suggest some form of compulsiveness, but that is our model of reality, not hers. She was a thirteenth century mystic and lived the role as completely as she could. Porete provides a model of self-actualization, one wherein personal drives for achieving the highest values of a society are totally internalized by an individual. In her milieu, union with God was the goal, and death was the event that finally and completely brought one to that state of being.

There are limits to what we know about any changes in personality that may have occurred during her progress toward her goal. Given Maslow’s characteristics of a self-actualizing individual (1968:26), we are unable know whether or not she experienced increased spontaneity and an enriched appreciation for life. Nor is there an increased identification with the human species. Certainly she does not indicate an increased acceptance of others although she uses many metaphors from nature. Porete does not appear to be more democratic when it comes to those who are not of the spiritual nobility, yet, paradoxically, she and the beguines did see themselves as helping society. We do not

know if her creativity increased although we do know that she had to produce more copies of *The Mirror* after they were destroyed.

Some elements of Maslow's model as well as particular aspects of the James model are evident in *The Mirror*. The seven steps or stages of progress in Porete's work indicate obvious changes in value system. They also indicate increased autonomy and a strong resistance to any further enculturation. Porete fits James’ consciously volitional conversion type (1987). She also fits his position that there is a difference between those who move on to personal spiritual experiences rather than persist in the practices of institutional religion alone; Porete’s division of souls into either the “lost” or the “sad” relate to this observation. James calls for pragmatic results that follow the lives of those who become saints. In the case of Marguerite Porete the situation is paradoxical. Her *Mirror* lived on as a guide to spiritual self-actualization for seven hundred years. However, her life was lost for a cause that took hundreds of years to be fulfilled, namely the opportunity for individuals to pursue their own religious persuasions without the control of the state or a dominant religious faith.

Porete’s example does fit both the Maslow and James models in that she has had “peak” or “conversion” experiences of unity with God. This is evident in chapter 122. She truly believes in what she has experienced. Her descriptions are not as personal or as detailed as those of other mystics, but Porete is writing a theological treatise, not a personal witness. She describes it as an event for the character she calls Soul, but judging by the book, she herself has had the experience. She does not deny her position even in death. This is due to the ineffability of the transformative sensation described by both James and Maslow. She is passive, receptive, and surrenders to it. In chapter 122, Porete
does give evidences that she unites with and is fascinated by her love object which is
god. The experience receives her entire attention. It is an idiomatic and distinctly
individual event. It is impossible for us to know whether or not she experienced physical
as well as psychological pain. The experience did not seem to produce a loving sense for
all of mankind, nor does it appear to have humbled her in relation to her fellow human
beings. On the other hand we only know Porete through the records of her enemies;
therefore, we are in no position to judge her personality and warmth.

When considering Porete’s behaviors and her book, we are left with yet another
paradox. Porete’s Soul wants union with God and that is her single goal. She chooses to
follow Christ’s last admonitions to his disciples as recorded in the Gospel of John,
chapters 13-17. Time and again during that sermon, his followers are urged to know God
personally. This is the high point of self-actualization for mystics, and Porete’s Soul
knows what it is, defines it, reasons it through and so we assume Porete the woman had
it. There is only one challenge to self-actualization left. If she wants to become a saint,
martyrdom is an excellent opportunity. However, if she wills it, Porete fails by her own
definition of an annihilated soul.

Porete reminds one of the protagonist in T. S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral. In
this case the archbishop, Thomas a Becket (d. 1170), has overcome all his desires but
one, the glory and power of martyrdom. He, like Porete, sets himself up to be killed. But
he is only a true hero if he no longer desires to be a martyr. We ask the same question of
Porete. Was she setting herself up so she could ultimately be victorious over her
opponents? Was her silence a determined effort to prevail and achieve the goal of
martyrdom? Would only martyrdom fulfill her sense of destiny or achieve a personal goal
for self-actualization? Did she feel within herself that she had the capacity to endure the flames, and only needed to prove it to herself? These are rhetorical questions that can never be answered.

Conclusions

Marguerite Porete can be understood as a woman who was very much a person of her era. She participated in the religious fervor of the period wherein women enthusiastically grouped themselves together in order to live lives of poverty, chastity, and service as well as seek the ultimate success of uniting themselves with deity. Porete was one of those who also chose to live their lives as mendicants. Her arrogance before the tribunals of the inquisition is best understood in the light of beguine arrogance and her own well developed theology of the noble souls of which she considered herself to be one. She also offended the sensibilities of those who believed in the religious sacraments of the official faith as well as the powers of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Porete’s refusal to plead for her life, her stoic courage in the face of death are best understood from the perspective of an individual who believes she knows the will of God for her life, a life that has nothing to lose in the way of property or ease. Furthermore, the beguine was well aware of the tradition of martyrs and saints. By dying for her beliefs she made possible the ultimate success for her own self-actualization, martyrdom. Her martyrdom was made possible by the purges commanded by the French king and his aides in order to strengthen royal power and wealth. Porete’s death was one of many that included Knights Templar. Eventually these persecutions quelled the Free Spirits and disenfranchised the beguines. Had these movements won the power struggle of their age,
the author of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* would have been revered as a saint and a martyr to their cause.

Marguerite Porete’s courage against or antagonism to external authority led her to participate in several of the changes occurring in society at that time. Porete was a female educator who preached in public as a mendicant. These practices were highly frowned upon. She was a woman who wrote and expounded upon theology. Again, there was traditional opposition to such female effrontery. Worse yet, she wrote in the vernacular language of the region instead of Latin. Rulers feared the education of the masses and opposed those who were willing to bring the rudiments of knowledge to the lower classes. They were right. It is very difficult to control individuals who are educated for they will eventually seek the freedoms that education demands. Porete set an example of an educated woman, a free spirited woman, and a courageous woman. In so doing she pressed on for full self-actualization despite the terrible misogyny of her age.

The story of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* did not end with the execution of Marguerite Porete as her inquisitors had hoped. It has in fact had an interesting seven hundred year history. The text was passed on to mystics from Paris to England to Budapest. Copies of *The Mirror* reached England by 1414 and eventually, one of the fifteen extant copies was translated from English into Latin. It is known that “thirty-six copies were circulating in Italy in the fifteenth century” (Lerner 1991:74). Today a copy even exists in a nunnery in Orleans and three copies are in the Vatican Library.

Although the book survived, the name of its author quickly perished. It is generally agreed that the great mystic Meister Eckhart was familiar with *The Mirror* to such a degree that he was later accused of the unlikely honor that he was the founder of
the Free Spirit heresy (Lerner 1991:185). Some have also pondered the possibility that, based on *The Mirror*, Porete herself founded that heresy. However, as noted earlier, Robinson discounts this position (Robinson 2001:30). At one time Jan van Ruysbroeck (c.1293-4 – 1381) was credited as the author, but that is now considered to be a fiction because he was in fact an avid enemy of all heresies (Lerner 1991:190-195).

Marguerite was rediscovered by Romana Guarnieri who first mentioned the beguine in 1946\(^{12}\) and later established Porete as the author of *The Mirror* in her 1964 article, “Frères du Libre Esprit.” Of this discovery Robert E. Lerner writes, “The identification of Marguerite Porete’s book is one of the most exciting discoveries recently made in the field of medieval religious history” (Lerner 1991:73 ff 32). As the pieces of her story gradually accumulated, Marguerite Porete has come to be seen not only as a talented theologian, but also as a stubborn soldier in the age-long quest for religious freedom. It has even been suggested that the spirit of modern new religious movements and counter culture groups resemble in some respects the independent mind set of the beguine and those who participated in the heresy of the Free Spirit.

While the delights of *fine amour* passed away long ago and with it the romance of medieval chivalry, Marguerite Porete’s handbook for mystics is once again in the hands of scholars and would-be modern mystics. The Templar Order dissolved and then integrated into other groups, but *The Mirror* has returned. The beguine and Free Spirit movements long ago passed into history but the handbook for mystics remains. All these social movements came under the control of the Church in one form or another. Yet the

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quest for *unio mystica* could not be controlled because it was a matter of heart and mind.

Carolyn Walker Bynum suggests that in the period from 1100 to 1517, "the emergence of lay spirituality created a world in which commoners could see religious significance in their own roles outside the confines of the monastery" (Bynum 1982:3). As a part of that realization mysticism set an amazingly high self-actualizing possibility for all individuals, whatever the cost. Marguerite Porete was one individual who participated in that social transformation. Despite persecution, female mysticism continued to flourish and within a few decades produced one of its most admired, imitated, influential and extreme exemplars in the life and works of Catherine of Siena.
CHAPTER 8

CATHERINE OF SIENA

When the Lord Jesus Christ first began to appear to her, he once came to her while she was praying and said, “Do you know, daughter, who you are, and who I am? If you know these two things, you will be blessed. You are she who is not; whereas I am He who is. Have this knowledge in your soul and the Enemy will never deceive you and you will escape all his wiles; you will never disobey my commandments and will acquire all grace, truth and light.” (From The Life of St. Catherine of Siena by her confessor, the Blessed Raymond of Capua 2003:79)

In 1375, the convict Niccolò Tuldo was arrested and accused of having insulted the current Sienese administration. Shrewdly and honestly, Niccolò refused to accept absolution for this sin or any other because he was not religious and had never even taken communion in his young life (Petroff 1986:240). His refusal made it impossible for the officials to complete his execution. By law they could torture him, but they could not kill him because it was considered a mortal sin to consign an individual’s soul to Hell. The officials called Caterina Benincasa to speak with him and gain his cooperation. She spent the entire night in his cell, talking with him and praying for him, thereby converting him to repentance, to accepting absolution and his execution. Now the frail young woman clothed in the robes of a Dominican Tertiary approached the site of the execution. All watched as she first “placed her own head on the block in order to understand the sensation he was soon to feel.” As Niccolò was brought out he “laughed with joy at seeing her and asked for her blessing, which she willingly gave. Catherine then held his neck in place on the block and kept her eyes fixed on his. As his head was cut off and she
was sprayed in his blood, she claimed to have seen the blood of Christ flow with the
young man’s as he was received into Heaven. Caterina then cradled his head in her lap
until the body was removed for burial” (Commire and Klezer 1999, vol. 3:546).

Caterina may have appeared young and frail, yet as this story indicates, she had a
stalwart ability to love and to serve no matter how repulsive the circumstances might
appear to others. Revered for well over six centuries, Caterina is best known as St.
Catherine of Siena. Her life was short for she only lived to the age of thirty-three, but
during those few decades her tenacious resolve and dedication to her spiritual calling
created in her the strength to serve Christendom and Italy to such a degree that she has
long been revered as one of the two patron saints of Italy, the other being St. Francis of
Assisi.

There is no dearth of material on or by Catherine of Siena. From her early
twenties, Catherine had many followers, some of whom wrote down her prayers and
served as scribes for her nearly four hundred extant letters. Two of her most important
admirers were her confessors and friends, Tommaso della Fonte and Raymond of Capua.
It was Raymond who wrote her hagiography, The Life of St. Catherine of Siena, just a
few years after her death. Catherine herself dictated or wrote parts of her major treatise,
the Dialogue, in which she brought together her wisdom and knowledge in the hope it
would be instructional for those in her spiritual care. Catherine’s life and writings are
held in such high esteem that in 1970 she was honored as a “doctor” of the Church. Her
place in history reflects her efforts on behalf of her faith and the Italian people. Her
determination to attain spiritual self-actualization in the name of love began in her youth.
The Early Life of Catherine of Siena

Catherine was born Caterina di Benincasa in 1347. Her Sienese father was Giacomo di Benincasa, an up-and-coming wool merchant and dyer of the increasingly powerful middle class in northern Italy. As provider for his family, Giacomo built a large home next door to the dyeworks, a house that still stands and from which the family name is taken (Flinders 1993:107). Despite Benincasa’s business acumen, he was unable to provide Catherine with the education of aristocratic children, in part because the family was so large. Catherine’s mother, Lapa di Puccio Piacenti, was the energetic center of the household, a woman whose father was a respected poet and quiltermaker. Mama Lapa was also creative and busied herself managing a rich family life for those of their twenty-five offspring who survived early childhood and the plague.

The years 1347 through 1349 were particularly difficult for the Benincasa household as they were for families throughout Europe. In 1347, Genoese trading ships brought the plague to Europe. That was the year Lapa bore twins, one of whom was Catherine. Catherine was the strongest of the pair of twins and was kept with her mother. Her twin sister was sent to a wet nurse and died (Dreyer 1989:8). Lapa’s twenty-fifth infant, another daughter, was born the following year but was weak and did not survive to adulthood. Perhaps Catherine felt personal guilt over these deaths, guilt that later manifested itself as her famous eating disorder. If she did, those feelings were not apparent in her early childhood for she was the darling of the household, an engaging and charming child whose qualities continued to draw admirers throughout her life.

Surrounded by guests and by older siblings who married and returned home with children of their own, the Benincasa household was a bustling enterprise. The Benincasa
family practiced its faith and allowed no vulgarities in the household. The parents of this family appear to have been loving, especially with Catherine who was their youngest surviving child and an extremely strong-willed one (Dreyer 1989:9). Young Catherine was particularly close to an older sister, Bonaventura. This sister’s death during childbirth as well as her use of fasting to control her husband’s behaviors are thought to have influenced the young Catherine’s resolve never to marry as well as her use of fasting to achieve her spiritual goals. As for the extended family, Catherine loved her nieces and nephews and corresponded with them for years after she reached her maturity. The Benincasas also opened their home to Tommaso della Fonte, a young man whose parents had been taken by the plague. He would later become one of Catherine’s closest friends and one of her three most important spiritual advisors (Dreyer 1989:10).

There was a Dominican church and cloister just up the street from their home and Catherine spent a good deal of time there (Flinders 1993:108). She reported visions at the age of six. The first was a powerful and spontaneous “conversion” or “peak” experience similar to those described by James and Maslow. Inner voices continued to prompt Catherine and convinced her to dedicate her life to God when she was only seven years old. Evidently the family took all this in stride for a while in as much as “Many young children went through a religious phase; actions that would seem extreme to modern parents (for example, stopping on each step of the stairway to recite a Hail Mary) were not unusual in her day” (Commire and Klezer 1999, vol. 3:545). Catherine is credited with the same behavior. Raymond of Capua wrote that when she dedicated her life to God at the age of seven, she also committed herself to remain a virgin. Catherine’s resolve was firm and
when Bonaventura died in childbirth Catherine declared her final decision never to marry. To that end Catherine refused to associate with any men other than those in her family; she even left rooms when her father’s apprentices entered them. When she was about fifteen years old, her parents began seeking an appropriate mate for her as was the custom. In response, Catherine cut off her hair (Noffke 1980:4). This was culturally symbolic as eligible virgins wore their hair long and free. Married women tied their hair to their heads and only nuns cut their hair. This act marked Catherine as unmarriageable (Wilson and Margolis 2004:144). She also tried to disfigure herself by burning her body at a hot springs resort to which her parents had taken her (Bynum 1987:224). Undeterred, her parents retaliated by taking her room from her and insisting she earn her keep by helping the maids. This she did cheerfully for three years, all the while still refusing to marry. It was during this period that she resolved to only eat bread, vegetables and water and fasted not only to achieve spiritual goals, but also to make herself less attractive as a prospective bride. She furthered the perception that she was an unacceptable marriage partner by doing the unthinkable in those trying times; Catherine gave away food from the family’s storage to the poor without her parent’s permission (Bynum 1987:170).

Catherine was not the only young woman of her era who was determined to become the bride of Christ no matter the cost. Rebellious daughters seem almost a religious fashion of the era. Marriageable daughters frequently refused the pressures of family and tradition. Columba of Rieti, Lidwina, Francesca Roman, and Margaret of Hungary also cut their hair. Some threatened to disfigure themselves in order to destroy their attractiveness, as was the case of Margaret of Hungary. Some women ran away from home to convents and refused to leave. Many fasted to the point of becoming physically
unattractive. Like Catherine, Columba of Rieti and Ida of Louvain also gave away their father’s food rations (Bynum 1987:222-225). The disruption of family life in these households became ongoing. In fairness, Bynum notes, “If daughters were increasingly a problem for families, it stands to reason that family was increasingly a problem for daughters” (Bynum 1987:225).

Catherine also practiced sleep deprivation, a form of self-mortification that was not only difficult but also a technique for entering into altered states of consciousness. Her mother, Lapa, related her efforts to get Catherine to sleep on a normal bed to Raymond of Capua. When she found Catherine sleeping on boards with a board for a pillow, she insisted her child come to bed with her, but as soon as Lapa fell asleep, Catherine slipped out of the bed and returned to her prayers. When her mother brought her back, the young woman snuck boards under her own side of her mother’s sheets so that she could be true to her resolve to make sleep as difficult as possible for herself.

By 1364 or 1365 Catherine’s exhausted parents finally agreed to let her become associated with the Dominican Order “but only as a tertiary” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:144). This was fine with Catherine who had also refused to live a life of enclosure as a nun. A “tertiary” was a lay sister who was allowed to live at home with her family and was expected to be a member of the civil community. An officially sanctioned version of the beguines, the group Catherine joined was called the Mantellate or the “Dominican sisters of Penance” and they were associated with the Dominican church near her home. Comprised only of widows and older women, the group hesitated to accept the young and willful Catherine because they were not enclosed and worked with the poor and the sick out in the community. It was at that time that Catherine contracted a
disfiguring disease, perhaps a pox, which left her less attractive than she had been and so the women relented and allowed her to wear the white veil or mantellata that was the symbol of their order (Flinders 1993:110).

Clothed in the black and white habit of the tertiary order Catherine immediately became a recluse. Except for mass and confession, she stayed in her room at home for nearly three years “and spoke to no one except her confessor” (Coulson 1958:169) until she was twenty-one. There she fasted, prayed, studied and may have been learning to read. It is believed that her “lifelong antipathy toward food worsened at this point” (Commire and Klezer 1999, vol. 3:545). Her father died in 1368 and ever after she rejected even bread except when she took the Eucharistic host. In fact “it is said that she learned to live on a spoonful of herbs a day and to make a couple of hours’ sleep every night suffice” (Coulson 1958:169).¹

Catherine’s ascetic practices were not the only cause for concern. Some of her spiritual experiences also proved frightening to Catherine and to those who cared for her. Catherine’s visions intensified during her period of enclosure at home. They took on demonic aspects. At an unspecified point during her three years of enclosure, Catherine felt herself deserted by Christ and left to the machinations of demonic spirits (Capua 2003:90). Her room at home became like a prison due to the sense that her cell was filled

¹ For information on the religious apparel of nuns see Elizabeth Kuhn’s 2003 work, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns*. On pages 5 and 6 she discusses the various parts of the costume, the tunic, veil attached to a coif; wimple or guimpe covers neck, chest, chin; bandeau across forehead; scapular apron; cincture belt, rosary, cappa or cape or cloak. Each part is symbolically meaningful and the ritual is similar to baptism in that a new personality is created. See page 15 for this aspect of the habit.
with demonic images and licentious scenes. Catherine recounted that she fled to the nearby Dominican church where she found comfort but only briefly, for her behaviors frightened others in the building.

Despite her fears, she would not be deterred from her inner drive to know God and insisted on gaining an understanding of these negative phenomena. Catherine believed herself to be taught by her bridegroom, Christ, and others of spiritual stature who came to instruct her; thus she relied upon noetic inspiration to gain control of her reactions. One of her early and important impressions was that visions from God are frightening in the beginning, but they become sweeter as they continue. As such, revelations from God are humbling and lead the listener from centering on the ego or “I am” aspect of the self. Furthermore, she concluded that the certain sign of a valid vision is that it must result in “a greater knowledge of truth in the soul” (Capua 2003:72-73). Catherine believed that when the visions were from demonic sources they “yield sweetness at the outset, but soon pain and nausea develop” (Capua 2003:72). They also lead to pride and presumptuousness in oneself, each of which is a sign of lies (Capua 2003:73). Eventually Catherine learned to accept any demonic experiences, any illnesses, and any setbacks cheerfully. (Capua 2003:90-95). She felt that if she did not feed negative impressions with her mind, they had no power over her. She separated her emotions and thoughts from the essence of her being, much in the spirit of Asian mysticism (Flinders 1993:113).

The period of her seclusion was also important because it was during this time that the developing mystic believed she had been taught by the Holy Spirit. In this she laid claim to the same divine guidance that Hildegard of Bingam credited for much of her
learning and knowledge. For Catherine, her instructors included not only Christ but the Apostle Paul, Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic (Capua 2003:96; Flinders 1993:113). Capua believed this is how she came to read “easily and fluently” (2003:97) without formal instruction. According to her accounts, it was in this manner that she learned the psalms and scriptures and formulated the consuming goal of her life: to develop Christ-like love for all her fellow beings. She also began to slip easily into states of ecstasy (Capua 2003:97).

The young woman’s quest led her to yet another vision of extreme power, one that changed her life. She was nearly twenty-one years old when she experienced her betrothal to Christ. According to Carol Lee Flinders, Catherine was given a betrothal ring from Christ which she described as incorporeal but with a central diamond surrounded by pearls. Catherine “herself tells us the ring was made of the circumcised flesh of the infant Jesus” (Flinders 1993:114). Catherine and others believed this vision to be symbolic of her now “quite literally ‘putting on ‘Christ’s flesh’” (Flinders 1993:114). This vision was followed by another wherein her heart was removed by Christ and returned a few days later, no longer her heart, but His (Flinders 1993:114).

Catherine’s period of seclusion soon ended after these visions and her intensity and determination for self-actualization as a servant of her God were directed in a new venue; that being one of service to others in a world riddled with violence and political intrigue, sickness and death. It was a world in which women religious had created their own culture, one shared by some men, but dominated by symbols of natural importance to the world of women. In order to understand Catherine’s behaviors as self-actualizing

2 See Capua 2003:99 for her account of the ceremony.
within her culture, it is necessary to examine the economic, political and religious elements of her milieu.

Religious, Economic and Political Crisis in the Fourteenth Century

The fourteenth century could qualify as a contender for the title of one of the worst periods in European history. This century was largely responsible for the end of the Middle Ages. On local levels, family feuds were continually perpetuated even as numerous small wars were waged by dukes and kings vying for territory, wealth and power. Crusades large and small continued be employed in the attempt to control even greater accumulations of power and riches (Riley-Smith 2005:245-274). Elites and their military leaders sponsored the competing popes of the Great Schism (1378-1417) as well as ongoing battles in the Holy Land. The Hundred Years’ War between England and France began in 1337 and continued sporadically with varying degrees of intensity for the next one hundred and sixteen years (Reither 1957:209-217). Its areas of contention spread from England and France to Spain and Flanders. Ruiz suggests it may have been the “first medieval, European-wide war” (Ruiz 1996:74).

Yet war paled beside the destruction of individual lives and society created by the second form of disruption, that of the 1315-1317, 1330-1334, 1349-1351, 1358-1360, 1371, 1374-1375 and 1390 famines. The warming trend of the eleventh though thirteenth centuries had increased the populations of Europe, but in the fourteenth century the good weather gave way to cooler temperatures and unprecedented precipitation (Fagan 2000:28-44). Italy was spared the most dramatic climatic change, but countries from the Alps northward were devastated by extraordinarily heavy rains and the resulting crop
failures. The "Great Famine" of 1315-1317 was disastrous. Even valuable salt and wine supplies were destroyed in the wet weather. Inflated prices soon added to the problem. In areas of France wheat prices rose 320 percent and stored grains were reserved for only the nobility. Nor was there grain to feed livestock, a situation that created protein shortages. Malnutrition resulted in sickness, increased crime, innumerable deaths, infanticide, reports of cannibalism and the demise of chivalry (Ruiz 1996:67-78). It is estimated that 10 to 25 percent of Europe's population perished in the Great Famine of 1315-1317 alone.

The worst was yet to come, for poor nutrition contributed to the physical weakness and disease of the next generation. The third major element that brought about the end of the High Middle Ages was the repeated ravages of plague. This ordeal arrived in Europe in 1347, the year Catherine was born, and devastated the continent from 1348 through 1350. Plague in one form or another returned periodically not only during the fourteenth century, but over the next three hundred years. By 1400, Europe had only about 60 percent of the population that it had in 1300 (Witt et al., 1989:286).

As a result, orderly social customs were rendered ineffectual and created the fourth major element in the crisis of the fourteenth century. Elizabeth Dryer describes the chaos that followed the years of plague and the "psychological toll on those who survived. Robbers and marauders had a field day. Civilized ways of doing business were compromised. Many people lost the will to continue to live, hope and work for a better tomorrow" (Dreyer 1989:15). Poverty increased to alarming levels and the poor ceased to be perceived as the children of God; now they were scorned. Religious men and women could choose voluntary poverty, but in their growing capitalistic societies the poor came
to be despised and their afflictions were assigned to their own sinfulness. The poverty was such that the best efforts of the remaining truly dedicated religious persons and charitable orders could not contain its effects. Only devoted individuals like Catherine of Siena would continue to care for the growing numbers of the poor and displaced members of society. As a result, the periodic rampages of the starving poor and lower classes added to the uncertainties of the age (Dryer 1989:16). There were frequent intermittent peasant uprisings such as the 1320 revolt of the Pastoureaux, the 1323-1328 peasant rebellion in Flanders and the 1385 Jacquerie peasant revolt in France. Frustrations continued as exemplified by the peasant rebellions in England during the years of 1380-1381 (Ruiz 1996:130-132).

No one knew the cause of the crisis and, as panic increased, scapegoats were found. Jews in particular were accused of poisoning wells or causing the turmoil of the era. As a result many Jewish communities were attacked and destroyed, most notably those of Strasbourgh as well as Mainz and Cologne where the Jews were literally exterminated in 1349. Despite admonitions from Pope Clement VI to stop the persecutions of whole Jewish communities, the rampage continued. “Christians became ‘destroying angels to the Jews,’ delivering thousands upon thousands of helpless people to torture, the executioner’s ax, or the stake” (Keller 1969:237-238). Yet there may have been more than fear at work in these actions for they resulted in the confiscation of Jewish property, an indication of the immense financial effects of the crisis.

Fifth, the economic ramifications of famine and plague were tremendous. Normal trade and production were disrupted. Debtors defaulted on their contracts. The most notable was the default of the largest debtor, King Edward III of England. As a result
many of the great financial houses of Italy went bankrupt (Dryer 1989:15-16) while at the same time Northern Italy was ravaged by yet another severe famine in 1373. Between wars, famine, and plague, merchants struggled to maintain some degree of stability. In the towns various guilds were fighting for power and economic supremacy. Some aligned themselves with the papacy, others with the aristocrats. Catherine became involved in the conflict as a mediator and peacemaker between the city-state of Florence and the papacy. Meanwhile, the labor shortage caused by the plague revived the demand for slaves. "By the end of the fourteenth century, there was hardly a well-to-do household in Tuscany without at least one slave" (Dryer 1989:16).

The sixth element of crisis was the dramatic alteration in population and life expectancy. The actual numbers of those who perished in the waves of destruction cannot be scientifically assessed. According to Teofilo F. Ruiz (1996) demographic information for the Middle Ages can only be estimated because formal parish records did not begin until the sixteenth century. However, given the information available, particularly from tax records and wills, it appears that the growth of human populations had been on the increase during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This growth stalled at about 1285 and populations significantly decreased in the following period. Life expectancy changed dramatically after 1276 to 1300. Using the royal house of England for data, it is evident that longevity dropped from 31.30 years to 17.33 between 1348 and 1375. It remained below the year 1300 level for a hundred and fifty years (Ruiz 1996:15). By the early fourteenth century the entire peninsula of Italy had about eight million people in all. France had the largest population, of about 13.4 million. It was also the richest and most
powerful country in Europe, a fact that proved important in relation to the decisions of ecclesiastical leaders and to Catherine of Siena as well.

Until 1348, there were many more men than women. Ruiz notes that in London it appears that 70 percent of the population was male (Ruiz 1996:14, 15). This changed dramatically after 1348. “By the late fifteenth century, there were more women than men, which created very serious problems for women. The witch craze was, in many respects, related to the ‘surplus’ of women” (Ruiz 1996:14). As for the women, most married between the ages of 12 and 24, although one could not officially marry until able to establish one’s own household. Once married, the women bore an average of five to eight children of which at least half died between birth and the age of five (Ruiz 1996:15).

Approaches to governance created yet another, or seventh, change in society. As a result of war, famine, plague, and the disruption of the social order, confidence in the powers of rulers to help their subjects fell to all time lows even as rulers promoted the growing centralization of their authority, consolidation of community, more efficient forms of taxation, and their divine right to govern. As Ruiz notes, during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, “we have the emergence of the concept of the public, of the corporate, the nation, the kingdom as a corporation, the Crown as something that lives on” (Ruiz 2002:29). The nobility refined the concept of “thaumaturgical” kingship, one wherein they covered “themselves with the mantle of sanctity and sacredness… by differentiating between the things that belong to the king as a human, as a person, and the things that belong to the king as king” (Ruiz 2002:29). Their growing power was based upon developing monetary economies which were
founded upon control of trade, control of the developing bourgeoisie in the cities, and control of the "ruthless nobility." Ruiz argues that this effort required the establishment of various forms of coercion including taxation without representation, torture, prisons, mental institutions, bureaucracies and standing armies (Ruiz 2002:28-30).

The eight area of social change related to religious conflict and the powers of the Church. The religious discontent of the fourteenth century fed upon the perception that the Church was not powerful enough to assuage the problems of the era. Some individuals saw God as having created the crisis and therefore of no help. Others turned to God rather than ecclesiastical authority for support, a position that encouraged mystic independence and furthered the trend toward heresy. Two great heretical leaders of the era were John Wycliffe (1320-1384) whose followers were called "Lollards" and the Bohemian reformer, Jan Hus (1372-1415), who was burned at the stake in 1415. His execution resulted in rebellion against the king and the Church, one that eventuated in yet another crusade during the years of 1420-1431 (Cook and Herzman 2004:261; Reither 1958:236). The opinions of these and other dissenters laid the foundation for the reformation to come.

Much of the antipathy toward the authority of the Church was created by ecclesiastical corruption and the disruption of papal authority (Riley-Smith 2005:271). From 1305 to 1377 seven French popes forsook Rome and lived at Avignon, France, a small town on the Rhone River (Cantor 2002:102-103). This period is referred to as the "Avignon Papacy" as well as the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy (Reither 1958:219). Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden are largely credited for the return to Rome of Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) shortly before his death (Cook and Herzman
2004:258-159). After Gregory’s passing, Roman mobs insisted upon the election of a Roman pope but only Urban VI, a Neapolitan, could be agreed upon. He was quickly opposed and the cardinals elected a second leader, Pope Clement VII, who returned the papacy to Avignon even while Urban VI remained pope in Rome. Various states throughout Europe had to choose sides and this created diplomatic crises throughout Christendom. For example, English kings would not send money to support French popes during the Hundred Years’ War. After long and unsuccessful efforts to resolve the conflict a council was called at Pisa in 1409. At that time Alexander V was installed as the third contemporaneous pope. The situation is variously referred to as the “Western” or “Great Schism.” It was officially resolved in 1418 but some problems actually continued until 1429.

One religious phenomenon was an increase in the activities of “flagellants.” The practice of whipping others or oneself had roots in some pre-Christian cults of Egypt and Greece. It was used as a form of penance in the early Christian centuries. It was in this sense that Catherine of Siena regularly whipped herself. No longer the practice of individual ascetics, the organized flagellant movement per se started in the 1260s (Ruiz 2001:182) and was immediately condemned by the Church but with little effect. The practice was again banned by popes in both 1349 and 1372, yet the poor and displaced continued to flock to flagellant events (Ruiz 1996:106; 2002:141-42). The cult is thought to have arisen in Perugia then spread to Italy and Austria and continued on into Germany and the northern Low Countries. Flagellant activity reached its peak during the Black Death of 1347-1349. Flagellants added to the chaos of the era with their assertion that “the plague was directly the result of human sin” (Cantor 2002:157). No one could argue
against their position because no one knew the cause of the disaster. Flagellants believed their acts of penance would inspire God to bring this terrible world to its end. Hope for the apocalypse and the millennium appealed to the thousands of poor and marginalized men and women of Europe (Ruiz 1996:41-47,106-107). Groups of this persuasion were comprised of 33 members in honor of Christ’s 33 years. They were largely active in urban areas where they paraded through the streets, singing hymns, praying, and whipping themselves in order to excise their sins, all the while carrying the plague with them. They are also noted for their participation in the scapegoat burning of nine hundred Jews in Strasbourg in 1349. The most notable group of flagellants gathered at Modena in 1399. They were 15,000 strong (Cantor 2002:157).

Individual concerns about sin had only recently constructed the concept of “purgatory.” Teofilo F. Ruiz (1996:44-46) recounts the history of the concept and notes that prior to the twelfth century one’s soul could only go to Heaven or Hell after death. During the early Christian centuries baptism had been held off until one was near death so that there was no time to sin again. They also believed that as long as individuals suffered pain and poverty, the likelihood of their salvation was increased. However, the growing bourgeois class valued their accumulating treasures and comforts and so an intermediary period or “purgatory” was created wherein one could practice penance or pay for one’s sins and then enter heaven.

Ruiz associates many of these changing attitudes with the growth of Europe’s bourgeois class and concepts that were developed in the area’s universities (Ruiz 1996:44-46). Even as the great cathedrals were being constructed, wealthy individuals

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began to look toward their own salvation independent of the communal attitudes of the past. The "renaissance" concept of the individual man was developing and with it the concept of individual salvation. Governments were now expected to do more for the poor and giving was perceived as an act of social standing. Indeed, Ruiz argues that "Society moved from charity to welfare. This was the manifestation of a new attitude towards poverty, of a new money economy" (Ruiz 1996:46).

Ruiz also maintains that society became divided between the haves and the have-nots, those who belonged and those who did not. Segments of society became more and more controlled. New social conventions of the "poor house, the prison and the mental asylum" (Ruiz 2001:88) were established to deal with problems of the poor and the powerless. With the increase in the wealth and power of both church and state, methods of torture and punishment were refined and institutionalized as part of the "theatricality of power" (Ruiz 2001:82). Yet even as these social inequalities increased, a vigorous cultural renewal was evolving. That regeneration of thought and cognitive exploration altered the values of the citizens of Europe. The changes began first in mid-fourteenth century Italy. Within two and a half centuries they spread throughout the Christian states.

Transition and Cultural Florescence in the World of Catherine of Siena

As the Renaissance approached, the arts and philosophical enterprises were marked by continued religious intensity as well as a growing value and interest in human beings themselves. However, the upheavals of the fourteenth century intensified the processes of thought that began in the twelfth century flowering of art and reasoning so beautifully exemplified by the interests of Hildegard of Bingen. The roots of that
evolution lay in the heritage of Rome and Greece, an influence that had been extant in earlier centuries but now intensified as trade, war, and crusades continued to bring to light the works of the classical theorists. The alterations in political, religious, and philosophical concepts from 1350 to the 1600s were accompanied by a dramatic enrichment of realism and complexity in the arts. Those changes first became visible in mid-fourteenth century Italy and are referred to as the “Early Italian Renaissance.” This was a cultural flowering in which Florence and then Italy as a whole dominated for 150 years. The use of the term “Renaissance” is hotly debated by historians, many of whom suggest the elements of florescence had existed for several centuries. Still, the term is generically useful and is employed in this study and elsewhere because it represents the intense development of thought that is now sometimes referred to as the “Early Modern Age.”

The changes that occurred during these centuries were gradual and in no way did the development of “humanism” supersede the influence of religion. Humanism, or the study of humankind, placed a stronger value on life in the present as opposed to life being solely a path to salvation after death. As a result, human life became more valued as wealth and physical comfort were acquired for the present lifetime. Simultaneously the sciences grew in boldness, and individuals began to write in vernacular languages rather than Latin only. This development was spearheaded in the twelfth century by the growing middle class merchants who needed to read and record their business dealings in their

4 Jacob Burkhart’s use of the term “renaissance” and the phrase “early modern” in some sense denigrate the culture of the Middle Ages. Both terms are debated by many historians. For further explanation of the controversy see Bridenthal, Stuard and Wiesner 1998:154).
own languages. Henri Pirenne notes that the development of literacy accompanied resistance to the clergy as town burghers exhibited a certain naïve piety, “a sincerity and a fearlessness which easily led it beyond the bounds of strict orthodoxy. At all times they were distinguished above everything else by the exuberance of their mysticism” (Pirenne 1925:167). Catherine’s refusal to enter claustrophobia yet still seek individual inspiration with the divine illustrates that fearlessness. Pirenne also asserts that by the fourteenth century the city folk were playing a role in the intellectual movements of the time, in literature, art and in religion. Catherine's family was well ensconced in that milieu and it was natural that she should share in Siena's creative and religious enthusiasm.

The majority of elite artistic and philosophical efforts dealt with religious topics while the peasantry remained loyal to a mixture of Christian and pagan thought. “At least in its early stage, humanism, the period’s leading intellectual movement, viewed its major task as making the men and women of the time better Christians” (Witt et al., 1989:285-286). In this it did not yet conflict with the growing enthusiasm for mysticism, especially among women, wherein individuals acceded to greater individual power through the authority of their visions. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) were among the great early humanists and provide a bridge between the Middle Ages and the following era. Petrarch wrote in both Latin and Tuscan Italian. He was followed by the Florentine Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) and Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) who strongly influenced theories of republican government (Witt et al., 1989:291).

Catherine of Siena was politically active in several major cities, most especially Siena, Avignon, and Florence, at a time when the Gothic art of the period became more refined and realistic. Giotto di Bondone’s (1267?-1337) artistic works illustrate the
transition from the artistic conventions of the Middle Ages to the developing realism of later centuries wherein he began to capture “the human presence through bodily form, gesture, and emotion” (Witt et al., 1989:304-306). Giotto also pioneered artistic perspective in various media, a trend that was strengthened by the later works of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472). Brunelleschi (1377-1446) dominated Florentine architecture in as both an artist and an inventor. There is reason to believe that women were artists in the fifteenth century although only one name is known. That is the name of a French woman, Anastasia, who is mentioned in Christine di Pisan’s work, the *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405:85). Pisan regarded Anastasia as the finest miniaturist in Paris. In the fifteenth century Giovanni Boccaccio painted several women who worked in various artistic media. The women generally are painting self-portraits or madonnas and child (Fox 1985). There was growing emphasis on realism as well as accurate portrayals of the body and its physicality. That physicality was also stressed in the female mysticism of the age.

During Catherine’s lifetime, music took new shape and dimension. Music is itself a physical sensation and the richness of sound was further developed in the fourteenth century by means of polyphony and the use of literary modalities that now structured musical pieces as well as lyrics reflecting the romantic metaphors of the period. Bruce W. Holsinger (2001) explored the physicality of medieval music in his seminal work, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture*. The music of the era still gave evidence of its medieval roots but it moved toward the fashions of the soon to be Renaissance.\(^5\) The

clavichord and the harpsichord were just coming into use (Apel 1958:156, 1328) and composers were beginning to put their names on their works. Guillaume de Machaut (d. 1377) was the preeminent composer of the period. He is known for his work with Ars Nova notation as well as his skilful development of the ballade and rondeaus. In Italy the outstanding composer of ballades and secular music was Francesco Landini (c. 1325-1397).

Gender roles continued to influence and constrain the musical opportunities presented to women in the fourteenth century. In Catherine's era women of the upper classes were not allowed to perform in public, but they were able to develop their talents within conventual settings. There is some evidence that women religious knew the new styles of polyphony and sang as well as copied the works of others but their names are not on the works. Wealthy women continued to sponsor musicians as their patrons, yet there is a dearth of information even on women elites as composers. This may be due in part to the growing practice of improvisation which resulted in the simultaneous skills of "composer, performer and improviser" (Wilson and Margolis 2004:705). Women in the lower classes had more freedom to express themselves musically, although they paid for the privilege by damage to their reputations. There is evidence that they employed the developing polyphonic forms and poetic structures such as the rondeaus. Again, the names of female musicians are not mentioned in the fourteenth century milieu but there are paintings that depict women playing stringed instruments, the organs of the period, and other instruments (Wilson and Margolis 2004:704-705).

Fourteenth century literary efforts began with the mature works of Dante Alighieri who died in 1321 following the completion of The Divine Comedy. His
contemporary, Petrarch, lived a long life, one that nearly spanned the century (1304-1374). Geoffrey Chaucer’s work (1340-1400) reflected many of the values and concerns of the citizens of the era. His *The Book of the Duchess* (1369) and the later *Canterbury Tales* have survived for centuries as literary classics. William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* is ranked by many as another exceptionally fine piece of English literature. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains a famous work that is attributed to the late fourteenth century although the author is unknown. It was also during this period that the earliest known copies of John Wyclif’s Bible translations were in circulation between the years of approximately 1382 until the close of the century.

The literary efforts of women during this period are less well known but are now receiving considerable attention. Christine de Pizan (1363-1429) is outstanding among the women of letters of Catherine’s era. Unlike Catherine and other female authors, Christine was not a woman religious. Pizan was a secular writer; in fact, she was France’s first professional woman author (Petroff 1986:304). A powerful champion of women, Pizan wrote with great confidence and relied upon the depth of her education and her passion for truth and justice. She skillfully defended women against the slanderous misogyny of the era. Her many works include the *L’Epistre au Dieu d’Amours, Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, and *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*. In her later years the decades of famine, plague and warfare caused Pizan to compose religious writings based upon her own reflections. In her last known work, the *Ditie de Jehanne d’Arc*, Pizan honored the young heroine of France.

As in earlier periods, the women of letters were generally highly religious and wrote for didactic purposes or to record their mystic experiences. Elizabeth A. Petroff’s
(1986) collection of female writers of the period includes examples of the visions of Angela of Foligno (c. 1248-1309), Marguerite d'Oign (d. 1310), Marguerite Porete and Umilà of Faenza (1226-1310). Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) was the founder of the Birgittine Order of Sweden and her Revelaciones are revered by many. Her daughter, Catherine of Vadstena (1332-1381) wrote another religious work, the Consolation of the Soul. There were other female writers including the visionary German, Christine Ebner, (1277-1356) whose “chronicle of her convent is highly regarded as a source on medieval mysticism of the period” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:282-283). Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) wrote the first book by a female in English. Another English woman, Margery Kempe (1373-1439) wrote the first autobiography in English. It emphasized her religious struggles and relationship with Jesus. The English abbess Katherine of Sutton (fl. 1363-1376) was also a dramatist and is considered to be the first English woman playwright (Wilson and Margolis 2004:512). The literary efforts of these and other women mystics reveal the developing motifs and patterns extant in late medieval female mysticism, among them a notable emphasis upon the body, blood, and death. These metaphoric features also occur in the visions of Catherine of Siena.

The Religious Fashions of Female Mystics in the Fourteenth Century

Both the virtues of poverty and chastity have been stressed as motifs in the lives of women religious. A third theme of spiritual endeavor was asceticism, wherein fasting and physical hardship facilitated union with deity and altered states of consciousness. However, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there also developed an emphasis on food and the body as major symbols of the divine. Not only was food central to life,
but it was also a communal act uniting the members of family and social groups. Famine was a threat not only to individual life and health, but to the stability of cultural institutions as well. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the weather changed and famine became a constant concern in the hearts and minds of European populations, it was a disaster on all levels of society. In the case of females, their gender was most strongly connected to food because its production, acquisition, and preparation were central to the work of women.\(^6\)

In her seminal and transformative work, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Carolyn Walker Bynum (1987) argues that medieval spirituality, and particularly late medieval female spirituality, must be understood in relation to the value placed upon food. Bynum’s pioneering work provides a framework for understanding the metaphors used by female mystics of the period. Indeed, Bynum makes several points that pertain to the life, visions, and behaviors of Catherine of Siena. First, Bynum suggests that gluttony was perceived as a major sin, and that only the very rich or very saintly could afford to share their largess (Bynum 1987:2). In this light, fasting was considered to be an essential weapon in one’s spiritual arsenal for “expelling demons, excluding evil thoughts, remitting sins, mortifying vices, giving

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\(^6\) Gies and Gies outlined the work of women in relation to provisioning and providing food for their households. For their detailed account of food care and processing see Gies and Gies 1981:47-56. A housewife’s first daily duty was to go to the marketplace to purchase food. It was her responsibility to bargain for fair prices on oils, vegetables, bread and meat. She was responsible to see to the quality and quantity of good purchased lest she be cheated by the vendors. The woman then saw to the preparation of the food over an open fire. She also supervised the preservation of food. Women cultivated family gardens and the healing herbs that grew therein. In this they provided the family’s first line of defense against disease. It is not farfetched to see how food moved from a position of centrality in the lives of women to a position of centrality in their religious symbology.
certain hope of future goods, and a foretaste [perception] of celestial joys.” In other words, the renunciation of food, with its social and communal pleasures, was symbolic of “religious world-denial” (Bynum 1987:3). Thus self-starvation was perceived as courageous asceticism, a “holy foolishness that marked the saints” (Bynum 1987:2).

Second, the women religious of the period perceived their sacrifices and suffering as service to God and humanity. Their fasts were often on behalf of others who were ill, or on behalf of souls in purgatory, as well as serving to further the intimacy of their relationships with Christ. Thus the women created an environment wherein they too could serve and save others despite the social restrictions upon their gender and the requirements of claustration. This concept was not experienced as rebellion against priestly authority. As Bynum explains, “It was simply another model – a charismatic model, a lay model. Women saw themselves as authorized to teach, counsel, serve, and heal by mystical experience rather than by office” (Bynum 1987:235). Tertiaries like Catherine of Siena were able to extend their service beyond fasting and out into the community. They did in several ways which included helping at hospitals, by giving their parents’ food supplies to the poor, or by openly facing the dangers of the streets as mendicant beggars on behalf of the poor.

Third, Bynum explains that food as a motif is noticeably more important in women’s piety than in men’s. Fasting for medieval self-actualizers was a religious fashion that many women carried to frightening extremes, extremes that modern historians consider to be the first documented cases of “anorexia nervosa” (Bynum 1987:4). Margaret L. King enlarges upon Bynum’s observations and notes that, from the

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thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, 30 percent of Italian Holy Women practiced regular fasting (1991:124). Many young women fasted for several days a week, or for cycles of forty days, or even daily. The fasters might eat only the Eucharist wafers or a few herbs, or seeds, or only eggs – each item having a symbolic relationship to Christ’s suffering. Their fasts often resulted in the inability to ingest nutrients. Like Catherine of Siena, many soon came to believe that they simply could not eat food. King also notes that for these women menstruation as well as digestion would cease. In this emaciated condition they achieved the “asexual body” that made them more like men and thus they surmounted the lower status of “unworthy” daughters of Eve.

Bynum’s fourth observation stresses the symbolic importance of food, one that extended beyond physical hunger, sociability and status. Food was intimately associated with participation in the Eucharistic sacrament. “To eat God in the Eucharist was a kind of audacious deification, a becoming of the flesh that, in its agony, fed and saved the world” (Bynum 1987:3). By surrendering mortal food through fasting and by partaking of the Eucharist or “eating God,” religious individuals prepared themselves for unio mystica (Bynum 1987:3). This was done in the spirit of the Gospel of John where it is written, “He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me” (John 6:5). Because women, even women religious, were considered to be lay members of the faith, they were not permitted to touch the chalice or any element of the Eucharistic ritual. Only the priests were permitted to hold and drink from the holy objects. Women religious of the period so valued the Eucharist that they not only developed concepts of living on communion wafers, they circumvented priestly powers by means of their visions wherein Christ himself or an emissary allowed women to drink from the sacred vessel. In fact, a
Eucharistic element was common in the visions of medieval women. Bynum notes this trend in the writings of the nuns of Helfta. For example, Gertrude the Great even took on the priestly role in a vision thereby providing further evidence that the women perceived a union with Christ made priestly intermediaries unnecessary (Bynum 1987:231-233).

In their visionary experiences the women were not just imitating clerical activities nor were they challenging clerical authority. Indeed, the women had great regard for their spiritual advisors. Catherine of Siena even called them “little Christs” (Bynum 1987:233). However, their sacrifices, ascetic practices and visions gave women religious a sense that they did indeed have the authority to teach, to serve others by means of their own inspiration, and to heal others by means of their spiritual insights and knowledge of herbs (Bynum 1987:235). In actuality, the women were creating

through charity, miracle and fasting, an alternative role - an essentially lay and charismatic role - authorized not by ordination but by inspiration, not by identification with Christ the high priest but by imitation of Christ the suffering man. Women’s charismatic, prophetic role was an alternative to, and therefore a critique of and a substitute for, the characteristic male form of religious authority: the authority of office...to women’s charismatic role, food was central (Bynum 1987:233).

Food imagery in the writings of female mystics increased over time. It occurred in the work of Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schonau, Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn (Bynum 1987:185), but it was not central to their visionary experiences. However, by the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries the concept flowered in the hearts and minds of women who knew famine and plague all too well. For many of these women, Christ himself was not only savior, but nurturer. Thus the concept of “Christ as Mother” developed into one wherein female mystics like Catherine of Siena nursed from the breasts or wounds of Christ (Bynum 1987:166) as well as received their marital vows from Jesus.
Fifth, Bynum explored the physicality of eucharistic enthusiasm in her 1982 book, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. She noted that, “Devotion to the eucharist frequently focused on the wounds, blood, body, and heart of Jesus” (Bynum 1982:172). Furthermore, she asserts that, “For the first time in Christian history certain major devotional and theological emphases emanate from women and influence the basic development of spirituality” (Bynum 1982:172). That theological emphasis was based upon the maternal aspects ascribed to deity as early as the twelfth century in the writings of the Cistercians and particularly those of Bernard of Clairvaux. The concepts began with an emphasis upon the mothering or nurturing qualities of the Virgin and the Church. Then male figures were also “described as nursing, conceiving, and giving birth” (Bynum 1982:147) due to their roles as ecclesiastic authorities to those in their stewardship. The caring aspect of divinity was extended to attributes of God, Christ, and the apostles. By the fourteenth century the concept had become far more physical. “Later medieval writing stresses suckling with blood and is more frankly eucharistic. More emphasis is placed on Christ’s suffering; much attention is devoted to sin, [and] the comfort offered by mother Jesus is not merely love but also a place among the elect” (Bynum 1982:153-154).

Sixth, Christ’s pain, bleeding, and suffering on behalf of humanity became aspects of female mystical objectification. The effort to become one with divine anguish led mystics like Catherine to experiment with despised and repulsive aspects of humanity, which revulsion, if overcome, made possible an expression of divine love and unity with God. For example, Angela of Foligno believed that by partaking of the Eucharist one ate “the blood of suffering, a food both earthly and divine” (Bynum
As she cared for the bodies of the sick and dying, Angela saw "their bodies as a substitute for Jesus' own" (Bynum 1987:144). To this end she drank some water that had been previously used to wash the sores of lepers. She was not alone in the physical expression of Christ's suffering. Catherine of Genoa ate lice and Catherine of Siena drank the pus from the sores of a woman with breast cancer. Each of these women saw the experience as filled with the sweetness of love, for the sores were representations of the wounds and blood of Christ (Bynum 1987:144-145).

Christ as a nurturing mother occurs frequently in the visions of Catherine of Siena. Like many of her contemporaries, she was very interested in the human or suffering aspect of Jesus as a mortal, rather than as a deity (Dryer 1989:14). She also emphasizes his blood and suffering in her teachings. To Catherine and other female mystics the poor, the sick and the dying were manifestations of Christ's sacrifice. To serve the unfortunate was to serve Jesus and women religious who sought unity with the divine did so notwithstanding the changing attitudes of their societies as a whole toward the lower classes. Despite, or because of the disruption of society, saintly women fought for and achieved growing power and influence by means of their good works, ascetic practices, visions, miracles and writings. By the middle of the fourteenth century, women had evolved a religious symbology and life-style that exceeded the extremities of many male religious. Among their numbers are the nuns of Helfta, Angela of Foligno, Columba of Rieti, Ida of Louvain, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Catherine of Genoa, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Hadewijch, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Catherine of Siena (Bynum 1987:186). Of these women, Catherine of Siena most exemplifies the growing influence
of religious women. Indeed, many of her behaviors can now be understood in the light of her religious milieu.

*The Ministry of Catherine of Siena*

Suzanne Noffke (1980:4) notes that following her “mystical espousal” to her Lord, Catherine left her hermetic life-style and turned to the service of her family and then the community of Siena. She was 21 years old (Noffke 1980:4) and her initial training in mystic spirituality had ended. In her communications with the divine she was now instructed to go out into the world to “be a city on a hill” for Christ, an assignment that her biographer, Raymond of Capua, described as having nearly broken her heart (Capua 2003:106). Whatever her emotional response, Catherine gave herself fully to social service for the next thirteen years while continuing her efforts at silence and contemplation as well as theological argument and biblical interpretation at every opportunity until her death in 1380 at the age of thirty-three (Noffke 1980:4).

Catherine first reestablished her relationships within her large and ever growing family. By now her older brothers and sisters were married and their children filled the family home. Catherine adored her nieces and nephews and in later years often wrote to them. Her sister-in-law, Lisa Colombini, was the first individual to recognize Catherine’s charismatic spirituality and became her first disciple. Shortly thereafter, Catherine joined the widows of the *Mantellata* in service to the sick and dying at two of Siena’s charitable hospitals. They were particularly known for their care of plague victims. The plague returned to Siena when Catherine was about twenty-seven years old and she joined in their efforts on behalf of the sick and dying. During these years of service Catherine was
believed to have effected several miraculous healings. She cultivated a friendship with the Mantellata, Alessia Saracini, who became another advocate on behalf of Catherine’s intense spirituality and her relationship with the divine (Capua 2003:268).

Soon other individuals, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, were drawn to Catherine due not only to her reputation as a female religious, but also because of her charm and magnetic personality. She was young, energetic, spontaneous and loving (Dreyer 1989:11). The young woman’s natural intensity was also expressed in the attention she gave each individual who sought her counsel, and many did so including unhappy wives and feuding members of families (Flinders 1993:116). Catherine broke with custom and looked directly into the eyes of all who approached her. In this she showed her genuine caring and the intensity that was basic to her nature. For many individuals, Catherine’s charisma and behaviors combined to mark her as a woman of God. She soon became the spiritual director of a group that she called her “children.” They referred to her as their dolcissima mamma and to themselves as Catherine’s bella brigata. Citizens of Siena referred to them as the Caterinati (Flinders 1993:117, 118,120).

Catherine’s audacity drew some people to her yet made her notorious to others. Her enemies found Catherine’s commanding ways, ascetic practices, associations with men, and her many comings and goings about Siena objectionable. Worse yet, Catherine often spoke with a compelling authority unusual for a woman. She was direct and did not ask others to do something. Whether the individuals involved were her social superiors or the sick and dying, Catherine commanded (Commire and Klezer 1999:547). In his hagiography Capua insisted that Catherine could even command inanimate things and
records many miracles attributed to her due to her profound relationship with Christ. The miracles included classics of producing bread and wine (Capua 2003:268-280) as well as miraculous healings. This quality may have been due to her sense that she was one with deity and therefore she spoke on behalf of the divine.

Several elements of Catherine’s spiritual efforts to self-actualize as one with her spiritual husband were particularly important during the years of her service, although they had their origins during her youth, and are reviewed here. Catherine inflicted painful mortifications upon her body in order to practice penance and subdue her flesh. To this end she wore an iron chain tightly about her waist until shortly before her death (Capua 2003:53). As an adult, Catherine continued to sleep boards. Over the years, she reached a point where she rarely slept but a half hour every other day or two (Capua 2003:54). She self-flagellated with an iron chain three times a day, “once for herself, once for the living and once for the dead” (Capua 2003:54-55). As time passed, Catherine’s eating practices altered her ability to imbibe even bread and eventually simple herbs. She insisted that she could not eat, that even a little wine or bread or sugar made her ill. As she grew emaciated she also developed a great deal of pain in various parts of her body. The years of bodily self-mortification took their toll on Catherine’s once strong and healthy physique. Near the end of her life she informed Capua that she endured pain on both sides of her body, had continual headaches, suffered from fevers and endured terrible and constant pain in her chest (Capua 2003:373). Yet, according to Capua, Catherine revived with great energy when speaking of God or working on behalf of her “children” everywhere. She died following a stroke during her last, prolonged “fast” (Commire and Klezer 2002:547).
Catherine’s devotion to her spiritual goals resulted in two particularly notable events. First, in 1373 Catherine experienced an ecstatic state wherein she appeared to be dead for four hours. During this period she seemed not to breathe at all nor could observers detect any heartbeat. According to Catherine’s account, she had hoped for death but instead was given a vision of the other world, experienced divine love, and then was sent back to her body in order to complete her life’s work (Flinders 1993:116-117). Her return to the living saddened her greatly yet the experience fortified her love for her Savior and strengthened her efforts to serve Him and her “children.” Accounts of her return from what appeared to be death reinforced her reputation as a holy woman. This added to the visions and healings for which she was already noted. Her fame increased and the *bella brigata* continued to grow around her (Commire and Klezer 2002:546).

Second, Catherine, like other women religious of the time, determined to overcome any aspect of creation that might ordinarily be perceived as disgusting. Her behaviors are repugnant to modern minds, but she was not alone in her resolve to overcome loathsome aspects of life by focusing on love and compassion, and by perceiving the sick and dying to be manifestations of Christ (Bynum 1987:144-145). Catherine’s biographer expressed great admiration for her patience and determination whereby he believed she was able to conquer the all aspects of the world, physical and psychological, including that which is normally repulsive (Capua 2003:372). She accomplished this as she deliberately exercised patience and the will to love under any circumstance. The ability to love greatly was considered a hallmark of a saint, and Catherine of Siena gravitated naturally to behaviors that exhibited that capacity.

Catherine’s biographer, Raymond of Capua, provides two examples of her efforts.
First, Catherine volunteered to care for a woman who suffered from leprosy. According to Capua the woman was destitute and her entire body was covered with lesions. The woman was not only miserable but on the verge of being sent away from the city to die alone (Capua 2003:130-133). Catherine determined to care for the woman herself, much to Lapa's dismay. The sick woman was also very antagonistic. The more the young tertiary did to help her the more the older woman tried to provoke her nurse. While caring for the woman Capua reports that Catherine's own hands showed signs of having become infected with the disease. Nevertheless, Catherine nursed the difficult woman until she passed away and then Catherine personally saw to her burial, "Whereupon the leprosy disappeared miraculously from her [Catherine's] hands" (Capua 2003:368). Capua perceives this episode as evidence of Catherine's resolve to develop her capacity for love and saintly behaviors. The young woman allowed nothing to interfere with that which she believed was given her to do by her "Eternal Bridegroom" (Capua 2003:132).

Catherine also nursed a woman named Andrea who suffered from the advanced stages of breast cancer. Catherine regularly washed and bathed the wound despite the feelings of nausea produced by the smells and putrefaction. Determined to overcome her revulsion, Catherine put her face to the sore until she nearly passed out. Angered with her own weakness, Catherine cried out, "By the living God, my Heavenly Bridegroom, for love of whom I serve this my sister, what you find so repugnant will now enter into your bowels!" (Capua 2003:147, 371). Thereupon Catherine washed the diseased areas of the woman's breast and drank the bath water which included the pus from her sores. The following night Catherine experienced a vision wherein she was advised by the Lord that

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8 Capua names the woman "Tecca" on 2003:130 and "Cecca" on 2003:368.
she had indeed been victorious over her weaknesses. He then seemed to draw her to him in order that she might partake of the blood from the wound in His side (Capua 2003:371). Capua notes that from this point on Catherine seemed not to need food nor could she digest it.

Catherine’s determined efforts to dedicate herself to a life of service as well as her resolve to overcome the weaknesses of her character and of the flesh did not go unnoticed. As she molded herself to the patterns of sainthood, stories of her miracles and devotion resulted in a widening sphere of influence. The bella brigata grew appreciably. This resulted in her reputation as a saint, and her followers spread her fame from Siena into the countryside and further abroad. Evidence of Catherine’s growing influence can be seen in the numbers of individuals who came to her for help and believed they were blessed by her counsel or healing.

While large segments of the local population accepted Catherine as a holy woman, not everyone agreed. Some, like her mother, often opposed her efforts because they saw them as too extreme and feared for her life. The young woman’s insistence on doing everything according to her own insights caused her difficulties with some spiritual directors although she insisted she was never disobedient (Capua 2003:69). Other individuals were offended by her constant visions, ecstasies, frequent weeping, and excessive penances (Capua 2003:150-155). They saw no reason for anyone to starve and afflict themselves as Catherine did. Some of those she served just couldn’t stand her virtuousness, the sweetness, the love, the constant goodness proved too saccharine for their tastes (Capua 2003:130-146). At one point her “meddling” in political affairs nearly cost Catherine her life. These criticisms of her behaviors were considered to be evidence
of the Devil’s determination to stop her good works, and, undaunted, her followers spread the stories of her spirituality further abroad (Capua 2003:146).

As a consequence of her increasing fame, Catherine’s life entered a new phase, one that began when she was twenty-seven years old. This period validates the evidence that she was becoming a woman of influence. In 1374 she was called to Florence to be examined by the Master-General of the Dominican Order. As Carol Lee Flinders notes, little is really known of the purpose of the audience. Perhaps the Dominican leaders simply wanted to assess the beliefs and authenticity of the young woman who was gathering a large following. “Far from censuring her, they were so impressed by her sanctity that they assigned to her spiritual family a Dominican superior” (Flinders 1993:119). Whether as a reward for valor or as a measure to keep her and her followers in check, Catherine was given a new spiritual director, the noted Dominican superior, Raymond of Capua. He soon became her devoted confessor, friend and, eventually, her hagiographer. The year 1374 continued to bring changes to Catherine’s life and work. Not only did she have a new confessor, but the plague returned to Siena. A third of the city’s population died by autumn (Flinders 1993:120). Raymond of Capua was stricken with the disease but survived due, he insisted, to the ministrations of Catherine (Flinders 120:1993).

Once found acceptable by the leaders of her order and with the support of her new confessor, Catherine enlarged her sphere of influence. As she grew in confidence the young woman decided to do all in her power to correct deficiencies of leadership throughout Europe, be they secular or religious. Her extant correspondence is just under four hundred epistles. Through them she exercised her charismatic energy on behalf of
political and ecclesiastical reform beyond the regions of Siena. As Margaret L. King notes, “Catherine of Siena was a dervish of admonition and advice” (1991:127). King lists just a few of Catherine’s epistles in which she rebuked the notables of Europe. These included John Hawkwood, an English mercenary whose armies were ravaging the Italian countryside (Flinders 1993:5). He was advised to get out of the Devil’s service and go on a crusade. The Queen of Naples, Giovanna of Anjou, was scolded for arrogance and told to become a servant of Jesus. Pope Gregory XI was lovingly but strongly counseled to use his authority and clear the Church of those who committed iniquities in Christ’s name and return to Rome from Avignon. As King indicates, Catherine expected everyone with influence in the world to hold to the standards of goodness she herself embraced (King 1991:127).

Catherine’s growing influence is evidenced by the fact that in 1375 Pope Gregory declared a crusade and requested that Catherine support the effort and encourage soldiers to join the movement. She did so with her usual vigor (Commire and Klezer 2002:547). It was during that same year that Florence and other Tuscan cities united in the “Tuscan League” and declared war against the pope. Catherine entered into the fray with goals that were perfectly clear to her. She resolved to urge Pope Gregory to return the Curia to Rome where he could better make the reforms Catherine deemed necessary for the survival of the Church. Next, she endeavored to make peace with Florence and weaken the League so she went to Pisa and pled with that city to stay out of the war. It was there that she received the stigmata in visions and insisted that they were visible only to herself by her own request (Flinders 1993:5). It was in that same year that Catherine returned to
Siena to assist Niccolò di Tuldo during his execution, again demonstrating her ability to accept Christ in all that happens for the good of souls.

Unfortunately, the grievances between the Tuscan cities and the papacy worsened during 1376. Knowing of Catherine’s influence, the Signoria of Florence asked Catherine to intercede with the pope and have him lift the interdict he had placed upon that city. Not only was it hard on souls, but it was interfering with business (Noffke 1980:5). Catherine agreed to help and went to Avignon in France. The Florentines betrayed her trust, which amazed Catherine, but set her free to pursue her most immediate goals, that of influencing Gregory XI to return to Rome, impose powerful reforms, make peace with Florence and launch the crusade. Flinders argues that Catherine believed the crusade would get the fighting out of Italy and return the attention of the church to its original goal of suffering on behalf of the souls of others (Flinders 1993:121).

By 1376 Catherine’s fame was so great the crowds who came to her for help and for confessions with her spiritual advisor were too large to handle. Pope Gregory issued a bull wherein three priests were to be with her at all times to take confessions of those drawn by her fame. Four more priests were added to her retinue in 1377 when she stayed in Rocca d’Orcia near Siena in order to make peace between warring families (Noffke 1980:6). During that same year she was given an old fortress at Belcaro for a monastery, which she never used (Noffke 1980:6). To her sorrow, Raymond of Capua was assigned elsewhere that year, but the thirty-year-old woman was confident enough to begin work on her book, Dialogue, without his guidance. Evidently Catherine did learn to write at that time although parts of the text were dictated.
In late 1377 or very early in 1378 Catherine was sent to Florence to negotiate a peace between Gregory XI and the leaders of that city. In order to do so, she became involved in the political intrigues of the time. Again, she was too naïve to deal with the more sophisticated Florentines. Pope Gregory died in March of that year and Urban VI was chosen his successor. Urban, a Frenchman, was extremely unpopular with the Italians. There were riots in Florence against his appointment, yet Catherine continued to argue publically for peace and unity while supporting the new pope. At one point she “suggested that some of Florence’s leaders who were against peace with the papacy be deprived of their offices” (Dryer 1989:16, 17). When word of her idea spread around town, a mob came to where she was in residence. They threatened to burn her alive or stab her to death.

Capua relates the exchange between Catherine and her would-be assassins. Once she realized the angry mob was seeking her, Catherine imitated the example of Jesus and first comforted her followers and then went into the garden to draw the mob off and to pray.9

Hearing the shouts, the virgin, as though she had been invited to a wedding feast, made ready for the martyrdom she had so long desired and went forward to meet one of them, who with dagger unsheathed was shouting the most loudly of all. Smiling she knelt down and said to him, “I am Catherine; do what the Lord permits with me! But on behalf of the Almighty I order you not to touch any of the people with me!” At this that wicked man was so taken aback that he no longer had the strength to strike and was ashamed to find himself in her presence.

After having sought her out with such ferocious eagerness, now that he had her in front of him all he could do was drive her away, shouting, “Go away from me!” But, hungry for martyrdom, she replied, “I feel so well here! Where should I go to now? I am ready to suffer for Christ and His Church: this is what I have been longing and asking for so long! Must I go away now when I have found

what I want? I offer myself as a living host to my Heavenly Bridegroom. If you are destined to be my executioner, do what you have to do and have no fear, for I shall not move a single step from here. But you must not touch any of my people!” But the Lord did not allow this ruffian to inflict his cruelty on the virgin, and he went off absolutely dumbfounded with the rest of his companions. Meanwhile, Catherine’s spiritual sons and daughters had gathered round her and were congratulating each other that she had emerged unscathed from those impious hands. But she herself was miserable and said, weeping,

“Unhappy that I am! I thought the Lord Almighty was to bring my glory to completion today, and that, as He had deigned to grant me the white rose of virginity, so He would also bestow upon me the red rose of Martyrdom. What a delusion! And all because of my innumerable sins, which by God’s just judgment have deprived me of so great a good. How blessed had my soul been had my blood been shed for love of Him who redeemed me with His blood!” (Capua 2003:380-382).

Although Catherine was spared any physical violence from her enemies, the efforts of these discouraging years took the last of her failing strength. Urban VI summoned her to Rome in November at which time she and some of her followers journeyed to the center of their faith. There they lived on alms while she met with the authorities of the Church, opposed the creation of the Great Schism, and continued her correspondence and counseling activities (Wilson and Margolis 2004:145). Despite her weakened condition Catherine spent her days at St. Peter’s for mass and prayer. By early 1380 Catherine could no longer eat or swallow. Water as well as food became impossible for her to ingest. It is believed she suffered a stroke on February 26 and lost the use of her legs. She spent the remainder of her short life in bed, in agony and fighting demonic influences that seemed to assail her. A group of her disciples stayed nearby to care for her. They also continued to record 26 of her prayers, the collection of which has survived to the present. The preservation of her auditory supplications began on August 14, 1376.
and ended on January 30, 1380. Those who so loved Catherine wrote the last, brief prayer
she uttered shortly before she died on April 29, 1380 (Noffke 1980:7).

The Written Works of Catherine of Siena

Whenever she could, Catherine of Siena argued for peace and for reform in
person. She also recognized the power of the written word to influence the hearts and
minds of individuals. For that reason she poured her considerable energies into her
correspondence and into her book, The Dialogue. This was largely made possible by the
fact that she rarely slept and could spend her long nights dictating her thoughts to
members of the bella brigata or the priests who were assigned to help her in this task.
During the last years of her life, her followers began writing down the prayers she uttered
while in states of ecstasy. As a result there is a large body of work that is attributed to
her. It has been highly valued by members of her faith and kept alive in the mind of the
public by those who continue to dedicate themselves to the cult of Catherine of Siena.
Three of her letters in whole or in part are provided here to give a sense of her values and
her personality. A portion of one chapter of The Dialogue follows. This is particularly
informative about her understanding of the purpose and need to suffer. Finally, one of the
last prayers recorded before her death are also presented in order to provide a sense of her
humility and love for her “children.”

The Letters

Wilson and Margolis (2004:146) note that three hundred and eighty-three letters
are attributed to Catherine of Siena. Most were written after her 1374 interview with the
master of the Dominican Order in Florence and demonstrate the intensity of her efforts to
encourage others to spiritual goals, for reforms in the church, or for peace between groups. However, some letters reveal the human and humorous aspects of Catherine’s personality and the charm that brought so many to support her as a saint. Portions of Letter T93/G366 provide a glimpse of her personal touch in dealing with problems between her followers. Catherine sent this letter to two of the *bella brigata*, Monna Orsa and Monna Agnesa. It contains Catherine’s advice to the women and then counsels them on how to deal with one of her critics. In it we see the charm of Catherine’s personality as well as the warmth of her friendship. Again, Catherine addresses these women as her “children” and there is, as always, reference to the blood of Christ.\(^\text{10}\)

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary.

Dearest daughters in Christ gentle Jesus,

I, Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you persevere in holy desire so that you may never look back. For if you were to look back, you wouldn’t receive the reward, and you would be going against the word of our Savior, who says we should not look back to see what we have plowed. So keep on going; don’t look back at what’s been done but ahead to what you have to do.

And what do we have to do? We have to turn our energies constantly toward God, scorning the world with all its pleasures, loving virtue, and accepting with true patience whatever divine Goodness sends us, understanding that what God gives he gives for our good, so that we may be made holy in him. In the blood we will discover the truth of this. So we must fill our mind with this glorious blood that reveals to us such sweet truth, so that it will never be out of our thoughts. This is what I want you to do, dearest daughters. If you do, you will persevere even to the point of death in this world, and at the end of your life you will receive the eternal sight of God. I’ll say no more here.

I am reproving you, my sweet and dearest daughter, for not keeping in mind what I told you – I mean, not to give any answer to anyone who tells you anything about me that to you seems less than good. I don’t want you to do this

any more. Here is how I want either of you to respond to anyone who talks to you about my faults: tell them they aren’t telling you the half of what they could! Tell them to be moved to compassion in their heart before God for what they are laying out in words, begging divine Goodness to reform my life. Then tell them that the supreme Judge is the one who will punish all my sins and reward every effort made for love of him. As for Monna Pavola, I don’t want you harboring any resentment against her. No, recognize that she is acting as a good mother who wants to see whether or not her daughter is virtuous. I must admit she hasn’t found much virtue in me, but I trust my Creator will make me reform and change my ways. Cheer up, and don’t worry yourselves any more, so that we may all be one in the fire of divine charity. That union won’t be taken from us by the devil or by anyone else.

I’ll say no more. Keep living in God’s holy and tender love. Give our greetings to Bartalo, and bless Bastiano and all the rest of the family.


It is not unusual for Catherine to make reference to the “blood” of Christ. In this case it contains God’s truth which, in turn, provides the opportunity to see God after death. As for her personal counsel to the women, she chides them gently and humorously for defending her. However, Catherine suggests that she would be better served if they told her critics that they do not know the half of all her faults. This is both humorous and effective for it places her opponents off guard.

The next letters provide examples of her earnest efforts to effect change in the political and religious conflicts of the era and at the same time encourage individuals to develop their own relationships to the divinity she embraced as her Bridegroom. Indeed, Catherine perceived personal selfishness to be the root cause of all political problems as well as the corruption of the Church. She makes that point in numerous letters. Her arguments for her position are direct and well articulated. Love, truth, self-knowledge and individual will are critical to a relationship with Christ. Excerpts are taken that present her standard form of address, the great value she placed on charity, and the value of suffering and self-inflicted violence. Note the references to food, blood and a
nuptial relationship to God. These are frequent metaphors used by Catherine and other women religious of her time. Letter T215/G145 of late 1377 was sent to several monasteries in Bologna in an effort to encourage nuns to return to lives of poverty and unselfishness. A portion of it is provided in order to give a sense of Catherine’s style.\(^{11}\)

Dearest sisters in Christ gentle Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you grounded in true and perfect charity. This charity is the wedding garment we must have when we are invited to the wedding feast of everlasting life.

Why would we not keep a vow once we have made it? Because of selfish love for ourselves. That selfish love deprives us of the wedding garment. And it deprives us of light and gives us darkness. It deprives us of life and gives us death and the appetite for things that are empty and transitory and fleeting. It deprives us of holy desire for God. Oh how wretched this sort of love is! It makes us waste time, which is so precious. It distances us from the food of angels and we go over to the food of brute beasts; I mean people who by their disordered life have become brute beasts whose food is vice and sin. The food of angels, on the other hand, is true solid virtue. How different the one is from the other – as different as death is from life, as different as the infinite from the finite!

Now let’s look at what gives pleasure to those who are true spouses of Christ crucified, who enjoy this sweet lovely food. And let’s look at what gives pleasure to those who have become brute beasts.

The true spouse of Christ finds joy in seeking her Bridegroom not among the crowds but in holy self-knowledge. There she finds him – that is, in knowing and experiencing the goodness of her Bridegroom within herself, in loving him with all her heart and all her soul and all her strength, in finding pleasure being at the table of the most holy cross, in preferring to acquire the virtues in suffering and struggle rather than in peace and painlessly in order to conform herself with Christ crucified and follow in his footsteps. Even if it were possible to serve him without suffering she would not want to. Rather, as a true knight, she wants to serve him by doing force and violence to herself because she has been stripped of selfish love for herself and clothed in loving charity. And she passes through the low narrow gate of Christ crucified. This is why she has promised and manages to observe voluntary poverty and obedience and continence.

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I’ll say no more. Keep living in God’s holy and tender love. Gentle Jesus! Jesus love! (Noffke 2007 vol. 3:6, 9, 12).

In this letter Catherine freely used metaphors based upon “weddings” and “food.” Both images were meaningful symbols in the minds of the women religious of her era. She also emphasized the role of selfishness in the disruption of social order. This was a point Catherine repeated in many of her letters and teachings. Brute animals live for vice and sin. These objects of pleasure in the physical world eventuate in chaos and disorder. Charity is the “wedding garment” of those who have been invited to God’s feast. The “food of angels” must be sought after, and that is the “Bridegroom” within each of the women. It is at his “table” that joy must be sought. Pleasure may be had in suffering with Him and seeking to serve as a “true knight” through violence to herself. Catherine was not alone in her emphasis on suffering as service to God on behalf of others. It was a religious fashion for the women religious of the period, one that was “encouraged by their spiritual directors and highlighted by their hagiographers” (Bynum 1995:111). For women whose lives were highly restricted, this concept provided them with some sense of power wherein they could accomplish good in the world, for the dead, and for their own salvation. This was achieved by means of their own discomfort. Like a true knight, pain and suffering were not to be avoided or feared in order to fight for one’s liege lord.

Another of Catherine’s letters describes the importance she attributed to the “cell” of the mind that she developed as a teenager. Although Catherine worked in the world and did not practice enclosure after she left the room in her parent’s home, she did work continually to stay in touch with the internal “cell” that anchored her to her spirituality, led her into spontaneous ecstasies, and strengthened her for her relationship with her divine spouse as well as those who peopled her world. The value she placed on that inner
“cell” is described in a portion of Letter T37/G78 which was sent in late 1377 to Niccolò di Ghida, a former Sienese physician who had become a monk.\(^\text{12}\)

Dearest son in Christ gentle Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you living in the cell of knowledge of yourself and of God’s goodness within you. This cell is a dwelling we carry with us wherever we go. In this cell we learn true solid virtue, especially the virtues of humility and blazing charity. Why? Because in self-knowledge we humble ourselves as we come to know how imperfect we are and that we are nothing. We see that we have received our being from God. And once we come to know our Creator’s goodness within us, we credit him for our being and for every grace we have received over and above our being. This is how we learn true and perfect charity, loving God with all our heart and all our soul and all our energy. And as we love, so we conceive such a hatred for our selfish sensuality that we are happy that God knows how to and wants to punish us for our wickedness in whatever way he chooses (Noffke 2007 vol. 3:13-14).

Catherine was noted for her use of Christ’s “blood” in her visions, letters, and teachings. She used that image to address those with whom she corresponded. This letter to Niccolò is of particular importance to those mystics who were seeking to develop the “immanence” or presence of God within themselves. Catherine argues that by means of self-knowledge and the recognition of one’s own “nothingness” individuals would gain the humility that would lead them to true charity. Noffke notes that this is only one of two places wherein Catherine states God wants to punish sins, otherwise Catherine constantly stresses God’s love and rewards (Noffke 2007 vol. 3:13-14).

Many of Catherine’s letters were appeals sent to Church authorities pleading with them for both loyalty to the pope and reform of the Church. One such epistle is Letter

T284/G25 which was sent to Cardinal Pietro di Luna in late April of 1378. At that time the leaders of Florence ignored the Pope’s interdict and ordered the services of the Church to be reestablished in the city. Catherine was there and opposed this defiance of papal authority. She saw it as one more step on the path to what would become the Great Schism of the Church.

Pietro was Spanish by birth and highly regarded as an intellectual man of good character. He had supported Pope Gregory XI in his return to Rome. However, Pietro refused to embrace Urban VI as leader of the faith, actively opposed his authority, and joined with the antipope Clement VII. This action marked Pietro as a traitor to truth in Catherine’s eyes. Fourteen years after her death, Pietro was elected as an antipope and took the name of Benedict XIII. His pontificate lasted until the end of the Great Schism itself in 1417. Note that in the following letter, she does not hesitate to give the Cardinal an overview of Christian doctrine nor cease to implore Pietro to inspire Urban VI to reform the Church. The reference to “a lovely troop” in paragraph five pertains to the bella brigata and their hopes to go on crusade and suffer martyrdom. The following paragraphs are selected portions of the original letter.  

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary.

Dearest and most reverend father in Christ gentle Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you a gentle lover of truth, the truth that sets us free. For there is no one who can oppose the truth. But it seems we cannot have

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this truth perfectly unless we know it, for unless we know it we cannot love it, and unless we love it we will neither discover it within ourselves nor follow it.

What shows us this truth? The blood of the only-begotten Son, shed with blazing love, the blood by which we were created anew in grace. For if God had not wanted and did not still want our good, he would not have given us such a Redeemer. So it is through the blood that we come to know the truth, by the light of most holy faith that is in the eye of our understanding.

Oh dearest father, fall in love with this truth so that you may be a pillar in the mystic body of holy Church, where this truth must be administered. For truth is in her, and because truth is in her it must be administered by truthful persons who are in love with it and enlightened by it, who are not ignorant or uninstructed in truth. But it seems to me that God’s Church has a great shortage of good ministers because the cloud of our selfish love has grown so big in our mind’s eye that no one, apparently, can see or know this truth, and therefore they do not love it, since they are so filled with sensual and particular love for themselves that they cannot fill their heart and their will with love of truth. And so the mouths of those who were made heralds of the truth are found to be lying and deceitful. And I, dearest father, can tell you why. For here, where I am, the religious and the secular clergy, and especially the mendicant friars, who are appointed by Christ’s dear bride to announce and proclaim the truth, oppose the truth and give it the lie in the pulpit. (Never mind the laity, of whom there are plenty of bad ones and few good ones!) I believe my sins are the cause of it. I say this in regard to their violation of the interdict. Not only have they done this evil thing themselves, but they are advising one group (for there is such a group) that they can celebrate the liturgy in good conscience and that the laity may attend. And they say that anyone who does not attend is committing a sin. They have led the people into so much heresy that it is pitiful even to think about it, let alone see it. And what makes them say and do these things is slavish fear of others, human respect, and desire for the stipends. Oime! Oime! I am dying and cannot die when I see that those who should be dying for the truth are in fact bereft of truth!

So I beg you, stand at the ears of Christ on earth and ring this truth into them continually, so that in this truth he may reform his bride. With a courageous heart tell him to reform her with good and holy pastors. Tell him to do it in deed and in truth, and not just with the sound of words, because if he were to speak and not act it would be nothing at all. And unless good pastors are appointed he will never realize his desire for reform.

Beg him not to let sins go unpunished, especially the sins of those who contaminate holy faith with self-centeredness. Let him want to see God’s servants at his side; they will sincerely help him to bear his burdens. For if he wants to drain the pus from this tragic sore, he will have to suffer harassment and tongue-lashing – and so will you and the others. And if you know the truth and are lovers of truth, suffering will not frighten you; rather, you will rejoice in suffering. But if you are not living in this sweet and gentle love of truth, you will be afraid even of your own shadow.
It is because I know there is no other way that I said I long to see you a
gentle lover of truth. I beg you then, for Love of Christ crucified and for that
sweet blood shed with such blazing love, to become a spouse of truth so as to
fulfill God’s will for you as well as my soul’s desire, for I long to see you die for
truth.

I’ll say no more. Keep living in God’s holy and tender love.
Gentle Jesus! Jesus love! (Noffke 2007 vol. 3:114-117)

Once again, Catherine presents love of the truth that resides in the blood of Christ
as the gateway to the effective administration of the church. She admonishes Pietro to
find that truth and seek for reform throughout the faith. Catherine argues that the truth is
in the church but that it is hidden by the corruption of the ecclesiastical leaders at all
ranks. She describes examples of various problems in a way that provide insights into the
problems of the time. Catherine does not hesitate to beseech Pietro to counsel and
strengthen the hand of the pope. At a later time Pietro became totally disaffected with the
pope and eventually opposed Urban VI.

The Dialogue

Also known as The Dialogue of Divine Providence (Commire and Klezer
2002:547), The Dialogue was written between 1377 and 1378. Catherine was thirty years
old at the time and began “the book” as she called it while she lived at Rocca d’Orcia and
then completed it in Rome. This 366 page treatise was both dictated to her various
followers and written by Catherine herself, who learned to write for this undertaking. Its
purpose was to condense Catherine’s teachings for the benefit of her “children.” To that
end, Catherine posed four petitions to God and then recorded His replies to her. Suzanne
Noffke, whose 1980 English translation is used here notes that Catherine requested 1)
that she be allowed to suffer for the sins of the world, 2) that God mercifully bless the
Church and the hoped for reforms, 3) that God’s mercy be upon the entire world and the
Christian efforts for peace, 4) that God provide for her dear Raymond’s spiritual welfare as well as the welfare of an unnamed sinner about whom she was concerned at the time (Noffke 1980:16, 17). The one hundred and sixty-seven chapters of the book are formed in nine sections that include the Prologue, The Way of Perfection, The Dialogue, The Bridge, Tears, Truth, the Mystic Body of Holy Church, Divine Providence, Obedience and the Conclusion.

A selection from the work is included here in order to demonstrate Catherine’s style and form of thinking. The most famous portion of the Dialogue is the introductory paragraph of the Prologue. Although Catherine does not name the questing soul as her own, the soul is feminine and used as a tool to explain Catherine’s own spiritual efforts and a prototype of all souls.¹⁴

A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God’s goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it (Catherine of Siena in Noffke 1980:25)

At one point, the soul seeks to understand the purpose of guilt and suffering. The answer she receives from “Gentle Truth” teaches that suffering must be borne with love and patience in order for atonement to be effective through the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus. Catherine is taught that when she asked for suffering in order to help atone for the sins of others, she was really asking for love and truth.

I have shown you, dearest daughter, that in this life guilt is not atoned for by any suffering simply as suffering, but rather by suffering borne with desire,

love, and contrition of heart. The value is not in the suffering but in the soul’s desire. Likewise, neither desire nor any other virtue has value or life except through my only-begotten Son, Christ crucified, since the soul has drawn love from him and in virtue follows his footsteps. In this way and in no other is suffering of value. So you see, said gentle Truth, those who have heartfelt contrition, love for true patience, and that true humility which considers oneself worthy of punishment and unworthy of reward suffer with patience and so make atonement.

You asked for suffering, and you asked me to punish you for the sins of others. What you were not aware of was that you were, in effect, asking for love and light and knowledge of the truth. For I have already told you that suffering and sorrow increase in proportion to love: When love grows, so does sorrow. So I say to you: Ask and it shall be given to you. I will not say no to anyone who asks in truth. Consider that the soul’s love in divine charity is so joined with perfect patience that the one cannot leave without the other. The soul, therefore, who chooses to love me must also choose to suffer for me anything at all that I give her. Patience is not proved except in suffering, and patience is one with charity, as has been said. Endure courageously, then. Otherwise you will not show yourselves to be - nor will you be - faithful spouses and children of my Truth, nor will you show that your delight is in my honor and in the salvation of souls.

(Catherine of Siena in Noffke 1980:29-30, 33). 15

Many of Catherine’s major teachings are expressed in these paragraphs. The emphasis on suffering and punishment endured with patience and love refers to the belief of women religious of the era that they could assist Christ in the work of atonement as co-redeemers through their own sicknesses and self-inflicted suffering (Bynum 1995:108-109). In this effort of co-redemption they were afforded one of the few venues for power and effective influence (Bynum 1995:119-120). Catherine taught this principle by example as well as by the spoken and written word.

The Final Prayers of Catherine of Siena

Although the young woman practiced the daily order of prayer as proscribed by the formal practices of her faith, Catherine of Siena also lapsed into prayer or ecstasy at any time or place. On those occasions she did not necessarily subscribe to formalized versions of personal prayer. Her followers noted that she prayed much during her sleepless nights and that she spent prolonged periods in prayer following each morning’s liturgy. The topics of the service were often the central facet of her meditations of the day. Noffke (2001) found that Catherine frequently prayed while in a trance state and these occurred spontaneously when she was “walking, kneeling, or prostrate on the floor, extending her arms or clasping her hands to her heart or striking her breast in contrition, gazing upward or closing her eyes. And when she prayed alone, especially in the garden, she liked to sing” (Noffke 2001: ix).

Scribes were assigned to help her with not only her correspondence, but also with The Dialogue, much of which she dictated. Many of her spontaneous prayers were recorded as part of the book. During the last four years of her life, scribes continued to record her prayers. They were particularly careful to do this in Rome and most certainly during the last seventeen months of her life. In 1983 Suzanne Noffke edited and translated into English the twenty-six prayers that have come down to us. The last one, Prayer 26, was uttered on January 30, 1380 while Catherine continued to labor in Rome. Portions of it are presented here from the 2001 edition of Noffke’s work. Catherine’s concern for the reform of the Church, peace in the land, and care for her “children” are central to her requests of God. It is followed by what is believed to be her final prayer prior to her death.
Prayer 26

Oh God eternal!
Oh good Master!

To you, eternal Father,
I offer once again my life,
poor as I am,
for your dear bride.
As often as it pleases your goodness,
drag me out of this body
and send me back again, each time with greater suffering than before,
if only I may see the reform
of this dear bride, holy church.
I beg you, God eternal,
give me this bride.

Then, too,
I commend to you my children,
Whom I love so much.
I pray you, most high eternal Father,
If it does please your mercy and goodness
to take me out of this vessel
and not make me go back again,
do not leave them orphans.
Visit them with your grace
and make them live as if they were dead,
in true and most perfect light.

Forgive us all our sins,
and forgive me the great foolishness and neglect
of which I have been guilty in your church-
for I have not done
what I could and should have done.

I have sinned against the Lord.
Have mercy on me!

I offer and commend to you my children,
whom I so love-
for they are my very soul.
But should it please your goodness
to make me stay yet longer in this vessel,
then do you, best of doctors,
heal and care for it,
for it is all shattered.
Give,
oh give to us, eternal Father,
your gentle benediction.
Amen.
(Noffke 2001:268-270)

St. Catherine's Final Prayer

Lord,
you are calling me to come to you,
and I am coming to you-
not with any merits of my own
but only with your mercy.
I am begging you for this mercy
in virtue of your Son's most sweet blood.
Blood! Blood!
Father,
into your hands I surrender my soul
and my spirit.
(Noffke 2001:274)

In this last recorded prayer, Catherine expressed her gratitude as a vessel that has
been formed and crushed and formed again through suffering and strengthening to do the
work she believed herself called by God to pursue. In this we see her total surrender of
self-will. Catherine’s great concern is for her bella brigata. They are her children and she
begs for their protection as well as for their continued loving association with each other.
It is probable that Catherine referred to her failure to achieve peace in the land and reform
of the church when she said, “Forgive me the great foolishness and neglect of which I
have been guilty in your church - for I have not done what I could and should have done”
(Noffke 2001:268-270). Four months later Catherine of Siena passed away.

Self-Actualization in the Life of Catherine of Siena

The spiritual life of Catherine of Siena illustrates many of the characteristics of
saintliness described by William James and aspects of self-actualizers described by
Abraham Maslow. The difficulty lays in the record of her numerous spiritual experiences. Catherine did not testify to a single life-altering peak experience, instead, she had several as well as innumerable visions. Her ability to experience many visions was in part due to the fact that she practiced the consciousness of God by going into her "cell," a place in her mind that she assiduously activated and developed in order to access altered states of consciousness. She considered this to be her life's work and never deviated from that opinion after her first childhood visions.

Catherine experienced her first visions at the age of six and one of her major conversion experiences at the age of seven. Consistent with both the James and Maslow models, she never forgot those events or the power of them. From that point on there is no evidence of her wavering in her determination to fulfill her religious and spiritual vocation. Throughout her life, the young woman would not be deterred from self-actualizing in what she believed to be her divine calling. There was no faltering with Catherine. "She did everything with drive, conviction and a refusal to compromise (Dryer 1989:11). For example, virginity was the standard for female sanctity and Catherine resolved to meet that criterion at all costs. In order to do this she made it a point to minimize her attractiveness and to avoid association with men other than those in her large family and her confessors. According to Capua, Catherine avoided the apprentices in her parents' home and never gazed out on the street looking for young men (Capua 2003:37-38). Her efforts later in life forced her out of seclusion and into association with male members of the bella brigata, the leaders of the church and various cities, but she seemed much too preoccupied with her spiritual efforts to have lost control of her virginity in mind or body.
Fasting and suffering were also required for sainthood. Catherine began her practices of these trials as early in her life as possible. According to Raymond of Capua (c.1330-1399), Catherine’s mother, Lapa, and Catherine’s sister-in-law, Lisa, told him how determined Catherine had been in her youth to remain unmarried and pursue her goal of unity with God through ascetic practices. The test of this voluntary pain was to do so joyfully on behalf of other mortals as well as the dead, thereby making oneself “another Christ” (Flinders 1980:121). Catherine’s unflinching self-inflicted suffering was in accord with the cultural criteria for sainthood as expected in her milieu and described by James in his chapters on saintliness (1987:239-298). Some of her behaviors are off-putting to modern individuals who find certain ascetic activities so questionable that they are seen as signs of neurosis or psychosis. However, Catherine was not alone in the performance of co-redemptive deeds; many mystics of the period practiced them. For example, Henry Suso (c.1300-1366) was Catherine’s contemporary. His self-mortifications were more extreme than Catherine’s, yet both individuals were admired by their associates and subsequent members of their faith. The motivation required to endure these practices over a life-time indicates that such individuals were fulfilling goals they considered to be heroic and self-actualizing.

Catherine’s witness also supports the models of James and Maslow in that she told her confessors that “she could not find words to express the divine experiences she had” (Capua 2003:164). Although Catherine could clearly describe the lessons she was taught during her various visions, it was the inexpressible love that she felt that confounded her ability to explain after peak-experiences that were traumatic in nature. This was the case when she asked God to create a new heart in her and to remove her
own heart and will. In the vision that followed her prayers, Christ came and removed her heart from her side. According to Catherine, she lived for some days in that state until she had another vision while praying at church. At that time she felt herself encircled by the light in which the Lord stood, holding a human heart in his hands. The vision was so powerful Catherine fell to the floor and trembled. Christ came to her, opened her side again and placed the heart within her, saying, “Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now, you see, I am giving you mine, so that you can go on living with it forever” (Capua 2003:165). He then closed the opening in her side and, according to tradition, a scar remained in that place the rest of her short life. These visions resulted in Catherine’s conviction that she had somehow changed, that she felt greater love than she had ever known before and a joy that was inexpressible (Capua 2003:167). Again, the models of James and Maslow are supported by her witness in that this particular vision was terrifying and exhausting yet filled with a sense of ineffable love and joy. This combination of emotional responses is often expressed by individuals who have undergone peak-experiences.

James insists that persons who have a conversion experience must not only find change and new direction for their lives because of it, but if directed toward sainthood they must also produce pragmatic results on behalf of others, particularly the poor and undesirable members of society. Catherine’s adult life conforms to this criterion. Catherine’s years of service to the sick and dying, to her family and the bella brigata are typical of the pragmatic works of saints. Her efforts to achieve peace within the Church and between the Church and the city-states of Italy were also pragmatic in essence although she failed to reach her idealistic goals.
Experiences like receiving Christ’s ring and Christ’s heart (Capua 2003) accelerated Catherine’s resolve to serve God, but in her case, there was a difference. One tends to think of reformers going in prayer for solutions to the problems before them. For Catherine of Siena it was the other way around. Her mysticism moved her to social action. Suzanne Noffke argues that this woman must not be perceived as going into prayer in order to find strength to “refuel” for her work in the outside world. Rather she came out of contemplation “impelled into action” (Noffke 1980:8). Noffke concludes that it is erroneous to perceive Catherine merely as a “social mystic” for “She was indeed a social mystic – but even more properly a mystic activist” (Noffke 1980:9). As an activist, Catherine labored in hospitals, comforted the poor and condemned, sought to reestablish order in the Church and spent the last years of her life trying to make peace between the powers of Church and state.

During the same period, Catherine taught and counseled her many followers, created a large body of correspondence, wrote a book, and daily struggled to center herself in her contemplation of the divine. Here again, James’ observations are confirmed by Catherine’s witness of her mystic experiences. James argues that there is a noetic or intellectual and instructional element in many “revelations” (James 1987:343). Catherine often went in prayer to receive answers to her questions about truth, life, and service. Indeed, the Dialogue itself is an example of that practice. The book is over three hundred pages of questions and answers, concerns and comforting explanations in response to Catherine’s quest for understanding. This is an example of the noetic quality in mystic experiences required by James’s model.
Self-actualization involves the effort to achieve one's goals within contemporary cultural models. Martyrdom was the ultimate goal of those who followed the medieval path to sainthood. The mob's assassination attempt upon Catherine's life illustrates how constant her effort was to perfect herself within the cultural model of saintliness, even to the point of seeking martyrdom. In another setting, martyrdom might be perceived as a sign of mental illness or a suicidal death wish, but within the Medieval cultural milieu, it is suggestive of a quest for sainthood. Despite the similarities to Christ's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, Capua's account provides strong evidence of both Catherine's self-actualizing goal and its model. Martyrdom involves choice. It is a symbolic act. Beyond her belief in its salvational aspect for the victim, Catherine knew this form of death would be recognized by her contemporaries and generations of leaders of her faith. Martyrdom would draw attention to her qualifications for and life-long efforts toward sainthood.

Catherine knew what tradition attributed to the actions of a saint and she knew how to self-actualize as one. Her steadfast determination to fulfill her life goal of service is not in question. Catherine was sincere and constant. No one could endure the self-inflicted pain she chose without believing there was value in those practices. However, Catherine gained attention by means of recognizable gestures at politically important moments. This is evident when she sought martyrdom from the crowd, or overcame her abhorrence to leprosy and infection. Catherine insisted she received the "stigmata" in a vision although it was invisible to others "by her request" (Flinders 1993:5). Her fasting and other ascetic practices were particularly recognizable as characteristics of holy women. Moreover, when carried to her extremes, they generally resulted in the cessation
of menses, thus overcoming the stigma of womanhood with its attendant “pollutant” qualities. There is an “edge” of the theatrical in some of these behaviors, as though she knew how to add to her reputation. This was the case when she assisted Niccolò di Tuldo during his execution.

Nevertheless, Catherine’s self-actualizing practices became totally integrated in her personality as was her quest for Truth and Love. For Catherine, self-actualization was the search for God and it is God who is *la prima dolce Verità (the first sweet Truth)*, one who is *pazzo d’amore* (mad with love) and *essa carità* (charity itself). The quest for knowledge of God is synonymous with the love of God, with God’s love for mortals, and with love itself (Noffke 1980:8). As for God’s love, the love of deity for mortals is so intense Catherine referred to it as “the madness of love” (Noffke 1980:9). Catherine’s perspective is constantly expressed not only by her life, but also in her book, her letters, and her recorded prayers.

Catherine of Siena went to great lengths to fulfill the life’s work she believed she was called to live when but a child. It was *her* soul that yearned for God’s honor and the salvation of souls. Naturally disposed to visionary experiences, Catherine pursued her self-actualization as a saint by means of asceticism, poverty, study, service and fasting. To modern sensibilities her efforts might seem extreme. However, in his introduction to Capua’s *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, Thomas Gilby argues that Catherine and her hagiographer, Raymond of Capua, “were children of a culture where spiritual forces could be readily materialized in the odour of sanctity and the stink of sin” (Capua 2003:15). He notes that the objects of one’s faith were not mere abstractions, but “vividly pictured.” In their world, visions, miracles, the stigmata, and levitation were not looked
upon as signs of illness, but rather expected as the symbols of those engaged in spiritual self-actualization. Asceticism, penance, virginity, poverty, obedience, service and all consuming love were vital tools in the battle for individual and social salvation.

Conclusions

Catherine of Siena died at a young age and felt herself to have failed in her efforts on behalf of the papacy and in her quest to secure peace among the Italian states. Commire and Klezer note that, “Anyone seeing her pitiful end might have thought her a person of little consequence, another religious woman ill-equipped to live in the world. Yet Catherine, a child of the newly emerging middle class, who had never officially joined a religious order, had in her day held great influence in the balance of powers in Europe and in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church” (Commire and Klezer 1999-2002 vol. 3:544). Catherine’s story did not end in defeat. She was so admired by those of her faith that she influenced the model of female mysticism for generations to come.

Catherine’s life and teachings were quickly recorded by hagiographers whose writings were based upon the saintly models of the past. By 1395 Raymond of Capua completed The Life of Catherine of Siena (Wilson and Margolis 2004:145) and died only four years later. Although the biography was “too long to be read easily and too extraordinary to be imitated humanly, Raymond’s associates promptly produced Latin supplements and abridgements, vernacular versions, and more accessible patterns for emulation. And so they hatched an astonishing brood of new Catherines” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:6). This “brood of new Catherines” was nurtured in their spiritual efforts not only by books about Catherine’s life but also by the works she herself wrote or
dictated. As noted by Ruth Mortimer, Catherine’s words as well as books about her life and teachings were staples in the Italian printing industry. Mortimer found that “early printed books by and about Catherine of Siena has so far yielded sixty-one editions, with imprint dates from 1477 to 1589” (Mortimer 1992:12). By 1492 they were being printed as far away as England. All these manuscripts extended the pragmatic influence of Catherine for centuries after her death. A few women religious followed Catherine’s extreme behaviors but most women, and men also, were inspired by her example. They found more moderate ways to improve themselves and serve God simply by remembering and emulating her devotion in their own ways.

Gradually the influence of Catherine extended further, even into the politics and policies of the Church itself. Raymond of Capua believed he achieved his high position as Master General of the Dominican order because of his association with Catherine. Other highly placed churchmen gave accounts of Catherine’s healing effects and inspiration for their lives. They then proceeded to reform their orders based upon Catherine’s teachings and example. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi argue that Catherine’s standards inspired both the “institutional organization of the Dominican Third Order Regular, but also the new ideological configuration that made it a model for the Observant reform of the Dominican order” (Bornstein and Rusconi 1996:92-93).

The bella brigata continued to honor the life of their “mamma” after her passing. Catherine’s “children” organized a powerful cult that saw to the promotion of her memory. When Catherine died “she was buried under the high altar in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. Her head was afterwards removed and taken to Siena, where it is enshrined in the Dominican church” (Coulson 1958:172). According to
Raymond of Capua, many miracles were immediately attributed to relics that belonged to
Catherine, or by touching her corpse, or by prayers to her (Capua 2003:346-355). For
example, Capua tells of a dying boy who was healed upon the touch of one of her teeth.
A case of leprosy was healed by the touch of her corpse. A crippled boy was made whole
by contact with Catherine’s remains. Given her life and works as well as the many
miracles attributed to her, Catherine of Siena was canonized in 1461, just eighty years
after her death. In consequence of that achievement her feast day is celebrated on April
29 (Wilson and Margolis 2004:146). Catherine of Siena was further honored by the
Church in 1970 when she was declared a Doctor of the Roman Catholic faith, an honor
afforded to only a few individuals whose writings are considered to be of great benefit to
the Church as a whole.

The leaders of Catherine’s faith as well as leaders of her nation have perceived
her self-actualizing and ascetic practices not as neurotic but as admirable. This tradition
has continued for over seven hundred years. Catherine’s honors have not simply been
awarded by those who share her religious affiliation. She was further honored in 1870
when Italy finally became united as a state. At that time she and St. Francis of Assisi
were declared the patron saints of the new nation (Commire and Klezer 1999-2002 vol.
3:547). According to Gerald A. Parsons (Parsons 2004), Catherine of Siena has
maintained her position as a patron saint of Italy throughout the innumerable political
changes of the past thirteen decades. Catherine continued to be a cult figure of such
stature that by 1939 her following reached the proportions of a civil religion as described
by Ralph Bellah.\(^{16}\) In 1939 and 1940 the traditions of a national festival in her honor were

invented as a part of the propaganda supporting Italy’s Fascist forces. Civil war followed the defeat of the Axis Powers, yet within two years Catherine’s festival began to be celebrated once again. The symbolic meanings of the rituals were reinvented. Instead of blessing Italy alone, the “festival celebrated Italy’s contribution to a post-war Europe dedicated to the ideals of peace, community, and justice” (Parsons 2004:883).

Catherine’s memory continued to be so highly regarded that by the late 1980s her followers began promoting her as a patron saint for all Europe. As a result the festivities in her name have become overtly international, particularly since the millennium celebrations. Today the flags and speeches represent not only Siena and Italy, “but also that of the European Union. Similarly, the final blessing, bestowed in the Campo at the conclusion of the entire festival is now habitually and characteristically designated as a blessing of Siena, of Italy, and of Europe” (Parsons 2004:882).

It is ironic that Catherine of Siena died knowing that she had failed to make peace between the powers of Europe and the Church, yet today, her name continues to symbolize the eventual victory of her goal. Catherine’s aspirations for accord between rulers were a response to her inner directive. In truth, she sought to actualize personal ambitions that were both otherworldly and romantic. Catherine knew the requirements for sainthood and gave whole-hearted attention to that achievement. She never wavered from her convictions.
CHAPTER 9

FEMALE MYSTICS OF THE RENAISSANCE:

COMPARATIVE CASES

"The greatest human ambition is to seek God, and the only true tragedy is failing to become a saint. These are the convictions of the men and women that others often call mystics...They are the most passionately personal practitioners of religion. Their chosen instrument is prayer. Their lifelong quest is to experience the living God. They regard their search for God as the expression of what is most authentic within themselves, as well as the greatest service they could pay to their fellow humans." (Luke Timothy Johnson in Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. 2008:1 Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company)

This study has explored medieval female mysticism, its cultural milieu and misogynistic elements as well as developments in the practice of enclosure and heresy.

The lives of three women illustrated the argument that female mystics were seeking self-actualization within their cultural constrictions. The present chapter is both a review of factors presented earlier, as well as an exploration of later developments that occurred during the Renaissance, an era which eventually resulted in the decline of this form of religious activity. Many aspects of medieval female mysticism were illustrated by the examples of Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, Marguerite Porete in the thirteenth century, and Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century. Yet the course of female mysticism continued for three hundred more years, during which time the criteria for sainthood remained the same, as did the social dangers and rewards of mystic experience. This point is illustrated by the lives of three women who lived in the
fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Jeanne Guyon.

Joan of Arc was the most famous woman of the fifteenth century, not only for her effect upon the armies of France, but also for the divine voices that guided her. Although she was not of the elite class of women who would have had conventual associations, Joan was a female mystic whose prophetic abilities will be reviewed in this chapter. Teresa of Avila provides an example of female mysticism at its peak in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spain. During the seventeenth century, female mysticism, and mysticism per se, began to wane before the forces of monarchy, science, and the onrushing movement toward the Enlightenment. Madame Jeanne Guyon was one of the most influential figures in a losing battle against the state of France and its Catholic ecclesiastical powers. She is the last of the exemplars used in this work to illustrate the development and the decline of female mysticism within a cultural milieu that provided a place for such individuals, women who dedicated their lives to their beliefs that individuals could access the divine and find self-fulfillment in that relationship.

Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon present further illustrations of the principles outlined throughout this work. In the opening chapters of this dissertation, various facets of mysticism were explained as well as the position of early psychologists who posited that the extreme behaviors of female mystics were evidence of forms of mental illness. The argument presented in this dissertation is that, whether or not such women had mental health issues, they were nonetheless acting from standards of heroism enculturated by their societies. The role of a female mystic was made very difficult by the
symbols of that occupation, the first one being life-long enclosure for many of the women.

Physical illness and self-inflicted suffering provided additional symbols of sainthood. The ability to endure pain was seen to have two benefits. First, it enhanced one’s ability to overcome attachment to bodily addictions and thus furthered one’s spiritual development. Second, it was believed that through suffering, saints could assist Christ in the salvation of souls in purgatory. Other symbolic measures included lifelong virginity and rigorous austerities. Although the Church officially condemned acts of extreme asceticism, some individuals still went to excess in fasting, self-flagellation, and poverty. Furthermore, women who developed saintly attributes were expected to be humble and obedient to ecclesiastical authorities. Service to others was considered to be a very important aspect of a woman religious’ life. Until the enforcement of claustration, women religious eagerly helped the poor, the sick, and the dying. Whatever the sufferer’s condition, saints overcame their natural repugnance to the affliction. These cultural expectations for female religious continued to be elements of female mysticism throughout the seventeenth century.

These women felt an inner determination to fulfill themselves personally as mystics, a resolve that went beyond their cognitive orientation. The choice of a mystical life style often came to them as the result of an overwhelmingly powerful sensation identified as a “conversion” experience by William James, or as a “peak-experience” by Abraham Maslow. In the case of Marguerite Porete, there is insufficient evidence to know if this was her initiation to mysticism, but both Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena had overwhelming visions that began in early childhood and determined the
course of their lives. Catherine and Hildegard’s writings indicate that they met the criteria of self-actualizers described by James and Maslow. Indeed, these women never wavered from their resolve to “self-actualize” in the service of God. All three women completely gave themselves to fulfill what they believed was God’s work for them to perform. Their mystical experiences inspired the many pragmatic accomplishments they achieved throughout their lives. It will be seen in this chapter that Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon also experienced frequent altered states of consciousness. They too were inspired, but not to states of mental illness and lack of productivity. Despite the fact that they endured many physical hardships, these women lived lives that were fruitful and met the pragmatic indicators suggested by William James and Abraham Maslow.

Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon confronted the same powerful social forces that challenged Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, and Catherine of Siena. First, they were women. As such, they were forced to overcome the stigma of their sex in order to fulfill their potential as human beings and accomplish the goals they felt they were directed to achieve by the voices and visions they believed came to them from God. Although forbidden to preach or write on religious matters, the women skirted these restrictions by means of visions which led to their claims of divine authority. Verification of one’s spiritual calling required unquestionable virginity as well as stamina to endure official investigation. Women had to be able to prove their visions were not diabolical in origin. This was particularly true for women because they were stigmatized as the daughters of Eve, and considered to have been created of poorer stuff than males.

The investigation of female spirituality became particularly acute as the Protestant reformation divided the Christian realm. Whether you were a Protestant or a Catholic, it
was dangerous to hold beliefs that conflicted with those of your local state and ecclesiastical authorities. As noted in chapter 5, many women were involved in movements for social and religious change. The problem for women resided in the propaganda that heretics, or anyone with unusual or uncontrollable beliefs, was suspected of witchcraft. Trials for witches increased to their greatest intensity during the lifetimes of Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Guyon. It required great courage to proclaim the “word of God” when the possibility of torture and death was an ever present reality.

Social class was an important aspect of acceptability for female mystics. It was necessary to have the support of powerful backers in the church and nobility if you were to survive as a visionary woman. Hildegard came from the elite and wealthy class of Germany. Her visions were accepted as prophetic by Bernard of Clairvaux and the pope. As a result she was a powerful voice for reform in the church and for peace between the princes of Europe. Marguerite Porete did not have wealth or the backing of nobility, let alone the papacy. She did not call for reform. Porete argued that only a relationship with God was necessary. This threatened Church and state powers and she was condemned for her audacity and stubborn refusal to surrender her beliefs. Catherine of Siena came from a wealthy family in a wealthy city. She had many followers and was accepted as a saint by powerful individuals in the Dominican Order. Like Hildegard, she did not challenge the Church, but called for its reform. The same pattern wherein it was helpful to be wealthy, of the nobility, and a reformer, saved Teresa of Avila. However, Madame Jeanne Guyon’s teachings were considered such a threat to the established order that
neither wealth nor aristocratic friends could save her from the greater powers of
monarchy and the authoritarian forces of the Catholic Church in France.

Joan of Arc was a peasant girl who, without the dauphin’s support, had no
defenders. Once she was captured by her enemies, no one bargained for her release as
was the custom of the time, no one came to rescue her as she had rescued others, no one
stood as her advocate in a long and frightening trial. Although prosecuted by the clergy,
she was a political captive. Young and uneducated, with only her “voices” to guide her,
Joan had to defend herself for months against many of the most important churchmen of
her day as well as scholastics from the University of Paris who hoped to prove her guilty
of witchcraft.

*Joan of Arc*

During her brief lifetime, Joan of Arc (c.1412-1431) was not an unknown mystic.
Joan was the greatest celebrity of her era. She still is one of Europe’s most famous
women. According to Wilson and Margolis, “Joan of Arc remains one of the most
disputed figures in history, and the person about whom more has been written, painted,
sculpted, and filmed than any other figure save perhaps for Jesus Christ” (2004:485). Her
life was exceptional in many ways, most notably as a female leader of several victorious
military campaigns. This was a success she insisted was due to the promptings of the
voices she heard in the light that often came to her. Although she was a peasant and
therefore illiterate, Joan’s history is well known due to the remarkable paper trail left by
her various ecclesiastical trials and the records of those who knew her.
Henry Ansgar Kelly (1996:205) notes that Joan’s brief life became the subject of six court actions. The first took place in her local bishop’s office because she refused to honor her parents’ contract for her to marry. Unbeknownst to them, Joan pledged to remain a virgin when she was thirteen; at the same time she began to hear her voices. Her virginity was critical to the second trial which took place several years later in Poitiers prior to her acceptance by the dauphin. Had she not been chaste, her visions would have been considered diabolic. The third trial was the infamous “condemnation” trial which was followed by the “relapse” proceedings which resulted in her death at the stake (Kelly 1996:205). At the end of the Hundred Years War, Charles VII ordered the “rehabilitation” or “nullification” trial wherein Joan was exonerated of all charges and whereby Charles himself was vindicated, thus strengthening his claim to the throne. Finally, the story of Joan’s life underwent the canonization process which took fifty years to complete. It began in 1869 and finally ended in 1920 (Kelly 1996:205).

The “Maid of Orleans” was not officially a woman religious who lived a cloistered life removed from the affairs of the world. Rather, Joan was very much in the political mix of her era, and actively sought to effect change by aiding the French heir to gain the throne. Although deeply religious, Joan did not wear the clothes of a nun; instead, once Joan left her village, she began to dress in men’s attire. There were several reasons for her decision to do this. Pants were more practical than skirts because she participated fully in the wars her “voices” insisted she lead. Moreover, the male attire symbolized knighthood and the superior virtues of maleness (McWebb 1996:135). Finally, she wore them because they made it easier to protect her virtue from rape.
Joan did practice poverty, but it was that of a peasant and a soldier. Her obedience and service was spent in response to the “light” she saw and the “voices” she heard, not in conformity with the rules of a convent. Joan made no effort to achieve unio mystica. That was largely a goal of the nobility, and Joan was a peasant whose relationship to her voices was one of purely pragmatic obedience to goals set before her in the here and now. Her suffering was not self-inflicted in order to save souls from purgatory, nor is there any record of her fasting in order to secure visions (Brooks: 1990:24). Joan’s suffering was that of one who risked her personal life and reputation, as well as the authenticity of her voices, before thousands of Frenchmen, Englishmen, and citizens of Europe. The last year of her life was frightening and humiliating. She spent it in chains, surrounded by male prison guards rather than female attendants as required by the laws of the age. Joan’s suffering climaxed with her death, one that occurred in the flames reserved for witches and heretics.

Despite these differences, Joan of Arc is pertinent to this study for several reasons. First, Joan had a powerful “conversion” experience when she was only thirteen years old. From that time on, she frequently heard voices that came to her in a powerful light. Second, Joan’s life changed after her visions began, and her social role was definitely altered by them when she reached the age of seventeen. At that time she was directed by the voices to ensure the dauphin’s access to the throne of France. Third, the information the voices gave her was prophetic and highly accurate. Joan was a prophetess. Fourth, changes occurred in her descriptions of the revelations she received during the process of interrogation throughout her captivity. This is of particular interest because it illustrates the vital connection between the phenomenon of an ASC and the
description required in order to make it understandable to others in the culture. Finally, Joan’s determination to obey her voices dramatically illustrates the power of her convictions and her drive to fulfill the actions required of her by those directives. Her feats are best understood in the light of the political situation of her era.

*The Third Phase of the Hundred Years’ War*

A series of royal succession crises, disputes over the territories of Aquitaine and Burgundy, as well as the quest for wealth and power among the intermarried nobility of England and France, produced a conflict referred to as The Hundred Years War. It began in 1337, during Catherine of Siena’s lifetime, and lasted until 1453. Joan of Arc participated in the third phase of the war which stretched from 1413 to 1429. This particular period was noted for the English victory of Henry V at Agincourt (1415). In fact, for all intents and purposes, the English were winning the war until the deliverance of Orleans, which was led by Joan of Arc in 1429 (Pernoud 1998:1, 3).

The major factions in this conflict included the armed forces of the English, who benefitted from the civil war between French royal houses (Pernoud 1996:291). The first group of French combatants was the *Bourguignons* who were actually Anglo-Burgundians and loyal to England. They were also supported by the scholars at the University of Paris. This was due to the fact that the English proposed parliamentary institutions which would balance or weaken the powers of the nobility (Adams 1998:5). The second group of Frenchmen was the *Armagnacs*, who remained loyal to Charles the dauphin and supported his claim to be the legitimate king of France, despite the fact that his father, Charles VI, gave the right of succession to England’s Henry VI.
The situation was further complicated by the ongoing “Great Schism” of the Church. This was the same conflict that so disturbed Catherine of Siena. It was still raging when Joan of Arc was born in 1412 or 1413. English factions opposed French popes, a position held by the Anglo-Burgundians as well. The Armagnacs defended the position of the Avignon’s pope as did the Scots who were determined to be free of England. A third claimant to the papacy emerged following a church council held at Pisa in 1409 (Adams 1998:5). This was Benedict XIII, formerly Cardinal Pietro di Luna, with whom Catherine of Siena corresponded in Letter T284/G25 in 1378 (Noffke 2007: vol. 3:114-117). These divisions were gradually resolved at several councils held from 1414 to 1417, and again at Basel between 1431 and 1437 (Adams 1998:5).

Thousands of lives were affected by the constant warfare. The hostilities actually ended the traditions of chivalry. Peasants were again brutalized and bore the brunt of the conflict. This was the case with the little village of Domrémy, which lay within a small pocket of Armagnac territory. During Joan’s childhood, there was a series of “brutal raids by the Anglo-Burgundians from 1425-1428” (Wilson and Margolis 2004:486). The villagers, with Joan and her siblings among them, fled to nearby areas of safety.

*The Life of Joan of Arc*

Jehanne Romée was born in either 1412 or 1413 in Domrémy, which now lies near the borders of France and Germany. Her father, Jacques d’Arc, was the mayor of the village and provided a comfortable life for a peasant family. Her mother was Isabelle Romée. She cared for Joan, three sons and another daughter. It was Isabelle who tutored Joan in the formalities of Catholicism and some local pagan lore, as well as the chores of a household and small farm (Wilson and Margolis 2004:485). Villagers testified that Joan
was a pleasant girl and well behaved. She was religious and often attended confession and local masses (Pernoud 1994:16-19).

When Joan began to hear the voices, they seemed to come from the right, which was the direction of the village church. A brilliant white light accompanied them. At first Joan was frightened yet elated. As the voices spoke to her in the peace of her parents’ lovely garden, she believed them to be of God. Nevertheless, the girl told no one about them, not even her mother (Brooks 1990:24). The voices eventually moved her to participate in the third phase of The Hundred Year’s War that determined the fate of France.

Joan had not doubt that the English had to go. Indeed, one wonders how a seventeen-year-old girl could have understood the convoluted politics of the time. One also wonders at the record number of military victories she achieved in only four month’s time and with no military training. Her victory at the siege of Orleans (May 1429) was a tactical success that recreated the morale of French troops. Her victory at Patay (June 18, 1429) resulted in a minor reversal of Agincourt with little loss of life for the French, but English casualties were high. According to Bonnie Wheeler, the “Maid of Orleans” had an “uncanny understanding of artillery tactics, something it had always taken older commanders quite a while to learn. And this on the part of someone distressed by bloodshed!” (Wheeler 2002:28). She showed incredible daring when she went far behind English lines in order to have Charles crowned as king of France in Reims (July 17, 1429). Had the dauphin not betrayed her plan, Paris would have been taken in August of the same summer.
Joan’s determined efforts to follow the instructions of her voices might appear self-fulfilling except that Joan’s ego never seemed involved. Her ambitions were not for herself; instead, she struggled to complete the assignments her voices set before her. Her self-actualizing capacity seemed based upon her faith in those voices, rather than a sense that she was a warrior. Her strange way of knowing just how to win a battle, her refusal to harm anyone, her survival of several wounds, and her knowledge of where to find the reputed sword of Charles Martel, which she carried into battle, caused many to think of her as either divinely guided or, (particularly by the English), a witch. Her capture on May 23, 1430, resulted in the determined efforts of the English faction to have her tried for witchcraft; for, as they argued, only a witch could be a woman and achieve the feats Joan had managed (Brooks 1990:67,110).

The visions are of particular interest because of the prophetic nature of their revelations. They were specific and unusually accurate. She knew that Robert de Baudricourt would provide her with horses and men although she had never met him. Joan insisted that she must complete all that her voices commanded within just over a year. She was captured thirteen months after her initial military efforts began. Joan sent a horseman to find the sword of Sainte-Catherine-de-Fierbois. Unknown to others, the sword was found buried behind the chapel altar. It was believed to have belonged to the French hero, Charles Martel (Pernoud1998:225). Joan foretold her first wound a month in advance and it was recorded three weeks before an arrow pierced her chest as she had predicted. The peasant girl insisted she would see to the coronation of Charles at Rheims, and despite the fact it was behind enemy lines, the goal was successfully achieved. Joan’s battle plans and prophesies were all fulfilled with the exception of the capture of Paris.
which was thwarted by command of the dauphin. Joan prophesied that as a result of this delay, Paris would fall to the French forces within seven years. The city was theirs within five years. Although she hoped to be rescued, she foretold her martyrdom three months in advance.

From the beginning of her captivity rules for prisoners were ignored. Joan should have been ransomed as a war trophy. She was not. Since this was to be an ecclesiastical court, she should have been placed in a woman’s prison for heretics and guarded by nuns. However, after having once again been examined to prove her virginity, Joan was placed in prison, guarded by men, and held in chains there and treated as a prisoner of war (Pernoud 1998:105). At her first public hearing, Joan had no lawyers to defend her, which by custom, should have been done. Instead, she faced forty-four scholars and theologians from the University of Paris and Bologna. Daniel Hobbins notes that “131 theologians, canon lawyers, clergymen, and abbots participated” (Hobbins 2005:4) in the interrogations over the course of the trial. The famous Bishop of Beauvais, Pierre Cauchon, headed the trial and served as her inquisitor (Pernoud 1998:93, 109).

Karen Sullivan (1996) has made a detailed study of the interrogation transcripts that were created during her trial sessions which began on January 9, 1431, in Rouen. These transcripts are of particular interest for this study because they illustrate a certain progress in Joan’s description of the voices. Individuals, who rode and fought with Joan, insisted she never referred to her “saints.” They testified that she always said “God” or “the Lord” commanded her (Sullivan 1996:91). However, during her trial the situation changed dramatically. Joan was repeatedly compelled to identify her voices. Who were they? What were they? Who came to her first, second? When did they come? Where did
they come from? (Sullivan 1996:99) Joan resisted being cornered in this way. Yet, Sullivan documents the alterations in Joan’s witness over a period of days, during which she underwent grueling examination.

The court insisted that Joan take an oath to answer all their questions and to tell the truth. At first Joan would not even take their oath because she did not want to chance saying something other than what was given her by her voices. She, like Marguerite Porete, refused, insisting that she could only answer questions that would not offend her voices. This is typical of mystics who insist their highest obligation is obedience to their inner directives. Joan agreed to answer questions that were answerable like those about her family and events she had witnessed. That was not good enough. On the second day of the trial she was again pressured to take the oath. Her response was typical of Joan, “I swore yesterday; that should be quite enough. You overburden me” (Jewkes and Landfield1964:6). On the same day, she still only mentioned her voices and their comforting effect upon her. She did not identify them as angels, saints, or God, as the court insisted they must be.

It was not until the fourth day of interrogation that Joan identified the voices as those of St. Michael who was the patron warrior saint of France, St. Catherine of Alexandria (a very popular saint in the Middle Ages best known for her powerful arguments against the priests of paganism and for virgin martyrdom), and St. Margaret of Antioch, another popular medieval saint who was also revered as a brilliant virgin and reputed to have had great power against demons (Sullivan 1996:103). After six days of intense questioning, Joan admitted that she saw them. She described them as wearing beautiful crowns and said they were glorious; thus, they fit into the cognitive contexts
expected by the clerks. Perhaps Joan hoped to achieve some surcease from the constant questions on this matter, but in order to do so she contradicted her earlier statements (Sullivan 1996:102). By the eleventh day of interrogation, St. Gabriel had been added to the list of visitors who she said had been sent by the Lord to comfort her and give her counsel (Sullivan 1996:104).

As Joan neared execution, her hopes for deliverance began to fade, as did her faith in her voices; she believed that at one time they seemed to indicate she would be “saved.” By the end of her trial, she too became “objective” and reified her voices; they had become identifiable “things” (Sullivan 1999:146). Moreover, on May 9, 1431, Joan was threatened with torture and death at the stake, the latter being her greatest fear. Brought out before the public, she declared that she had been deceived and had deceived others. She asked the crowd to forgive her for her crimes (Sullivan 1999:147). A letter of abjuration was read which she evidently signed although unable to read. Joan agreed to wear women’s clothing but within five days recanted, returned to men’s attire, and declared she had betrayed her voices and was now ready to face the flames. On May 27, she was tried again, this time as a relapsed heretic. When asked why she had changed her position, she admitted that she hoped to be sent to a woman’s prison and taken out of irons, both promises her jailors had not kept. Given her tears and disheveled appearance, some have wondered if she was assaulted while wearing women’s clothes (Pernoud 1994:220). Furthermore, she insisted she had not been true to her voices when she gave way to pressure on the public scaffold. According to the court records, Joan argued that she did not know or understand what was in the cédule of abjuration and that she acted from her fears of death.
Before Thursday my voices had told me what I was going to do that day, and what I then did. My voices told me, when I was on the scaffold and the tribune before the people, that I should reply boldly to that preacher who was then preaching. He was a false preacher and he said I had done many things which I have not done. If I said that God had not sent me, I should damn myself; it is true that God sent me. My voices have since told me that I did a great injury in confessing that I had not done well in what I had done. All that I said and revoked that Thursday, I did only because of fear of the fire (Pernoud 1994:221).

On the following Wednesday, May 30, 1431, Joan was burned at the stake in Rouen’s market place. Her last words were said to have been, “Jesus, Jesus.” Once assured she was dead, the wood around her charred body was pulled back and she was left for all to see. Then, because the English feared her as a witch, her body was reburned and her ashes thrown in the river Seine (Brooks 1990:148).

_Teresa of Avila_

Teresa of Avila is another one of Christendom’s most famous and revered saints; yet, with the exception of her spirituality, Teresa’s life could not have been more different from Joan of Arc’s. The reformer’s very active life spanned the years from 1515 to 1582, and incorporated the best and worst aspects of sixteenth century female mysticism. Known also as Teresa of Jesus, she was born into a family of great wealth and influence, yet she found her life caught up in the religious turmoil and dangers of the cultural revolution that began in 1492 with the discovery of the New World, the unification efforts of Spain’s victorious King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I, and the Catholic Church’s response to the heretical movements of the Protestant Reformation.
Political Background

Avila was a walled city located to the northwest of Madrid. It played a vital role as a fortress during the wars between the Moors and the Christians. Avila continued to be an important site when, in 1492, the victorious King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I called for the unification of all Spain as one Christian nation. The Spanish Inquisition was created to enforce the state’s policy and oversee the development of a homogeneous religious community (Ruiz 1996:32-33). Jews and Muslims were forced to convert or leave. Jews, in particular, were given three months to collect their things and get out. Tens of thousands did so. Those who stayed and converted were known as conversos or “New Christians” and were never wholly trusted by the “Old Christians,” who believed the Jews continued to practice their religion in secret. The Muslims, called Moriscos, were also forced to convert to Christianity or leave. They were officially expelled about 100 years later.

It might be expected that all the religious persecution and danger involved with religious faith would have caused many individuals to forsake any belief at all, but this was not the case. Stephen Haliczer (2002) describes the social and psychological climate in which mysticism thrived in Europe during the Renaissance, now referred to as the “early modern period.” The revival of mysticism was based upon the hope for certitude in very uncertain times. “But nowhere in Europe did mysticism come to play such a dominant role as in Spain...where it took on the character of almost a mass movement, at least among the urban middle and upper classes” (Haliczer 2002:8). The growing mystical movement encouraged literate individuals to read the Bible for themselves and
this resulted in more independent thought and resistance to established religious
authority.

Having dealt with the Jews and Moslems, the church next sought to bring popular
religious beliefs and behaviors under control. To that end the Inquisition gathered up
vernacular Bibles and citizens were left with variations of biblical stories related in
theatricals, many of which depicted Jews as the villains. In the absence of Bibles, the cult
of the saints rose to renewed prominence among the laity. Hagiographies were published
and were very popular with the literate members of the upper and middle classes
(Haliczer 2002:30-31). Children had always been raised on stories of saints and martyrs,
but now images of cult figures were everywhere present, and relics were highly valued.
As McNamara noted, the reverence for saints and martyrs created the inspirational hero
tales upon which youthful ambitions thrived (1992:12).

As a result of this enthusiasm for saints and martyrs, mystic-would-be-saints
began to emerge from among the populace. Many were arrested because the Inquisitors
were on the lookout for false pretenders. It is notable that “70 percent of the approved
women mystics came of aristocratic families” (Haliczer 2002:105) while the “pretenders”
were found among the peasants and urban artisan classes. Religious enthusiasm was
exciting, but it was also dangerous. Accusations of false pretences were attached to the
search for heretics and the ever present concern that witches and their craft be obliterated
from society. This was the era of the Malleus Maleficarum, a book whose popularity was
rivaled only by the Bible itself. Wisdom became the better part of valor, and survivors
played the spiritual game with social, political, and economic skill.
The Life and Works of Teresa of Avila

Ruiz notes that the *conversos* who faired the best were those who were wealthy and those who married into aristocratic “Old Christian” families. Teresa’s grandfather and father were such *conversos*. Exceedingly wealthy, Teresa’s father, “purchased his way to acceptance and respectability” (Commire and Klezer 2002:288). He managed to go to court where he “bought” the title of *hidalgo* and thus acquired the honorific of “Don” to his name. Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda married twice into “Old Christian” families, each time enriching his social position. When his first wife died, Alonso chose Beatriz de Ahumada to be his second wife. Teresa remembered the young Beatriz as almost constantly bedridden and pregnant, unhappy, and totally submissive to her husband’s will. Her mother’s early death and the dominating nature of her father had a profound effect upon Teresa and her eventual decision to enter the convent.

As related in chapter 3 of this dissertation, at the age of seven, Teresa and her favorite bother, Rodrigo, ran away from home to seek martyrdom at the hands of the Moors. This devotion to sainthood waned during Teresa’s adolescent and teen years. Her father’s financial and political skills provided his children with wealth and prestige. Only the death of her mother when she was thirteen years old saddened Teresa’s youth. Her father’s two marriages left her with nine siblings and many cousins. She was happy in her associations and proved to be a delightfully spirited and attractive young woman. Perhaps she was too charming, for at the age of sixteen she was thought to be involved in a romance (Commire and Klezer 2002:288). As a result, in 1536, Teresa was sent to live in the Augustinian Convent of St. Mary of Grace, Avila, where she boarded for eighteen months. Teresa returned home, but difficulties remained. She was eighteen years old and
beyond a marriageable age. Also there was the suggestion of a romance, however innocent, and that combined with her Jewish roots, made it very difficult to procure a husband for her. After months of fretting over her fear of disappointing her father and her fear of marrying a man she didn’t want, Teresa settled for life in a nunnery (du Boulay 1991:16-17).

At the age of twenty-one, Teresa decided to join a friend at the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila. In 1536 she “took the habit” as a novice (Peers vol.1: xxvii). This convent was not wealthy and housed about 100 to 180 women, only a few of whom had taken vows as nuns. It was more austere than the homes most of the women had known, but “it was a loosely run community” (Commire and Klezer 2000 vol. 15:289) and, because many of the women were from wealthy families, ample dowries paid for the women’s maintenance. This was the era before strict enclosure was enforced, so most of these women took no vows of poverty. They maintained their chattels, private incomes, and some of the simpler luxuries of life. Many of the women lived in comfortable apartments with their servants, pets, and slaves. Although they wore habits made of coarse fabric, they could keep their jewels, sashes, and gifts (du Boulay 2004: 16-19). They could also enjoy entertainments and receive visitors in the parlor (Medwick1999:35). The nuns were fairly free to come and go as they wished, and often returned home for months at a time, particularly if they became ill or if there were family emergencies.

The nuns attended chapel services, choir, lectures, and made their confessions regularly. Some physical rigors were demanded of the women. They were expected to eat a simple diet and fast regularly, scourge themselves with nettles or knotted cords three
times a week as penance, and maintain appropriate decorum (du Boulay 2004:16-19).

According to Teresa’s accounts, she adapted well and found comfort in the life-style. She did object to the social discrimination between the wealthiest women and those with less, perhaps because she always carried the knowledge of her own converso background within her. Nevertheless, Teresa lived comfortably in the convent for twenty years, a long period that was interrupted only by occasional severe illness and a growing sense that something was missing in her spiritual life.

In 1539, her uncle gave her a copy of the Abecedario espiritual (Spiritual Alphabet) which was written by Francis of Osuna in 1527 (Commire and Klezer 2002:290). This book called for spiritual renewal within the church itself through intense personal contemplation. Teresa realized this was the element missing in her life. Osuna was an advocate of the new “Devotio Moderna” which evolved from Christian humanism and “urged private prayer with the purpose of achieving a mystical union between the individual worshiper and God” (Commire and Klezer 2002:290).

Teresa began to study the classics in religious literature but found it difficult to discuss her concerns with others at La Encarnación. By the time she was in her early forties, she began to hear “interior voices and to see certain visions and experience revelations” (Peers 2002: xxvii). When she spoke of these things to her confessors they were unreceptive. For five years her spiritual advisors at La Encarnación thought the voices were probably of satanic origin. Finally, Teresa was sent to new confessors, Jesuits, who deemed her experiences valid (Commire and Klezer 2002:290). With this assurance, Teresa’s spiritual raptures increased until she underwent her most dramatic mystical experience in 1559. This was the famous “transverberation of her heart” wherein
she felt her heart to have been pierced through and through by an angel’s flaming golden spear. Teresa wrote that she experienced pain so severe she was forced to moan, and yet felt such intense love of God that she never wanted it to end (Medwick 1999:56-57). Teresa also believed this experience was unlike her previous “intellectual visions” of angels, moments when she felt the presence of angels, but did not actually see them (Medwick 1999:57). This was more intense, more real, and, as with a true “conversion” or “peak-experience,” Teresa’s life changed.

During the next three years, Teresa came to believe that she was being called by God to reform the Carmelite order and contribute to the Catholic Counter Reformation that was the church’s response to growing Protestantism. In 1562, she and four women created their first convent at St. Joseph’s in Avila. They objected to the lax atmosphere at La Encarnación and, under Teresa’s leadership, worked to restore the discipline found in the original Carmelite organization. First, they established their convent without any endowments or rich patrons. They survived as mendicants and by their own efforts. Following some of the ideals in the Franciscan orders, Teresa and her nuns began wearing sandals without stockings as a symbol of their humility; it was for this reason they were called “Discalced (barefoot) Carmelites” (Commire and Klezer, 2002:291). The sisters in this group took care of their own needs and refused to have servants or slaves. They abjured any form of social elitism, and the only requirement for membership was spiritual aptitude and the ability to sustain their rigorous life-style. Over the years, Teresa encouraged enclosure for her nuns, although she herself was too busily engaged in reform and building to practice a cloistered life. In April of 1567, the Carmelite General, P. Rubeco (Rossi), authorized Teresa to found more monasteries. Teresa also had the
support of the Pope and King Philip II of Spain. She needed their endorsement because she faced opposition from civic leaders who did not want mendicant females on the streets, and religious conservatives who considered her to be too “reformist” or “protestant” for their tastes. As a reformer and a woman, she was constantly under suspicion of heresy or demonic visions. Yet Teresa, now called Teresa of Jesus, learned to work with men of power and influence and to side-step the watchful concerns of the Inquisitorial leaders. She was very pragmatic and despite, or because of, all her hours in prayer, Teresa managed to achieve her goals not withstanding physical illness, fatigue, and the constant travel required to build houses for, and supervise, the women and projects under her direction. Hers is another example of a female mystic whose determination to fulfill a sense of calling enabled her to have much success not only in her reform efforts, but also in raising the funds for the convents she brought into being. By the time Teresa died at the age of sixty-seven, she established sixteen Discalced Monasteries and helped St. John of the Cross establish similar reforms in the thirteen houses he founded.

Leona English (1996) studied Teresa’s mentoring relationships with men like St. John of the Cross, Peter of Alcantara, and Jeronimo Gratian. English concluded that the church’s program of spiritual direction between clerics and nuns worked well when both parties admired and understood each other, and when they both listened to and profited by the other’s counsel (English 1996:2). Patricia Ranft (2000) also studied the special relationships between women religious, their confessors, and their spiritual directors. She found that when the women participated in the choice of their directors, the relationships proved particularly effective. Teresa of Jesus believed it required special men to
understand female spirituality, and that a poor confessor could create great difficulties. This was based upon her own experience when she had been under such suspicion during her early years as a mystic. If the more mature Teresa did not find the confessor to be worthy in her estimation, she just quietly ignored him. Otherwise, she worked very well with men in and out of church circles (Ranft 2000:118).

During the first years of Teresa’s mystical endeavors, her skeptical spiritual directors required her to write an account of her life and revelations designed to ascertain the origins of her visions. She completed the first draft of the Life in 1562, the same year she moved to St. Joseph. Still under suspicion, she was asked to enlarge upon the autobiography, and was able to complete the Libro de su vida by 1565. She then began writing her second book, the Way of Perfection (El camino de la perfección). This work was a manual for spiritual development and the evolving discipline of the new order. Teresa of Jesus continued to write even as she traveled throughout much of Spain to supervise and construct new convents. Teresa began work on the Interior Castle in June of 1577 and completed it in November of the same year (Peers 2002: xxviii-xxxvi). Also known as Las moradas, it is considered her finest explanation of the methods she used to develop spirituality through “disciplined prayer” (Commire and Klezer 2002:291).

Meanwhile, Teresa began writing the Libro de las fundaciones (Book of Foundations) in 1573. She continued working on this account of the discalced reform’s history until shortly before her death in 1582 (Commire and Klezer 2002:291).

Despite her many accomplishments and her very pragmatic abilities for dealing with great difficulties and aggravations, Teresa of Jesus is among those female religious who are regularly accused of being neurotic or hysterical. She was indeed plagued by
many years of illness. Modern physicians and psychologists have suggested the most troubling period of her life left her paralyzed for more than three years, and affected her health and strength for many years thereafter. Some have believed she also fought bouts of malaria, or was consumptive. Physicians who knew her thought the nun had heart disease. She did suffer pain all over her body, which may have been due to the “holy anorexia” she practiced when ill and still wanted to take communion (Medwick 1999:30-33). Some medical practitioners now suggest she may have had a thyroid problem; they also suggest that she may have died of uterine cancer. Other modern healers have come to the conclusion that her problems were psychosomatic. Whatever the cause, nothing kept Teresa of Avila from fulfilling her goals and serving her God to the best of her ability.

Perhaps her sense of humor was Teresa’s saving grace. Once when a man commented on her pretty foot, her response was, “take a good look - this is the last time you’ll ever see it” (Medwick 1999: xii). Another aspect of her personality that delighted those around her was her pragmatic and sensible approach to much of life. For example, she loved good food and was noted for saying “there is a time for penance and a time for partridge” (Medwick 1999: xii). She was often irritated, moody, and her visionary writings seemed too erotic for some, particularly men. Yet women loved her and men worked successfully with her to produce necessary changes in the religion they served. Her influence was felt throughout Spain and spread to France and other countries in Europe as well as in the New World. Her writings were and are so highly esteemed by Catholics that she was the first woman awarded the title of Doctor of the Church in 1970.

According to witnesses, many manifestations of sainthood occurred at Teresa’s death in 1582. It is said a light filled the room, a dove flew up from the bedside, and a
leafless tree nearby burst into bloom (Medwick 1999:3). Teresa was buried immediately but exhumed shortly thereafter in order to ascertain if she really was a saint. Her body was raised and found to be sweet smelling; this was the “odor of sanctity.” Her body was then taken in to a bed for examination and portions thereof were removed for relics. According to Cathleen Medwick (1993), Teresa’s left hand was sawed off and taken to Alba (although the man who performed these acts kept one of her little fingers for himself). Teresa’s remains were exhumed on five occasions, “and always a piece or two were spirited away – a foot, an eye, a collarbone. Her damaged heart...is displayed in an ornate reliquary case at Alba. Her right foot and upper jaw are in Rome. Other pieces of her flesh migrated to Brussels, Paris, and Mexico. General Francisco Franco kept her left hand beside him until his death” (Medwick 1999:4-5).

_Madame Jeanne Marie Bouvieres de la Mothe Guyon_

The final exemplar of female mysticism and the history of that religious practice in this dissertation is Madame Jeanne Guyon who was born in 1648 and died in 1717. Guyon was similar to Teresa of Jesus in that she came from a wealthy and aristocratic background. She was educated in convents and often contemplated becoming a nun. Guyon experienced the hardships of imprisonment as did Joan of Arc. Although Jeanne Guyon dedicated her life to her understanding of “democratic spirituality,” unlike Joan and Teresa, she was not canonized as a saint. Indeed, this very influential mystic was condemned by both the church and the state of France and ended her life in exile from Paris and her associations there. Guyon’s history can only be understood in the light of seventeenth century France, and the dynamics of that era.
The Seventeenth Century French Milieu

During the seventeenth century, powerful changes occurred in numerous aspects of European life. Science was developing rapidly. Industrial capitalism was expanding and the need for labor encouraged the institution of slavery in various forms. Trade between the European colonies and other nations became intercontinental. The middle class was growing rapidly. Increasing wealth and leisure time made reading and literacy possible for many hundreds of people. Literacy resulted in a freer flow of ideas which, in turn, threatened the elitist social structure. Therefore, "royal absolutism became the political order of the day" (Witt et. al.1989 vol. 2:129) and its ultimate exponent was King Louis XIV (1638-1715) of France.

In 1685, this powerful ruler revoked the Edict of Nantes which had been in effect since 1598. The edict granted religious freedom to all the citizen of France. However, in the late seventeenth century, King Louis insisted upon complete conformity in religion. This was an age of fully developed monarchy, and the connections between church and state maintained their bonds of wealth and power. As a result, both religious elites and European states continued to seize upon accusations of heresy and witchcraft as convenient ploys in the hunt for, and elimination of, their opponents. Anyone even remotely connected with Protestantism or heretical beliefs of any sort fell under the suspicion of church and state.

Reinforced by the Malleus Maleficarum, which was written just a few decades after the Rehabilitation Trial of Joan of Arc, the Inquisitional investigations for witchcraft and heresy continued throughout Teresa of Jesus' lifetime and peaked in the seventeenth century, which was the period during which Madame Jeanne Guyon risked everything for
her mystic beliefs. Both men and women experienced the constant fear of accusation, but far more women than men suffered at the hands of those fighting for complete conformity in the Church. The same misogynistic attitudes pervaded the countries professing the new Protestantism. The *querelle des femmes* continued to “denigrate women” (Bridenthal, et al 1976:195) even as the “modern age” of the seventeenth century steadily evolved into the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

René Descartes (1590-1650), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and John Locke (1632-1704) participated in and influenced the philosophical debates that would change the world in less than a century. During the same period, the practice of medicine became solidly fixed in the male establishment. The combination of social change, Cartesian philosophy, the growing influence of scientific inquiry, as well as the dogmatic demands of both church and state for increased conformity to authority, eventually dealt a brutal blow to the influence of mysticism and to the prestige of female mystics in particular. This was especially true in France. Whereas the center of mystic influence had been in Germany and northern Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and in Spain during the sixteenth century, it was centered in France during the seventeenth century (Bruneau 1998:28). However, during the last few decades of that era, scientists and theologians severed mysticism from the main stream of society and created a new paradigm wherein female mystics in particular were perceived to suffer from mental illness (Bruneau 1998:29-32).

Mystics did not softly fade away into the cells of convents and monasteries. Powerful theorists like Madame Jeanne Guyon defended “negative” or “apophatic” mysticism. As described in chapter 1, it is a method of meditation and prayer based upon
silencing the mind and ego in order to feel the presence of God, receive inspiration, and
possibly achieve union with the divine. Guyon and her associates argued that these
principles had been part of Christian philosophy since the earliest days of the faith.
Nevertheless, the concept was given a new name by its opponents; now it was called
“Quietism” and judged heretical by the powerful in both Church and state. Referred to as
the “Quietist Affair,” its adherents were condemned in 1687 by Pope Innocent XI. As a
result, its major proponents were arrested, tried, and met various fates, none of them
pleasant. Spain’s Miguel de Molinos (c. 1628-1697) was condemned as a heretic and died
in prison despite having made a public confession of his “mistakes.” Father Père François
La Combe was imprisoned in the Bastille in 1687, and remained in various prisons until
his death twenty-seven years later. François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénélon (1651-
1715) was banished to Cambrai because he defended principles of Quietism. There he
served as Archbishop, having risked and lost a far more brilliant career in Paris. The most
famous proponent of this mysticism was Madame Jeanne Guyon. Although she always
perceived herself as a devout Catholic, she too spent years of her life in prison because
she refused to conform her personal spirituality to the demands of those in power
(Bruneau 1998).

Personal Background

Madame Jeanne Marie Bouvieres de la Mothe Guyon was born in 1648. Her birth
was premature and she was not expected to live. As a toddler, she was small and sickly.
Her very wealthy parents sent her to a convent at the age of two and a half. Throughout
her youth and childhood she was shunted from one convent to another. Given this
environment, she felt herself drawn to the life of a nun, and yet, as she approached
adolescence, Guyon found that she enjoyed many social pleasures. She did not feel her mother or father cared about her until she was becoming an attractive, marriageable teenager, at which point her parents brought her home to prepare her for Parisian elite society. Thereafter, her relationship with her mother and father improved considerably. Guyon later wrote that she enjoyed the worldly pursuits her family introduced to her life. She knew she was beautiful and admitted to suffering from vanity, lying, and love of material things. Guyon spent the early decades of her life engaged in a struggle between the two desires, one for a spiritual life, the other for worldly pleasures and attention.

Guyon had an older half-brother who despised her and on one occasion nearly killed Guyon when they were children. As an adult he became the influential priest, Father Dominique La Mothe of Paris. (Commire and Klezer 2002 vol. 6:650). An ambitious man, he sought the associations of the Archbishop of Paris and King Louis XIV. Over the years, Father La Mothe’s very wealthy sister proved to be an embarrassment to him. He abhorred her mysticism and was infuriated because she was giving her wealth away outside the family or his domain in the church. As a result he helped ruin her financially (to his benefit), and assisted those who imprisoned her (Coslet 1995:109).

In a sense, her series of confinements began with her marriage. Her husband had been chosen by her father. The man, Jacques Guyon, was extremely wealthy and also thirty-eight years old. His bride was only fifteen years old and had never seen him until three days before the wedding. The young beauty did not love him, yet she obeyed her parents’ authority, married and bore her husband five children, two of whom died in infancy. To make matters more difficult, her mother-in-law lived with them and totally
dominated Guyon’s every move. Evidently the young woman could do nothing to please her husband or his mother. According to her autobiography, she endured continual verbal abuse not only from her in-laws, but household servants as well. Guyon was determined to endure the situation silently and with the obedience and humility she had learned in the convent schools. When alone, she focused on her own “interior occupation,” this being the effort to maintain her inner composure and peace of mind (Kahley 2005:55).

At the age of twenty, Jeanne Guyon experienced a religious conversion. She had been speaking to a Franciscan friar and told him that she was having great difficulties trying to become closer to God. He told her, “Your efforts have been unsuccessful, Madame, because you seek outside what you have within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will find him there” (Commire and Klezer 2002 vol. 6:652). That same evening she experienced such joy that she remained awake all night in what sounds like a state of ecstasy. This event appears to be consistent with a “conversion” or “peak-experience” because from that time on, Guyon became devoted to the goal of living her life in the service of God and seeking a state of peace and joy permanently.

The young wife’s husband and mother-in-law disapproved of her newfound religiosity. She was required to keep up the appearance of normalcy and remain well dressed. But she would not do her hair in the fashions of the time, nor would she socialize. Her personality changed. She became more gentle, kind, humble, and modest. Guyon actively participated in helping the sick and impoverished. People noticed the change, but only her family saw the extremes her devotion took, namely the ascetic austerities practiced by medieval female saints of earlier centuries, techniques which Guyon learned from the nuns at St. Cyr’s Convent (Coslet1984:62).
Jeanne Guyon resolved to rid herself of all attachments and submit herself only to the will of God. First, she stopped all worldly “diversions” or any kind of unprofitable activity. Second, she began a program of “rigorous bodily mortification” in order to overcome all her sensory addictions. According to Commire and Klezer, (2002:652) her program included self-flagellation to the point of bleeding, wearing corsets with nails and thorns tucked in them, and sleep deprivation. They also note that Guyon was determined to bring her appetite for good food under control. To that end, she kept bitter herbs in her mouth and also “mixed her food with a purgative.” This program to break her additions to normative patterns of comfort and pleasure lasted for nearly a year, at which time she felt she had succeeded in her goal and could stop. Nevertheless, she was pleased when her beauty was compromised by a severe episode of smallpox. She was also known to leave bad teeth in her mouth and extract healthy ones in order to transcend the pain. On one occasion, she “poured molten lead on my naked flesh, but it did not cause any pain, because it flowed off and did not stick” (Commire and Klezer 2002:652). The goal in all this was to overcome the addictions of the flesh and transcend the natural inclinations of the “will.”

When she was twenty-eight years old, Jeanne Guyon became a very wealthy widow with three surviving children. Guyon refused to remarry, freed herself of her mother-in-law (as much as possible), and pledged herself to live the remainder of her life as a “bride of Christ.” She chose to do this outside the claustration system of the convents (Upham 1984:94-95). Guyon proceeded to teach others the meditative techniques that had sustained her, attempted missionary work among Protestants near Geneva, gave away large sums of her wealth, thereby offending her brother. She also began writing about the
form of mysticism that was coming under attack as "Quietism," although she insisted she had never heard the term.

Despite the dangers, Guyon wrote, taught, and distributed reading materials, including Bibles, to the many that came to her for instruction. Her fame was spreading and so was her reputation as an audacious woman who wrote about religion outside the conventual setting; she even wrote her own interpretations of scriptures, an act that had been forbidden to women for centuries. In all, Guyon's writings amount to about forty volumes and another five volumes of her correspondence is said to survive. (Commire and Klezer 2002:653). She is most noted for her books, *Les Torrents spirituels* (1682), *Moyen court et tres facile pour l'oraison* (1685), *Petit abrege de la voie et de la reunion de l'ame a Dieu* (1689), *Commentaire au Cantique des cantiques de Salomon* (1688), *Justifications* (1694), *Commentaire sur Livre de Job* (1714), and her autobiography, *Vie de Madame J.M.B. de la Mothe Guyon* (1682-1709).

Notwithstanding Jeanne Guyon's claims that she had never deviated from the Church, she was first arrested in 1688 and sent to the Convent of the Visitation where she spent eight months in solitary confinement. Guyon recanted nothing and was removed from prison to prison. In 1696 she was taken to Vaugirard near Paris where she stayed for two years. In 1698 she was moved to solitary confinement in the Bastille where she stayed for a little over four years. Most people died quickly in this infamous prison. Inmates had no heat, just one blanket, and only bread and water on which to live. Despite the hardships of life there and the brutalities of interrogations, Guyon continued to defend herself and her beliefs. Her maid, Mademoiselle La Gautiere, accompanied
Jeanne into the prison. Mademoiselle La Gautiere died in the Bastille within a year. (Coslet 1995:209)

Finally, the political situation lightened somewhat. Guyon’s friends at court secured a pardon for her in 1703. She was paroled on the condition that she never write or preach again. She was exiled to the city of Blois and placed in the custody of her son, Armand Jacques. This amounted to banishment for life. Her health was broken and she was old, yet she lived and wrote for another fourteen years. In fact, her captivity in the Bastille had made Guyon famous throughout Europe. A constant stream of visitors sought her out and she corresponded with many of the great minds of Europe. Jeanne Guyon died in 1717 reportedly in a state of peace.

Guyon’s influence transcended her death. Her books and correspondence were translated into several languages and continued to be shared in religious circles though the friendships she had made during the last fourteen years of her life. Those associations included individuals from the Netherlands, Scotland, Switzerland, Germany and England. These men and women actually comprised an international spiritual network (Bruneau 1998:146-149, 156-159). Jacobite friends introduced her work to John Wesley who became the founder of the Methodist Church. Apophatic mysticism was transformed and morphed into Lutheran “Pietism” and then into German and European Romanticism. Aspects of Guyon’s influence are found in the works of philosophers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard.

There were three common elements Guyon’s approach. They were (1) tolerance, (2) antiauthoritarianism, and (3) the “democratization of the pursuit of happiness” (Bruneau 1998:159). Guyon insisted that any individual could access a relationship with
God by means of a proper method of prayer, emptying the mind, and dedicating oneself to the work of the divine. In other words, this was the democratization of mysticism. Access to the ultimate spiritual experience was no longer reserved for elite monks and nuns. Scriptures were opened for interpretation by individuals, male and female, not just ecclesiastical authorities. These concepts were what threatened the Church officials during the Quietist Affair. They were similar to the concerns that the church had with the theology of Marguerite Porete and the Beguines.

Conclusions

Saints, martyrs, and mystics, no matter how revered, always honor the inner voice of conscience. Despite its revered place in the history of Christianity, the opponents of this manner of worship believed that mystic practice was simply wrong when practiced outside the control of the Church. The highest loyalty of a mystic is to an inner directive and this makes the control of such independent individuals extremely difficult. It was assumed that masses of mystics would disrupt the social order as well as the financial well-being of the established organizations. Yet Bruneau argues that when the Catholic Church condemned Quietism, “Catholicism evacuated its own mystical tradition in the seventeenth century...relegating it to monastic institutions, and especially to female cloisters” (Bruneau 1998:145-146). She asserts that “Historians agree that the Quietist Affair explicitly put on trial the precepts of Western mysticism” (Bruneau 1998:167).

Thereafter, individuals seeking a deeper religious experience than organized ritual could provide would look to Protestantism, which, ironically, eventually created its own forms of authoritarianism. Major lines of ideological demarcation were established by
rulers in the seventeenth century. It was during this same century, that the Church condemned Galileo in 1633, and, according to Bruneau, “declared a divorce between scientific and philosophical enquiries on the one hand and Christian ideology on the other” (Bruneau 1998:147). This was a pivotal moment in European history, and the widow, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon, played a very influential role in the fate of mysticism.

So it was that the era of powerful female mystics slowly abated. Although there have been outstanding and courageous nuns during the past few centuries, the tradition of powerful abbesses and nuns who spoke through their visions as prophetesses of God waned as did the history of female mysticism. The social position of power afforded the great female mystics evaporated as the modern age evolved. Strict claustration continued to be enforced in France until outlawed by the decrees of Napoleon (Evangelisti 2007:231-233).
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSIONS

"There is, at present, a dispute among philosophers of religion as to whether all 'mystical experience' is fundamentally and ultimately the same or is shaped in important ways by one's culture and language. There does not seem to be much controversy...that this state, whatever it is, represents an altered state of consciousness." (Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach. The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics. New York: Routledge Publishers, 2005), 228, n 99).

This dissertation presented evidence of a pervasive cultural traditional of heroic asceticism that existed in Christian mysticism for several thousand years. This belief system led many individuals to seek a state of union with God. As mystics, men and women claimed to have overwhelming experiences with the divine that led them to seek the life-styles of saints and martyrs. Furthermore, women developed a form of female mysticism that was so rigorous it gained them access to power and influence because they were perceived to have overcome their feminine weaknesses.

The model of saintliness suggested by William James provided criteria whereby the "conversion" experiences of six female exemplars and the pragmatic results of their illuminating moments could be examined. Abraham Maslow also gathered information on hundreds of modern individuals who underwent "peak-experiences" or altered states of consciousness (ASCs). Both men found that these people were inspired to greater efforts of creativity and productivity by their experiences. At the same time, they consistently maintained that it was impossible to adequately describe their sensations. However ineffable the moment, these persons insisted the reality of the vision was

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undeniable and unforgettable. James and Maslow both argued that, whatever the
"hallucinations" may be, they are not necessarily signs of mental illness because this
form of experience creates a more loving individual who finds increased purpose in life.
The position that all individuals who are "sensitive" to ASCs are mentally ill is weakened
by the examples of productive men and women around the world who find their lives
altered for the better by their illuminating moments.

The women exemplars in this dissertation give evidence of exactly the criteria
postulated by James and Maslow. Hildegard of Bingen’s visions of light led her to
develop a theology of femininity, write music, produce works of art, and author several
encyclopedic books. Whatever Marguerite Porete’s spiritual experiences were, it appears
that they inspired her to write a handbook for those who sought to achieve unio mystica.
She gave her life rather than rescind that effort. Catherine of Siena not only followed the
most extreme ascetic fashions of her era, but also battled for peace in her land while
leading a group of followers, writing a book, and carrying on a voluminous
correspondence. Joan of Arc’s short life provided more evidence that an inspirational
form of visionary experience can lead one to amazing feats of energy and determination.
Teresa of Avila’s “peak-experience” was followed by other illuminating moments that
gave her the strength to found a reform movement, establish an entire conventual system,
and author several very influential books. Madame Jeanne Guyon’s “conversion”
experience changed her life’s direction. It led her to fight for the democratization of
mysticism, write forty volumes of mystical instruction, and survive years in the most
rigorous of prisons.
After studying the lives of these six women, as well as the history of medieval female mysticism, it is evident that there is a strong cultural element in mystical undertakings. However, enculturation alone does not explain the unique power of ASCs for those individuals who experience them. Therefore we are left with several questions. First, can the many forms of ASCs be placed in a simple organizational framework? Second, what factors play into the ASC experience as a whole? Third, does modern science help explain what was really being experienced by Hildegard and Catherine, Joan and Marguerite, Teresa and Jeanne Guyon?

It is the position of this dissertation that it is possible to shed more light on these “mysterious” phenomena in the hope of carrying the discussion beyond culture alone. Scholars in the fields of the anthropology of consciousness, medical anthropology, and neuroscience are developing new information on altered states of consciousness (ASCs). However, before examining those findings, it is helpful to use a model that illustrates the differences and cultural interconnectedness of altered states of consciousness as described not only by medieval female mystics, but also by mystics around the world.

A Holistic Model of Mystic Experience

As noted earlier in this dissertation, anthropology calls for a holistic approach to any investigation of the human experience. To that end a model is suggested here that may reify altered states of conscious within the constructs of anthropology. The Holistic Model of Mystic Experience (HMME) includes four elements that are critical to human life and religious expression. First, there must be an ecological environment that sustains human life, its nurture, its clothing, shelter, as well as the healing and harmful elements
As simplistic as this outline may appear, it is important to remember that religion interconnects with all aspects of a society. This includes the personal psychology of the individual as well as the cognitive associations enculturated within that person. There is a factor of interrelatedness that exists between a group’s language system, its economic and political systems, and its belief systems which are often founded upon the religious myths and symbols that form the values and meanings agreed upon by members and expressed through religious ritual and symbols. These form webs of interconnectedness or “structures of signification” as described by Clifford Geertz (1973). Gender roles are also strongly influenced by religious mythologies and religious traditions. In other words, religious belief systems are interconnected with all aspects of a society (Crapo 2003).

The actual expression of ASCs may be seen to fall into three broad categories. The foundational level as relates to mystical experience is termed the “exoteric” or physical realm of existence. The “esoteric” are the inner experiences of single individuals that are manifestations of altered states of consciousness. The final category is that of Unio mystica, or a sensation of being united with God or the Universe.

Figure 1. Three aspects of mystic experience.
The Exoteric Level of Experience

Figure 2. The exoteric or cultural/foundational level of mystic experience.

The Exoteric foundation of mystical experience is the level of enculturation that forms the cognitive understanding of individuals. This is the area of physical “reality.” The first face or side of the pyramid represents the ecological and economic base of the group. This is the level at which an individual learns how to survive and flourish within the physical environment. Perhaps one becomes a hunter, a fisher, a craftsman, a priest, or a king. At some level, one’s chosen occupation and contribution to the group is learned on this exoteric level. It is not learned in isolation from other elements of the social structure, which are all interconnected.

The second triangle on the face of the pyramid represents enculturation relative to the superstructure of society. At this level individuals are taught everything from the simple rules of social conformity to cosmology, the myths of gods and mortals, the values of society, and the standards of heroism. All members of a society receive this exoteric exposure. On occasion, moments of mass religious fervor, even altered states, may occur during large gatherings. Many members of any group are content with participation in religious activity at this level. However, there are individuals who seek a more
adventurous religious experience. This aspect of personality will be discussed in the section on esoteric phenomena.

The third triangle or side of the pyramid represents communication. Language and meaning are taught at the exoteric level. This component of the model is critical to communication, not only of facts, but of an individual's affect or emotional states. According to Richley H. Crapo, language is the “vehicle” whereby religion is transmitted from one generation to the next. He also points out that the structure and intent of words may change during transmission or over time (Crapo 2003:173). Spoken language is a universal based upon sounds, but a multitude of symbols and signs are also meaningful forms of communication. (Crapo 2003:83).

The last triangle represents the fourth side of the pyramid or the mind-body aspect of ASCs. It is critical to the experience of mystical phenomena in as much as they are received through the sensory system of the mind and body. There are various types of ASCs. Some are mild, some are powerful, but all are experienced by the body and the brain. Therefore, an individual's “sensitivity” or inclination toward mystical experiences lies somewhere on a continuum between few or no such ASCs, to frequent experiences of this type. The mind-body connection may be influenced by illness, sleep deprivation, pain, drugs or extreme mental distress. Individual may also simply experience an altered state of consciousness serendipitously.

*The Esoteric Level of Experience*

The second level of experience on the pyramid represents esoteric moments of various kinds. These may include psychic phenomena such as hearing voices and seeing
visions. In fact, many, but not all, forms of ASCs that occur on the esoteric level can be expressed through language and symbols.

Figure 3. The Esoteric Level of Mystic Experience

Individuals may write "by the spirit" or "automatically." Poets and writers fall into this category when they are in a state of concentration so deep that they hear music or poetry and write as if they were scribes. These are moments of inspiration, and prophetic figures receive "revelations" that flow to them in this state. Some individuals may speak in "tongues," or experience "glossolalia" (Crapo 2003:160). Again, for the mystical experience to be successfully communicated, the mystic must know and use the language and the symbols supplied by the society in which they live. If others do not understand or believe the "inspirations," the individual is likely to be scorned or ignored.

The expression of an ASC is sometimes difficult to describe. The complexities of expression were illustrated during the trial of Joan of Arc. Prior to her imprisonment and trial, she always referred to the "voices in the light." For days, her interrogators insisted she identify and describe individuals in the light. Finally, she named them, but it took six days of coercion to force her to do so, and it has been assumed that she relented only to relieve that pressure. This process was explained in chapter 9.
Again, enculturation is vitally important to the reception of these "revelations." Individuals who are prompted by voices to kill or become anti-social are a danger to societies. Frightened and frightening individuals whose "voices" make them non-productive to society are in danger of being confined or killed. Those who suggest antinomianism meet the fate of a Marguerite Porete or a Jeanne Guyon. As illustrated in this dissertation, there was a social provision for female visionaries during the Middle Ages. A woman had to be of the upper classes and a virgin. It also helped to have powerful authority figures who accepted the woman's revelations. Nonetheless, there was a position available in medieval society if a female met the criteria of a saint.

Even at the esoteric level, the ecological environment contributes to the likelihood of one's ability to have ASCs. The plant and animal life available provide substances that engender health and energy, thus enhancing the opportunities to experience ASCs. There is no indication that the female mystics of Europe used drugs to go into these states. They practiced contemplative and affective meditation techniques as well as various forms of asceticism. Whereas some mystics fasted to great extremes, others did not. The latter group included Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen, both of whom lived long lives for their times. Madame Guyon only practiced austerities for about a year as a young woman, but her years of imprisonment without sunlight, warmth and food, took years off her life. Still, she was productive until her late sixties. In contrast, Catherine of Siena did not, or could not, avail herself of sufficient food. She died at the age of thirty-three years.

At the esoteric level, the mind-body component is vitally important. ASCs are often frightening, especially when they occur frequently and seem uncontrollable. Mental and physical stamina seem required by those who experience these events. Shamans are
traded in order to deal with them, and their experiences are integrated into community ideology and ritual. The modern Western world has largely relegated mystic experiences to the categories of “hallucinations” and “hysteria,” terms which indicate mental illness rather than moments of mental functioning which neuroscientists are coming to understand. ASCs still are not discussed or channeled in a comfortable social form for our unenlightened citizens, although we continue to be fascinated by tales such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the *Exorcist* with all their elements of sorcery and witchcraft. As a result, individuals do not know how to deal with the frightening aspects of the sensations and behave inappropriately.

Many individuals move between the exoteric and the esoteric levels throughout their lives. The frequency of esoteric events depends upon one’s “sensitivity” or proclivity for such experiences. Again, the predisposition to mystic experiences relies upon the individual’s biological inheritance, cultural indoctrination, and the degree of stress which the person is undergoing at any given moment. However, these experiences are far less intense than the ultimate sensation of union with God or the universe.

*The Unio mystica Level of Experience*

![Figure 4. The *Unio mystica* level of mystic experience.](image)
Unio mystica is the term used by medieval mystics to describe their experience of union with God. It is to this end that they practiced contemplative and affective meditation. Their ascetic observances and their penance were undertaken in the hope of someday achieving this state of mind. Unio mystica differs from other esoteric experiences in that this phenomenon is ineffable. There are no words to describe it because the sensation bypasses both ego and verbal centers in the brain (d’Aquili and Newberg 1999:110-115). It just is, and in its “being” permeates the individual in both mind and body. This ASC meets all the criteria described by both James and Maslow as “conversion” or “peak-experiences.”

The state of union with the universe or with God may happen only once in a lifetime or not at all. Like the esoteric states of consciousness, individuals may have the unio mystica experience and return to normal life, or have other esoteric ASCs and still actively participate in the exoteric aspects of daily and religious life as did Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila and Madame Guyon. The ability to move between the states of consciousness and function pragmatically in the quotidian world is critical to the acceptance of the revelations, and apparently requires a strong personal nature.

There are dangers in these altered states of consciousness for some individuals. The hazards have been recognized by scholars of religion for thousands of years. There is an old story related by Jewish Kabbalists, one that originated in the Babylonian Talmud, parts of which were written as long ago as c. 200 C.E. Evidently, four masters entered into the Lord’s “Garden of Delight.” One of the four men was so overwhelmed that he died. Another man found the experience so intense that he ran mad and no longer enjoyed
his rational faculties. The third man became filled with anger, turned from God, and became a vicious criminal. Only the fourth master, Rabbi Akiba, “entered in peace and came out in peace” (Franck, 1967:16-17). There is something to be said for what the individual brings to the experience. The importance of personality and brain function in relation to ASCs has become a dynamic aspect in studies of psychology, anthropology, and neuroscience. Some of the factors in those studies are relevant to this dissertation.

Neurotheology: The Child of Science and Religion

Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg are leading members of a growing group of scientists and doctors who are investigating the relationship between the brain and religious experiences, a relationship they call “neurotheology.” Neurotheology is a term that describes how the brain works through, or “modulates,” stimuli from religious ritual or practice. These scholars define the “mind” as the name “for the intangible realities that the brain produces” (1999:47), be they in the arts, forms of thinking, emotions, or other abstract uncertainties. As a result of their work at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, they are pioneering neurological tests on individuals who practice meditation techniques and go into ASCs. In their book, The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience (1999), they argue that “no matter what happens to us or what we do, there is a part of the brain that becomes activated.” In fact, they insist that the brain “is eminently responsible for everything that we do or experience” (1999:45). This conclusion includes all forms of ASCs.

By means of imaging studies, these men and other researchers have found that the “amygdale, hippocampus, and neocortex of the temporal lobe are highly involved in the
production of vivid hallucinatory experiences” (1999:44). They believe that the visionary experiences of mystics are also related to these areas of the brain, although these phenomena are highly complex and integrated with various other centers of the brain as well as with one’s social conditioning. Mystical experiences incorporate both the “mind” and the “brain” to produce instances of a lack of differentiation that occurs in states of *Unio mystica*. Binary oppositions disappear, dualities evaporate, and there remains the sense of unity with all creation as discussed by both James and Maslow. Neurological tests and studies indicate that there are many similarities between *unio mystica* and near-death experiences (NDEs). D’Aquili and Newberg suggest that, “In a way, the NDE is ‘every person’s’ mystical experience” (1999:143).

As introduced in the Preface to this dissertation, physical anthropologists have joined with psychiatrists and neuroscientists to study the human mind and the brain’s physiology. Recognized as “medical” anthropologists, scholars in this growing field study ethnomedicine, the ecology of health, and shamanic activities, particularly as related to evolutionary theory and culture. A few examples of recent work done by anthropologists will suffice to indicate the interest in and various approaches to the subject of ASCs.

Anthropologist Pascal Boyer (2001) takes an evolutionary approach to the various phenomena of religion. He argues that research in evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology is providing new insights into the formulation of religious concepts and practices. Boyer draws heavily upon the findings of cultural anthropology to explain not only religious phenomenon, but also the basis for beliefs that are not founded in materialism. Boyer sees many operations of the brain as adaptive devices for survival. He
posits that religious beliefs are founded upon various functions of a variety of mental systems (2001:298) such as inference systems, adaptations for social exchange, and evaluation of trust. He argues that “Religion does not really support morality; it is people’s moral institutions that make religion plausible” (2001:170). An understanding of the brain’s cognitive processes should produce better understanding of the purpose for religious concepts as well as an appreciation for the fact that “religion is dramatic, it is central to many people’s existence” and, furthermore, that there “are many different cognitive processes [that] conspire to make religious concepts convincing” (2001:330).

The activities of shamans verify the observation that religion has powerfully dramatic elements. Shamans have interested anthropologists from the early years of the discipline. In her classic work, *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict (1934) argued that shamans experienced such “severe symptoms that, were they to live in the United States, they would be treated as the mentally ill” (Anderson 1996:345). Yet, as Robert Anderson points out, the very aspects of their behaviors that seem frightening and abnormal to Western minds are the elements that provide shamans with power and prestige in their own societies. Anthropologists have come to recognize that shamans do not meet the criteria of psychosis; in fact, a deranged individual could not perform all the tasks of society undertaken by shamans.

Michael James Winkelman is another medical anthropologist who is particularly interested in shamans and other types of “magico-religious” healers. He has categorized shamanistic practices around the world. Winkelman views their activities within their ecological environments, the types of social organization, and the forms of ASCs that are manifested within various societies such as hunter-gathers, agriculturalists, and politically
stratified societies. He has found that the types of magico-religious practitioners and their ASCs vary depending upon the social structure of each group.

This small sampling of work done in the fields of medical anthropology and neurotheology demonstrates the importance of social structure and enculturation relative to mystic experience. The investigation of brain function and cultural receptivity to spiritual phenomena leads to the question, “If our beliefs are simply cultural constructs, and our revelations are overtaxed systems in our brains, what are we left with? Is there a God? Can humans experience the Divine?” While the existence of God has been debated for thousands of years, the work of neuroscientists has added fuel to the fire.

Matthew Alper (2001) replies negatively to those questions. In his book, The “God” Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God, Alper argues that the negative “inspiration” of religion towards hatred, persecution, and war on behalf of one’s belief system, decries the existence of any god with any level of compassion. He considers the history of religious fanaticism to be a “disorder” of the brain, and purely the result of the human predisposition to survive against the opposition of all “others.” Alper believes that by accepting “ourselves as organic machines,” humankind would benefit and help preserve life and its better aspects. He offers no hope for an existence hereafter. If life is good, it must be good now, because “Death, whether we want to believe it or not, most likely represents the end of our conscious experience...forevermore” (2001:188).

Andrew Newberg, Eugene d’Aquili, and Vince Rause disagree. In their book, Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief (2001), these neuroscientists and psychiatrists argue that it is possible that mystic experiences are more
than mere "misfirings" of the brain. After years of study, they claim to have seen "evidence of a neurological process that has evolved to allow us humans to transcend material existence and acknowledge and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived of as an absolute, universal reality that connects us to all that is" (2001:9). They argue for a biologically purposeful reason for myth and ritual that leads individuals to transcendent experiences. Furthermore, they suggest a personal god is more than a "limping metaphor" (2001:162) that leads to war and strife. Mysticism, in particular, is a "genuine spiritual union with something larger than the self" (2001:100-101). Central to their position is the fact that, around the world, the testimonies of individuals who have had "conversion" and "peak-experiences," as well as milder forms of ASCs, all insist that the transcendent states "feel more real than everyday reality" (2001:179).

Barbara Newman concurs with the position of Newberg and d’Aquili. In her seminal work, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (1995), Newman argues that humans do have a "developed interiority" which functions within the scope of their respective cultures. She asserts that "religious experience reveals the traces, however opaquely filtered, of a real and transcendent object. This is not to exclude the possibilities of self-deception and deliberate fraud" (Newman 1995:16).

Certainly the lives of Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and Madame Jeanne Guyon testify to the vivid reality of something beyond material existence, and that something was worth living and dying for if necessary. These women were both strong and tender. They stood for their beliefs, yet suffered for every living creature. Even Joan of Arc refused to harm others during the
heat of battle. Although she was wounded several times, Joan made it her work to bear the waving standard of her soldiers in the midst of the danger. Newman reminds us all that these women entered into the great conflicts of their eras for reasons other than those of some modern reformers. “For it was not because of their commitment to feminism, self-empowerment, subversion, sexuality, or ‘the body’ that they struggled and won their voices; it was because of their commitment to God” (Newman 1995:246).

Perhaps courage is the greatest asset humans derive from mystical experience. Whatever their personal persuasions, saints or heretics, these women displayed intrepid bravery. The author of this dissertation has been on a long academic pilgrimage covering six hundred years of history in which the mystic experiences of six females were examined in six areas of Europe. I began this journey having never heard of these women, save Joan of Arc. I came to this work from another “cognitive” land. At first I was stunned and found some of their practices startling and repelling; culture shock, as it were. However, with the journey completed, I am strengthened by their resolve and filled with admiration for what they, and women like them, have been able to accomplish despite all obstacles. Whether as the result of misfiring brain synapses, or actual spiritual experiences with an ultimate force, these women fulfilled the pragmatic requirements of William James and Abraham Maslow as well as the standards of sainthood in their eras. One is left feeling both proud and inspired by their examples.
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Las Vegas, NV 89121
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Cherel Jane Ellsworth Olive

Local Address:
UNLV Department of Anthropology
4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 455003
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-5003

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, 1960
Mills College

Master of Arts in Anthropology, 1977
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Master of Science in Education, 1978
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Special Honors and Awards:
Distinguished Educator Award, Southeast District, 1968
Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada

Publications:
The Handbook of Preschool Special Education
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