

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN WOMEN MYSTICS: THE EVIDENTIAL CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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I RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

The subtitle of my presentation bears what someone might recognise as a certain, perhaps misleading resemblance to Caroline Franks Davis' book *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. The difference is important, however. I believe that there is an evidential force to religious experience, both for the individual and for society. History certainly provides plentiful instances. I also believe that a compelling case can be made in regard to knowledge of human nature and what Sir Alister Hardy called the spiritual world or realm on the basis of a comparative study of cases of religious experience employing increasingly sophisticated methods of textual analysis.

But in this paper I do not intend to argue that religious or mystical experiences, even when manifesting a remarkable consistency and congruency over centuries of development in significantly different cultural contexts, prove that the claims made by those having religious experience are in fact true or even that they point to a common element in such religious experiences as a group. So far as I can tell, this is the case, but establishing that remains a goal of my present research into the relatively large number of cases found in the convent chronicles of the South German Dominican nunneries of the 14th century compared with similar cases of women in the contemporary period found in the files of the Religious Experience Research Centre.

My purpose here is more modest. I hope to show, first, that significant parallels exist between the function (the social significance and personal value) of religious experience in the 14th century Rhineland and among women and even men today. More specifically, I will suggest that this similarity is grounded in certain shared features of women's social and especially ecclesiastical situation in the Middle Ages and the present. Finally, I wish to consider the implications of this parallel for an understanding of the evidential character of religious experience. That is, does the similarity that exists between the situation of religious women in the Middle Ages and today adequately account for the content or character of their experiences, or must we look further and deeper in order to fathom the meaning of these experiences for the women of the Middle Ages and our own time?

Before retreating into the Middle Ages, I want to add a note about the man whose vision is directly responsible for the RERC. It was my great pleasure and honour to have worked as a volunteer researcher with Sir Alister Hardy during the academic year of 1974 and '75 when the [then] Religious Experience Research Unit occupied the old building on the corner of Holywell Street and Mansfield Road. Among other tasks Sir Alister gave me was sorting out the similarities and differences between religious and psychical experiences based on the contents of the notorious Zed-file and a thousand cases of religious experience selected randomly from what at that time was a base of about 4,000 submitted cases.

The Zed-file included over one hundred experiences submitted to the unit that could not be accommodated in any of the ordinary categories of religious experience by any of the researchers whose job was to analyse and codify the experiences according to the classification system based on the first thousand cases received.

Although I was never sure exactly how Sir Alister utilised my findings, I found the results of my study to be interesting, even fascinating, even if they remained tentative because of the relatively small number of cases studied and the admittedly provisional character of the classification system elaborated up to that time. Still, the information proved extremely valuable in my teaching work in the psychiatry department of the Loyola University Medical School some years later. Even more significantly in my case, the work with the provisional classification system, which was drawn up empirically on the basis of incidence and frequency with which descriptors were mentioned in the initial thousand cases received, provided the background for a remarkable discovery when I was writing my doctoral dissertation in 1977. In consulting the doctoral research of a German-language scholar writing in the late 1950s on the mystical language of the South German Dominican nuns of the 14th century, I chanced upon a list of the frequency with which the most important terms in this literature were used. By what struck me as a remarkable coincidence, the German list bore a definite and wholly unexpected resemblance to the provisional classification system at RERU [now RERC].

While not of immediate relevance to my dissertation, that discovery continued to haunt me. It contributed to my interest in Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics of the 14th century, and eventually led me to envision the comparative research programme that has brought me back to Oxford almost every year from 1978 to the present and accounts for this paper.

II. THE MIDDLE AGES: MISOGYNY AND MYSTICISM

Almost any work on the Middle Ages seems to demonstrate one or another kind of parallel with the contemporary period. As Barbara Tuchman demonstrated at great length in her study *A Distant Mirror*, the 14th century resembles our own in particularly noteworthy respects. Not least of these, although Mrs Tuchman passed over them rather scathingly, are those of mystical spirituality and feminism. As a military and political historian, she can be forgiven this oversight. But since the publication of her book, the point has been made many times over in a variety of ways, including Umberto Eco's enormously successful novel and the film made from it, *The Name of the Rose*.

In fact, despite the reticence of scholars earlier in this century to admit it, perhaps nowhere else is the parallel between the 14th century and our own time greater than in the area of feminism and spirituality.¹ A growing list of scholarly works testifies to the recognition that the situation, lives, and experiences of women, especially religious women, in the 14th century illuminates the situation of women today, particularly in the Church.² The reciprocal is also true.

A. Medieval Misogyny

In the early Middle Ages, it was commonly accepted, especially among religious writers, that women as a whole were not only deficient in reason, but morally weak and therefore prone to sin, especially sins of a sensual nature.³ Not surprisingly, women were deprived of legal status except as property, and found themselves hedged in by restrictive moral and physical

sanctions not applicable to males. Access to educational opportunities were barred to all except the nobility, and careers for women in law, medicine, commerce, teaching, much less military service, were virtually non-existent.

For any respectable woman, the only paths open to her were either marriage or a life of consecrated virginity as a nun safely walled into a monastery. Widows, even queens such as St Elizabeth of Hungary, could be turned out of home or castle at the whim of the dominant male authority; Eleanor of Aquitaine was imprisoned for years by her husband, Henry II. Even in the Church, which was the most favourable environment for women of talent and ambition, even abbesses had few rights and little protection outside their own walls.

Some of the sources of early Christian misogyny have been vividly adumbrated by Frances Beer in her recent book, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. As early as the second century, Tertullian (c.160 - c.240) accused women of responsibility for the fall of man, not just of men:

Do you not know that you are Eve? ... God's sentence still hangs over all your sex and his punishment weighs down upon you ... You are the one who opened the door to the devil, you are the one who first deserted the divine law... All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of [you] ... even the Son of God had to die.⁴

According to Clement of Alexandria, "every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the thought that she is a woman".⁵ Thus, for St Jerome, "she who serves Christ will cease to be a woman and will be called a man".⁶ St Jerome's antagonism towards women is well known: "lift the corner of the dress", he wrote, "and you will find the tip of the tail".⁷

While more temperate in his attitude and language than Jerome, Augustine, too, took a dim view of women's intellectual and moral capabilities. He takes his stand on the Pauline texts that, "if [women] want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home" (1 Cor 14:35) for, as "Christ is the head of every man, ... a husband is the head of his wife" (1 Cor 11:3). Women should not presume to teach, then. In addition, as Augustine, too, accepts the view that women are by nature weak – carnal, deficient in understanding, and unable to rule their own concupiscence.⁸

St John Chrysostom, the ill-fated patriarch of Constantinople, was brief and pointed: "the woman taught once, and ruined all ... The sex is weak and fickle ... The whole female race transgressed ..."⁹

Similar passages from the Greek and Latin Fathers could be multiplied indefinitely. By the early Middle Ages, Andreas Capellanus was thus able to articulate an encompassing vision of female depravity:

... according to the nature of [her] sex ... every woman is by nature a miser, ... she is also envious and a slanderer of other women, greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant, fickle in her speech, disobedient and impatient of restraint, spotted with the sin of pride, ... a liar, a drunkard, a babbler no keeper of secrets, too much given to wantonness, prone to every evil, and never loving any man in her heart.¹⁰

Similar sentiments are produced in the *Ancrene Riwe* as a motive for a woman's becoming a recluse:

... it was commanded in the Old Law that a pit should always be covered; and if an animal fell into an uncovered pit, the man who had uncovered the pit had to pay the penalty. These are terrible words for the woman who shows herself to men's sight ... The pit is her fair face, and her white neck, and her light eye, and her hand... She is guilty ... and must pay for his soul on the Day of Judgement.¹¹

The Nun's Rule, another English treatise for anchoresses, describes woman's condition in terms of Eve's being tempted by the forbidden fruit, especially of sexuality:

This apple, my dear sister, symbolises all those things towards which desire and sinful delight turn. When you look upon a man, you fire in Eve's case; you are looking at the apple ... [Eve] has many daughters who, following their mother, answer in the same way: "But do you think ... that I shall leap upon him because I look at him?" God knows, my dear sister, more surprising things have happened. Your mother, Eve, leapt after her eyes had leapt; from the eye to the apple, from the apple in paradise down to the earth, from earth to hell, where she remained in prison, four thousand years and more, together with her husband, and she condemned all her children to leap after her, to endless death.¹²

Gottfried von Strassburg, in his secular romance *Tristan*, echoes such a view of woman's insatiable concupiscence: "Women do many things just because they are forbidden".

God knows, these same thistles and thorns are inborn in them! ... In the first thing she ever did ... [Eve] proved true to her nature and did what was forbidden! ... She wanted none but that one thing in which she devoured her honour! Thus they are all daughters of Eve who are formed in Eve's image after her.¹³

For Gottfried and other medieval writers, to the extent that a woman rises above her nature and overcomes such debasing tendencies, she has in effect ceased to be a woman, as St Jerome and other early theologians had urged:

When a woman grows in virtue despite her inherited instincts and gladly keeps her honour, reputation and person intact, she is only a woman in name, but in spirit she is a man! ... When a woman lays aside her woman's nature and assumes the heart of a man, it is as if the fire dripped with honey, ... a nettle bore roses above ground!¹⁴

Small wonder then that at least in French law, husbands could be exonerated for harming their wives in their needed efforts to keep them in check:

In a number of cases men may be excused for the injuries they inflict on their wives, nor should the law intervene. Provided he neither kills nor maims her, it is legal for a man to beat his wife when she wrongs him ... It is the husband's office to be his wife's chastiser.¹⁵

The logical outcome of such diatribes were works such as the *Malleus Mallificarum*, written in 1483, one of the most vicious misogynist works of any period, and one which provided both justification and procedures for the interrogation, torture, and execution of hundreds of thousands of women on the mere accusation of witchcraft. Not surprisingly, the opening words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes' new book, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, aptly illustrate the perception of many women and men today regarding the historical role of women in the world and Church:

Wildlife and the Wild Woman are both endangered species.

Over time, we have seen the feminine instinctive nature looted, driven back, and overbuilt. For long periods it has been mismanaged like the wildlife and the wild-lands. For several thousand years, as soon and as often as we turn our backs, it is relegated to the poorest land in the psyche. The spiritual lands of the Wild Woman have, throughout history, been plundered or burnt, dens bulldozed, and natural cycles forced into unnatural rhythms to please others, (p.3.)

It is against this infamous background that the women mystics of the Middle Ages, especially of the fourteenth century, appear in such striking contrast and in so doing provide an instructive parallel for many women today.

B. Medieval women mystics

Speaking of women in general, either in the Middle Ages or today, is a dauntingly inclusive task, and an impossible one in a single paper - or, for that matter, a single book, or a single

author, and apparently even an entire bishops' conference. I propose to approach the topic circumspectly and in a narrow sense, rather than trying to describe the situation and experiences of Christian women in general in either era. I am particularly interested in those women in the Middle Ages and today who, first of all, describe their religious experiences, who provide insight into often specifically gender-related expressions of mystical union, and, secondly, whose encounters with the religious structures, institutions, authorities, and events of their time are known to us.

Many women mystics of the Middle Ages are known to us today from their writings and from descriptions of them by others. Among them, I would include St Hrotsvit (or Roswitha) of Gandersheim (c.940-1002), St Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, St Gertrude the Great, St Bridget of Sweden, St Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, a whole host of *Beguines*, and the group I am particularly interested in, the Dominican nuns of the 14th-century southern Rhineland. In this later group are found, for instance, Margareta Ebner, Elsabet Stagel, Adelheid Langman, and Christina Ebner.

Also important, especially with regard to the social situation of women, including their position in the Church, are visionaries like Marguerite Porete, Bloemardine of Brussels, and St Joan of Arc, who were punished and even martyred for their teaching and activities. Other important medieval women, neither declared saints nor avowed mystics, must be included in this group. Their contributions to learning, literature, law, and politics require us to reconsider the status and accomplishments of medieval women in contrast to the often prevailing view of them. Here I would list in passing Eleanor of Aquitaine, the redoubtable Queen Joanna of Naples, Christine de Pisan, Marie de France, and the two Provençal poets, the Countess of Dia and Castelloza. It will not be possible to consider them here, however.

In the early Middle Ages, two groups of religious women are of particular interest because of their success in redefining their position in the Church with respect to jurisdiction, the semi-autonomous Augustinian canonesses, especially of Germany, and the Cistercian Abbesses from Spain to England. In the High Middle Ages and 14th century, the *Beguines* represented only one of the paths taken by lay women to live in community, poverty, and service without submitting to regular enclosure.

(a) Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

In the relatively stable if not exactly peaceful era ushered in by the Carolingian Empire, it became possible for the first time in centuries to establish monastic enclosures for women outside the Italian peninsula or the relative safety of Britain and Ireland. In the ninth and tenth centuries, several large houses were founded by royal decree, particularly in Germany. Here the high-born widows and daughters of the aristocracy could retire into seclusion for political or religious purposes. Such women were 'canonesses' rather than nuns, however. They did not make vows of poverty although they did profess chastity and obedience to the rule. Thus, many of them, especially abbesses, exercised extensive influence over their domains.

One of the most interesting of these royal or at least noble ladies was the Saxon canoness St Hrotsvit (or Roswitha) of Gandersheim (c.940-1002), a well-educated, powerful writer who composed the first Christian dramas among other works, including legends of the saints, epics, and poetry.¹⁷ Her explicit task, she tells us, was to glorify Christian womanhood in contrast to the developing view of women as weak, wanton, and a certain danger to the virtue and therefore the salvation of men.

It is difficult to determine whether she was a mystic in the sense of later figures such as Julian of Norwich or Catherine of Siena. But as an early feminist theologian and poet, Hrotsvit was principally concerned to correct the negative judgement on women found in both pagan and Christian authors. How successful she was in reversing Christian misogyny in her own time can only be conjectured, for her writings were lost for over five hundred years. But she may well have influenced another German writer, the formidable Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who flourished in the twelfth century.

(b) Hildegard of Bingen

St Hildegard was not only a feminist poet and composer, a very capable administrator and something of a scientist, but perhaps above all, a mystic. She was born at Bingen in Hesse about 1098. She experienced her first visions about the age of three: "in their earliest manifestation, these took the form of a light of awesome brightness, and they continued on a regular basis throughout her early years".¹⁸ From her eighth year, she was reared in the Benedictine convent near Bingen by the Abbess, Jutta, who was also her tutor. In 1136 she succeeded her mentor as Abbess. Two years later, guided by an interior voice, she began committing her visions to writing.

Not long afterwards, Hildegard divorced her community from the double Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg in order to achieve greater autonomy and the intellectual and spiritual freedom for her sisters.

Most of her revelations were strikingly apocalyptic in tone as suited her role as reformer and prophet. For her counsel was sought by bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and a variety of lay persons of both sexes, including princes and the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa himself. Her replies to over three hundred letters are extant, and she left a major book, the *Scivias*, containing her visions and revelations. In addition, she wrote scriptural commentaries and composed hymns for the liturgical office. She also demonstrated an extraordinary interest in scientific observation.¹⁹

Guided by St Bernard, his former teacher, Pope Eugenius III warily approved Hildegard's visions in 1147. In an age in which ecstatic experience was popular and hysterical religiosity would soon become a major problem for civil and ecclesiastical authorities alike, Hildegard insisted that her 'visions' were not physical or even psychological experiences. Rather, they flowed from contemplative union with God in the depths of her soul. In this life, she wrote, God is present to us in all things, and is revealed in scripture and contemplation. Even here, however, we experience God's presence 'darkly' through 'the windows of faith'. Clear vision awaits the full light of glory.

Towards the end of a long life marked by more than occasional controversy, Hildegard's monastery at Rupertsberg was placed under interdict because she defied her religious superiors' order to exhume the body of a nobleman she had allowed to be buried on monastery grounds. Convinced that she was in the right by a divine vision, she appealed to "higher ecclesiastical authority, who arranged for the interdict to be lifted."²⁰

Although sickly all her life, Hildegard lived to be over 80, dying in 1178. Great in her own time, her influence would extend through the centuries, finding its first resonance in the major women mystics and saints of the next century, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrude the Great.²¹

(c) The Beguines and Mechthild of Magdeburg

In the 13th century, lay women rather than nuns took up the cause of spiritual emancipation. The lives of a number of saintly women in the Low Countries of the early 13th century were written by Bishop Jacques de Vitry of Liege and Thomas of Chantimpre. The lives of other women are known from similar sources. But the bishop knew these women directly, having aided and guided them, and not infrequently defended them against civil and ecclesiastical adversaries. For contrary to custom and even some popular feeling, these *Beguines*, while profoundly religious, were neither nuns nor recluses, choosing to live in the world according to a simple gospel spirituality.

The most famous of the early *Beguines* was St Marie of Oignies (c.1177-1213). Married at 14, she persuaded her young husband not only to live with her in sexual abstinence, but even to join her in tending lepers. Eventually, she established herself at the priory of St Nicholas at Oignies, where she became the leader of a sizeable network of like-minded women.

The visionary poet Hadewijch of Antwerp is today perhaps the best known of the beguines, although little information about her life can be discovered from her poems, letters, and prose works, which are some of the first works in the Dutch vernacular.²² The theme of ecstatic love found in the writings of St Bernard permeate her works and, through them, *Brautmystik* - the "bridal mysticism" of loving union with God - became a major element in beguine spirituality.²³

The spirituality of these remarkable women embodied many of the essential elements of medieval religion in its more intense expression - it was primarily a lay movement rather than clerical or monastic; it was feminine; it encompassed a life of mystical contemplation focused on the divine humanity of Christ; it embraced a life of voluntary poverty, humility, and chastity; and it found characteristic expression in the service of the poor, sick, and suffering.

Many beguines begged on the street, even in defiance of ecclesiastical prohibitions against mendicancy. Others supported themselves by handiwork, particularly weaving, spinning (from which comes the epithet 'spinster'), and sewing, and gave any surplus income to the poor. When their daily duties were finished, they joined in common prayer, scripture study, and what today we would call theological reflection. In many respects, the beguines and similar associations of holy women in the 13th century created the first 'base communities' in the new urban environment. Their influence on the mendicant orders coming into existence at that time was both powerful and reciprocal.

But the most impressive of these 13th-century mystics was for most of her life a lay woman, whether or not she is to be considered a Beguine – Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210-97).²⁴ She was strongly influenced by the idealistic poverty, learning, and apostolic zeal of the new mendicant orders. Considered the first mystic to write in German, from the age of 24 she lived the life of a beguine, completely devoted to prayer and charity, under the direction of the Dominicans, calling St Dominic "my beloved Father".²⁵

At about 23 Mechthild had what might be referred to as her first ecstatic experience, described in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Mechthild speaks of her soul being taken out of her body, which remained behind, and transported her to a region set "between heaven and earth", where for a time it communed with God, forgetting its earthly connections.

And I saw with the eyes of my soul in heavenly bliss, the beautiful humanity of our lord Jesus Christ and I knew Him by His shining countenance. I saw the Holy Trinity, the Eternity of the Father, the work of the Son and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

Such visions continued throughout her life, most of them providing the matter for her single book, one often so critical of the spiritual laxity of the clergy and aristocracy that attempts were made to burn it.

Towards the end of her life, ill and growing blind, Mechthild entered the Cistercian abbey at Helfta, where she may have taken vows. There she finished her great book of prophecies, poetry, visions, parables, and letters. At this period Helfta was under spiritual influence of Dominican Friars. The Dominican friar Henry of Halle, a disciple of Albert the Great, arranged and edited Mechthild's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, and translated it from Low German into Latin. (It was later translated into Middle High German by Henry of Nordlingen for Bl. Margareta Ebner and the Dominican nuns at Maria Medingen.)

The convent at Helfta had been relocated from Rodersdorf in 1258 by its abbess, St Gertrude of Hackeborn, one of the three outstanding nuns there when Mechthild entered. Dedicated to promoting the contemplative life, Gertrude had made the abbey a recognised centre of mystical spirituality, attracting to it saints such as her sister, St Mechthild of Hackeborn and St Gertrude the Great, both of whom became notable poets and scholars.²⁷ The influence of Mechthild of Magdeburg on this coterie of holy women was at least as profound as its effect on her.²⁸ Perhaps the first mystic to have experienced a vision of the heart of Christ as the focus of divine love and human compassion, Mechthild's devotion to the Sacred Heart became especially characteristic of the Helfta nuns.

(d) Julian of Norwich

Like the *Cloud* author, the mystical writer greatly beloved as 'Julian of Norwich' has evaded every attempt to uncover her identity. The name was attributed to her from the parish church in Norwich where she was walled into a cell to spend the rest of her life in prayer and contemplation.²⁹

Julian's spiritual odyssey began on 8 May 1373. Gravely ill with an unspecified disease, possibly the plague, she received 15 visions during an ecstasy that lasted about five hours. On regaining consciousness, she found herself cured, to the alarm of some of those in attendance who thought she had died. The following day, she received another vision which amplified and clarified the meaning of the others.

As she never tires of repeating in her amazing manuscript, *Showings of Divine Love*, the meaning is simply Love. God as pure Love is the origin, the goal, the way, the means, and the motive of everything that is. Although focused on the passion and death of Christ, her revelations encompass an astounding range of topics and express an unquenchable optimism in God's power to bring good out of evil. "All shall be well", she reiterates. "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Although a recluse, Julian was well educated theologically and spiritually, possibly having been educated at a near-by Benedictine convent before her illness and ecstatic revelations. Nevertheless, she denies in the short text of her book, according to the conventions of the time, that she should be seen as pre-empting a role reserved to males:

God forbid that you should say or understand that I am a teacher, for I mean not so ... For I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail ... (VI)

According to Frances Beer, this disclaimer is "... not so much an expression of women's insufficiency as a recognition that all of humankind are students, and God the only teacher".³⁰ Here, she is following Ritamary Bradley's 'suggestion' in *Christ the Teacher* (p. 128). In her recent book on Julian, however, Bradley maintains that such "self-deprecation is dropped totally, however, in the later [the 'long'] text, where she speaks to all, without apology, without reference to her sex".³¹ This seems to be not merely a defence of her right to teach as one instructed by God, but as in her advice to Margery Kempe, Julian is taking a stand "against the degrading type-casting imposed on medieval women"³².

For Julian also gave spiritual instruction, as we know from the reference to her in the precious single manuscript of a very different, lovable, but undoubtedly unusual lay mystic of the turn of the 15th century who came to Norwich to consult her.

(e) Margery Kempe

Margery Burnham (c!373-1433) was the daughter of the Mayor of Lynn, Norfolk, the wife of John Kempe, a merchant of the town, and the mother of 14 children.³³ After the difficult birth of her last child, she experienced a mystical revelation in which she was promised to become Christ's bride, thus obligating her to a life of continual sexual abstinence. After some time, she convinced her husband of the correctness of her vision, and they joined a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the first of many for Margery. In 1413 the couple exchanged vows of chastity before the bishop of Lincoln.

Accused of being a Lollard (a follower of John Wyclif's radical teachings) because of her denunciations of clerical immorality and general vice, Margery Kempe narrowly escaped censure and even imprisonment on several occasions. Her long (and often harrowing) pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, Compostella, Norway, and Danzig between 1413 and 1433 thus served a tactical as well as spiritual purpose.

In her wonderful journal, published only in 1935 as *The Book of Margery Kempe*,³⁴ the "apprentice saint" described in the form of memoirs dictated at the end of her life the misadventures that befell her during these pilgrimages. It is easy to dismiss her as a mere hysteric, and thus well to remember that Margery was perhaps the first laywoman ever to attempt the composition of such a work in any language.

Further, she lived at a moment in spiritual history in which the rich network of support and advice that had nurtured Mechthild of Magdeburg and Catherine of Siena was now shattered. The chief source of inspiration was now one's own inner experience, which in Margery's case and that of many others of the time often took the form of ecstatic raptures and public displays of religious emotion.

(f) Dominican Nuns in the 14th Century Rhineland

That the flowering of mysticism in the 14th century Rhineland involved both Dominican friars and sisters should come as no surprise. What is still surprising is the extent of that involvement and especially the great numbers of sisters concerned with the mystical revolution of that era.

There were undoubtedly many reasons why large numbers of women literally flocked to Dominican convents in the first decades of the 14th century. But none was so compelling nor can any more satisfactorily account for the phenomenon than this: in Germany at this time the mystical movement that catalysed the religious restlessness of a generation of both men and women was largely Dominican in character. It is thus understandable that those most

strongly attracted to mystical spirituality would identify with the Dominican Order and most particular its outstanding mystical theologians, Meister Eckhart, John Tauler and Henry Suso.

The contribution of the nuns to mystical literature is significant. Content not only to preserve the teachings of their brother Dominican mystics, the sisters put them into practice. In putting them into writing a generation later, they also stabilised the vocabulary of mystical spirituality in the vernacular and also maintained authentic Christian values and behaviour during an era of manic deviation in spiritual and mental health.

The original writings of the sisters take the form of personal Revelations, occasional letters and, of special importance, the convent chronicles or *Schwesternbücher*, which recorded the histories and mystical experiences of their most illustrious members. Several hundred are extant and have recently attracted the attention of German language scholars.³⁵

The Chronicles were apparently passed from convent to convent for purposes of mutual encouragement, edification, and undoubtedly some degree of propaganda. A form of holy rivalry did exist among many of the medieval monasteries. But Hester Reed Gehring's intensive study of the language of the *Schwesternbücher* reveals not only the influence of the great Dominican mystics, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, but also the sisters' role in articulating and stabilising a mystical vocabulary as nearly capable as one can be of describing the nature of their experiences.³⁶

Accomplishing such a task during the formative phase of a national language seems to have been the accomplishment of mystics at this period in England, Italy and the Low Countries as well as in Scandinavia, Germany and Switzerland. The South German Dominican women are perhaps unequalled in this regard, especially in light of the doctrinal contributions of their spiritual advisers and their own great numbers. Their intention, however, was primarily to witness before a less ardent generation to the felt presence and activity of God in their midst.

C. Religious Experience

As a catalogue of the varieties of mystical experience, the Chronicles of the South Gertian Dominican convents are unrivalled, not only in the 14th century, but up to present times. The only more extensive collection consists of the 5,000 case histories collected over a ten-year period at the Religious Experience Research Centre here at Westminster College.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, the category system used for analysing the nun's experiences developed by Hester Reed Gehring on the basis of linguistic frequency is strikingly similar to the provisional classification developed at the Alister Hardy Centre. Gehring organised her analysis of the chronicles according to the traditional division of the spiritual life into active, contemplative, and mixed forms and also into the three 'ages' (or, more properly, aspects): purgative, illuminative and unitive. Such categories were familiar to the sisters themselves, although the chroniclers did not attempt to organise their accounts accordingly.

1. *Purgative: Extraordinary often severe forms of asceticism*
 - a. in the tradition of ecstatic asceticism of the beguines and other medieval manifestations.³⁷
 - b. realised in the cultivation of Virtue
 - i. Obedience
 - ii. Humility

- iii. Constancy, Zeal
 - iv. Self-denial, abstinence
 - v. Mortification (*abtotung*)
 - vi. Long-suffering
 - vii. Courage in the face of death
2. *Illuminative: Mystical experiences, more typical of contemplative life*
- a. *Vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*
 - b. Visionary Life
 - i. Sensory and Quasi-sensory Experience:
 - 1. Visions - Ocular
 - 2. Revelations
 - ii. Oral
 - Voices
 - Music
 - iii. Inner, Intellectual
 - Experiences of Taste and Smell

3. *Unitive: Ecstasy and Rapture*

That the sisters as a whole followed a path of ecstatic mysticism is admitted by all modern commentators, often but not always disapprovingly. Christine Ebner of Engeltal, speaking of a certain sister, remarked ingenuously, "She was the only one in our convent who never had ecstasies, and yet she was a very holy religious".³⁸ Similarly, while rapture was favoured at Töss, Elsbet Stagl reports that "Margaret Finkin was found worthy to be remembered solely because of her exemplary conduct. No signs, visions, or wonders occurred in connection with her ...".³⁹

The contribution of the Dominican Nuns to medieval and contemporary feminism does not lie solely in the extent and richness of their experiences or their canonisation of the mystical teaching of the great German preaching friars in their lives. They also demonstrate the same tendency found in Hildegard, Mechmild, Julian, and other women mystics to spiritual autonomy, an immediate and direct relationship with God that is not essentially dependent on the instrumentality of the clergy.

In her analysis of the letters between the 14th century Dominican nuns and their spiritual advisers, Debra Stoudt has pointed to "insights into the divergent attempts religious women made at asserting their own spiritual identity and offering the male confessors sonic advice and guidance of their own".⁴⁰

It is Margaretha Ebner's single letter to Heinrich of Norlingen that offers the greatest step toward spiritual partnership between two equals ... Heinrich's true accomplishment is fostering of the mystical gifts given to others, particularly Margaretha. Margaretha responds to his nurturing of her spirit by revealing her own very personal feelings: her illness and her wish that Heinrich visit Medingen. From Henry's more numerous letters it is clear that he treasured their friendship highly. Based on epistolary evidence, it is between Margaretha and Heinrich that there is the most spiritual reciprocity.⁴¹

The egalitarian impetus of mystical spirituality revealed in the lives of the Rhineland nuns among themselves and with their spiritual directors is reflected in other similar encounters. Frances Beer observes with regard to the spiritual friendship between Richard Rolle, the English mystic of the early 14th century, and the Cistercian nun, Margaret Kirkby, that:

... the bond of love between Margaret and Richard was one of mutual benefit: as she was helped along her spiritual path, so he was able to attain a degree of tenderness and generosity that on his own might not have been possible. For him to love God perfectly was not so difficult as to love another soul well; in this respect, perhaps Margaret was the leader, and Richard the disciple.⁴²

III WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE TODAY

In summarising the principal characteristics of medieval spirituality, Valerie Lagorio offers the following six tenets:

- a. The need for self-renunciation;
- b. The action of the Spirit in all believers;
- c. The feasibility of mystical union with God;
- d. The essential equality of lay persons and religious; no division on account of sex or rank;
- e. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis with regard to the institutional Church;
- f. The superiority of the mixed life of action and contemplation.

With certain exceptions, these principles seem to have been realised effectively in the lives of the women we have considered. I suggest that they also bear significantly on the spirituality of women today.

Characteristics of Contemporary Women's Spirituality⁴³

Recently, after ten years of attempts to get it right, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the United States gave up the effort to write a pastoral letter on the role of women in the Church. In the light of such a colossal admission of inadequacy, it would be somewhat rash of me even to attempt to outline the subject of women's religious experiences in only a few minutes. Nevertheless, it is probably safe to suggest a few lines of possible development.

1. It seems to me that the struggle for equality and fair treatment begun by women for women in the Middle Ages only began to bear significant results in the latter half of the 19th century in the western democracies and truly came into its own within the last seventy-five years with respect to issues such as the right to vote, to hold property in their own right, and to equal treatment under the law. But progress in achieving even limited equality in society and in the church was not made without struggle, self-sacrifice, and suffering.

Full social emancipation of women even in the western democracies is not yet complete. In other areas of the world, although change is at work, women still suffer from a host of inequalities in almost every area of life.

2. Clearly, women working today for spiritual and social emancipation feel that theirs is a movement inspired and guided by God. They assert, however, that God is present in the whole church, not merely in the hierarchical authorities or within the norms of institutional convention.

3. The increasing interest in new models of God, pre-eminently the reconceptualisation of God as mother, as feminine, as indeed female, is a significant step toward a new form of mystical spirituality, one with important implications for both women and men.

4. The anti-patriarchal, and in some cases anti-hierarchical stance of many women in the church today clearly echoes the medieval emphasis on the essential equality of all human beings before God.

5. In regard to organised religion, the recent controversy in the Church of England and the developing crisis in the Roman Catholic church over the ordination of women suggests that many, perhaps most women today intend to stay within the organisational church. They do not see themselves as subversives, heretics, or schismatics, but prophetic witnesses to a widened orthodoxy, one closer to the primitive Church.

6. Finally, the importance of a deeply contemplative, but profoundly committed form of life is as characteristic of women's movements in the churches today as it was in the Middle Ages. This is particularly true, I think, among women in South and Central America, whose peaceful protests against injustice and oppression, particularly the disappearances of their husbands and children at the hands of military dictators contributed significantly to the overthrow of despotic regimes in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Peru. This was also true in England and the United States with regard to protests at Greenham Common and elsewhere against militarism and the arms race, especially nuclear armaments.

Much of the controversy surrounding so-called abortion-rights should also be interpreted primarily in terms of the struggle of women for equal treatment under the law. Recent events in Ireland concerning abortion and divorce reflect the same ferment at work. Here, the perspective of church men and women in the church tend to vary widely and regrettably.

I am not saying that the rights of women are the only issues, nor in some cases perhaps the most important in such instances. Yet to conclude that they cannot be is to fall victim to the prejudice that has blinded society to the unequal position of fully half the human race for several thousand years.

Women's religious experience today bears directly and significantly on these and many other issues. Further, I believe it does so in terms meaningfully similar to medieval women's religious experiences in regard to the issues of their day.

First of all, religious experience refers to at least two major areas of life today as in the Middle Ages – the personal, even individual encounters of women with what they perceive as the sacred, including mystical experiences of the presence of God, visions, revelations, and so on. But it also means the social, sometimes collective encounter between women and the religious structures, institutions, authorities, and events of their time. The two notions are closely connected, but they are not the same nor are they, I am convinced, reducible to each other.

The return of the goddess - redefining the sacred

In her book *Engendered Lives*, psychologist Ellyn Kaschak proposes that in all historical societies, the masculine has always defined the feminine and that the feminine is never allowed to stand by itself or subsume the masculine. Gender bias has thus been embedded in the prevailing explanatory and therapeutic systems that define mental and physical health. Moreover, dysfunctions increasingly common among women today such as depression, dissociation, and eating disorders can be seen to arise directly from the social conditioning through which girls learn to be women.

It is therefore not surprising that much of the incentive for developing new paradigms of feminine spirituality have originated through a collective “regression in the service of the ego” in the form of a feminist reassessment of archaic civilisations by archaeologists such as Marija Gimbutas.⁴⁴ It should be noted that the exuberance with which women writers have produced sociological, psychological, and spiritual-theological elaborations of the Goddess myth has also contributed to a discovery or rediscovery of models of male or masculine spirituality – sometimes by way of reaction.

However it is characterised, most contemporary students of religious experience concur that, as in the Middle Ages, women today are remarkably concerned with an awareness of a divine presence accessible to human consciousness and love. This need not imply that women’s religious experience is qualitatively different from men’s. But what does seem manifestly evident is that, quantitatively, women report religious and especially mystical experiences more frequently than do men, whether or not this means they actually have more such experiences.

It is not entirely clear why women should be less reticent than men to acknowledge religious experience. Because they have been excluded from full participation in the structures and functions of religious institutions, women might well be expected to be more sensitive to the personal validation that results from intense, individual episodes of religious experience. Acknowledging and sharing these experiences with others sympathetic to their agenda would also elicit collective support. For whatever reason, it is a truism in religious research that many more women than men report such experiences.

IV CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE

What then was the evidential character of mystical experience for the women of the Middle Ages? And what is its evidential character for women today? Why the surge of interest in these remote foremothers?

In concluding, may I point out that the term “evidence” comes from the Latin *evidere*. Fundamentally, it means “obvious, visible, manifest, significant in appearance.” By the 14th century, it had come to imply “grounds for religious belief” as well as “information tending to establish a fact in law”.

Thus, evidence tends to persuade, to elicit belief, if not actually to prove or delineate the constituent elements of truth in the order of logical necessity. But what is persuasive, and even what is taken as true, depends in large measure on what is acceptable as proof at any given time or situation. Today, what constitutes evidence in the sense that religious experience can be said to persuade or prove varies considerably from the 14th century. And yet, appeals to transcendent experience as a warrant for personal, moral authority characterise women’s groups today much as they did in the 14th century. And, I might add, for many, perhaps most of the same reasons.

May I suggest, then, that in both cases the evidential character of religious experience provides, as William James argued, a sense of personal certitude, a profound conviction of validation, of the rightness of one’s course or cause. It consequently weakens the case for the necessity of institutional authorisation or approval. When accepted as evidential, religious experience gives coherence or unity to one’s life, becoming the focus where the currents of energy and intention meet.

I also suggest, then, that the evidential character of the mystical experience of women in the Middle Ages and today is more personal than logical, more historical and indeed revolutionary than philosophical or even theological.

In any event, it is my growing conviction that women today are accomplishing what women in the Middle Ages sought to achieve in their own time – they are redefining the sense of God as a supportive presence not only favourable toward women (as well as men), but as a spirit of liberation from the fear, disdain, prejudice, stereotypes, and active discrimination that has characterised men's attitudes towards women throughout much of the modern era and in many, perhaps most areas of the world.

Secondly, with regard to their position in the Christian church in particular, women are protesting against their disenfranchisement as children of one God, co-heirs with Christ, full members of the Body of Christ, and adult citizens of the Reign of God, the heavenly City. They are doing so not only by pressing for full incorporation into ministry, but, as happened with the Augustinian canonesses, Hildegard, the Cistercian nuns, the beguines, and even Julian of Norwich, establishing havens or sanctuaries where they are free to express their spirituality and, as Hildegard recognised, to mature personally and collectively. Such enclaves need not be physical enclosures, nor need they be exclusive. And in fact Christian women today are for the most part creating such sanctuaries of equality in communion with, if critically so, the whole body of believers.

My final question regarding the similarity between the situation of women mystics in the Middle Ages and today is whether that similarity adequately accounts for the content or character of their experiences? Is mystical experience ultimately an expression of emerging social or political independence? Is its function to ground women's self-esteem on a foundation more solid than the received definitions of the past by disengaging them and other oppressed groups from the dominant social structures and processes of the day? Or should we look further and deeper for the meaning of these experiences for the women of the Middle Ages and our own time?

I cannot provide a satisfactory answer to this question now, and I don't expect to in the near future. I believe, however, that as a liberating, even revolutionary force, mystical experience succeeds only if it occurs spontaneously, that is without such results in mind. A compelling case can be made, I think, for the prophetic function of mystical experience. The American religious philosopher, William Ernest Hocking, maintained that at the bottom of every social revolution one will find a mystic. But like Hocking, I believe that both the discovery and the event are the consequence of the quest for a more meaningful, valuable life, one grounded in the ultimately Real.

Emancipation and liberation are not themselves the goal of mystical experience. And yet, paradoxically, it is for that reason that it attains them. Therefore, we must probe farther and deeper than an exploration of the conditions in which it arises and flourishes to account for the fact of mystical experience and the evidential character through which it transforms individual lives and whole epochs.

NOTES

1. "There was a mild-tempered 'women's movement' in the fourteenth century. Dr Carl Buecher in his *Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter* (Tubingen, 1882), almost certainly exaggerates the range and significance of the struggle for the 'emancipation' of women at this time. But there was undoubtedly in the fourteenth century an unusual flowering of the feminine mind and spirit and with it the expression of a yearning for a richer and freer life." (Jones, p.159).
2. For contemporary accounts of this not-so-mild-tempered movement, see the bibliography attached to this article.
3. "The classical idea of woman as defective male was augmented by the Middle Ages' view of her as moral cripple: if Eve had not disobeyed, we would all still be in the Garden of Eden. Disobedience was Eve's worst sin, but only one of many. Her defective reason was passed along, with the result that all her daughters were also more prone to vice." (Beer, p.22).
4. Tertullian, "The Apparel of Women," trans. E.A. Quain, *The Fathers of the Church* (New York, 1959), p. 188. Cited, Beer, p.3.
5. Beer, *ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* See the article in Janet Soskice, *After Eve*.
8. See Bradley (1992), pp.20-21. Her citations from Augustine are taken from his commentary on the Gospel of John, Tractate 15, chap. 4.1-42.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Beer, p.22-23, citing Cappellanus, p.201.
11. *The Ancrene Riwe*, trans M. B. Salu (London, 1959), p.3. Cited by Beer, p.3, author's emphasis.
12. *Ibid.*, p.4.
13. Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*, trans. A. T. Hatto (Harmondsworth, 1960), p.277. Cited by Beer, p.4, along with several other contemporary passages from French literature of the period.
14. *Tristan*, p.278. Cited by Beer, p.5.
15. "Coutumes de Beauvaisis" in Julia O'Faolain and Laura Martines, eds. (New York, 1973), p. 175.
16. See the essays by Joan M. Ferrante and Peter Dronke in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson, pp.64-89 and 131-52.
17. On Hrotsvit, see Katharina M. Wilson, "The Saxon Canoness: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim", in *Medieval Women Writers*, pp.30-63.
18. Beer, p.15.
19. On Hildegard, see Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), Barbara Newman, *Sisters of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theory of the Feminine*, Berkeley, 1979, and "The German Visionary: Hildegard of Bingen", by Kent Kraft in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson, pp. 109-30. Recent editions of Hildegard's works include the *Book of Divine Works, with Letters and Songs*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1987) and *Scivias*, trans. Bruce Hozeski (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1986), trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, New York: Paulist Press, 1990.
20. Beer, p.26.

21. Ecstatic revelations figured prominently in the life and mission of another German nun of the time, St Elizabeth of Schonau, who also manifested the extraordinary physical and spiritual sufferings that would become associated with mystical spirituality in the coming centuries. Like Hildegard, Elizabeth committed her visions to writing, and corresponded extensively with abbots, bishops, and lay persons of both sexes. For all its mystical sublimity, however, her spirituality, also like that of Hildegard and her successors of the next century, remained centred on the liturgical celebration of the divine presence in scripture and sacramental worship.
22. See *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. by Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) and Ria Vanderauwera, "The Brabant Mystic: Hadewijch", in Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, pp. 186-203.
23. Other outstanding examples of mystical spirituality among lay women of the Low Countries include Juliana of Cornillon (d. 1258), Beatrice of Nazareth, Ivetta of Huy (1157-1228), Margaret of Ypres (1216-37), and the amazing Christina of St Trond (1150-1224), who claimed to have returned from purgatory after reviving at her own funeral.
24. See Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Revelations, The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Lucy Menzies (London, 1953). See also John Howard, "The German Mystic: Mechthild of Magdeburg", in Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, pp. 153-85.
25. Cf. Ancelet-Hustache, p.17.
26. Cited by Beer, p.80.
27. See Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. and ed. by Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989), St Gertrude the Great, *The Life and Revelations* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), and Theresa A. Halligan, *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechthild of Hackeborn* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979)
28. "Though she is little known in Christendom and has never been canonised, she influenced the books of two saints who were the glory of Helfta: *The Book of Special Grace* by St Mechthild of Hackeborne (1241-99) and *The Messenger of Divine Love* by St Gertrude the Great (1256-1302), both written in Latin." (Ibid, p.18).
29. Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ, eds. and trans., *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). An earlier translation by James Walsh, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, was published by Anthony Clarke Books (Wheathamstead, Hertfordshire, 1973). See also *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. by Clifton Wolters (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966). In terms of closeness to the grace and beauty of Julian's original language, the best translation is still that of Grace Warrack, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Methuen & Co 1901). For commentary on Julian's experiences and teaching, see Joan Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, and Robert Thouless, *The Lady Julian: A Psychological Study* (London: SPCK 1924).
30. Beer, p. 142, n.3.
31. Bradley, *Julian's Way*, p.19.
32. Ibid, p.24.
33. For the life and times of Margery Kempe, see Louise Collis, *The Apprentice Saint* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964), Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), and Martin Thornton, *Margery Kempe: An Example in the English Pastoral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1960).

34. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and trans. by W. Butler-Bowden (New York: Devin-Adair Co, 1944). For a modern version, see B. A. Windeatt, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe*. (London and New York: Penguin, 1985).
35. "In Dominican convents the Lives of sisters who had visions or ecstasies, and the personal records of mystical experiences are numerous, in distinction from Franciscan nuns of the period. (NOTE: Preger, *Geschichte*, I, 138.) At Freiburg in Breisgau the biographies of no fewer than thirty-six nuns were written about 1318. Elsbeih Stigel narrates the lives of thirty sisters at **Töss**." (Clark, *The Great German Mystics*, p. 106).
- "... the Chronicle of **Otenbach** relates in great detail the lives of three sisters and deals more briefly with four others. The Chronicle of **Weiler** has twenty-seven life histories, the **Adelhausen** Chronicle thirty-four, the Töss Chronicle forty; the Engeltal and St Katharinental texts each have fifty-four." (Hester Reed Gehring, p.15).
36. "Meister Eckhart, as we have seen, and also Tauler and Suso, were appointed as preachers and father confessors in the Dominican convents for women, and all three of them carried on at various times a preaching mission in these convents. Many of their sermons and other writings were copied by the sisters and preserved for us through the zeal and interest of these women.
- These preaching mystics, all three of whom possessed contagious qualities of life, produced a profound effect upon their hearers and their confessants, and every glimpse we get into these sisterhoods of the period reveals a widespread and very intense mystical life in these groups, usually under the leadership of some signally devout woman mystic." (Jones, 158)
- "Eckhart was well known and highly revered in two Swiss convents, Töss near Winterthur and Otenbach near Zurich. At Töss the Dominican nun Elsbeth Stigel, the friend and confidante of Suso, asked for guidance about the teachings of Eckhart, (note 3: *Des Dieners Leben*, cap.xxxiii) while at Otenbach Elsbeth von Begenhofen recorded the fact that she had consulted Eckhart about her own personal difficulties, (note 4: *Die Stiftung des Klosters Otenback*, p.263)" (James Clark, *The Great German Mystics*, 23)
37. Gehring, pp.17, 26.
38. Felix Vernet, p.61.
39. Frank Tobin, p.3. Tobin comments, "Most lives are a mixture of exemplariness and the supernatural. However, the supernatural, i.e. signs, miracles, visions, or ecstasies, is never portrayed as something to be sought or as something of value in and for itself. Rather, such things just happen and confirm accidentally holiness already present." (p.4)
40. Stoudt, p.325.
41. Ibid., p.326.
42. Beer, op.cit., p. 129.
43. In a presentation of this length, it is not possible to consider individual cases and in some respects probably premature to attempt it. Nevertheless I would suggest the following as modern exemplars of women's spirituality particularly consonant with the characteristics of the outstanding instances of medieval spirituality considered above: Sojourner Truth, Clara Barton, Evelyn Underhill, Dorothea Dix, Dorothy Day, Caryll Houselander, Maisie Ward, Simone Weil, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.
44. Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500 B.C. - 3500 B.C.* and *The Language of the Goddess*. For an influential and cogent statement of the emerging thematic, see Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*. Other recent titles include Geoffrey Ashe, *Dawn Behind the Dawn*, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*, and Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess*, etc.

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Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he attended the Catholic University of America and the University of New Mexico. In 1962 he joined the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) and was ordained to the priesthood in 1969. In 1974, whilst completing a doctorate in religious studies at Loyola University, Chicago, he joined the Religious Experience Research Unit [now Centre] as a volunteer under the founding director, Sir Alister Hardy, and has maintained contact with succeeding directors. After receiving his doctorate in 1978, he resumed teaching at Loyola Institute of Pastoral Studies. He also served as visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California (1977-78) and was awarded the Chair of Philosophy of Theology at St. Thomas College in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1984-85. In 1996 he resigned from the full-time faculty of Loyola University in order to devote more time to research, writing and lecturing. As founding director of the Center for Religion and Society, he is also on the board of directors of the Forge Institute of Spirituality and Social Change in New York, and serves on the editorial advisory board of *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International*.

Former editor of *Spirituality Today*, he is the author of eight original works, including *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence Through the Ages*; *Eckhart's Way*; *Mysterion: An Introduction to Mystical Spirituality*; *Understanding Mysticism*; *Another Kind of Love* and *The Occult Revolution*, as well as other books, anthologies and articles.

Amongst recent articles, he has contributed "Spirit and Word" in *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International*, 3.2 (May 1997): 62-67; "Mysticism and Social Action: The

Mystic's Calling, Development and Social Activity" in *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3.2 (1996): 158-171; "Spirituality, Jung and Psychological Type: The MBTI Phenomenon" in *Myers-Briggs: Critical Reflections*, edited by Kenneth Leech, Croydon, England: The Jubilee Group, 1995; and a short story entitled "Choices" in *Tales of the Knights Templar* edited by Katherine Kurtz, New York: Warner Books, June 1995. A sequel, "The Treasure of the Temple", will be published in a second anthology in 1998.

In addition to lecturing in the United States and England on a variety of subjects related to religious experience, he has contributed articles to theological encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Recently he completed a cassette tape on angels, and is preparing another series on the women mystics of the Middle Ages.

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