

# Self-Transcendence and the Group: The Attitude to Life of Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Beguines

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You should love what is not  
And flee what is.  
You should stand alone  
And approach no one.  
You should strive always  
To be free from all things.  
You should free the bound  
And bind the free.  
You should comfort the sick  
And yet possess nothing.  
You should drink the water of suffering  
And feed the fire of love with the fuel of virtue.  
Then you shall live in the true wilderness.

Mechthild of Magdeburg: *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*,<sup>1</sup>. (35 1)

This highly poetic, but deeply paradoxical passage from Mechthild of Magdeburg, the thirteenth century beguine and mystic, can stand as a paradigm for the themes of self-transcendence and communality as understood and experienced by religious women in the later middle ages, and in particular those belonging to the beguine movement.

Mechthild advises her readers how to live in 'the true wilderness', a place located beyond our ordinary existence and geographical reality. This 'true wilderness' is reached by 'loving what is not' and 'flee(ing) what is'. All that binds her to this world must be left behind, if the mystic is to rise above earthly ties and unite herself with God, her transcendent lover; a God who, like the Lady of the Courtly Lover, is a God of absence as well as presence, of pain as well as joy. Although Mechthild chose a communal form of spiritual life as a member of a monastic community, she realised that each of us must travel to God

alone. A community can provide support, comfort, protection, even self-affirmation and encouragement, but it can never be a prop for the individual on her path towards God. In her admonition to 'strive always to be free from all things' we can see something of the struggle facing the mystic in her efforts to transcend the ties and burdens of ordinary human existence. This way is one of renunciation, often of harsh asceticism. In an environment in which the body, the feminine, and the world were often contrasted with the divine life of the spirit, there was always a tension between incarnating the divine in the physical daily life of the individual and of the community, and escaping from everything corporeal into a spiritualised realm. The line between detachment from, and rejection of, the world and of the body was perilously thin, and its discernment a particularly urgent and complicated affair for women, as I hope to show.

**You should free the bound and bind the free, you should  
comfort the sick and possess nothing.**

The works of mercy were a prominent aspect of the beguine vocation. The mystical journey is not undertaken for the sake of the individual soul but for the benefit of the community. Through a holy life the true Christian, and in particular the mystic, as one who is granted special graces from God, has the authority to bind and to free. This passage is reminiscent both of Christ's first sermon in Nazareth when, quoting Isaiah, he announced the freedom of the Messianic age, and his granting of authority to the apostles to forgive or to condemn sinners, understood subsequently as a prerogative of priesthood. It is probably not too far-fetched to see in this command an allusion to the corrupt clergy of Magdeburg. Like Hildegard of Bingen a generation earlier, Mechthild was concerned with 'cleaning-up' the abuses of the Church and, as with Hildegard, and her own younger contemporaries in the monastery of Helfta, she saw in mystical, visionary experience an alternative source of authority to that of ordination.

The reference to the 'water of suffering' in the following line can be understood on different levels. Water, and images of flowing are favourite symbols for Mechthild suggesting communion with the divine; indeed her book was called *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The juxtaposition of water and suffering call to mind the water that flowed from the side of the crucified Christ, the water of baptism, and the water mixed with the eucharistic wine with which it is associated, as well as the vocation of the Christian to imitate Jesus in his passion. As well as experiencing physical sufferings and voluntary austerity, Mechthild faced misunderstanding and persecution on account of her writing and

for her outspoken criticism of the clergy. In her works she often returns to the theme of innocent and substitutive suffering.

**And feed the fire of love with the fuel of virtue.**

Love for Mechthild was all-consuming. It burned the body as well as the soul or, as she herself put it:

Love penetrates the senses and storms the soul with all its  
power . . . Love melts through the soul and into the senses  
(5.4).

Another thirteenth-century beguine mystic, Hadewijch of Brabant, wrote of divine love in similarly intense and poetic language: 'I greet what I love with my heart's blood and my senses wither in love's fury' (Poems in couplets 15). This love must be fed with the fuel of virtue, but here we return to the problem facing all women in a patriarchal culture. Virtue, for Mechthild, lies above all in humility and obedience to the will of God. Lack of virtue is seen in self-will, obstinacy, anger and false-piety. In order to truly eliminate self-will and conform oneself to the image of God (to transcend the limitations of the human condition) one must have a firm sense of the self. For women, brought up to subordinate their own wishes and to see themselves as sinful, attaining an understanding of the self which is sufficiently redeemed to identify with the risen as well as with the suffering Christ, often involves a lifetime of struggle. For some women, such as Catherine of Siena, the need to find an autonomous and powerful self took the form of an anorectic battle in which her will sought to gain and maintain control of her body, a battle in which her own will triumphed as she starved herself, unable to allow the will of God to temper her own desperate striving for individuation and connection.<sup>2</sup> For others, among them Mechthild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, we can see a movement away from an identification of sinfulness with the incarnate world and towards an understanding of God's loving action within the created order, acting through the senses and conforming the will to the image of God through transformation rather than renunciation. Transcendence becomes not so much an ascent away from the body and from the world as a breaking out of the limitations of our ordinary existence: going beyond our limited vision and seeing God in all things. Beatrice of Nazareth, a Cistercian who was educated by beguines as a child, speaks of living on earth the life of angels (371-392), and Mechthild tells of making *a heaven on earth when we lead a holy life here below* (3.7)

In order to understand the context in which this type of spirituality emerged, the growth and development of the beguine movement and the impulses which lay behind its rapid expansion need to be examined. Some of the ways in which beguines differed from religious women in monasteries in their attitudes to life and in their spirituality, despite the many similarities and the fluidity of the boundaries between these different groups, must also be indicated. An appreciation of the meaning of self-transcendence for these women also involves some consideration of contemporary understandings of femininity. The destructive influences of patriarchal and misogynistic culture threw up their own agenda, constraining and determining the space within which women could operate and providing a background against which an understanding of the world was formed.

### **The Beguine Movement**

The origins of the beguine movement can be traced to the latter part of the twelfth century. This was a time of extraordinary religious enthusiasm and revival: the age of Francis (1181/2-1226) and Dominic (1170-1221), of monastic growth and of the crusades. Urban life in both northern and southern Europe was growing in complexity, and professional guilds increasingly dominated the craft professions. Caroline Walker Bynum has remarked that 'No period was ever busier creating structures for its piety than the twelfth century.' Amongst others, the Orders founded by Gilbert of Sempringham (c.1083-1189), and the wandering preacher Norbert of Xanten (c. 1080-1134), known respectively as the Gilbertines and the Premonstratensians, were attracting both men and women in large numbers. The communities following either the older Benedictine or Augustinian rules also continued to flourish. These Orders all found it easier to accommodate men than women and, having tried to ignore the presence of women, or to strictly limit and control their activities, there was, by the end of the twelfth century, a move to curb their enthusiasm for the monastic life and to prevent any new women's houses becoming affiliated to these Orders.

Religious fervour amongst twelfth century women is often related to what has become known by historians as the *frauenfrage* or 'woman question'. It appears that there was an excess of marriageable women in the populations of many European countries, perhaps due to the loss of men in petty local wars, the crusades, and the pursuit by large numbers of men of a celibate vocation as priests, monks and friars. With the development of the guilds, which sought to exclude women from practising their trades, independence for women became increasingly

difficult to achieve. The prospect of moving from the authority and control of a father to that of a husband, and of facing the dangers and rigours of marriage and successive child-bearing, seem to have persuaded many of those women for whom husbands were available to seek instead a celibate religious vocation. One of the earliest beguines, Marie of Oignies, was married at fourteen to a man chosen for her by her parents. However, she managed to convince her husband to take a vow of mutual chastity and to join her in working in a leper colony.

The Fourth Lateran council in 1215 brought to a close the period of proliferation of new monastic and other Rules, but inadvertently strengthened the type of lay religious life typified by the beguines. Never a religious order with a uniform Rule, a single founder or prescribed form of work or life style, the beguine movement fulfilled the desire of many women for a dedicated religious life outside the enclosure of a nunnery and free of the ties of husband and family; an option no longer always available at this time for political reasons or through lack of sufficient dowry. Beguines might live on their own, meeting other similarly-minded women for worship at a parish church, or to engage in social works or to enjoy a common meal. More often they sought to share their resources, buying houses together, which allowed a more communal form of life to develop. Larger groups of beguines lived in what were referred to as convents, housing anything from a dozen to a hundred women. Convents were often endowed by wealthy benefactors, male and female, to enable poor girls who were unable to bring a dowry or goods to the community to share in the beguine way of life. Both Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Brabant may have lived in beguine convents. Indeed, Hadewijch appears to have been beguine mistress with responsibility for the community until her presumed dismissal by a group of her co-beguines; an experience to which she refers continually and bitterly in her letters and other spiritual writings. The fullest development of the beguine way of life occurred in the Low Countries, where beguines formed separate villages within, or on the outskirts of larger towns. The majority of these settlements were built between 1230 and 1300, by which time virtually every major Flemish or southern Dutch town boasted the existence of one or more beguinages. Some of these beguinages were even given the status of separate parishes and consisted of a *church, cemetery, hospital, public square, streets and walks lined with convents for the younger sisters and well-to-do inhabitants*.<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of the fourteenth century the Great Beguinage at Ghent contained two churches, eighteen convents, over a hundred houses, a brewery and infirmary.<sup>4</sup>

The beguine attitude to life is remarkable for its apparent

moderation, although for a movement which incorporated such a wide variety of lifestyles over an extensive geographical area and long historical period it is difficult to generalise. When referring to beguine attitudes or describing their activities I am chiefly confining my attention to the Flemish beguinages of the later middle ages for which we have the most extensive records, although the German convents, such as those of Magdeburg, may well have had many features in common with the larger beguinages.

Beguines took no permanent vows but promised to remain celibate while living as beguines. They retained the use of private property, but were enjoined to live simply, eschewing either riches and luxury on the one hand or excessive poverty on the other. Whatever their background they sought to live by the work of their own hands. Many were engaged in the cloth industry, spinning, embroidering, bleaching and carding cloth, activities which brought them into conflict with the guilds, with whom they were never very popular. They also worked among the poor and the sick, and educated other people's children in the homes of wealthy families or in their beguine convents. We have records of beguines taking in laundry, working as priest's housekeepers and even begging, although the latter was strongly discouraged. Robert Grosseteste, the Bishop of Lincoln who in the 1220s and 30s taught at the Franciscan house in Oxford, is reported to have compared the beguines favourably with the Franciscans because by earning their own living they did not burden the world with their demands.<sup>5</sup>

At first the beguines dressed simply in the manner of poor townswomen (the term 'beguine' may refer to the simple gray undyed clothes they wore).<sup>6</sup> In time a habit was devised although, as with the beguine Rules, these were specific to each community and not generalised to other beguine groups. A beguine convent was entrusted to the care of one of the older women whose task it was to regulate the life and discipline of the house and to further the spiritual development of her charges. In the beguinages a Grand Mistress, with the help of a council, was responsible for the many administrative and religious aspects of community life. Local parish priests, or more often Dominican or Franciscan friars, acted as chaplains to beguine communities but, bearing in mind the antipathy to women's control in any aspect of later medieval life and the frequent attempts of bishops and papal delegates to impose their own regulations on these women, we appear to have in the beguines the closest we have come to a religious community run by and for women.

## **Religious Asceticism and medieval Attitudes to women**

John Malderus, Bishop of Antwerp in the early part of the seventeenth century, gave an appreciative account of the beguine life style, stressing its moderation and simplicity:

. . . it was a common capacity of many pious women in Belgium to rejoice in excellence rather than promise it. They preferred to remain chaste perpetually than to vow perpetual chastity. Likewise they were more eager to obey than to vow obedience, to cultivate poverty by frugal use of their fortunes than to abandon everything at once: they might be the kinder to the poor if something were left. They preferred to submit daily, as it were, to obedience within the enclosure than to be confined once and for all. In constant spontaneity they found compensation for perpetual claustration.<sup>7</sup>

Although perpetual claustration does not seem to have been a characteristic of the beguinages something of the spirit of the beguine way of life emerges from this description. When the religiously precocious and somewhat neurotic Christine of Stommeln (1242–1312) ran away from home to live with beguines in Cologne, they declined to see her trances, ecstasies and visions as signs of divine favour, regarding her claim that she was being plagued by devils as an indication more of mental derangement than of genuine spirituality, and they urged her to return to her parents.<sup>8</sup> These indications of a common-sense, balanced view of life (by twentieth century standards) does not, however, mean that medieval beguines were exempt from prevailing attitudes to female religiosity and to women in general which could encourage extreme asceticism and hysterical behaviour patterns. Eleanor McLaughlin (1979: 102) has argued that women's allegiance to God and the pursuit of holiness was a source of wholeness, meaning, power and authority for medieval nuns and lay women and extra-regulars like the beguines. Although to an extent this was the case, she glosses over the destructive elements of female piety and the strength of anti-woman feeling with which women had to contend. It is impossible to ascertain how widespread ascetic practices were among beguines, as those who wrote, or whose lives were recorded by others, are not necessarily typical of the movement as a whole. Male chroniclers, concerned to stress the sanctity of their subject, emphasised precisely those elements of suffering, mortification and self-control, which today would be considered to tend towards the pathological rather than the holy. Jacques de Vitry, who recorded the life of Marie of Oignies, wrote that, horrified by what she

considered to be the carnal pleasures of her past life, she

began to afflict herself and she found no rest in spirit until, by means of extraordinary bodily chastisement, she had made up for all the pleasures she had experienced in the past. In vehemence of spirit, almost as if she were inebriated, she began to loathe her body when she compared it to the sweetness of the Paschal Lamb and, with a knife, in error she cut out a large piece of her flesh which, from embarrassment, she buried in the earth.<sup>10</sup>

While we may note that whilst such extremes do not appear to have been applauded, Jacques de Vitry apparently approves of the beguines whose ecstatic encounter with Christ so overwhelmed them that for many years they rarely left their beds, becoming *deformed in body. but comforted and made strong in spirit*.<sup>11</sup>

A partial explanation for attitudes towards female sanctity is provided by Beatrice of Nazareth. For Beatrice illness, by which she chiefly meant insanity, was the essential lived metaphor for union with Christ.<sup>12</sup> The true self was the image of God within, and how better to discover this self than to model one's life upon and merge one's whole being with Christ. The most direct way of achieving this union was identification with Christ's passion. Beatrice even sought the advice of her confessor as to whether she should literally drive herself insane. Discouraged from this course of action she nevertheless developed such an intense eucharistic devotion that the reception of the sacrament almost killed, before it finally healed her. The fact that Beatrice, and many women like her, equated illness, passive suffering for others, self-inflicted mortifications and mutilation, with normal female spirituality requires further explanation.

From the classical period, through the middle ages to the Reformation and beyond, the physical, psychological and spiritual natures of human beings were all closely linked—a notion which is regaining ground today with a renewed search for a wholeness which integrates different aspects of ourselves and emphasises our unity with the rest of creation.



## BEGUINES TWO

### **The Four Elements and Humours**

One of the foundations of medieval science was the classical notion of the four elements (air, fire, earth and water) and their dual qualities (moisture, heat, dryness and coldness). The elements and qualities were associated with the points of the compass, the four seasons and with the four humours and temperaments of which human beings were constituted. Indeed, all living creatures were seen as a microcosm of the universal elements. Hildegard of Bingen expressed this notion succinctly:

. . . just as the four elements hold the world together, they also form the structure for the human body. Their distribution and function in the whole human being are such that they constantly sustain the person, just as they spread throughout all the rest of the world and have their effects. Fire, air, water and earth are in human kind, and humans consist of them. From fire they have the warmth of their bodies, from air they have their breath, from water they have their blood and from earth their bodies.<sup>13</sup>

Health depended upon maintaining a balance between the four elements and, according to Hildegard, on a right relationship with the natural world. Men and women, however, were thought to possess these elements in varying proportions, men being predominantly hot and dry and women cold and moist. The left and right sides of the body were also believed to vary in their possession of these qualities, the left (the *sinistra* or 'sinister' side) being associated with the female and the right side with the male. Dryness and heat were thought to be prerequisites for the production of male children and of sperm. A child conceived by the right testicle and womb would therefore be male, by the left side, female. Only men, being hotter and dryer, could produce sperm, a substance accorded almost divine status by Aristotle. The male sperm, as the finer, active ingredient in conception, was in every way superior to female products, and the possibility of women being more than passive receptacles of the male seed was widely debated over many centuries. When the notion of a female contribution to conception was finally accepted there were men who cautioned against disseminating this information, so powerful a tool in female subjugation had prevailing biological and theological attitudes become that they feared women's continual desire to dominate should the truth be known.<sup>14</sup>

For Aristotle only the male, produced by a hotter active force, could be regarded as 'normal', women, being *weaker and colder by nature* were considered a *deformity . . . though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature*.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas took up this theme, regarding men alone as bearers of the true likeness of God, women being 'defective and misbegotten'.<sup>16</sup> Heat, a quality of the male, was thought necessary to purify the body products which would otherwise poison the individual and those with whom they came into contact. The whiteness of semen was due to the purification of the blood, from which it was derived. Women's menstrual blood remained as it was because women were too cold to complete the process of purification. The retention of menstrual blood was seen as particularly damaging and the blood itself was greatly feared as a source of pollution. Albert the Great claimed that the eye, a passive organ, received menstrual fluid during a women's period which could be transmitted via the air, infecting everything the woman looked at. Popular belief held that at this time a mirror would become clouded with a blood-red colour and both venereal disease and leprosy were sometimes attributed to menstrual contagion.

Both virgins and post-menopausal women were thought to retain the poisonous substances in their bodies making them particularly dangerous. This link between the elderly and female pollution is made explicitly by one medieval writer who claimed that:

. . . the retention of the menses engenders many evil humours, and these women, being old, have almost no natural heat left to consume and control this smatter, especially poor women, who live off nothing but coarse meat, which greatly contributes to this phenomenon. These women are more venomous than others.<sup>17</sup>

This type of thinking, which stated that women by virtue of their physiological processes are in fact deformed, sick and dangerous, lay behind the witchcraft purges and have been used to justify male fears and mistreatment of women.

From what has gone before it might be thought that married women would find it easier to develop a positive attitude towards themselves and their bodies, but the teachings of the Church Fathers and of medieval churchmen, with their extreme ambivalence towards sexuality and in particular female sexuality, did not encourage a balanced view of marriage or of sexual activity. Jerome, a Latin Father much quoted in the middle ages, wrote to a woman contemplating a second marriage:

You have already learned the miseries of marriage. It is like unwholesome food, and now that you have relieved your heaving stomach of its bile, why should you return to it again like a dog to its vomit.<sup>18</sup>

Intercourse was justified by reference to procreation. Pleasure derived from the sex act was regarded necessary for fertility, but excessive pleasure was sinful. Both the courtly imagery of the troubadours and the bawdier popular *fabliaux* depicted wives as adulterous, deceptive and controlling. In these largely male sources women are exalted or derided, but usually succeed in indulging their desires unchecked. The reality was otherwise. In thirteenth century Spanish law a husband or fiance could kill a woman and her lover and 'pay no fine for the homicide, nor be sentenced to death'. In thirteenth century France the law stated that: '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 or maims her, it is legal for a man to beat his wife when she wrongs him.'<sup>19</sup>

As the cult of the Virgin Mary gathered momentum in the thirteenth century, so ordinary women were seen as Eve, sinful and impure by their natures and through their behaviour. It is no wonder that neither marriage nor celibacy enabled women to feel good about themselves, and that so much effort was expended in seeking to transcend the essential female condition in the *imitatio Christi*.

### **Transcendence and incarnation: the search for integration**

In the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg we find a distaste of the body and a longing to abandon it, together with a recognition that through the incarnation Christ has in fact redeemed the body. More than this, it is through the body, the senses, that God can be 'tasted' and enjoyed. This ambivalence is very common among medieval women mystical writers, although each one has a slightly different nuance. Mechthild refers to her body as a 'dead dog' and describes it as something 'horrible' or 'disgusting' (*egesclisch*). The 'manifold wickedness of the body is given as 'a good reason to die' (bk 6, critical text p.236). The body is her 'enemy' and its impoverishment is contrasted to the enrichment of the soul (book 2). Towards the end of her life, however, Mechthild writes of a touching and revealing conversation between the agonised body and the banished soul in which the body asks the soul:

When you fly with your wings of desire to the blissful

heights, to Jesus your eternal love, then thank him for me my Lady, my mistress, for although I am wretched and unworthy he wished to be mine when He came into this place of misery and assumed our humanity.

The soul in return thanks the body, in recognition that it was as a human being in bodily form that Christ won our salvation and that without the body the soul cannot be saved. (Book 7, p. 310). At the Last Day the soul will receive back the body which has endured 60 much pain and misery while on earth.

Hadewijch, throughout her writings, which consist of letters of advice to young beguines, of poems and of visionary dramas, reveals a desire to discover and unite with Jesus in his humanity. As Bynum expressed it (quoting Mommaers and Reynaert), not for Hadewijch *an ecstatic transcending of humanness but a joining with Jesus' "concrete disconcerting. human Humanity"*. In one of her letters to a young beguine whom she was urging along the path of spiritual perfection, Hadewijch wrote:

This is how everyone today loves themselves: they want to live with God in consolation, in wealth and in splendour, and to share in the delight of his glory. We all wish to be God with God. But, God knows, there are few enough of us who want to live as men and women with his humanity or to bear his cross with him, and to be crucified with him in order to pay for the sins of the whole world.

The sense of living with an incarnational God is therefore very strong, but to live in this way is to travel the path of suffering. It is the crucified God who attracts Hadewijch.

The way of the cross and identification with Christ's passion is not, however, an end in itself. Although Hadewijch often uses intensely erotic and sensual language to describe her relationship with God she also displays a sense of balance in her spiritual life which is, perhaps, a characteristic of her beguine environment. Masochistic suffering is not mystical union, but in our earthly sufferings we can identify with God who took on human flesh, trusting in God's love in the circumstances of everyday life, while rejoicing in the eternal Godhead. The incarnation also implies that God is present in those around us, so that to truly love God one must serve one's neighbour. Hadewijch's letter continues with these lines:

You should live on earth with the humanity of God when you experience suffering and troubles, while inwardly loving and rejoicing with the almighty and eternal Godhead in sweet abandonment. In both these truths there lies a single delight. And just as the humanity of Christ on earth yielded to the will of both together. Serve humbly under their one power, standing always before them as one who follows their will in its entirety. And let them do with you whatever they will. Do not involve yourself with anything else. But serve the humanity with ready and faithful hands and with a will firm in all virtues.

Hadewijch continues by describing the ecstasy of love and the conjunction of the lover with God, but before this can happen both service in the works of virtue and suffering in the form of total obedience are necessary. In this way Love can take her rightful place in the lover and among all creatures. This, says Hadewijch, is to hang on the cross with Christ, to die with him and to rise again with him (Letters 6)

### **Beguine Spirituality and the Nuns of Helfta**

Women seem to have moved fairly freely between different communities and states of life. Widows might become beguines or enter a monastic community, individual beguines became Cistercian nuns and, as a result of persecution and church politics whole beguine convents sometimes adopted the habit of Dominican Tertiaries, or were expelled from their houses and forced into marriage. It is invidious in these circumstances to attempt to draw any clear distinction between beguine and monastic forms of spirituality, but Bynum has pointed to some interesting differences between the writings of Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn, women who entered the Cistercian monastery of Helfta as children, and Mechthild of Magdeburg who fled there in around 1270 to escape her persecutors, after forty or so years as a beguine.

For Mechthild of Magdeburg the equation of the male with spirit and the female with matter, and the centrality of femaleness as a symbol of our lowliness and otherness from God—an otherness that cries out for complementing by the bridegroom and therefore makes intimate union possible contrasts with the more self-assured writings of the two younger women mystics. Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude use both 'masculine' and 'feminine' imagery for God. The feminine can be seen as disciplining and stern and the masculine as nurturing and gentle,

and there is no suggestion of stereotyped masculine and feminine roles. As Bynum comments:

It is not surprising that Mechthild of Magdeburg, who grew up in the world and fled from it into a quasi-religious role that left her open to misunderstanding, should show in her religious imagery and awareness of the world's opinion that females are lowly, powerless, without learning or authority, and in need of complementation.<sup>720</sup>

A similar parallel could be drawn between the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, who had lived with Benedictines from the age of eight, and her contemporary, Heloise, who was educated by the gifted Peter Abelard and exposed to the misogynistic influences of the medieval schoolroom. While both women show an awareness of the lowly position of women, Hildegard celebrates femininity with glorious triumphalism which does not betray an internalisation of the lessons of a male-oriented culture to the same extent as with Heloise.

Women's monastic communities could therefore provide a safe space for women, in which a surer sense of the self, made in the image of God and not merely a 'defect of nature' and 'misbegotten male', could be nurtured. For the beguines, always living half in the world, a greater accommodation with the dominant culture was inescapable. The lack of claustration and the independence afforded by beguine status was both one of the attractions of this way of life and one of its dangers. The beguines were never without their detractors. Neither married women nor nuns their behaviour and spirituality were suspect. As an anomalous group who had apparently eluded male control they were always vulnerable to accusations of debauchery or of heresy, or sometimes of both. From within, however, the beguine way of life provided a large number of medieval women with a model of sanctity and a means of support which enabled them to transcend the externally imposed limits on female nature and to identify with an incarnate God in whose service they lived out their vocation.

- 1 Quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from Oliver Davies' translations in Fiona Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality an Anthology* (London, 1990)
- 2 Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago, 1985) Chapter 1.
- 3 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 1984) p. 109.
- 4 E. McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Jersey, 1954) p. 479.
- 5 R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Penguin Books, 1970) p. 320.

- 6 Fiona Bowie, *Hildegard of Bingen: An Anthology* (London, 1990) p 12.
- 7 Quoted in McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, p 122.
- 8 See McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*. p 445.
- 9 E. McLaughlin, 'Women, Power and the Pursuit of Holiness' in ed. R. Ruether and E. McLaughlin *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Tradition* p 102.
- 10 Jacques de Vitry, 'Life of Mary of Oignies' quoted in ed. E.A. Petroff *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (Oxford, 1986) p. 7.
- 11 Quoted in Shulamit Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London and New York, 1990) p 59.
- 12 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp 161 ff.
- 13 *Causae et Curae* 49, 29, quoted in Bowie and Davies p 29.
- 14 Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition* (New York, 1980) pp 51–52.
- 15 Aristotle, On the Generation of Animals quoted in Gies and Gies p. 50.
- 16 Summa Theologiae Ia Q 92 ad i.
- 17 D Jacquart and C Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Polity Press, 1988) pp. 74–75.
- 18 quoted in Jane Barr, 'The Influence of Saint Jerome on Medieval Attitudes to Women', in ed. J Martin Soskice *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition* (London, 1990) pp. 89–102.
- 19 Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 46.
- 20 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, pp 244–45.

## Do Whales have Souls?

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Do whales have souls and if so what follows? How would Catholic theology have to change if it was discovered that whales were as rational as you or I? If whales have souls can they become Catholics?

For a traditional Catholic, to have a soul, in latin *anima*, is to be animate, to be alive. Having a soul is having a certain form, a certain organisation such that one can move oneself. One part moves another so that the whole moves itself. This self-moving quality, shown in the processes of nutrition, growth and reproduction, is common to all living things. To be alive is to have a soul. St. Thomas Aquinas would affirm that all living things from cabbages to whales, so long as they were