

HER STORY

WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN
TRADITION



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CHAPTER 3

VIRGIN AND WITCH: WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

The images of women that emerge in medieval literature were shaped to a large extent by monks, bishops, and noblemen who comprised that small percentage of the population that was literate. Images of women in both secular and church writings oscillate between two extreme positions which historians have described as “the pit and the throne.” On the one hand, women are denounced in strong terms as wicked and inferior. This virulent misogyny (a hatred and distrust of women) reached its peak in the witch craze which swept across Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, women are praised, idealized, and adored in the symbol of the Virgin Mary and as the courtly lady in the popular tales of chivalry.

Many medieval theologians repeat some of the main ideas on women found in the church fathers. Thomas Aquinas, for example, claimed that woman was created as subordinate and inferior to man. Not only was she second in the order of creation, but she was endowed with less intellectual capability and, consequently, less ability to make right moral decisions. Aquinas and others also propagated the belief that women were more sensual than men and more oriented toward the functions and appetites of the human body. Based on the revival of certain Greek ideas, Aquinas added that women were “defective” human beings. They were the result of an accident to the male sperm which would always produce another male under normal circumstances.

A fear of women and their power to cause lust and sin in men permeated not only theology but popular piety as well. Stories about adulterous wives far outnumbered those of unfaithful husbands. Books of “wicked wives” detailed all the women in the Bible and in history who had led men astray. The widespread vices of women were constantly stressed as well as

the need to keep women under control in church and society. The monastic literature frequently portrayed women as talking too much, causing discord, loving gold, and being disloyal. Literature addressed to young women urged them to honor and obey their husbands, even when their husbands were evil. Church law specifically permitted wife beating as a way to control female corruption and disobedience.

A few positive attitudes toward women did find their way into medieval theology. Aquinas and others stressed that women, although inferior, had been given the important task of procreation by God. Some theologians also insisted that men and women have rational souls and that in the future kingdom of God, male and female would be "equivalent." The institution of marriage itself was also given a slightly more positive character. Marriage was increasingly described as a "sacrament" which conferred God's grace upon those bound in it. Virginity, however, was still applauded as the best life style for women since it dissociated them from sexuality and therefore from evil.

THE LIFE OF VIRGINITY AND CHASTITY

The Growth of Asceticism

By the end of the third century, a growing number of Christians were adopting a life style of asceticism. They denied themselves physical pleasures such as eating and warmth, doing only what was necessary to stay alive. They practiced voluntary poverty and complete abstinence from sexual relations. This "practice" or "exercise" of self-discipline (from which the word "asceticism" comes) was seen as both a good preparation for martyrdom and a way to a more holy or perfect life in the eyes of God. Less time and resources spent in the preparation of food and on personal appearance meant more time and resources for prayer, worship, and acts of charity. Some Christians also believed that the kingdom of God and the end of time would be brought nearer if the followers of Jesus practiced self-denial.

Christian ascetics looked to the biblical tradition to justify their life style. The Old Testament does recommend periods of fasting and sexual abstinence, but overall it applauds the goodness of the created world and married life. In the examples and teachings of Jesus and Paul, however, the ascetics believed that they found strong support. Jesus told his disciples that they must deny themselves and follow him. His life was one of a poor nomad who had no possessions and who lived a life of complete chastity. Paul frequently spoke of the need to quell the passions of the flesh. He endured nakedness and cold for the gospel and, above all, he counseled that

celibacy is preferable to marriage. Christian asceticism gained further impetus from prevalent philosophies in Greco-Roman culture. Some of these philosophies not only advised the avoidance of physical pleasure, but they also expressed a contempt for the material world as evil which went far beyond biblical teachings.

Monastic and Domestic Asceticism

Many women as well as men adopted the ascetic way of life in the Christian community. Some were widows who vowed to live in perfect chastity and self-denial for the remainder of their lives. Others were married women who persuaded their husbands to relinquish sexual relations and live together in chastity. Still others were young unmarried women who eventually were referred to as "virgins." The virgins are occasionally mentioned in writings from the second century but it was not until the following century that they were recognized as a special order within the community. They were not ordained to their role since virginity was not seen as an office bestowed by the church but rather one that was privately and voluntarily chosen. The women made a private vow to live the virgin life, although this vow was complemented by a public ritual in later church history.

The virgins were regarded as special symbols for the union of Christ with the church. They were called the "brides" or "spouses" of Christ because they had entered into a mystical union with him. A virgin who broke her vow was considered to be guilty of adultery in both church law and civil law. In some places, she was punished by death. An illustration of this understanding of virginity comes from the life of Macrina, a leader of one of the earliest communities of women ascetics. She lived a chaste life with no possessions and was buried in a beautiful wedding gown at the time of her death.

Christianity was established as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. The churches filled with members who had only a passing or halfhearted interest in Christianity. The ascetic life became an attractive option for those who wished to escape from lax standards of faith and practice. Women again opted for the ascetic life which was taking several distinctive forms. Women became hermits, virgins in their own homes, partners in "spiritual marriages," and members of monastic communities.

Domestic Asceticism. Many women chose to live the life of chastity in their own homes. This was a particularly attractive option for wealthy women who could remain in seclusion on their estates or gather around them female friends, relatives, and servants of a similar spirit. Early Chris-

tian pastors and theologians were concerned with the problems the "virgins of the world" faced. They dispensed advice on the kind of company these women should keep, the clothes they should wear in order to avoid attention, and the strategy they should use in dealing with family pressure to marry. Women with property faced subtle and sometimes violent attempts to persuade them to abandon their vows and prevent family wealth from passing into the hands of the church.

The Monastic Community. The ancient historian Palladius records that there were some twenty thousand women living in poverty, chastity, and solitude in the desert surrounding Egypt. Whatever the actual numbers, the life of the desert hermit was less frequently chosen than the organized community life of the monastery. From the fourth century on, monasteries for women proliferated throughout the Christian world. Some shared a roof with a male community, others were separate but close to male monasteries, and some existed on their own. The monastery became a popular option for virgin women as Christian history unfolded. In it, women lived under the authority of a superior or leader and according to certain regulations of life style set out in the monastic "rule." One such rule was developed for men and women who lived in two monastic communities in Egypt. It illustrates the daily life and responsibilities of some four hundred women in this particular group. The women spent most of their time in a routine of worship, prayer, and Scripture study. These contemplative tasks which had been done by the widows in the churches were gradually taken over in the monastic communities. Also, the women made their own clothing and clothing for their male counterparts across the river. Many other female communities shared this basic division of the day into periods for household tasks and periods for devotion.

The Spiritual Marriage. Another life style chosen by women was the "spiritual marriage" in which a man and a woman committed to a life of chastity shared the same house and sometimes the same bed. The couple engaged in an intimate but not sexual relationship. There are many condemnations of this practice in the writings of early bishops and theologians and many church councils forbid it right through the Middle Ages. The assumption of course was that men and women could not cohabit and at the same time be faithful to their vows of chastity. Yet these "spiritual marriages" met a need for women who did not live near a monastery and who were not wealthy in their own right. They could, in this arrangement, depend on a man of similar ideals to provide a livelihood and some protection. Also, the *agapatae* (as Jerome called these women) seemed to share a deep friendship with their male partners which Greco-Roman culture be-

lieved to be impossible between men and women. They raise for the Christian community the possibility of relationships between men and women that are other than sexual and yet still intimate and compassionate.

Power and Autonomy in the Virgin Life

The ascetic life offered women certain opportunities for choice, freedom, and participation from which they were excluded in church and society. In practical terms, communal life gave women physical protection both from the risks of childbearing and from the risks of living alone in a society that became increasingly unstable and dangerous as the rule of Rome disintegrated.

Throughout Christian history, the ascetic life also often gave women freedom to travel. The rules that disapproved of women traveling on their own changed for those who went on pilgrimages or in the name of religious devotion. Melania the Younger, for example, traveled throughout Italy, North Africa, Egypt, and Palestine. The Holy Land was a favorite destination. Wherever these ascetic women traveled, they were greeted with honor and gifts.

The Abbesses. The monasteries for women were also headed by women, giving them an opportunity to exercise authority and leadership within the institutional sphere of the Christian community. The list of women in this capacity begins with individuals such as Paula, the associate of Jerome, and the sister of Augustine, and extends throughout Christian history. The medieval abbesses, however, most clearly illustrate the temporal (relating to the affairs of this world) as well as spiritual power that the monastic life offered to women.

The abbess usually headed a group of women living the monastic life under some form of the rule designed by Saint Benedict in the sixth century. In countries such as England and northern France, they frequently headed "double" monasteries of men and women. In many places, they enjoyed the same powers and privileges as abbots, bishops, and noblemen. They sat in parliaments, attended church councils, and signed official church decrees. They oversaw the affairs of the clergy and lay people who lived on the often vast lands owned by the abbey, and they answered only to the Pope in Rome, not to the local bishop who had no jurisdiction over their territory (this is the origin of the term "exempt order"). The word "ordination" is sometimes used to describe the consecration of an abbess. Although she was not given the power to administer the sacraments, she was given the same signs of high office that a bishop received. These included a ring, mitre (a special headdress worn by bishops and abbots), and crozier (a staff resembling a shepherd's crook carried by bishops and ab-

bots as a symbol of office). In addition to offering spiritual guidance, the abbesses heard the confessions of those in their charge and, despite the wrath of the church hierarchy, even administered penance and granted absolution for sins.

The power of the abbess declined, however, in the later Middle Ages. Double monasteries were closed, their "ordination" became a blessing, and they gradually came under the authority of local bishops. This decline can be attributed in part to a resurgence of patriarchy in Renaissance culture, with its admiration for ancient Greece and Rome, and in the writings of the Protestant Reformers. This tendency reached its zenith, for the abbesses, in the 1563 decree of the Council of Trent. The exempt female orders were either to join a male order with a male superior or come under the jurisdiction of the local bishop as a delegate of the Pope. Some exempt orders did continue in France, but they were abolished during the aftermath of the French Revolution.¹

Power Through Piety and Learning. Ascetic women also held positions of authority in a less formal and institutional manner. By virtue of their holiness and personal piety, women were treated frequently with respect and deference by the whole community, including men of high standing among the clergy. Eleanor McLaughlin has described these women as being "empowered" by their holiness.² This power was often believed to take concrete form in the ability to perform miracles. Lioba, an eighth-century English ascetic, is recorded as having calmed a storm and healed the sick in her community. She was honored by bishops, nobles, princes, and even the emperor Charlemagne.

Power stemming from a holy life also took shape in the ability to acquire great learning which also attracted men of authority within the church. The ascetic life gave women the opportunity to study and it rewarded them for intellectual achievement. Melania the Younger acquired a formidable theological education, debated doctrine, and taught an array of men and women including the emperor Theodosius. Marcella became an expert on the Bible in Rome and aided the clergy with their dilemmas of translation and interpretation. Lioba was skilled in classical philosophy, theology, and canon law. This erudition, claims one historian, gave her an almost magical authority and prompted the bishop Boniface to seek her help in bringing order to the missionary churches in Germany.

A Chance to Choose. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the ascetic life gave women an opportunity to exercise free choice and a basis for rejecting the demand that they marry and bear children for the sake of the patriarchal clan. The decision to lead a chaste life was an autonomous one

in a society that left little up to the preference of women. Although not all families objected to such a decision, many women experienced family pressures to conform to tradition and many women protested by appealing to the authority of God. In medieval France, for example, Saint Burgundofara hid in a basilica when her father wanted to betroth her. When Saint Maxelinda insisted on keeping her vow of chastity even after her marriage, her husband tried to rape and abduct her and eventually murdered her. The experiences of Christina of Markyate provide one of the fullest accounts of a woman's protest and initiative.

Christina, the daughter of an English nobleman, was born at the end of the eleventh century. An account of her life describes her marriage to Burchred despite the fact that she had made a vow to be a virgin when she was thirteen. She refused, however, to consummate the marriage, which was forced on her by her parents. She escaped several plots by her husband and family to lure her into the marriage bed. Once, when her bedroom was invaded by Burchred and his drunken friends, she avoided them by hanging by her fingertips between the bed curtains and the wall. Although Christina initially had the support of the bishop, even he began to pressure her into relenting after receiving a bribe from Christina's father. She eventually escaped from her home disguised as a boy and took up the life of a hermit. Within the medieval Christian community, she became recognized as a woman of power and authority that extended far beyond the confines of her cell.

Medieval Restrictions. The eleventh and twelfth centuries brought a new enthusiasm for Christianity to medieval Europe. One aspect of this revival was a movement to reform the old established monastic orders and to create new orders which emphasized poverty and public preaching reminiscent of the life style of Jesus and his disciples. During this period, a large number of women were attracted to the monastic life. They met with a variety of responses, generally negative, when they tried to open female monasteries under the authority of the reformed and new orders. This negative response was caused largely by the church's views on the nature and role of women.

Some of the new orders initially welcomed women but very quickly abandoned their enthusiasm. The Cistercians (an order established in France in the eleventh century which revived a strict obedience to the monastic rule of St. Benedict) believed that the female sex was not capable of obeying the austere rules and attaining the level of perfection demanded by the order. The Dominicans and Franciscans both had a tradition of encouraging the spirituality of women but soon began to repel any attempts by women to open convents under their rules and ministered to by their

members. Economic reasons were sometimes given: the men would have to support these new groups of women financially since they frequently came from the lower classes of society and were without wealthy patrons. The argument that close association with women was dangerous to the spiritual well-being of the monks, however, was more evident. As one official document from a new religious order (the Premonstratensians) claimed, "The poisons of vipers and dragons are healthier and less harmful for men than familiarity with women. . . ."³³

Some of the new orders that emphasized the public preaching of the gospel, such as that at Fontevrault in France, did welcome women as members but opened convents for them which prevented them from having any contact with the outside world. Obviously, this strategy excluded women from evangelical preaching, which was one of the main activities of the order. There was a growing insistence in the medieval church that women leading the virgin life be locked securely away behind cloistered walls. This opinion was based on the belief that women would easily give in to sexual temptation and would compromise those men with whom they came into contact. Cloistering had long been recommended in some places but in 1299 Pope Boniface VIII tried to impose it upon the whole church. Strict rules were laid down regarding the conversations a monastic woman could have with outsiders as well as the occasions on which she could leave the convent. The Catholic Church tried to enforce this general policy well into the twentieth century.

In some instances, those women who wished to pursue a life of poverty and active mission but who had been refused by the new religious orders joined the Beguines. The Beguines were loosely organized groups of women which emerged mainly in urban areas. The women involved did not take formal vows but did adopt a chaste and simple style of living. They ministered to the poor and sick but despite their good works, the church regarded them with suspicion. Their informality placed them outside the disciplinary structures of the institution and their emphasis on righteous living and a personal relationship to Christ associated them with movements that the church was trying to eliminate.

Ambiguous Space. While the life of chastity and austerity presented new opportunities for power and participation, it did not always have an overall positive effect on the status of women. The monastic community, in fact, represents a somewhat "ambiguous" space for women.⁴ It did not, for example, open up the office of priest and bishop to women. It also suffered from the deep-rooted tendency of the churches to value the writings and lives of the male ascetics above the lives and works of the women. Eleanor McLaughlin suggests that there was a profound difference be-

tween the experiences of men and women who entered the religious order.⁵ While men were expected to deny themselves sexual experiences, they retained their masculine nature which society defined as superior mental and spiritual capacities. Women, however, were expected to erase their female natures which were closely identified with the functions of procreation. They were encouraged to become "like a man" in their anticipation of the kingdom of God by developing rationality, loyalty, and courage. Also, the celebration of the virgin life tended to degrade women who were not prepared to erase their femaleness and who continued to be wives and mothers. Finally, we are left to ponder whether the monastic ideals of self-denial and self-effacement were appropriate for human beings who had few occasions for pride. The monastic life, in reality, may have hindered the self-development and independence of women and instead reinforced the traits of passiveness and dependence.

MEDIEVAL MARGOLOGY

In contrast to the image of woman as evil seductress, the church as well as medieval society also placed woman on a throne or pedestal as a paragon of virtue and piety. The idealized woman, however, was not a sexual creature. In secular tales of courtly love and chivalry, this image comes across forcefully. In these stories, a beautiful, pure woman is adored by a male lover (not her husband) who in turn is inspired to do great acts of heroism for his lady. No sexual encounter is involved, only spiritual love. The woman stood in a superior position and encouraged morality, patience, and humility in her lover. The church of course had its counterpart to the lady of courtly love in the figure of the Virgin Mary. Especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the mother of Jesus commanded great devotion and adoration and inspired holy living in many Christians.

Evolution of an Image

The New Testament provides very little information on Mary in contrast to the rich body of story and theology which had accumulated around her by the medieval period. The earliest biblical reference, Gal. 4:4, does not mention Mary directly, but only states that Jesus was born of a woman. Acts 1:14 places her in the community of Christians but the Gospel references describe her relationship to Jesus as ambiguous and peculiar. In some passages, the relationship appears to be tinged with hostility (Mark 3:31-35; John 2:1-11). Only in John's Gospel (19:25-27) does Mary play a role in the last events of Jesus' life.

Luke and Matthew both include Mary in their accounts of the birth of Jesus, but only Luke makes her the center of the drama. Both accounts re-

veal Mary as an ordinary Palestinian woman who is obedient to the will of God. Both accounts also identify Mary as a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth and they imply that his conception was miraculous. Scholars disagree about the source of this idea which was well established in Christian circles by the time the Gospels were written. It may have come from the Greek version of the Book of Isaiah which prophesied that "a virgin will conceive and bear a son." It may have been borrowed from Greco-Roman culture which ascribed virgin births to its great heroes and leaders to illustrate their divine origins. In any case, for the early church, the virgin birth was probably used to show that Jesus was chosen by God and that he shared both a divine and human nature. It was more a statement about Jesus than about Mary. There is no conclusive biblical evidence that Mary remained a virgin for the duration of her life. That question would be posed by a later age.

In the second century, a cluster of theological ideas and stories about Mary began to grow. Mary's nature and role became the object of intellectual speculation and Mary herself became the focal point of popular devotion. This "cult" of the Virgin Mary was fully developed by the twelfth century. Mary was the Christian counterpart of the romantic lady in medieval tales of chivalry. The cult of Mary was influenced by a number of things: biblical imagery that portrayed Israel as the bride of God and the church as the bride of Christ, pre-Christian goddess worship, and the theological debates over the nature of Jesus.

The virginity of Mary quickly emerged as an essential feature of theology and popular piety. This was especially true as the ascetic lifestyle became more popular. As sexuality became associated with sin, it was necessary to remove sexual relations from the origins of Jesus as the sinless Son of God. Also, those who supported the virgin life used Mary to show that God had placed a seal of approval on chastity.

Virginity was extended from the conception of Jesus to his birth and to Mary's entire life as Christian theology developed. Mary became the perpetual virgin who gave birth to a child without having the seal of her womb, or hymen, broken and who remained a virgin until her death. These ideas were spread by an early Christian book, the *Book of James*, which included many stories about the birth, childhood, and adult life of Mary. Joseph, for example, is portrayed as a widower to explain the existence of the brothers of Jesus in the New Testament.

Apart from virginity, one of the earliest images associated with Mary was that of the New Eve. Mary, it was said, reversed what Eve had done. Eve had broken God's commandments and passed sin and death on to her offspring. Mary, however, was obedient to God and brought redemption to the world through the birth of Jesus. She was the spiritual mother of

Christians who were participants in God's new creation. Mary also represented the whole church or community of believers in her obedience and faith. Both as the New Eve and as the symbol for the church or bride of Christ, Mary took her place in art and literature as the spouse and consort of Jesus who reigned in heaven.

Historians believe that when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it was profoundly affected by the beliefs and customs of pre-Christian religions which had been practiced by the new converts. Many of these ancient religions worshiped a mother goddess who was the source of all life and the one from whom the earth, all living creatures, and even the gods themselves derived their being. This goddess devotion may have been transferred to Mary with the coming of Christianity. Particularly, it may be the source of the image of Mary as the Mother of God. This image was reinforced by a strong theological view that said that the divine and human natures of Jesus were intertwined such that it was possible to speak of Mary as the mother of God (God-bearer) and not merely as the mother of the Christ. Mary is still regarded in some agricultural communities as the source of fertility for land and people and the source of good fortune and good weather.

After the first few centuries of Christian history, it became increasingly common to see Jesus as a terrifying judge who was far removed from humanity in his heavenly domain. He was concerned more with punishment for sin rather than with mercy and love. Mary therefore began to assume the role of mediator, speaking on behalf of Christians before God. It was believed that since she had been a human mother, she would not turn away even the most wicked child. She would plead for grace on behalf of all who came to her and God and Jesus would hear her petitions. As a mediator of grace, Mary became an adored figure in the religious life of ordinary people. They flocked to her shrines, built chapels in her honor, and celebrated the special events in her life with festivals and processions.

Although they did not become official doctrines of the Catholic Church until the modern era, two important theological ideas about Mary had emerged by the twelfth century. One was that Mary had been taken up bodily or "assumed" into heaven at the time of her death. She existed, just like God the Father and the Son, in a heavenly realm where she could mediate for believers on earth. This doctrine of the assumption nurtured the image of Mary as the queen of heaven who reigned over the hosts of heaven at the right hand of Christ. Medieval art is resplendent with scenes of the Virgin with crown and jewels, displaying the signs of royal office.

The other idea about Mary evolved eventually into the doctrine of her immaculate conception. The church believed that although Mary was fully human and the product of sexual relations which passed on original sin,

God had cleansed her from this sin at the moment of her conception. God also preserved her from any additional sin during her lifetime. In this way she provided a pure, sinless womb for Jesus.

Mary and the Status of Women

What significance has Mary had for the status of women in the Christian community? Her presence has certainly provided a feminine dimension in a tradition dominated by masculine symbolism for the divine. For many Christian women, Mary has also reinforced the idea that the virgin or chaste life is most pleasing in the eyes of God. This belief, as we have already seen, has had both a liberating and oppressive effect on women. Women as virgins did gain a measure of freedom and equality with men but only by learning to loathe their sexuality and female natures. But although Mary was a woman, the circumstances of her life could not be duplicated by ordinary women. The birth of Jesus was without pain, marriage was without the sexual union of two bodies, and death did not mean the decay of her flesh. After her death, Mary took on the role of queen with the exceptional honor and luxury that implied. Even when a more human vision of Mary developed in popular literature, it simply reinforced traditional ideas about women. In the popular stories, Mary polishes the ornaments in the temple, becomes hysterical at the crucifixion, and is soft-hearted rather than logical when dealing with sinful human beings. She deserves to be venerated because she was submissive and obedient. According to Marina Warner, there is a definite correlation between the popularity of Mary and the low status of women in past and contemporary cultures.⁸

WOMAN AS WITCH

Popular and Official Attitudes

Toward Witchcraft

Toward the end of the fifteenth century in Europe, a detailed picture of the nature and activities of witches took form in the minds of church authorities, government officials, and ordinary people. At the heart of this image was the widespread belief that witches were people who had made pacts with the devil. They promised to worship the devil, be his sexual partner, and renounce the Christian faith. It was believed that, in exchange, witches gained the power to inflict harm on their neighbors through the practice of magic or sorcery. Witches were said to cause crop failure, illness, and even death. Particularly, it was believed that they had special powers over the procreation of children through their abilities to

cause impotence, infertility, and abortion. Finally, many people believed that witches were able to fly through the air to attend group orgies where they worshiped the devil, ate the bodies and blood of children (mimicking the Christian Eucharist), and indulged their sexual appetites. At these orgies, as well as at home, it was said that the witches surrounded themselves with small animals or "familiar" which were really demons in disguise.

Historians generally believe that this picture of the witch existed only in the minds and writings of people and never in reality.⁹ Throughout the Middle Ages, some village people did practice popular magic and healing, and fragments of Greek and Roman religious practices persisted in medieval Europe. These activities, however, were a far cry from the full-blown image of witch as it emerged in Christian history. The image of the witch was a product of folklore, ancient non-Christian religious traditions, and medieval Christian theology. People were accused of worshipping the devil and acquiring supernatural powers. They confessed—under torture—and thus a body of evidence accumulated that the church could use to crusade against witchcraft as a danger to the faith and the social order.

Up until the thirteenth century, the church in Europe had ambivalent feelings toward witchcraft. Some churchmen argued that since God alone controlled natural events, it was impossible for human beings to do so through magic and sorcery. Something that did not exist could not be punished. Others argued that the Bible itself recognized the powers available to some people through sorcery and communion with evil spirits (Exod. 22:18; Acts 13:6–12) and condemned it in the strongest terms. Some of the church fathers, including Augustine, took this position and penalties such as excommunication or long periods of penance were levied sporadically against witchcraft. In the thirteenth century, however, the church began to take a more uniformly harsh position. Witchcraft came to be associated with the worship of the devil and with various heretical groups which, it was commonly believed, promoted allegiance to the powers of darkness. Witchcraft became a crime of heinous proportions and the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, looked to the civil authorities to eliminate it through torture and executions. The result was the witch craze that spread throughout Europe and Great Britain and touched the American colonies as well. It did not abate until the eighteenth century.

The Association of Women with Witchcraft

Upon examining those individuals who were imprisoned and executed as witches, it becomes clear that women were much more frequently persecuted than men.¹⁰ In some areas and periods, two women were executed for every man. In others, the ratios are as high as twenty to one or even

one hundred to one. In Essex County, England, for example, 90 percent of the inhabitants tried for witchcraft were women. One historian indicates that the witch trials of 1585 left two villages with only one female each. Certainly in the popular imagination, the image of the witch was—and continues to be—female. Even our Halloween decorations and contemporary dictionary definitions reinforce the long-held belief that a witch is “a woman practicing usually black witchcraft.”¹¹

We can make several observations explaining why women were more frequently persecuted than men. The witch craze emerged in a period of violent sentiment against women as evil instruments of the devil. They were therefore likely candidates for devil-worship and pacts with the prince of darkness. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (which means “Hammer of Witches”) was published in 1486 by two German churchmen as a guidebook for those who wished to rid the Christian world of witchcraft. Although other works echoed many of the ideas of the *Malleus*, it was the most popular publication of this kind. It specifically asserted that witchcraft was more likely to be found among women and it went on to give detailed reasons why this was so. (1) Women were by nature feeble-minded and were easily swayed by false doctrines. (2) Women were also morally weak and were particularly inclined toward deceit and revenge. They would therefore not only be adept at keeping their activities secret, but they would seize any opportunity to cause harm to those around them. (3) The Christian faith of women was weak. They would easily renounce Christianity and have few qualms about stamping or exerting on the crucifix. (4) Above all, the *Malleus* insisted that women had insatiable lust which caused them to submit willingly to the sexual advances of the devil. They had, it was believed, “more pleasure and delight” with the incubus or demon who came to them in the night than with any mortal man. The identification of witch as woman was reinforced, of course, by the popular belief that the devil, as a divine power, had to be male when he assumed a human form.

Rosemary Radford Ruether has also observed that old women in particular were singled out for persecution as witches.¹² Reginald Scot, a sixteenth-century writer, describes the popular view of witches as “women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed [sic], pale, fowle [sic] and full of wrinkles. . . .”¹³ This writer is echoed in the modern definition of the witch as an ugly old woman or hag.

Ruether and other scholars suggest some reasons why old women incurred such hostility.¹⁴ In many medieval communities, it was the older woman who knew and passed on the folklore traditions regarding healing, abortions, and contraception. She was also the one to preside over births and she prepared corpses for burial. She knew how to prepare herbal med-

icines and how to use charms and spells to fight evil. These areas—birth, illness, and death—were believed to be the province of the witch. Furthermore, such women opened themselves to the hatred of others if their charms and medications were not successful.

The old woman living alone was vulnerable in other kinds of ways. Loneliness and poverty may have made her seem marginal or odd. The curses she might have muttered out of frustration were interpreted by her neighbors as spells and the summoning of evil spirits. In some ways, she may have made her neighbors, who were becoming increasingly concerned about their rights as individuals, feel guilty about their neglect of communal values and in turn take out their guilt on her. Also, she had few legal powers with which to defend herself against the machinery of church and state. Finally, it was believed that the devil physically marked his women and gave them special “tears” from which the demons could nurse. When exposed, the moles and growths common to an aging body sealed the fate of countless helpless women.

MEDIEVAL WOMEN IN PRAYER AND PROTEST

At all socioeconomic levels of society, women performed vital services and were often recognized for their contributions in everyday life. These circumstances alone challenged the official view of women as mentally and physically incompetent and as morally defective. Aristocratic women, for example, took full responsibility for running their husbands' estates while they were away at war or imprisoned. Women in the middle and lower classes frequently went out to work or did work at home in addition to child rearing and housekeeping. Some aided their husbands with a craft or business and frequently carried on alone after being widowed. Single women in urban areas ran their own businesses and there are numerous examples of single women who managed their own farms.

During this period the few women whose religious writings are known to us are largely silent about the roles they were assigned and the images with which they were described. There are, however, a few examples of clear-cut protest against the church's degradation of women and the culture's belief that a woman's main function was procreation. There are also more indirect challenges to the accepted status of medieval women in church and society from the pens and lives of some of Christianity's most revered saints—the female mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Christine de Pisan

The fifteenth-century Frenchwoman Christine de Pisan was left a widow at the age of twenty-five and was able to earn a living through writ-

ing. She produced two popular prose works on women, one of which was a set of stories illustrating the virtues of women. She also wrote poetry in protest against the violent attacks on women by medieval churchmen and noblemen. Christine de Pisan argued that there was good evidence to show that many women were modest, gentle, and loving. As a group, they did not wage war and they did not oppress other people. Adam, she pointed out, was just as guilty as Eve in bringing sin into the world. What is more, she argued, women were the ones who remained faithful to Jesus during his trial and death.

Isotta Nogarola

Another woman of the same century, Isotta Nogarola of Verona in Italy, aspired to a life of academic scholarship. Although she acquired a wide knowledge of classical studies, including Latin, by the time she was eighteen, her efforts were not encouraged. Learned men failed to take her seriously, enemies accused her of sexual promiscuity and incest, and her female friends shunned and ridiculed her. Nogarola was forced to conclude that only the virgin life would give her the freedom and social approval she needed to pursue her studies. From 1441 until her death she lived virtually in seclusion on her own property. She studied and wrote on topics related to Christianity and she eventually gained praise from prominent men for her saintly and scholarly life. They could approve of an intellectual woman who had taken a vow of chastity, but not one who was marriageable or married.

One of Isotta Nogarola's surviving works deals with the question of Eve's responsibility for the origin of sin. She argues that Eve cannot be blamed for her partner's participation and that she was not even entirely responsible for her own actions. While Nogarola wished to protest against the excessive burden of guilt that the church had placed on Eve, she does this by accepting her own culture's definition of the nature of women: Eve could not be blamed because she was by nature weak and ignorant and was no match for the cunning serpent.

Margery Kempe

One of the few spiritual autobiographies extant from the medieval period was written by an Englishwoman, Margery Kempe. Kempe has left us an account of her answered prayers, visions, and prophetic insights which she believed to come from God in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Her spiritual experiences persuaded her to alter her life style dramatically. After bearing fourteen children, she persuaded her husband to agree to a cell-

bate marriage which she thought was God's will for her. She undertook a number of journeys to shrines and holy places including Santiago de Compostella in Portugal and the Holy Land. Margery Kempe aroused the anger of the clergy because of her flamboyant and eccentric behavior (she was prone to emotional outbursts and tears). Yet she was regarded with suspicion and hostility also because she believed that her spiritual experiences gave her the right to teach and advise, questionable activities for a medieval Christian wife.

Female Mystics

One of the pilgrimages Margery Kempe made was to a nun who lived alone in a room attached to the side of a church in Norwich, England. This nun was Julian, who, together with a number of other medieval women, made a significant contribution to the church's tradition of mystical theology which flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At the heart of the mystical tradition were the experiences of people who had acquired a direct and intimate knowledge of God in visions and at times of worship and meditation. Women frequently had mystical experiences which they then, on occasion, committed to writing. Julian of Norwich, for example, describes a series of visions or revelations that she received during an illness in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Catherine of Siena writes about a similar set of experiences in *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*. Some of the nuns of the Cistercian monastery at Helfta in Germany also produced a large body of reports describing their visions and inner experiences.

The content of this mystical writing varies from woman to woman but there are certain common features. There is considerable emphasis on the physical suffering of Jesus and a free use of bridal imagery to describe the relationship between the Christian and Jesus. Both God and Jesus are also described in female and feminine images in some of the writings. One of the nuns at Helfta frequently referred to God as the mother of humanity to show that God's justice was tempered by love and comfort. Julian claimed that Jesus had the character and performed the activities of an earthly mother. Jesus sustained and loved the Christian and he gave the Christian life. He fed the Christian with his body just as a mother fed her child with milk. Julian also believed that, like a mother's love, the love of Jesus knew no end, even though he chastised the believer when necessary: "And though, possibly, an earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our heavenly Mother Jesus can never suffer us who are his children to perish. For he is almighty, all-wisdom and all-love."¹⁵

The female mystics, apart from bringing a feminine dimension to the

images used for God, represented an important avenue of power and self-affirmation for women in the Christian community. While they were excluded from offices within the structure of the medieval church, the mystics were regarded as figures of authority within the Christian community on the basis of their visions and intimate friendship with God. Catherine of Siena, for instance, was able to persuade the pope to move back to Rome from France because he believed that she had received authentic directions from God. One study by Caroline Bynum on the mystic nuns at Helfta stresses their role of authority among both men and women.¹⁶ Although they held no official administrative positions, the nuns were sought out as spiritual advisers by lay men and women, the clergy, monks, and the other women at Helfta. The community believed, for example, that the mystics could provide information on the condition of people who had already died. Perhaps most significantly, the visions of women like Gertrude of Helfta sometimes enabled them to perform priestly duties like the forgiveness and absolution of sins. In her visions, Gertrude was told by God who had been forgiven and she was commanded to announce this absolution to the people involved. Also in their visions, the nuns were commissioned by God to serve others and to teach (often understood as preaching) what had been revealed to them. Those nuns who compiled the visions and life of Mechtild of Hackeborn described her in the following way: "She gave teaching with such abundance that such a one has never been seen in the monastery and we fear, alas, will never be seen again. The sisters gathered around her as around a preacher to hear the word of God."¹⁷

Medieval Christianity presents us with strong male voices praising the virgin but condemning women as women for their association with the flesh and sin. Yet it also has left to us, for the first time in Christian history, an array of female voices. Women write and their works endure. We hear direct and indirect protests against their status as they seek both to serve God and to develop their talents. We also have a picture of their conscious and unconscious efforts to circumvent some patriarchal limitations in order to find meaning and dignity in their lives. Within Catholic Christianity, the images of virgin and witch will continue to shape the status of women for centuries. The Protestant Reformation brings a new emphasis on women as obedient wives and devoted mothers, a shift that is explored in the next few sections.

CHAPTER 3

1. Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop: The History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1973), 100–104.
2. See Eleanor McLaughlin, “Women, Power and the Pursuit of Holiness,” in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 100–130.
3. Quoted in Eleanor McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes,” in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Ruether, 242.
4. McLaughlin, “Women, Power and the Pursuit of Holiness,” 102.
5. McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes,” 234–35.
6. This cluster of ideas and stories is examined in detail in Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).
7. This question is raised, e.g., in McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes,” 245–51.
8. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 284.
9. For a discussion of the elements contributing to the popular conception of a witch, see Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Witchcraft* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 41–42.
10. See Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 113; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Persecution of Witches: A Case of Ageism and Sexism?” *Christianity and Crisis* 34 (23 December 1974): 291; Clarke Garrett, “Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 (Winter 1977): 461–63.
11. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1979), 1336.
12. Ruether, “Persecution of Witches,” 291; Garrett, “Women and Witches,” 462–65.
13. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584; reprint, Torowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1973), 5.
14. Ruether, “Persecution of Witches,” 292–95; Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 113–15.

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15. Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. James Walsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 166–67.
16. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1982).
17. Quoted in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 225.