

The Thirst of God

*Contemplating God's Love
with Three Women Mystics*

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A Note to Readers and Acknowledgments

A few words about the kind of book this is and the kind of readers who might be interested. The genesis of this book was the many conversations I have had over the years with dedicated but frustrated Christians who are in the church, at the margins of the church, or who have abandoned it altogether. For them, I would like to send a word of solidarity and say that there is a rich tradition of wonderful women and other contemplatives who are great resources for thinking differently about Christianity. They emphasize divine love, human compassion, and the radical possibilities of contemplative practices. They were not afraid to criticize the church and indeed thought of their challenge as crucial to their faith. We do not have to lose faith in the beautiful wisdom of this story of intimate and compassionate love dwelling among us and within us.

I also teach theology at a university and am inspired by the way the borders of theology are constantly expanding and becoming more inclusive. I hope that people studying and teaching theology will widen their scope still further by including these amazing women on their reading lists. They merit a place next to Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Luther. Like other great theologians, they challenge our assumptions and demand that we expand our sense of what counts as the written body of Christ.

These women do not write in scholastic or systematic style. Their theology is like that of the Bible or of Dante or Coleridge. It emerges from image, dialogue, exemplum. In interpreting the theology and spirituality of these women we need to learn how to read images theologically. I have attempted to do this here, to get at the theological meaning and significance of these women by paying close attention to the different genres of their writing. This

does not make them less theologically sophisticated than academically trained male theologians, but it does challenge us to new methods of interpretation.

All three women are contemplatives, and two of them record visionary experiences. I do not think this genre should distress contemporary readers. In the medieval period, it was the only form in which women could hope to be taken seriously. Marguerite Porete's refusal to write in this way is one of the reasons she was executed. It is sad irony that the very thing that granted them a voice in one period of history condemns them to the outer borders of serious thinking in our own. We do not need a theory of visions or even religious experience to read them. Simply taking the images on their own terms and working with them theologically is sufficient to allow us access to their profound wisdom.

What we believe translates into what we do and how we construct our societies. These women were ardent lovers of God and bracing critics of the theological assumptions that have shaped much of Christian history. Writing about love as the central attribute of God was not a private, subjective, feminine, navel-gazing bit of "mystical" experience. It is a dramatic challenge to the social and religious apotheosis of the logic of domination and patriarchy that tears humanity into segments, some worthy of salvation, others not. I have read these women not only for their great spiritual and theological insights but because their contemplative theology is also political theology. If it were not, they would not have experienced the conflict they did. Taking them seriously as theologians has meant for me thinking more carefully about the way theologians of the classical tradition may have colluded with political regimes that governed by ideological control and violence.

I have tried to write in a way that is scholastically responsible without distracting readers who are not professional academics. My footnotes give basic credit to the secondary literature to which I am indebted. I am including a bibliography that will prove a useful resource for readers interested in further study.

The translations of the three primary texts I am using are my own. I am not an expert in any of these languages and would not encourage readers to prefer my translations to others. I worked from the texts in each original language and consulted several English translations. I hope I have captured enough of their meaning in my admittedly amateurish translations. I did very much enjoy their fascinating and often untranslatable imagery, puns, and strange words. Who could fail to appreciate Julian's "dear-worthy" lovers of God or be startled by Marguerite's strange term for the soul that held back nothing from God—*adnientie*: annihilated? Nothinged? Made nothing? And yet in a way that is inebriated with joy.

I hope my very brief introduction to these “dear-worthy” women who were “reduced to nothing” by their inebriation in divine Love may entice readers to pick up one of their books. I hope my readers discover for themselves the sweet mystery that enlarged these women’s hearts and gave them the courage to pick up their pens and write for us. They suffered much because of the absence of guides in the way of Divine Lady Love and endangered themselves so that others would not feel so alone. May the recovery of their texts speak to another generation of “God-hunting hearts.”

I am grateful to the Louisville Institute and Emory University for funds that allowed me to take a leave to finish this book. I am grateful to the women and men in retreats and study groups that have been curious about these women and inspired me to provide a simple introduction. I am grateful to colleagues who constantly press me toward clearer thinking. I am grateful to the many generations of graduate and undergraduate students who have wrestled with these texts, not least those who have gone on to publish more sophisticated books than this one about women theologians (Emily Holmes, Min Ah Cho, Michelle Voss Roberts, Shelly Rambo, Marcia Mount Shoop, Elizabeth Gandolfo). I thank my older daughter, Emma, for her help with Mechthild’s confusing German, even when our communication had to be carried out between Atlanta and a tiny village in Mozambique. I thank my younger daughter, Yana, for her stimulating theological conversation and doing all those dishes I left in the sink. I thank my son, Paul, for prodding my thinking by sharing his own reflections in papers he has written on Buddhist thought and practice. I am grateful to Beth Waltemath, Bev Eliot, and my sister, Amy Howe, who teach me so much about what the church can look like when it is ministered to by women. I am grateful to WJK and its editors, especially Robert Ratcliff, Julie Tonini, and Daniel Braden for supporting yet another of my theological efforts.

Introduction

“I once was enclosed in the serfdom of prison . . . Now divine light has delivered me from prison and joined me by gentleness to the divine will of Love, where the Trinity gives me the delight of his love.”¹

Marguerite Porete concluded her magnificent book with this song of freedom. Soon afterward, she was enclosed in a physical prison from which she was led away to be burned as a relapsed heretic. The primary goal of this book is to reintroduce Marguerite, together with Mechthild of Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich, to readers who may never have heard of them. I feel compelled to do this because in this moment of history we are desperate to reawaken the good news that God is love.

These women portray with singular vividness the longing of the divine Love for humanity. Like them, we might believe that it was because of the longing of God for humanity—all of humanity—that divine reality clothed itself in human nature. As Christians we recognize this in Jesus Christ but, confident that divine Love never leaves her children bereft, we also recognize it in the wisdom of all of the spiritual traditions of the world. Love comes to humanity to reincorporate this broken body back into the divine life. In one sense, we have never left it. But in our brokenness and misery, our cruelties and deceptions, we have forgotten who we are and who it is that holds us in the infinitely tender, eternal, and unchanging power of love.

I have watched my older children turn away from the church in disgust and boredom—a church that nurtured me, rooted my parents and sister in patterns of love and courage, and whose congregations still feed the hungry, protest

injustice, and comfort those who grieve. My younger daughter is mocked for her Christian faith on the assumption that she hates gays and lesbians and believes everyone is going to hell. (The irony of mocking the daughter of two mothers for her assumed homophobia is lost on her accusers.) I talk with women who have left the faith, scarred and battered by it. I meet women who feel nurtured by the church but want to know how to deepen their faith. I meet young men who are torn between the ways their childhood faith has wounded them and their passion to serve God. I meet converts to Buddhism who are mystified to discover there is a contemplative strand within Christianity. The wisdom of these ancient women is much needed.

As a child I learned that “they will know we are Christians by our love.” I believe my own frustration with the church is rooted in the utter confidence in this love, which I learned from my parents and grandmothers. The women I write about in this book are far from being solitary witnesses to this love, but they are exceptionally clear and bright ones. Adding them to the “cloud of witnesses” in our tradition can only refresh and expand our awareness of the depth of this love that encompasses all of creation and dwells in the cavern of every human heart.

But No One Would Tell Me the Truth about Him

The theological canon that I learned in graduate school and have been teaching for nearly thirty years did not teach me much about divine love. The recitals of my sinfulness in the liturgies of my progressive churches did not awaken my mind to the great beauty and dignity of the human soul or who dwells there or how precious it is.² There is much to love in “the tradition,” but who was this appalling deity that the brilliant minds of Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin and Luther, described as a god whose chief principles of creation included the predestination of arbitrary portions of humanity to hell as a sign of his justice? Was it a good use of his intellect for Augustine to assure us that God’s omnipotence would be sufficient to hold an otherwise finite body over a pit of fire forever?

Working for Amnesty International and living with a mother whose daily work brought her in contact with nightmarish lives of abused children, I wanted to hear more than a story of fall, punishment, and forgiveness. Even as a child, I knew that if God is love, it would be impossible for the people of the world, whose beauty and fragilities were like the flowers of the earth, to be cast into hell. And yet I do not remember encountering any canonical theological text that did not assume that non-Christians, or insufficiently good Christians, or Christians whose doctrine was not sound, or simply people arbitrarily chosen as vessels of wrath would suffer that fate. My professors—love

and admiration for whom still inspires me—did not believe this. Their own brilliant, compassionate, and courageous writings testify to a different deity. And yet these early fathers constituted the core of my theological education.

I am a constructive theologian as well as a student and teacher of contemplative practices. I do not usually write books like this one. I have spent several years working on this book because when I discovered these amazing women, I realized that my own spiritual and theological hungers did not separate me from the Christian tradition. To the contrary, I was part of a tradition as old as Christianity itself—as old as Wisdom “without whom nothing was made.” I was part of the ancient, if mostly invisible, community of women and men in love with the Beloved but who have felt undernourished by the institutional church.

“I wanted to speak of him because no one would tell me about him when I would have listened gladly [until] Lady Love told me the truth about him.”³ Like Marguerite, I longed for news of divine love. When I discovered other pockets of the tradition—Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, Schleiermacher, Tillich, and many others—I knew there was a place for me in Christian theology. But when I discovered these women, I knew I was home. I heard with unparalleled intensity the praises of Lady Love, the sweetness of the dark abyss, and the beauty of the soul made and redeemed for intimacy with this spacious goodness. They are not scholastically trained, and this continues to exclude them from the theological canon. But their lack of scholastic training is their great strength. They write immediately and candidly rather than through the mediations and constraints of lines of authority and academic niceties. Like Marguerite, I want to share their exquisite theology and spirituality with others. I want others to know that this, too, is Christianity, and it is theology. I want others to know “the truth about . . . the one who is all love.”⁴

Theologies of Love

Who are these women and why are they gathered here? I tell something of this story in later chapters. But a few words here may orient my readers. Mechthild, Marguerite, and Julian are gathered together in this book as witnesses to the spaciousness and graciousness of the Christian path. There are many others that could be here, but, I admit, I love and admire the writings of these women. For a brief and beautiful moment, women believed they would be allowed to write of their experience and their theology. Mechthild of Magdeburg lived from 1207–1282/94. She was a beguine (a lay contemplative—more about that later) who took up writing at the request of her Dominican confessor. By the end of her life, it seems that certain members

of the church were becoming hostile to the beguine way of life. In any case, as an old woman she retired to a Cistercian convent in Helfta. Marguerite Porete died in 1310. She seems to have begun her life in the heyday of the beguine movement, surrounded by fellow contemplatives, monastics, and theologians. She was swept up by larger politics that were putting in place the mechanisms of inquisition. Her death extinguished the light of this creative period of women's theology and spirituality. She is both the apex and demise of beguine theology. Julian of Norwich was born in 1342 and disappears sometime after 1429. As an anchoress, Julian resided in a tiny cell, about ten by twelve. Though she was invisible to the world, her writings shone a brilliant light.

The arc of these three women transverses a period of hope and energy, through intense and deadly persecution, to a light that refuses to be entirely extinguished. They are themselves participants in a much longer lineage: Perpetua and Felicity, Macrina, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Clare of Assisi, Hadewijch, Teresa of Avila, Margaret Fell, Jarena Lee, and all the named and unnamed women whose lives and work testify to the refusal of the Holy Spirit to color within the lines of patriarchal institutions.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Europe was aglow with religious renewal. This took many, sometimes contradictory, forms. What interests us here is the women who were energized by religious devotion and wanted to find ways of life that did not restrict them to convents or motherhood. One such movement was the beguines; but to call it a "movement" implies an organization and structure that it did not have. There is no founder, no creed, no vows. The beguines were women who gathered for prayer, study, charitable works, and meditation. They chose lives of voluntary poverty and chastity to strengthen these activities. While continuing to participate in the sacramental life of the church, they also renewed their spiritual lives through contemplative practices.

Mechthild, Marguerite, and Julian were among the many women who experimented with spiritual practices outside the Benedictine or Cistercian convents that were available to wealthy women with large dowries. Like all women who lived before the nineteenth century, an academic education was forbidden to them. (Women were first admitted to a British university in 1878. Nonetheless they were theologians whose contemplative practice opened to them the book of divine love. Each is unique but they share theological common ground in the pride of place they give to divine Love. Mechthild uses the feminine inflected German word *Mimme*—translated "Lady Love"—as one of her main images for God. Marguerite personifies the divine voice who leads the soul to unity with God as "Amour" or "Dame Amour." For Julian, Mother Christ infuses the Trinity with love that creates,

restores, and nurtures humanity. God is beyond all images and words. But the feminine bespeaks the divine powerfully and evocatively.

These women also share the optimism that human beings can fully participate in this love. Mechthild relies primarily on the erotic and bridal imagery of the Song of Songs and troubadour poetry to portray the union of the soul with God. Marguerite Porete occasionally uses bridal imagery but more often describes union in terms of the soul's disappearance into divine reality. Her word, *adnientie*, is translated in various ways: reduced to nothing, annihilated, or stripped. She does not mean that personhood becomes nothing; rather, she means that those elements of egocentric desire that separate us from God are reduced to nothing. In this joyous "nothingness," we are opened to the spacious goodness of God. Julian of Norwich describes God as thirst: "It is the thirst of God to have all of humanity drawn within Godself."⁵ Like her beguine sisters, she gives us a taste of the radical goodness of God, depicting God's longing for us and our longing for God.

These three women are among the apostles of the gospel truth that when we abide in love we abide in God, for God is love. They understand this abiding to be rooted in the transformation of the human soul into love, a transformation that allows belief and action to radiate this goodness to the world. They not only believed that God is love but also believed Lady Love enables her followers and lovers to become that love. "God became human so that humans can become divine," as Athanasius (the energetic defender of the Nicene Creed) put it centuries before.⁶ For these contemplatives, desire is the wound of love that draws us to our divine Beloved and our Beloved to us. In this mutual desire, our deepest selves become available to intimacy with divine reality.

Women Theologians and the Church

Although these women wrote in order to participate in a conversation about theology and practice, their relationship with the church was not an easy one. In this, they may prove interesting sisters to contemporary people whose relationship with the church is also uneasy. Mechthild reports that clerics threatened to burn her book. Marguerite was herself burned; though once her book was separated from her name, it enjoyed a vital afterlife. Julian seemed to have enjoyed some local respect, but her writing voice did not emerge from obscurity for some five hundred years.

All three women understood themselves to be Christian and did not identify with the overt dissent of outspoken critics of the church. They seem to have several strikes against them, nonetheless. They were innovators in writing theology in vernacular (local spoken) languages instead of Latin.⁷ As time

went on, the vernacular was associated with nonclerical writing, therefore with heresy, and fell under suspicion. In England, the “Lollards” (followers of John Wycliffe and his criticisms of the church) advocated translating the Bible into English. The resounding silence surrounding Julian’s text may be related to the association of vernacular writing with the Lollard “heresy.”

A second problem is that they unabashedly defined God in terms of love and used feminine metaphors to express the sweetness, intimacy, and reliability of this love. It is not heretical to think of God as love, but to use it to redefine Christian faith produces troubling consequences. Origen’s argument that if God is powerful and good, the long arc of endless time would be sufficient to save all humanity, was declared anathema. John Scotus Eriugena was condemned for rejecting the doctrine that God eternally predestines part of humanity for hell and part of humanity for salvation. Anselm seems to find eternal punishment inconsistent with divine mercy but did not have the wherewithal to openly reject it.

It seems strange, but throughout the history of Christianity those who have a particularly clear focus on love have been condemned, silenced, or marginalized. These three women were not condemned for their emphasis on Lady Love and Mother Christ. But the readers they attempted to create through their writing—readers able to embody the depth and goodness of divine love—could not appear. The consistently enacted logic of love could only be an affront to a church whose allegiance was to imperial models of divine and human power.

More damning, they were women.⁸ Since many contemporary Christian denominations, including the largest, do not ordain women, it perhaps will not shock us that women have not been accepted as interpreters of Christian thought. Even so, women now contribute a great deal to spiritual and theological writing, retreats, and workshops. Some of our most wonderful ministers are women. Even those denominations that continue to exclude women from leadership have no power to criminalize their writings. But the official silencing of Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that the church’s ability to keep women invisible and inaudible is not a thing entirely of the past.

Although contemporary theology is written in vernacular languages, theologies of love and justice are commonplace, and while women are no longer complete strangers to preaching, teaching, or theology, medieval women still tend to bear the stigma imposed by harsher times. They are rarely included in classes on historical or systematic theology.⁹ Mechthild has achieved minor historical interest, but the main translator of her work finds in her writings nothing original.¹⁰ Julian is contained in a cocoon of orthodox and sometimes sentimental piety. Marguerite is still a “heretic,” and Philip the Fair remains

a “loyal defender of the faith.”¹¹ Churches and seminaries continue to accept it as natural that the feminine body of Christ, figuratively and literally, has had its tongue cut out.¹²

Just Who Is “Orthodox” Here?

Most of this book is an exploration of beautiful and important theology. But to argue that these women’s books are important to our basic understanding of Christian thought requires that we rethink what is normative and what is marginal. I am not only suggesting that we expand our canon to include Mechthild, Marguerite, and Julian but also asking us to wonder who are the orthodox and who are the heretics in our story? I propose telling a piece of this story from a somewhat off-kilter point of view.

To entangle ourselves in the Sargasso Sea of thirteenth-century politics would take us far astray. But without understanding something of these events, the condemnation of Marguerite by Philip the Fair and the subsequent silence of theological women will be easy to misunderstand.

Philip was an ambitious king, dedicated to extending France’s borders and winning the tug of war with the pope about who would be in charge. In 1309, he managed to move the papacy from Rome to Avignon in order to install a French pope. But this bold political move was only a part of his strategy to monopolize wealth and power.

He engaged in long wars that contributed to the hemorrhaging of money from his treasury. Indebted to Jews, he found it expedient to arrest and then expel them from France in order to take over their property. The Knights Templar, who functioned as bankers for both the papacy and French royalty, held a massive debt against Philip. In 1307 he began a campaign to arrest and torture Templar monks. When some hundreds of Templars mounted a defense of their order, Philip responded by burning fifty-four in a field outside of Paris.¹³ The rift this caused with the pope did not change the fact that he had come into possession of their funds.

What has all of this to do with Marguerite? In one sense nothing. She was a contemplative and a theologian. This would seem to place her far from the radar of Philip’s machinations. The simplest way to describe the motivations for her execution would be to say that she proved a useful pawn whose death would shore up Philip’s much besieged reputation as a “defender of the faith.” Marguerite served this purpose because she was both more audacious and more vulnerable than other contemplative women. It seemed suspicious to have a woman wandering around, unsupervised by a husband or the regulations of a walled convent. She was a teacher and apparently a popular one. As Bernard McGinn points out, she was burned in part for failing to observe

the limits imposed upon her.¹⁴ After the appalling scandal of the Templars, the show trial of an outspoken beguine would burnish Philip's reputation as a champion of orthodoxy.

Julian of Norwich, born thirty-two years after Marguerite's execution, was symbolically dead and buried in her anchor-hold, and her writings were never widely circulated. But Norwich was honored with its own energetic defender of Christianity in the person of its Bishop, Henry le Despenser ("the Fighting Bishop").

The church was torn by the scandal of having a pope in Avignon and in Rome, a logical sequence from Philip the Fair's removal of the papacy to France. Kingdoms and bishops lined up in support of one or another of the popes as their own interests dictated. Notwithstanding this transparently political agenda, the pope remained the visible sign of Christ on earth and a symbol of the unity of the church. To the extent that Christians took their faith seriously, a Christendom divided between two popes was a disaster.

Henry le Despenser would have been the bishop that gave Julian last rites as she entered the anchor-hold of St. Julian. In 1383 he received permission to initiate a crusade against France in retaliation for their support of the Avignon pope. English royalty supported the crusade as a part of their economic war on the European cloth trade. Soldiers were enticed with indulgences, assurances that their sins and those of their family would be wiped clean. The English were quickly routed, but even lost crusades must be funded by tithes and taxes. Peasants and serfs provided numerous, if impoverished, sources of money required for war, crusade, and extravagant lifestyles. When they rebelled, the brutality with which they were repressed, spear-headed by Norwich's bishop, indicated the determination of church and state to maintain the status quo.

Upon their return to England, the savagery that served soldiers well in war was now directed at local citizens, who were terrorized by soldier-brigands. Citizens' outrage of rampaging (but shriven) soldiers was coupled with anxiety over loved ones who died suddenly in plague, famine, or flood. These juxtapositions of arbitrary salvation and equally wanton condemnation made a mockery of the power of the church to forgive sins. Criticism of the church and repression of this criticism spiraled in a deadly dance.

In England, criticism was spearheaded by John Wycliffe and the Lollard movement. In 1396 Bishop Despenser was given permission to apply the death penalty against religious dissent. "Heretics" began to be burned in Norwich's public square. The introduction into England of the mechanisms of inquisition occurred not far from Julian's quiet anchor-hold.¹⁵ In crusade, war, massacre, and inquisition Bishop Despenser imitated the techniques of the god to whom he was so loyal.

Babylonian Captivity of the Church

The contrast between orthodoxy and heresy structures much of the way the history of Christianity is told. The lovely scholar and sympathetic translator of Marguerite Porete, Ellen Babinsky, takes Philip at his word and describes him as a “pious leader who was genuinely concerned about the fate of the church and who took seriously his title as ‘Most Christian King.’”¹⁶ The much less sympathetic, though exquisitely scholarly, translators of another edition of her work acknowledge that medieval methods were certainly savage but add that Marguerite vaunts a “stubborn persistence in her opinions, even when she knew that this could cost her a cruel death. That this assessment may not be unjust...is shown by her persistence in publishing what had already been condemned.”¹⁷ It is remarkable that scholars writing in 1999 would assume that burning a woman alive for attempting to promulgate her work, though cruel and even barbaric, makes a kind of theological or institutional sense. But the assumption that Philip’s techniques reflect genuine piety or that Marguerite’s execution was probably justified indicate how tightly we are held by the assumption that those in power are by definition orthodox and that their victims are “heretics” and perhaps even deserved to die.

Philip the Fair initiated the schism that would divide Western Christianity between popes for one hundred years. He murdered, tortured, and exiled Jews in order to steal their property to fund his wars. He arrested members of an international religious order, tortured them by outrageous methods into confessing the most absurd fantasies of their tormentors. He burned dozens of them alive to take ownership of what amounted to a large European bank. He had two daughters-in-law tortured, flayed, and executed for alleged adultery. He pocketed taxes extracted from a weary population for a crusade to Jerusalem that he (mercifully) never initiated.

Marguerite taught and wrote and prayed. She courageously defended the name of God as love and the capacity of human persons, including women, to fall in love with that love. In contrast to harsh asceticism, she was at pains to offer her fellow beguines a more humane understanding of their practice. As Amy Hollywood argues, her theology “is a direct response to the forms of sanctity prescribed for women . . . and is an attempt to counter a situation of anxiety, struggle, moral rigorism, and bodily suffering.”¹⁸ For this she endured eighteen months in an inquisitor’s prison and a slow death as flames ate her living flesh.

Orthodoxy means something like “right praise.” If we resist construing torture and murder as praise of God, we might recognize Marguerite’s tenacity not as “contumacious and rebellious”¹⁹ but as resembling the heroically steadfast faith of Perpetua and Felicity, martyred for their rejection of the

theology of Roman imperialism. What if Marguerite was a great Christian martyr and the faith that Philip the Fair and Bishop Despenser defended was not the flickering light of Galilee but a piety they inherited from Roman executioners?

Perpetua, with a slave Felicity, was arrested by Roman officials in 203 CE. She was perhaps twenty-two and had recently given birth to a child. During her imprisonment, she had a dream. She awoke “with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.”²⁰ Like Marguerite, she realized she had fallen into the hands of an utterly implacable power.

Perpetua is a relentless witness to the goodness of God, and her story is heart-wrenching. Her father rages at her stubborn refusal to sacrifice to the emperor—surely a small and empty gesture not worth dying for? Notwithstanding the excruciating compulsions of motherhood and daughterhood, she *could not* accept what passed for piety in Roman religion. The cruelty of its practices and the emptiness of its theology were impossible for her to tolerate. She would not by her actions participate in its theology of death or by her silence renounce the truth she had learned of a God of love. She was obviously a “contumacious and rebellious” traitor to Rome.

The surviving description of her death portrays her going into the stadium with a “shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.” After she is first stripped and then gored, she finds herself still alive and waiting for execution by the sword. At this point, she is reported to have said to her fellow Christians, “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.”

Marguerite is also described as courageous in death. A witness (presumed to be one of those who had condemned her) describes her demeanor as both “noble and pious, in her death. For this reason the faces of many of those who witnessed it were affectionately moved to compassion for her; indeed, the eyes of many were filled with tears.”²¹

Marguerite and Perpetua were rebels against empires of violence and their gods. After long months in prison, they still refused to renounce their faith as the price of freedom. It is not accidental that these women who celebrated divine Love and conceived of power in nonimperial symbols were objects of imperial brutality. That is how empires work. They require a theology to underwrite their methods of terror.

What must happen to our Christian faith that we attribute to Philip the Fair an authentic Christian piety and to Marguerite a stubborn and virulent heresy? He acts with the same kind of bloodlust and greed that animated the

worst of Rome. She echoes Perpetua's admonition to stand fast in faith and love one another. We might wonder if "orthodox" theology is not implicated in the violence of rulers such as King Philip and Bishop Despenser. Is there a connection between Augustine's insistence that God created most of humanity to be tortured forever in order to display his "justice" and the fires that burned Marguerite? Is there a connection between God's need for payment in blood to restore his honor and Bishop Despenser's crusade and burning "heretics"?

But to leave it there would be to grant to the "powers and principalities" too much. We have these beautiful texts before us and the witness of these courageous women. We have freedom to write, and think, and gather together. We no longer have to fear the physical prisons of Rome or medieval Europe. But we can still inhabit mental prisons. If we have a too narrow understanding of what Christianity can be, then the full reach of the human spirit will be thwarted. But when we begin to explore beyond the narrow confines of an artificially restricted canon and set of beliefs, we find that Christianity is actually very spacious. In it are vast cathedrals for the mind to explore and in which the heart can fly.

As Teresa of Avila says, the soul is like a great diamond with infinite facets. The soul

is nothing but a paradise in which, as God tells us, He takes his delight [Proverbs 8:31]. . . . I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of the soul and its great capacity. . . . For, as He Himself says, He created us in His image and likeness. Now if this is so—and it is—there is no point in our fatiguing ourselves by attempting to comprehend the beauty of this castle [the soul]; for, though it is His creature, and therefore as much difference between it and God as between creator and creature, the very fact that His majesty says it is made in His image means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty.²²

Mechthild, Marguerite, and Julian cannot exhaust this great mystery and beauty any more than anyone else can. But spending time in their company may be a way for us to begin to taste this "great dignity and beauty" for ourselves.

Prologue

Contemplation of Divine Love

Clergymen troubled by the Church's frailty repeatedly sought the company of such devout beguines to bolster their own confidence, forming close relationships in which their own alleged deficiencies were offset by the women's special holiness . . . such men admired in religious women what they, their office, and their gender, were perceived to be lacking: true religious poverty, integrity, spontaneity, charisma, a clear presence of the divine, so poignantly absent, many thought, from the institutional Church.¹

Centuries before the Protestant Reformation, women and other laypeople hungered for more immediate and personal ways to live out the Christian life. Throughout Europe, movements arose advocating simplicity, prayer, and service to the poor and sick. Informally, without direct guidance from bishops or the parish priests, women experimented with practices that would nourish their religious devotion. Beguines and anchoresses were among those who combined contemplative practices with compassionate action and who discovered among themselves a theology of divine love that was not always well represented in the church of the clerics.

We also live in a time of enormous social tumult and change and spiritual creativity. The mainstream denominations struggle, and younger people are likely to consider themselves spiritual but not necessarily religious. Mothers, queers, ministers, single people, and widows again gather in small, informal groups. They go on retreats, learn to meditate, study Scripture, practice compassion, and seek justice. Encountering our sisters from long ago may inspire

a thirst for a goodness more beautiful, a compassion more joyous than we knew how to dream.

In the early dawn hours, grey habits move quietly through the pathways of the beguinage to a small chapel. Women gather together and read from Scripture, sing psalms, pray, and sit quietly in meditation. They may be joined by neighborhood women who share their devotion to prayer. Some of these women live with families or alone. Others live with one or two others in houses they share in town. They form a loose community of women who share certain ideals. As dawn breaks, they part.

Small groups leave the beguinage and enter the city. Traveling two or three together, one group goes from house to house in a poor district, ministering to the sick, aiding an overwhelmed woman who has just given birth, encouraging a young woman to get off the street. Another group hires itself out as mourners, imbuing moments of grief with their calm compassion. Others turn their hands to labor, spinning and weaving cloth. Some return to their small cottage and continue to meditate on the readings for the day. Those who enjoy a private income choose a book from a small library. There is a school within the walls where some beguines teach local girls and boys basic literacy and the bones of an education. Virgins and widows live together supporting their way of life with the work of their hands or by begging or through income from family or from those who admire their devotion.²

Later in the day, small groups gather again. The literate read aloud to the illiterate from spiritual writings circulating from other contemplatives: beguines, friars, enclosed monks, and nuns. Sometimes they discuss Scripture. The official Bible is the Latin Vulgate; the clergy provide the only official interpretation, and they guard this privilege well. And yet, as lovers of the gospel, contemplative women study Scripture, moved by stories from the gospel and its heroes: the apostles, John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Christ. Images from psalms and prophets enrich their thinking. They discuss prayer and meditation, seeking to unite with the love that flows from the Holy Trinity to humanity. Sometimes they are joined by Dominican or Franciscan monks. Some of these are suspicious of these enterprising women, but many are friends who admire their piety and devotion.

Each woman shapes her activities in ways that suit her vocation. But they share a commitment to prayer, contemplation, and a radical devotion to their Beloved. The increased preoccupation of both the church and society with money, prestige, and power does little to inspire their faith. The bitter feuds and endless wars are troubling contrasts to gospel invitations to charity and love. They, like others in this period, seek spiritual practices focused not on wealth and power but on imitation of Christ and his followers: impoverished

but filled with love for God and compassion for the poor and suffering. They try to follow Christ by living simply: wearing a plain gray habit, eating only what is necessary, living without luxury or extravagance. They experiment with ascetic practices such as fasting and prayer vigils. Though some bring children to the community, unmarried or widows, they remain chaste to focus their attention on prayer, study, and service.

These communities have arisen in a period of unusual religious fervor and creativity. They are similar to their counterparts in Italy or southern France: Franciscan tertiaries (Angela of Foligno), Dominican tertiaries (Catherine of Siena), or devoted laywomen (Catherine of Genoa). They blur the edges of rigidly defined social boundaries. They live on the borderlands between lay and religious, scholarly men and “ignorant” women. Many are educated, reading Latin and familiar with theological writings. They sometimes preach, teach, and write but lack the university education and ordination that would authorize these activities. They are laypeople, coming and going in the towns and cities. But their contemplative way of life is similar to that of monastics. They do not live with husbands, but they are not cloistered. They are chaste but have not made permanent vows. They are drawn from different strata of society to live more simply and with greater equality than richly supported nuns. But they have taken no vows of poverty or obedience. Some own their own homes and will them to friends or daughters or sisters. Others live together or in dormitories. Status, in the sense of respect and leadership, accrues from holiness more than from nobility. They are admired for their piety and service and reviled because they are “false women,” failing to fit into any of the roles demarcated for them.

Among the beguines we rediscover the finest flowering of women’s religious writing of the medieval period. They were among the first to write religious texts in the local language. They were among the most imaginative and bold theologians of their time. Daughters of the church, they anticipated the Protestant emphasis on free access to divine love, a love radically merciful and inclusive. They were drawn to the study of Scripture, but they understood the power of the sacraments and the possibilities of interior prayer. They sought deep intimacy with the divine, whose perfume is evident in their compassionate service and brilliant writing. Though they disappeared behind the silent walls of convent-like beguinages or solitary anchor-holds, their spirited desire continued to resound across time and space in the writings of Teresa of Avila, Simone Weil, Cynthia Bourgeault.

As we experience our own frustrations with church and society, the voices of contemplative women come to us as long-lost sisters and mothers who remind us of the burning light of divine love, piercing any darkness, luminous

regardless of the fluctuations of fate. Their lives are models of courage and creativity, and their theologies invite us into depths of the Christian vision that we may hardly know exist. By encountering these women, we become part of this broken lineage of contemplative women that never quite dies. Fragments of this story are told here: in the life and theology of Mechthild of Magdeburg who became a beguine as the movement was getting under way, Marguerite Porete whose execution marked the end of its flourishing, and Julian of Norwich, who was able to carve out a space of freedom unvanquished by fire or fear only by retiring to a shuttered anchor-hold.