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Recommended Citation

Ellen M. Ross. (2001). "Visions Of Spirit: Prospects For Retrieving Medieval Spirituality". *Women Christian Mystics Speak To Our Times*. 17-36.

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VISIONS OF SPIRIT: PROSPECTS FOR RETRIEVING MEDIEVAL SPIRITUALITY¹

ELLEN ROSS

Medieval women's spiritual writings are living texts of vision and hope. While inviting us into the world of the Middle Ages, these narratives have the potential to inspire our own spirituality in these contemporary times. I believe that many of us are drawn to late medieval women's mystical writings because these texts speak eloquently of the love between human persons and the Divine—they express the joy and exhilaration of human intimacy with the Sacred. With extravagance, they name, nurture, and celebrate the relationship of God and humanity. In third-millennium American cultures, we hunger for resources that will enable productive journeys toward the Sacred. As such, medieval women's writings are essential aids in many practitioners' moves toward greater intimacy with God. These writings express the profundity of experiences of divine presence and absence that many of us glimpse and where many of us may even dwell in our own spiritual journeys. Thus, these spiritual narratives witness to the transformative possibilities of the reciprocal love that can exist between humankind and divinity.

*Contemporary Anxiety about Medieval Mysticism:
Violence, Suffering, and the Sacred*

Yet many texts by medieval women make us profoundly uncomfortable. Such texts are, for example, rife with debilitating clericalism, anti-Judaism, and gender hierarchies that are highly inflammatory and deeply troubling to the sensibilities of twenty-first century audiences. These texts present

a God who justifies and even sacralizes violence. At one point, the fourteenth-century Catherine of Siena urges the Queen of Naples to the crusading cause by saying: “I beg and urge you in the name of Christ crucified, to fire up your desire and get ready so that . . . [y]ou may give whatever aid or force is needed to deliver our gentle Savior’s holy place from the unbelievers’ hands and their souls from the devil’s hand so that they may share in the blood of God’s son as we do” (Catherine of Siena 1988, 112). This God wounds persons as a sign of divine love, as the thirteenth-century nun Gertrude of Helfta writes: “I had received the stigmata of your adorable and venerable wounds interiorly in my heart, just as they had been made on the natural places of my body. By these wounds you not only healed my soul, but you gave me to drink of the inebriating cup of love’s nectar” (Gertrude of Helfta 1993, 100). This God is moved by persons’ suffering to act mercifully, and yet is simultaneously portrayed as complicit in causing persons to suffer.

For some contemporary commentators like Sara Maitland, the focus on suffering and, in particular, on suffering women’s bodies in late medieval religiosity renders this material a pernicious exercise in self-abnegation (1987). We fear that the implied divine violence or, at the very least, the divine *sanctioning* of violence and suffering may legitimate a spirituality that includes a volatile conflation of politics, religion, and the denigration of women’s bodies. Understandably, we fear that texts in which believers understand or even cultivate pain as a means of spiritual transformation may lead persons to practice self-directed violence or endure violence as passive victims themselves.

In our own time, we know too well the dangers of a Christianity focused on the suffering Jesus and a model of imitative suffering in which persons endure violence directed against them because they believe they have been taught to “suffer as Jesus did.” As Joy Bussert’s research indicates: “Indeed, many battered women remain in violent relationships, many incest victims protect the secret, and many rape victims hesitate to report their assaults because of religious beliefs and values they have internalized from growing up in the church and in our culture” (1985, 2). The linking of language of violence and suffering so central to medieval mystical writings will surely, we fear, lead to the horrifying specter of the character Bess, in the Danish film “Breaking the Waves,” whose brutal death at the hands of rapacious men is figured in the film as a Christ-like sacrifice—a sacrifice

evoked by her “suffering love” as sanctioned by God and her husband. In medieval mystical texts, we confront once again the terrifying visage that the Christian heritage presents to us of a God immersed in the blood and suffering of humanity, not only as a healer, but, most hauntingly, as a perpetrator.

Yet the God present to us in these medieval texts is not unknown to us. It is the God of the biblical witness, that biblical witness that is the medium through which medieval women mystics experience the Sacred. This God who uses violence or painful experience to purify the believer, for example, is an old and venerable Christian tradition (Schwartz 1997; Wallace 1996)—this God is not a medieval mystical invention. The God who troubles us in these medieval texts—the God implicated in inflicting pain, or in being accessed through pain, or at the very least in permitting pain to function in a theological context—is the same God who allows the “righteous” Job to suffer, who tells the Hebrews to massacre their enemies in the Christian Old Testament, who strikes Ananias dead in the Book of Acts because he did not fully tithe, and who allows (or requires) God’s own beloved Child to die in the New Testament. Here in these mystical texts, where we hope to find unparalleled joy, we also find ourselves once again in the muck and mire of the ambiguity of the Christian legacy. This is our struggle as Christians—our history is deeply ambiguous, marred by brokenness and violence, and by the unsettling claim that needless suffering can sometimes be redemptive.

We may dismiss these texts in our attempts to disown the Christian association of the Sacred and violence, but before we summarily do so, I urge us to explore more fully the nature of the suffering present in these writings. While I agree with scholars like Maitland that we do not want uncritically to replicate the medieval world in our retrievals of women’s mystical thought, I want to suggest that studying these texts and appreciating the dynamics of theological and spiritual vision so central to them does not necessitate blanket approval of the medieval world or even our rough imitation of it. The point is not to read these medieval texts with an eye toward *replicating* them. Rather, the point is to *understand* these texts as testimonies to a complicated history of spiritual expression and to be open to the possibilities of a rich and potentially productive reflection on a world that may be very different from our own. Our understanding of the history of how women have practiced their faith may lead us to

appreciate—and, perhaps, even be transformed by—the religious leadership and spiritual power of medieval women who practiced the religiosity recorded in these mystical texts.

Simultaneous attention to two distinct dimensions of contemporary Christian spirituality can help mediate the challenges and prospects of learning from writings by and about medieval women mystics. First, contemporary Christian spirituality asks of these texts, *What do they tell us about the world of medieval spirituality?* This question reflects the first task of spirituality: to familiarize contemporary persons with the history of how believers have cultivated, experienced, and responded to relationships of intimacy with God. Second, contemporary Christian spirituality asks, *What can these texts contribute to spirituality today?* This query reflects the second task of spirituality: to provide present-day Christian practitioners with images, rituals, and resources to nurture their own intimacy with God. Recognizing that these tasks of contemporary Christian spirituality are distinct provides a context for attending to the historical and social environments from which the medieval texts arise. We can appreciate both differences from and similarities to the contemporary context and seek to understand the integrity of these texts in their original settings; and also, while respectful of tradition and cognizant of differences, we can reflect upon the ways these texts can invigorate, challenge, and sustain contemporary spiritual practice.

A final caveat. It is important to affirm the fundamental importance of understanding medieval women's mystical texts in their own settings. This proviso keeps us from uncritically appropriating material that may not be productive or fitting for our contemporary setting. And, of equal importance, such an appreciation for the historical nature of these mystical writings keeps us from uncritically dismissing them as dead icons left over from a prior age. Consideration of the integrity of these texts teaches us about the creativity and wisdom of generations prior to our own, and may challenge us to think in new ways about our own religious practices and traditions.

*Medieval Spirituality:
Female Inheritors of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*

Medieval mystics like Catherine of Siena, Gertrude of Helfta, and Angela of Foligno live out a trajectory within the history of Christianity. It is a trajectory of asceticism, spiritual transformation, prophecy, spiritual and physical healing, and advocacy. Here advocacy worked both ways: on behalf of people before God *and* on behalf of God before people. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts I consider here emerge in a culture (from which there were detractors) that followed a unified, scripturally derived, and theologically consistent line of interpretation in understanding the economy of salvation. This trajectory is characterized by its focus on the significant role of the suffering Jesus who bodies forth the spiritual truth at the heart of medieval piety: the medieval God is not abstract and distant, but radically immanent in the suffering Savior whose wounds are an invitation to compassionate response and engaged relationship.

For these writers, the theological starting point is, first, that Jesus' suffering is integral to the offer of transformation he proffers to humans. Second, in this interpretive world, the suffering of Jesus stands as a plea to persons to imitate Jesus' suffering as a way of linking themselves to the reality of who Jesus Christ is. That is, the path of imitative suffering enables persons to participate in the spiritual power of the suffering Jesus. Furthermore, suffering leads persons to perceive the trinitarian God of love who is embodied in Jesus Christ. Some texts even claim that imitative suffering enables persons to achieve divinity and become what Jesus Christ is, namely God. Through the journey of imitative suffering, devotees enjoy a deeper encounter with God's love in Christ and, in some cases, experience divinization.

While this extraordinary call to religious suffering present in some mystical texts may seem strange and perhaps unhealthy to many of us now, I nevertheless urge us to attend to the *function* and *meaning* of this suffering in its medieval context. In general, ritualized identification of holy women with the suffering Jesus, in a world far removed from our own, did not foment in religious women a self-denigrating, agency-denying, body-hating, private agony, but rather enabled these women to function as public heralds and living embodiments of the Divine through their widely recognized works of preaching, prophecy, and healing. In their personal devotion,

suffering erased the boundaries between the Divine and human persons, and invested medieval women with the very transformative power to teach and heal expressed by Christ himself.

This perception of imitative suffering is theologically sophisticated and grounded on a nuanced scriptural hermeneutic, one that reads the suffering Jesus as the key to understanding the typologically figured Christ in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The central idea here is that in imitation of the suffering Christ, persons find the seeds of personal and corporate transformation. This foregrounding of Jesus' suffering and its implications for the lives of spiritual virtuosi was elaborated by the moral or tropological reading of Scripture that understands the Bible as God's personal address to humans and even as God's love letters to the human soul (Ross 1989). As James Marrow has demonstrated, that medieval iconography of the Passion is grounded in a subtle reading of the Bible (1979), I also suggest that the interpretation of the believer's suffering as integral to spiritual and social change is grounded upon a finely tuned scriptural hermeneutic.

The understanding of suffering as part of the process of spiritual purification is seen in numerous passages cited by medieval mystics: so for example, Isaiah 1:24–26:

Therefore the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, . . .
 I will turn my hand against you;
 I will smelt away your dross as with lye
 and remove all your alloy. . . .
 Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
 the faithful city.

In the tropological reading in which Scripture is a personal address, persons are invited into a process of transformation to become faithful: it is a painful transformation of which God says: "I will turn my hand against you." Many twenty-first-century readers disregard such passages, but medieval mystics interpret their suffering through these scriptural lenses. The tropological reading gives rise to the idea that believers gain and express spiritual authority through their mimetic identification with Jesus Christ.

Catherine of Siena expresses this in her exegesis of Galatians 6:17 where Paul says: "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body." In interpreting this passage in its tropological or moral sense, Catherine urges readers of

her own text to carry on the work of Paul, and says of those who do that “they want to be of service to their neighbors in pain and suffering, and to learn and preserve the virtues while bearing the marks of Christ in their bodies” (Catherine of Siena 1980, 144). Holy women are agents of reform in the spiritual lives of their contemporaries, and they are representatives of humanity to God. Mystics like Catherine of Siena, Gertrude of Helfta, and Margery Kempe, for example, advocate on humans’ behalf and urge God to deal mercifully with the unrepentant living and the contrite dead. The power of these women’s advocacy, at least in part, is often linked to their suffering. Like the biblical prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, the fifteenth-century English laywoman Margery Kempe, for instance, rebels against her mission, saying that she does not want to weep and cry out at sermons anymore, bitterly lamenting the pain of her compassion for Christ’s suffering (1944, 181). This work of weeping pains Margery to the point that she shouts out to God, “Lord, I am not your mother. Take this pain away from me, for I cannot bear it” (164). Christ tells her not to pray in this manner because her desire will not be fulfilled; he explains to her that her weeping will benefit the world (181–184), saying that through her “thousands of souls will be saved” (186). As well, Lidwina of Schiedam’s (d. 1433) hagiographers explain that “the fevers [Lidwina] suffered almost daily for many years before her death released souls from Purgatory” (Bynum 1987, 127).² And Caroline Walker Bynum points to the “immoderate” nature of Mechtild of Magdeburg’s confidence that her “suffering with Christ saves 70,000 souls from purgatory” (1987, 401, n.81). Immoderate though this claim may be, it is common in stories about and writings by medieval women.

At the very least, identification with the suffering Jesus leads to spiritual transformation, cultivation of compassion, and rigorous attempts to transform the world. For Catherine and others like her, the tradition of suffering was not finished with Christ, but was extended as an offering of transformation for persons: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). The offering to human persons here is that through suffering, human persons can experience and even become what Jesus Christ is.

I am not suggesting that we uncritically imitate the forms of suffering present in many medieval mystical texts, but rather that by frankly acknowledging the presence of suffering in these texts, we may study these

sources with an appreciation for their thoughtful attention to scriptural and historical sources, and we may recognize how suffering functions in the religious lives and leadership of medieval mystics. What emerges from such study will both complicate and deepen our appreciation for medieval life and thought as well as challenge our assumptions about the role of pain and suffering in contemporary spirituality. As an example of this double benefit to understanding medieval writings, I point next to one often-overlooked accompaniment to suffering, namely, that imitation of or identification with the suffering Jesus is not an end in itself but a path toward greater intimacy with God—indeed, a path toward relationship with the *trinitarian* God who extends to persons the offer to participate in trinitarian life.³

Trinity and Deification in Women Mystics

In medieval mystical texts, the God Jesus Christ leads to is the triune God of Christianity. What often begins with a focus on Jesus and includes attention to and often identification with the suffering Jesus usually ends with a perception of the Trinity. At times, employing the traditional imagery of a soul imprinted with a seal, Gertrude of Helfta, for example, describes the intimacy of her union with God through the sign of the “resplendent and ever tranquil Trinity” being impressed upon her (Gertrude of Helfta 1993, 105). Other devotional texts also link trinitarian union with the experience of the suffering of Jesus Christ. The fourteenth-century Angela of Foligno’s biographer Brother A. describes Angela’s transformation in these terms:

Moreover, we must ponder with great care what she also said, namely, that the elevations into the Uncreated and the transformation into the Crucified placed her in a continual state of being plunged into the fathomless depths of God and of being transformed into the Crucified (Angela of Foligno 1993, 247).

In most mystical texts, Christ and the Trinity are intimately intertwined with each other because true understanding of life in Christ allows the devotee to plumb the depths of the meaning and experience of the Trinity itself.

Indeed, some medieval mystical authors like Angela of Foligno and

Gertrude of Helfta follow the thesis about the relationship of humans to Christ and the Trinity to its logical outcome. They claim at times that humans can be divinized—that the human person can merge with God and thereby become God or become so assimilated with God that observers or the devotees themselves cannot distinguish the person from God. Devotees are not only personally transfigured but also publicly transformed into purveyors of divine power. The God of medieval Christianity becomes visible through the sensual and the visual: devotees function as “texts” to be read by a world in need of spiritual transformation, offering the promise that human persons can be the site of divine presence, and even deified in the process.⁴ Here we move through imitative suffering to a situation in which these mimetic devotees become through *grace* what God is by *nature*.

Throughout texts as diverse as those by or about Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, and Elizabeth of Spalbeck, among others, the boundaries between God and humankind break down. Divine and human merge as the distinctions between these two orders of being are consistently dissolved. The ways of describing this fusion of the human and the Divine orders are many.⁵ Gertrude of Helfta, for instance, describes an experience that occurs on the second Sunday of Lent, traditionally the liturgical occasion for the reading of the narrative of Jesus’ transfiguration, in which Gertrude is united with God by becoming, in body and soul, what God is:

I saw the Lord face to face [Gen. 32:30,28] my soul was suddenly illuminated by a flash of indescribable and marvelous brightness . . . In this sweetest vision . . . [y]our eyes, shining like the sun, seemed to be gazing straight into mine . . . You, my dearest and sweetest, touched not only my soul but my heart and every limb. . . . I felt as though an ineffable light from your divine eyes [deifying eyes—deificis oculis] were entering through my eyes, softly penetrating, passing through all my interior being . . . [w]orking with marvelous power in every limb. At first it was as though my bones were being emptied of all the marrow, then even the bones with the flesh were dissolved so that nothing was felt to exist in all my substance save that divine splendor which, in a manner more delectable than I am able to say, playing within itself, showed my soul the inestimable bliss of utter serenity (cf. Wisd. 7:22, 23–26) (Gertrude of Helfta, 1993, 125–126, 152, n. 104).⁶

Gertrude describes her union as not only with Jesus Christ but as with the “mutual love of the ever adorable Trinity” (127). She says that she has been “given . . . [t]he grace to share with [God] on equal terms, like a queen with a king” (130). Through the process of transformation, Gertrude of Helfta becomes a purveyor of divine power and a spiritual advocate for the living and the dead. Gertrude becomes, in a phrase, the body of God to the world:

I have deigned to join my heart so courteously and so inseparably with her soul that she is become one spirit with me . . . I have chosen to dwell in her in such a way that her will, and the works which stem from this good will, are so firmly fixed in my heart that she is, at it were, the right hand with which I work. Her understanding is like my own eye with which she perceives what pleases me; the movement of her spirit is like my own tongue . . . And her discretion is like my nostrils . . . I incline the ears of my mercy toward those to whom she is moved to compassion. And her attention is like feet for me, because she is always bent on going where it is fitting for me to follow (84).

The deified devotee embodies God and manifests divine presence and power in the world. So Gertrude makes extensive claims about her powers, including that if she promises pardon for anyone’s faults, “God will respect her words as faithfully as if they had been spoken and solemnly promised by God’s lips” (Gertrude of Helfta 1993). As Gertrude’s biographer says, “she did not hesitate to play the part of an equal with God” (Gertrude of Helfta, 1993, 69). Likewise, God tells the thirteenth-century Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno, “You are I and I am you” (Angela of Foligno 1993, 205). Angela is “transformed into God” (253). Angela promises her followers that if they pursue the spiritual path she describes, they too may become God. Brother A., who records her teachings, and often says that he struggles to understand her correctly, begs her to tell him what will happen when the followers reach the highest stages of purification: “As I kept insisting, she finally told me: ‘What do you want me to say? My sons seem to be so transformed in God that it is as if I see nothing but God in them, in both his glorified and suffering state, as if God had totally transubstantiated and absorbed them into the unfathomable depths of his life’” (249).

At times, human persons themselves become embodiments of Godself, sources of sacred power, and transfigured beings who share in the divine life. In the theologically nuanced reflection on the Trinity of the medieval

mystics considered here, the lines of division between the divine realm and the human order finally blur and then are erased in christological ecstasy, trinitarian identity, and compassionate social engagement. Through the process of divinization, these texts celebrate the grandeur of the human condition. Humans, images of a trinitarian God, are invited, by following the path of the suffering child of God, to enter through that suffering into the realm of joyous intratrinitarian life. Believers may share in the power of God to heal and transform life, and at times, may even share, by grace, in the very being of God.

I have said that a first task of Christian spirituality is to cultivate understanding of the history of the spiritual traditions that are a central part of the Christian tradition. In this vein, these mystical texts suggest the type of intimacy that is possible between the Divine and humans. They also indicate that, at times, suffering is an integral part of the process of transformation. Studying these texts of theological and spiritual vision does not necessitate our mechanical replication of the medieval world. Rather, we seek to understand the spiritual expression in these texts and then to reflect on this richly textured world—a world very different from our own—as a possible world that we can inhabit and within which we discover a renewed sense of selfhood in relation to God and others.

*Contemporary Spirituality:
Medieval Sources of Spiritual Wisdom and Theological Insight*

I have noted that a second task of spirituality is to provide present-day Christian practitioners with potential images, rituals, and resources to nurture intimacy with God. Fundamentally for me, the most profound thing to learn from these texts is the joy and delight that accompanies believers in their journeys toward intimacy with the Sacred. This is why many of us turn to these narratives: they witness to spiritual transformation and companionship with the Sacred.

I suggest that we take from these works, however, neither a direct compilation of practices nor a complete and coherent worldview. For me, for example, the patriarchal structure of medieval Christianity renders it untenable as a metaview for our time. Yet, we can draw from these texts a witness to the intimacy possible between humans and the Sacred. These texts are visions of spirit: they are the works of women who express with

spiritual wisdom and theological acumen the profound pleasures (both private and public) that await persons willing to risk the journey of spiritual transformation.

Let me conclude with three suggestions about how a dialogue with these texts may yield spiritual practices, spiritual wisdom, and theological insights that can contribute to our communion with the Sacred in our own time and culture.

First, we may learn from the *spiritual practices* in these texts. Medieval mystical texts consistently present images and rituals as critical to spiritual transformation. Medieval women's mystical texts offer a wide variety of ritualized practices for invoking divine presence through prayer, posture, singing, sacrament, and performance. The point is not that we should woodenly imitate the medieval rituals as such, but rather that we should reflect upon how a wide variety of contemporary, historically embedded rituals—alternately similar to and different from medieval practices—can function to nourish and cultivate spiritual transformation. In turn, these texts also call us to recognize the power of images to transform experience—that is, they call us to cultivate practices of image making and image contemplation as a means of expressing and deepening our spiritual realities. A comparison of traditional artistic depictions of the Trinity with, for example, Judy Chicago's rendering of the Birth Trinity as a portrayal of a woman giving birth, a person standing behind her to support her, and a third figure which is both the child being born and the midwife-figure (1985, 118–119) may be as spiritually thought-provoking to us now as was the portrayal of the cooperative action of three males in the common medieval depiction of trinitarian creation. But both the medieval depictions of Trinity and contemporary figurations of the same highlight the perichoretic intimacy between the three divine Persons that can serve as a model of genuine intersubjectivity in our own time. Attention to how statues, images, and physical spaces function in spiritual life calls attention to the variety of ways the Divine was manifest in medieval culture and, in turn, provides resources for reflecting on the ways spiritual persons can cultivate intimacy with God and access to the Sacred in the present.

Second, insofar as these texts witness to human transformation, we can learn from the profound *spiritual wisdom* so essential in these texts. While suffering is a critical part of the journey they describe, it is never figured as the goal. The goal, in a word, is joy. The taxonomy of joy is a

necessary and crucial counterpoint to our fascination with suffering in these texts. The focus on suffering should be heeded, however. These texts observe that suffering is a part of the journey to transformation, an insight to which I think much spirituality, psychology, and theology in our own time attests. The pathos of the suffering prophetic voice in the world, the painful awareness of our own implication in the world of sin and persecution, the suffering of yearning for God, and the suffering borne of our awareness of our own resistance to transformation are among the great variety of sufferings witnessed to in medieval texts. While we may draw the lines about healthy and unhealthy suffering in very different ways from our medieval predecessors, we, with them, must acknowledge the presence of suffering—and, at times, the necessity of suffering—in the journey of spiritual transformation.

I am not suggesting, however, that we seek suffering in the journey to spiritual transformation in the way that, for example, the thirteenth-century Gertrude of Helfta asked God to wound her heart with the arrow of his love (Gertrude of Helfta, 1993, 102), or the way Julian of Norwich asked for suffering when she desired to have a sickness that would include “every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I should have if I were dying” (Julian of Norwich, 1978, 125). Nor, by the same token, do we want to sustain the cosmological view of medieval thinkers like the twelfth-century Hildegard of Bingen, who suggested that God often afflicts those who experience intimacy with God with physical pain as a way of keeping them from becoming distracted by worldly matters (Silvas, 1999, 175). Yet, medieval women’s testimony to the power of suffering as an essential aspect of the spiritual journey is a testimony that is still relevant today—not as a challenge to *seek* suffering, but as an invitation to acknowledge the *experience* of suffering as a possible site of potential spiritual transformation.

Reflection on the significance of suffering in the medieval context calls us to perceive the widespread presence of suffering in our own communities and, in particular, in the lives of persons who long for spiritual transformation. We are called to notice in our own lives the symptoms of suffering which may include anger, depression, rage, inaccessibility, and isolation. We are called to attend to the ways in which our culture encourages people to medicate suffering through alcohol, drugs, pornography, food, and work, among other strategies. The tradition of suffering in

medieval spirituality urges us to acknowledge the inevitable role suffering plays in the human drama. Rather than teaching us to turn away from suffering, this tradition challenges us to acknowledge suffering as a site of learning and as a place where one may meet God. The witness of the historic Christian tradition is that the God of joy and healing may be experienced in the encounter with suffering.

Indeed, this medieval insight is not foreign to many healing contexts of the early twenty-first century; this insight is, for example, at the heart of the twelve-step recovery programs so prevalent today. This insight into the meaning of suffering is that dwelling for some time in the valley of suffering may be essential to the journey toward intimacy with God, self, and the world. There is a heritage for this insight, a lineage of many who have sought self-transformation of the world through and into love. These practioners know that not only is suffering inevitable, but that it is only by experiencing the depths of suffering, while neither denying nor medicating it, that the seeds of transformation into love can happen. This transformation through suffering further calls persons to become themselves purveyors of divine presence and public heralds of God's compassionate love to the world.

I am not suggesting, as do some of the medieval thinkers I study, that suffering in and of itself is to be sought after because it is salvific for oneself or others. Rather, I am saying that suffering is an inevitable consequence of being human; it *can* be a door through which one may journey to God—a God who made suffering a part of Godself in the person of Jesus Christ. Medieval Christians understood that the sins of the world were written onto the body of Christ; sometimes even, Christ's body was described as a book with the sins of the world inscribed on it in red ink (Ross 1997, 132). We, too, are invited to imagine ourselves in this lineage of Jesus Christ, as being Christ-like in our suffering and as inheritors of the brokenness that led Jesus' persecutors to torment him. That is, the sins, the hatred, and the sicknesses of this world wound our bodies and our psyches, our very beings, just as Jesus' body was wounded. And at the same time we may wound the bodies and psyches of others in our own alienation from the pain we carry within ourselves.

And yet the message of Jesus Christ as relayed by our medieval forbears is that although suffering is inevitable, it is joy that is the last word. Although evil dwells all around and even within us, the testimony of the

Christian heritage is, as Hildegard of Bingen put it, that “just as Lucifer for all his malice could not bring God to naught, so too, he shall not succeed in destroying the human race” (Silvas 1999, 179). Our cosmology may not be as literal or as apocalyptic as that of Hildegard of Bingen, but this heritage is a reminder to us to live always in the hope of the transformation of suffering to joy. This tradition calls us to acknowledge suffering for what it is, and even to dwell with suffering at times as a part of the journey to transformation of self and society through experiencing a God of love.

When I present my reflections on suffering someone always protests that perhaps I am legitimating oppressive suffering and suggesting that persons who are being victimized should suffer in silence. Neither I, nor most medievals, would ever make this claim, although as I previously noted, the history of Christianity is sadly ambiguous (and even horrifically unambiguous) at times about the meaning and function of suffering in spiritual life. I understand that what I am saying here may be perceived as dangerous—misunderstood, it could seem to lead to the world of the character Bess in “Breaking the Waves.” I have no straightforward formula for separating suffering that can be construed as essential in the journey toward spiritual transformation from suffering that is utterly oppressive and suffocating of all life. As we know from stories we read in the newspaper everyday, as well as from the poignant testimony of writers like Elie Wiesel, there is incorrigible suffering *about* which we can make no sense (Wiesel 1999, 270) and *to* which we can perhaps respond only in the tradition of lament and by committing ourselves to keeping alive the memory of those who have suffered needlessly (Ricoeur 1995, 292).

In the face of the terrors of history and of our world today, there are some who have witnessed to the meeting of God in suffering and who have testified to the transformation into love through the path of suffering. In reflecting upon medieval spirituality I urge us to recognize the complexities of how suffering functions in spiritual transformation and to acknowledge the testimony of those who have gone before us—many of them athletes of God and intimates with God—who testify that the experience of suffering itself may be a significant aspect of spiritual transformation. The witness is that God took this suffering even into Godself in an affirmation of transformation and love. And God invites persons themselves to become living embodiments of God’s love to a world in need of healing.

I reiterate, however, that in these medieval texts we also encounter what is unfathomable and reprehensible to us since these texts challenge us, as do biblical texts where we meet the disturbing association of God and suffering, to live within the ambiguous and at times disquieting world of the Christian heritage. These texts then remind us that our own constructions of the spiritual journey may be just as fraught with troubling distortions as are those of our predecessors.

Third, we may learn from the *theological insights* of these texts. When we ask how women understood God in the Middle Ages, scholarship often tends to focus on the Christ-centered nature of medieval texts. Indeed, Christ is central, but most medieval women's mystical texts are profoundly trinitarian. My sense in teaching and working in the area of contemporary spirituality is that many people are renewed and refreshed when they live toward the Divine as Trinity. For medieval Christians, the notion of God as Trinity is not an irrelevant dogmatic abstraction but a living testimony to the deep interdependence and interrelationality of each member of the Godhead with one another. Again, my point is not that we should simply re-pristiniate the medieval world, but that while aware of its differences from our own world, we respond to the spiritual cosmos it sets before us as an occasion for a renewed understanding of the inward journey. The images and experiences that emerge from mystical traditions testify to how central the Trinity is to the lived spirituality of persons who devote their lives to loving the Sacred. The witness of mystical writings is that the experience of intimacy with Divinity is the experience of intimacy with a triune being (for example, Gertrude of Helfta 1993, 105). This is an argument for understanding sociality and community as both essential to what it is to be God and as essential to what it is to be human.

Many medieval mystics conjure the notion of a divine dance to express the manner in which the sacred partners of the Trinity turn and weave in interconnected harmony. This sense of the spiraling dynamic Trinity is brilliantly portrayed in medieval mystical texts like those of Gertrude of Helfta, where Gertrude seeks herself to be taken into the circle of the perichoretic divine dance:

O love, you alone know this road of life and truth. In you are carried out dear contracts with the Holy Trinity. . . . In the love of the nuptial contract, [let me follow] where you reign and govern in the fullest majesty of your divinity, [where] in the most dulcet coupling of your living love

and in the living friendship of your fiery divinity, you lead with you in the most blessed circular dance in heaven thousands upon thousands of the very brightest virgins. They are adorned, at one with you, in snow-white robes, jubilantly singing the dulcet songs of everlasting marriage. (1989, 56)⁷

For Gertrude, the joy of everlasting life is the joy of dancing together with the Sacred for eternity. It is to enter into the divine dance, to become one with God in the jubilant celebration of spiralling, swirling trinitarian love. We may figure the dancers differently from the monastic world Gertrude inhabits, but the trinitarian vision of ludic divine harmony can still inspire our spiritual vision and engender strength for the contemporary journey.

Conclusion

The God of medieval mystical writings yearns for persons to become like God, even to become God in following the religious path. As Angela of Foligno expresses this divine longing: “God wants [God’s children] to be totally transformed into God by love. . . . It is necessary that knowledge comes first, and the love follows which transforms the lover into the Beloved” (Angela of Foligno 1993, 295). At the same time that we may find the relentless construction of the suffering creature in the face of the Creator God disturbing in these texts, we may be jarred by the equally powerful assertion of the grandeur of human persons present in these writings. Persons are invited to become what God is, to share in the powers of transformation, and to share in the joy of the divine life. While the nature of the journey to this transformation into love is rife with the ambiguous legacy of Christianity’s alliance with violence, it is important to appreciate the dynamics of transformation in medieval mystical texts in which holy women become advocates for persons with God and intimates with the Sacred. In this vein, I believe that the work of contemporary spirituality is, on the one hand, to familiarize contemporary persons with the historic ways believers have cultivated, experienced, and responded to relationships of intimacy with God and, on the other hand, to provide present-day Christian practitioners with images, rituals, and resources to nurture their own intimacy with God. Faith-centered texts that celebrate the God of love with sense-rich images and words undergird and sustain spiritual life. In

reading medieval sources, we can appreciate both differences from and similarities to the contemporary context as we seek to understand the integrity of these texts in their original settings; and also, while cognizant of the differences, we will profit by reflecting upon the ways these texts can invigorate, challenge, and sustain contemporary spiritual practice.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the organizers, panelists, and audience participants at the November 1999 American Academy of Religion session on Women Mystics for their responses to the paper in which I originally presented the ideas I have further developed here. I am grateful to Mark Wallace, David Perrin, and two anonymous readers for their careful review of this article.

2. Accounts of the miraculous “death” and “resurrection” of Catherine of Siena say that “she agreed to continue living only because the Virgin Mary promised that God would free souls from Purgatory because of her pain” (Bynum, 1987, 171).

3. Among recent scholars who have attended to the significance of trinitarian traditions are Barbara Raw (1997) and Barbara Newman (1999).

4. Although I disagree with Edith Wyschogrod’s assertion that “[s]elf-renunciation to the point of effacement is the mark or trace of saintly labor” (30), I find her notion of body as “text,” or “surface of writing,” to be helpful and important (30, 96, 204).

5. The concept of beatific vision so critical to late medieval thought is, I would argue, often closely connected to the theme of transfiguration. As Caroline Walker Bynum points out, “By the 1330s the faithful were required to believe that the beatific vision could come to the blessed before the end of time; and theologians held, although in different ways, that the gifts of the glorified body were in some sense a consequence of the soul’s vision of God. Indeed, some theologians argued that a special miracle had been necessary to block the manifestation of God’s glory in the human body of his son Jesus; the body Jesus displayed at the Transfiguration was, they held, his normal body, manifesting the beatific vision he constantly possessed. . . . But the notion that the beatific vision could spill over into bodily manifestations, such as beauty or agility, probably encouraged the extravagant claims of hagiographers, who described their holy subjects as rosy and beautiful despite flagellation and self-starvation, excruciating disease and death itself. Aquinas wrote that martyrs were enabled to bear up under pain exactly because the beatific vision flows over naturally into the body” (1991, 231). I am suggesting that while in some cases there is a difference between texts that focus on beatific vision and those that make claims to the divinization of devotees, in many other cases the language of beatific vision is more closely associated with deification than scholars often acknowledge.

6. God speaks to Gertrude about the transformation: “As I am the figure of the substance of the Father (Heb. 1:3) through my divine nature, in the same way, you shall be the figure of my substance through my human nature, receiving in your deified soul the brightness of my divinity, as the air receives the sun’s rays and, penetrated to the very

marrow by this unifying light, you will become capable of an ever closer union with me" (Gertrude of Helfta, 1993, 104).

7. Gertrude of Helfta 1989, 56, note # 79: "The metaphor of the mystical dance, i.e., the dance in heaven (cf. also VI, 633), is often found in Mechthild of Magdeburg and other mystics describing the state of the soul in union with the divine. It goes back to patristic literature. . . ." An artistic vision of the sacred dance is magnificently portrayed in the fourteenth-century Rothschild Canticles (Hamburger 1990).

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