

*“Blessed is she who believed” (Lk 1:45), Exploring the Witness of Scripture.*

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## **Women Mystics: Mirroring the Wisdom of Scripture**

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Despite all that has been revealed about God through scripture or the great teachers of the Church, God remains difficult to describe, as St Augustine said, “It is easier to describe what God is not than to describe God.” We can only use our human imagery and words to attempt to come close to God “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1Tim6:16. NIV). In religious language ‘a mystery’ is not just a puzzle or something unknown or unknowable, it is something transcendent concerning God. Referring to the Church as ‘mystery’, Pope Paul VI defined this mystery as “reality imbued with the hidden presence of God”. The sacred Scriptures, the Sacraments, the Church itself, and perhaps even each one of us, could also be described as ‘mystery’. Christian writing over the centuries has endeavoured to break open some of these mysteries for us.

In the words of Mary T Malone, Feminist Theologian and Teacher of Women’s Christian History: “The Christian writing that has come down to us has been almost entirely in a male voice. No woman has ever been allowed to influence the theology, official teaching, liturgical ritual, or even the language of these productions in the preceding two millennia of the church’s life. All is male reflection on male experience, voiced in male symbolism and male prayer -forms, to a God predominantly imaged and addressed in male terms. This constitutes the church’s self -expression to this day.” This the truth although it could also serve as a critical statement.

I heard the author Alice Taylor speak about her faith a few years ago and was struck by something she said, “We grow where we are planted”. She referred to her rural upbringing, in a devout family living close to nature, as having an impact on her developing faith and relationship with God. Growing up in that family in a different part of the world with a different religious tradition would affect only *how* she worshipped God *not* that she would have been a person of faith, she said.

What is abundantly clear to all of us is that women are drawn to worship God just as much as men. The women mystics of the middle-ages are role models for us all. They are significant from a historical and a faith perspective, as they illuminate both women’s spiritual journeys, and through their writings, their desires to share these experiences and to draw others to God. Many people are unaware of these holy women, and few are familiar with their writings. These women were often discouraged by church authorities from writing or teaching in public, and several came to the attention of the Inquisition, had their books banned or burned, some were declared heretics and paid the ultimate price with their lives. For all of them the hardships and ridicule or censure meant nothing compared to the desires to share their profound experience of the presence of God. We find ourselves at a moment in the Church where the role of women is coming under a new spotlight, and the time seems appropriate to look to the wisdom and understanding of these great women visionaries.

There were 3 groups of women mystics:

**Religious sisters**

**Hermits or anchoresses.** A common tradition throughout Europe especially in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries. These women lived alone in contemplation, often in a little room attached to a church with only a window for contact to the outside world. They were respected in their communities and took prayer requests or dispensed wisdom and advice through their little window. Julian of Norwich is one such anchorite, famous since we still have her writings to this day.

**Beguines.** These women were quite unique in that they were independent women who didn't marry or enter the convent but supported themselves in small communities, through their work growing food or making crafts. Some were self-sufficient hermits. Some of them produced illuminating spiritual writings. The Beguines were often viewed with suspicion by church authorities.

The writings of the women mystics share common features

Many wrote in the vernacular. They used the language of the people not Latin which was very much considered the language of the church and thus whether they could publish would often be under control of clergy or church officials. Writing in the people's language meant more lay people would have had access to their writings too.

The majority used feminine names and images for God. They addressed God as Mother as well as Father. The name Lady Wisdom, Lady Love, Woman Spirit was used by some.

They imagined themselves through the eyes of God. They did not relate to the image of women portrayed in the dominant church teaching of their times. They did not see themselves as mere creatures of flesh doomed by Eve to embody sinfulness. They saw the worth of all creation in God's eyes and therefore felt responsibility towards all living things and the environment. They saw themselves as equal to men before God.

Their theology was Incarnational. The birth of Jesus into humanity had changed humanity forever and through Jesus they understood their own humanity in a new way. So too they understood God in a new way. They understood that through the God-man Jesus, somehow, they too embodied some of God. Reducing the distance between themselves and God was at the core of their spiritual journeys, their hearts were filled with the desire for spiritual unity with God. Julian of Norwich called it 'One-ing'. Catherine of Genoa said, 'my real me is God'. They described visions. They experienced a real immersion in the love of God. Some of them described ecstasies. Some used visceral images of bloodshed and childbirth, of suckling at the breast of God.

They wanted to teach. They shared their experiences so they could reassure people of God's presence during the difficult years of plague and warfare. They wanted to teach women and men to draw closer to God in prayer and to enrich their whole life out of that experience. Knowing God would lead to bringing God's love and compassion into a world that surely needed more of that.

There was a newness to these women mystics' theology, to their revelations of and experience of God that is still fresh and immersive even today. They caused some consternation in their own time with religious authorities, but they were largely well received within their own communities and many lay people made pilgrimages to their locations for advice and to pray. They encountered and mediated God to others in a uniquely female way, which in addition to all the other spiritual writings we have in the body of Christian literature and didactics, can only serve to enlarge our vision of God and focus our desires to know God better.

There are 4 women from the mystic tradition who have been declared Doctors of the Church, they are the only female doctors of the church. Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila (1970), Therese of Lisieux (1997) and the latest Hildegard of Bingen in 2012 (only 2 years after Pope Benedict XVI declared her a saint by "equivalent canonization"), in recognition of "her holiness of life and the originality of her teaching".

## Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) Sibyl of the Rhine

A brilliant polymath, Hildegard is a towering figure among women of the European Christian tradition of the high middle-ages. Born in Germany in 1098, she was the tenth child of her family and was tithed to the church. At the age of 8 she was sent to live with the anchoress Jutta at the Benedictine cloister at Disibodenburg and eventually took religious vows at her convent. She was wise and capable and became abbess of the community in 1136 after Jutta's death, she later moved the convent to Bingen. It is believed she governed a dual community with a monastery and a convent, and she is sometimes depicted with a crozier. Hildegard had been having visions since early childhood and told her confessor about them at the age of 43. The Archbishop of Mainz was sceptical and convened a committee of theologians to verify that there was nothing heretical in her visions and a monk was sent to help her write them down. *Scivias* 1141-1152 (Know the Ways), is her most famous work. She was seen as a prophet and preached in the towns and cities along the Rhine. She wrote music and plays, and she illustrated many of her visions in paintings. She also was a healer, with a vast knowledge of plants and herbs, who wrote medical and scientific books and is recognised as a founder of the science of pharmacy. She corresponded with popes and secular leaders, and many sought her advice and prayers. In her 80's, Hildegard was even excommunicated for a period for refusing to disinter a young man, who had been excommunicated, whom she allowed to be buried in the convent cemetery. She and her sisters suffered greatly from being denied the Eucharist but persevered because the young man had repented prior to dying. The excommunication was overturned shortly before her death. She died on Sept 17<sup>th</sup>, 1179. She was declared a saint in 2012 and a Doctor of the Church later that year by Pope Benedict XVI. Her feast day is Sept 17<sup>th</sup>.

## Julian of Norwich (1343-1413)

Though she is known as Dame Julian or Mother Julian very little biographical information is available about this English mystic, who became an anchorite for the last twenty years of her life, at the church of St Julian in the city of Norwich in Norfolk. Even her own name is lost to the ages. She survived the pandemic bubonic plague which decimated British society through several outbreaks for over 20 years. A contemporary of Chaucer, when she was thirty years old, she became gravely ill, and while close to death she received several visions of Christ on the cross, the Motherhood of God, and God's love and mercy for all. She recovered and wrote the first book in the English language that we can be sure was written by a woman. This fact alone makes her remarkable, but she was also a sophisticated theologian. Her book is called *Showings or Revelations of Divine Love*, and she says it is written as an answer to prayer. Completed in 1393, it is the result of a lifetime of contemplative prayer based on the visions she received. There is a strong theme of 'the motherhood of God' in her writings. We may be familiar with her phrase, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well"; even though sin exists, and misfortune, sickness and death affect us all, God's love transcends all this chaos and leads to peace and joy in the end, Dame Julian encourages. Her words are vibrant, and they confidently and reassuringly speak across time to us; God will enfold us in love and mercy if only we would reach out, Julian of Norwich takes us by the hand and leads the way. Thomas Merton named Julian of Norwich the 'essential theologian for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Although not officially canonized in the Catholic church, she has a feast on 13<sup>th</sup> of May and the church of St Julian in Norwich is a popular place of pilgrimage in the UK. (Her feast is May 8<sup>th</sup> in the Anglican, Episcopalian and Lutheran churches.)

## Hildegarde of Bingen

“ ... after all the other creatures were created, the Word of God, in the strong will of the Father and supernal love, considered the poor fragile matter from which the weak frailty of the human race both bad and good, was to be produced, now lying in heavy unconsciousness and not yet roused by the breath of life; *and warms it so that it is made flesh and blood*, that is , poured fresh warmth into it, for the earth is the fleshly material of humans, and nourished it with moisture, as a mother gives milk to her children; *and blows upon it until it raises up a living human*, for He aroused it by supernatural power and miraculously raised up a human being with intelligence of body and mind. (Scivias, Book One: The Creator and Creation, p 56)

*“And he makes his way into the greatest height of inestimable glory, where he radiates in the plenitude of wonderful fruitfulness and fragrance* that is to say that the Son of God ascended to the Father, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit is the height of lofty and excelling joy and gladness unspeakable; where that same Son appears to His faithful in the abundance of sanctity and blessedness, so that as they believe with pure and simple hearts that he is true God and Man. And then indeed the new bride of the Lamb was set up with many ornaments, for she had to be ornamented with every kind of virtue for the mighty struggle of all the faithful people, who are to fight against the crafty serpent. But let one who sees with watchful eyes and hears with attentive ears welcome with a kiss My mystical words, which proceed from Me, who am life.” (Scivias, Book Two: The Redeemer and Redemption, p62-63)

[note- the italics indicate what Hildegard sees in her vision and she goes on to interpret them herself, with God’s revealing help and often with reference to the prophets and the gospels.)

‘Hildegard’s mystical visions have a rich theological content. They refer to the principal events of salvation history, and use a language for the most part poetic and symbolic. For example, in her best- known work entitled *Scivias*, that is, “you know the ways”, she sums up in thirty-five visions the events of the history of salvation from the creation of the world to the end of time. With the characteristic traits of feminine sensitivity, Hildegard develops at the very heart of her work the theme of the mysterious marriage between God and humanity that is brought about in the Incarnation. (Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience 01-09-2010)

## Julian of Norwich

While I still had sight of our Lord's head as it bled, he showed me further understanding of his homely love. I saw that he is the ground of all that is good and supporting for us. He is our clothing that lovingly wraps and folds us about; it embraces us and closes us all around as it hangs upon us with such tender love; for truly he can never leave us. This made me see that he is for us everything that is good.

At the same time, he showed me something small, about the size of a hazelnut, that seemed to lie in the palm of my hand as round as a tiny ball. I tried to understand the sight of it, wondering what it could possibly mean. The answer came: "this is all that is made." I felt that it was so small that it could easily fade into nothing; but again I was told, "this lasts and it will go on lasting forever because God loves it. And so it is with every being that God Loves..."

... "God of your Goodness give me yourself; for you are enough to me; and I may nothing ask that is less than that may be full worship to you. And if I ask anything that is less, I am ever left wanting; but only in you I have all".

These words are full lovesome to the soul and closely touch the will of God and his goodness. For his goodness fills all his creatures and spills into all that he does. He is our endless home: he only made us for himself; he remakes us by his blessed passion and always keeps us in his blessed love. All this is down to his goodness. (The First Showing 5, p 9-11)

I it am : the might and the goodness of the Fatherhood. I it am: the Wisdom of the Motherhood. I it am: the light and the grace that is all blessed Love. I it am: the Trinity. I it am: the Unity. I am the sovereign goodness of all manner of things. I am that makes you to love. I am that makes you to long. I it am: the endless fulfilling of all desires....

...And thus, Jesus is our true Mother in kind, by our first making; and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our kind that is made. All the fair working and all the sweet kindly office of dearworthy motherhood are appropriated to the Second Person. For in him we have this godly will whole and safe without end, both in kind and in grace, all of his own goodness that is his alone. I understand three ways of beholding the motherhood of God: the first is grounded in the making of our kind, the second is his taking our kind, and then begins the motherhood of grace; the third is the motherhood of working, and there begins his going forth, by the same grace, all the length and breadth, to every height and in all depths without end. And it is all of his own love. (The Twelfth Showing 59, p131-133)

... we should quietly plead our cause to our most dear Mother, and he will wash over us with all his precious blood and make our souls full soft and mild, healing us fully fair in the process of time, which is to his worship and our endless joy. And he shall never cease nor stint from this sweet fair task till all his dear children be born and brought forth. (The Twelfth Showing 63, p141)

And from the time it was shown, I often desired to know what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years more after I was answered in spiritual understanding, with this saying: "Would you know the Lord's

meaning in this thing? Know it well: love was his meaning. Who showed you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Wherefore did he show it you? For Love. Hold yourself therein and you shall know and learn more in the same; but you will never know nor learn another thing therein without end." Thus was I taught that love was our Lord's meaning. And I saw full surely in this and in all that before God made us he loved us; which love was never slaked, nor never shall be. (The Sixteenth Revelation 86, p181)

## *The Witness of Scripture*

### FEMALE IMAGES OF GOD

Gen1:27 man and woman each created in God's image, equal before God.

Gen7:1; Deut32:18; Job38:28-29, Isa42:14,46:4-4; images of a birthing God

John1:12, 4:7, 16:21; those who believe and those who love are born of God, and God is bringing forth a new humanity like a woman in labour

Acts17 in God we live and move and have our being.

Hos11:3-4 God described as mother, 13:8 God as a mother bear.

Ps131 God as mother; Ps123:2-3 God compared to a woman.

Matt23:37; Lk13:34; God as mother hen.

Lk15:8-10 God as woman searching for lost coin.

Proverbs 1-9 Wisdom described in female terms

Wis7:22-8:1 She is the fashioner of all things; 9:10 She shares the throne of God;

Sir24:1-7 Wisdom sings her own praise.

Given the patriarchal cultures of both OT and NT times it is remarkable that the bible uses female imagery for God at all. Using feminine images for God is not radical or feminist yet we are sometimes uneasy about using them. Describing God in female imagery doesn't mean God is a woman, but that feminine or maternal traits say something about the nature of God and about the author's experience and understanding of God (just as male imagery does). How we relate to or describe the transcendent and ineffable stretches the capacity of human language and has done since the first words of scripture were scribed. Revelation is mediated through language, and just because we have gendered images for God, we must not confuse these metaphors with God's reality. God is Mother, Father, Wisdom, Fire, Rock, Refuge, Eagle, all of these things at once and yet entirely Other. The image of something as deep and encompassing as the concept of Love, itself ungendered, holding all things in unity, may somehow suffice.