

"I AM YOU": MEDIEVAL LOVE MYSTICISM AS A POST-MODERN THEOLOGY OF RELATION

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or many contemporary theologians, the dominant models and metaphors of theology are, in Sally McFague's words, "triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal."¹

This is nowhere more evident than in conventional theological views of the love of God, which is depicted as perfectly disinterested, and therefore perfectly dispassionate. In the face of such views, McFague calls for a "remythologising of the relationship between God and the world." In a similar vein, Carter Heyward writes that the "'symbolic universe' constructed by the Christian Church is often a gross impediment—heavy with meaning—to our realizations of who we are and what we might do together." She sees her own project as a re-naming and re-imaging of key elements of this "symbolic universe" that will enable Christians to claim themselves as "sacred, proactive

¹Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, NuclearAge* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) xi.

participants in the liberation of humanity from injustice and despair."²

It may be suggested that the texts of thirteenth century women mystics are engaged in just such a re-naming and re-imaging, particularly around the concept of love. Suppressed, downplayed, ignored or belittled, the full subversive power of the texts of so-called "love mysticism" in re-casting conventional theology in terms of human passion and desire has rarely been recognized. Yet these 700-year-old texts, authentic expressions of medieval Christian spirituality, offer images, myths, and ways of symbolizing and representing the relationship between God and the soul, and (hence) God and the world, that are peculiarly appropriate to the post-modern moment.

In particular, their representations of a God who is passionately in love with the human, and of a human "being" that is interpenetrated with God, short-circuit the "triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal" imagery that dominates some modes of Christian theology to vividly figure the radically open, intimately relational, and passionately dynamic God towards which many recent theologies are groping. To get to this "remythologized" mystical theology, however, readers must move past their own deep cultural fears of passion, fears which are supported by the numerous philosophical and psychological prohibitions on merging or "fusion" which relegate mystic union, along with intense experiences of human love, to the troubled realm of the pathological.

² Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of MutualRelation* (Lanham, New York: University Press of America, 1982) 13.

Love Mysticism

In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas is at pains to emphasize that God does not love "as we love" (Q. 20, art. 2).³ Certainly God is loving, containing "love . . . and joy and delight," but in God these attributes are not "passions" but "denote acts of the intellective appetite" (Q. 20, art. 1). Above all, God's love is not like human love because it contains no element of need. Because God "needs no creature outside Himself," he loves us "only on account of His goodness" (Q 20, art. 2). Such a view of divine love, as Catherine Keller explains, is partly the result of the doctrine of God's immutability, which is itself an essential part of the doctrine of God's perfection.

In philosophical and theological thought going back to Plato, Keller writes, that which is perfect cannot change: "a perfect being is eternally—already—all that it can be. Or in Aquinas's language, God's essence is strictly identical with God's existence: this is the meaning of the divine infinity." Being immutable, then, God is necessarily "impassionable," unable to feel: "For if God could be moved by feeling for the creatures, God would not be the purely active cause of all things, the Unmoved Mover."⁴

Keller notes that this belief has been difficult to reconcile with the equally strong theological commitment to the idea that God is love. Bringing these two characteristics, God's immutability and God's love, together

³Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

⁴ Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 36.

has caused much theological squirming: "One may read much of theological history as a conscious and convoluted attempt to compress the warming intuition that God is love into the cold, hard diamond of divine immutability."⁵

In the texts of a number of thirteenth-century women mystics, however, the passion, power and personal quality of God's love are so self-evident as not to need stating. Love mysticism is often associated with what Barbara Newman identifies as the "eroticized contemplative practice based on allegorical reading of the Song of Songs," a practice with a long monastic history but which came to special prominence in the twelfth century through the influential work of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁶

In the hands of thirteenth-century women mystics, however, love mysticism took on significant new characteristics, becoming what Newman calls "a distinctive creation of the thirteenth-century beguines, not just a pretty bottle for the same old wine." Part of what makes this genre distinctive, Newman argues, is its integration of the secular genre of courtly romance with traditional "bridal" mysticism, an integration which created a range of mobile subject positions or "identities" for both the mystic soul and God. The thirteenth century mystical text was thus able to

⁵ Keller, 37.

⁶Denys Turner, *Eros and allegory: Medieval exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995). Turner identifies a thousand year tradition of commentaries on the Song of Songs stretching from Gregory the Great to John of the Cross. He argues that it was the potential of the Song of Songs to express allegorically the nature of monastic spiritual life that led so many celibate priests and monks to devote so much of their time to this erotic poem.

"convey strikingly different views of the lover, the beloved, the emotional and ethical praxis of love" and to "express the loving, volatile self's whole panoply of response to its ineffable Other."⁷

For Grace Jantzen, the primary difference between traditional love mysticism and that of thirteenth-century women was the much more direct approach the women mystics took to the passion represented in the Song of Songs. She notes that Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs, although "explicitly based on one of the most erotic love poems in the literature of the world, . . . manage to reduce eroticism to a sustained allegory, intellectually intricate, but hardly passionate."⁸ By contrast, in the work of women mystics:

...there is a direct, highly charged, passionate encounter between Christ and the writer. The sexuality is explicit, and there is no warning that it should not be taken literally. There is no intellectualizing or spiritualizing, no climbing up into the head, or using the erotic as an allegory hedged about with warnings.⁹

As Bernard McGinn puts it:

⁷Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 137-39.

⁸Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 128.

⁹Jantzen, 133.

The modes of representation of erotic union with God are no longer concerned with signaling the allegorical transformation of sexual terminology, as was the case in monastic mysticism, but rather seek to show that passion *is* passion and passionate union with Christ is its highest form.¹⁰

The beguine mystics to whom these writers refer include Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, and Angela of Foligno. For all of these women, passion is, indeed, passion. God feels, and what he feels is desire and need, sorrow and joy, and all the vicissitudes of human love. In Mechthild's text, God tells her: "I longed for you before the beginning of the world,"¹¹ and begs her to allow him to "cool the heat of my Godhead, the longing of my humanity, and the pleasure of my Holy Spirit in you."¹²

His desire for her/humanity is infinite: "God has enough of everything; caressing souls is the only thing he cannot get enough of."¹³ Indeed, Mechthild experiences God's love for her as so intense, so powerful, that it is literally unbearable; yet God assures her that he reveals to her only a small part of his love:

¹⁰Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 156.

¹¹Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 287.

¹²*Ibid.*, 155.

¹³*Ibid.*, 153.

No matter how softly I caress you,
I inflict immense pain on your poor body.
If I were to surrender myself to you
continuously, as you desire,
I would lose my delightful dwelling place on
earth within you,
For a thousand bodies cannot fully satisfy
the longings of a soul in love.¹⁴

The image suggests not only the power of God's love but also the inexhaustibility of Mechthild's own desire; if she had a thousand bodies with which to experience God, she would still not be satisfied.

The God of the beguines not only desires the mystic, but also desires her desire. He tells Angela of Foligno that he wants her to "hunger for me, desire me, and languish for me."¹⁵ Indeed, Angela sees her own desire as a gift from God, who "sets ablaze a fire within the soul with which the whole soul burns for Christ."¹⁶ and then teasingly fans the flame, "playing" with her by offering and then withholding his presence in such a way as to further incite her.¹⁷ At the

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁵Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 152-3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁷Angela writes: "God often plays like this with and in the soul. When the soul tries to seize him, he immediately withdraws" (Angela, 174). In one such instance, she writes of how she saw "love gently advancing toward her...and as it approached her it moved like a sickle...because, as it approached her, love at first drew back not bestowing itself as much as it had led her to understand it would, and as much as she did understand it would at that time; and this made her languish for more" (Angela, 182-3).

same time, the desire of the mystic is a force before which God himself is helpless. He tells Mechthild that her desire has power to "compel" him:

Your secret sighs shall reach me.
Your heart's anguish can compel me.
Your sweet pursuit shall so exhaust me
That I shall yearn to cool myself
In your limpid soul.¹⁸

Elsewhere, he tells her that if she comes to him "with the blossoming yearning of flowing love, I must go to meet you and caress you with my divine nature as my one and only queen."¹⁹ Such "yearning love" has a power to compel God greater even than "humble sorrow and holy fear."

For Hadewijch, too, God cannot resist or remain aloof from the loving soul. In a startling re-telling of the story of the annunciation, she writes that rather than submitting herself with docility to God's will, Mary actually compelled God to enter her womb:

She made the Lord a slave;
Although he was the noblest in heaven,
Her deep humility made him so submissive
That he fell from his sublimity
Into this unfathomable chasm.

¹⁸Mechthild, 93.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 122.

For her humility was so great
That she summoned the King to come to
her.²⁰

Similarly, any soul may "summon" Christ through Love: "Love brings him down to us and makes us feel so tenderly who he is; in this way we can know from him who he is."²¹

For the mystic, love and desire are the very locus of her being, manifested both physically and spiritually. As Mechthild describes it, love is a force that ruptures and re-makes the self:

My blood dries up, my bones torture me,
My veins contract,
And my heart melts out of love for you,
And my soul roars
With the bellows of a hungry lion.²²

Far from the contemplative stillness of the meditative soul waiting on God, this is a frenzy of waiting, a desperate and imperious hunger that is vociferous in its demands. Similarly Angela writes of how love generates in her "a hunger so unspeakably great that all her members dislocated"²³ and of how in the blaze of "sweet and gentle

²⁰Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 320.

²¹*Ibid.*, 71.

²²Mechthild, 94-5.

²³Angela, 183.

love," she feels a "disjointing" in all her "members," hearing "the bones cracking."²⁴

Hadewijch, too, writes of how "[m]y heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire"²⁵ and of a love so "violent" that the loving one "fears he will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts" (Hadewijch 1980, 65). This is a love utterly heedless of the conventional distinction between body and soul. Brooking no denial, suffering no check, it transforms the lover into longing.

These "violent" images of cracking, stretching, contracting, disjointing and melting represent the pangs of both death and re-birth as the mystic recasts herself through the force of her desire. In her passion, the mystic opens herself; her boundaries become permeable, her being becomes fluid. This is particularly evident in the many mystical images of incorporation in which the soul is taken into God, and God is taken into the soul.

Mechthild, for instance, inverts the eucharistic meal, describing herself not only as being nourished by God's body and blood, but also as nourishing God with her own heart's blood: "Ah, I shall drink of you/ And you shall drink of me."²⁶ This image is literalized in a vision in which Christ in the form of a lamb drinks from her "heart": "The more it suckled, the more she gave it."²⁷ Similarly,

²⁴*Ibid.*, 158.

²⁵Hadewijch, 280.

²⁶Mechthild, 255.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

Hadewijch writes of how, in mystic union, "each knows the other through and through . . . And eats his flesh and drinks his blood:/ The heart of each devours the other's heart."²⁸

Such images reach their logical conclusion in depictions of mystic union in which the interpenetration of the mystic and God is so complete as to make the concepts of "self" and "other" virtually meaningless. Images of the mingling of two fluids are particularly powerful in evoking this. As Ulrike Wiethaus writes in her study of Mechthild, "everything shines, flows, burns, reflects, floats, rises, falls, merges, dissipates."²⁹

Mechthild, who figures both the soul and God as "ever-flowing," writes of how "we two have flowed into one/ And have been poured into one mold."³⁰ Hadewijch writes of being "flowed through by the whole Godhead" and of "flowing back through the Godhead itself"³¹ and Angela writes not only of being filled with God, but of being herself inside God.³²

The loss of boundaries between the self and God is entirely mutual, experienced by both the mystic and God. Thus God tells Angela: "You are I and I am you."³³ God tells Mechthild: "I am in you/ And you are in me./ We

²⁸Hadewijch, 353.

²⁹Ulrike Wiethaus, *Ecstatic Transformation: Transpersonal Psychology in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 46.

³⁰Mechthild, 217, 111.

³¹Hadewich, 303.

³²Angela, 170, 176.

³³*Ibid.*, 205.

could not be closer,/ For we two have flowed into one."³⁴ Hadewijch writes of how "the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in such a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other."³⁵ For the mystic, then, passion, self-shattering desire, is the means by which the "sealed" self, both her own and God's, is ruptured, opened to the ebbs and flows of the other. No longer a single, self-identical entity with distinct physical and psychic limits, both she and God are a kind of force, what Paul Mommaers calls an "unlimited dynamic" that is re-made at every moment in relation to the "other."³⁶

I Love, Therefore I Am

These texts, then, develop a kind of ontology of love, a radically different way of conceiving of the self. French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva sees such an alternative mode of being in both medieval courtly romance and the love mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux, parallel traditions which she, like many other scholars, identifies as having "a matching genesis, if not a reciprocal contamination." In these texts she sees an alternative to the Cartesian *cogito*:

Beyond the affirmation, *Ego cogito* . . .
which Descartes handed down to us in a
straight line originating with Thomas

³⁴Mechthild, 111.

³⁵Hadewijch, 66.

³⁶Paul Mommaers, preface to Hadewijch, xiii-xxiv.

Aquinas and whose fruits and miseries our age has gathered, [there is] another one of man's practices at the very heart of that first renascent or precolonial expansion that the crusades constituted for the West. Saints and troubadours seem to proclaim, *Ego affectus est*, thus glorifying what, in the light of Reason, will appear to be base irrationality.³⁷

For Kristeva, the word "affect," which includes love, fear, sadness, and joy, emphasizes "the movement toward the other and . . . mutual *attraction*."³⁸ This "irrational" form of subjectivity, then, is based not on an affirmation of the individuated self but on the "movement toward the other." Bernard's writings, she argues, provide "the adequate and powerful means to define man's *being* as *lover*." She goes on: "Ego does not yet know how to *be* because he thinks . . . 'I' is because *I love*."³⁹

In medieval love mysticism, then, and particularly in the "distinctive genre" developed by thirteenth-century women, there is a whole new conception of the self: in Kristeva's terms, "An *I* that is passion." Kristeva's work suggests that the loss of identity experienced in mystic union is also the "human" experience of being in love: in love, "I" has been an *other*." This is a threatening concept,

³⁷Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 154, ellipsis in original.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 155.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 167-9.

she notes, suggesting "a state of instability in which the individual is no longer indivisible and allows himself to become lost in the other, for the other." However, when understood as a manifestation of love, such a state can be seen as productive and healthy rather than dangerous or pathological: "Within love, a risk that might otherwise be tragic is accepted, normalized, made fully reassuring." For many, however, both psychoanalysts and theologians, this experience can never be either "normalized" or "fully reassuring."⁴⁰

Opening the self to the other, experiencing the self as flux, living in a state of continuing responsiveness to the other, of transformation and becoming, is profoundly threatening within Western culture. As Kristeva notes, such a state of being appears "in the light of Reason" to be "base irrationality." This is exactly the way love mysticism has tended to be viewed, as "base irrationality." Not only does the mystic abandon her "self" completely to the other, she writes of an embodied passion as the way to experience God, and embraces experiences of self-loss and "fusion." All of these things strike fear into the heart of the "rational" self of Western modernity.

Fear Of Love

This fear is evident in the earliest ecclesiastical responses to the concept of mystic union that was being developed in the texts of beguine mystics. In challenging the boundaries between self and (divine) other, these

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

women were courting charges of heresy. As George M. Sauvage explains in the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, in "true mystical contemplation . . . there is no annihilation or absorption of the creature into God, but God becomes intimately present to the created mind." Thus, he goes on, the Church "condemned the immediate vision of the Beghards and Beguines."⁴¹

What McGinn, in his article on mystical union in the Christian tradition, calls an "affective, operational union of willing and loving, an *unitas spiritus*," was tolerated, but the assertion of an "ontological union of essence or substance" was not.⁴² This was a distinction about which the mystics examined here, with their images of the indwelling of the one in the other, seem to have been largely unconcerned. However, as McGinn writes, the "union of indistinction," as formalized in the work of Meister Eckhart, was condemned by Papal Bull in 1329.⁴³

More recent, and sometimes more subtle attacks on the beguine mystics have focused specifically on the "irrational" elements of their texts: the passion, extreme physicality, and experiential reality of their love. For instance, in his well-respected study of mysticism, W.T. Stace writes: "[The] excessive emotionalism of some saints and mystics is, according to this writer's taste, an

⁴¹George Sauvage, "Mysticism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (n.p., 1913).

⁴²Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge and *unio mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition," *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, 59-86. (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 63.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 71, 78).

unpalatable characteristic, tending to show lack of balance and of good judgment and critical ability."

Significantly, Stace associates such "excesses" with "the unwashed and dirty habits notoriously indulged in by some medieval saints" thus making a perhaps unconscious connection between what he calls "hyperemotionalism" and the body. His preference is for the "intellectual or speculative type [of mystic], who usually keep their emotions under control."⁴⁴ Such "preferences" inevitably bias his study in certain directions, away from the love mysticism of thirteenth century beguines, for instance, and towards the more theological treatises of a Meister Eckhart.

In his study of medieval women mystics' "ways of loving and knowing," John Giles Milhaven points out that such philosophical distaste for "affective" mysticism is often specifically a distaste for the writings of women. He cites Wolfgang Riehle's 1981 book *The Middle English Mystics*, which identifies "the unpleasant side of medieval female mysticism," as a case in point. Riehle writes:

[The] process of materializing sensual imagery . . . [is] something which was taken to extremes in texts of female mysticism. The great mystical texts are satisfied with the implied suggestion of mystical communication, but in the texts of the

⁴⁴W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960) 53-4.

women mystics the imagination knows no such restraints.⁴⁵

In a similar vein, Frances Beer notes that the erotic language used by many female mystics has been discounted and discredited over the centuries by those who find such expressions of desire and pleasure uncomfortable. She quotes Rufus Jones as typical of such responses: "there is a large element of pathology . . . far too much reproduction of the experiences reported in the Song of Solomon, and unwholesome dialogues of love intimacies which mark this type of amorous, romantic, cloistered mysticism."⁴⁶

Sexuality, in this view, has no role in spirituality, and "love mysticism" is neither a sophisticated narrative trope nor a joyful reclamation of the physical for the spiritual but simply evidence of a diseased, or certainly a repressed, sexuality. This view is also evident in the work of W.R. Inge, who wrote in 1904:

[The] image of Christ as the Lover of the individual soul rather than as the Bridegroom of the Church was too dear to these lonely men and women. . . . The raptures of Divine Love, which they

⁴⁵Quoted in John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993) 87.

⁴⁶Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992) 91, Beer's ellipsis.

regarded as signal favours bestowed upon them, were not very wholesome.⁴⁷

Such expressions of discomfort with, and even contempt for, love mysticism suggest a strong investment on the part of these writers in the "rational" and a deep unease with emotion and the body, at least in a spiritual and/or scholarly context. This unease is embedded in the Christian theological tradition, as Milhaven points out. He writes that the body has traditionally had no place in spiritual experience: "The necessity of rising above all bodily experience, sense images, and bodily passion in order to come to any experience of God is repeated monotonously in mystical theologies."⁴⁸

Further, he demonstrates the precedence given in orthodox theology to intellect and reason, to the extent that "only the nonbodily identification by reason and will was the love that counted" and cites Thomas Aquinas's view that "the pleasures of touch are the least good of all human pleasures because the perceptions we take pleasure in with touch are the minimal forms of knowing."⁴⁹ The texts of thirteenth-century women mystics turn that tradition upside down, often privileging touch as the most profound form of knowing.

Not only do they envision physical encounters with Christ, but they also insist that the joys of mystic union are

⁴⁷W. R. Inge, *Light, Life, and Love: Selections from the German Mystics of the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1904) 10.

⁴⁸Milhaven, 84.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 117, 107.

experienced in the body as well as in the soul.⁵⁰ Angela writes, for instance, of hearing a voice say "You are full of God," and immediately feeling "all the members of [her] body filled with the delights of God."⁵¹ Hadewijch, too, explicitly includes the body in the joys of union when she writes of how, in a vision, Christ "took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity."⁵²

Descriptions like these have provoked such ambivalent reactions from scholars of mysticism not only because they insist on bringing the body into spiritual experience, and seem thus to be "improper," but also because they are so clearly outside of those theological frameworks in which love is essentially dispassionate. It is easy to see how Stace's sense that love mysticism shows a "lack of balance and of good judgment and critical ability" shades into Jones's "large element of pathology." To experience "an *I* that is passion," a self that abandons itself in love, is, in conventional terms, to teeter on the brink of madness. However, such a judgement reflects, it may be argued, both an over-valuation of separation and autonomy in terms of the self, a bias towards what Keller calls the "separative self," and a deep cultural fear of so-called

⁵⁰See, for example, Mechthild's encounters with Christ on the "bed of love," Hadewijch's famous eucharistic vision in which she embraces Christ (Hadewijch, 280-2), and Angela's descriptions of holding the baby Jesus and embracing Christ in the sepulchre (Angela, 274, 182).

⁵¹Angela, 147-8.

⁵²Hadewijch, 281.

"fusion" experiences, a fear which manifests itself as a distrust of love itself.

Pathologizing Love

To understand how frightening the mystic's representation of the loving self as fluid and permeable can be to her readers, it is necessary to understand how deeply committed Western society has been to the concept of the self as contained, sealed and inviolable. Keller describes the "separate, self-enclosed subject" who dominates Western philosophy, theology and literature as one who, far from dissolving the boundaries of the self, reinforces them with armor:

Its relations do not affect its essence. Indeed, to sustain its sense of independence, such a subject is always liberating itself from its bonds as though from bondage. Intimacy, emotion and the influence of the Other arouse its worst anxieties, for somehow it must keep relation external to its own being, its "self." It proves its excellence through the tests of separation, establishing a mobile autonomy as its virtue. . . . Virility lies above all in impermeability.⁵³

This self, which values independence and autonomy above all else, and which fears connection as a form of

⁵³Keller, 8-9.

bondage and relationship as imperilling its freedom, has become the "norm" of psychic health in Western culture. Its legacy can be seen, as Jessica Benjamin's work suggests, in the commitment of ego psychologists to the "separation and individuation" process as the hallmark of successful development and maturation.

Benjamin writes that the "classic psychoanalytic viewpoint did not see differentiation as a balance, but as a process of disentanglement. Thus it cast experiences of union, merger, and self-other harmony as regressive opposites to differentiation and self-other distinction. Merging was a dangerous form of undifferentiation."⁵⁴ The concept of regression itself implies that experiences of union and merger belong to an early, in fact, specifically an infantile, stage of development and should be left behind as the individual grows and matures.

This Freudian concept grows out of the idea, increasingly being challenged by psychoanalysts,⁵⁵ that humans begin life in a state of "symbiosis," unable to distinguish between themselves and that which is around

⁵⁴Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 46-7.

⁵⁵Drawing on the work of Hans Loewald, Donald W. Winnicott and Hal J. Breen, Dan Merkur argues that "[t]here is no neonatal developmental phase of primary narcissism, or monism, or subject-object non-differentiation, when infants naively mistake their care-givers for parts of themselves." His theory is that unitive experiences can be explained not as regression but as sublimation, and as such "inherently and inalienably healthy": "If unitive thinking is indeed a form of sublimation, psychoanalysis must maintain the view that unconscious unitive thinking has a natural and healthy tendency to manifest as conscious spirituality." Dan Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999) ix.

them, and move gradually towards a "mature" sense of the self as a separate, individuated, autonomous entity. Fusion and merger experiences are thus regarded as "primitive" while separation and individuation are "more sophisticated" ways of being, as Kevin Fauteux suggests when he defines regression, following Freud, as "the temporary or permanent disavowal of developed behavior or mentation, in order to return to 'primitive methods of expression and representations that take the place of the usual ones.'"⁵⁶ Regression to these "primitive methods," of which "fusion" is one instance, implies a failure to cope, and a retardation of development.

This view of fusion experiences leads psychoanalytic theorists of love into the same kinds of quagmires in which theologians have found themselves foundering when trying to come up with a plausibly loving God who does not feel. Given that apparently healthy and mature people yet experience fusion in love, psychoanalysts have struggled to identify a form of fusion that is not really fusion, a fusion that leaves the sense of self intact, and that is thus compatible with maturity. This struggle, and its unsatisfactory resolution, is evident in the work of Otto Kernberg, for instance, who writes that "mature sexual love" involves both a "regressive pull toward establishing fusion with the loved object" and a

⁵⁶Kevin Fauteux, *The Recovery of Self: Regression and Redemption in Religious Experience* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) 10.

"progressive tendency" toward consolidating the separate identities of self and object/other.⁵⁷

Sexual love, he concedes, does involve a "crossing" of the boundaries of the self, but if such love is to be considered "mature" and "healthy," this "crossing" must never be allowed to compromise the "integrity" (separation, individuation) of the self: "In passionate love, orgasm integrates . . . the crossing of boundaries in a sophisticated identification with the loved object while maintaining the sense of separate identity." The sense of separation even in the ecstatic moment of fusion is absolutely essential for Kernberg. To be tolerable, fusion must, paradoxically, be an experience that "reconfirms one's separate identity and autonomy."⁵⁸

Again, this recalls the distinction the medieval church sought to make between the "unitas spiritus" and the "union of indistinction." No matter how the experience might subjectively feel, the mystic (and the lover) must accept that there is no true union. The self is in truth, if not in experience, absolutely sealed. By insisting on union/fusion in love, the medieval mystic risked a charge of heresy; the contemporary lover risks the charge of madness. As Benjamin writes, in its "most extreme version," the commitment of psychoanalysis to the individuation-differentiation process "pathologized the sensation of love."⁵⁹

⁵⁷Otto F. Kernberg, *Love Relations: Normality and Pathology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 34.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁹Benjamin, 47.

Reclaiming Love

However, for Benjamin, the psychoanalytic model of the "isolate self" is neither a true reflection of the way in which the self develops nor a healthful model of achieved subjectivity. She suggests that psychoanalysts' commitment to separation and individuation has led them to ignore, repress or negate a whole range of experiences, including "the intersubjective experience of recognition and all the emotional elements that go into appreciating, caring for, touching, and responding to an other."⁶⁰

Fauteux, too, writes that rather than learning "a healthy balance between the drive toward autonomy and control and the longing to maintain some sense of communion and instinctual spontaneity," children are taught to develop "autonomy and control at the expense of communion feelings." For him, the "overemphasis on autonomy and control to the detriment of communion feelings marks a premature closure of psychological development" and an impoverishment of the "individual's sense of self."⁶¹

Benjamin goes further, arguing that there is a need for psychoanalytic theory to validate the striving for "unity [union], symbiosis, fusion, merging, identification."⁶² In place of the traditional concept of development as separation and individuation, Benjamin proposes what she calls "intersubjective theory," in which "the relationship between self and other, with its tension between sameness

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 177.

⁶¹Fauteux, 93.

⁶²Benjamin, 177, quoting Hans Loewald.

and difference" is seen as "a continual exchange of influence," and the focus is not on "a linear movement from oneness to separateness, but on the paradoxical balance between them."⁶³

The idea of the self as a "continual exchange," a "paradoxical balance" between oneness and separateness, is highly reminiscent of the mystic self as she flows out of herself and into her lover, and experiences both the joy of communion and the agony of separation. If the entire psychoanalytic narrative of development, which begins with fusion and ends with definitive separation, is seen as culturally determined and fundamentally flawed, as theorists such as Keller and Judith Jordan et al.,⁶⁴ as well as Benjamin, suggest, then the mystic's passionate movement from separation to interrelation and fusion can be seen as a liberating re-imaging of the self.

If one can throw off the fear of fusion, a fear which trickles down to infect all experiences of relationship and connection, perhaps the potential in this mystic self-which-is-not-self may be seen. In order to do this, however, one needs to revisit the often implicit assumption that fundamentally, human beings are not relational but solitary creatures, and that aloneness is the human condition.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁴Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver & Janet L. Surrey, *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center* (New York and London: The Guildford Press, 1991).

Love And Relation

This assumption is sometimes evident even in the work of those who value the transformative spiritual power of love. Thomas J. Tyrrell, for instance, does see passionate human love as a spiritual path, and even draws on the mystical poetry of John of the Cross to make his point. His work nevertheless exemplifies the unease and ambiguity with which both human and mystical love are so often regarded. For him, spiritual maturity and wisdom are about coming to terms with one's fundamental aloneness rather than about seeing one's fundamental interconnectedness with all others as well as with God. Accordingly, the urgency of being in love, which he associates with "infatuation" and with the loss of "individuality," is always negative and must be overcome both in human relationships and in the relationship with the divine.⁶⁵

In his reading of "The Spiritual Canticle," then, the bride's demands that her lover return to her are an aggressive attempt to dominate:

Her love for him is a clingy, possessive kind of love. She will not let her lover go; her life *depends* on his presence. . . . Although she is dependent, her complaints reveal that her love is also a kind of self-centred

⁶⁵ Thomas J. Tyrrell, *Urgent Longings: Reflections on Infatuation, Intimacy, and Sublime Love* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994) 58.

domination. She insists that her lover return to gratify the demands of her love.⁶⁶

Dependency, for Tyrrell, is at the heart of "urgent longing" and, for him, dependency is never acceptable. The response to her "whining and sniveling" should be, he suggests, a punitive one: "We . . . must not be seduced by her pain," but must realize that "[s]he needs to be liberated from the urgency of her need." The implication is that desire, passion, and longing are always and by definition a bondage, dependency and/or domination, and that any such bondage places intolerable limits on one's own and one's lover's freedom.

Experiences of fusion attendant upon passion also, for Tyrrell, fatally compromise one's freedom:

[T]his bursting forth in enthusiasm, this being "fired with love's urgent longings," promotes a fusion with the beloved that robs infatuated persons of their freedom to choose. . . . [What is at stake, then, is] our freedom and, as a consequence, . . . our identity.⁶⁷

Identity is, in this view, necessarily independent, separate, and autonomous, and thus incompatible with experiences of fusion, no matter how ecstatic. The harsh reality of life is separation, aloneness: "We are alone

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁷Tyrrell, 63.

together, you and I, and we cannot make each other unalone."⁶⁸ The "urgent longings" of love and passion simply disguise this unpalatable fact; they are an attempt to evade it. True happiness comes, Tyrrell suggests, only when one is able to let go of urgency and "stand alone."⁶⁹

On the contrary, the theology of Heyward and McFague, among others, suggests that far from standing alone, one always stands with others. Heyward writes:

. . . [that] the experience of relation is fundamental and constitutive of human being; that it is good and powerful; and that it is only within this experience—as it is happening here and now—that we may realize *that the power in relation is God*.⁷⁰

This is a powerful reclamation of love, and of a love that is not impassive but passionate, not transcendent but fully and triumphantly human. For Heyward, "[t]he lover is aware that she is not alone, but rather that she is bound from the beginning to others; and that there is no greater good than this."⁷¹ The idea that being "bound" to others is a "good" rather than an evil is a dramatic shift in perspective in contemporary culture. It suggests that responsibility towards others need not be seen as an unacceptable

⁶⁸Tyrrell, 97, quoting John Dunne.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁰Heyward, 1-2.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 48.

curtailment of freedom, and that taking pleasure in another need not be seen as an unacceptable "dependency."

For Heyward, the "dispassionate" God of patristic theology is:

. . . a destructive controlling-device, manufactured in the minds of men who have bent themselves low before ideals of changeless Truth, deathless Life, pure Spirit, perfect Reason, and other qualities often associated with the patriarchal "God."⁷²

She sees in this version of God a "sterilization" of love. In her view, the games theologians play in robbing God's love of its "loving" attributes are pointless: "If God loves us, the human-divine relation is reciprocal, dynamic, and of benefit to both parties. No lover is completely autonomous, wholly untouched, finally unmoved by the loved one." If God is lover, then he "needs relation—if for no other reason, in order to love."⁷³

For McFague, too, the theological view of agape as "disinterested" is a "sterile and unattractive view of divine love." Such a God sees our utter worthlessness, but loves us anyway out of the bounty of his own goodness:

In other words, even though we are worthless, we are loved, but disinterestedly. Needless to say, this is a . . . view that most

⁷²*Ibid.*, 7.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 6-7.

of us would not settle for even as a description of human love. If, among ourselves, we want to be loved not in spite of who we are but because in some sense we are valuable, desirable, and needed, then is this not the case also with divine love?⁷⁴

McFague seeks to counter this view of God's love by developing a series of images in which the love of God can be seen as indeed interested, images which, she suggests, can potentially transform theology. For her, "there is no way to do theology for our time with outmoded or oppressive metaphors and models."⁷⁵

Medieval women's mystical texts evoke, imagine and represent a God who, far from being remote, is passionately engaged with the human, undoing the traditional theological distinctions between human and divine, body and soul, and even heaven and earth. According to Heyward, the theology of a dispassionate God sees "human brokenness, division, isolation, and alienation as basic to human life; as the 'original' or constitutive human experience. In the beginning is not the relation, but rather the separation of persons from persons, humanity from God." A theology of passion, however, enables us to affirm "[t]he value of the earth, history, and humanity."⁷⁶

The emblems and images of such a theology can be found in the texts of medieval women. Their vivid

⁷⁴McFague, 102.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁶Heyward, 137-8.

depictions of God's love, desire and need for the human, and of the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between the human and the divine, the spiritual and the material, the self and the other, suggest that the truth of "being" is relationality. Heyward's work suggests that enacting this truth can bring about justice in the world:

Justice is the fruit of human passion, deep love that is willing to bear up fear and tension and uncertainty in relation to persons, issues, and possibilities known and unknown. Our passion enables us to act together rather than separately; co-operatively rather than competitively; on the basis of an original bonding rather than on the assumption of a dualistic gap between us."⁷⁷

Mystic union is not usually seen as an instance of this kind of relatedness, nor as leading to justice in the world. Indeed, even those who argue against the "separate self" sometimes reflect a fear of, or distaste for, the "fusion" experiences of mystics. Keller, for instance, touches only briefly on mysticism, dismissing it as the melting of the mystic soul "into the unity of ecstatic subservience to a masculine image."⁷⁸ As has been seen, and despite the pervasive rhetoric of abjection in mystical texts, the mystic is far from subservient and her God is far

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁸Keller, 35.

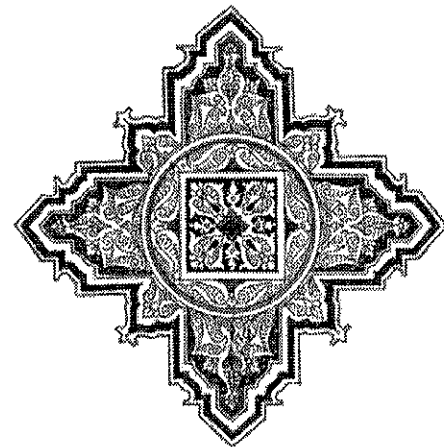
from a conventionally "masculine image." Indeed, the power of the mystical text is precisely that it figures not only the mystic but God himself as open. Like her, he is not sealed, inviolable, and impassionable but rather takes place as a passionate dynamic, a relational becoming, a movement of desire.

Mystic union is the experience of openness to the other: infiltration by, permeation of, and transformation into the other. Mystical texts show that this radical openness, even abandonment, of the self leads to an intimate knowing of the other — God, but also, potentially, human friends and lovers — that can be achieved in no other way. The mystic knows the other in and as herself, as an act of love rather than of intellection.

Further, though she is prepared to die for love, the mystic lives most fully. Her whole being, her body, soul, mind, heart and will, participates in every moment as she is traversed by agony and transformed by ecstasy. Though she loses her self (and becomes God), she is nevertheless able to continue an active (often contentiously so) public and private life, working for the poor, teaching others, participating in liturgy, and, above all, writing. Her texts suggest that it is love that propels one towards the deepest desire, most perfect happiness, most intense suffering, most complete experience of what it is to be both human and divine.

This is a challenge that has too often been denied and contained, "sterilized" and "domesticated," out of fear of the body, of passion, of intimacy, and perhaps above all of the loss of (self) control. A love that is a fire of the

whole self cannot be willed or created, and once lit it cannot be contained. It is disturbing, chaotic, frenzied, leading to agonizing suffering as well as the deepest intensities of joy and delight. But it is also the way in which the self is opened, separateness is left behind, and the soul partakes of the divine.⁷⁹



⁷⁹ Acknowledgement: This paper was written during the two months I spent as a scholar in residence at St Benedict's Monastery, St Joseph, Minnesota in 2001. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, who funded my residency with a TimeOut grant, and the women of Studium at St Benedict's Monastery, who provided so much stimulation and inspiration.