Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies

Volume 3 | Number 1 2011

Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine

Jenny Bledsoe
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Recommended Citation
Bledsoe, Jenny "Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (2011).
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol3/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Program in Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact becky.thoms@usu.edu.

UtahStateUniversity
MERRILL-CAZIER LIBRARY

JENNY BLEDSOE

Jenny Bledsoe recently graduated from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in honors religious studies and honors English literature with minors in Latin and history. In August 2011, Jenny began a Master of Theological Studies program at Harvard Divinity School, with a focus on religion, literature, and culture. Her research interests lie particularly in literature, religion, and gender in late medieval England. Jenny loves to delve into the mysteries of a centuries-old culture and has received several rewards for her work, including two UT Knoxville Chancellor's Citations for Undergraduate Research in the Humanities. Jenny has presented her research at eight academic conferences.

Jenny Bledsoe

Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine

During the later medieval period in Western Europe, feminine representations of Jesus abounded. Medieval Christians had begun to emphasize the humanity of Jesus in reaction to the religious foci of the era before their own (early medieval focus on the spirit and Jesus' resurrection), and seemed to find that "feminine" characteristics were most expressive of the human nature of Jesus. During the later medieval period (1000–1500 CE, encompassing both the "high" and "late" medieval periods), motherhood was valued. Medieval motherhood was cast in a positive light through the recent trend toward veneration of the humanity and suffering of the Virgin Mary. This standard of motherhood was based on self-sacrifice. While families were central and the cultivation of "feminine" virtues was valued, this does not mean that women themselves were.

As a result of economic changes, the later medieval period refashioned Christology, as well as conceptions of self. Feminine images of Jesus express changing ideals of femininity and also the socially accepted roles of women in the Church and the public. This study explores later medieval representations —both textual and visual—of Jesus as mother in order to determine the implications of such representations for actual women. We will sample three medieval writers who wrote about feminine Jesuses, two writing in the heyday of

Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies, Volume 3, Number 1, pages 33–58. © 2011 by Utah State University Religious Studies Program. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the IMW Journal at imwjournal@aggiemail.usu.edu.

incarnation theology and feminized Jesus imagery—the twelfth century monastics Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard of Bingen—and later, one fourteenth-century theologian who inherited the legacy of her predecessors, Julian of Norwich. In her book on Hildegard's theology of the feminine, Barbara Newman describes the shared focus and understanding of all medieval representations of a feminine Jesus: "The common denominator is a sense that the feminine is somehow problematic; being neglected, undervalued, or wrongly understood within a patriarchal culture, it needs to be perpetually redefined, revalued, and relocated in the general worldview."[1] Although all of the medieval writers subscribed to essentialist understandings of gender based in a patriarchal society, it is true that they all seemed to think that it was necessary to explore and define the feminine more fully and consider how the feminine fits within human understandings of God.

By also exploring several modern discussions on feminine Jesus imagery, we will scrutinize the legacy of medieval Jesus as mother imagery. This study ultimately argues that the feminine depictions of a divine figure who is understood to be inherently physically masculine are ultimately androcentrically androgynous. Because of the androcentric nature of such depictions, the feminine is subverted and cast as both physically and spiritually limited and as less spiritually valuable than the masculine.

FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Some feminist theorists argue that descriptions of divine motherhood refer to long-suppressed ancient worship of female goddesses or androgynous gods. Elaine Pagels writes that the monotheistic religions are unusual in comparison to other world religions in that the former do not employ feminine im-

1. Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 266–67.

agery to describe God.[2] By 200 CE, upon the establishment of the Christian canon, orthodox Christianity discouraged feminine symbolism for expressing the essence of the divine.[3] While women played leading roles in Gnostic Christian groups, which sometimes described God in feminine language, the orthodox tradition banned female leadership and description of the divine as female. Pagels questions why the orthodox Christian tradition so ardently demanded that women and feminine conceptions of God be banned from Christian hegemony: "Is it possible, then, that the recognition of the feminine element in God and the recognition of mankind as a male and female entity bore within it the explosive possibility of women acting on an equal basis with men in positions of authority and leadership?"[4]

Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian, answers Pagels' question a decade later. Daly calls for an uprising against Christian patriarchy, pointing out the pervasiveness of male images of God and the antifeminism that arises from such conceptualizations.[5] Also taking issue with the standard Christian fall narratives that lead to pessimism about the future, Daly writes, "This static, sin-haunted view of human life reflects and perpetuates a negative attitude toward sexuality, matter, and 'the world.' In such an atmosphere antifeminism has thrived. To some theologians, 'woman' came to personify all those aspects of reality which they believed should be feared, fled from, denied, despised."[6] For Daly, the very core doctrines of orthodox Christianity must be revised to combat the antifeminism levied by a patriarchal society, to restructure the Christian-established patriarchy to create an egalitarian society. So, one way to understand the emergence of feminine characterizations of Christ is as an uprising of the stifled female divine. In somewhat of a contrast, we will see that these feminized repre-

2. Elaine H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 293.

3. Ibid., 298–99.

4. Ibid., 301.

5. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 180.

6. Ibid., 186.

sentations of Jesus are actually based on systems of thought that relegate women to the negatively-perceived half of a binary opposition. In our exploration of the communities within which these images occur, we will discover that such feminine images of Jesus reinforce the subordination of women through the strict definition of what it means to be "feminine."

MEDIEVAL PHYSIOLOGY, MOTHERHOOD, AND THE EMPHASIS ON JESUS' HUMANITY

The medieval epoch was characterized by changing conceptions of the role of the mother, as well as changing conceptions of self. The later medieval period based its feminized Jesus on physiological theory and thus medieval artists characterized Jesus' femininity through specifically "feminine" biological functions. First, a short introduction to the medieval period and the perceived mindset of the medieval people is necessary to the context of the discussion of images of Jesus as mother. Since medieval devotion to Jesus as mother was a component of popular religion, the attitude that is most important to this study is that of the medieval lay person. Since few lay people during this time were able to write, it is challenging to construct what their religious mindset might have been.[7] Caroline Walker Bynum focuses on the images constructed in medieval religious writings because these constructions were personally important to the writers (mostly monks and other clergy) and were considered by the writers to have value for their audiences.[8] The rise of affective piety and mystical theology included increased devotion to female figures and use of feminine metaphors for God. Feminine metaphors were particularly appropriate to the new devotion to Christ's humanity, as they constructed characterizations of God that were similar to human features.[9]

7. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5.

8. Ibid., 7.

9. Ibid., 17.

While medieval lay people certainly valued the perspectives of the clergy and adherence to communal standards, a new sense of self was also being discovered during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[10] These competing notions of the communal and the individual complicate the perceived motivations of medieval lay people. This new concept of the individual or the self is not the same as the modern conception of individualism. However, "[to] the ancients the goal of development is the adult human being, for which one finds a model in the great works of the past; to the twelfth century the goal of development is likeness to God, built on the image of God found in 'the inner man'; to the twentieth century the goal is the process itself."[11] And so, the medieval period was a time of changing ideas of self and society. Peter Brown agrees that the twelfth century did indeed mark a change in mindset, a shift in thinking about the relationship of the supernatural to the individual.[12] Once, the sacred had been accessible only through group participation, but beginning in the twelfth century the supernatural came to be regarded as "an upward extension of the individual."[13] As Bynum emphasizes, this does not mean that medieval people began to reject the Church as an institution necessary to spiritual interaction; an individual medieval believer simply came to recognize that his or her interaction with God also had an inner component, in addition to the communal interaction with the divine.[14]

MEDIEVAL CONCEPTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

At this point in Western culture, there was no conception of separate religious and secular realms. And so, religion defined all aspects of later medieval

10. Ibid., 85.

11. Ibid., 87.

12. Peter Brown, "Society and the Supernatural," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 325–29.

13. Ibid., 329.

14. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 107.

society, including the role of the mother. Spiritual writers define the medieval woman or mother as having three distinct characteristics: "The female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid)."[15] In medieval representations of Jesus as mother, Jesus displays these feminine characteristics, all of which are based on medieval physiological theories, which will be examined below. While medieval people apparently knew the proper medical care for pregnant women, the advice of such medical guides was starkly opposed to the ascetic ideals laid out by writings on spiritual motherhood: "Women who starved and abused their bodies were presented in hagiography as models of spiritual health, and very often as spiritual mothers. A sharp opposition between physical and spiritual health and virtue was built into medieval Christian motherhood."[16] At the same time, with Christ's mother Mary as a standard by which Christian mothers modeled themselves, the Virgin mother gave "hope and consolation to the grim realities of the experience of most medieval mothers."[17] Along with the rise of the adoration of the human aspects of Christ, so too was Mary's humanity emphasized in the twelfth century, focusing on Mary's and all medieval mothers' suffering.[18] Thus, medieval ideas of motherhood are essentially intertwined with the religious tendencies of the time.

MEDIEVAL MEDICAL THEORY

High to late medieval theology focused on the characteristics the divine shared with humanity, emphasizing Jesus' humanness. Bynum describes this theological shift from earlier medieval religious foci: "The new devotion to

15. Ibid., 131–32.

16. Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 238–39.

17. Ibid., 240.

18. Ibid., 241.

Fig. 1.1. Quirizio da Murano, The Savior, *ca. 1460–1478, Accademia, Venice.*

Christ's humanity was also at least implicitly a shift in theological emphasis from atonement-resurrection and last judgment to creation and incarnation. In twelfth-century religious writing, great stress is placed on God's creating of us 'in his image and likeness' and on Christ's taking our humanity into himself."[19] Medieval images of a feminine Jesus reflect this new focus on Jesus' humanity, illustrating him as having characteristics of the ideal medieval mother. The reason for associating a human Jesus with femininity may not, at first, be clear. However, medieval medical theory generally associated the spirit with the male and the body – flesh and blood – with the female.[20]

Medieval physiological theory was largely based upon Aristotle's classical medical theories. "According to Aristotelian theory, the mother provided the matter of the foetus and the father its life or spirit or form."[21] Thus, Jesus was literally part of Mary's body and blood. Christian believers partake of Christ's blood in the Eucharist, thus being incorporated into the body of Christ, which was essentially composed of Mary's body. These "images suggest a radical incorporation of all humanity in Christ."[22] This medieval emphasis on the body of Christ

19. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 17.

20. Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Autumn 1986): 421.

21. Ibid., 421.

22. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 161.

was represented in art through his sharing of his blood and other bodily fluids with his believers. Clearly suggestive of the Eucharist, Quirizio da Murano's *The Savior* (ca. 1460–1478) depicts Christ offering to a believer his blood from his breast, along with a wafer, symbolic of his body, both of which impart faith and thus nurture the spirituality of the believer (see fig. 1.1).[23] An even more obvious allusion to the Eucharist appears in a German work titled *Christ and Charity* (ca. 1470).[24] In this piece, Jesus' blood spurts forth from his breast in a stream, as breast milk might. The blood streams into a cup held by personified Charity, obviously suggesting the Eucharist but also highlighting the nutritive nature of the Eucharistic blood by its connection with breast milk. According to medieval physiological theory, all bodily fluids were seen as bleedings, occurring in both male and female bodies, though bleedings functioned more regularly in women's bodies.[25] Bleeding was seen as purgative and as a symbol of cleansing; these ideas transferred to representations of Christ bleeding, even to those created centuries later than many of the textual representations of a feminine Jesus.[26]

The most important conflation of bodily fluids for this discussion is the equation of blood with breast milk, which was considered to be "processed blood."[27] So with this understanding, medieval mothers fed their children with their blood, just as Christ nourishes his believers with his blood in the Eucharistic rite:

> In medieval devotions … milk and blood are often interchangeable, as are Christ's breasts and the wound in his side. What writers in the high Middle Ages wished to say about Christ the savior who feeds the individual soul with his own blood was precisely and concisely said in the image of the nursing mother

23. Quirizio da Murano, *The Savior*, ca. 1460–1478, Accademia, Venice.
24. Northwest German Master, *Christ and Charity*, ca. 1470, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.
25. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 436.
26. Ibid., 407.
27. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 132.

whose milk is her blood, offered to the child.[28]

Bynum points out a parallelism between Christ's wound and Mary's breast, which she calls a "double intercession." Lorenzo Monaco's *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin* (1400) is one such example.[29] The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the action of the work:

> Christ and the Virgin are shown pleading with God the Father for mercy on behalf of eight small figures … Pointing to the wound in his side, Christ says, "My Father, let those be saved for whom you wished me to suffer the Passion." The Virgin, holding one of her breasts, pleads, "Dearest son, because of the milk that I gave you, have mercy on them."[30]

In this way, one sees the double intercession – Christ pleading with the Father and Mary pleading with Jesus – which associates Christ's wound and Mary's breast as serving the same purpose.

While Jesus' blood served as a symbol of his nurturing nature toward his believers, it also served as proof of Jesus' humanity, a key emphasis of the later medieval period. According to the story of the crucifixion, believers were ensured of Christ's humanity when Longinus, a Roman soldier, pierced Jesus' side with a lance and blood poured forth from his wound.[31] Apparently, "even the central Christian belief that God became flesh, that Christ had a body in the first place, was still contested, and in need of miraculous and theological confirmation. Again, blood was often used to supply such evidence."[32] Another characteristic associated with this medieval Jesus is that his blood served as

28. Ibid., 132–33.

29. Lorenzo Monaco, *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*, 1400, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, New York City.

30. "Description," *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/the_cloisters/the_intercession_of_christ_and_the_virgin_lorenzo_monaco_piero_di_giovanni/objectview.aspx?collID=7%26OID=70010757.

31. Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 29.

32. Ibid., 28.

food for his believers, reinforcing the feminine physicality of Jesus, "the feeder of humankind."[33]

Bettina Bildhauer challenges Bynum's idea that female blood was essentially positively viewed because of its nourishing qualities. Bildhauer argues that female blood was seen as fearsome and potentially contaminated; she also calls attention to medieval ideas about male heroic bleeding.[34] It is worthwhile to consider the implications of Jesus' bleeding being perceived as masculine in nature, but it is also useful to remember that the nutritive qualities of Jesus' bodily fluids led to an association of Jesus with mother. Bynum supports her association of Jesus' blood with breast milk through examples that illustrate the parallelism between Jesus' wound and Mary's breast, mentioned above. The double intercession of Jesus and Mary is also parallel in that both Mary's breast milk and Jesus' blood are feedings.[35] Bynum argues this point because separately Jesus' wound and Mary's breast are depicted as offerings of food. In addition to the works mentioned above that highlight the nutritive qualities of Christ's blood, some depictions overtly associate Jesus' body with food. From the studio of Friedrich Herlin, *Christ with Ears of Wheat and Grape Vine* (1469) shows a wounded Jesus with wheat and grape vine.[36] Bynum explains that the association of Christ's body with food is an inherently feminine characteristic for medieval artists: "Over and over again in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we find representations of Christ as the one who feeds and bleeds. Squirting blood from wounds often placed high in the side, Christ fills cups for his followers just as Mary feeds her baby. Christ's body, like woman's, is depicted as food."[37]

33. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 424.

34. Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, 139.

35. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 429–30.

36. Studio of Friedrich Herlin, *Christ with Ears of Wheat and Grape Vine*, 1469, Stadtmuseum, Nordlingen.

37. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 427. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Bynum argues that the association of Jesus' body with food would have been to medieval people an inherently feminine biological characteristic.

As women were considered to be rooted in the body, the rise in affective piety in the twelfth century led to a focus on female biological reactions (bleeding, crying, and erotic union with Christ) to the divine in accounts of female spirituality.[38] Elizabeth Robertson argues that in medieval medical theory "a female child was seen as simply an incomplete male."[39] This pervading idea of female inferiority raises questions about the medieval representation of Jesus in female form. Why would medieval artists and authors represent their savior as a member of the inferior sex? Bynum would argue that such representations of Jesus highlight what medieval medical theory saw as the positive aspects of women: mothering, comforting, and nourishing through blood. Representations of a feminine Jesus also illustrate his human aspect, including the imperfections that humanity, corporeality, and femininity entail. Robertson suggests that representations of Jesus as mother are unique to medieval female spirituality.[40] While feminine Jesus imagery may have proved particularly appealing to the female religious, it is nonetheless not limited to women writers, as we will see with Bernard of Clairvaux, for example.

Bynum argues that male authors might have chosen to portray Jesus as feminine because such a conceptualization allowed them to relate to the metaphor of sexual union with Jesus, a metaphor often employed by female mystics.

38. Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 142.

39. Ibid., 144.

40. Ibid., 142. Robertson clarifies her position in relation to Bynum's thesis: "Caroline Bynum argues that even though women were not created in God's image, and even though they were conditioned by their sensual, appetitive natures, these facts did not prohibit their approach to God. While I agree that they did not *prohibit* women's access to God, I think these views did *condition* their approach to God; that is to say, female spirituality is expressed not only through the body, as Bynum argues, but also through those parts and activities of the body that are understood as specifically or 'essentially' female." Ibid., 149. Emphasis in original.

More broadly, though, Bynum writes that images of Jesus as mother "reflect a need, felt especially by males, for a view of authority that balances discipline with love."[41] Even so, feminine images of Jesus may have been particularly appealing to female believers who thought of their own bodies and religious receptivities in terms of medieval medical theory:

> The biological parity between blood, sweat, tears, milk, and urine meant that a woman's contemplation of Christ's blood was contemplation of her own blood, and further that her tears were equivalent to Christ's blood. The suffering body of Christ thus allowed a woman not only to pity Christ but to identify in him her own perceived suffering body; moreover, union with his suffering body would allow her to realize her perceived biological needs.[42]

In a way Bynum agrees with Robertson's conclusion that images of a feminine Jesus were particularly appealing to female believers, as medieval medical assumptions ultimately led to a connection between the female body and the body of God: "Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a woman; his own flesh did womanly things: it bled, it bled food, and it gave birth."[43] While Jesus' body exhibited female characteristics, these images enforced his humanity, the imperfect half of his nature. It is also important to remember that Jesus was still conceived of as essentially masculine.

Modern social constructions may cause misunderstandings of medieval theological ideas about a feminine Jesus. Bynum argues that it is essential that modern conceptions of what is sexual and erotic not be assumed for medieval viewers. Medieval believers often associated acts modern people find inherently sexual with liturgical, spiritual emotions and actions.[44] One difference between medieval and modern viewers is that "there is a modern tendency to find sex

41. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 8.
42. Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality," 149.
43. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 423.
44. Ibid., 406–7.

more interesting than feeding, suffering, or salvation," which could be considered to be based on a tendency for literal interpretation of artistic symbols.[45] Of course, modern and medieval medical theories are vastly different and thus lead to divergent understandings of the body and the secretions of the body.[46] While medieval art may seem straightforward and even simplistic to a modern viewer, "things are seldom what they seem, at least if the seeming is based on modern attitudes. Medieval symbols were far more complex … than modern people are aware. … Rather than mapping back onto medieval paintings modern dichotomies, we might find in medieval art and literature some suggestion of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack."[47] At the least, an understanding of medieval theological concepts as expressed in art will lead to an awareness of the historical background of modern Christianity and the gender stereotypes within it.

A MODERN ADAPTATION

Sarah Ruhl's second newest play (directed by Les Waters and performed by Laura Benanti, Quincy Tyler Bernstine, and Michael Cerveris), *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play),* explores female sexuality in the Victorian era, a time in which physicians used vibrators to relieve hysteria in female patients and in which wet nursing was common.[48] Ruhl conducted extensive research on the Victorian era in order to provide an accurate picture of the social and romantic trends of the time. Of course Ruhl's play is not a "true" account of the Victorian era, but it highlights many of the backward glances the white American Protestantism of the time made toward medieval representations of Jesus.

Just as Victorian society had been divided into private and public, female

45. Ibid., 413.

46. Ibid., 437.

47. Ibid., 438.

48. Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play),* Lincoln Center Theatre, New York City, December 12, 2009.

and male spheres, so too is the stage of Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room*. Although the action takes place within the space of the family home, the doctor/husband keeps primarily to the public area of the home, in which his patients are treated, and the wife to the private, domestic side of the home. This partition illustrates the division of Victorian society into female and male realms and also the changes to family models that result from the economic shift to a modern, capitalistic society.

Throughout the play, Mrs. Givings (Laura Benanti) makes statements about her inferiority as a mother because of her inability to breastfeed her baby herself. For example, she says, "I could not turn my body into food. I was a very inferior mother, a very inferior Jesus." This present-day reference to Jesus as mother is at first surprising. It connects medieval representations of Jesus nurturing and breastfeeding his believers with his blood as a mother would to modern, Victorian images of a feminized Jesus.

Later in the play, Mrs. Givings states, "We can't think of feeding Jesus. Jesus has to feed us." This beckons viewers to think of the Eucharist, the ritual in which Jesus feeds his believers with what is literally his body.[49] It is interesting that Mrs. Givings makes this statement because she makes it clear that she is a Protestant, and Protestants do not believe that the communion wafer and wine actually turn into Jesus' body and blood, as the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation posits. The character of Mrs. Givings does not live up to her role as a mother because she is unable to feed her child, as Jesus feeds his believers in the communion rite. Mrs. Givings is also far from fulfilling the characteristics (being pure, pious, passive, and domestic) of True Womanhood. The fact that Mrs. Givings rebels from these standards could be historically accurate of the behavior of some Victorian women. Even so, it also reminds the viewer that Ruhl's play is a present-day representation of the Victorian era looking back to

49. See the above discussion on the fifteenth-century German image *Christ and Charity* and Quirizio da Murano's *The Savior*.

the earlier example of the later medieval period.

One further connection between the medieval and modern periods manifests itself in a statement of the wet nurse. The wet nurse, Elizabeth (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), begins to feel a connection to her employer's child and as a result quits her job because the attachment is too difficult for her because of the recent death of her infant son. Before departing, Elizabeth says that her blood is flowing through her employer's child's veins, as if a familial relationship has been transferred through her milk into the baby's blood. This recalls medieval medical theory, which posited that all bodily fluids were essentially blood. The transference of familial connection through breast milk also points to the idea that the Eucharistic rite, in the consumption of Jesus' blood, is key to incorporation of believers into the holy family.

Ruhl's modern dramatic adaptation of Victorian characters interpreting medieval conceptions of Jesus as mother illustrates how a feminized Jesus can limit the lives of women, even those of a different period than the one in which the images were first created. In the play, Mrs. Givings attempts to live up to the maternal standards set by depictions of Jesus as ideal mother. Although Mrs. Givings seeks to fulfill an explicitly feminine and maternal role as a woman who breastfeeds her baby, her androgynous representation of Jesus as ideal mother limits her own ability to consider herself a successful mother because of her inability to fulfill the motherly responsibility to nourish that Jesus himself so well accomplished. In this way, the feminized Jesus is not empowering to this modern woman. Instead, the feminine characteristics of Jesus cause Mrs. Givings to judge herself inadequately feminine and maternal.

WITHIN PATRIARCHAL, HIERARCHICAL COMMUNITIES

I. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

In the medieval setting, images of Jesus as mother were concentrated primarily within the intra-Church community. Holy men and women created or

commissioned these portrayals within a cloistered setting, and lay people simply received rather than participated in the formulation of these feminine images of Jesus. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) characterized not only Jesus but also abbots and prelates as mothers. In a letter, Bernard encouraged a recent convert to take comfort in a motherly Jesus, whose wounds would function as breasts in their nurturing powers.[50] Describing himself as a mother, Bernard emphasized the nurturing role of a mother and in this way equated this maternal characteristic with his own relationship with lay people and holy men further down the hierarchy than himself. In his twenty-ninth sermon on the *Song of Songs*, Bernard characterizes himself as motherly and thus like Jesus for rebuking other members of his monastery when they stray from the right path:

> And indeed if some of you have been saddened by me in the past for this reason, I do not regret it; the sadness was for their salvation. I certainly cannot recall ever having done it without experiencing great sadness myself, such as Christ referred to when he said: "A woman in childbirth suffers." But let me no longer remember my anguish, now that I enjoy the fruit of my pain, seeing Christ formed in my offspring.[51]

Bernard envisions himself as generative and thus like Christ and in this nurturing and creative role, he also sees himself as one who creates Christ-like nature in others. Writing of the physical body in particular, Bynum explains, "Breasts, to Bernard, are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectiv-

50. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Epistola 322," in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Vol. 182, ed. J.-P. Migne (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), 322.1. The Latin reads: "Si tentationum sentis aculeos, exaltatum in ligno serpentem aeneum intuere; et suge non tam vulnera quam ubera Crucifixi. Ipse erit tibi in matrem, et tu eris ei in filium."

51. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. III, trans. by Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1976), sermon 29.6, p. 108. The Latin reads, "Ego profecto, si quos vestrum aliquando pro hujusmodi contristavi, non me poenitet; contristati enim sunt ad salutem. Et quidem nescio id me fecisse unquam absque mea quoque magna tristitia, secundum illud: *Mulier cum parit, tristitiam habet* (Joan. XVI, 21). Sed absit ut jam meminerim pressurae, tenens fructum doloris mei, dum perinde videam Christum formatum in sobole." Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus,* Vol. 183, ed. J.-P. Migne (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), 29.6.

ity or of instruction and almost invariably suggest to him a discussion of the duties of prelates or abbots."[52] Feminine imagery allowed Bernard to define the proper roles of others within the Christian community and to situate himself therein.

Bernard wrote many times of the role of the abbot as mother within the monastic community. In one example, Bernard encourages his fellow monastic leaders to balance their fatherly harshness with motherly gentleness and nurturing:

> Learn that you must be mothers to those in your care, not masters; make an effort to arouse the response of love, not that of fear: and should there be occasional need for severity, let it be paternal rather than tyrannical. Show affection as a mother would, correct like a father. Be gentle, avoid harshness, do not resort to blows, expose your breasts: let your bosoms expand with milk, not swell with passion.[53]

With such imagery, Bernard is able to instruct other abbots to take on a kinder and more welcoming leadership role, that of a mother and more specifically of a feminine Jesus. Bernard's writings encouraged abbots to place themselves and their subordinates in supportive relationships within the religious community. Although feminine, maternal imagery may seem to indicate a familial sort of relationship, it is important to note that proper behaviors and relationships were being defined for the lay people and lower holy men and women in a top-down fashion.

II. HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

52. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 115.

53. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, sermon 23.2, p. 27. The Latin reads, "Discite subditorum matres vos esse debere, non dominos; studete magis amari, quam metui: et si interdum severitate opus est, paterna sit, non tyrannica. Matres fovendo, patres vos corripiendo exhibeatis. Mansuescite, ponite feritatem; suspendite verbera, producite ubera; pectora lacte pinguescant, non typho turgeant." Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*, in *PL*, Vol. 183, 23.2.

While her theology of the feminine is probably the most well developed of the three writers mentioned in this study, the thought of Hildegard of Bingen is also the most complex. Thus, because of the comprehensive nature of Hildegard's writings on the divine and its feminine and masculine aspects, it is almost impossible to provide a single textual example of her presentation of a feminine Jesus. Hildegard (1098–1179), like Bernard and Julian, functioned within the patriarchal community of the monastery. Faithful to the existing structure of the Christian community, she did not seek to upend gender stereotypes or the Church hierarchy:

> Hildegard attacked only the abuse and not the very form and source of hierarchical power. With her unshakeable faith in the divine ordering of society, and especially of the Church, she saw no conflict in principle between the prophetic and the priestly charisms. As to gender, her most radical departure lies in appropriating to herself the Pauline doctrine that divine power is perfected in weakness, and therefore in women. Given the structure of twelfth-century society, such a notion, taken with full seriousness, could have had dangerous implications; just as the claim that woman signifies the humanity of Christ could have shaken the ideology of an all-male priesthood. But, however radical the principles, Hildegard drew no such alarming inferences. She was resourceful enough in defending her own activity and authority, but she certainly did not aim at a full-scale empowerment of women.[54]

With her own role as a prophet, preacher, healer, and much more within the Christian community, Hildegard exhibited the potential for women to hold leadership roles in the Church. Additionally, her theological writings do not so much imagine Jesus himself as feminine but rather personify characteristics of the Godhead as a whole as essentially feminine. In this way, Hildegard described what she saw as the essentially positive and essentially female characteristics of

54. Newman, *St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, 254.

Jesus and the Trinity. In order to validate her feminine descriptions of God, Hildegard appealed to two "strategies of validation," according to Newman: First, she described her supposed feminine weakness as a positive indicator of both her humility and chosenness by God, and, second, she empowered femininity by describing positive, feminine features of divinity.[55] Hildegard's theology of the feminine does not lead to any obvious consequences for actual women: "Her visionary forms fade into one another with dazzling and dizzying speed, but within them all, and behind all, shine neither woman nor man but the living Light."[56] The complex, multi-gendered nature of Hildegard's writings about God may not have many implications for actual women, and thus they defy many contemporary feminist critiques.

III. JULIAN OF NORWICH

An anchoress best known for her theology of divine motherhood, Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–ca. 1416) also wrote within a monastic community, describing the divine in motherly terms for all to read. Julian wrote of one aspect of the Trinity, Jesus, as a mother: "for in our Mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again, he unites us to our essential being. This is how our Mother mercifully acts to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him."[57] Julian describes Jesus as motherly and thus feminine because of the grace he exhibits in nurturing and teaching his followers. Julian is a later ex-

55. Ibid., 35.

56. Ibid., 270.

57. Julian of Norwich, "Long Text," in *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing, ed. A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin, 1998), chap. 58. The Middle English reads, "For in oure moder Crist we profit and encrese, and in mercy he reformeth us and restoreth, and by the vertu of his passion, his deth, and his uprising oneth us to oure substance. Thus worketh oure moder in mercy to all his beloved children which be to him buxom and obedient." Julian of Norwich, "A Revelation of Love," in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, eds. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 309.

ample of the feminine images of Jesus so prominent in the twelfth century with Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard of Bingen. There were complications to Julian's writing, as women were strictly banned from preaching. For example the *Ancrene Wisse,* a guidebook for anchoresses, enforces "St. Paul's prohibition on preaching applied with special force to female recluses."[58] Women were viewed as dangerous because of their sexual nature; Julian circumvented this rule by re-envisioning the female body not as "inalienable sexuality as inherited from Eve but [as] inalienable capacity for maternity as modeled on that of the Virgin."[59] While Julian does avoid some prescriptions on her femininity, guidebooks such as the *Ancrene Wisse* likely "conditioned [the anchoritic] experience, determining how women like Julian might understand their own devotional practices and experiences."[60] It might seem that Julian of Norwich broke free from the negative Aristotelian conceptions of what it means to be feminine, but she only did so to a certain degree.

Julian operated within a male-dominated Christian community. Much like many women ordained as priests today, Julian had to shape her theology to fit the normative, male-dominated Christianity of her time. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the modern situation of the female priest:

> Women are allowed in token numbers to integrate themselves into this male-defined role. They adopt the same garb, the same titles (Reverend, if not Father), the same clerical modes of functioning in a hierarchically structured church. They too stand in the phallically designed pulpit and bring down the "seminal" word upon the passive body of the laity. … Women play the ministerial role by endlessly proving that they can think, feel, and act like "one of the boys."[61]

58. Maud Burnett McInerney, "*In the Meydens Womb*: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure," in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 162.

59. Ibid., 163.

60. Ibid., 160.

61. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Bea-

Julian of Norwich also had to participate in these "games of masculinity"[62] in order to convey her radical theological message: "She does not question Christianity's logocentrism – rather, she uses patriarchal logic in a very idiosyncratic way to gesture toward the doubly unrepresentable: mystical understanding and feminine experience."[63] Thus, these feminine representations of Jesus still function within an unchanged, patriarchal Christian community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTUAL WOMEN

The feminine images of Jesus we have explored above are actually androgynous representations, as they impose "feminine" characteristics on what is an indisputably male body. This uneven androgyny is actually androcentric: medieval women are limited by Aristotelian medical theories that conceive of the female as purely physical without spiritual capabilities. In this way, these feminine images of Jesus are deceptive. They are actually built upon systems that perpetuate negative stereotypes of what it means to be feminine.

Indeed, "there is little evidence that the popularity of feminine and maternal imagery in the high Middle Ages reflects an increased respect for actual women by men."[64] Bernard of Clairvaux expressed sentiments consistent with medieval medical theory in that he saw the "feminine" as inherently inferior to the "masculine": "To call monks women, as Bernard does, is to use the feminine as something positive (humility) but also to imply that such is not the opinion of society."[65] And so, while medieval images of a feminized Jesus may highlight "feminine" characteristics in a positive light, such depictions are built on the belief that it is unusual to conceive of femininity as spiritually worthwhile.

---

con Press, 1993), 200.

62. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 201.

63. McInerney, "*In the Meydens Womb*: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure," 165.

64. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 143.

65. Ibid., 144. Emphasis in original.

The later medieval period was a time of rapid change – economically, socially, religiously – but feminine representations of Jesus actually did little to enact positive change in the lives of women:

> All of these concepts of androgyny, whether they identify woman with the lower material nature, or whether they identify her with the higher spiritual qualities of altruistic love, never succeed in allowing women to represent full human potential. The very concept of androgyny presupposes a psychic dualism that identifies maleness with one-half of human capacities and femaleness with the other. As long as Christ is still presumed to be, normatively, a male person, androgynous Christologies will carry an androcentric bias. Men gain their "feminine" side, but women contribute to the whole by specializing in the representation of the "feminine," which means exclusion from the exercise of the roles of power and leadership associated with masculinity.[66]

Later medieval feminized representations of Jesus contribute to the new emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, but at the same time they also reinforce stereotypes about what it means to be "feminine."

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF JESUS AS MOTHER

Some ministers have delivered sermons on the trope of Jesus as mother within the past decade. These sermons are often heard in more progressive churches and in the most prominent case raise questions about the current state of Christendom, including the issue of the ordination of women. Katharine Jefferts Schori, then the bishop-elect of the U.S. Episcopal Church, closed the 2006 General Convention with a sermon highlighting an image of Jesus as mother. Schori preached, saying, "That sweaty, bloody, tear-stained labor of the cross bears new life. Our mother Jesus gives birth to a new creation – and you and I

66. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 130.

are His children. If we're going to keep on growing into Christ-images for the world around us, we're going to have to give up fear."[67] An article in *The Times* noted that Schori's sermon was based on the writings of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century theologian, for which reason some defended her: "Liberals in Britain and America defended her sermon as being in a long tradition of writings by women theologians that use the metaphor of Jesus as mother."[68] To note that some defended Schori's sermon topic indicates that others were not as receptive to it. Other modern sermons and online faith-based articles referring to imagery of Jesus as mother either directly cite the writings of Julian of Norwich or seem to be aware of Bynum's *Jesus as Mother,* as they cite the same authors to whom Bynum refers, including Bernard of Clairvaux and Anselm of Canterbury.[69] Many of the sermons and articles also either refer to Luke 13:34, which characterizes Jesus as a mother hen,[70] or are written for the occasion of Mother's Day.[71] These contemporary appearances of a feminized Jesus are not common, and they are not always warmly received. A Southern Baptist website,[72] con-

67. Katharine Jefferts Schori, "From Columbus: Text of Presiding Bishop-elect's June 21 homily," *Episcopal News Service,* June 21, 2006, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76300_eng_htm.htm.

68. Ruth Gledhill and James Bone, "Our Mother Jesus … A sermon by US church's new head," *The Times*, June 22, 2006, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article1083674.ece.

69. Examples include Rev. Penelope Duckworth, sermon preached at Church of St. Ambrose, Foster City, 14 May 2006, http://www.stambrosefostercity.org/sermon.05.14.06.doc; Martyn Percy, "The Mother of All Days," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/mar/09/religion.uk; and Br. Clark Berge, "Easter 4," The Episcopal Church, May 14, 2000, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_7145_eng_htm.htm.

70. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings," Jesus says in Luke 13:34 (New Revised Standard Version Bible). Examples include Jeffrey Van Orden, "Complex Christ," First Moravian Church of Riverside (New Jersey), February 28, 2010, http://www.riversidemoravian.org/sermons/sermon100228.htm; Ray Anderson, "The Fox in the Hen House," (sermon, St. Peter's Church, Cheshire, Connecticut, February 28, 2010).

71. Examples include above-mentioned Berge, Duckworth, and Percy.

72. The purpose of the Southern Baptist website is to combat the "heresies" of the splinter-group, the "Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," who have erred from the conservative Baptist beliefs: "The organization's willingness to accommodate blatant theological liberalism and its openness to those who hold extreme positions on such issues as abortion, pornography and homosexuality should

cerned about theological liberalism, quotes feminist theologian Jann Aldredge-Clanton, asking the readers of the site, "In the name of 'inclusive language,' is it now acceptable to call God 'Mother' or replace Jesus with 'Christ-Sophia?' Has feminist theology so caught on that it is now acceptable to ordain our women as pastors?"[73] These are exactly the questions that contemporary feminist theologians answer with a resounding, "Yes."

It is difficult to reflect on the present. It is evident, however, that progress has been made to incorporate feminine imagery of God in more progressive Christian churches: "The feminist movement has served as a catalyst to liturgical creativity, inspiring new inclusive-language hymnals, prayer books, and lectionaries. It has rekindled interest in theology, giving rise to whole new areas of theological inquiry and to a new generation of women theologians."[74] A fairly recent editorial even called for the employment of feminist theologies to reform the scandal-laden Catholic Church.[75] Medieval images of a feminized Jesus did not have the goals of activism at heart, though. As we have seen, they did not even serve to better the social standing of women of the time.

CONCLUSIONS

As I have suggested, feminine representations of Jesus may not be the marker of a truly progressive and egalitarian Church. Misogynist ideas thrived in the later medieval Church in Western Europe, even amongst representations of a motherly or otherwise feminine Jesus. In fact, such representations of Jesus were actually built upon androcentric systems that reinforced the subordination

---

cause grave concern."

73. "The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship: Serious Questions for Serious Consideration," *Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association*, http://www.mbla.org/mbc97.htm.

74. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 102.

75. Donna Freitas, "On remaking the Catholic Church," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2010, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/stubborn_catholic/2010/04/on_remaking_the_catholic_church_theological_resources_for_dissent_resistance_and_civil_disobedience.html.

of women. That medieval Christians found "feminine" virtues and physical attributes most expressive of the bodily existence of their Savior is indicative of the fact that these societies saw women and femininity as limited. Medieval society thought of women as inherently physical and thus inherently flawed. Present-day Christians ought to hesitate in their crusade for inclusive God-language: simply casting "feminine" attributes or language upon a male Jesus does little to affect gender inequality. Within Christendom, there is a need to completely rethink conceptions of God, freeing the divine of gender altogether; after all, God wasn't created in *imago humani.*