

“Ella Johnson’s passionate study explores the depth of the writings associated with Gertrude of Helfta, looking into both their sources in scholasticism and their effects for meditative readings. It discusses questions of theology, gendered authorship, and the medieval *sensorium* in new and inspiring ways.”

— Racha Kirakosian
Associate Professor of German and the Study of Religion
Harvard University

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This Is My Body

Eucharistic Theology and
Anthropology in the Writings of
Gertrude the Great of Helfta

Ella Johnson



Cistercian Publications
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LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

A Cistercian Publications title published by Liturgical Press

Cistercian Publications

Editorial Offices
161 Grosvenor Street
Athens, Ohio 45701
www.cistercianpublications.org

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, Ella L., author.

Title: This is my body : Eucharistic theology and anthropology in the writings of Gertrude the great of Helfta / Ella Johnson.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Cistercian Publications, 2020. | Series: Cistercian studies; number two hundred eighty | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Examines how the writings of the thirteenth-century nun Gertrude the Great of Helfta articulate an innovative relationship between a person's eucharistic devotion and her body"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019036576 (print) | LCCN 2019036577 (ebook) | ISBN 9780879072803 (paperback) | ISBN 9780879075804 (epub) | ISBN 9780879075804 (mobi) | ISBN 9780879075804 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Gertrude, the Great, Saint, 1256–1302. | Lord's Supper | Human body—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BX4700.G6 J64 2020 (print) | LCC BX4700.G6 (ebook) | DDC 234/.163092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019036576>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019036577>

To my teachers

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List of Abbreviations

Journals and Series

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina
CF	Cistercian Fathers series. Cistercian Publications
CS	Cistercian Studies series. Cistercian Publications
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly</i>
PG	Patrologiæ cursus completus, series graeca. Ed. J.-P. Migne. 162 volumes. Paris, 1857–1866.
PL	Patrologiæ cursus completus, series latina. 221 volumes. Paris, 1844–1864.
RB	<i>Regula Benedicti</i>
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi opera. Ed. J. Leclercq, H. M. Rochais, C. H. Talbot. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977.
SCh	Sources Chrétiennes. Les Éditions du Cerf

The Works of Gertrude the Great of Helfta

CF 35	Gertrud the Great of Helfta. <i>The Herald of God's Loving Kindness, Books One and Two</i> . Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991.
CF 49	Gertrud the Great of Helfta. <i>Spiritual Exercises</i> . Trans. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989.

- CF 63 Gertrud the Great of Helfta. *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness, Book Three*. Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999.
- CF 85 Gertrud the Great of Helfta. *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness, Book Four*. Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2018.
- SCh 127 Gertrude d'Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles I: Les Exercices*. Trans. Jacques Hourlier and Albert Schmitt. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967.
- SCh 139 Gertrude d'Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles II: Le Héraut, Livres I et II*. Trans. Pierre Doyère. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968.
- SCh 143 Gertrude d'Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles III: Le Héraut, Livre III*. Trans. Pierre Doyère. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968.
- SCh 255 Gertrude d'Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles IV: Le Héraut, Livre IV*. Trans. Jean-Marie Clément, the nuns of Wisques, and Bernard de Vregille. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1978.
- SCh 331 Gertrude d'Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles V: Le Héraut, Livre V*. Trans. Jean-Marie Clément, the nuns of Wisques, and Bernard de Vregille. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986.

Other Works from Helfta

- BSG *Book of Special Grace*. Mechthild of Hackeborn. *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*. Ed. Theresa A. Halligan. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979.
- FL Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Trans. Frank Tobin. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998.
- Licht *The Flowing Light of the Godhead (Fließende Licht der Gottheit)*. Mechthild of Magdeburg. Ed. Hans Neumann

and Gisela Vollmann-Profe. Munich: Artemis-Verlag, 1990, 1993.

LSG *Liber Specialis Gratiae*. Mechthild of Hackeborn. Vol. 2 of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*. Ed. Louis Paquelin. Paris: H. Oudin, 1877.

Augustine's Works

Civ Dei	De civitate Dei
Conf	Confessiones
De doc	De doctrina christiana
De Trin	De Trinitate
Div qu	De diversis quæstionibus
En in Ps	Enarratio in Psalmo
Ep(p)	Epistola(e), letter(s)
Gen lit	De Genesi ad litteram
Lib arb	De libero arbitrio
S(S)	Sermo, sermones

Bernard's Works

Apo	Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem
Asc	Sermo in ascensione domini
Conv	Sermo de conversione ad clericos
Csi	De consideratione
Dil	Liber de diligendo Deo
Div	Sermon de diversis
Ep(p)	Epistola(e), letter(s)
Hum	Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiæ
Nat	Sermo in nativitate domini
SC	Sermo super Cantica canticorum
Sent	Sententiae

Origen's Works

Cant	In Canticum Canticorum
Cels	Contra Celsum
Comm in Rom	Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos
Hom 1–28 in Num	Homiliæ in Numeros
In Luc Fragm	Fragmenta in Lucam
Jo	Commentarii in evangelium Joannis
Princ	De principiis

Thomas Aquinas's Work

ST	Summa Theologiae
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Acknowledgments

This book began, in its earliest form, in my doctoral dissertation, directed by Dr. Robert Sweetman, whose wise guidance has brought much depth and breadth to my fledgling academic interests and insights. This book and much of my scholarly development leading up to it is a result of his dedication, thoroughness, encouragement, enthusiasm, and instruction. Yet I would have not dreamed of writing such a book had it not been for the work of Caroline Walker Bynum and others following her, like Barbara Newman and Amy Hollywood, who wrote of medieval women in such eloquent ways.

Second, I must thank other teachers from whom I have had the pleasure to learn about medieval writers: Patricia Donohue first introduced me to this study; Gill Goulding, CJ, witnessed to me a study of these women with her own astute theological wisdom and personal integrity; and Ellen Leonard, CSJ, blazed new trails for women in theological scholarship and first led me and countless others to an understanding of God through the lens of feminism. Other colleagues at the University of Toronto deserve special mention. Reid B. Locklin has been a supportive friend and an inspiring mentor to me, both as a scholar and a teacher. Our writing group, including Reid Locklin, Iris J. Gildea, Caitriona Brennan, Michael O'Connor, Alison More, and Colleen Shantz, has given my work much needed peer editing and has provided me with lively discussion and encouragement for the journey.

Many thanks also go to my colleagues at St. Ambrose University and St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry for their support, especially Patricia Schoelles, SSJ, and Devadasan Premnath. In addition, I am grateful to the colleagues and friends I have met through the Wabash Center of Teaching Theology and Religion. Special thanks goes to Stephen G. Ray, Jr., Amy Oden, Paul Myhre,

and Ruth Anne Reese, who affirmed my vocation to teaching and emboldened my pursuit of justice.

I also owe a great deal to the editor of this book, Marsha Dutton, who has provided me with fresh insights and new resources along the way. She has also convinced me of the dullness of metawriting. The general index for this book was produced by my St. Ambrose University student, Kayleigh Oleson. I am grateful for her careful and diligent work on this tedious task.

Palgrave Macmillan and *Viator* have graciously permitted me to reprint portions of my previously published work with them. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the anonymous readers of my work there, who have sharpened my thought.

I must especially thank the small but dedicated circle of Helfta scholars, especially Sr. Ann Marie Caron, Anna Harrison, Laura M. Grimes, Gertrud Jaron Lewis, and Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen. Through formal meetings at academic conferences and informal chats over email, I have learned much about our subject and have been refreshed with new scholarly energy and enthusiasm. Just as for the Helfta women themselves, I have found that our collaboration and conversation generates theology.

Finally, this book would not be possible without the love and support I have received from people not directly related to my studies. Kelly Bourke, Roslyn Karaban, Deepa Premnath, The Rev. Cheyanna Losey, Ari Anderson, and Sr. Nancy Charlesworth have been very special friends to me. The support, encouragement, and joy I have received from my spouse, Germano Noce, throughout the twists and turns of my academic career, have meant everything to me. I wrote this book during the time my daughter, Isa, was one-and-half to three-and-half years old. She has been my delight and, at the same time, has necessitated childcare to sustain my writing. Without my mother-in-law, Franca Noce, and my mother, Vicky Johnson, this book would have not been possible. For them I am truly grateful.

As Gertrude herself attested, writing can be a painful process. She suffered migraines and headaches and even once lost her pen! Through these times, I was reminded to persevere by her—and all others, especially today when it is just as much needed, who work for social justice and equality.

Preface

In the last few decades, a scholarly trend has emerged to reappropriate the lives and writings of women in the history of Christian spirituality. Motivating this trend, what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza termed a “hermeneutics of remembrance,” is the desire to illumine the female half of the Christian tradition, which has been obscured by an almost exclusive focus on men.¹ The work of scholars heeding this call has led to the production of anthologies like *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, and *Women & Christianity*.² As a result the standard canon of holy women in Christian history (at least what I was aware of as a young Christian girl), comprising Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux, has been broadened and extended to include women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, and Gertrude the Great of Helfta.

While reclaiming these women for Christian historical consciousness has been an important scholarly contribution, this work also has a problematic tendency to categorize them within the “female tradition,” as if they were a homogenous group and isolated from the theological ideas and spiritual practices of their male contemporaries. As Grace Jantzen has shown, the recovery of women’s lost history has tended to the essentialism of women and thus their further marginalization. This tendency is most

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 15–22.

² Barbara MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Mary T. Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 3 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

evident in the false, yet sharp distinction that has been made between women who are categorized as “mystics” and male theologians and philosophers.³ Of course, writings penned by men and women in Christian history differ. Medieval women, for instance, did not write in the scholastic mode of their male contemporaries, because they were denied the training; instead, they wrote in the only genre available to them, in visionary accounts and devotional instruction. But the difference in genre should not be understood as an essential one of gender, that is, arising from a false assumption that women did not have or write about theological ideas. Such a bias toward traditional genres of philosophy and theology serves only further to conceal rather than to reveal women’s place in the history of Christianity.

A clearer and more accurate picture demands beginning to read the female-authored devotional texts that have begun to be recovered with a view to their theology.⁴ The list of women writers in Christian history could then be celebrated rightly—not just for their holiness, but also for their scholarship, not just as mystics but also as theologians. Women would then receive the kind of theological authority accorded to traditional male authors in Christian history (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux). Illustrating the fact that much work needs to be done to achieve this ideal is that when Hildegard of Bingen was recognized recently as “Doctor of the Church,” she became only the fourth woman on the list, alongside thirty-two men.

This study aims to contribute to the project of women’s theological recovery by closely examining the theology in the devotional and visionary writings of Gertrude the Great of Helfta. Gertrude belonged to the thirteenth-century Cistercian convent of Helfta during its heyday of liturgical, contemplative, and scholarly activity, and like many other medieval women religious she taught and wrote within her community. Her two extant works—*Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis* (*The Herald of the Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Love*), consisting of Gertrude’s

³ Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2–4.

⁴ Margaret Ruth Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 4.

vita, autobiography, and visionary accounts, and *Documenta spiritualium exercitationum* (*Teachings of Spiritual Exercises*), containing seven liturgically based meditations—are highly erudite and astute. Gertrude’s two works, along with two others (Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* and *The Book of Special Grace* [*Liber specialis gratiae*], associated with Mechthild of Hackeborn), form the largest extant body of female-authored writing from that period.⁵ Nevertheless, Gertrude studies are still nascent. Of the valuable scholarly work on Gertrude that has been conducted, much falls within the four following categories: history,⁶ literariness,⁷ gender,⁸ and (the largest category of all)

⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 174.

⁶ For examples of historical studies, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta,” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 186–209; Anna Harrison, “Sense of Community Among the Nuns at Helfta,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2007; Anna Harrison “‘Oh! What Treasure is in this Book?’ Writing, Reading, and Community at the Monastery of Helfta,” *Viator* 39, no. 1 (2008): 75–106; Anna Harrison, “I Am Wholly Your Own: Liturgical Piety and Community Among the Nuns of Helfta,” *Church History* 78, no. 3 (2009): 549–83; Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

⁷ Claudia Eliass, *Die Frau ist die Quelle der Weisheit: Weibliches Selbstverständnis in der Frauenmystik des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts*, Frauen in Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Band 28 (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlangsgesellschaft, 1995); Gertrud Jaron Lewis, “Gertrud of Helfta’s *Legatus divinae pietatis* and *ein botte der göttlichen miltekeit*: A Comparative Study of Major Themes,” in *Mysticism: Medieval and Modern*, ed. Valerie Lagorio (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1986), 58–71.

⁸ See for example Mary Jeremy Finnegan, “‘Similitudes’ in the Writings of Saint Gertrude of Helfta,” *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 48–54; Mary Jeremy Finnegan, “Idiom of Women Mystics,” *Mystics Quarterly* 13 (1987): 65–72; Johanna Schwalbe, “Musik in der Mystik: Zur Sprache der Musik in den Schriften der hl. Gertrud von Helfta,” *Erbe und Auftrag* 71 (1995): 108–24; Maren Ankermann, “Der ‘Legatus divinae pietatis’—Gestaltete Mystik?” in *Freiheit des Herzens: Mystik bei Gertrud von Helfta*, ed. Michael Bangert, Mystik und Mediävistik (Münster: Lit, 2004), 37–56; Maren Ankermann, *Gertrud die Grosse von Helfta: eine Studie zum Spannungsverhältnis von religiöser Erfahrung und literarischer Gestaltung in mystischen Werken* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1997).

spirituality.⁹ Yet aside from the brilliant work of Michael Bangert, Laura Grimes, and, most recently, Claire Jones,¹⁰ very few studies on Gertrude belong to the category of theology.

This book has a theological focus. It examines the extensive eucharistic theology and anthropology that Gertrude presents in her visionary accounts and devotional instructions, in particular the innovative relationship she articulates between a person's eucharistic devotion and that person's body. This study attends to her references to the biblical, monastic, and theological traditions, including ideas about the spiritual and corporeal senses, in order to illuminate the positive role she assigns to the body in making spiritual progress.

Chapter one introduces Gertrude and her writings, and chapter two discusses the relevant details of her monastic context, with the next two chapters situating Gertrude within the tradition of

⁹ Jean Leclercq, "Liturgy and Mental Prayer in the Life of Saint Gertrude," *Sponsa Regis* 32, no. 1 (September 1960): 1–5; Maria Teresa Porcile Santiso, "Saint Gertrude and the Liturgy," *Liturgy* 26, no. 3 (1992): 53–84; Cyprian Vaggagini, "The Example of a Mystic: St. Gertrude and Liturgical Spirituality," in *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976), 740–803; Gertrud Jaron Lewis, "Libertas Cordis: The Concept of Inner Freedom in St. Gertrud the Great of Helfta," *CSQ* 25, no. 1 (1990): 65–74; Michael Casey, "Gertrud of Helfta and Bernard of Clairvaux: A Reappraisal," *Tjurunga* 35 (1988): 3–23; Miriam Schmitt, "Freed to Run with Expanded Heart: The Writings of Gertrud of Helfta and RB," *CSQ* 25, no. 3 (1990): 219–32; Ann W. Astell, "'Hidden Manna': Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrude of Helfta, and the Monastic Art of Humility," in *Eating Beauty: the Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 62–98; Sabine Spitzlei, *Erfahrungsraum Herz: Zur Mystik des Zisterzienserinnenklosters Helfta im 13. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991); Spitzlei's work remains the standard study on the sacred heart at Helfta.

¹⁰ Michael Bangert, "A Mystic Pursues Narrative Theology: Biblical Speculation and Contemporary Imagery in Gertrude of Helfta," *Magistra* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 3–20; see also his German work, *Demut in Freiheit: Studien zur geistlichen Lehre im Werk Gertruds von Helfta*, *Studien zur systematischen und spirituellen Theologie* 21 (Würzburg: Echter, 1997); Laura Marie Grimes, "Theology as Conversation: Gertrude of Helfta and her Sisters as Readers of Augustine," Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004; Claire Jones, "Hostia jubilatio: Psalm Citation, Eucharistic Prayer and Mystical Union in Gertrude of Helfta's *Exercitia Spiritualia*," *Speculum* 89, no. 4 (2014): 1005–39.

the doctrine of spiritual senses. She integrates the legacy of the doctrine of spiritual senses into her theology of the Eucharist while making some important innovations of her own. Specifically, chapter three provides an overview of the legacy of the doctrine of the spiritual senses, with a focus on the doctrines that Gertrude used as source and authority in her own writings, those of Origen, Augustine, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Chapter four turns to Gertrude's teaching on the spiritual senses, demonstrating the way she left behind some of the more dualistic aspects of her sources while exploiting the more affirmative concepts for bodily forms of divine union.

Chapter five goes deeper in its textual analysis of Gertrude's doctrine. It takes seriously the devotional genre of Gertrude's writings and the mode in which she teaches her innovative eucharistic theology and anthropology. Gertrude's writings are overtly liturgical. They rely upon epistemological principles and pedagogical techniques beyond those used by the schoolmen in theological treatises, recognized in the traditional sense. Her writings presuppose an epistemology based upon her liturgical experience and that of her intended audience. She painstakingly constructs her eucharistic theology and anthropology with conscious use of multiple references to sensory language, ritual actions, and liturgical tropes and images. Mary Carruthers' scholarship on medieval monastic contemplative texts provides the hermeneutical key here for examining Gertrude's rhetorical strategy, as she argues that medieval meditative texts are best viewed as a "craft of thinking," because, as she points out, they entail more than "mental contemplation" but in fact frequently use "tools . . . made of language and image, primarily the tropes and figures and schemes discovered in the Bible, the liturgy, and the arts." In the idiom of medieval monasticism, Carruthers says, people do not "'have' ideas, they 'make' them."¹¹ Of necessity, then, in order to more fully examine Gertrude's theology, chapter

¹¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–5.

five carefully considers the function and place of the liturgical tropes and images that she weaves throughout her texts.

The work of chapter five paves the way for chapter six, which discusses the gender implications of Gertrude's use of liturgical tropes and images. Her works, specifically her *Spiritual Exercises*, demand this examination, as she writes them consciously from the feminine perspective, using feminine grammatical endings (e.g., *captiva* for "prisoner"). The chapter again considers the tools of sensory language and liturgical image that Gertrude uses to craft her works, but here the focus is on significant moments when Gertrude inserts feminine nouns or uses feminine grammatical endings. In the final analysis, the chapter shows that the way Gertrude crafts her *Spiritual Exercises* transforms fixed dichotomies between male and female.

Yet the question remains as to whether Gertrude's innovations build upon previous understandings of being a woman. Chapter seven takes up this question, looking beyond Gertrude to her female religious contemporaries and considering the gender conventions modern historians have identified in the writings of these women. For instance, Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that many medieval women writers exploited the ancient association of the female with the flesh as the means by which women could achieve union with the humanity of Christ and therefore sanctification.¹² In addition, Barbara Newman has identified the "womanChrist" model in women's writings, which claims the possibility that woman qua woman could imitate Christ by using feminine inflections and thus achieve a high-ranking religious status in the spiritual realm.¹³ Indeed Gertrude is not alone as a medieval woman reimagining deeply rooted institutions in the structure of Christian thought to manipulate male/female di-

¹² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 260–69.

¹³ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 3.

chotomies.¹⁴ The chapter shows how elements of Gertrude's rhetorical strategy both correspond with and depart from that of her female religious contemporaries. For example, like many of her contemporaries, she was able to retain an impeccably orthodox piety while also and at the same time creatively claiming a female religious identity and ranking herself equal to, if not above, men. She also claimed an association with Christ's humanity, yet unlike so many of her contemporaries, she does not gender this association, playing on the connection of femaleness with flesh. The chapter concludes by suggesting socio-cultural reasons for Gertrude's understanding of being a woman.

Ultimately, Gertrude's affirmative embodied spirituality is what speaks to the current wave of excitement about other medieval women mystics like Hildegard of Bingen. What is attracting contemporary readers to them is what Bynum alluded to in her ground-breaking work a few decades ago, that these women's voices—which are alongside and distinct from the prevailing male voices of medieval religion—stress continuity and reconciliation between concrete earth and ethereal divine, and they emphasize the role of physicality in religiosity.¹⁵ For this reason, their voices can point today's people in the direction of a search for positive religious symbols of the human person. This book aims to contribute to that work.

¹⁴ Both medieval men and women challenged and broke down gender dichotomies through their self-presentations and writings. See especially Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More, "Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600–1530," in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600–1530* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 1–13.

¹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, ". . . And Women His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 257–88; see especially 280. See also Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*; Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Yet the overarching aim of the book, which I have sought to make transparent at its outset, is to show that Gertrude's highly nuanced and sophisticated theology merits a place in the canon of medieval theological works because of its originality. Her eucharistic theology is different from traditional forms, because it is delivered in hybrid form—i.e., as a blend of scholastic and vernacular theology. Gertrude writes in Latin and draws from scholastic sources, but she does so in the genre of visionary literature and devotional instruction. As she depends on both traditions, her theology cannot be characterized as belonging wholly to one or the other. In this regard, Gertrude contributes in a distinctive way to what Gary Macy has called “the legacy of diversity” in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century eucharistic thought. Macy, of course, tries to overturn the stubborn notion that all medieval eucharistic theology may be reduced to the thought of one influential Dominican, Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶ With his focus on theology done in the traditional sense, Macy's studies uncover a great deal of theological diversity but still exclude female writers.

Because of the recovery project of the last few decades, a goldmine of female-authored texts is now available for contemporary theology. Yet the scholarly bias against devotional texts still has to be shed. Through attention to the sophisticated, creative, and complex theology of one medieval woman, other readers and scholars may be prompted not only to recognize but also to turn to the devotional writings of women in history for the innovative theological insights they offer today.

¹⁶ Gary Macy, *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 36–58.

CHAPTER SIX

“This Is My Body”: Woman as Signifying Humanity *and* Divinity

As historians of the Christian Middle Ages have shown, from the twelfth century onward, ordained priests became increasingly set apart from lay persons in nearly every aspect of the religious culture. At the intellectual, social, and moral level, priests were regarded as especially privileged. Their authority was drawn from their role to be dispensers of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, to lay persons, who were dependent on them.¹ The sharp distinction between clergy and laity, of course, hardened the male/female divide, given the fact that women were not ordained to the priesthood. Even Hildegard of Bingen, who was a highly educated Benedictine nun and preacher, who crafted a prophetic identity for herself, and who was highly critical of the decadence and corruption of the priesthood, repeated the conventional *topos* opposing male and female as divine to human or mind and spirit to flesh: “Man . . . signifies the divinity of the Son of God and woman his humanity.”²

¹ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51. See also John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 547.

² Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, PL 197:885. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, “. . . And Women His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986), 274; Alcuin Blamires, “Paradox

As recent scholarship has revealed, medieval writings commonly demonstrate this asymmetrical evaluation of "man" and "woman" as soul/body, divinity/humanity, but also rational/irrational and virility/weakness. The influence of these ancient dichotomies regularly appears in a variety of writings of Gertrude's day, in works of theological, philosophical, and even scientific nature.³

Such dichotomies, as Caroline Walker Bynum has shown, had implications for women's spirituality. In their writings and devotions, medieval women tended to emphasize Christ's humanity and their own. They focused on the incarnation of God in the physical realm, and their devotions were eucharistic and Christocentric, oriented toward encountering or assimilating with Christ's humanity, because traditional theological discussion and devotional trends taught them to associate *humanitas* with physicality and being a woman.⁴

Yet Gertrude's writings resist these simple dualisms. Gertrude crafts within her *Exercises* a female *persona* that is liberated from traditional prescriptions for women's behavior. Her images of God and self in the prose of her *Herald* are consistent with this *persona*, as they subvert the behavioral roles and traits conventionally connected with men and women.⁵ Further, Gertrude's visionary

in the Medieval Gender Doctrine of Head and Body," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis, York Studies in Medieval Theology (York: York Medieval Press, 1997), 13–29.

³ On this association in medieval theories of science and medicine, see Vern L. Bullough, "Medieval, Medical and Scientific Views of Women," *Viator* 4 (1973): 485–501; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, Cambridge History of Medicine (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Danielle Jacquart and Claude Alexandre Thomasset, ed., *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 179–214. Bynum illustrates this thesis throughout Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁵ Because contemporary definitions of *sex*, *gender*, and *sex roles* vary, it is important to define my use of the terms. I use *sex* to refer to a person's

priesthood shows how Gertrude's conception of man and woman has the effect of subverting the ecclesial roles aligned with them—at least in her self-imagery. Her priestly claims—even to bind and loose souls—are also supported by her eucharistic theory, which is nuanced and highly innovative.

“Woman” as Re-Identified in Gertrude's Exercises

In crafting her meditative texts, Gertrude is deliberate about her use of gendered pronouns and grammatical endings. Whether she is composing prayers to God or addressing her readers, in all seven sections of her *Spiritual Exercises* Gertrude writes from the feminine perspective. In her Latin prose, she almost entirely uses feminine grammatical endings for nouns, as for example, “That in the violence of living love I may become your prisoner [*captiva*] for all time.”⁶ This feminine voice differs from that of the psalms and liturgical prayers, which filled Gertrude's day, addressing God from the viewpoint of a male devotee, with male pronouns.⁷ Even when she refers to biblical parables with male protagonists, like the prodigal son, she replaces masculine nouns with feminine ones. For instance, she writes about the “prodigal daughter” (*prodiga filia*)⁸ and the “adopted daughter” (*filiam adoptasti*).⁹ She

biological status (typically “male” or “female,” as understood in the Middle Ages). *Gender* refers to the attitudes and behaviors that the dominant culture typically associates with a person's biological sex. The phrase *sex roles* refers to the sexual behaviors and actions typically associated with being “male” or “female,” defined by the dominant culture. Sex roles, therefore, reflect the interaction between biological status and the behaviors and attitudes typically associated with biological sex and reproductive anatomy. At the same time, these contemporary linguistic categories of sex and gender do not apply to thirteenth-century understandings of women and men. For that reason, in elucidating Gertrude's thought, I generally avoid these terms, which she would not recognize.

⁶ Gertrude, *Exercises* 7.65 (CF 49:124; SCh 127:262).

⁷ Gertrud Jaron Lewis, “Introduction,” in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:6–9).

⁸ Gertrude, *Exercises* 4.184 (CF 49:63; SCh 127:126).

⁹ Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.510 (CF 49:91; SCh 127:196). In the *Herald*, she also replaces the popular image of John leaning on Christ's breast at the Last Supper with a young girl (*puella*). Gertrude, *Herald* 5.32.2 (SCh 331:256). See also Lewis, “Introduction,” in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:6).

uses feminine pronouns as well when she refers to God. In fact, in most of Exercise seven, Gertrude personifies divine attributes as female figures (e.g., Goodness [*Bonitas*], Charity [*Caritas*], Cherishing-love [*Dilectio*], Compassion [*Misericordia*], Peace [*Pax*], Loving-kindness [*Pietas*], Wisdom [*Sapientia*], and Truth [*Veritas*]).¹⁰ Finally, she draws from different rituals in the life of a nun, so that they may be easily remembered by her readers (i.e., the sacrament of Baptism; the rituals of clothing, consecration, and a profession of a cloistered nun; and the Divine Office).¹¹ In this way, the female authorial voice of the *Exercises* connects with the experience of women religious.

Yet Gertrude did not envision her *Exercises* to be read only by women. As her biographer testified in the *Herald*, Gertrude wrote “examples of spiritual exercises” (*documenta spiritualium exercitationum*) primarily for the women of the Helfta community, but also for “all those who wished to read them.”¹² That she intended men as well as women to practice her exercises means that she would have anticipated that both men and women would adopt the female *persona* she maintained in composing her exercises. The feminine perspective of the *Exercises* should thus be read as a consciously created female *persona* rather than as an address to an audience comprised only of women.

Several of the prayers Gertrude composes in the feminine perspective in her *Exercises* discuss the need to renounce associations of women with sensuality, weakness, and sinfulness in order for them to be able to gain traits typically associated with men, like virility and rationality. In Exercise five, for example, she describes

¹⁰ Lewis, “Introduction,” in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:7). Of course the personification of these attributes as female figures is common in patristic and medieval authors. See Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 1–3.

¹¹ Gertrude parenthetically remarks that readers outside of the religious state of life should make the appropriation to their own life circumstances (Gertrude, *Exercises* 3.21 [CF 49:41; Sch 127:94]).

¹² Gertrude, *Herald* 1.1.2 (CF 35:39; Sch 139:135). The next section of the same chapter in the *Herald* describes Gertrude counseling several women within the Helfta community and a large number of outsiders, who included both men and women (Gertrude, *Herald* 1.1.3 [CF 35:40–41; Sch 139:136–38]).

the change in traits required for the “fragile sex” to attain divine union; she asks Jesus to replace sensuality and weakness with virility and rationality: “May all my vigor [*vires*] become so appropriated to your charity and my senses so founded and firm in you [*sensus mei in te fundati et firmati*] that, while of the fragile sex [*sexu fragili*], I may, by virtue of a virile soul and mind [*animi menteque virili*], attain to that kind of love which leads to the bridal-couch [*thalamum cubiculi*] of the interior bed-chamber of perfect union with you.”¹³ This exercise is replete with traditionally defined masculine and military imagery. Readers are instructed to pray,

O queen of queens, charity [*reginarum regina charitas*], make [me], for the sake of your glory, bound to you by oath in the new warfare of cherishing you [*in nova tuae dilectionis militia*]. . . . Gird my thigh with the sword of your Spirit [*gladio spiritus*], most mighty [*potentissime*] one, and make me put on virility in my mind [*mente virum*] so that in all virtue I may act manly and energetically [*viriliter agam et strenue*]; and inseparably with you, I may persevere, well strengthened [*bene solidata*] in you, with an unconquerable mind [*invincibili mente*].¹⁴

Ultimately, the replacement of weak “sensuality” with “manly” strength and “virility in . . . mind” is the path Gertrude lays out toward divine union.

Because Gertrude composes this prayer from the feminine perspective, whether a man or a woman is performing the exercise, that person is praying as a woman who wants to become “manly” in mind and spirit. The inconsistency between feminine grammatical endings and conventionally associated masculine traits shows that Gertrude understands women as able to transcend the spiritual impediments typically associated with women. In other words, by the very act of praying as a woman for manly

¹³ Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.394–99 (CF 49:87; SCh 127:186), with my emendation to the translation.

¹⁴ Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.386–93 (CF 49:87; SCh 127:186). Translator’s insertion; with my emendation to the translation.

traits, a real woman may liberate herself from associations with weakness. Indeed, this idea coheres with the locational structure of the *Exercises*, which emphasizes the idea that the *memoria Dei* transcends time and entails a transformative encounter with Christ, the Mediator between the already/not yet dichotomy. By performing the memory of God in Gertrude's *Exercises*, women are no longer hindered in the spiritual life by associations with sensual weakness and irrationality but are able to be strong and rational, as men are conventionally thought to be.

Yet in considering the female *persona* Gertrude's memory of God invents, it is important to distinguish between women's bodies and the behaviors typically associated with them. Gertrude does not teach that the *memoria Dei* annihilates the female sex so that a woman *becomes* a man in the body or in the soul.¹⁵ Rather she challenges the behavioral associations with men and women so that real women may be allowed *to behave* as men are thought to behave, virile and strong.

Gertrude is clear that being a woman is not *ipso facto* an obstacle to divine union, as is evident in several ways in the same prayer from her fifth exercise. First, she addresses the prayer to a divine attribute, charity, which she personifies as a woman, a "queen." It is the "queen of queens, charity" (*reginarum regina charitas*) that she has the reader invoke in order to acquire characteristics conventionally associated with men; that is, to become "well strengthened [*bene solidata*] . . . with an unconquerable mind [*invincibili mente*]." ¹⁶ Second, she uses a feminine noun for the person in the prayer who has been made strong in Christ. As the English translators of her *Exercises* note, "Given the context of repetitions of 'virility' in the prayer, Gertrude seems to intend a pun on *bene solidata*. Instead of 'well strengthened', the phrase could be translated as 'the female/woman soldier' (from *solidatus* which means

¹⁵ Such an idea is witnessed in the early Christian tradition, particularly in eschatological speculations, that "woman" will be resurrected in the body as "man," or as sexless. On this, see Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 239–89.

¹⁶ Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.386, 393 (CF 49:87; Sch 127:186).

'soldier, mercenary')."¹⁷ Furthermore, in the conclusion of the prayer, Gertrude envisions the annihilation of traits conventionally associated with women in this newly made, "manly," "woman" to lead to a female, "bridal" kind of divine union: "I may, by virtue of a virile soul and mind [*animi menteque virili*], attain to that kind of love which leads to the bridal-couch [*thalamum cubiculi*] of the interior bed-chamber of perfect union with you."¹⁸ The kind of soul (and body) that Gertrude envisions for "woman" as (re-)conceptualized or even (re-)invented in the *memoria Dei* is still a woman in the body. But she is no longer limited in her Godward progress by the associations of women with sensuality and weakness.

Even when Gertrude writes a prayer for the death of self, using the feminine voice, later in Exercise five, it is the traits associated with women that she describes as hindrances (*impedimenta*) to the religious life, like the archetypal temptation to sin (*tentamenta*)—not being a woman, per se. In the petitions she describes these associations as "hindrances" and identifies them as the things to be annihilated in the death of self. For instance, Gertrude composes the prayer, "O Wisdom, most outstanding virtue of divine majesty, if only your efficacy prevailed over me, an unworthy woman. If only, with the breath of your mouth, you were to blow upon and annihilate in me, small as I am, all hindrances to your will and gracious purpose, that through you I might conquer all temptations, and through you overcome all hindrances, that in greatness of love, dying to myself, I might live in you."¹⁹ In the climactic conclusion of this prayer, the female *persona* is entirely possessed by the divine attribute Wisdom, personified as a woman. By remembering how all obstacles to divine union died with Christ in his crucifixion, Gertrude has readers annihilate the restrictions of sinfulness associated with women. She thus teaches how women can be transformed in Christ, through the power of

¹⁷ Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:87, n. 81).

¹⁸ Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.396–99 (CF 49:87; SCh 127:186), with my emendations to the translation.

¹⁹ Gertrude, *Exercises* 7.232–38 (CF 49:130; SCh 127:274).

his resurrection, to live a new life of virtue, freed from such hindrances, in Wisdom.

In a related case, later in the *Spiritual Exercises* Gertrude shifts her authorial voice, and therefore the voice of her readers as well, to the masculine perspective. She makes this significant change in the seventh and final exercise, an “Exercise of Making Amends for Sins and of Preparing for Death.”²⁰ In composing the prayer, Gertrude provides the reader a female *persona* to invoke “Peace,” in a prayer written in the first-person perspective. But then, as the prayer continues, she assigns the reader a male *persona*: the prayer asks Jesus to say words that refer to the reader in the third person, using the masculine pronoun *eum* (him). Finally, the prayer shifts back to the first person, applying words of a masculine gender (i.e., *miserorum* [miserable] and *desperatum* [hopeless]) to the reader:

O my Peace [*Pax*], most dulcet Jesus, how long will you be silent? How long will you be secretive? How long will you say nothing? Ah, rather speak for me now, saying a word in charity: “I will redeem him [*eum*].” Surely, you are the refuge of all those who are miserable [*miserorum*]. You pass by no one without a greeting. You have never left unreconciled anyone who has taken refuge in you. Ah, do not pass me by without charity, miserable [*miserum*] and hopeless [*desperatum*] as I am.²¹

One of the English translators of the *Exercises*, Gertrud Jaron Lewis, interprets this change in gender perspective as abrupt and inadvertent. Her interpretation is based on the fact that the nuns in the choir at Helfta used masculine nouns and pronouns to refer

²⁰ Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:122, n. 1).

²¹ Gertrude, *Exercises* 7.52–158 (CF 49:127; Sch 127:268, 270) (with my emendations): *O pax mea Iesu dulcissime, quosque siles? quosque dissimulas? quosque taces? Eia vel nunc pro me loquere, verbum in charitate dicens: Ego redimam eum. Tu quippe es omnium miserorum refugium. Tu neminem praeteris insalutatem. Tu nunquam aliquem ad te confugientum dimisisti irreconciliatum. Eia ne pertranseas sine charitate me miserum et desperatum.*

to themselves when they chanted the Divine Office:²² “Gertrud thus includes adjustments for which the liturgy did not provide. There are two places where Gertrud, in fact, relapses into this generally adopted male *persona*. In Chapter Seven she abruptly and perhaps inadvertently shifts to the masculine gender in speaking about herself (cf. 155 and 158); and one time (VII, 684) she prays that ‘brotherly charity’ may be increased in her. These two passages let us appreciate all the more Gertrud’s conscious effort throughout to maintain the feminine perspective.”²³

But perhaps in these cases Gertrude’s gender shift is deliberate. Indeed, in the context of the exercise’s theme of death, coupled with Gertrude’s rhetorical strategy in the passages from Exercise five considered above, it seems Gertrude is using the gender shift as a conscious linguistic tool to call for the final and absolute death of typically restrictive behaviors associated with women. While speaking in the male *persona* in this prayer, readers no longer have to renounce the traits of sensuality, weakness, irrationality as they do in the passage from Exercise five. Having progressed this far, readers have effectively sloughed off the “hindrances” to the religious life that are specific to women.

Here again, Gertrude’s thought is underpinned with her belief that the memory of God transcends time and entails a transformative encounter with Christ, the Mediator, between already and not yet. The encounter with the divine Mediator in performing the *memoria Dei* is what allows women on their journey toward divine union to transcend the cultural conventions of gendered behavior. This state, in which the restrictive associations with women have been annihilated, reflects the “not yet” eschatological reality “already” in the female *persona*, so much so that she adopts a male *persona*.

²² Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:127, n. 18)

²³ Lewis, “Introduction,” in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:5–6). Lewis notes another gender shift in Exercise seven when Gertrude includes in a long litany a prayer for “brotherly charity” (Gertrude, *Exercises* 7.684 (CF 49:145; SCh 127:306). This shift appears to be less a conscious linguistic tool than the passage discussed above, as Gertrude’s language here comes from the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 72.8).

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