

The Role of Women in the Development of Christianity, 1000-1500 CE

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It is the year 2019 CE, and the Catholic Church still does not recognize women as members of the clergy in any way. So how, in a world dominated by patriarchy and misogyny, have women clawed their way into the history of Catholicism? As of today, there are hundreds of female saints recognized by the Catholic Church. They are responsible for miracles, visions, stigmata, and writing some of the most influential and controversial religious pieces ever recorded. This article will examine the ideas and experiences of just a few of one of the most powerful yet rarely exalted influences in the medieval Catholic faith: the religious female. These women found ways to exercise agency and authority in spite of the oppressive patriarchy which dominated the European culture, specifically during the time between 1000 and 1500 CE. Without a doubt the feminine contribution to Christianity was made possible by two very important things. First, it was an unwavering courage, knowing that what they said or published might cause them to be executed; and second, it was the hope that their life meant more than being responsible for the burdens of man forever.

In the beginning, there was Eve. Depending on whom you ask, she is regarded as either the vilest or the most misunderstood of all women in the bible. For the purposes of *this* article, she is often blamed for committing the original sin. While Eve's story took place much earlier than the time period considered in this article, her influence on early Christians is relevant to almost everything with respect to women's equality regardless of the time period. The bible tells us that God made Adam in his own image. After God created Adam, he took one of Adam's ribs while he slept and created Eve to be Adam's companion. Adam and Eve lived happily together in the Garden of Eden, a paradise on Earth full of all manner of animals and vegetation. They were to have total dominion over the earth forever, free of all pain and sin. There was only one rule. They were not allowed to eat from a special tree in the garden called the "Tree of Knowledge." According to the story, Eve was convinced by the devil (disguised as a serpent) to break the rules and eat from the forbidden tree. Not only

did she eat the fruit, she persuaded Adam to do the same. Here, according to the bible, is the beginning of the road for all womankind.

From this moment on, women are blamed for the original sins of our earth, but also labeled as simultaneously manipulative and weak. This misogynistic way of thinking based on these early interpretations of the bible will color the behavior of men and priests alike. Rarely will men believe that it was necessary to think about the struggles of women. A monk named Robert (that is all we know about his title) aptly describes the views of the time as he interprets a speech given by Pope Urban in 1095 CE at the Council of Clermont, “What shall I say of the abominable rape of the women? To speak of it is worse than to be silent.”¹ Robert’s translation calls rape abominable, but rather than do anything about it or even speak about it, he claims to prefer to remain silent simply because it is easier. (God forbid women being raped made these poor men uncomfortable). To make matters even harder, medieval women would also be compared to Mary, the most miraculous female that ever existed, according to Christians.² She is second on the scale of Christian awesomeness to only one: her son Jesus Christ.

Mary’s story deserves telling in this context, as she will inevitably serve as a role model to most medieval Christian women. According to the bible, Mary was a virgin when the angel Gabriel visited her. He told her she would become pregnant with a very special child and this child would be the Son of God: Jesus Christ. Because of Mary, women were given the completely unrealistic goals of being capable of virgin births if they were to only act humble and pious enough. This is an excerpt from a fourteenth century Catholic woman describing Mary:

Then he brought our blessed lady in to my mind. I saw her spiritually in bodily likeness, a meek and simple maid, young—little more than a child, of the same bodily form as when she conceived. God also showed me part of the wisdom and truth of her soul, so that I

¹ Robert The Monk, “Speech at Council of Clermont”, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, written 1094, accessed 17 November 2018 from sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp.

² Julian of Norwich, and Elizabeth Spearing. *Revelations of Divine Love*. (Penguin Books, 1998) xxi.

understood with what reverence she beheld her God and Maker, and how reverently she marveled that he chose to be born of her, a simple creature of his own making.³

From Mary's time onward, sex and the body were considered disgusting not just by women, but men as well. A man named Paul of Tarsus, present at Christ's crucifixion, would make it his life's work to plant the seeds of Christianity. He defined Jesus and his significance in the world (post-crucifixion) as being fundamentally about suffering and martyrdom, and made these pillars of the new religion. If Mary could achieve procreation and good standing with God without sex or desire or any selfish filthy task, anyone could. Ascetic practices, or the act of morbidly mortifying the body would become very popular in the medieval Christian world. Medieval men and women would physically abuse themselves daily in the hopes to simulate "imitatio Christi," or the imitation of Christ's suffering. This suffering could include starvation, cutting and whipping themselves, spiked leg collars and horse hair shirts. Many women even starved themselves to the point of losing their monthly menstruation, which was in fact ideal: ascetic women believed that having their period was a dirty bodily function corresponding only to procreation and sex. The more like Mary they could be, the better. Mary was the ideal woman. When Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, they lost their immortality, leaving sex as the only option for procreation. If Eve had never sinned, sex would not be necessary; hence, sex was linked to the original sin, which explains the reverence towards Mary.

As asceticism gained popularity, so did the practice of monasticism. Monastics remove themselves from society in order to prevent sinning through bodily temptations. Medieval Catholics frequently sought these isolated lifestyles because they could better control their ideal religious experiences. Being separated from other people meant their life experiences could be completely spiritual and they could forego the normal human needs presented on a daily basis. These bodily temptations could include eating, drinking, sleeping, and

³ Julian of Norwich, 46.

sex. These religious fanatics were often half starving, dehydrated, sleep deprived, celibate, and spent as much time as they wanted praying or self-mutilating. This kind of behavior would never be socially acceptable for someone like a medieval mother or wife who from a young age would be in charge of running the household and raising the children. Most women during this time were married and having children by the time they were fourteen or fifteen.

One such woman who took the monastic route was a Catholic mystic who we know today by the title of Julian of Norwich.⁴ This is how she was referred to after she became a very famous anchoress around 1342 CE in the English town of Norwich. Julian became an anchoress around the age of thirty after having survived an unknown, but very serious, illness. During her illness, she came very close to dying. While she was receiving her last rights from the priest, as he held the crucifix in front of her face, she had a divine vision. Her vision is twice recorded in a book she wrote, *Revelations of Divine Love*. The first recording of the vision was almost directly after it happened, and the second was twenty years later, after she had spent the better part of those years as an anchoress.

After Julian recovered from her illness she approached her local priest about permission to become an anchoress in his church. An anchoress (or anchorite if they are a man) is someone who was literally built in to the walls of a church to live there in a solitary, highly devout lifestyle. The anchoress or anchorite would exile themselves from society and “die”, leaving behind every piece of the worldly life they knew before entering the walls of the church. Many even received last rights to consecrate their death from humanity. The wisdom behind having an anchoress in the church was that they made the church essentially alive. Because someone lived in the walls, someone would always be there praying. It was as if the person gave the church its own heartbeat. The anchoresses or anchorites were able to interact with the parish of the church, the priest, and even any nuns who may live on the grounds but only through a very small slit in the wall. Through this slit, they would have also received food, communion and chamber pot services. Often an anchoress or anchorite would

⁴ A mystic is a person who believes they can transcend ordinary human experience and communicate or receive intuitions from the divine.

become a local celebrity, and they would have visitors that would come and bring them gifts that they could insert through the slit. In return for these gifts, they might be asked to pray for the individual or someone in their family. Julian chose this kind of solitary life to transcend her physical body while still on earth. It was her spiritual soul she wished to nurture and this could only be achieved through a temptation-less, solitary and nutritionally deprived state. Suffering was essential, and many men and women actively sought this lifestyle in order to guarantee their place in heaven. In medieval Europe, there were over 120 women living in anchor holds in the thirteenth century alone. Their presence turned these spaces in to the modern-day equivalent of super-churches. This attention most likely gave Julian the confidence to record her thoughts in book form.

In her book, Julian describes her vision twice. She makes multiple claims that would have bordered on heresy at the time. These include her description of the original sin as “Adam’s sin.” She never once mentions Eve or her part in the story: “He taught me that I should consider the glorious atonement; for this atonement is incomparably more pleasing to God and more glorious in saving mankind than Adam’s sin was ever harmful.”⁵

Julian also made references to a growing cult of the time called “God the Mother,” claiming that Jesus could be anyone someone needed him to be, father, ***mother*** or spouse:

And so our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways; 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.⁶

The fact that she wrote a book at all implies confidence in what she believed she saw. Books are meant to be read. She obviously intended that other

⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

people should read her work, something that was almost unheard of at the time; Women were almost entirely uneducated, they rarely knew how to read or write and they most certainly were forbidden to interpret the word of God. It would seem that the line between heretic (burned at the stake) and becoming a canonized saint with celebrity status (as Julian of Norwich was), might have been as simple as being in the right place at the right time. Less than seventy years later, in 1483 CE, a man critical to the reformation of the Christian faith was born: Martin Luther. His criticisms of Catholicism and Lutheranism were certainly just as scandalous as a *woman* publishing a *book* about Christ as her ***mother***. Yet, she is a saint and he was declared a heretic by papal bull and spent the better part of his life on the run.

Another female mystic turned Catholic celebrity was Hildegard of Bingen, who lived from 1098-1179 CE. Hildegard, a German nun, is also canonized and published a book with extensive descriptions, interpretations, and illustrations of her visions. Both Hildegard and Julian of Norwich were born of noble blood, and both suffered from inexplicable illnesses. We now know that Hildegard was epileptic and suffered from massive seizures, but at the time this disease was misunderstood and would have gone undiagnosed. It was also probably the catalyst that led her parents to give her away to an anchoress living in their community, named Jutta. Jutta raised the young girl from the time she was eight until Hildegard was thirty years old, when her caretaker and teacher passed away.⁷

After Jutta's death, Hildegard was elected the leader of the nuns in the convent. It was during this time of her increasing confidence that she revealed that she had been receiving divine visions from the time she was five years old. It was a dangerous time, and she was justly nervous to reveal such an intimate secret. She claimed that she was "weighted by the scourge of God," but for Hildegard, this revelation was crucial to her future notoriety:⁸

Perhaps her scourge was less of God and more of men, for this was a time when heretics and witches were burned at the stake. Hildegard

⁷ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Ways of the Lord* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), vii.

⁸ Hildegard, ix.

knew that a woman who had visions would be suspect by certain members of the Church who believed it better to burn people on earth than allow them to burn in hell. But eventually Pope Eugenius heard about Hildegard's visions and suggested she write them down. She did, and they were so breathtaking in their simplicity and scope that she practically became instantly famous throughout Europe. Riding on her fame, she decided to move her convent to a larger venue, the town of Bingen on the banks of the Rhine.⁹

The Pope essentially endorsed Hildegard. She went on in her life to probe the very nature of the universe she lived in, inspiring a multitude of women in her wake. She is credited with some of the first Gregorian chants both written and performed, categorizing and observing herbal remedies, describing plants and animals in detail and the most shocking: studying of the human orgasm. She describes it as: "A sense of heat in my brain, a sensual delight, the taste of which summons forth the emission of the man's seed."¹⁰ This was a nun studying orgasms, writing and performing music, working as a scientist and penning her direct interactions with the divine. She is a solid reason why many women from this point on picked up a pen and opened their eyes to the world. Perhaps she could even be called the first feminist. *Her ideas certainly question the origins of those of Karl Marx. Maybe Marx was not the father of socialism, maybe socialism had a mother instead.*

Another "budding feminist-type" was Marguerite Porete, who lived as a beguine during the 12th century. Beguines were similar to nuns as they were all highly religious and devout females who lived together in a communal house. Beguines, however, stayed within their communities rather than isolating themselves to a nunnery. Many, although not all, were older women, possibly widows, and devoted much of their time to charitable work in their own towns and villages. They often provided medical care and food services to those less fortunate. Marguerite Porete served her community in many ways, but she is

⁹ Hildegard, ix.

¹⁰ Hildegard, x.

most famously remembered for *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. In her book, Marguerite claims that men will be unable to comprehend her writing. She accuses men of lacking the depth to understand the intensity in which she loves her God but also that she and the women who “own the house” not only have the understanding men lack, but that they should be teaching this subject. Marguerite’s writing sounds like a celebration of independent women:

Men of theology and scholars such as they, will never understand this writing properly. True comprehension of it only may those who have progress in humility; you must let Love and Faith together be your guides to climb where Reason cannot come, they who this house as mistresses do own.¹¹

Marguerite met an unfortunate demise, but not before she lived long enough to see her work performed. *The Mirror of the Simple Souls* was an allegorical piece intended to be read or recited aloud. Marguerite was adamant that her character “Reason” would often struggle through life, while “Love” was always there to help. This frame of mind would seem quite the opposite of what had been preached by the Church. Men were made to be priests; they were the voice of reason, while women were unpredictable and needed saving from themselves. Marguerite turned the tables and told the European world that she was not sorry for being female and she did not need saving, not by any man anyway. She would also vehemently denounce the rampant corruption in the Church, especially in the higher ranks. She claimed that the church belonged to the people, not the Vatican. In a tumultuous time of the Crusades, her preaching would land Marguerite in the hot seat quite literally. Marguerite was tried for heresy and burned at the stake in 1310 CE.

So much of what influential Christian women achieved had to do with location and politics. For example, Joan of Arc began receiving divine visions at the age of thirteen. Her visions were specific missions that led her to ask her king if she could have an army to help France defeat the English in the Hundred

¹¹ Marguerite Porete, Edmund Colledge, Judith Grant, and J. C. Marler, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 1999, 9.

Years' War.¹² Out of complete desperation, he gave her what she asked for and much to everyone's surprise she made a decisive contribution to the French victory. She won during a time that the English had been pummeling the French regularly; She was a hero. Unfortunately, Joan was only helpful to the French until the English caught her in 1430. When Joan was captured, her French king would turn his back on her.¹³ She was accused of heresy and witchcraft, and her king permitted her to be burned not once but **three** times at the stake. Once until she was dead and the next two times to completely decimate her body. This was a message: *You are expendable and we owe you nothing no matter what it was you achieved.*

Joan of Arc is one of the most famous women of all time. She is associated with a strong sense of patriotism and fierce bravery. As far as achievement goes, her name is burned in to history books while her king, Charles VII, is forgotten. It is a fact that historically women have not been afforded the same rights men have enjoyed. According to Christians, this way of thinking has existed since the dawn of creation; but women have made their mark whether the Catholic church cares to practice a meritocracy or not. During medieval times, in a desperate attempt to remain "more powerful," the Church and all its pedagogy resorted to burying as many strong women as they could under threats and accusations of heresy and witchcraft. Yet, these women's stories survive; their ideas cannot be erased. They were innovators and celebrities of their time whether by fame or infamy. The Church was and maybe still is threatened by women's ideas because it would mean their initial interpretation of the bible was wrong.

What if Eve is not the real reason for sin? If she is not, then what is? What else might they have gotten wrong? This could have disastrous consequences for the Church, crumbling the very bedrock on which it was constructed. Over the course of the five hundred years between 1000 and 1500 CE, women changed the course of Catholicism. With or without the Church's permission, their contribution is clear Women might have been told they were weak, and portrayed as such, but the definition of courage is to do something scary in the

¹² W.P. Barrett and Pierre Champion, "Medieval Sourcebook: The Trial of Joan of Arc," *Internet History Sourcebooks*, published 1932, accessed November 24, 2018, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/joanofarc-trial.asp>.

¹³ Barrett and Champion.

face of peril. Women during this time showed true courage in the face of opposition and planted their feet like tree roots in the history of Catholicism and beyond. It is also important to note, that whether the men that surrounded these women

enabled these publications or their demise, it was enabling all the same. Men's ignorance may have been responsible for the destruction of a few of the aforementioned women, but they also have a hand (as is often the case in a patriarchy) in the success as well. Women, during medieval times, needed permission from men (and from the world) to be heard. It would seem that the world was ready to hear them, because women would never look back. They were innocuous at first, like the water that runs through the Grand Canyon. What was once a small trickle running over the sand, is now one of the most incredible and powerful reminders of nature's beauty on earth.