

MYSTICISM AND FEMINISM IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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IF ASKED TO CREATE A MENTAL PICTURE of a pious seventeenth-century woman, you might imagine something not dissimilar from the figure pictured on the right. She is modestly clothed, seated, with her eyes set firmly on the crown of glory, and the trappings of earthly interests strewn contemptuously beneath her feet. She is portrayed with only one possession: a book held in her left hand which we may safely assume is a Bible. This image is taken from the frontispiece of Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling*,¹ a work which has become a byword for the patriarchal moralism of the Augustan period—the age of the 'Societies for the Reformation of Manners' and of purity movements in religion characterized by anxiety about the volatile sexual and spiritual tempers of women. With sections headed 'On Modesty' and 'On Meekness', and repeated assertions of women's intellectual incapacity, this was a textbook for those who wished to live as godly virgins, wives and widows in the obedient state which was considered 'the womens lot'.²

Yet there is more to the picture than a first glance might suggest. The book is certainly not at the centre of the composition. It is held lightly, in the shadows, while the woman's eyes and right hand are turned away towards the light from heaven. More strangely, a small disembodied face glows from within her bosom. Whether intended to represent the image of God in humanity (a favourite theme of Allestree's), or the spiritual 'inner man', or the indwelling Christ, or all of

¹ From the seventh impression (1700). *The Ladies Calling* was first published in 1673.

² Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling* (London, 1673), preface. On Allestree's female readers, see Anne Kugler, 'Constructing Wifely Identity: Prescription and Practice in the Life of Lady Sarah Cowper', *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), 291–323.

these, it is this inward radiance which lies at the heart of the picture. Throughout his work, Allestree exhorted his female readers to 'look inward to see ... an emanation of the eternal Brightness', that 'spiritual Essence, that ray of Divinity' which 'owns no distinction of Sexes'.³ The frontispiece illustrates that something else was going on in Allestree's world, something more complex than the hardening of conservative cultural values. A new emphasis on the inner life and on the 'divine spark' in the human spirit was beginning to change the tone of austere Prot-



estant discourse on human nature and biblical authority. By the end of the seventeenth century, English Protestants in general were rediscovering the mystical, partly because the Calvinist system was proving increasingly unattractive, and partly because, as a reaction to this system, Enlightenment atheism was gaining ground. The mystical turn would inspire a generation of women writers to launch a remarkable attack on the 'tyranny of customs' which had kept them in subjection. Unwittingly, Allestree and other exponents of inward piety would stimulate a far-reaching critique of the social order they so cherished.

During the period after the Restoration and before the Hanoverian succession (1660–1714) a number of women went into print to defend, or 'advocate' for, the female sex. I would like to introduce here a sample from the work of some of the most striking and original female

³ Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, preface.



A woman addressing a Quaker meeting

theological writers of the period: the Philadelphian prophetesses Ann Bathurst (c.1638–c.1704) and Jane Lead (1624–1704), the Quaker Elizabeth Bathurst (d. 1690) and the prolific visionary known only as ‘M. Marsin’ (fl. 1694–1701). These women were mostly unconnected to one another; they represented a range of Protestant belief and practice; and their reading audiences varied dramatically in size. However, they shared a common conviction that the equality of the sexes in marriage, society and religion was not only theologically defensible, but was *instituted by God* at creation. Moreover, these writers were convinced that in defending female dignity they were defending deep and divine truths about human nature. The links that they made between the new discourse on universal grace and on the nobility of the ‘inner man’, and the status of women, were entirely original and creative. But they suggest that the potential for such subjective and critical thinking nevertheless lay buried within the mystical-theological tradition.

The relationship between mystical thought and the outbreak of feminist ideas in seventeenth-century England raises some complex questions: how far were these women writers inspired by the *language* of mysticism, its vocabulary and categories? Was the inward and spiritual

encounter truly central? Perhaps these are questions which need to be approached psychologically rather than spiritually. But it is at least possible tentatively to suggest ways in which the 'inner life' of the mystic gave women writers a space in which to think provocatively about themselves as women. The pursuit of the spiritual life became the focus for all their aspirations for their sex.

Mysticism has often come into conflict with patriarchal structures in religion and in society. Nancy Hawkins' recent article in this journal on the great German feminist and theologian Dorothee Sölle⁴ shows how, for Sölle, the mystics' experience of God is 'something flowing, growing, driving, ... a process', a rushing stream which carries on everything that enters into its joyful movement.⁵ Rather than offering individuals a lonely retirement from the world, it opens up the heart to a new divine love of the world and drives them out of their isolation within a culture defined by 'spiritless materialism'.⁶ Sölle recognised the historic coupling of mysticism and resistance, and found in that tradition the inspiration for her own response to contemporary questions of individualism, poverty, power distribution, and the oppression of women. Her own apophatic way meant letting go of materialistic priorities—as she put it, 'To be egoless, propertyless and nonviolent is to be identified with the nothing that wants to be everything'⁷—but also of the orthodox, authoritarian God, the totem of patriarchal religion, whose chief characteristics were transcendence and power rather than justice and love.⁸

As Sölle's critique suggests, feminist (and simply 'feminine') spiritualities have tended to flower within the mystical tradition, whether they be ascetical or corporeal in tone. It is, of course, impossible totally to disentangle what is mystical from what is sacramental or evangelical. Yet there is something about the epistemology of mysticism, its focus on the 'inner book' and insistence

⁴ Nancy Hawkins, 'Dorothee Sölle: Radical Christian, Mystic in our Midst', *The Way*, 44/3 (July 2005), 85–96.

⁵ Dorothee Sölle, 'The Spirituality of Globalisation and the Spirit of Resistance', in *Colloquium 2000: Faith Communities and Social Movements Facing Globalisation*, edited by Ulrich Duchrow (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2002), 48–56, here 51. Available at <http://warc.ch/pc/c2000/c2000.pdf>.

⁶ Sölle, 'The Spirituality of Globalisation', 49.

⁷ Sölle, 'The Spirituality of Globalisation', 51.

⁸ Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, translated by John Bowden (London: Trinity Press, 1990), 176–182.

on finding oneself in God rather than in external circumstance or status, which has always struck a chord with women pursuing the way of piety. Beverly Lanzetta has recently tried to recover a historical *via feminina* in Christian spirituality, defined by the mystical stages of suffering the wounds of Christ, articulating resistance to authoritarian systems, and experiencing a dignifying union with the divine.⁹ Lanzetta's model of a mystical feminism is not one which can be neatly overlaid on to the spiritual biographies of the seventeenth-century writers, nor are these women obviously ancestors of a modern liberationist feminism. However, there are enough sympathetic echoes to justify a very general comparison with both. I will look first at the ways in which early modern feminism was bound up with a broader re-imagining of God's justice, God's relationship to humanity, and God's very nature itself; and then consider how an emphasis on the 'inner light', or reason as an interior and divine faculty, enabled these women to re-examine their status in tradition and Scripture.

Mysticism and Enlightenment

During the middle years of the seventeenth century, at the same time that the seeds of Enlightenment were starting to shoot, Protestant England saw something of a mystical renaissance. The mystical and the rational were by no means rival tendencies in English culture at this stage, nor did they fall into any sort of division between marginal and respectable religion. The group of philosopher-theologians known as the Cambridge Platonists brought the two together in a sophisticated system which drew upon Greek patristics, medieval mysticism and Neoplatonism, but also on the new Cartesian metaphysics. Anglican writers such as Richard Allestree and Jeremy Taylor developed a sort of practical mysticism, largely inspired by the Eastern Fathers, which was also highly rationalistic in tone. And even the most radical of the spiritual groups which sprang up during the Civil Wars and Republic, the Quakers, had connections to the early Enlightenment via their

⁹ Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).

discourse on toleration, and possibly through no less a figure than Spinoza.¹⁰

These groups and individuals had in common an emphasis on the life of the 'inner man' and an overwhelming hostility to the Calvinistic credal formulae and persecuting zeal (as they saw it) of the Presbyterians. They represented a burgeoning distaste for the doctrines of original sin, of double predestination, and of *sola scriptura*. The former, in particular, were regarded as vindictive and brutalising notions which, as Leibniz commented, were 'little suited to make men good and charitable by the imitation of God'.¹¹ The mystical theology adopted by the Platonists and Quakers gave back human agency in the pursuit of spiritual perfection, and emphasized human dignity rather than depravity. It also insisted (rather unapophatically) that God's nature and actions should be intelligible to the human intellect, God's image. Moreover, after so many disastrous attempts to bring about doctrinal purity by force, the focus on religion as chiefly a matter for the heart and the conscience was clearly attractive. There were a good many conversions to groups like the Quakers from the Presbyterian and other Reformed Churches, particularly after the Restoration.

**Religion as a
matter for the
heart and
conscience**

Visionary Women

During the late 1670s, two women living in London (both, coincidentally, named Bathurst) experienced a revelation of 'Divine Love' which would utterly transform their thinking on predestination and sin. Ann Bathurst, the older of the two, described how,

... on June 23rd 1678, a year of Jubilee was proclaimed, and prophesied to me by an Angel or Spirit in a Dream or vision ...

¹⁰ See, for example, *Spinoza's Earliest Publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell's A Loving Salutation*, edited by Richard H. Popkin and Michael A. Signer (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987); also Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza and Samuel Fisher', *Philosophia*, 15 (2006), 219–236, and Nicholas McDowell, 'The Ghost in the Marble: Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying* (1647) and its Readers', in *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, edited by Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene (London: Ashgate, 2006).

¹¹ Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée* (Amsterdam, 1734), pt I, xxii, cited in D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, (London: Routledge, 1964), 55.

when another Spirit [was] given me that was accompanied with new understanding.¹²

Bathurst's account of the prophetic visions which followed is extraordinarily carnal and at times erotic, resonant of the meditations of Julian or Mechthild. She describes how she and Christ nuptially possessed one another, in the flesh and in the heart: 'Christ was One with me, and I one in Him, the blessed Union, which I had long desired'.¹³ Then she is visited by her dead children, who came to her 'like two Bright Sparks, one after another, and entered into this great Light and became one with it'.¹⁴ The memory provokes a poignant physical reaction, which she interprets as a spiritual sign:

O how my Breasts do warm me with the hot milk: where are thy Children Good Lord? and what is this for? I am even in tears, lest the Child should want it, whilst I am as over full with it. O what! Even what is this for?¹⁵

Bathurst's ecstasy appears to have unleashed a massive emotional catharsis, and the maternal grief and fear surrounding the loss of two infants wells up to the surface in her union with love itself. Crucially, the visions led Bathurst to a 'new understanding' of God's nature. Part of the release which she experienced in being reunited with Christ (and, in Christ, with her children) had to do with her own inner religious crisis. In the course of her dramatic epiphany she became 'undeceived' of 'the doctrine of Election' and persuaded of God's gift of universal grace.¹⁶ Her anxiety about her own salvation had tormented her since childhood, causing her 'such great horror and anguish, as even to despair of mercy'.¹⁷ She had finally concluded that she was indeed condemned to hell, until her adult visions convinced her of 'the overflowing of His nature of Mercy and Love', or God's 'Merciful-Nature-Love' which took precedence over all other attributes.¹⁸ Perhaps

¹² 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions by Mrs Ann Bathurst, from 17 March 1679 to 29 June 1693', Bodl. MS Rawl. D. 1262, 8.

¹³ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 12.

¹⁴ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 13.

¹⁵ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 351.

¹⁶ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 3.

¹⁷ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 2-3.

¹⁸ 'Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions', 1, 326.

this revelation had also to do with her concerns for the eternal welfare of her lost children.

Interestingly, the millenarian 'Philadelphian Society', to which Ann Bathurst later belonged, would produce a radical defence of Origen's universalism at the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The Philadelphians were also notable for fostering female spiritual leaders. Jane Lead in particular, a disciple of the theosophist John Pordage, held a dominant position within the group. Like Bathurst, her visions of God led her to see him as a supremely merciful being, whose eternal love always overwhelmed his temporal judgment. She was criticized for 'her doctrine concerning *the finiteness of hell torments*' and her revelations about universal salvation.²⁰ In *A Revelation of the Everlasting Gospel-message*, Lead argued that the notion of eternal torment 'is very Injurious to the *Grace of GOD*: for tho' he may punish for the Sin of *Unbelief* ... yet it is reckoned but as *for a Moment*'.²¹ God's love and grace, however, are eternal and universal, and admit of a completely 'Universal Restitution' of all Adam's descendants.²² Lead reported an encounter with Adam and Eve in which they rejoiced that 'the whole race of our descendants [will] be restored' through Christ.

Lead is also famous for having expounded Jacob Boehme's mystical doctrine of a female aspect of the divine nature, 'Sophia' or 'Virgin-Wisdom'. It is not always clear how Sophia or Wisdom, whom Lead described as 'the *eternal*



The Flaming Eye of God, from Jane Lead's
Fountain of Gardens

¹⁹ See Richard Roach's defence of Origen in the preface to Jeremiah White, *The Restoration of All Things: Or, a Vindication of the Goodness and Grace of God* (London, 1712).

²⁰ Henry Dodwell, in a letter to Francis Lee of 1698, cited in Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, 226.

²¹ Jane Lead, *A Revelation of the Eternal Gospel-Message* (London, 1697), pt II, § X.

²² Lead, *A Revelation*, pt IV, § XXXII.

Goddess, in a high and sober sense', is distinct from the spiritual Christ, and certainly the feminine in Christ is brought to prominence in Lead's mysticism.²³ It would take a more detailed analysis to examine the links between universal salvation and the feminine in her thought, but certainly her theological anthropology had a gendered aspect. In the bosom of Wisdom (Christ?), she wrote, we have entered a 'Mystical Paradise, in which *Wisdom* hath recreated and formed another Adam, both Male and Female'.²⁴ Sophia also became the focus of Philadelphian expectations that women would begin to inhabit the spiritual freedom that was theirs in Christ. Richard Roach, a devotee of various charismatic women including Lead, Madame Guyon, Antonia Bourignon and Rosamunde von Asseburg, expressed his hope that Sophia would,

... in an extraordinary manner Excite and Animate that Sex whereby she is Represented; and Endow them with her peculiar Graces and Gifts, in such Degrees that they shall often Out-run and Exceed the males themselves.²⁵

At almost the same time, to the east in Spitalfields, young Elizabeth Bathurst was undergoing her own moment of illumination. A 'very zealous' Presbyterian, Elizabeth had recently seen her parents convert to Quakerism, but resisted joining them. Then, at an unknown date before 1679, she and her siblings were unexpectedly struck in their home by a dramatic 'Visitation in the living Power of the Lord ... as the Way of Life was opened to them'.²⁶ Convinced by this encounter with the presence of God, Elizabeth returned to her former congregation to,

... make Proclamation of His universal Love so that none should need to fear their Eternal Predestination or Reprobation to Everlasting Misery, as though God had fore-ordained some for everlasting Damnation; for God would have all men come to the knowledge of the Truth and be saved.²⁷

²³ Jane Lead, *The Revelation of Revelations* (London, 1683), 42.

²⁴ Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens*, II (London, 1697), 79.

²⁵ Richard Roach, *The Great Crisis* (London, 1727), 96.

²⁶ 'Charles Marshall's Testimony', in Elizabeth Bathurst, *Truth Vindicated, by the Faithful Testimony and Writings of the Innocent Servant and Hand-maiden of the Lord, Elizabeth Bathurst, deceased* (London, 1695), sigs. A5v–A8r, here sig. A6r (some leaves mis-signed).

²⁷ Elizabeth Bathurst, *An Expostulatory Appeal to the Professors of Christianity, Joyned in Community with Samuel Ansley* (London, 1680), 3.

Like Ann Bathurst, Elizabeth had known the oppressive burden of spiritual doubt. To what she hoped would be the Presbyterian readers of her major statement of Quaker theology, *Truths Vindication*, she described how:

... now having delivered me from that cruel Bondage of Corruption which once I groaned under, this makes me restless in my Spirit, that others may believe in that inward Power that's able to rescue from the Fury of their Soul's Oppressor²⁸

Again, Elizabeth's direct encounter with Christ offers release from the fear of an oppressive and arbitrary God. She insists that it is 'the feeling sense of the inward Operation of this Divine Principle, that alone can satisfactorily inform you'.²⁹

Remarkably, not only did Elizabeth discard double predestination, but she also rejected the notion that,

... there is no Salvation to be had without the explified [explicit] Knowledge of Christs coming in the Flesh, and of the Scriptures; both which we know whole Kingdoms and Empires in the World are unavoidably ignorant of.³⁰

This was a logical working out of her conviction that true revelation is 'a certain experimental Knowledge', rather than the signs and shadows contained in 'the outward letter of the Scripture'.³¹ Her radical universalism, based on a vision of God's 'universal love and free grace', also had implications for the place of women in her system. The Quakers had always been unusually accommodating of women's preaching and teaching, and Elizabeth was not a pioneer in this respect. However, she was among the first to make a clear link between their soteriology and their commitment to female participation. She regarded the new status granted to women as an essential counterpart of lessons learned about universal divine grace and justice.

**God's universal
love and free
grace**

Elizabeth believed that she was called by God to be a preacher and theologian—'the Gift communicated to me, from the Dispensation of the

²⁸ Bathurst, *Truths Vindication* (London, 1679), 2.

²⁹ Bathurst, *Truths Vindication*, 84.

³⁰ Bathurst, *Truths Vindication*, 6.

³¹ Bathurst, *Truths Vindication*, 17, 65.

Most-high'—and defended that gift in other women.³² In her *Sayings of Women*, she insisted that 'Women receive an Office in the Truth as well as Men', because the office of preaching was freely and inwardly received.³³ The universality of that inner calling is the key link to her soteriology: as she puts it, 'every one hath a Divine Teacher in them'.³⁴ As she lists the biblical heroines who established a precedent for women speaking (Deborah, Hannah, the Samaritan woman, the witnesses to the Resurrection, and so on), it is clear that her purpose is to demonstrate that they all had true 'Spiritual Understanding from the Lord' rather than to show that the Bible gives permission for such a practice.³⁵ Her point is to illustrate that women had been inspired and appointed to preach throughout salvation history, and that they are vindicated by their own words.

Elizabeth believed that the inner light was actually implanted in every human conscience through Christ's historic sacrifice: Christ died 'not only as a Propitiatory Sacrifice ... but that by his once offering up of himself, he might bring in everlasting Righteousness' through granting 'a measure of his own Divine Light and Spirit unto all the Children of men'. This is why the Scriptures were not essential, because 'the Lord hath not confined himself to them, but hath left himself a Witness in every Conscience'.³⁶ Again, she was insistent about the universality of grace, and also hinted at an opposition between the Fall and the Cross which had far-reaching implications for the status of female nature. Elizabeth set up an antithesis between the state of woman after the Fall and that of redeemed womankind. As she explained,

Although the *Woman* was first in Transgression, which brought in Death; yet was she made ... to bring in him *who is the Resurrection and the Life* So that it may be said, As by *Woman* came in the Transgression and Degeneration; So by *Woman* also came in the

³² Bathurst, *Truths Vindication*, 81. See also 'A Journall of y^e meetings G:ff hath been at ffor y^e year 1685' in *The Short Journal and Itinerary Journals of George Fox*, edited by Norman Penney (London: Cambridge UP, 1925), 105–106: 'The next day being ye 19th of y^e 2^d mo: & y^e 1st day of y^e week he went from thence to y^e meeting at y^e said towne [Waltham Abbey, near the Bathurst country home at Epping Forest] & T:R[obison] alsoe where was alsoe Ben: ffreeman & Eliz. Bathurst who all three having Declared he stood up & declared & afterwards.' And see Bathurst, 'The Sayings of Women', in *Truth Vindicated*, 202–225.

³³ Bathurst, 'Sayings of Women', 225.

³⁴ Bathurst, *Truths Vindication*, 51.

³⁵ Bathurst, 'Sayings of Women', 213.

³⁶ *Truths Vindication*, 65–66.



The Annunciation, by Fra Angelico

Reconciliation and Restoration, to wit, Christ, ... He it is, who is the Healer of our Breaches, and restorer of our Paths: And in him Male and Female are made all one, as saith the Apostle, Gal. 3.28.³⁷

The idea that Mary was instrumental in the restitution of humanity, thus acting as a counter-figure of Eve, appeared frequently in the writings of women in the 1680s and 1690s. It is an ancient argument which, at first sight, seems uncritically to reinforce the view that women were chiefly responsible for sin. However, for these seventeenth-century exponents, it is simply a way of neutralising the tradition that Eve was 'first in Transgression'.

³⁷ Bathurst, 'Sayings of Women', postscript.

Universal Grace

Another female theologian who made creative use of the Second Eve parallel was M. Marsin. Marsin's first name remains unknown and little information survives about her life. In this passage, written around fifteen years after Bathurst's treatise, Marsin apparently supports the idea that Eve's sin placed women in general under the curse of subjection:

... because a Woman was the first in the Transgression, therefore all the time of this World, God hath more afflicted them than Man. But the Lord Christ, to restore fallen Mankind, came of a Woman; and to show they were alike beloved of the Lord, therefore his first coming was revealed to the Women, as well as to the Men. And also when he arose from the Dead, he then first appeared to the Women. But, because Woman was first in the Transgression, therefore in the time of this World, Man was given the Ruling Power, and it is he that hath been the first setter up of the Idolatrous Worship in the World.³⁸

However uncomfortable Marsin's acceptance of the Fall narrative may be for modern readers, it should not blind us to her obvious ambivalence towards the tradition. Seen as a whole, her work shows once again how the defence of God's attributes was closely linked to the defence of women. But she is known to have written a series of apocalyptic tracts in the 1690s, in which she combined an almost messianic persona with a curiously turgid exercise in biblical exegesis. She boldly described herself as being one of two 'remarkable females of womankind'—the other being the Virgin Mary—who stood at key moments in history as instruments of salvation. Marsin understood her vocation as analogous to that of Mary as mother of Christ: she was entrusted with the task of presenting to the world a definitive exposition of Scripture, a commission equivalent to that of bearing the incarnate Word.

Describing Marsin as a 'mystic' in any conventional sense is problematic, and yet there are features of her thought and self-presentation which can only be described as mystical: 'self-resignation' as a key to revelation, for example (the *gelassenheit* of the Rhineland mystics);

³⁸ Marsin, *The Womans Advocate* (London, 1697), 1–2.

or her gnostic conception of a sealed and hidden meaning in Scripture; or her claim that her own peculiar 'discovery of these great and hidden Mysteries was from the Lord, and attained ... by prayer and diligence'.³⁹ Her revelations came to her over a long period marked 'by fervent desire, and self-resignation of my own Understanding, and by Prayers, and Tears, and many a waking Night'.⁴⁰ Her visionary enterprise entailed both study and 'Meditation', during which God 'inlightned my understanding in his word'.⁴¹ There was nothing particularly inspiring about Marsin's work of exegesis, which involved interpreting rather shadowy eschatological imagery. However, her account of her role as a woman in bringing to account the whole of Christian society is startling, as is her thoroughgoing defence of God's nature as just and merciful.

In three treatises, *The Womans Advocate* (1697), *Two Remarkable Females of Womankind* (1701) and *Good News for the Good Women* (1700), Marsin argued, on rather dubious scriptural grounds, that women had been promised a special dispensation to restore creation at the end of time. She believed that women were called to overturn the



Eve and Mary, from the Missal of Archbishop Bernhard von Rohr, c.1481

³⁹ M. Marsin, 'To the Reader', in *The Near Approach [sic] of Christ's Kingdom* (London, 1696).

⁴⁰ M. Marsin, *The Figurative Speeches* (London, 1697), 1.

⁴¹ M. Marsin, *The Womans Advocate*, 16; *All the Chief Points Contained in the Christian Religion* (London, 1697), 16.

misguided Church and its male clergy, who had corrupted their entire sex by deviating from scriptural truth. As she colourfully put it, ‘it is the He-Goats that have eaten the good Pastures, and trodden down the residue, and fouled the deep Waters’. She recounted with anger how ‘the Beast [the Papacy] ... would not permit any woman so much as to Read the Word: For which, when man acts contrary to God, then God acts contrary to man’. These inhibitions placed on women were acts of rebellion against God and, for that reason, Marsin as a woman had been given exclusive insight into ‘the Misterious part of the Scriptures’. She explained that,

... our Teachers need not wonder that the knowledge of the lost Truths should come out by a Woman, and that Women should have Light herein. For they have had no hand in overturning the Bible; for that has been done by the Wise and Learned of this World.⁴²

Although Marsin was not above conventional appeals to modesty—she hoped that ‘thro my weakness His Power might be exalted’⁴³—she saw her marginal status as a woman as an actual advantage, as the gospel ministry was especially given to the poor and the disempowered.

The two major principles underpinning Marsin’s system were her conviction that there was a hidden meaning in Scripture which needed to be brought to light, and that this hidden meaning was Christ’s universal grace. Thus she elegantly brings together two important ideas in the feminism of the period.

First, like her contemporary Mary Astell, she took an iconoclastic approach to the Pauline injunctions about women’s speaking. She pointed out that Paul had appointed women such as Phoebe, described in Romans 16 as a ‘servant’ or ‘deacon’ in the Church, and concluded,

As to what the Apostle speaks in *contradiction* hereunto, he declares he speaks it from himself, in that he *saieth*, He *suffers not a Woman to teach*, 1 Tim.2.12. But his, nor no Man’s Words are of force, as to what they speak in contradiction to the Word of God.⁴⁴

⁴² M. Marsin, *Two Remarkable Females of Womankind* (London, 1701), 21.

⁴³ Marsin, *The Womans Advocate*, 3–4.

⁴⁴ Marsin, *Two Remarkable Females*, 16.



Marsin explained her rejection of certain Pauline texts by emphasizing, as some modern Christian feminists do, the context of his procriptions, 'considering how they were spoken', and the 'plain Contradictions' in others of his letters.

Marsin also argued that Christ and the gospel had radically undone the consequences of the Fall, so that women and the poor were embraced within a universal covenant. Like Elizabeth Bathurst, she placed a special emphasis on the role of the Virgin Mary in reversing Eve's legacy, pointing out that 'the Lord Christ, to restore fallen Mankind, came of a Woman'.⁴⁵ Mary's conception of Christ 'without Man' signified a reinstatement of womankind which would be paralleled and brought to completion in her own person. She rejoiced that,

⁴⁵ Marsin, *The Womans Advocate*, 1-2.

... the Lord of Life coming by a Woman, he who is the Reconciler between God and his Creature, by him the Women will be deliver'd from that Bondage, which some has found intollerable.

Marsin links the atonement very explicitly with the deliverance of women from their subject state. She also envisions a time when 'the Husband will not be above the Wife, nor the Wife above the Husband; but as they were in the first Creation, before Sin entred into the World'.⁴⁶

But the deliverance of women from their subjection was only one aspect of Marsin's wider vision of Christ's saving work, which came close to the universal salvation of the Quakers and Philadelphians. In fact, the only people she consigned to hell were the Pope and the Prophet Muhammad; otherwise, the doors were wide open. Marsin's universalism and her defence of women were both tied into her rather maverick approach to the authority of Scripture. In 1696 she complained that,

... we have so mistakenly believed *St Paul*, as to think, that by afore-sight in God of *Adam's* miscarriage, he did predestinate a few to Salvation, and left all the rest under a necessity of damnation, decreeing them Reprobates before they were created, or the world in which they offended.⁴⁷

She even considered it a 'mistake' to 'believe *St Paul*' on this matter! Marsin's refutation of Paul went beyond questioning his authorship, or the claim that his words had been corrupted in subsequent transcriptions as other early Enlightenment interpreters such as Richard Simon might have suggested.⁴⁸

Instead, Marsin attacked Pauline predestination (presumably as it is set out in Romans 8:28–30) as irreconcilable with the compassionate God of the Gospels, condemning the doctrine as 'blasphemous, and contrary to Scripture' (the Gospels), and describing the God of the

⁴⁶ M. Marsin, *Good News to the Good Women* (London, 1700), 3–4.

⁴⁷ Marsin, *Good News to the Good Women*, 79.

⁴⁸ See Justin Champion, 'Pere Richard Simon and English Biblical Criticism, 1680–1700', in *Everything Connects*, edited by James E. Force and David Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 37–61; see also Scott Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet: Biblical Criticism and the Crisis of Late Seventeenth-century England', in *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, edited by James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1994), 149–178.

predestinationists as 'more black than a Prince of Darkness'.⁴⁹ She insisted that, if God's foreknowledge was defended and took priority over all his other attributes, then 'God cannot be the God of Truth, nor the God of Justice, nor the God of Mercy, nor the Holy God'.⁵⁰ Elsewhere she claimed that 'I do not deny a fore-knowledge in God, that Man might miscarry'; what she was absolutely opposed to was the suggestion 'that God made a Decree for Mans Damnation, before ever man was Created, or the World, in which they Transgressed'.⁵¹ For Marsin, God's goodness and mercy outweighed any other consideration, and the gospel outweighed any other part of Scripture. As she confessed,

... it had been a far less error to have thought St *Paul* might have erred, than to have made the Oath of God, and the general offer of mercy by Christ, void, by the misapprehending the words of St. *Paul*, so as to think that none but the Elect could be saved.⁵²

It is highly significant that precocious feminism was so often linked to the turn away from predestination in seventeenth-century England. As with Elizabeth Bathurst's conversion, Marsin's path to revelation was opened up by rejecting the doctrine of reprobation. Their conviction that Christ's work was principally about removing the barriers between God and the human, and within human society itself, had far-reaching implications for their own sense of calling to preach the gospel. If the heathen could be encompassed by grace, how much more were barriers to the ministry of godly women removed. The election of men for dominant religious roles seemed to them as arbitrary as the ordination of a minority of humanity for salvation. It is also significant that feminist ideas coincided with a growing insistence that Scripture be interpreted in the light of a more subjective, rational and intuitive reading. The idea that the Bible could only point to the divine life, that real insight into God's nature and wisdom happened at the level of 'a certain experimental knowledge', enabled women such as Marsin radically to reconfigure readings of passages which seemed to contradict the whole spirit of the gospel itself.

⁴⁹ M. Marsin, *A Full and Clear Account the Scripture Gives of the Deity* (London, 1700), 72–73.

⁵⁰ Marsin, *A Full and Clear Account*, 73–74.

⁵¹ Marsin, *A Full and Clear Account*, 321.

⁵² Marsin, *The Near Approach of Christ's Kingdom*, 34.

Spirituality and Action

There has always been an emphasis in *The Way* on the encounter between spirituality and action, between theology as reflection and in application. A reading of the seventeenth-century 'feminists' brings us right to the heart of that encounter. We find them struggling, within the limits of early modern theological discourse, to relieve the tension between the open heaven of their spiritual and intellectual experience and the narrowness of their horizons as early modern women. Out of this struggle emerged a remarkable critique of women's subordination. What is challenging about these women, however, is not merely that they were politically confrontational or that they transgressed cultural boundaries. They surprise us because they did not merely put forward a secular argument dressed up in religious language: the case for female equality was made on the basis of their experience of God. This illustrates an important point about the social role of mystical spirituality and theology: it has frequently opened up a highly critical and fertile dialogue with the structures and traditions of the Church. Sociologists, influenced by Ernst Troeltsch, have tended to see mystical religion as a withdrawal from the world into an interior life. But this caricature has difficulty holding up under scrutiny.⁵³ Over recent decades, a number of historical studies have examined the link between mysticism and social or theological radicalism. In particular, mystics have often been implicated in religious movements for social reform: Stephen Ozment's classic book *Mysticism and Dissent* (1973) surveys the central function of mystical theology in the thought of six 'theoreticians of dissent' in the sixteenth century.⁵⁴ Interestingly, a study of socio-religious thought in Qajar Iran, also entitled *Mysticism and Dissent*, makes similar connections between social protest and religious quietism.⁵⁵ Discussions of apocalyptic writing often trace the evolution of mystical practice towards eschatological expectation, then dramatic

⁵³ See William R. Garrett, 'Maligned Mysticism: The Maledicted Career of Troeltsch's Third Type', *Sociological Analysis*, 36 (1975), 205–223; and Karl-Fritz Daiber, 'Mysticism: Troeltsch's Third Type of Religious Collectivities', *Social Compass*, 49 (2002), 329–341.

⁵⁴ Steven Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973), 1.

⁵⁵ Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1982).



Christ presents Eve to Adam, detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*,
by Hieronymus Bosch

or subversive attempts to bring about heaven on earth.⁵⁶ The role of apocalyptic theology in stimulating radical ideas suggests that even Weber's nuanced distinction between two types of mystic or ascetic, the *innerweltliche* (innerworldly) and *ausserweltliche* (outerworldly), is no more persuasive than Troeltsch's model. It has also been noted in the pages of this journal that mystical spirituality and social critique go hand in hand, and form part of a joined-up cycle of reflection and action.⁵⁷ Reading the work of the seventeenth-century feminists has

⁵⁶ See, for example, Norman Cohn's famous *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1983); Alex Nava, 'Teresa Urrea: Mexican Mystic, Healer, and Apocalyptic Revolutionary', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73 (2005), 497–519.

⁵⁷ See, for example, J. Matthew Ashley, 'The Mysticism of Everyday Life', *The Way Supplement*, 102 (2001), 61–70; Edward Howells, 'Mysticism and the Mystical: The Current Debate', *The Way Supplement*, 102 (2001), 15–27; Patricia Carroll, 'Moving Mysticism to the Centre: Karl Rahner (1904–1984)', in *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 41–52.

convinced me of the provocative power of mystical thought, both as the theological tradition inherited from patristic and medieval sources and as the discipline of meditation. This conviction continually finds reinforcement in historical scholarship. The seventeenth-century feminists illustrate one of the ways in which that interplay might work. At times the rhetoric of these writers was indeed of ascetical withdrawal, and their focus was on the life beyond; but ultimately they were driven out of withdrawal from the world and into a public articulation of their radical protest.

Mystical *theology* enabled this critique of the argument for women's natural inferiority in three ways. First, it provided a narrative in which women and men were partners on the journey to spiritual perfection. Their common status as creatures on whom the *imago Dei* was stamped set them on an equal footing on this path, and their total restoration in Christ eliminated the effects of the Fall (including women's subjection). Second, the seventeenth-century mystical theologians also placed an emphasis on God's justice and indiscriminate grace, and for their feminist interpreters this implied a universal covenant in which women were invited to minister and contribute alongside men. Finally, a mystical hermeneutic provided women with a way of reading Scripture which gave priority to spiritual rather than literal meanings, thus getting around the problem of Pauline prohibitions on women in religious authority.

This critique can be seen as arising, not only from an intellectual paradigm change, but also from a much more intimate and personal encounter with the Creator God, with the God of justice and grace, with the God of Scripture. Meeting with this God is always transforming at some level: inwardly it renews our images of ourselves, and it also causes us also to perceive the exterior world through changed lenses. It drove Lead, Bathurst, Marsin and their contemporaries to uncover new insights into their status in relationship to God, and to burst the bounds of notions about God Himself which they had found oppressive and incongruous. The extravagance of that grace spilled over the sides of their experience in the world. In their effort to cover the distance between the knowledge about themselves that was taught, and that which was received experientially (in seventeenth-century terms, 'experimentally'), this group of female writers came to radically subversive conclusions about the implications

of the gospel for women. The links that they made between sexual equality, human dignity and the divine nature, and their personal pursuit of a Christian vocation, lead us to examine the limits we ourselves set upon both human potential and the justice of God. They confront us with the challenge to expand our vision of what is possible, what is required and what is fulfilled in Christ.

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