

“Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography”

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Almost every woman who produced religious writings in the Christian Middle Ages claimed to receive the authority for her teaching, and often the content of that teaching itself, directly from God. Submission of one's own will to that of the divine was the precondition for women's agency within the religious sphere, either in the form of textual production or institutional development.

Although some medieval Christian men rested their religious authority on prophetic, visionary, or mystical claims, these were the primary modes of religious authorization available to women. (514)

The complete loss of will or of the self in the divine, which legitimates almost all of the women's and some of the men's textual production and religious authority, is often explicitly gendered. Not only is the soul usually (although not always) read as feminine in relationship to a male divinity, but women's putative passivity and malleability render them particularly apt sites of divine agency on earth. Medieval women make use of the very gender subordination that constrains them as the condition for and source of agency, an agency ultimately ascribed not to religious women themselves, but to God.

Mechthild accentuates her humility, even abjection, as female in order to become the site of divine agency on earth. Worried by the disparity between her lack of learning and status and the task of teaching and prophecy assigned her by God, Mechthild laments that God did not choose someone better suited to make his word known to humanity. (515)

Yet if the description itself contains an explanation, then the scholar of religion is perforce situated in opposition to her subject matter, for her explanation of religious experience will ultimately be at odds not only with the religious person's explicit explanation of his experience but also with the explanation of that experience embedded within the description.

Unlike other kinds of experience, moreover, religious experience seems to be by definition inadequately explained. Hence the religious person's explanation of his or her experience ... is not even considered as one possible explanation of the experience by the social scientific researcher.

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My reading of Mechthild ... implicitly argues that even if Mechthild did not know it, what she was really doing in ascribing her writing to God was engaging in a project of self-authorization. Although we might legitimately understand authorization as one of the effects of women's experience of the divine, to render it a cause of these experiences undermines medieval women's own self-understanding and practice. (519)

Western historicist narratives cast this alterity [alterity in the medieval conception of divine influence] as 'medieval,' hence attempting to render it other, past, and no longer intrusive on the contemporary world. Secular history, then, routinely translated supernatural agents into terms intelligible to it—hence my reading of women's claims to divine agency in terms of women's own agency, legitimization, and authorization.

For those whose world is imbued with supernatural agents, time itself operates and is experienced differently than it is for secular, post-Enlightenment Europeans and Americans. (522)