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WHY PARADOX? THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MY LIFE AS A SCHOLAR

BY

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Distinguished historian Caroline Walker Bynum discusses influences on her work in medieval European history as teacher and scholar and draws conclusions about methods of writing history.

Keywords: historical method; women's history; history of the body; materiality; identity; medieval Europe

When I entered the Harvard Graduate School in fall 1962 to study history, the department secretary asked me immediately what field I really intended to pursue. "You put on your application medieval or early-modern history," she said. "You must decide so we can assign you an adviser." Profoundly unsure, I thought for a few minutes and then chose the Middle Ages. I have not been sorry for the choice. But that choice is not the point of what I recount here. The point is rather that my confusion about where to locate my interests either chronologically or disciplinarily was nothing new. I had tried four different undergraduate majors before settling on history and had done so more because it gave a great deal of latitude than because I thought it—or any other major—was what I really wanted. Yet, had I been asked in 1962 what sort of history I wanted to write rather than what period I wanted to study, I could have replied without hesitation.¹

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¹For an exploration of the forces from my childhood, especially the role of both religion and region, that shaped my need to situate events in their historical context, see

Perhaps I could have articulated only awkwardly the complexity of what I thought doing history was, and I am certain that I looked pretty much unsuccessfully for a model of this approach during my graduate student days. But I was never unsure of what sort of questions I wanted to explore. It was not just that I wanted to study religion in its historical context, although that might have served as a short answer had the department secretary asked me what sort of topics I wished to pursue. It was rather that I had a deep conviction that cultures have basic assumptions about issues I could think of only as ontological and cosmological; that these assumptions are in part conditioned by the structures of the society; and that studying religious practice as well as religious theorizing was a way of ferreting out these assumptions, which (even with my 1960s optimism and naïveté) I never assumed to be internally consistent. So I began graduate study with a profound uncertainty about how I fitted into the structure of the Harvard curriculum and indeed, given a rather ragged undergraduate preparation at the University of Michigan, an inadequate grounding to do any very sophisticated research. Yet I already possessed a tough sense of what I thought was really worth doing. In other words, a contradiction between disciplinary insecurity and self-confidence in my own curiosity.

It seems to me that this initial contradiction mirrored what came to be a fully acknowledged contradiction in my vision of history itself: the contradiction between an effort to find the basic structures of thought, the deep assumptions characteristic of the particular period of a culture, and yet a commitment to a variety of perspectives—that is, to the recognition that within any period there are radically different voices that cannot be reconciled or reduced to each other. And as I never, I think, managed to reconcile the oppositions of disciplinary and chronological diffuseness, on the one hand, and what one might call clarity of methodological commitment, on the other, so I did not reconcile the contradictory desiderata that underlay my scholarly approach. I did, however, come to reject profoundly the idea that the reconciliation of opposites, synthesis following upon dialectical oppo-

"Curriculum Vitae: An Authorial Aside," *Common Knowledge*, 9, no. 1 (2003), 1–12; published in a slightly different version as "My Life and Works," in *Women Medievalists in the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison, WI, 2005), pp. 995–1006. The present essay is a complement to the earlier one. Remarks about my efforts to teach graduate students, which are also autobiographical, can be found in "Teaching Scholarship," *Perspectives on History*, December 2009, 14–16.

sition, mono-causal answers crafted after considering alternatives, was possible or desirable. This rejection came to be rooted not only in personal stance and in the historical method to which I was instinctively drawn but also in a sense of what life is like. What is the opposite of opposites, I have often asked myself during my growth as a scholar. And the opposite to opposition is not answer but paradox—that simultaneous (not serial) affirmation of the totally irreconcilable, incompatible, opposed. When Eamon Duffy reviewed my most recent book in the *New York Review of Books* last summer, he commented quite rightly that paradox had become a familiar theme of my work—almost a mantra.² It has. But that is so because I feel as if I can never get away from students, colleagues, and the general public asking: But what's the real reason? What does it all come down to? How could medieval people have held those funny, incompatible beliefs and done such silly, incompatible things? To which the only answer is: So do we. Because life is like that.

As I emphasized in my presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1997, quoting a wall slogan from the Paris student revolution of 1968 that had long been tacked on the bulletin board in my office: “Toute vue des choses qui n'est pas étrange est fausse.” (Every view of things that is not strange [i.e., bizarre or foreign] is false.)³ Only when we really see the oddness of the past—and of our own present as well—do we begin to ferret out the anxieties, structures, and fundamentally incompatible needs that shape lives. And, as the slogan says, it is not “toute chose” that is “étrange” but “toute vue des choses.” It is not so much that the bits and pieces of the past we encounter are bizarre (although they are) as that the view we must take of them (for taking a view is not optional) must preserve their foreignness. We must stub our toes over bits of the past that strew our path where we least expect them and accept that these bits will be as incompatible yet simultaneous as life and death. Writing history is like performing ritual. As the Dutch anthropologist J. C. Heesterman says about sacrifice: “Sacrifice deals with the riddle of life

²Eamon Duffy, “Sacred Bones and Blood,” *New York Review of Books*, August 18, 2011, 66.

³Caroline Walker Bynum, “Wonder,” *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), 1–26; rpt. in Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), pp. 37–75. For the slogan, see Stephen Spender, *The Year of the Young Rebels* (New York, 1969), p. 42. For other methodological remarks, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “In Praise of Fragments: History in the Comic Mode,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), pp. 11–26.

and death, which are ultimately linked and at the same time each other's absolute denial. The riddle cannot be resolved, it can only be reenacted."⁴ Writing about the culture of the past is a little like such reenactment: striving to contain in a single sentence or paragraph the simultaneous yet contradictory glory and horror of the world, without muting the incompatibility and utter strangeness of either.

With this as introduction, then, I tell the story of my journey toward becoming a historian, emphasizing contradictions as well as continuities. But my final point will be not contradiction but paradox—the opposite of opposites.

I did not find my voice in graduate school, and my dissertation was only marginally successful. History was mostly institutional history at Harvard in those days, at least when it was not flirting with the new fields of cliometrics and quantification. All of us were excited by those odd index cards with holes along the sides that were to be cut out so one could put a knitting needle through them and shake out one's data according to various themes one coded in—an early paper form of the search engine. We graduate students tried to count many uncountable things. But by and large, we were taught conventional philology by professors who were studying institutional developments. My mentors, Giles Constable and Charles Taylor, were doing research on monastic and secular taxes respectively. They taught me a care for the genre of documents and their immediate context, and a need to consider the historiography of every topic; for this I have always been grateful. If they had been asked (as professors were not in those days), "what is your methodology?," they might well have answered what David Stone, a Member at the Institute for Advanced Study, answered a few years ago to the same question: "My method is knowing what you're talking about." As I remember it, all my professors tended to begin their lectures, and their published articles, with a survey of the relevant literature in many languages going back well into the late-nineteenth century. And I have continued to impose such a sense of required expertise on my own students, who often think anything published before 1990 is out of date. Hence I am inclined to say, to the dismay of students: yes, this topic on the tactility of altar furnishings, for example, is a wonderful one, but you really need to read Joseph Braun on "der Altar" (1924), or Eduard Dumoutet on "le désir de

⁴J. C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual* (Chicago, 1993), p. 2.

voir l'hostie" (1926), or Reiner Hausscherr on "der tote Christus" (1963) before you take another step.⁵ My teachers had a sturdy integrity that cut no corners in research; there was never a sense that one should publish for careerist reasons, or that one should publish in haste at all. Extreme care to take the past in its own terms was the norm, perhaps buttressed by a confidence that came from security in a Harvard setting that knew what "we" assumed and therefore should avoid projecting back. Fortunately, several of the good habits of our mentors stuck with my scholarly generation—habits of caution, historiographical attentiveness, and scrupulous fairness to scholars who came before. It was from my teachers at Harvard that I learned that the footnote is neither a place to parade one's learning nor an exercise in one-upsmanship, but an opportunity to say "thank you" for what one has learned from the literature of the past, both primary and secondary.

Nonetheless, for all the support I found in my mentors' nuanced determination to put the past in its own context, buttressed by their keen historiographical habit, I did not find in graduate school the way of doing history that I was looking for. I had caught a glimpse of it as a sophomore in a history-of-science course I had taken with John Murdoch while at Radcliffe (before I transferred in my junior year to the University of Michigan); I caught another glimpse during my second year of graduate school when I studied briefly with Hannah Gray, who visited for a semester to replace Myron Gilmore who had taken a leave of absence to direct I Tatti. But the only place I encountered it fully was when I discovered M. D. Chenu's *La théologie au douzième siècle* (1957).⁶ Father Chenu's sense of the Gospel at work in the world seems perhaps a bit naive today, and perhaps also a little sad, given what has happened to the vision of the Second Vatican Council he embodied. But I was not a Catholic and was relatively immune to the ideological currents in the Roman Catholic Church that led to some of his emphases. For me, to read Chenu's collection of essays was to encounter a historian doing in print what I had always known I wanted to do—ferret out the basic assumptions that

⁵Joseph Braun, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1924); Edouard Dumoutet, *Le désir de voir l'hostie: les origines de la dévotion au Saint-Sacrement* (Paris, 1926); Reiner Hausscherr, *Der tote Christus am Kreuz: zur Ikonographie des Gerokreuzes* (Bonn, 1963).

⁶Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle*, [Études de philosophie médiévale 45], (Paris, 1957); partially translated into English by Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West* (Chicago, 1968).

drive religious thought and practice while understanding such assumptions to be almost infinitely complex, responsive to fundamental characteristics of social structure, and derived from other cultures (Chenu's attention to Arab influence has sometimes been forgotten) as well as indigenous.

I do not remember that I talked to anyone much about Chenu, although I was excited enough about the essays to translate some of them into English for my undergraduate tutees in History and Literature, developing a healthy respect for the liquid and elegant (almost untranslatable) style in which the arguments were presented. But then I had a chance to meet Chenu himself. In 1967, while a graduate student, I decided to attend the meeting of the Fourth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy in Montreal. Most of the major figures in the field were there, and the place was awash in clerical collars. I hung out with a group of Francophone students from Quebec, and given the limitations of my spoken French, I mostly listened. On the last day of the conference, as we students took our accustomed place in the far corner of the cafeteria, we looked up to see Chenu bypassing the head table where the other worthies were sitting. "May I join you?" he asked. "I'm tired of sitting with the old folks. I want to find out what the young think about the world." Then he questioned us not only about how we perceived trends in medieval scholarship but also about *aggiornamento* and the Church, about sixties radicalism and war. And he listened. When we looked up, the cafeteria was empty. Everyone else had gone on to the afternoon sessions, while we, engrossed in our discussion, had not heard the room emptying.

Despite my best efforts, my dissertation did not turn out to be very Chenuian. And I lucked into an assistant professorship at Harvard more on the strength of my performance in the oral examinations, I suspect, than owing to any excellence of research. I submitted my thesis on the day students occupied University Hall to protest ROTC on campus, and my first teaching as a full-time faculty member was done in 1969–70, with the whiff of tear gas wafting in from Harvard Square and massive student strikes during Cambodia spring. I was young; thus I had in many ways more sympathy with the students than with the department faculty. Yet increasingly I felt at home in neither group. The student leadership was male, and indeed the crucial, close-to-the-bone issue was a male issue; women did not have to decide whether to give up their citizenship or their integrity if they opposed the war in Vietnam. The faculty was male, too. In spring 1970, there were approximately 670 members of the faculty of arts

and sciences; only ten of them were women, and all the women were in the assistant professor rank. (The Zemurray-Stone chair, endowed for a woman, was vacant at the time.)⁷ I had barely noticed the gender imbalance when I was a graduate student; I was too busy exploring Widener Library and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, teaching bright and articulate Harvard and Radcliffe tutees, and debating anthropological theory and, yes, Marxism with graduate student peers (who were all men—something I barely noticed, so excited was I by the play of ideas I'd had little of at Michigan or in my large Atlanta high school). Once I became an assistant professor, I noticed that I had almost no female colleagues. So did my friend Janet Martin in Classics. After making a thorough study of the Harvard situation, using the statistical techniques 1960s students employed so enthusiastically, Janet and I spent the night in Boylston Hall cranking a mimeo machine, turning out the first, informal report on the status of women and requesting that the dean establish a committee to look into why the numbers were so skewed. In response, Michael Walzer and I were asked to cochair a committee that produced in spring 1971 the "Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences." It was a radical document, none of whose recommendations (for parental leave, a halt to the tenure clock for junior-faculty women who gave birth, better procedures for mentoring women graduate students and conducting searches, and so forth) were adopted by the Harvard faculty, but it became a model that circulated widely and influenced changes in procedures and atmosphere at several other major universities.

I encountered a good deal of personal animosity during these years. I received hate mail, some of it pornographic. Much of the hostility was quite overt. Such things were permissible in those days. Two examples will suffice. The wife of a faculty member in the English department accosted me in the little parking lot behind the faculty club, saying, "You have no right to a job here. You are taking the bread out of the mouth of some young man who has a wife and children to support. I was always content to be Mrs. _____; why can't you be content to be a wife?" A male member of my department sought me out while I was looking up a book in the Widener Library card catalog to tell me, "I suppose you think you are going to get tenure for yourself by this sort of activity; I warn you, you aren't." The second

⁷*Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences* (Cambridge, MA, April 1971), Table I, p. 73.

attack hurt more than the first because in my innocence, I had never assumed that my activity would do me anything other than harm. Nor had I ever assumed that tenure was a possibility. I had simply discovered that I had to act.

This is not the place to describe in any further detail the Harvard politics of those years. But they cannot be simply passed over without gloss. For that period in my life as a scholar was as deeply characterized by contradiction as the periods before or since. No matter how engaged I was in holding hearings for the Committee on the Status of Women or in counseling female graduate students, I was also teaching and writing medieval history and in doing so was resisting some of the academic feminism of the 1970s. It was not until the later 1970s, when I wrote the article “Jesus as Mother,” that I found something like a Chenuian voice and began to feel satisfied with my scholarly stance. But the lessons of my Harvard graduate school mentors—lessons of attention to context and genre, and avoidance of presentism—were never in the early 1970s forgotten. I could no more have undertaken to “update” Julian of Norwich, changing her tough-minded exegesis of the parable of the servant and her feminine language for the Trinity into the cozy new-age spirituality espoused by some activists, than I could have ignored the cruelty of some of the academic discrimination and condescension around me.⁸ To do either would have seemed to violate the basic integrity of other human beings. In order to explain this, I need to examine the development of my scholarship from another direction.

There was a contradiction in the way my scholarly interests grew that characterizes the work of most scholars. At the moment topics are undertaken, their genesis often seems accidental, even arbitrary, impelled by the moment. Yet when one looks back, there are usually deep connections between what one studied last and what one takes up next. Certainly there have always been threads in my work that carried me forward from one subject to the next, yet timely and almost fortuitous impulses as well have led to my questions. Following both the fortuitous and the continuous will take me back to the deeper contradictions I felt in the 1970s and early 1980s as I

⁸Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, [Studies and Texts 35], 2 parts (Toronto, 1978). For my own sense of Julian, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 204–08.

moved from studying religious men (“religious” in the technical French sense of “those in orders”) to studying religious women.

My dissertation, later published as *Docere Verbo et Exemplo* (1979), grew out of a desire to look at the ways in which a sense of obligation to community and neighbor shaped the vocations of men in the twelfth century who chose to join orders of monks or regular canons. It was shaped both by the presence in much literature of spiritual advice of the little tag “to teach by word and example” and by my intuition that responsibility for one’s impact on one’s companions and the broader community would be felt in different ways depending on the extent to which the order in question was withdrawn from the world or committed, at least in part, to clerical work within it. I had originally intended to include the polemical literature of the period—and it would have been a better study and one with more consequence if I had done so—but I was persuaded to take a narrower focus in order to deal more thoroughly with the material. That was probably sage advice to give an apprentice scholar, especially one who needed to work on paleography, codicology, and even Latin. In any case, the most valuable aspect of the dissertation for me was probably the pursuit of the manuscript work necessary to study Stephen of Paris’s unedited and extremely long commentary and—a very different sort of challenge—my plunge into the works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux to situate within his spirituality the little treatise “The Steps of Humility,” which I treated as a commentary on the Benedictine Rule. Perhaps the most valuable aspect for other scholars was the appendix in which I located and characterized all extant sources of two types written by the two religious groups in question: commentaries on the rules of the two orders and works of advice and instruction for novices. Nonetheless, I did not feel then—and do not feel today—that the study succeeded. I made the argument that the clerical vocation of the regular canons shaped their spirituality to include in more direct ways responsibility for neighbor, but I did not fully articulate the nuance of the rather different monastic commitment to some version of the same responsibility; and I vacillated in rather confused prose between the distinctiveness of each treatise I studied and an argument concerning the different sense of identity of the two vocations, which I probably overstated.⁹ In other words, I

⁹Caroline Walker Bynum, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo* (Missoula, MT, 1979). Bynum, “Wonder,” is much more successful at ferreting out the contradictory assumptions of different groups, or one might say “discourse communities.”

failed to find a balance between two impulses: to recognize distinctive and incompatible voices and to dig out the basic, not fully conscious or articulate-able, assumptions of groups or religious milieux. Yet it was in reading the Cistercians St. Ælred of Rievaulx and the sometimes disparaged St. Bernard of Clairvaux that I came upon the language that led to the essay "Jesus as Mother," where I finally found a way—if not of reconciling then at least of simultaneously asserting—the distinctiveness of a voice and the assumptions of a group.

I wrote the article "Jesus as Mother" during the summer I was in transition between Harvard, where I had moved from the History Department to the Divinity School in 1972, and the University of Washington, where I began to teach in fall 1976. I would doubtless not have written it without the stimulus of the politics of the Divinity School, which were angry and presentist and which, in ways too complex to discuss here, I opposed as much as supported. But it was also a response to my sense, from reading the advice Cistercians gave to their novices and from being myself a teacher at a time of enormous challenge to the pedagogical role, that the responsibility to advise and instruct others is a weighty and even dangerous one. Nor—enjoined by my own teachers to begin always with a survey of existing scholarship—would I have written it without the guidance of the 1949 essay by André Cabassut, which should have been groundbreaking but had gone almost unnoticed at the time of publication.¹⁰

It was undoubtedly the title (later used, at the publisher's insistence, for the volume of essays I published with the University of California Press in 1982) that drew attention, but the article itself was not a contribution to the 1970s pressure to update and feminize liturgical language nor was it, to the surprise of some readers, about women. The argument of "Jesus as Mother," put simply, is that twelfth-century monks who occupied positions of authority used feminine, often maternal, imagery for both God and self to express newly complicated notions of what it means to lead, and that their roles were newly complicated exactly because of broad social and economic as well as religious changes that resulted in an increased sense of the importance of individual choice in religious vocation. The essay was actually an early example of what would later be called "men's history"—that is, the study of male attitudes, not as the norm but as spe-

¹⁰André Cabassut, "Une dévotion médiévale peu connue: la dévotion à Jesus Notre Mère," *Mélanges Marcel Viller, Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 25 (1949), 234–45.

cific to only half (at most) of the human race. It was also, I felt, my first successful attempt to ferret out unspoken assumptions and anxieties behind texts without violating individual voices. Some of the argument spilled over into my essay "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?," which maintained, against a good deal of 1960s scholarly debate about when "individuality" emerged, that increased awareness of individual choice and self-assertion is inevitably accompanied and even impelled by a greater self-awareness of group identity. In other words, to define self is to define not-self. Some of the argument of "Jesus as Mother" also led to the little essay on the nuns of Helfta, which was the final article in the 1982 collection; that essay led, after many years of further work, to *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

The study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, my most influential book, arose almost seamlessly from "Jesus as Mother." Having explored the pressures and opportunities that led certain groups of religious men to use explicitly gendered images for themselves and for the divine, I was curious about whether religious women did so. And I discovered, again to put it a bit simply, that what seemed distinctive about woman-authored texts and male accounts of women was not awareness of gender or complex and self-conscious use of gendered language, but food images and food practices. Although misunderstood by some critics as "essentializing" (this was a nasty charge in the 1990s) or as a glorification of female masochism, it was in fact neither. The argument that women's texts were characterized by specific metaphors and their lives by specific behaviors was not the imposition of modern assumptions about "woman." It was empirical, based on a careful comparison of female-authored texts about the divine, female-authored texts about women, and male-authored texts about women, with texts about men by religious men, such as St. Francis of Assisi or Heinrich Suso, who appeared to be closest in their spirituality to that of women.¹¹ I could not, after all, explore all male-authored texts from three centuries, but I thought (and still think) that this was an ingenious solution to the question of how to choose material for comparison: that is, to choose the material that appears on the face of it most likely to prove your provisional conclusions wrong.

Moreover, the book was not an apology, or an excuse, for female self-punishing. As I stated explicitly in my epilogue, no one today

¹¹Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 94–112.

would hold out the behavior and piety I described as a model for his or her own daughter. My point was rather to see what women at a particular moment in the past made of the cultural material they had at their disposal (and I argued that they made of it a kind of agency and a kind of truth), not to urge their choices or their sensibility on the present, or to use modern medicalized models to explain it.

In writing *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, I was not only responding to my own essay of the mid-1970s on male language; I was also inserting myself into number of traditions concerning women's history, some going back to the early years of the twentieth century, some considerably more recent. As far as the religious content of women's experience was concerned, there had long been a tendency to psychological reductionism, especially when treating the sort of visionary and ascetic phenomena about which historians had the largest amount of evidence, both through women's own writing and through accounts about them by confessors, hagiographers, and inquisitors. For example, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), for all its phenomenological awareness and its antireductionism, became reductive when it treated women's religiosity. James took the visionary texts written by and about medieval women as cases of psychopathology:

A[n] . . . example . . . of theopathic saintliness is that of St. Gertrude, a Benedictine nun of the thirteenth century, whose "Revelations" . . . consist mainly of proofs of Christ's partiality for her undeserving person. Assurances of his love, intimacies, and caresses and compliments of the most absurd and puerile sort, addressed by Christ to Gertrude as an individual, form the tissue of this paltry-minded recital. In reading such a narrative, we realize the gap between the thirteenth and the twentieth century, and we feel that saintliness of character may yield almost . . . worthless fruits if it be associated with such inferior intellectual sympathies. . . . A God indifferent to everything but adulation, and full of partiality for his individual favorites, lacks an essential element of largeness; and even the best professional sainthood of former centuries, pent in as it is to such a conception, seems to us curiously shallow and unedifying.¹²

"Theopathic," "paltry-minded," "intellectually inferior," "shallow and unedifying"—not only is this a condescending dismissal not accorded to other forms of religiosity with which James disagrees, it is also a

¹²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; New York, 1961), p. 275.

fundamental misinterpretation of what he calls Gertrude's "Revelations," which is a multiauthored text whose basic message is the importance of community (not personal reassurance).¹³

But even where women's practices such as fasting or prayer to the baby Jesus were not taken as pathological and or potentially heterodox, scholars often reduced them to mechanisms of psychological compensation, as if celibate women prayed to a baby God because they did not have babies of their own or fasted because they hated their bodies. In the early years of the twentieth century, the only place where texts authored by women were regularly studied without reductionism and condescension was by philologists, who did notice that some of our earliest examples of European vernacular languages occurred in woman-authored texts. It seems that it was acceptable to study the adverb in the Flemish poet Hadewijch but not very interesting to consider seriously the ideas those adverbs expressed.

Where women's religiosity was taken seriously in early-twentieth-century scholarship was in the long tradition of treating it as compensatory in a socioeconomic sense. If we look, for example, at the discussion of the so-called *Frauenfrage* (the "woman problem") in German scholarship, we find that it was taken up enthusiastically by American medievalists, who were attracted to the notion that the increase of religious opportunities for women in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries was the result of changing dowry structures and the marriage market. According to such interpretation, the informal religious groupings known as *beguinages* that were in fact the first real women's movement in Western history were understood as places created to park unmarried or "surplus" women. Not only did this deny what we today call female agency, treating women's groups and structures as mere reactions to what men did, it also tended to interpret as economic arrangements the great outburst of female literary and religious creativity that was a major factor in changing the religious attitudes of both women and men. Herbert Grundmann, who resisted this and, in the 1930s, attributed to women both agency and creativity, was virtually unknown in the United States until the 1960s and not translated into English until 1995.¹⁴ (Grundmann's reputation

¹³For this interpretation, see Anna Harrison, "I Am Wholly Your Own: Liturgical Piety and Community among the Nuns of Helfta," *Church History*, 78 (2009), 549–83.

¹⁴Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter; Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden*

has, quite rightly, suffered recently, especially in Germany, as his Nazi connections and postwar efforts to hide them have become known.) I was not the first American medievalist to discover Grundmann—whose impact on me was at least as great as Chenu's had been more than a decade earlier—but I discovered and used his paradigm at a time when another model of women's history, broadly speaking, was reigning in American historical scholarship. This was, of course, the exuberant and highly politicized feminist history of the 1970s. Although I was, as I have explained, a committed feminist in my efforts to open up the misogynist academy I had known at Harvard, the women's history popular in the 1970s and early 1980s was, for me, a complicated and in some ways problematic context.

It is hard, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when work on women's texts and women's lives is so multifaceted and sophisticated, to remember how politicized—and in some ways, crude—it was in the 1970s. Much of it was engaged in counting women and in giving grades to historical periods. This sort of history was very preoccupied with the so-called "status of women," which was thought to go up and down in history, but to be always suppressed by what was called "the patriarchy." It was a curious approach—one that has been questioned by most later feminist historians. For how can half the human race have "a" status? It is true that we do today have indices of maternal health, women's literacy, women's wages relative to men's, and so forth, that can be used to construct a worldwide comparison of women's statuses across cultures in a socioeconomic sense. But there were—and are—problems with using this approach for the Middle Ages in general and for the topic of medieval religion in particular.

First, medievalists lack statistical evidence for many of these categories. For all the recent progress in medieval archaeology and demography, we still have only very fragmentary information about such basic matters as life expectancies, age at marriage, infant mortality, and so forth. And even what we thought we knew about the

und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik (1935; rpt. Darmstadt, 1977); trans. Steven Rowan, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, introd. Robert Lerner (Notre Dame, 1995).

changing structure of the medieval family from clan to lineage has recently been questioned by much good research. Second, as feminists such as Denise Riley have pointed out, “woman” is clearly an unnuanced category.¹⁵ Not only does it ignore class; it also puts various sorts of incommensurate cultural phenomena on a spectrum as if they are parallel. For example, if there are more women troubadours than before, but peasant women *and men* are still starving, does “the status of women” go up or down? Is the opportunity to enter a convent, or the experience of being forced into one, oppression or liberation in a period when the dangers of arranged and abusive marriages and of death in childbirth were high? Third, much of the women’s history of the 1970s was so busy casting blame for the absence of women in certain categories that it did not notice where the women were. To point out this blind spot in 1970s and 1980s feminism is not to deny that it saw important beginnings of the search for hidden women and new efforts to find and read their texts. It did. But there was also much assuming that women’s voices were not there and much seeking of answers for the presumed absence that was driven more by theory than by research.¹⁶

Two further assumptions framed the model of women’s history that prevailed when I began to do the research for *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. From the 1970s, indeed well into the 1990s, some interpreters suggested that women’s writing was not women’s writing at all. Under the influence of certain forms of French feminism, it was sometimes taken as a kind of false consciousness, a ventriloquism; women, not just when viewed by men but even when themselves writing, were interpreted to be merely conveying male stereotypes of the female. Second, a great deal of the feminist scholarship of the 1970s—and this was particularly true in the area of women and religion—assumed that women need female symbols. That is, that the goddess and the mother as religious figures appeal to women, whereas gods of war, for example, appeal to men. It was a kind of divine role-model argument, and it is difficult today to remember how prevalent it was and how inappropriate for the study of the Middle

¹⁵Denise Riley, “*Am I that name?*” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Minneapolis, 1988).

¹⁶Two recent works that counter this trend and have discovered significant new information about women’s artistic and literary activity are Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, 1997) and Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (New York, 2004).

Ages. For example, Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex*, a brilliant cultural study that has had a liberating influence on many contemporary Catholic women who feel burdened by their tradition with unrealistic and contradictory expectations of being simultaneously virgin and mother, has been less helpful as a guide to medieval Christianity.¹⁷ I see little evidence that medieval women or men took the virgin so literally as a symbol. The linkage of gender and gendered symbol in a one-to-one relationship drew scholars in the 1970s and early 1980s toward judging medieval writers with contemporary standards—just the sort of thing William James did to such unfortunate effect, albeit with a very different agenda.

Holy Feast and Holy Fast went against the grain of such scholarship. Unconcerned with ascertaining or judging the status of women, unconvinced that people necessarily express gendered assumptions in language that is explicitly about gender, but far from denying the force of gendered values or of patriarchy in the medieval church, I saw texts by and about women not as ventriloquism but as creative, even courageous, self-expression. Such interpretation located places where the male scribe or confessor who did the recording resisted what he was being told and let the historian see his resistance, or where (to take another example) he wrote down the woman's vernacular utterances exactly because they were not in Latin and could not be rendered in it. It also located points where the women, in their own writing, explicitly or implicitly criticized and rejected norms or turned them in new directions.

There was another deep vein of twentieth-century scholarship against which *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* stood. This was the assumption, found in scholarship about religion emanating from Catholic, Protestant, and secular circles, that medieval Christianity was dualistic.¹⁸ Valuing the soul and heavenly rewards, promoting virginity, celibacy, fasting, and asceticism, the religion of the Middle Ages was understood to purvey a message of body-hating that was especially damaging to women, who tended to be equated with Eve, uncleanness, and sexual temptation. Although rejecting the cosmological dualism of the Manichees and Albigensians, which supposedly

¹⁷Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976).

¹⁸For an example, see Jacques Le Goff, "Body and Ideology in the Medieval West" and "The Repudiation of Pleasure," in *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1988), pp. 83–85, 93–103.

assumed evil to be a force in the universe equal to good, Christianity, especially in its medieval version, was understood to theorize the human person as a soul trapped in a body, from which it sought release by often extreme forms of self-mortification such as flagellation and self-starvation. Hence the female behavior I studied in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* was to be interpreted either as the abnormal psychological response of women whose culture led them to extravagant gestures toward bodily control and self-denial or as a religious pathology induced by a fear of sex often laid at the door of St. Paul. In arguing that women's food practices (such as charitable distribution and food miracles) gave them control of what was often the only family resource they could control and that their self-discipline (even in some of its most extravagant forms) was a kind of change rung on the body to induce the pleasure of encounter with God, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* ran up against a deep secular distrust of religion and an equally deep distrust in modern religious thinking of any form of renunciation. Yet behind the bizarre behaviors I studied in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (and I always had that wall slogan on my bulletin board reminding me of the need to keep my vision of things "strange"), I found a counter-intuitive and paradoxical affirmation of person as psychosomatic unity. It was that sense of person that some of the essays in *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991) began to explore. And that is what *The Resurrection of the Body* (1995) is about. It is an argument against understanding the anthropology (that is, the theory of person) of medieval Christianity as body/soul dualism.¹⁹

The Resurrection of the Body did not, however, arise seamlessly from *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. It was impelled, most specifically, by a suggestion from my old friend, the Renaissance historian Donald J. Wilcox, who was dying of AIDS in 1990. He had wanted to work on the topic himself. It was also facilitated by two almost simultaneous events. In July 1986, just before accepting a position at Columbia University, I was awarded a MacArthur fellowship—the grant, known in the press although not by the foundation, as the "genius award." Like many MacArthur fellows before me, I plunged into what can only

¹⁹This is not to deny that there are elements of practical dualism in medieval Christianity, or that a sense of spirit striving against flesh can be religiously useful. On this, see Peter Brown, "A Tale of Two Bishops and a Brilliant Saint," *New York Review of Books*, March 8, 2012, 29. Striving with and striving against the flesh are often, of course, indistinguishable in religious practice, and the importance of both in medieval Christianity is evidence of the fact that body was understood to be crucial to person.

be called MacArthur guilt. Why me? Since I didn't deserve it, what should I do to earn it retroactively? Shouldn't I retool? Become something more relevant? Go to Africa and cure dengue fever? Found a shelter for the homeless? Tackle a comparative topic and learn six Indian languages? As many scholars know, there is nothing like a deadline to put an end to narcissism, self-doubt, and unrealistic self-expectations. And, luckily, I was almost simultaneously invited to give the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Lectures in Religion, an invitation that committed the recipient to a series of lectures to be given at a number of universities around the country and published subsequently by Columbia University Press. Once I accepted the ACLS invitation—and some sense of self-preservation must have led me to say “yes”—I could forget all those “why me?/what else should I do?” questions and get to work to have something ready in time.

The MacArthur fellowship enabled me to take two and a half years off from teaching, spread out over the next five years; thus I had time, while preparing the ACLS lectures, to tackle some of the conceptually very difficult theological reading I had always wanted to tackle (shades here again of the inspiration of Chenu). The time off from teaching was crucial in another sense, for when I was not in Butler Library immersing myself in abstruse scholastic discussions of which bodily particles would return to a perfected but identical body at the end of time, I was reaping the rather dubious rewards of my lingering disciplinary multi-location. Because the sort of material I had examined in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and was now turning to in *The Resurrection* included poetry, natural philosophical discussion of what we would call scientific and medical issues, visual images of the Last Judgment and the General Resurrection, as well as women's mystical writing, I ended up, despite my determination to say “no” to such requests, directing or codirecting dissertations in comparative religion, English and comparative literature, and art history as well as history. It was a lot to juggle. The relentless deadlines of lectures to give at places as diverse as Harvard, the University of California at Berkeley, and Sarah Lawrence College kept me focused almost in spite of myself.

Much about writing *The Resurrection* was fun, as scholarship can be when one has both time to explore and a deadline to pull one up from endless wandering in the sources. I did a good deal of reading in philosophy of mind, arguing that there were parallels between scholastic inquiry and the questions that contemporary scholars such

as Bernard Williams, Derek Parfit, Richard Swinburne, and Robert Nozick were asking about personal identity and survival. The issues explored by university theologians in quodlibetal questions and commentaries on the resurrection of the body—questions about such bizarre matters as, for example, to which individual an eaten embryo would return when the last trumpet sounded—were, I argued, questions about ontology: What is essential to the nature of the body and hence of the person as psychosomatic entity? What must survive for an individual to have the same identity over time?²⁰ I also watched a number of episodes of *Star Trek* and other TV and film sci-fi productions, convinced by my daughter that the popular culture of the 1990s was obsessed with issues of identity in the sense of continuity through time as well as with the more polemically debated sense of identity as group self-identification—that is, identity as what might survive a brain transplant operation as well as identity as, for example, Hispanic or lesbian or middle-aged.

But it was not all fun. Not only was struggling with the philosophical texts hard work, there was always the loneliness attendant upon the determination to let individual voices be individual and to let the past be different. The philosophers I talked to insisted that I did not understand the medieval issues if I did not translate them into issues of modern epistemology or logic; the literary critics I talked to were, in the 1990s, not interested in religious texts; feminists were still dubious about whether one could ever hear a woman's voice. Despite the Apostles' Creed and the three core beliefs of rabbinic Judaism, Christians and Jews alike insisted that their traditions did not hold the resurrection of the body but only the immortality of the soul. The avoidance of the fact of death reflected in the euphemisms that afflict our language when we substitute "passed away" or "passed" for "died" made my readers and hearers uncomfortable with my subject matter. Audiences might giggle or be appalled at discussions of eaten embryos, but it was very much more difficult to share the soaring beauty of, for example, Mechtild of Magdeburg's description of the crystalline body in heaven or the deep seriousness of medieval exegesis of I Corinthians 15: "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall rise

²⁰For the relevance both of current philosophy of mind and of popular culture, see Bynum, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 239–97.

again incorruptible; and we shall be changed.” Although “the body” and “identity” were popular topics in the 1990s, they very often did not mean what I meant in my study of the resurrection. For all my careful explanation that the asceticism of medieval religious practice was not based in a sense of body as trap so much as a sense of body as necessary component of person, and despite the almost innumerable passages I cited in which *identitas* meant “numerical identity” or enduring as the same entity, I had trouble making much headway against the textbooks and even specialized studies that still today impose modern sensibilities back onto medieval texts.²¹

It was twelve years after *The Resurrection of the Body* that my next big book, *Wonderful Blood* (2007), appeared. Of all my writings, it has the most ostensibly fortuitous genesis, originating as it did in a moment in 1999 when Paul Freedman of Yale called me up and said, “We’re going to have a conference on ‘Blood, Sweat, and Tears.’ We’ve got someone doing ‘sweat’ and someone doing ‘tears’; can you do ‘blood?’” Having done some work for *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* on the literalism of medieval Eucharistic devotion, I thought I might be able to put together something fairly quickly on “blood.” That conference invitation led to almost ten years of research on blood cult in northern Germany.

Centered on cult sites in the states of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg close to Berlin, *Wonderful Blood* entailed a sort of local history that I had never done before—something I would not have tackled had I not had the opportunity of two resident fellowships in Germany during the early years of the research—one in spring 2000 at the Warburg Haus in Hamburg and another in fall 2002 at the American Academy in Berlin at Wannsee. My interest in the German Middle Ages had been piqued earlier, however, during the many trips I took to Germany with my husband, Guenther Roth, whom I married in 1983. My passionate love of Berlin began in 1994–95 when I spent a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, but the affinity I felt for that guilty yet tortured city had roots, I think, in the guilt I felt in my own history as an American Southerner—something too complicated to write about here.²² In any case, finding the little town of Wilsnack,

²¹For remarks on our recent impoverished understanding of “identity,” see Marilynn Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York, 2012), pp. 26–27.

²²See Bynum, “Curriculum Vitae,” pp. 7–8, and Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Presence of Objects: Medieval Anti-Judaism in Modern Germany,” *Common Knowledge*, 10, no. 1 (2004), 1–32.

site of an almost forgotten fifteenth-century pilgrimage, in my guidebook, I visited it on the last day of my stay in Germany in 1995, although I made that initial trip more because it was a railway stop en route to the lovely cathedral of Havelberg, see of the twelfth-century bishop Anselm whose treatises I had studied long before in *Docere Verbo et Exemplo*, than because of its intrinsic fascination. Ten years later, the cult at Wilsnack—which provided manna for the full range of my research interests, from abstruse scholastic debates and extravagant miracle claims to the details of local power politics—served as the opening chapter of my study of fifteenth-century blood piety.

Wonderful Blood is a far darker book than *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* or *Resurrection*. Whereas they are a sort of defense against the reduction of Christianity to politics or pathology, *Wonderful Blood* focused on the increasing centrality in late-medieval Christianity of an ideology of sacrifice in all its horrific consequences. Not only did the fifteenth-century cult of relics of Christ's blood and of what German historians call *Dauerwunder* (transformed Eucharistic hosts or chalices that endure as such) become excuses, and incentives, for antisemitic persecution and pogroms and for harsher definitions of heresy turned against flagellants, Hussites, and Waldensians, but the killing at the heart of the Eucharistic offering—the sacrifice of God to God by God in the Crucifixion—took its toll as well on the logic of Scholastic theologians and the hearts of pious laity.

At the center of *Wonderful Blood* was the conundrum that became the theme of *Christian Materiality* (2011), a set of lectures first given in Jerusalem in May 2007 that appeared from Zone Books last year after much reworking. Together, the books move beyond the topic of “the body” explored in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Resurrection* to explore the paradox of matter itself. Both books consider miraculous matter, albeit in different contexts—that is, graven or painted images that come to life, weeping or oozing; blood relics of Christ or the saints that liquefy; Eucharistic wafers that appear as bloody meat and chalices that fill with viscous red fluid. In part, the books make a specific argument about historical periodization and causation. They suggest that the increasing emphasis in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century theology on the power of God as explanation, like the new stress in spirituality on interior response cut free from any necessity to conform that response to outer gesture or speech, is one pole of a view of the world whose other pole is an increasing sense that the sacral is manifested and conveyed in matter. The fear and rejection of images

that culminated in Protestant iconoclasm were in part reactions to renewed instances of their animation. The increased emphasis on interiority was not merely a reformist response to an old-style religion of mechanical and “superstitious” spirituality but rather an uneasy complement and counter to a new enthusiasm for matter that disclosed the divine. The need to account for miracle led natural philosophers such as Nicole Oresme to an understanding of the rules imbedded in matter that limited as well as explained its anomalous behaviors. Nor did the voices of philosophers, pilgrims, and reformers, or of the Jews and heretics they persecuted, fall into a single pattern. Persecution of out groups and definition of ideas and practices as “other” increased as contradiction sharpened within Christian communities between inner and outer forms of devotion.

Wonderful Blood and *Christian Materiality* locate one of the causes of the reformations of the sixteenth century, both Protestant and Catholic, in the increasing pressure exerted by miracles of material transformation—miracles that bodied forth the paradox that matter is created by God to manifest his glory and yet utterly different from him in his eternity, omnipresence, intangibility, and utter incomprehensibility. In their suggestion about causation and periodization, the books argue not for a perduring paradox but for the pressure exerted in a particular historical period by an increasing awareness at every level of society of the contradiction between the material and the divine and yet the contradiction to that contradiction: the manifestation of the divine in matter, which is by definition totally “other” from it.

The basic argument of *Wonderful Blood*, as of *Christian Materiality*, is not, however, about periodization but about conceptions of matter in Western Christianity in the later Middle Ages and hence about paradox itself. What I try to explain—and here language almost fails me—is that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century devotion in the West not only assumed the opposition of an eternally unknowable God and an essentially animate and labile matter he created. It also assumed that miraculous matter itself asserted that God. Ever-living blood erupted on ever-decaying bread, painted wood, and bone. In so doing, it asserted the presence of life in death, eternity in change. Transformation miracles were moments when matter contradicted itself. But it could do so only in material ways. Hence, if matter transcended its own ordinary changeability by denying decay and death, it could do so only by another change. Such change could, however,

last only a moment before it itself decayed. Bleeding hosts, glowing relics, and weeping statues inevitably faded. Other miracles were then necessary. But the repeated eruption of miraculous stuff was threatening to ecclesiastical authorities who wished to control pilgrimage, to philosophers and theologians theorizing the natural world, and to the Christian devout who wished their cult objects to endure. The paradox of matter, which in Christian theology and practice must and cannot be divine, parallels the paradox of the body, which must and cannot be the locus of salvation.

I am not sure what comes next for me. At the moment, I am immersed in two kinds of comparative reading—both some theoretical reading about materiality as art historians understand it and an exploration of Hindu cults, stimulated by a five-week visit to India in autumn 2009, that suggests to me that the ostensible parallels of Western and Indian images fade once one knows more about specific practices. I expect that whatever does come next will be propelled both by fortuitous suggestion and by the continuities of my long-standing concerns. I also suspect that I shall be, as I usually am, tongue-tied in my first efforts to grasp and articulate radical contradictions as contradictions.

I am not sorry that I chose medieval history when I was asked to specify my field back in 1962, although I seem to have crept up recently at least to the brink of the early-modern period I also considered studying. But I am not confident that I have managed to find the Chenuian voice to which I aspired as a graduate student or a young professor. It would be arrogant to think so. I am convinced, however, that the balance I sought between recognizing incompatible perspectives and digging out the underlying assumptions of a religious tradition in a specific historical period is both impossible and necessary. We have to write serially, crafting one sentence after another, piling up note card after note card, reconciling opposing bits of evidence; yet that is not how life happens. Life is much more like the realization we have, just after we manage to shape a lovely interpretation in our prose, that if we look at things another way, we have gotten them quite hideously wrong. Nonetheless, there is comfort, I think, in realizing that, as historians and as human beings, we must live in paradox and that paradox—the simultaneous assertion of contradictions—is the opposite of opposites. For paradox is not a method; it is life.