

EXPERIENCE IN MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

The medieval theology workshop was devoted to the discussion of *The Voice of My Beloved: The "Song of Songs" in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), by E. Ann Matter (University of Pennsylvania). An examination of early medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs (up to about 1200), *The Voice of My Beloved* is a perceptive overview of many of the central features of medieval Christianity. As the favorite of medieval exegetes (there were more commentaries in the middle ages on the Song than on any other book of the Bible), a study of Song of Songs commentaries naturally reveals much about medieval standards and expectations in biblical interpretation. Yet, in their allegorical readings of the Song, such important authors as Bede and Gregory, Bernard and Honorius, also gave expression to their most cherished beliefs about the self, about gender, about the encounter with God, and about the Church on the way to God. By this study of medieval interpretations of the Song of Songs, Prof. Matter has thus at the same time skillfully introduced her reader to the characteristic convictions and sentiments of these medieval Christians.

The workshop opened with prepared comments about *The Voice of My Beloved*. Keith Egan (Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana) praised the author for her handling of medieval biblical exegesis, noting that he found compelling her contention that the numerous medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs constitute a distinctive genre of literature. Prof. Egan added that he is especially intrigued by the notion of allegory, along with the symbolist mentality that underlies it, that informs medieval readings of the Song. In recent biblical scholarship, of course, allegorical reading has often been dismissed as utterly fantastic and irresponsible. As practiced by the medieval authors treated by Prof. Matter, however, allegorical reading conformed to established and well-conceived rules and, most notable, by discovering new venues for the encounter with God and Christ, served to foster the spiritual life. Finding the vital spirituality of the Song commentaries most attractive, Egan suggested that it would be more profitable if traditional ways of reading and more recent historical-critical work were not placed in unalterable opposition but rather seen as complementary, and mutually enriching, approaches to the same material.

In her comments, Elizabeth Dreyer (Washington Theological Union) outlined how the Song of Songs might contribute to a modern anthropology, spirituality, and theology characterized by wholeness, equality, and mutuality. Prof. Dreyer isolated four areas of theological discourse for special comment: affective spirituality, attitudes to the body, sexuality, and images of the Church. In some instances, the modern appropriation of the Song can benefit greatly from the

medieval approaches examined by Prof. Matter. As for the medievals, for example, the Song of Songs continues to be a stimulating guide to the experience of God, although, she added, the message of the Song should now be acknowledged as directed not exclusively to the male, monastic communities for whom the medieval commentaries were originally produced but to all Christians, all who seek closer contact with God. The Song promotes as well a healthier view of the body by offering an integrated view of the self. As *The Voice of My Beloved* discloses, in their commentaries on the Song the medieval authors often showed themselves cognizant of the positive value of the body as the medium of the encounter with world and with God, thus tempering more baleful statements elsewhere in the tradition that tended to demean the body or put it in conflict with soul. In other respects, however, modern readers will be shaped by the Song in ways not anticipated by medieval readings. Medieval exegetes were familiar, of course, with the highly erotic language of the Song. But they used such language exclusively to figure their experience with God. Without forsaking that aspect of the Song, modern readers will also want to dwell on the implications of the Song's eroticism for the development of a more nuanced Christian view of sexual love itself. Along similar lines, the nuptial imagery of the Song can be fruitful for our understanding of Church, pointing the way to a greater intimacy among those who are united by love in Christ.

E. Ann Matter brought the formal part of the workshop to completion by reflecting on the factors that had motivated her to write *The Voice of My Beloved*. For one thing, she is committed as a historian to do justice to the full range of medieval Christian theological material. Too often, scholars have been content with examining the well-known classics of scholastic and monastic theology. But a great deal of theologizing in the Middle Ages was done in the form of biblical commentary; her book thus is part of a larger project aimed at the recovery of this neglected aspect of medieval thought. Professor Matter was also drawn to this biblical book by its positive sense of the body and physicality, and its concomitant positive depiction of sexual love. Greater knowledge of the Song and its medieval reception may contribute to the development of a less repressive sexuality, one open to the actual range of human sexual experience.

The rest of the workshop was given over to observations from the floor. The evidence of the Song of Songs commentary tradition for the "symbolist mentality" received closer scrutiny; members of the audience and the panel speculated about medieval understandings of sign and how these might differ from modern. The possible contribution of the Song to a contemporary theology of sex and sexuality also received considerable comment. While it seems clear that the medieval monks who produced these commentaries remained at best ambivalent about human sexuality, moving immediately to the encounter with the divine, a consensus did seem to emerge that their use of this imagery to portray their deepest spiritual experience provides the warrant for a more extensive consideration of this erotic language in its original application.

The 1992 medieval theology workshop had been organized in response to the concern expressed at previous meetings that contemporary theologians have become insensitive to the rich resources of the Catholic tradition. The engagement of the participants at this year's workshop demonstrates, however, that the membership of the CTSA remains committed to the ongoing consideration of the Christian heritage.

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