

PLAYING WITH THE SPIRIT: A RESPONSE TO ELIZABETH DREYER

In her paper, Elizabeth Dreyer compares her collection of narratives of the Spirit to a smorgasbord of treats. I must confess that in pondering how to respond, I felt the way I do at a smorgasbord. Part of me wants to sample everything; another part knows I'd do better to stay with one or two dishes. I have opted for the latter.

First, I want to endorse strongly Dreyer's reminder to us about the richness and variety of the theology of the Middle Ages. If we restrict our appreciation of medieval theology to the scholastics, indeed, as is often done, to a few notable scholastics like Aquinas or Scotus, we miss the variety, the spice, the exuberance, the pathos, the drama, the love of life, the wisdom and whimsy contained in the works of some remarkable authors. There is such bounty here that we should all be motivated to brush up on our Latin and do some exploring for ourselves. Or at least we might take advantage of the work of historians who translate and interpret these texts for us. I suggest as a beginning place the provocative work being done on women visionaries by medievalists like Carolyn Walker Bynum and Barbara Newman, two of the finest.¹ Or we might digest the first two volumes of Bernard McGinn's *History of Western Christian Mysticism* as we eagerly await the third.² Dreyer's paper is a ringing call, following the lead of Karl Rahner, to understand spirituality as source *par excellence* for theology, most especially for theology of the Spirit.³ Indeed she calls us to consider works immediately reflective of spiritual experience, or pastorally concerned with

¹Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); idem, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, distributed by Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); idem, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Carolyn Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); idem, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

²*The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

³See *Theological Investigations 16: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

fostering it, as properly theological in themselves. Those of us who teach an historical approach to various theological topics would do well to include a few so-called "spiritual" writers in our curricular bow to the Middle Ages. Julian of Norwich, who had a little to say about almost every area of theology, would be an excellent choice.⁴ Dreyer has reminded us that medieval theology is always poorly represented by an exclusive attention to scholasticism.

Why bother with medieval theology at all, you might ask. Haven't we, with our advanced philosophies and historical-critical methodologies, moved far beyond the more primitive, imprecise, symbolic gropings of our nonscholastic medieval forebears? What can these curious medieval texts tell us that we don't know already? Can they, as Dreyer suggests, evoke for us "a more lively and relevant way to encounter the mystery of the Spirit in everyday life" and thus enrich our theology as we enter into the twenty-first century? She has given many affirmative answers to her question. Let me, too, explore the possibilities of this question by playing with one more medieval "text" in the time allotted for my response. Like the other neglected texts considered by Dreyer, the one I have chosen belongs to a category too seldom visited by contemporary academics—the realm of the visual arts. The main source for my reflections is a book already referenced by Dreyer: Barbara Newman's *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*.⁵

In a small, nondescript chapel dedicated to St. James in Urschalling, Bavaria, there survives a remarkable trinitarian fresco, dating from the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The figure depicted in the fresco is unified from the waist down. The figure's unity is further emphasized by the fact that it is surrounded by a single cloak, it has only two visible arms and hands, and the beams of a single cross are inscribed in the halos surrounding the three heads of the figure. But above the waist the figure separates into three torsos and faces, representing the three persons of the Trinity. To the right is the gray-bearded, kindly Father; to the left a younger, serene, golden-haired and bearded Son; but in between them is a sweet-faced, smiling young maiden clad in a rose colored garment. She looks to be just prepubescent, about eleven years of age. She is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, proceeding from Father and Son, each of whom rests a hand on her shoulder to support her, or perhaps, as Newman suggests, to restrain her.⁶ Indeed, with all the joyful exuberance of youth, she looks ready to leap out of the fresco to play in the world. With your indulgence, I'd like to play with her a bit.

When I say "play," I mean that honestly. Working with medieval symbolism can be maddening for systematians such as myself. We are taught to aim for

⁴Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

⁵See n. 1 above for reference.

⁶Newman, *From Virile Woman* 198-203. There is a photograph of the fresco opposite 198.

logical precision in our theological constructions, as if that were the only way to achieve intelligibility. Prescholastic medieval writers were far less concerned with freezing images into one idea in the interests of clarity. Their images often slip and slide from one referent to another. Reading medieval texts can remind us not to overintellectualize or literalize a given image, to stay with the *spirit* of the image, rather than sum it up exactly in one *word*. This can actually help us remain more true to our object, the Incomprehensible Mystery of God. For, as T. S. Eliot learned by trying to describe our relation to eternity,

... Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.⁷

Dreyer has shown us how especially appropriate this is to pneumatology. I therefore ask your indulgence for my theological imprecisions as I play with the Urschalling Holy Spirit. Two characteristics of this delightful image cry out for interpretation: her femaleness and her youth.

The first, her femaleness, deserves an extended treatment not possible in this short time span. Let a few words suffice. Newman links the Urschalling fresco to the memory of one Guglielma, a Bohemian princess who migrated to northern Italy in the 1260s and who inspired a small sect which worshipped her as the Incarnation of the Holy Spirit.⁸ In doing so, the Guglielmites were perhaps guilty of that overliteralizing of images I referred to earlier; history shows that such an impulse is not confined to our century. But their instinct that the exclusively male imagery attached to Jesus needs to be counterbalanced by female imagery is worth consideration. It shows that the human drive to worship a female deity is not easily restrained. If "Father" and "Son" are painted as exclusively male, the more amorphous Spirit is the logical depository for such devotion. If that effort is snuffed out, as it was, violently so, in the case of the Guglielmites, this devotional need migrates elsewhere to an image more palatable to ecclesial authorities. The main beneficiary of such devotion in Catholicism has been Mary.⁹ I find very telling a quotation from a Protestant student Elizabeth Johnson cites in *She Who Is*: "When I began the study of Catholic theology, every place I expected to find an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit I found

⁷"Four Quartets: Burnt Norton," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971) 121.

⁸On the history of the Guglielmites see Newman, *From Virile Woman*, 185-95, 212-15.

⁹See Newman's discussion of the "Marian Trinity" and its evidence in art, *From Virile Woman*, 200-208.

Mary."¹⁰ I would encourage Dreyer to add the theme of the female Holy Spirit to those she will consider in her ongoing research. Further, she might explore how medieval Mariology helps to answer her question about the silences of the Spirit.

Now let us consider the youth of the Urschalling Holy Spirit, the Spirit as "child" of the Trinity. Medieval writers sometimes found in the persons of the Trinity a parallel to the three ages of human life. For example, Mechthild's God tells her, "Your childhood was a companion of my Holy Spirit, your youth was a bride of my humanity; now your old age is a housewife to my divinity."¹¹ Medieval Joachites saw a similar parallel to the epochs of human history; the age of the Holy Spirit, being last, is the youngest. If we can contain ourselves, and not short-circuit too precipitously this image of the Holy Spirit's youth in the interests of avoiding trinitarian subordinationism, we might gain some useful insights from imagining the Holy Spirit as the "child" of the Trinity.

My friends who teach elementary school tell me that nine-year-old to eleven-year-old children are the most fun to teach. They are no longer babies, needing coddling. They are not yet inhibited by adolescent peer pressure or adult responsibility. They are free, exuberant, creative, often refreshingly unstructured in their approach to life, open to new ideas and projects. Aren't these some of the characteristics we instinctively attribute to the Holy Spirit?

Considering the Holy Spirit as child puts a new layer of meaning into Jesus' warning: "Whoever does not receive the reign of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). As we know from scriptural scholarship, Jesus was referring not to childhood innocence, but to the fact that children in his society had no status.¹² They were therefore content to be in the last place, content to be themselves, not needing status or hierarchical privilege to forge their identities. Jesus' commendation of childhood as the ideal attitude for God's reign is thus subversive of patriarchy. It is the Spirit living in us who enables this attitude of spiritual childhood. Can we allow ourselves, as Church, to give ourselves over to the Spirit's childlike influence, and dismantle the trappings of patriarchy which continue to inhibit her free play in our Church and world?

Considering the Spirit as child in this sense brings to mind the related theme of the Spirit's self-effacement, which suggests to me another answer to Dreyer's question about the silences of the Spirit. I remember learning early in my religious instruction that the Spirit does not call attention to self, but rather directs us to Jesus, through whom we return to God the source and goal of our being.

¹⁰Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 129-30.

¹¹Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* VII.3 cited in Newman, *From Virile Woman* 151.

¹²Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 147-51.

In her novel *The Children of Men*, P. D. James posits a world in the not too distant future which has seen no children born for twenty-five years.¹³ How chilling! Reading this novel made me realize how essential children are to our sense of meaning and purpose in life. What happens to what we treasure if there is no new generation to receive it from us to refashion and reshape to their own benefit? Childless myself, I have watched the children of my friends grow to maturity. Now those children are having babies. James' novel made me realize that I would trade this experience for very little else in my life. Why? Children remind us, I think, of the perennial renewal of life, of the fact that everything in life isn't old and tired, even while some things do get that way. I have a friend who regularly gives retreat weekends entitled "Rediscovering the Child Within," wherein participants are invited to revisit the wonder of their childhood, perhaps to discover some unrealized potential for the renewal of life.

Is this not what we ask of the Spirit when we pray that she "renew the face of the earth?" As Johnson says in *She Who Is*, Spirit-Sophia "initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. . . . Thanks to her power the dry bones of a whole people will reconnect, be en fleshed, and live."¹⁴ So, too, the Spirit of Hopkins' magnificent poem continually enables "that dearest freshness deep down things,"¹⁵ in our natural world, in the depths of our hearts, in our interpersonal relationships, in our ecclesial and civil societies, in our communion with God.

The title of James' novel *The Children of Men* is an allusion to Proverbs 8 where Spirit-Sophia, eternal Godchild, plays in creation, rejoicing in the world, delighting in the children of humanity. Will we play with her? Or will we restrain her playfulness? I mentioned earlier that the Father and Son in the Urschalling Trinity seem to be restraining the Spirit in her eagerness to spring forth from them. In its overmasculinized, hierarchical, static vision of God, our Western theological tradition has too often done the same. Our ecclesial institutions have squelched attempts to worship God as female, have restricted and controlled the Spirit's charismatic play in the Church, especially in women's lives. Like overprotective parents, they have stifled the Spirit-child's development. This, sadly, continues today.

But, happily, there is another tradition, far more enduring and normative, which remembers that Father and Son have not restrained but sent the Spirit out to us as the inner renewing life and hope of our humanity. Would it be presumptuous to suggest that, as theologians, we are, in a special sense, the Spirit's guardians, charged with nurturing her gifts so they may come to fruition? Like parenting, such guardianship is a delicate task. We need to learn how to

¹³(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

¹⁴Johnson, *She Who Is*, 135, 138.

¹⁵"God's Grandeur" in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 1970) 66.

encourage and enable the Spirit's creativity and freedom, within properly protective boundaries. We know well our need for the discipline of spiritual discernment and for the discipline of our theological craft. But within these parameters, the theologian is called to allow God's Spirit-child to play freely, creating the genuinely new, perhaps ushering in a "new age" of the Spirit, as we approach the third millenium. Dreyer's paper provides us with much food for that journey. I invite you to take and eat!

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