

Patterns of Polemic¹: Medieval Women and Christian Doctrinal Reform

Robert Green

The Christianity of medieval England and continental Europe was a fragmented one. The proliferation of monastic communities allowed for individualized interpretations of Christian practice to flourish, during the same period that Christian communities and institutions came to serve secular as well as supernatural roles. Reactions against encroaching secular influence on the supernatural mission of Christian communities and institutions created tension within the church, as well as the opportunity for new interpretations of the Christian mission and practice to take hold. Heresies that challenged Christian doctrinal hierarchy demanded immediate attention from church authorities who wished to preserve stability and their own status. Christian authorities who engaged in efforts to reform the church and its institutions in the face of these tensions were presented with simultaneous tasks of overcoming and suppressing popular heresies that threatened to take hold, establishing a rule both inside and outside the monasteries that navigated a course between institutional sameness and individual ecclesiastical zeal, and preserving gender and class hierarchies both within the church and society at large. Women—in popular legend and hagiography, as troublesome practitioners of Christian faith, and as subjects at large—played a substantial part these reform efforts.

How did the women who participated in, or who become targets of, medieval doctrinal reforms impact the outcomes of those efforts? What conditions and behaviors gave rise to them?

¹ I have taken my title from the title of an essay that greatly influenced my work here: "The Prostitute-Priest, Patterns of Polemic Against Medieval Waldensian Women Preachers" by Beverly Mayne Kienzle.

And how did the reformers succeed in perpetuating an aggressively anti-feminist Christian doctrine?

The institutional location of women within the medieval church, the convent, faced a number of unprecedented challenges by the early middle ages. Specifically, the nunneries of Medieval England, usually the province of the daughters of upper-class families, came to serve as a sort of dumping ground for the unmarried daughters of the wealthy. In some cases, young girls, who probably did not fully appreciate the magnitude of their choices, made lifelong commitments to the nunnery (Daichman 98). At the same time, older women, especially well-off widows, flocked to medieval convents where both they and the financial support they had to offer were welcomed by convents in constant need of financial support. There were sometimes economic advantages of making public vows and entering the convent for the women themselves, which partially explains the popularity of the convents among widows.² Joining the convent offered women the opportunity to exert greater control over their own lives, free from male intrusion and pressure to remarry (Erler 167).

These women, however, were particularly ill-suited to a lifestyle of self-effacing religious devotion that the convent called on them to undertake: They were accustomed to the positions of authority and prestige they had enjoyed before joining the convent. The demands that they made on the fellow nuns and abbesses, as well as their vocal dissatisfactions with the monastic life, were a recipe for conventual strife, both between wealthy older widows who had no plans to

² Erler mentions that, in some cases, concerned husbands left cash rewards for public vows of chastity to their surviving wives. Additionally, Erler points out that, for many women, attaining the elevated social status of a vowess—superior to that of a mere widow—allowed them to act in legal and economic spheres. She cites the cases of three 15th century vowesses, Alice Lynne, Joan Gedney, and Alice Brice, who, thanks to their legal and economic prowess, are able to secure the inheritances of their children and grandchildren as well as manage business ventures, accumulate land, and lend money.

forego lives of prestige and privilege and their “often equally high-minded and domineering abbesses,” as well as between authentic religious devotees and the “child-nuns” and surplus daughters of wealthy Britons, who had little enthusiasm for the austere, pious lifestyle of the convents (Daichman 99). In some cases, church authorities tried to redress grievances and mediate these disagreements. Graciela S. Daichman points to a 13th century instruction from the Dominican Order to the nuns of Saint Lambert regarding a new admittee, the Countess Agnes of Orlamunde:

“If she does not want to eat with the convent community, she may enjoy the privileges of the infirmary. Her name is not to be entered on the lists for service; she is to be entitled to sleep cushions, is not to be called up for the daily reading of the chapters and is not to be burdened with work. All this is to be granted to her and to any person of higher rank, even to all those who come to the convent from a more refined way of living, and it is not to be deemed a violation of the rules.”

It is easy to see how such exceptions could create friction within the convent community. Over time, church authorities came to regard with horror the conditions within the nunneries, both because of the generous exceptions conceded to “persons of higher rank” and because of what they understood to be the heresies and misbehavior of the less devout segments of the convent population. Efforts to reform such behavior played into a broader trend of monastic reform that had come into full swing by the 11th century and continued throughout the Middle Ages.

Some of the more sensational occasions of action against nuns gone astray involved drastic and sometimes gruesome action by church authorities. In the case of Amesbury, a well-established and prestigious house in England, the order was dissolved and the nuns relocated by

the order of Pope Alexander—with the assent of King Henry II and Richard Archbishop of Canterbury, after the abbess was said to have given birth three times, and a number of the nuns there “leading sinful lives.” Diachman also cites the case of a girl who was placed at age four into the double monastery of Watton. According to Giles Constable, she grew into “a frivolous and lascivious young woman who resisted all efforts at correction and remained without inclination for monastic life of love of God” (Daichman 99). Eventually, she became pregnant by a Gilbertine canon. He was castrated, and she and some of her fellow nuns were publicly dishonored.

Although it is these sensational cases that seemed to draw most of the attention of church leaders, the prosecution of minor impunities seemed to be the order of medieval monastic life, both for men and women. Diachman cites numerous examples of vicars, chaplains, and priests who violated their vows of celibacy, and numerous other rules, regularly.³ After all, they “moved about the convent and had perfectly easy and justified access to it,” and “could practically tempt and absolve a sinner in the same breath” (Daichman 104). Catherine of Siena likely spoke for much of the church hierarchy’s perception of the condition in the monasteries when she said: “In miserable fashion they fulfill their lusts; and the fruits which appear are such as I know well you have seen, children to wit.”⁴

³ Diachman points out the most of the infractions that occurred in these institutional settings were minor infractions, and she stresses that such misbehavior was by no means the sole provenance of women. Far more attention was paid, by both laity and church authorities, to the most sensational cases of clerical misbehavior, which Diachman points out certainly led to a dramatic sensationalization of the conditions in the monasteries and convents.

⁴ Additionally, Archbishop Johannis Peckam wrote to Romsey Abbey in 1289 that: “In a lily garden, the Bridegroom is filled with delight, and finds pleasure gathering lilies above all other flowers. It is therefore needful to enclose this garden by defence of shrewd and sharp discipline, as the Paradise of God was enclosed by angelic care and the flaming sword, lest the entrance be opened to the serpent into the same.”

The helplessness, for over three centuries, of church authorities in the face of this crisis points to the difficulty of their task as well as the fragmentation of the church and the extent to which its ideals had been diluted by the secular missions it had taken up. The few tools the church held for correcting the indulgences and sinfulness of the monasteries and convents were as unimaginative and ineffective as procuring a confession and penance from the guilty parties before allowing them to return to the fold.⁵ Throughout the Middle Ages, Episcopal visitations were often the only occasions that conventual misconduct might be uncovered, and many in the church came to regard scandal as more serious than actual sin, particularly those sins which could be easily kept under wraps.⁶

Often the discourses that developed in excoriations of misbehaving abbesses and nuns were handily applied to other women whom the church authorities came to view as threats. A number of heresies that arose during the middle ages, both in France and England, drew the attention and condemnation of church authorities there, particularly the Lollards in England and the Waldensians in France. Both movements carried a similar anti-clerical and anti-papal doctrine of individual piety rather than salvation through the church hierarchy, and the message seems to have resonated widely both in England and France.

The Constitutions of Thomas of Arundel, written by the stridently anti-Lollard Archbishop of Canterbury, provide a glimpse into some of the more aggressive measures that were taken in later medieval England to suppress alternate Christian ideologies from flowering. Arundel's *Constitutions* were preceded by King Henry IV's *De heretico comburendo*, which eight

⁵ Daichman points out that the guilty parties in virtually all instances of misconduct, most of which were minor anyway, were subject to only minor reprimands.

⁶ Daichman mention of monasteries and convents whose only oversight from church authorities came during annual, or even rarer, Episcopal visitations, indicates to me a church that is not only ideologically fragmented, but geographically fragmented as well.

years earlier prohibited English translations of the Bible and stipulated that heretics were to be burned at the stake. Along similar lines, Arundel's *Constitutions* forbids any preaching or ministering not expressly authorized by the church. Arundel prohibits any questioning of established church doctrine, and takes time to mention John Wyciffe, the founder of the Lollard movement, by name. The *Constitutions* also prohibit any schoolmasters or instructors from providing any teaching related to the church or the sacraments. The *Constitutions* also take care to prohibit any translations of the Bible, and any discussion of God or his attributes in philosophical terms. Arundel also prescribes specific punishments for the offenses that he enumerates, such as excommunication from the church and expulsion from the universities. Arundel darkly suggests that such offenses will be "lawfully punished."⁷

One group that was especially troubling to medieval reformers such as Arundel was vocal women preachers. Many enjoyed great popularity and prestige throughout Europe, and hagiographical and popular Christian literature contained no shortage of compelling female protagonists who engaged in active, sometimes anti-authoritarian Christian practice. These women clashed directly with church authorities who prescribed a limited realm to women and expressly forbade women from preaching or ministering, especially during this period of obsessive emphasis on female chastity (broadly understood as acting within designated parameters, in matters both sexual and otherwise)⁸ as a barometer for theological health, and a period of concern over the outlets of Christian doctrine and interpretation.

⁷ This points to the church collaborating with the state to exact gruesome capital punishments on convicted heretics, without bearing direct or full responsibility for the decision to do so.

⁸ As I will indicate below, an effective rhetorical device in the argument against women preaching was to associate female ministry—and even women themselves—necessarily with heresy and sexual impropriety. Diachman cites a popular proverb of medieval England: "A woman ought to have either a husband or a wall."

Such behavior on the part of medieval women is understandable given the literary precedents of the time. Popular literature of the day, conveyed both orally and in writing, bears account of a number of holy women, part of a ‘golden age’ of piety that readers and listeners living during this period—one of growing concern over flagging morals in religious institutions—might have viewed as in decline. Such popular texts included accounts of female saints who lived during the first few centuries of the church and engaged in fantastic, often anti-authoritarian acts against oppressive and immoral pagan authorities. Drawing parallels between the oppressive and morally bankrupt authorities presented in popular hagiography and the oppressive leaders of a church whose institutions were ever more frequently being called into question must have been tempting, and church authorities who used women as scapegoats for what they perceived to be a decline in both popular and institutional devotion, and who tried to limit the number and influence of vocal women in the church must have made tempting targets. Far from being the passive victims of increasingly aggressive reform efforts throughout the Middle Ages, some women seized the reins of interpretation themselves, and, perhaps drawing from inspirational tales of outspoken, counter-hegemonic female saints of centuries past, threw themselves into lives of public devotion and, sometimes, public ministry. In some extraordinary cases, these women engaged in active and dangerous criticisms of church authorities and the church hierarchy. Christina of Markyate, an eleventh-century English nun, took an oath of chastity and refused to consummate a marriage forced upon her by her morally compromised, but Christian, parents.⁹ Up to a certain point, the narrative of her life mirrors those of a number

⁹ The author of *The Life* spends a lot of time detailing the corruptness of Christina’s family; in one of the most disturbing passages in the text, Christina’s family conspires to help the man they have forced her into marriage with rape her in order to crush her vow of virginity.

of other legendary female saints¹⁰, narratives that would have been familiar to Christina and whose arc typically followed women living in pagan societies from a conversion to Christianity and an accompanying vow of lifelong virginity, to a forceful and unsuccessful courtship by morally lacking but socially desirable men, and finally to continued devotion under duress and, usually, martyrdom. If the parallels between Christina's story and that of the virgin martyr archetype are drawn out, Christina's family and the church authorities who become complicit with her suitor, Beorhtred, are placed in the role of pagans and other assorted non-Christians and Christian heretics who populate medieval legends of early women saints. The discussion that Christina engages in with her family, her suitor, and church authorities as well as society at large extends far beyond questions of virginity or female ministry, to one of control over the body¹¹, balance between religious devotion and secular temptation, and the balance between institutionalized religious practice and individual devotional zeal.¹²

One important forerunner of Christina of Markyate, a woman whose story is remarkably similar to Christina's (excepting the martyrdom at the end), is Saint Margaret of Antioch, a fourth-century virgin martyr whose story was popular in England during Christina's lifetime (Reames 111). The glories and difficulties of preserving virginity, which were conveyed to Christina during her childhood by an early mentor, the nearby canon of Huntington, Sueno, doubtlessly were informed by legends of Margaret and other virgin martyrs of the early church.

¹⁰ Women such as Mary Magdalene, Saint Anne, Margaret of Antioch and Katherine of Alexandria, whose hagiographies would have been popular stories during this period. I will discuss many of them further below.

¹¹ One of the most compelling points in *The Life* occurred when Christina argues that by breaching her commitment to God, Beorhtred runs the risk of incurring the wrath of God as one might incur the wrath of a jealous lover. On page 17 of the text, Christina responds to allegations from a church authority that her husband has control over her body by saying "I do now know that passages of Scriptures you have quoted but I will reply to you, my Lord Prior, in accordance with their meaning."

¹² Margery Kempe, in particular, seems to me to exemplify the dangers of publicly displayed individual ecclesiastical zeal.

Another such virgin martyr whose life likely resonated with Christina and, indeed, with a wide cross-section of medieval women, was Katherine of Alexandria, who, according to legend¹³, was a noted scholar who managed to convert the wife of Roman Emperor Maxentius to Christianity before being beheaded in the fourth century (Reames 169).

Another Englishwoman, who lived several centuries after Christina and made vaguely similar devotions, also doubtlessly informed by legends and hagiographies of earlier women saints that were popular in medieval England: Margery Kempe. Kempe's story unfolded very differently from Christina's—she spent many years as a married woman, gave birth to over a dozen children, and made two abortive attempts at home-based start-up businesses before she decided to leave her marriage, become a vegetarian, and take up a life of chastity and ministry. Toward the end of her life, she returned to her hometown and dictated her biography—the first autobiography in the English language—to a succession of scribes. We know from that text that a figure who inspired Kempe and must have given her some sense of historical precedent for her own path of devotion was fifteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich. One of the most remarkable aspects of Julian's work is her radical re-imagining of the relationship between God and humanity. In Julian's works, God is portrayed as a nurturing, maternal figure, rather than the distant, judging, and condemning God that is typical of most writers within mainstream Christianity during her lifetime, and many even today.

Margery also, like Christina, drew inspiration from the popular hagiographies of her day, and some of these stories were well-suited to her individual circumstances. In particular, medieval English accounts of the life of Mary Magdalene, the penitent and apostle of Jesus, must

¹³ Reames mentions that many historians today doubt that Katherine actually existed and suggest that her story might instead have been intended as an allegory.

have carried profound meaning for Margery. The Mary Magdalene of popular English medieval legend was actually a composite character constructed from short, poorly detailed biblical passages about at least three different women: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the female penitent who washed Christ's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair three nights before the Last Supper. The composite story of Mary Magdalene had made its way into Bede's martyrology by 720 and into the Old English Martyrology by 900 (Reames 51). The account of Mary Magdalene's devotion had an astoundingly wide appeal, it seems: her feast day was ranked highly on the summer calendar, she was the first female saint to have a college at Oxford devoted to her (where the students were exclusively male, of course), and was among the most common saints to appear in artwork in English churches and manuscripts (Reames 52). She was depicted variously as a redeemed and penitent sinner, which allowed her to appeal to virtually any Christian—and female sexual sinners as well (Reames 53).¹⁴ She was used as a model of charity because of her care for Christ's body after his death. Likely the most compelling aspect of the story for Margery Kempe was Mary Magdalene's early loss of chastity. It is clear that, in spite of her early lifestyle, some allege as a prostitute, Mary Magdalene was able to fully atone for her sins and reclaim a life of chastity, and, possibly, restored virginity, through penance and love for Christ. Not only did she erase the stain of her sins, but she even enjoyed a personal relationship and individual instruction from Christ, and had become highly ranked among the most revered Christian figures—male or female—by Margery's lifetime. Her restored sanctity, even following a life of sin, must have been reassuring for Margery, who agonized over what she viewed as her early transgressions and her reluctance to respond to God's call, in the visions following her first pregnancy, to a sanctified life.

¹⁴ Reames points out that she was named the patron saint of convents that were built to house former prostitutes and hostels built for pilgrims.

Women such as Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe sought spiritual purity, as well as respect and devotion through lives of public ministry. They engaged in active re-interpretations of Christian narratives and Christian doctrine, based in part on the values and gender roles they extrapolated from their readings of popular legend and hagiography. Church authorities, however, were rarely accommodating to these new understandings of what it could mean to be a medieval Christian woman in England and throughout Europe. Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich did receive some measure of renown for their lives of devotion, but the more radical aspects of their teachings never made it into mainstream Christian doctrine. Accounts of all of these women, like the accounts of earlier female saints they drew inspiration from, were passed through male intermediaries, such as scribes and editors, before they made their way to popular consumption. Margery Kempe, however, faced constant accusations of heresy and impropriety from church authorities during her travels. Indeed, she was repeatedly imprisoned for her alleged wrongs.

In many cases, the works that these women produced, while being kept intact, were nonetheless subjected to the editorial control of male church figures and male scribes. Julian's central work, The Showings of Julian of Norwich, included a passage—the final paragraph of the text—which was most likely inserted by a seventeenth-century scribe editor (Colledge and Walsh? 343):

"May Jesus grant this. Amen. So ends the revelation of love of the blessed Trinity, shown by our savior Jesus Christ for our endless comfort and solace, and also that we may rejoice in him in the passing journey of this life. Amen. Jesus. Amen. I pray almighty God that this book may not come except into the hands of those who wish to be his faithful lovers, and those who will submit themselves to the faith of Holy Church and

obey the wholesome understanding and teaching of men who are of virtuous life, settled age, and profound learning; for this revelation is exalted diversity and wisdom, and therefore it cannot remain with him who is a slave to sin and the devil. And beware that you do not accept one thing which is according to your pleasure and liking, and reject another, for that is the disposition of heretics. But accept it all together, and understand it truly; it agrees with Holy Scripture, and is founded upon it, and Jesus, our true love and light and truth, will show this to all pure souls who meekly and perseveringly ask this wisdom from him. And you to whom this book will come, give our saviour Christ Jesus great and hearty thanks that he made these showings and revelations for you and to you out of his endless love, mercy and goodness, for a safe guide and conduct for you and us to everlasting bliss, which may Jesus grant us. Amen. Here end the sublime and wonderful revelations of the unutterable love of God, in Jesus Christ vouchsafed to a dear lover of his, and in her to all his dear friends and lovers whose hearts like hers do flame in the love of our dearest Jesus."

The placement of this editorial addition to the text suggests its purpose: to deter any individual or 'illegitimate' interpretation of Julian's work, that is, any interpretation of the text not sanctioned by church authorities. Such additions were not uncommon,¹⁵ and were intended to intimidate (Crampton 206).

Church authorities who sought to limit the multiplicity of interpretations of Christian doctrine and heal the fissures of the fragmented church seized upon convenient polemics for dealing with women such as Margery who posited understandings of Christianity that they viewed as dangerous. Drawing from the increasing concern about and attention to sexual

¹⁵ Crampton points out that a similar prohibition was inserted by a male scribe at the beginning of Julian's The Cloud of Unknowing.

impropriety, particularly among members of the clergy and nuns in the convents, they unfurled a devastating discourse that grouped unorthodox understandings of the lessons of Christ and the Saints with popular movements within the church deemed heretical, such as the Lollards, and with sexual impropriety.

A heresy similar to that of the Lollards in England arose in France among a group known as the Waldensians. A group of them traveled to Rome in 1179 to seek approval before Pope Alexander III and the Third Lateran Council for their way of life, as well as to ask for permission to preach. The Pope granted them his affirmation, but warned them against preaching without authorization (Kienzle 99). Much like the Lollards, however, the Waldensians continued to preach, reasoning that they owed obedience to God rather than to human authorities.¹⁶ Attacks on Waldensian women who preached without church authorization established a pattern for associating doctrinal misconduct with sexual misconduct that was later picked up in attacks against prominent women who were accused of heresy such as Margery Kempe. In a treatise by Geoffrey of Auxerre, a thirteenth century abbot of Clairvaux, he comments that “Paul spoke well when he forbade women from speaking in churches and said that they should ask their husbands at home.” Geoffrey goes further, specifying that women are to ask at home, not outside; ask questions, not presume to preach; and ask their husbands, not each other; and their husbands, not someone else’s (Kienzle 101).

Geoffrey, and other authors of misogynist polemics of the period, make plain what they view as the dangers of women who preach. He relays an account of two women, followers of Waldensian founder Peter Valdes, who make a brutal verbal assault on the bishop of Claremont,

¹⁶ Similar disagreements over the propriety and extent of devotion to church versus supernatural authorities led to tensions that later fed into the Protestant Reformation a few centuries later.

who has condemned their sect: “After the preaching every day [we were] feasting splendidly; almost every night we were choosing new lovers for ourselves; bothersome to no one, without care, without toil; passing time without danger to life.” Such dubious accounts of exaggerated licentiousness show the impact of concerns about conventual piety on discussions of ministerial legitimacy and a gender hierarchy of the church. That such comments resonated with Arundel’s audience also shows how effective the rhetorical strategies of tarring vocal women as promiscuous and immoral, no matter how fantastic the charges, really were.

Authorities within the fragmented medieval European church sought to shore up divergent views of the faith through a variety of means. One of the persistently troublesome groups for them were vocal women, who seized on hagiographical and legendary accounts of active female saints and holy people within the early church as corroboration for their decisions to undertake lives of public ministry. In some cases, prominent women even engaged in active criticism of church authorities and of church institutions, such as the monasteries and convents, which seemed to be veering astray, as focus intensified on accounts of sexual misconduct. These episodes also presented some women with the impetus to seek out alternative models of devotion, outside of such morally compromised church institutions as the convents. Church authorities, however, were able to forestall further fragmentation of the church by seizing on the patterns of polemic that created easy scapegoats for episodes of clerical misconduct: women, especially, but not exclusively, heretical women, as harlots, temptresses, and sexually unrestrained, animalistic beings in need of suppression, correction, and constant male domination. This line of thought is one that is all too familiar, centuries later with us. Medieval women were by no means the passive victims of this imposition of gender hierarchy, however: women such as Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe, as well as many

others, engaged in an active struggle of interpretation with church authorities to determine the lessons of Christ, and the implications of them for church doctrine and for women in the church.

Works Cited

- Daichman, Graciela. "Misconduct in the Medieval Nunnery: Fact, not Fiction." That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity. Ed. Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990. 97-118.
- Erler, Mary C. "Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses." <http://monasticmatrix.org/MatrixTextLibrary/51Text.pdf>
- Kienzle, Beverly Mayne. "The Prostitute-Preacher: Patterns of Polemic against Medieval Waldensian Women Preachers." Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millenia of Christianity. Ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998. 99-114
- Millet, Bella, and Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn. "Saint Margaret." Medieval English Prose for Women. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1990. 44-86.
- Norwich, Julian. The Shewings of Julian of Norwich. ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton. Middle English Texts Ser. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 1994.
- Norwich, Julian. The Showings of Julian of Norwich. ed. Edmund Colledge, James Walsh, and Jean Leclercq. The Classics of Western Spirituality ser. New York: Paulist Press. 1978.
- Reames, Sherry L. Middle English Legends of Women Saints. Middle English Texts Ser. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 2003.

Kempe, Margery. The Book of Margery Kempe. Trans. Lynn Staley. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 2001.

The Life of Christina of Markyate. Trans. C. H. Talbot. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1959.