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A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women’s Experience and Men’s Thought

J. Giles Milhaven

In the last decade or so, a number of women writers have made the point that only through the body can human beings know adequately what is good and worthwhile in human life. To discern with any adequacy human values and their relative importance, one has to experience them physically. This epistemological claim is no novelty in Western thought, but women writers, eminently Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, and Haunani-Kay Trask make the claim particularly plausible and urgent in their chilling critique of male-dominated Western culture.

The women score the neglect of bodily knowing in areas of human decision and action. Such areas include war and peace, social justice, reproduction and sexuality, education, and interpersonal relations in general. To decide and act well, it is critical to know how valuable in the situation are the various realities at stake. In modern, western culture, these values are wrongly or inadequately assessed because, among other things, males continuing and shaping the culture use only a disembodied, "rational" mode of knowing.

Since I have learned from and agree with this epistemological critique, I look for more conceptual articulation than is provided by the cited women writers or by the few male authors I know, such as James Nelson, Andre Guindon, Leon Kass, and Don Browning, who argue, in conscious opposition to their Western tradition, for the intrinsic value and importance of the bodily in human life. These thinkers, male and
female, do not examine systematically what the bodily is, wherein lies its peculiar value, and, in particular, how it can be a unique knowing. The same may be said of my own recent attempts to mark the relevance and range of bodily affective knowing in reproductive choices, in college education, and in sex and the erotic generally. So, too, my earlier, more general arguments for an ethical epistemology that universally endorses such knowing.

I have, therefore, a question, which I can state variously. How do human beings know values through their bodies? What is this bodily knowing of value? What is meant here by "bodily"? My question reflects perhaps an overrational male mind's need to do the impossible, to reduce the nonrational to the rational. But it seems pertinent—I nearly said "reasonable"—to ask what distinguishes bodily knowing of value from nonbodily knowing, real or alleged, of value.

I look for an idea of bodily knowing that does not pretend to encapsule bodily knowing itself, but points respectfully to it in experience. A start would be a list of recognizable traits of some bodily experience that grasps human values. The list could help to locate the experience and clear ground for a more intrinsic phenomenology. On the basis of the more internal phenomenology, then, one might determine more exactly what this bodily knowing knows and where and how it can be exercised and applied.

In the present essay I propose such a starting list. I propose it as a tentative working identification of some bodily knowing which we humans have of major values of our lives. I derive the list from women's experience in the middle ages brought recently to light by research of Caroline Walker Bynum and Johanna Ziegler. At each trait on the list I offer inchoative analysis and phenomenology to suggest how this medieval experience is, for all the great differences, analogous to experience we have today and how it illuminates the question about the nature of bodily knowing.

I

The modern era is not the first time that women urged on the dominantly male culture a bodily way of knowing. Christian medieval piety was more bodily than ever before in Christianity. It became more and more bodily as the Middle Ages progressed. As Bynum and Ziegler point out, this "physicality" of devotion was found much more in women than in men.

Bynum stresses the consonance between this trend of popular piety
and the contemporary development of medieval theology. The theologians, mainly male, came in the same time period to give more credit to the bodily, as they did to humanness in general. Bynum affirms a parallel progress of the male theologians and the devout women and suggest a mutual influence (Bynum:1984:199-201; 1985a:12a-13).

The parallel, however, between the women’s devotion and the theologians’ ideas falls short. The women’s religious experience reported by Ziegler and Bynum outran the theology. Bynum notes some of this divergence but does not get to the point that I make in the present essay. In the very extent of its physicality, the experience contradicted the theology. The women experienced physically as real knowing what theologians generally ignored or denied could be real knowing.

In the middle ages, as in succeeding centuries, Church theologians generally treated religious experiences of this extremely physical and popular kind as delusion or, at best, pious imagining. It was not a knowing of anything real. The theologians did not criticize the official toleration and popular enthusiasm for such experience. They did not contest that the experience might be genuinely pious and, under competent supervision, might have good spiritual effect on the faithful. But by ignoring or by explicit cautioning they treated this physical devotion as essentially subjective. A modern atheist must treat the women’s religious experience as unreal because the experience was religious. The medieval theologians treated the women’s experience as subjective because the experience was too bodily.

Yet the reason for the theologians’ recalcitrance is not immediately evident. By the Thirteenth Century the theologians, aided by Aristotle, were affirming more strongly than ever the goodness of the human body and its indispensable, positive place in human life. A human being did not live in his body; he was his body as he was his soul. He had bodily knowing distinct from rational knowing. Why then did the theologians deny, or refuse to affirm, that the kind of bodily experience the women reported could be true knowing? What in the experience led them to reject it? What characteristics of the experience which the women claimed to be genuine knowing compelled the theologians to treat it as pious fantasy?

This is the immediate enterprise of the present essay. What traits of the medieval women’s experience could the theologians not accept as characteristic of true knowing? What unacceptable traits emerge clearly in that the epistemology of the theologians rejects them in principle and the women describe them in flesh?

Neither Bynum and Ziegler nor I claims an absolute division
between women and men in the respects in which we contrast them. Assuredly not all medieval women were affected significantly, or at all, by the embodying trend of medieval spirituality. Bynum describes how the physicality of devotion she finds widespread in medieval women is verified for some medieval men. She adds, however, “Moreover, careful reading of the texts produced by male mystics reveals that those whose piety comes closest to that of their female contemporaries were invariably involved with advising communities of nuns, were usually deeply influenced by their own mothers, and were inclined to describe themselves as women. Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi and Henry Suso, for example, all preferred female images for themselves.” (Bynum, 1985a:6; cf. 1987, chapters 3 and 10). Bernard McGinn has kindly drawn my attention to a good deal of evidence in some male medieval thinkers, especially the mystics, for the kind of “physical knowing” I argue for in the present essay. McGinn offers as illustration a description by Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075-1129) of a dream vision he had of the living Christ. “I took hold of him whom my soul loved. I held him. I embraced him, I kissed him for a long time. . . . in the midst of the kiss he opened his mouth so that I could kiss more deeply.”

I noted above a few modern male ethicists who join women in appreciating bodily knowing. Some modern women seem to me to think principally along the exclusively rational tracks of the culture. Nevertheless, on the whole, a similar tension seems to hold roughly in the late Twentieth Century in this country and in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries in the Low Countries and Germany. In both settings, many women prize bodily knowing to an extent which contemporary male thinkers generally do not. I will describe this tension in its medieval setting and try to bring out its analogy to what occurs today.

II

My reflections were set in motion by the exhibition at the College of the Holy Cross entitled “THE WORD BECOMES FLESH,” curated by Joanna Ziegler. My thought was stimulated further by the connected symposium, organized by Ziegler, entitled “THE WORD BECOMES FLESH. Radical Physicality in Religious Sculpture of the Later Middle Ages.” The pieces of the exhibition were examples of the extremely

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physical kind of sculpture commonplace in the Low Countries in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. In the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue and in her paper at the symposium, Ziegler argued that the art responded to a demand of the women's religious movement of the time. The "radical physicality" of the art reflected the physicality of the women's piety (1985a:9-37 and 1985b).

This Low Countries art, like much Rhenish art of the time, tended to portray moments of the this-worldly life of Christ and his followers, where earlier art had generally portrayed their joy, glory, and triumph after death. Far more than artists of Christendom had ever done, the Low Countries artists expressed "physical and psychological states of being" recognizable by their viewers then and today (Ziegler, 1985a:13). The artists did so by force of physical detail. The pieces of the Holy Cross exhibition assault the senses of the viewer with the agony of Jesus in his passion and death or with the responding anguish of Mary, John, and other followers: twisted grimace beneath the thorns, sagging shoulders beneath the cross, open mouth of horror, spread arms and legs embracing the foot of the cross, etc. (1985a:39-61). The reader may recall a passion scene of a Grunewald or Riemenschneider.

Walking from one wooden figure to another in the Holy Cross exhibition, one was—stunned? shocked? drawn to? repelled?—by the agony portrayed. It was hard to avoid feeling some of the feelings of the figure. It was hard to avoid some "physical and psychological" feeling of one's own, whether empathetic or antipathetic. This is another novelty of the new art. Not only did it depict familiar bodily feelings, but it tended to involve the spectator in physical, emotional response to the feelings of the figures.

All art—Ziegler cited Huizinga—is applied art. The market for an art shapes the art. Much of the market shaping this art, Ziegler argued, was devout women of that time and place. "[W]ith the thirteenth century the women's religious movement constituted one of the largest and most serious components of the new piety, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. . . . In fact, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that women were the dominant feature along the Rhine and in the Low Countries . . ." (1985a:19). The new devotion of the women, in particular their devotion to the Eucharist, created the demand for the art. Ziegler analyzed the art, particularly the original art form of the Pieta, to suggest how the physicality of the art reflected the Eucharistic piety of the women.

Ziegler supported her conclusion by her research into not only art but also written records of the life and Eucharistic piety of women of
northwestern Europe in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. She concentrated on the communities of lay women called Beguines, which were then found throughout the Low Countries, and invoked convergent research by Caroline Bynum (Bynum:1984, 1985a, 1985b, and 1987).

Bynum recorded evidence of various sorts to show how the piety of women of the late middle ages was more physical than any Christian piety before it. The women's devotion epitomized this. Unprecedented in Europe was the eagerness of the faithful, especially women, to receive the Eucharist, to eat of the bread, drink of the wine, and thus receive Christ within them. Similar was their eagerness to venerate the Eucharist when consecrated bread and wine were placed in a tabernacle of the church and they could pray before it. The Church of the late middle ages made possible much more frequent reception and veneration of the Eucharist and the ardent desire of women was a principal cause of the change.

Devotion to the Eucharist is by its nature physical, for its reception involves eating and drinking with the belief that Christ is then in one's body. Other veneration of the Eucharist involves cherishing physical proximity to Christ in the tabernacle. But the ecstatic experiences which Bynum retailed of the women in relation to the Eucharist were, as Ziegler's art, of an even more physical piety, even more unprecedented in Christendom in its physicality. The ecstacies were numerous throughout northwestern Europe at the time and of enormous popular interest. The intense interest of women who did not have the ecstacies indicates their similarly physical piety.

In the Eucharistic raptures of some women, the wounds of Christ appeared spontaneously in their hands, feet, sides, and faces. The reception of the Eucharist led so naturally to stigmata that contemporaries hardly worried about how to account for their appearance. Women who did not experience such mystical or paramystical phenomena felt similarly, though in a more moderate way. "No religious woman failed to see and feel Jesus as wounded, bleeding and dying" (Bynum, 1984:189). Women desired in prayer to take the dead Jesus down from the cross onto their laps. Ziegler concluded to a similar devout desire in women when explaining the origin and popularity of the sculpted pieta (1985a:12-25).

The physical union the women sought and had with Christ was not only that of sharing his agony and passion. They saw often in the host and chalice Christ the baby or Christ the bridegroom and joined him as such. "Agnes of Montepulciano and Margaret of Faenza became so

Bynum notes that the physical union experienced by some of these women "sometimes culminated in what appears to be orgasm—as in Hadewijch's beautiful vision..." (1984:191). Hadewijch recounts:

On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire, and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfil my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my desperate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail...I desired to have full fruition of my Beloved and to understand and taste him to the full.... After that [her reception of the Eucharist], he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him, and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported. Also then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon...I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.... After that I remained in a passing away in my beloved, so that I wholly melted in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself..." (Hadewijch:280-82).

As Ziegler and Bynum stress, theology kept pace to some extent with the physicality of the new Eucharistic devotion and new religious art. Each of the three, theology, piety, and art, brought out the humanity of Christ as never before in Christendom. Each in its own way gave Christ's body more importance than ever before. Each, too, made the Christian's body more central to Christian life. For example, while frequent reception of the Eucharist became more and more popular and art became more and more realistic in bodily detail, Thomas Aquinas, following the lead of Albert the Great, introduced Aristotle's hylemorphic anthropology into hitherto Platonic theology. In a variety of other
respects, and in other media and milieus of Europe in the late middle ages, the physicality of Christ and Christian advanced upstage.

III

But in medieval theology, I want to stress, the advance was limited. In fact, this traditional theology, marching past the women down the modern centuries to the year 1989, has still not assimilated their physical experience. I know no contemporary mystical theology offered as a continuation or extension of Christian tradition that integrates into its system or endorses in principle the physical experiencing of Christ such as medieval (and modern) women tell and is exemplified above. Many Christian thinkers deny that such experience can be anything but delusion or pious imagining.

The great twentieth-century philosopher of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, continues traditional thought when she explains what part the physical can play in an individual’s experience of the divine and what part it cannot. The experience of God, the union itself with the divine, cannot be physical. The union must be nonbodily, spiritual. The physical serves at most to “interpret,” “translate,” or “express” the spiritual experience. In rapture, the body of the mystic can be stunned by the intensity of what is going on in his or her spirit. Physical experience is then an overflow, a secondary accompaniment, of the spiritual. But this is the most it ever is. Underhill echoes here the views of late medieval mystics, Walter Hilton and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing (Underhill:266-70, 359-79; Colledge:60-2; Hodgson:lxxi). Thomas Aquinas gives the same explanation for the fullness of bodily life in final beatitude after death: “in perfect beatitude the whole human being is perfected, but in the lower part through overflow (redundantiam) from the higher” (S.th., 1-11:3, 3; my translation).

In assessing “rapture,” a mystic’s state of bodily trance with drastically reduced bodily perception, Underhill quotes Thomas Aquinas: “The higher our mind is raised to the contemplation of spiritual things, the more it is abstracted from sensible things. But the final term to which contemplation can finally arrive is the divine substance. Therefore the mind that sees the divine substance must be totally divorced from the bodily senses, either by death or by some rapture” (Underhill:361; she quotes Summa contra Gentiles III, xlvii, Rickaby’s translation). The word “rapture” in English has lost much of the meaning of the Latin word used by the theologians which “rapture” translates: raptus. Raptus means literally “being carried off by force.” In
other contexts than mystical experience *raptus* can mean “robbery,” “plundering,” “abduction,” or “rape.” For Underhill, drawing on numerous accounts and interpretations of mystical experience, the impact of the union with God is to sweep the soul away from the body. There is a withdrawal of life and energy from the body, for the union itself is purely of the soul.

J. Aumann in the article “Contemplation” of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* summarizes, “The various grades of contemplative prayer produce definite reactions that are sometimes manifested even in the body.” (263) All contemplation is of the speculative intellect, though using other cognitive powers as auxiliaries (258).

Illtyd Trethewan declares that extraordinary forms of mysticism are “sometimes accompanied by extraordinary physical conditions (levitation, for example), visions, and locutions. The competent authorities agree that such manifestations have nothing to do with the substance of mystical prayer and that they normally disappear before its highest stage has been reached…” (79; cf. 86, 88). Thomas Merton stresses similarly the necessity of leaving behind all visual images (110-11).

A main thrust of Charles Davis' *Body as Spirit. The Nature of Religious Feeling* is to oppose a common rejection of the body by religious consciousness, past and present, and to affirm that religious feeling and all truly human feeling is essentially both spiritual and bodily. Yet Davis—consciously, I believe—follows tradition in seeing the bodily as no more than the “medium” or “expression” or “participation” or “presence” of spirit. Any important knowing of reality, any “cognitive apprehension” of real value, is not of the bodily itself, but of the embodied spirit (4-13, 32-58).

The medieval women to whom Caroline Bynum listens say the contrary of what these traditional theologians, medieval or contemporary, say. The women report no two-level experience. They testify to a single experience of, for example, the suffering Christ or the sweet Host or Baby Jesus or Christ as lover. The women’s physical experience did not express anything. It was itself. They held Christ physically. That was the whole thing. That was the wonderful, longed for, enjoyed, whole thing.

The women knew, of course, that their union with Christ was not normal, natural eating, normal, natural lovemaking, etc. They would have nothing to do with natural sex. They tended to eat little, if any, normal food. They took their experience of Christ as supernatural. It was a miracle, gift of God. But the miracle was that it was, analogously but truly, a physical eating of him, nursing him, making love with him,
holding him dead, etc. They felt they possessed and experienced Christ through bodily perceptions, bodily interactions and bodily feelings, through holding, giving suck, eating, orgasm, etc.

It is not the intimacy of the women's union with God that repels the theologians. The theologians affirm with awe the intimacy of soul and God which God makes possible on the mystical heights and in the immediate vision of God which all the faithful have after death. It is the degree of physicality of the women's experience that make it unintelligible and often repugnant to mystical theologians of the tradition, even modern ones.

Thus Wolfgang Riehle: "In comparison with [Mechtild of Magdeburg's image], Margery Kempe comes off very badly, for in her treatment of this motif she shows the unpleasant side of medieval female mysticism. In her book Christ thanks his 'dowtyr' for so often having bathed him in her soul, and when he appeared to her in a dream she took his toes in her hand and felt them. This is certainly an expression of the theme of man touching God, but the 'detour' via the idea of the incarnation of God becomes almost an end in itself for Margery. For her it is nothing short of the highest goal to be able to feel the physicalness of God *realiter* '& to hir felyng it weryn [i.e. Christ's toes] *as it had been very flesch & bon' " (Riehle:118). "This process of 'materializing' sensual imagery, which we can observe here in Hilton's translation of the *Stimulus Amoris*, is again something which was taken to extremes in texts of female mysticism. The great mystical texts are satisfied with the implied suggestion of mystical communication, but in the texts of the women mystics the imagination knows no such restraints." "These images . . . stand out . . . because of their complete lack of any spiritual reference" (119). Riehle asserts the superiority of Julian of Norwich to the German women mystics in that "Even when she has a corporal vision of the Passion of Christ this is not really an end in itself, but serves only as a starting point for some theological abstract knowledge" (126: cf. 114, 116). Riehle is right; the women mystics on the northwestern Continent often report their bodily mystical experiences as ends in themselves. The question is: why are theologians, like Riehle, sure that this is a mark of inferiority of the experience or its account?

In the Bible and in Christian tradition, physical experience can be a revelation from God. Jacob saw a ladder with angels descending and ascending (*Genesis* 28:10-22). Peter saw all sorts of animal and bird, walking, crawling, and flying (*Acts of the Apostles* 10:9-35). Christian thinkers understood that God sent of times physical images to tell spiritual truth. The physical serves to symbolize the nonbodily. Christianity
always recognized that what a person visited by God sees with her eyes or hears with his ears may express spiritual truth. New was the kind of Eucharistic experience on which Bynum and Ziegler focus. Here, when the women are visited by God, they experience with their senses Christ himself.

Christians have always compared their experience of God to bodily experience. But they were speaking metaphorically of what they believed to be a spiritual experience. Augustine inspired many to exclaim with him: “You [O God] called and cried out and broke my deafness. You flashed and shone and put my blindness to flight. You gave fragrance and I drew breath and now I pant for you. I tasted and I hunger and I thirst. You touched me and I burned for your peace” (Confessions, X:27, my translation). But none could be clearer than Augustine that this kind of language can be only metaphor for the spiritual. “You, O God, are sweeter than all pleasure, but not for flesh and blood” (IX:1; cf. X:6-7).

Sensual metaphors with which theologians described their relationship with God grew more abundant and more sensual as the middle ages progressed. The erotic imagery of Bernard of Clairvaux and other Cistercian monks of this time, collated perceptively by Jean Leclercq, is a case in point. But theologians who used them made clear that the images were only metaphors. The physical images stood for spiritual, nonbodily experience of spiritual, nonbodily reality (Leclercq, 1979: 103-04).

Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and other women recount physical experiences at times as metaphors for their relationship with God. They know then that they are only expressing in imagination what they believe by faith. At other times, however, they tell of what they physically experienced, not as metaphor, symbol, or expression, but as fact: Christ himself really, physically interacting with them. Is it possible to read the lines of Hadewijch quoted above and believe she was using bodily metaphor to express a nonbodily happening?

Were such physical experiences of Christ all illusions? I cannot judge. Some of the experiences are bizarre to modern ears. But some of these women were recognized by their contemporaries and by later historians to be wise, mature women. They were consulted by theologians and other men and much of their advice seems sound today. But this does not prove they did not hallucinate in their physical raptures or confuse fantasy with fact.

Whether their raptures were illusions or whether the women did experience Christ does not affect my point. My point is the response of
the theologians to such raptures. Or more accurately, their lack of response. Why did the theologians not acknowledge that rapture of this kind could be a true experience of Christ?

To ask this question sociohistorically or psychologically might be more fruitful, but I, sticking to my last, will ask it philosophically and phenomenologically: Did any element of their theology block these men from seeing the possible validity of the women's experience? More precisely: did anything in the theologians' theory of knowledge keep them from recognizing the human mode of knowing which the women exercised? That is, which properties of the women's experience did the theologians' epistemology exclude in principle as possible characteristics of true knowing? The answer that I will argue for is not peculiarly religious. Closer scrutiny shows that the theologians' refusal ultimately stems not from an understanding of the divine but from an understanding of the human.

IV

What logical obstacles could there be to the theologians' assimilating into their system the women's experiences? For traditional theology, God can take on the properties of any physical reality He wants. He became man. In the Eucharistic host He has the physically experienceable properties of bread. The Christian eats Christ, as Christians have said from the beginning of Christianity. They echoed John 6, First Corinthians 11:23-24, and confessions of faith which Berengarius was compelled to make by the Council of Rome in 1059 and 1079 (Denzinger and Schonmetzer:690, 700).

True, the theologians insist that one receiving the Eucharist does not literally taste Christ nor experience Him physically in any other way. The Christian knows by his senses the properties of bread but only by faith does he know it is the Lord he eats. But why could not the theologians acknowledge the possibility that the Eucharistic Christ had on occasion by His special grace enabled the loving recipient to experience Him physically in His physical reality present in the sacrament? Why not? A first answer is obvious. For the theologians, all experience of Christ must be immaterial, noncorporeal.

For traditional Christian theology, all experience of God must be noncorporeal, whether the experience be by intellect or by loving will and its affects. Mystics and contemplatives cannot taste the sweetness of Jesus through their body. Their mind must move "higher" or "deeper" to some nonphysical level in order to find and savor this sweetness with
the mind's higher faculties. The necessity of rising above all bodily experience, sense images, and bodily passion in order to come to any experience of God is repeated monotonously in the mystical theologies of Origen, Augustine, Cassian, Gregory the Great, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus Confessor, Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, etc. (Hodgson:liii, lix-lxii, lxv-lxxii, lxxv; Johnston:24-31; Butler:xxxiv, lxxvi-lxxviii, 183-88).

This necessity is affirmed by both of the main currents of mystical thought in Christian history. The apophatic theology of Plotinus holds sway in the East from the earliest centuries and in the West from the medieval period on after ps.-Dionysius has been translated into Latin. A soberer, less negative current of mystical theology dominates the West during the earlier centuries through the work of Cassian, Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard. In both theologies the mystical experience must leave behind all sense and bodily experience (Butler:179-92).

But why? Why must all experience of God be immaterial, nonbodily? Why could the theologians not recognize that there might be also another way of doing it? Why could they not conceive at least the possibility that chosen individuals, by God's extraordinary grace, might experience God in their very sensuality and physical passion? One might grant that humans could not experience in their body the divine nature. The women after all did not claim to experience God's eternity, infinity, omniscience, etc. If they were to use traditional theological language, the women might have said they experienced Christ, the divine person, in His human nature. They experienced the Incarnate God as the human being He also was. Why did the theologians not work into their theology this claimed bodily experience of the divine Christ in his humanity?

The answer is that not only divine nature is immaterial. God, angels and humankind are all "persons," i.e. an individual subsistent reality of rational nature (substantia individua rationalis naturae). This is Boethius' classic definition of person and Thomas Aquinas accepts it without question (S.th., 1:29). Rational nature is essentially incorporeal. This is obviously true in the Platonism which dominated Christian theology before the Thirteenth Century and in which the human being was simply his immaterial soul. But even with the introduction of the Aristotelian understanding of the human being as composite of body and soul, all that makes him human as distinct from a brute animal is his soul in its purely immaterial reality. It is, therefore, for the same reason that one cannot know by the senses either God, angel, or human in their
proper reality: they are rational (S.th., I:75, 4-6:76, 4; I-II:3, 3; also I:80, 2; I:12, 2).

By this epistemology, bodily experience as such cannot attain the human being as such, the person as such. One must first perceive with the senses the individual before one, but according to the Greek thought that shaped medieval thought one must rise above the senses and bodily passions not merely to know God, but to know this sensible reality as human, as a person. Though he wrote in the Thirteenth Century, we can use Thomas, too, as representative of later theologians, because Thomism spread widely in Western Christian theology before the Reformation and because, more than the alternative Platonic, Neoplatonic, or Nominalist syntheses of the late middle ages, Thomas’ systematic accords and elaborates for the body a central, estimable place in human life and knowing. It can be argued that Thomas’ Aristotelian epistemology is a high point in the appreciation of bodily knowing by traditional Christian thought (S.th. I:80, 2; I:84-86; Miles:120-34).

Yet by Thomas’ epistemology, neither Mary in Bethlehem nor any other mother knows the humanity of her child by the bodily experience of Him at her breast. The senses cannot perceive distinctively human nature or any distinctively human traits as reason, will, and corresponding affections, for everything distinctively human is immaterial. Only by rising from physical experience to a higher, nonbodily kind of knowing, whether of faith or reason, can mother attain her child as human.

If traditional Christian theology be right, no bodily experience itself can be knowledge of another person, human or divine. I need to have the physical experience of the person in mind when I think of him, but my knowing him is the thinking or rational understanding, not the physical experience. Margaret of Cortona, however, and Mary of Oignies and Mechtilde of Magdeburg knew that the physical experience they had of Christ was itself a knowing of him.

It is similar with the Pieta and the devout onlooker. By traditional Christian philosophy, the essential conscious union of the onlooker with the mourning mother is immaterial, nonphysical. It consists in knowing Mary by bodiless intellect and loving her and feeling with her by bodiless will. The viewer’s physical experience of the sculpture is necessary only as context for the viewer to unite with Mary spiritually. The physical experience of the viewer serves also as echo chamber where the intense union of intellect and will with Mary, the spiritual pain, may flow back down into the viewer’s body, causing bodily pain. The bodily pain or sadness is, therefore, a union with Mary mourning, a knowing of Mary mourning, only to the extent that the sadness reflects and
expresses the spiritual sorrow of this individual viewer (Thomas Aquinas, *S.th.* also I-II:4, 6; II-II:28, 3; *Compendium Theologiae*, 168, cited by Miles:132-34).

This traditional theory is contradicted by the impact of the Pieta on many devout believers. We can, I believe, imagine what must be such pious experience, whether it be medieval or modern. The direct conscious union of the devout person with the mourning mother is inextricably both physical and personal. The union, which is, among other things, knowing the mourning mother, is wholly physical and wholly personal. The physical is the personal. The personal is the physical.

This is not a momentary confusion of consciousness. After the devout person’s experience of the Pieta, she cannot go back in memory and distinguish in the original experience a nonbodily union with Mary from a bodily one. If the devout person were to abstract from his or her bodily aching with the griefstruck Mary, there would be little of moment left of that first, immediate experience of Mary.

Going back in memory, they cannot extract or even point to a bodyless care or height or depth to the experience. They are with Mary *inasmuch as* they ache with her aching. Apart from the ache they are not with her. Apart from the ache they are scarcely aware of her. The ache is their knowing and loving and feeling with her. The ache is their being with her. It is personal *qua* muscular. It is muscular *qua* personal. For our question about knowing, we can say: this is knowing *qua* muscular. It is muscular *qua* knowing.

V

The foundation of mainstream Christian thought up through the middle ages was that only one kind of knowing was intrinsically worthwhile, whether it were called “rational” or “intellectual” or “immaterial” or “faith seeking intellectum.” In the women’s devotional experience there emerged into light another kind of knowing which they prized for its own sake.

The second kind of human knowing did not return to deep shadow in the following centuries, but the light on it in Western culture remained sparse and wavering, and is so today. Western thought pays mainly lip service to it now, for, whether secular or religious, Western thought still recognizes only one intrinsically worthwhile kind of knowledge. As Heidegger said, Western thought still speaks Greek. One could put it more accurately: Western thought still speaks like a Greek man. Such thought can do nothing with modern women’s experience.
Like Johanna Ziegler, I see the devout women of the late middle ages as among the first moderns (Ziegler, 1985a:9-10).

It is enlightening to examine the characteristics of the women's experience which repelled the theologians. The theologians do not deny that there can be human knowledge with these traits. But such traits cannot characterize knowing of any intrinsic importance because, the theologians say, they characterize the lowest kind of human knowledge. The characteristics thus spell out something of what that "bodiliness" is that the theologians could not accord to any intrinsically worthwhile knowing.

Each of these characteristics of this kind of pious experience is the contrary of a characteristic of that distinctively human, intrinsically precious knowledge for which alone, according to the theologians, the human mind strives. The primary value which the theologians see in knowledge with the characteristics of the women's experience is extrinsic to it: it helps the mind to higher knowledge, i.e. to knowledge with contrary characteristics. But the women who felt bodily raptures or bodily devotion of this sort believed that they were being privileged to know in an intrinsically valuable way, independently of any further knowledge that might result.

What then characterizes this kind of knowing claimed by the women and scorned by the theologians? Since I want to evoke the characteristics as they appear in consciousness, I may be permitted to start with actual experience. I recall summers with friends thirty years ago in western France and Belgium and eastern Germany. Sitting in the back of the car, I directed the driver on the trail of a piece of Grunewald or Riemenschneider or an anonymous Pieta until I stood staring at it. The mosaics of Ravenna, the Christ of Chartres did not soak into me as this fourteenth-fifteenth century art did. Contemporary works of the south, say, of Giotto and Fra Angelico, whom I loved, did not move me half as much.

Then back into the car I went to pick up my Michelin and determine the route to the next nearest piece of northern fourteenth-fifteenth century art. Why? What in this art drew me on and in as no other Christian art? I know now, with the clarity of retrospect. For one thing, this art brought me to rest. Before a Pieta I rested in pain. In every line of stone or wood, I felt Christ, God and man, dead for love of me. I felt the mother grieving him dead. That was all I felt. I felt nothing else at the moment, nor wanted to.

I felt Christ's love realized in his death, but the sculpture did not send me on to ponder divine attributes of this love. No line of wood or
stone lifted my mind to anything of God’s ineffable transcendence, to anything of His salvific plan, His gracious condescension, His infinite wisdom or even the wonder that He chose from all eternity to become human and live and die for me.

In earlier art I had seen a Crucified Christ with the Resurrection already glowing on the pain-wracked face. As it pained me, it sent me on to Christ’s glory. Not so this Flemish and west German art of the late middle ages. It surrounded me, enclosed me in a futureless, buried present of anguish with Christ and His mother. My experience did move me after a while to realize better some spiritual truth, like the infinity of God’s love for me. But that was not the innate impact of the sculpture or painting. The art itself pinned me down within the Passion of Christ and Mary. It held me fast in their pain and sorrow.

Other was the impact of earlier Christian art which had also moved me. That art did not hold me in the physical experience of what it described. That art rose from the physical beyond the physical, carrying the viewer with it. Earlier Christian art was primarily symbolic or allegorical or didactic, as one sees in the sculpture abounding on the earlier cathedrals or the images of the illuminated Bibles.

Even the realistic art of the South which I had seen drew the viewer into a Bible scene in such a way as to lift him or her to intimated nonmaterial realities. The glowing visage of Fra Angelico’s Virgin sends us immediately inward and upward to a spiritual message she must be hearing. Giotto’s apostles are transparently moved and absorbed by an event that only faith discerns. But the mother of the northern Pieta holding the dead Jesus holds our awed, sorrowing feelings down with hers. She and her Son are all we know and for the moment all we want to know.

The satisfying knowing which a devout Christian had of a Pieta or other pieces of northern late medieval art was for traditional Christian theology knowledge of the lowest kind of minimal value. Why? First, because it was knowledge simply of the singular, i.e. simply of individual, concrete reality as such. It brought the mind to rest there, held it fast. Truly worthwhile human knowledge is knowledge of the universal, moving to know yet more of reality (Thomas Aquinas, S.th. 1:84-86). This art locked the responding Christian into a single time and place with individual human beings.

The art closed her in with Jesus and Mary at a given moment of their lives. The experience the art evoked not only did not contain and was not in motion towards more spiritual truth. The experience did not contain nor was in motion towards any universal truth. It was not even in
motion towards that moment two days later when Jesus would rise again and his mother would find out. The art buried the Christian in a moment of time, in a single moment of a single person's life. Wherefore it was for the theologians least knowing, and for the women great knowing.

VI

The ecstatic experiences of the women and the religious experience evoked by the art not only held the individual to knowing particular individuals at a single time and place. The experiences we consider have a second characteristic which is belittled in principle by the theologians. The sense of touch pervades the experiences. This sense, says Thomas Aquinas, is the lowest and least worthy of all the human senses.

In the hierarchy of knowledge, bodily knowledge is lowest. Bodily knowledge, says Thomas, is least knowledge, hardly knowledge at all, because it is sense knowledge. Sense knowledge is wholly inferior to the rest of human knowledge, which is rational knowledge. Only reason can know being and its properties: goodness, beauty, and unity. The senses know nothing of this. Humans can perceive by eye and ear the beauty, of sound and sight only by these senses' participation in reason (Milhaven, 1977:163-65; Kovach:232-67).

Sense knowledge itself is of some worth inasmuch as it is knowledge and knows its object. Thomas rates the different senses as more or less of worth (bonus) inasmuch as each is more or less knowing. The sense lowest in value is the sense that knows the least. It is the sense of touch, says Thomas, following Aristotle. The senses rank in value to the degree in which they resemble reason. The sense of touch is least like reason (Milhaven:164-67).

This is not to deny that, as Margaret Miles brings out, for Thomas, following Aristotle, touch is the only sense in which man surpasses the animals, since his touch is finer and more assured. Touch is the basis of all the other senses and excellence of reason requires corresponding excellence of sense. Those men have greater ingenuity and excellence of mind who have delicate touch. (Miles cites Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on Aristotle, II de Anima, lect. 19, and S.th I, 76, 5.) But none of this contradicts Thomas' assertion elsewhere (documented in Milhaven, 1977) that man's touch, in comparison to his other senses and especially to reason, is least knowing. Moreover, the kinds of touch commonly felt in the women's devotion, e.g. in satisfying hunger or sex appetite or in
hugging or in weariness, are not what Thomas would call "finer" or "delicate," indicating ingenuity or excellence of mind.

That human touch is least like human reason is why, for Thomas Aquinas, it is a sin to choose to eat or drink or have sex for the pleasure of eating, drinking, or having sex. There is nothing wrong in principle in choosing a reality for the pleasure it gives. All of us, if we are wise, choose God for the pleasure of union with Him. It is not a sin, but good indeed, to choose to get to know a friend for the pleasure of doing so. It is not a sin, but good, to choose for its own sake the enjoyment of seeing visible beauty or hearing beautiful music. But it is a sin to choose to eat, drink, or have sex for the pleasure of it. Why the difference? The pleasures of eating, drinking, or having sex are pleasures of touch.

The pleasures of touch are good, says Thomas Aquinas, for created human nature remains essentially good even after the Fall. But the pleasures of touch are the least good of all human pleasures, because the perceptions we take pleasure in with touch are the minimal forms of knowing. The sense of touch never participates in reason, though higher senses do on occasion. For this reason, pleasures of sight and sound can be worth being chosen for their own sake. Never should the pleasures of touch be so chosen, for touch is minimal knowing, nonrational knowing. We may not, therefore, choose to eat, drink and have sex for their pleasures. We may choose them only for further good they effect: self-preservation, nourishment, continuance of the species, avoidance of greater sin, etc. (Milhaven, 1977).

But bodily touching suffuses the pious and mystical experiences we are studying. The women seek and enjoy eating and drinking Christ, caressing and nursing Christ, making love and playing with Christ, embracing the suffering or dead Christ. All are kinds of bodily touching. The women declare, contradicting unwittingly Thomas Aquinas and medieval theologians generally, that their tactile experience is a sublime knowing of Him, a wondrous experience of Him worth seeking for its own sake, without reference to any further good achieved or achievable.

Other writers, including modern historians, betray perhaps the continuing influence of traditional Western thought when they refer to these experiences as "visions." Vision is theologically the most respectable and honored of the five senses. But in some of the religious experiences we consider, vision is subordinated to touch. The rapture, ecstasy, knowing of Christ is in the touching, holding. Read again Hadewijch's account of her seventh "vision."

Should we be surprised? Does not some of the greatest awareness in
family take place through touch? Is it not at times the most precious mutual awareness of each other that the family has? Tactile are not merely the eating and drinking together, giving suck, playing with baby, and having sex, which are described in the women's "visions." (For traditional thought, touch is the sensation involved in orgasm, swallowing, and sating hunger and thirst.) But touch is central, too, to supporting the baby taking its first steps, clothing the child, embracing mutely the bereaved, holding the ill person's hand, sleeping together, the playful wrestle of children, the adult hug of reunion after long separation. To contradict Thomas: are we not in these experiences "more knowing" than usually? The depth and extent of tactile knowing can also make an act more evil, as in the slap or brutal kick delivered, or in rape.

Let me, less wise, make a suggestion to the art historians. Johanna Ziegler asks, "Why did the Pieta originate—and in essence remain—a sculptural, rather than painted, type?" (1985b:13) Could it be because devout women found special satisfaction in identifying with the sorrowing mother in the feelings of touch throughout her body, her tactile holding, weariness, pain, and abandon? Does not sculpture by its three-dimensionality convey more powerfully than painting a tactile experience? The wood or stone filling space draw us out through our eye to feel her sad, limp, tired pain through head and shoulders and whole body?

In the last part of her Brown lecture, "The Emergence of a Women's Sensibility in Late Medieval Art in Northern Europe," Ziegler began an answer to her question. She showed in detail how sculpture, in comparison with other art forms such as painting, "was ideally suited to visualizing for the laity the humanness, the bodiliness, the physicality of Christ and Mary" (16). She did not discuss, however, whether sculpture ideally visualized the tactile experience of Christ and Mary.

VII

The physical experiences the medieval women had of Christ have often a third trait that was generally depreciated by traditional Christian thinkers. The women's physical experience of Christ is at times the kind of serene physical experience we have when we happen to perceive something and are moved by the perception, e.g., a lovely landscape or beautiful music or beautiful art. The object need only appear to us and we give our attention to it, we know its goodness. As I noted, this kind of physical experience the theologians ranked highly among forms of
bodily knowledge, though only reason entering into the experience perceives as such the beauty or goodness.

Often, however, the women do not have this peaceful, contemplative physical experience, but an experience of a contrary kind. It is the experience we have only when a physical desire rises in us. The now pressing need yields us a kind of knowing which we do not have except when we feel this need. It is not enough for the object to be present and our attention given to it. The need or desire must arise in us. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn’t.

Hunger, thirst, and sexual desire, again, exemplify this. Feeling them makes us know something about what or whom we want and about ourselves. At no other time do we know it, except by remembering the times we felt this way. Moreover, this kind of desire does not move us serenely as the beauty of landscape or song. It disturbs us, often violently. Unsatisfied, it can overwhelm us, make us wild.

The erotic mysticism of women like Hadewijch and Beatrice of Nazareth, Caroline Bynum tells us, is not that of passive, submissive brides. “Their search for Christ took them through a frenzy which they called insanity...” So, too, Mary of Oignies, “when she was not able to bear any longer her thirst for the vivifying blood... would remain for a long time contemplating the empty chalice on the altar.” As we saw, a recurrent conflict in the Church life of these times was the women’s demanding intensely more frequent communion and the theologians resisting this. It was in the “heat” (aestus) of passion that the women experienced Christ (1984:192, 179). The women’s need in these instances was thoroughly physical and bodily, as well as religious and personal. Yearning with desire, the women knew in a peculiar way Him whom they desired.

That some knowledge can be had when and only when the individual feels certain desire is a commonplace of Western thought. The distinctive wisdom of the Christian, says Thomas Aquinas, is formed by the Christian’s charity, the Christian’s love of God. More generally, Christian theology, in the middle ages as today, echoes paens by Plato and Augustine to the desire by the soul for the good and the beautiful (Phaedrus, 249-57; Confessions, IX:10). Only this desire for the good and beautiful can open us to know the good and beautiful. Only to the extent that our desire becomes more conscious and we engage our whole self in it, does our rational knowledge grow of what is and is good. Thomas follows Aristotle here, as do contemporary ethicists (S.th. I-II:39-40; Ginolf, 347-49; Milhaven, 1971:421-30).

In a dramatic turn of the tradition, certain late medieval and early
modern thinkers made more of love than of reason or intellect in actual contemplation or mystical union with God. Whereas Christian thinkers before had seen the mystic’s knowing of God as intellectual vision, these later theologians, like Thomas Gallus and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, saw the mystic’s knowing of God as an effective awareness of surging, climaxing love (Hodgson:lxii-lxiii, lxix). These men extended thus the traditional Western view that some precious human knowledge is possible only through loving desire.

But these mystical and contemplative theologians, later ones like the earlier, meant incorporeal love and desire. They did not mean bodily desire such as our devout women felt. The knowing which the theologians extolled depended in no way on a bodily need asserting itself. It came out of desire rising out of bodiless will and/or intellect acted on by God’s grace. A traditional thinker could not write, meaning literally, what Audre Lorde writes in her poem, “On a Night of the Full Moon:”

> Out of my flesh that hungers and my mouth that knows comes the shape I am seeking for reason (Griffin:166).

VIII

The religious experience of women in the late middle ages had often a fourth characteristic that was in principle denigrated by theologians. This characteristic largely overlaps characteristics I have listed so far, but is the most revelatory of the richness of the women’s experience and the peculiarity of the belittling by the theologians.

Consider an argument which Thomas Aquinas uses to support the traditional prohibition of marriage between close relatives. The pleasure of sexual intercourse, he quotes Aristotle approvingly, corrupts seriously the judgment of moral wisdom. This pleasure, Thomas notes, is increased by the love of the persons in the union. If, therefore, he reasons, to the sexual love itself is added the love “that comes from common origin and sustenance,” the soul “would be necessarily more overcome by the pleasure,” and therefore its wisdom more corrupted (*Summa contra Gentiles* III:125; cf. *S.th.* II-II:154,9; Aristotle, VI:5, 1140b10-20).

Thomas and other theologians ignored the wisdom growing from sexual love and pleasure. More to our present point: they ignored generally any wisdom coming from the ordinary love and pleasure of “common origin and sustenance,” of living together in family, of eating day after day at the same table, as well as of making love. As we saw, they
did not ignore all knowledge arising from bodily pleasure. They praised the eyes' and ears' pleasurable perception of beauty, and the higher knowledge it made possible. They ignored the wisdom, the knowledge of value, arising from pleasure in satisfying basic human needs, the needs for sexual intercourse, common life, shelter, sustenance, etc. They ignored in general the ordinary wisdom of family life.

The women, like the theologians, knew that both sexual and other loving that can come with family life bring their special pleasures. They knew, unlike the theologians, that these pleasures constitute a personal union of the persons involved. In the very satisfaction, the everyday satisfaction, of elemental human needs, one experiences uniquely, comes to know profoundly, the other person.

Here again, as in each of the three points I already made, the theologians fail to recognize in their conceptual synthesizes what they with the rest of Christendom presuppose by their metaphors. Traditional thinkers describe regularly the life of the blessed after death as a banquet, as happy family life. They emphasize how much the Eucharist is like a meal together. They describe often mystical union or Christ's union with the Church as sexual union. The Song of Songs was "the book which was most read, and most frequently commented in the medieval cloister" (Leclercq, 1960:106). The pleasures of banquet, sex, and other family life serve the tradition as images of, among other things, richly aware interpersonal union.

But traditional Christian thinkers failed to endorse explicitly what they implied in their metaphors.

For monastic and secular literature on the whole, we can apply with some reservations this observation made by Edmond Faral, a historian as competent as he is impartial: "It is remarkable that the Song of Songs... has never been interpreted, in the many commentaries written from the tenth to the fourteenth century, otherwise than in the sense of religious sentiments and mysticism. No lay author ever saw in it, for his inspiration, any signs of human passion" (Leclercq, 1979:29; cf. 1960:106-09).

Traditional Christian thinkers did not acknowledge that if they used a reality of this world to image something otherworldly, the worldly reality must be similar to the otherworldly reality. The worldly reality must have, if in much lesser degree and a different way, precisely those good qualities that the thinkers want by the metaphor to bring out in the otherworldly reality. Otherwise the comparison is meaningless, groundless.

Bernard of Clarivaux and thinkers influenced by him went beyond
prior Christian theology in expressing high esteem for married love, including its "carnal love" and "fleshly pleasure." But they never say that the carnal or fleshly dimension itself is a genuine knowing of the other, nor that it has any intrinsic value of its own distinct from the spiritual. When speaking of marital sex, they appear to ignore familiar Biblical language where "knowing" is a synonym for sexual union (e.g. Genesis 24:16 and Luke 1:34). Leclercq in his Monks on Marriage. A Twelfth-Century View does not seem to note the monks' curious lapse. Thomas Aquinas ignores similarly the humanistic import of traditional erotic metaphors. These thinkers have to so ignore because, as we saw, their epistemology excludes the possibility of any knowledge that would be intrinsically bodily and yet knowledge of a human person as such. Sense knowledge is useful and necessary for human beings, but is never itself knowledge of the human.

This blind withdrawal of men from familial knowing is a striking bit of evidence to support the thesis that the traditional Western thinker is a man sitting and pondering alone. If the medieval pieta epitomizes devout women's experience, perhaps Rodin's sculpture epitomizes male thought. I admire this noble intellectual lineage of Greek descent, still ruling in our own time. I admire it because it is my lineage and because I will defend to the death the greatness of mind of Plato and Augustine and Thomas and Kant and Barth and Rahner, Karl and Hugo. But their reaction in past and present to the experience we have traced out with four characteristics suggest that, intellectually speaking, 2500 years succesion of male virgin births is enough.

IX

Let me continue the opening of my male thought for impregnation and name briefly two final points of contrast between the experience of the women and the theory of the theologians. Complete immersion in singular place and time, pervasion by physical touch, surging physical need or desire, and pleasuring typical of family life are not the only traits of bodily experience had by devout women which are generally ignored or belittled by the theologians. Pain often is, too.

Physical pain runs through much of the rapture and devotion of the women. In the hopeless longing of a mother holding her dead son. In the fear of death, the weariness unto death, of a man who trod the wine-press of his suffering alone. Through thorns pressing into the head and a desolate loneliness. One knows oneself uniquely in experiencing that pain. One knows another uniquely in sharing that pain. Imagine,
again, the experience of the devout before these late medieval Low Countries and German portrayals of the passion of Jesus or Mary or disciples.

The final trait has already been seen in connection with the others. Much of these elemental experiences of urgent human need and passion, climaxing in overwhelming pleasure or pain, is identification, physical, personal. Bodily identification erupts and flows in the women’s experience, and is, once more, a mode of interpersonal knowing that the theologians generally ignore or depreciate. The women staying with Christ in his passion and death become one with him suffering. The women weep with Mary sorrowing. They laugh with the joy of the Baby in their arms.

Once more, too, we recognize a mode of knowing typical of family life. The parent feels the sick feelings of the child. The nursing mother smiles, feeling how the baby experiences her in the feeding. The baby laughs, echoing her generous joy. So, too, the sick person and the carer. The two sexual lovers. The person setting the food on the table and the person picking up the food eagerly. They feel physically as theirs the other’s feelings. By identification one knows others in their experience because their experience becomes one’s own.

Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle knew well that identification was essential to love. Lovers consider their loved ones as their second self. One considered the other’s good or evil as one’s own (S.th. I-II:28, 2; 32, 5-6; II-II:25, 7; 30, 1-2; Aristotle:VIII and IX). But, for such traditional thinkers, only the nonbodily identification by reason and will was the love that counted. Bodily, sensory identification was not. In intrinsically good human love, sensory identification was a natural, appropriate, often praiseworthy complement of the rational identification, but it was not essential to that love. That sensory identification could be inextricably constitutive of intrinsically worthy love, as it was for women of the late middle ages, was unintelligible to these men (S.th., II-II-, 30, 3;24, 1; 25, 7 and 12; 26, 5). Typical is Thomas’ emphasis on “rationabile” in endorsing Aristotle’s explanation of why parents love children and vice versa (In Decem Libros . . ., VIII, 12).

Caroline Bynum suggests that medieval women, rather than men, became absorbed in Christ as Eucharistic bread and wine because giving food and drink was a major, ongoing experience of women in that time (1985b:10-16; 1984:192-99). I would like to expand the suggestion. The experience of women of those times, even more than today, was centered in family life: not just in putting food and drink on the table, but in giving suck and caring for babies, in playing, in hugging, in help-
ing clothe, in sex, in sympathizing with and caring for the hurt or ill or dying, etc. A certain number of the women whom Ziegler and Bynum cite were or had been married, or lived at home, never having left there. This was particularly true of the Beguines, whose religious communities were everywhere through the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In any case, most of the women whose religious experiences we hear of grew up in family life.

The social fact is not the sole cause. The women must have had and exercised a strong, vital humanness to feel fully and prize their familial living and to continue it in their religious life. Their waxing personal-ness opened them to the revolutionary, nonmetaphorical experiences recounted by women mystics and reflected in the art of their time and place. What we saw in the fourth characteristic is true of all six characteristics of the women’s religious experience: each characteristic is an extension of their ordinary experience in family life.

Something parallel happened with the theologians, but, again, they only went part of the way. Perhaps one cause was that for centuries practically none of the theologians had lived long in a family. Certainly, as becoming a monk began more often to be the decision of an adult, not the determination for a child by its parent, medieval theologians, led by Bernard of Clairvaux or Francis of Assisi, multiplied, more than ever before, religious metaphors based on the experience of being in love and making love, on mothering and being mothered. Medieval theologians praised more than ever before, and on its own merits, married and family life, including “flesly love.” But no male theologian, to my knowledge, acknowledged that either this or any other of the distinctive everyday experiences of family was interpersonal knowing.

X

Why, therefore, could the medieval theologians not recognize the widespread religious experience of women as a genuine knowing of Christ, Mary, etc.? Because the experience was too physical to be knowing of a person. In what respect was it too physical? In at least six respects. The experience was of nothing but a single person in a single moment and place. The sense of touch pervaded the experience. The experience was shaped by bodily need or desire. The experience was often of pleasures peculiar to family life. The experience was often run through with bodily pain. The experience was often a bodily identification with another.

The medieval theologians’ opposition, therefore, helps to place in
relief six facets of the bodily knowing which the women reported. The six make a unity. They do not contradict each other but can be combined to make a single concept of “bodily knowing.” The facets overlap, but still are distinct aspects of the whole. This hexagonal concept is not only logically coherent, but points convergently to recognizable experience. Moreover, they are found together manifestly, though not exclusively, in the same milieu: family life.

I conclude this essay with two suggestions for discussion. First, despite enormous differences between medieval and modern, the “bodily knowing” experienced, reported and extolled by certain medieval women and by certain modern women is analogous. The hexagonal idea I have drawn from the medieval accounts outlines also the bodily knowing which certain women writers advance today, yet for which they have not, to my knowledge, offered a systematic conceptual overview.

This modern feminist epistemology, too, grows out of family life. Into Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* went what the author “learned of the necessities of daily life from the women of my family, the work necessary to keep house together and raise children—all that women know of naming feeling while we live in a culture that misnames and mistakes what we experience . . .” (Griffin:xi; cf. xvi, 188-91, 197-99, 201-02, 207-08; cf. Rich, “Foreword” and passim). In *Eros and Power*, Haunani-Kay Trask traces out modern feminists’ “vision” of “a qualitatively better mode of being and living,” a vision that “is evidence of a critical consciousness which arises out of women’s particular form of social practice: their erotic/reproductive roles of biological and emotional mothering of children, men and other women,” their emphasis “on physical and emotional gratifications that connect ‘life’ and ‘work’; fluid forms and concepts of intimacy that extend far beyond the merely genital . . .” (x-xi; cf. 86-100). Poems of Robin Morgan convey powerfully the precious knowledge she gained from her pregnancy, her nursing her child, and her caring for her elderly mother, “cleansing her genitals and helping her to urinate.” Trask observes that Morgan’s poem, “Network of the Imaginary Mother,” is a deliberate “stunning reversal” of the ritual and meaning of the Eucharist (Trask:138-40, Morgan:67-84). Medieval and modern women cross forbidden lines at the same point and make history in that they, among other things, extend publicly this kind of knowing outside of family life. The similarity of the medieval and modern accounts is all the more suggestive when a modern woman advocates this kind of knowing, not for religious life, but for a secular sisterhood which includes lesbian relationships.

My second suggestion is that the women are right. Not only by rea-
son, but also in and through their bodies do human beings know other human beings in their humanness, their personalness. Not only by reason, but also in and through their bodies do human beings know much that is intrinsically precious in human life. The recognition of this fact does away with any epistemology, medieval or modern, that propounds a hierarchy of knowledge. It demands instead a bipolarity.

If human knowing be bipolar, the various forms of human knowledge of person and value do not constitute degrees of realizing one supreme kind of knowing, as the theologians thought they did. The various forms of human knowledge of person and value fan out between two polar kinds of knowing. One is bodily. The other is rational. All human knowing is constituted by its particular degree of participation in both poles. The poles are irreducible to each other. They are incomparable to each other in value. One cannot be rated superior to the other. Good human living is at any moment determined by both poles.

Since Western culture has confined its light to rational knowing or blind faith, it will make history if Western thinkers locate and investigate where in the shadow the other kind of knowing—or better, the other side of knowing—goes on or can go on. This, I agree with modern women, will affect areas of human decision and action such as war and peace, social justice, sexuality and reproduction, education, and interpersonal relations generally. It is likely to affect all areas of human decision and action.

I know the fears of male thinkers. God knows what we may find if we acknowledge in principle this bodily knowing, ponder it in experience, and exercise it in practice by and beyond hearth and home. But the alternative, the narrow tracks chosen by our intellectual forefathers clearly have their limits.

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