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Scholasticism in the High Middle Ages and its Affect on Female Monastic Tradition

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The Middle Ages are often characterized as the “Age of Faith” because Christian ideals and doctrine were embedded in every aspect of life. Monasticism was seen as the epitome of Christian living and monks were seen as the guardians of spirituality. Prior to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, literacy and education were almost exclusive to monasteries because monks were often the only clergy or lay men that were literate. They studied scripture and the works of the Church Fathers as a spiritual exercise.¹ The prominent intellectual achievements of medieval Europe came from the rediscovery of Greek scholars such as Aristotle that resulted in dialectic application to theology in monasteries. In the eleventh century monks and nuns had a degree of spiritual parity and often resided in monasteries together.² However, the rise of scholasticism as an intellectual method in the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries resulted in a disparity between male and female monastic traditions. The intellectual method of scholasticism that characterized educational reforms in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had profound effects on male and female monastic tradition because women were often excluded from this education. This essay will argue that much the disparity between male and female monasticism in the High Middle Ages was an effect of the rise of scholasticism and cathedral schooling that favoured Latin as the primary language for intellectual work. This growing discrepancy resulted in Medieval nuns embracing their role in the *Devotio Moderna* movement that emphasized mysticism, contemplative prayer, and devotion over theological exegesis.

The rise of education and literacy in the High Middle Ages can be characterized in two streams. The first is the shift that occurred in monastic learning from spiritual reading to

¹ Maurice Keen, *The Penguin History of Medieval Europe*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 99.

² Patricia Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 119.

intellectual exegesis. This new method of education is known as scholasticism, and emphasized the application of logic and philosophical ideas to Christian scriptures. Scholasticism was characterized in the Middle Ages in three main areas. First, the scholastic method was always taught and applied in Latin. Second, it applied Aristotelian ideas of logic and reason to textual practices. And finally, all scholasticism always led back to theology and exegesis of the Bible.³ Scholars trace the beginning of scholastic training to the eleventh century where it steadily rose in prominence until it reached its peak in the thirteenth century.⁴ Prior to the eleventh century and the steady rise of scholastic learning, monks were literate for the sole purpose of experiencing sacred texts. Reading was a spiritual experience similar to music or art, and there was no logical interpretation applied to the texts. Scholasticism became popular as a method to reconcile contradictions within biblical passages and the works of the Church Fathers such as Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.⁵ Perhaps the most well known work in this fashion is Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non*. In this text, Abelard juxtaposed contradictory statements made by the Church Fathers on various topics in Christian theology.⁶ An important characteristic of scholasticism is that it always used faith as the starting point. The existence of God was a fundamental truth, so the scholastic work of medieval theologians attempted to rationalize or prove His existence through logic. One such example is Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument made in the literary work *Proslogion*. Anselm explores the idea of faith seeking

³ James A Weisheipl, s.v. "Scholasticism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005).

⁴ Weisheipl, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Scholasticism."

⁵ Weisheipl, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Scholasticism."

⁶ Keen, *Medieval Europe*, 106.

understanding. He uses the existence of God as a fundamental truth on to which he applies the scholastic method in order to assert that God is that which nothing greater can be conceived. Anselm's logic suggests that if something can be conceived of in the mind, it can also be conceived of in reality. Then, since something existing in reality is of greater value than something existing purely in the mind, and God is the greatest thing one can conceive of, God must exist in reality.⁷ This formula is the ontological argument, but in order for it to hold true, one must have already accepted that God is the greatest thing that can be conceived. It is evident through this small sample of Anselm's work that he appealed to both reason and faith. This academic fusion of faith and reason reflects the scholastic method that was prominent in monasteries starting in the eleventh century.

The second aspect of the expansion of education in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was the introduction of cathedral schools that rose dramatically under Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great. Cathedral schools continued to teach the scholastic method, however they were not dedicated to solely theological interpretations.⁸ Cathedral schools were seen as a replacement for monastic schools because they had the ability to create curriculums outside the restraints of strict liturgical services and spiritual training.⁹ The implementation of cathedral schools coincided with the rise of administrative capability in the papacy and in secular nations. Therefore, men being taught at cathedral schools were being trained to serve at episcopal or secular courts, and not to participate in monastic tradition. These schools were run in chapels and

⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*. ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.

⁸ Stephen C Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 46.

⁹ Keen, *Medieval Europe*, 96.

had clerics of high nobility acting as instructors rather than monks. Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, ecclesiastical appointments went to students of Cathedral schools which turned them into a training ground for future bishops. The prominence cathedral school meant that monasteries were no longer the only avenue to become literate, and a rise in royal and imperial administrative capabilities meant a rise in demand for learned men that were not dedicated to a spiritual life in a monastery. In this way, education was institutionalized to serve the purposes of the imperial administration. It is important to note that, while women were included in monastic learning to an extent, they were explicitly excluded from cathedral schools.¹⁰ As such, women were consistently less fluent in Latin, which prevented them from fully engaging in the intellectual sphere.

Only select boys would learn Latin, and to do so they had to enter a monastic life wherein they would have to give up their temporal life of family and sexuality.¹¹ Earlier in the Middle Ages, women had the same opportunities to enter into the monastic life as nuns or abbesses, but as Christianity became increasingly imperial and male, so did monasticism. This is not to say that women were barred from entering convents, rather their brand of monasticism focused on mysticism, devotional and contemplative prayer, and visions. Medieval convents and abbeys often preserved Pagan manuscripts, further associating themselves with a lower status of language/vernacular.¹²

¹⁰ Barbara Newman, "The Visionary Texts and Visual Worlds of Religious Women," in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed., Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti, (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2008), 152.

¹¹ Julia Bolton Holloway, "Crosses and Boxes: Latin and Vernacular." In *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed., Julia Bolton Holloway, Joan Bechtold, and Constance S. Wright, 58-88. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1990. 75

¹² Holloway, "Crosses and Boxes: Latin and Vernacular," 75.

The importance of language in explaining the divide between female and male monastics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries cannot be understated. Monastics in the middle ages were almost all bilingual, because they were required to know Latin on top of at least one vernacular tongue. The divide between languages comes from gender and class divides, because Latin was the language used primarily by elite men throughout Christendom. Languages were gendered in this way, with Latin being referred to as the father tongue and vernacular languages as the mother tongues. Latin was the language used in all intellectual writing. As scholasticism and cathedral schools reached their peaks in the thirteenth century, women were excluded from the theological elite because of their inability to become fluent in Latin. They were excluded from cathedral schools, so they could not become practiced theologians. What is interesting to note is that many historians attribute women with converting pagan tribes to Christianity and adopting Latin. However as Christianity became increasingly imperial and male dominated, women were excluded from this spiritual language.¹³ It was the dichotomy between the official and popular languages, and the official language (Latin) was used for monastic learning and teaching.

The rise of vernacular languages in the twelfth century paralleled the rise of literacy and scholasticism. Instead of this movement primarily impacting men, this movement put women at the forefront for devotional and mystical writing.¹⁴ Women were associated with both vernacular languages and mysticism. Therefore, their exclusion from intellectual theology led to the work of nuns becoming increasingly involved with mysticism and contemplative prayer. Female monasticism was linked with mysticism, visionary experiences and contemplative prayer because women were excluded from scholastic method of learning, so they turned to spirituality

¹³ Holloway, "Crosses and Boxes," 59.

¹⁴ Newman, "Visionary Texts," 152.

that could be practiced with vernacular language

Ecclesiastical doctrines in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries asserted the subordination of women and excluded them from clerical positions. The official position of the papacy was that women should not be able to preach which echoed the beliefs of Saint Paul in explicitly forbidding women from communicating the words of God to the masses.¹⁵ With some exceptions in the mendicant movements, preaching, performing liturgical services, and all official Church business was done in Latin. Again, one can see the profound effect women's exclusion from the education reforms had on their position within the Church. Medieval nuns adapted by embracing their association to the vernacular languages in the rise of the *Devotio Moderna*. This religious reform that gained popularity in the thirteenth century and peaked in the fourteenth century promoted a life of apostolic simplicity and renewed practices of humility, obedience, contemplative prayer.¹⁶ The High Middle Ages were a time where people began to yearn to know God for themselves instead of through the strictly ritualized practices of the Church. Many believed that the only way to truly experience the Divine was to absolve oneself of any worldly influence or desire and engage in contemplative worship. Since devotional and prophetic visions, mysticism, and contemplative prayer became the specialty of nuns due to their exclusion from the scholastic sphere, historians are able to see female monastic influence on this type of Medieval Christianity.¹⁷

¹⁵ Joan Bechtold, "St Birgitta: The Disjunction Between Women and Ecclesiastical Male Power," in *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Julia B Holloway, Constance S Wright, and Jooan Bechtold (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1990), 91.

¹⁶ Patricia Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), 179.

¹⁷ Newman, "Visionary Texts," 154.

In order to expand on the ideas brought forth about nuns and their position within the mystical and contemplative sphere of medieval Christianity, this paper will examine the life and work of Saint Birgitta of Sweden. Birgitta's political and spiritual influence exemplifies the role of women played within the Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Her visions never challenged the patriarchal structure of the Church, but they did position her as an influential member of the clergy in terms of contemplative mysticism. She founded her own monastic order known as the Order of the Most Holy Saviour (or Bridgettine Order). The order was dedicated to devotion to the Virgin Mary and to the Passion of Christ, because in Birgitta's own life many of her revelations used female metaphors to praise the Incarnation and devotion to the Virgin Mary.¹⁸ Much, if not all, of Birgitta's work comes to historians through the use of a hagiographer who described Birgitta's visionary experiences.¹⁹ The feeling of her revelations is described in her work *The Rule of The Saviour* where it is written that, "physical forces were emptied, but her soul began to see, hear, speak, and feel spiritual things with full force and vigor."²⁰ The way Birgitta's visionary experiences are described reflects the method of contemplative prayer that was popularized throughout the High and Late Middle Ages. Saint Birgitta's visionary and mystic experiences exemplify the place that women had in the monastic hierarchy of the High Middle Ages. Although she had a significant impact on mysticism and devotional worship, she was only sainted because the Church perceived her visions as confirmation of existing structures

¹⁸ St Birgitta of Sweden, "The Angel's Discourse," in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: The Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings, The Rule, and Minor Works*. ed. Bridget Morris. (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), 123.

¹⁹ Bechtold, "St Birgitta," 94.

²⁰ St Birgitta, "The Angel's Discourse," 124.

and doctrines. She reported any revelations to bishops or abbots who legitimized them.²¹

Eleventh and twelfth century Europe saw a general distancing of male and female monasticism. The wedge between monks and nuns was generally due to an emphasis on female spirituality through mysticism because of the rise of scholasticism in education. Scholastic theology as a discipline excluded women because it was entirely practiced in Latin and taught in schools that women were explicitly excluded from. At the beginning of the eleventh century, female monasticism enjoyed a level of parity with monks, however as the impact of scholasticism reached monasteries and learning shifted to favour philosophical exegesis, nuns became associated on spiritual contemplative and visionary experiences.

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²¹ St Birgitta, "The Angel's Discourse," 124.

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