

VIRGINITAS

AN ESSAY IN THE HISTORY OF A MEDIEVAL IDEAL

Series Minor

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MEDIEVAL IDEAL

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VIRGINITAS:

AN ESSAY IN THE HISTORY OF A
MEDIEVAL IDEAL

by

JOHN BUGGE



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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	VII
<i>Introduction</i>	I
CHAPTER I: SEXUALITY AND THE FALL OF MAN	5
1. Gnostic Cosmogony	6
2. Christian Gnostics and the Book of Genesis	12
3. Augustinian Orthodoxy and the Original Sin	21
CHAPTER II: VIRGINITY AND THE MONASTIC ECONOMY OF PERFECTION	30
1. <i>Vita angelica</i>	30
2. <i>Simplicitas</i>	35
3. Contemplation and Prophecy	41
4. <i>Milites Christi</i>	47
CHAPTER III: <i>SPONSA CHRISTI</i> : VIRGINITY AND EPITHALAMIAN MYSTERY	59
1. The Song of Songs and Christian Exegesis	59
2. Encratism and Marriage	67
3. Epithalamian <i>Gnosis</i>	75
CHAPTER IV: VIRGINITY SEXUALIZED	80
1. The Twelfth-Century Context: Ideas and Influences	81
2. Victorine Spiritual Marriage	84
3. St. Bernard and the Song of Songs	90
4. The Katherine Group and Erotic Spirituality	96

CHAPTER V: SURVIVING ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN GNOSIS	III
1. Sin as Sexual	III
2. Traditional Features of Virginity Deontologized	115
3. Virginity and Moral Conflict	123
<i>Afterword</i>	134
<i>Appendix: The Virgin Mary: Virgin Birth and Immaculate Conception</i>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	155
<i>Index</i>	164

PREFACE

A preface is best written last, after a book is done and its author may look back to survey what he hopes he has accomplished and what he must admit he has not. In hindsight virginity by itself has seemed a very large field to till, but with that reflection also comes a sense of misgiving, the awareness that a really comprehensive treatment of that subject would somehow have to encompass an enormous terrain, the whole length and breadth of Christianity's attitude toward sexuality from the earliest times down to the high Middle Ages. It could be argued that no small book could cover so much ground, and I would be the first to agree. As its subtitle is meant to suggest, the present work is, in at least two senses of the word, an *essay*: both an initial and tentative effort to get at the meaning of an extremely important but as yet unprobed medieval belief in the perfective value of the virginal life; and an interpretive study of a complex subject from a limited point of view, specifically, that in which the virgin appears in devotional literature as the bride of Christ. An exhaustive investigation of the theological ideal would require massive documentation; with no claim to such thoroughness this attempt may perhaps be pardoned for trusting to a minimum of footnoting, and that of the exemplary, rather than the statistically conclusive sort. Indeed, in one sense I have not seen my task as one of persuading the reader to accept a new verdict, but as one of offering a way of structuring his oldest suspicions about the incompatibility of normal human sexuality and spiritual perfection within Christianity.

I should like to record my indebtedness to three men who have shaped my thinking in various ways. Every student of monasticism finds himself beholden to the awesome learning of Fr. Jean Leclercq, and, while at times I challenge his conclusions, I have largely de-

pended on his informed scholarship for the facts of medieval monastic belief. I owe much to Morton W. Bloomfield for the encouragement and generous help he gave me at the start of this project and throughout the time it was under way, but not less for the standard of eminence his own work in the history of ideas has set for a generation of scholars. I am especially grateful to Gregor Sebba, the truest exponent of the humane letters it has been my privilege to know, for the cogent editorial suggestions and advice he so freely gave.

One woman, too, has been extremely helpful in seeing this book to completion: my own *sponsa*, long since *subintroducta*, whose support and unfailing good cheer have made it impossible for this enquiry to be anything more than disinterested.

J.B.

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of this enquiry is virginity, until comparatively recent times the single most essential prerequisite for a life of perfection in Christianity. The problems are formidable; one need only consider the regularity with which some sort of impulse toward sexual puritanism has made itself felt in the course of western Christianity to appreciate the immensity of the undertaking that would presume to treat the subject in anything like its entirety. From the very beginning the Church as a whole has insisted on restraint in sexual matters, but, properly speaking, it is only the institution of monasticism to which the ideal of virginity has remained, now as always, directly relevant.¹ This book will therefore seek to explore the meaning of virginity in the ascetic philosophy of medieval monasticism.

Ernst Curtius has written, "Much of what we call Christianity is purely and simply monastic."² If so, one cannot expect to know very much of the mind of medieval Christianity without first sharing the reflections of the medieval monk. Beyond that, however, is the main

¹ A recent work by the Dominican J. M. Perrin, entitled simply *Virginity*, trans. Katherine Gordon (Westminster, Md., 1956), is an example of modern enthusiasm for a theme that is "allied to whatever is deepest in the human heart, . . . lies also at the centre of the Catholic Church," and is "intimately related to the Christian conception of life present and to come" (pp. vii-ix). In an entirely different spirit, Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Celibacy*, trans. C. A. L. Jarrott (New York, 1968), discusses the present celibacy crisis in the Roman Church as merely another phase of a historical concern that dates from the twelfth century. And as recently as September 1970, as part of the liturgical revisions growing out of the reforms of Vatican II, the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship introduced a rite of consecration for women who, not drawn to the conventual life of the nun, nevertheless desire to remain chaste in secular society.

² *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (New York, 1953), p. 515.

argument that emerges from the findings of this study, that a sympathetic appreciation of the strictly monastic view of soteriology is impossible without a clear understanding of the fundamental importance of the ideal of virginity within that scheme. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the notion of a sexless state of existence is the very leaven of monastic thought, and therefore a principle upon whose viability as a spiritual ideal the development of the institution has largely depended.

Quite early it became apparent that no study of monastic virginity could be of value unless it also undertook to deal with the attitude of early Christianity toward human sexuality itself. Chapter I, accordingly, is retrospective in more than one way. It not only looks back to the patristic period, but concerns itself especially with the relationship between sexuality and the doctrine of the Fall in the thought of certain representative commentators on the story of Genesis. The special point at issue there was simply how to define man's true, original nature; the speculation that was to have a lasting influence upon monastic belief held that prelapsarian man, like the angels, was created virginal, and that sexuality is a result of his sin. Chapter II attempts to show how this remarkable appraisal of man's original innocence is, in fact, the organizing principle in the monastic economy of perfection. Considered structurally, the ideal of asexuality stands in a vital, logical relation to such traditional monastic concerns such as contemplation, the ideal of a simple life, and the concept of the monk as a soldier of Christ, themes which are especially manifest in some of the literary productions of early English monasticism before the Conquest.

In the remaining chapters the focus narrows to an approach that makes use of the popular and historically durable motif of the *sponsa Christi*, the "bride of Christ," as a sort of touchstone with which to assay the changes the ideal of virginity undergoes from earliest Christianity to the twelfth century. By a selective probing of devotional literature which extols virginity as a kind of sacral marriage, it will be possible to discover the outlines of an evolving theological concept lying beneath the unchanging literary metaphor. While Chapter III will consider the origins of the bridal idea and the growth of epithalamian mysticism in the early Church, the next two will deal with momentous developments of the later Middle Ages. During the hundred years between 1150 and 1250, the ancient mystery of marriage to God underwent a profound transformation, one that found expression in an unprecedented outpouring of devotional

literature that was overtly "feminist" in nature. This spiritual reading not only tailored its exhortations to female taste; it consistently implied and celebrated, as historically it helped to create, an essential disparity between male and female forms of Christian devotion. But while it may have conferred upon the female reader a new awareness of her own sexuality, it sought to focus that heightened consciousness exclusively upon the spiritual object of a virginal marriage to the Saviour.

The last two chapters concentrate on the so-called "Katherine Group," a collection of early Middle English works from the West Midlands, and on closely related works such as the *Ancrene Riwele*, or "Rule for Anchoresses." They are all roughly contemporary and were produced with the same end in view, the spiritual tutelage of professed holy women.³ Taken together these pieces comprise probably the most varied and accessible collection of this sort in any vernacular literature. Apparently with the sole exception of Aethelwold of Winchester's tenth-century translation of the Rule of St. Benedict, they are almost the first writing done expressly for women in English, and stand at the wellhead of a vernacular tradition in the literature of female piety.⁴ Moreover, they exhibit strong Cistercian influence, a critical ingredient in the compound of ideas on virginity during this period. In a number of respects, then, the Middle English Katherine Group and its kindred writings provide a kind of show-

³ The Katherine Group consists of the legends of Saints Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana, the heavily sermonistic treatise on virginity entitled *Hali Meidenhad*, and the allegorical *Sawles Warde*. For the textual relationship of these works to each other see J. E. Wells, *A Manual of Writings in Middle English, 1050-1400* (New Haven, 1916), pp. 272-74, 312-14. R. M. Wilson has an excellent discussion of the importance of the Katherine Group in the continuation of the native prose homiletic tradition in *Early Middle English Literature* (London, 1939), pp. 116-27. Closely associated with the Katherine Group in MSS are certain lyrical pieces written for a female audience. This collection is known as the "Wooing Group," and contains such works as *On Ureisun of Ure Louerde* and *On Lofsong of Ure Louerde*. See *De Wohunge of Ure Louerd*, ed. W. Meredith Thompson, E.E.T.S. 241 (London, 1958), especially pp. xi-xii, xv-xxiv, lx-lxi. In addition, J. R. R. Tolkien, "Ancrene Wisse and *Hali Meiphad*," *Essays and Studies*, 14 (1929), 104-17, points out the close linguistic kinship between the Katherine Group and the Corpus Christi MS of the *Ancrene Wisse*. For the various MSS of the *Ancrene Riwele*, see Wells, pp. 361-65.

⁴ See R. W. Chambers, *On the Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School* (London, 1932), pp. xcii-c, esp. p. xciii: "England was remarkable for the number of its hermits and recluses, . . . a fact which is the cause of the composition of so much English prose: the fact that women recluses would not be expected to be as familiar as men would be with Latin."

case in which to view important contemporary mutations in the virginal ideal.

It would be misleading, however, to allow the implication to stand that even at the turn of the twelfth century virginity was only a feminine attribute. Although the concept of spiritual nuptials inclines us to think of it as proper to females, the historical fact is that for centuries virginity was predicable of both sexes. Its essence, of course, is complete sexual abstinence, which can also apply to celibacy on the part of the male. The early history of the question permits no simple distinction between male celibacy and female virginity; it is only late in the Middle Ages that virginity becomes almost exclusively something female. To be able to appreciate this and certain other modifications the ideal underwent, we must first examine what it was in the mind of early Christianity that contributed to its formation. The notion of virginal perfection is rooted in the consciousness of the primitive Church, and, in fact, helped to establish that consciousness. Its putative importance in the scheme of Christian salvation is exemplified in the casual but unequivocal statement of Epiphanius, writing about the year 375, that "Virginity is the cornerstone of the Church."⁵

⁵ *Expositio fidei catholicae*, xxi (PG 42.823-24), as trans. Henry C. Lea, *The History of Clerical Celibacy in the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev., 2 vols. (London, 1907), I, 39.

CHAPTER I

SEXUALITY AND THE FALL OF MAN

Gaude ergo talem te esse, qualis Dei formata es manibus. Ille ergo integra condidit utique, quam integritate ditavit; quam ad integritatis praemia praeparavit. Perversi enim naturalem corrumpunt homines, quam Deus formavit integram. Et haec offensa humani generis prima, haec damnatae originis causa dum protoplasti esse noluerunt quod fuerant conditi: idcirco meruerunt in se et in prole damnari. Reparatae castimoniae in vobis retentaculum, O virgines, quod perdidit in paradiso primi homines.

— Leander, *Liber de institutione virginum*¹

To understand virginity one must start at the Beginning. It is not just the logical place to begin, it is the only place, for the belief in the perfective character of virginity is intertwined with the mysteries of the creation, man's primal life in a garden of innocence, and an original transgression. Christianity has always been heedful of the way things were in the Beginning, and perhaps this systematic concern reflects a basal tendency in all religious thought, the disposition to explain and evaluate belief and observance in the light of the nature of things in the Time before time, *in illo tempore*.² A sense of afflicted nostalgia for the original state of human nature is so prevalent in the writings of the Fathers as to suggest that Christian thought is actually based upon a mode of *quondam* retrospection which views present, profane reality exclusively in terms derived from a belief in a sinless Beginning. As Paul Ricoeur writes,

To posit the world as that *into which* sin entered, or innocence as that *from which* sin strayed, or again, in figurative language, Paradise as the place *from which* man was driven, is to attest that sin is not our original reality, does not constitute our first onto-

¹ *PL* 72.877.

² For instance, in *The Myth of Eternal Return*, trans. Willard Trask (New York, 1954), pp. 80–81, Mircea Eliade speaks of the mythic pattern of the regeneration of history through ritual actions or formulas designed to signify a destruction of the past: "these instruments of regeneration tend toward the same end: to annul past time, to abolish history by a continuous return *in illo tempore*. . . . Hence the essential importance, in rituals and myths, of anything which can signify the 'beginning,' the original, the primordial."

logical status; sin does not define what it is to be a man; beyond his becoming a sinner there is his being created.³

It is not surprising, therefore, that so much of the speculative theology of the first four centuries of the Christian era takes the form of commentaries on the first few chapters of Genesis, treatments whose main concern is the often minute examination of human nature in its pristine condition.⁴

I. Gnostic Cosmogony

It is a striking fact that commentators occupied with the first things seem to align themselves with one or the other of two quite distinct persuasions over the problem of sexuality in the Garden of Eden. First, there are those whose conclusions show a remarkable affinity to those of heterodox gnosticism, and who might, therefore, be regarded as members of a "Christian gnostic tradition." No imputation of "heresy," however, is intended, nor is it any part of our concern to determine whether this view of primal sexuality is somehow "unacceptable." On the other side, fundamentally opposed to these Christian gnostics, are certain Fathers of the Church whose ideas on the original nature of man are less austere and uncompromising; their most important spokesman is Augustine. For the moment, at least, our attention must fix on the originally oriental, gnosticizing tradition: its fascinating vein of speculation over the status of sexuality in Eden is ultimately the source of the ideal of virginity in later western monasticism. Now it is clear that in other ways the cloister is directly indebted to this brand of eastern Christianity. Jean Leclercq has shown that while monastic culture is grounded in the Latin Bible, it depends upon the writings of the eastern Fathers for expressing its unique rationale. The ninth chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, for example, counsels monks to read the works of "the Fathers," that is, the Fathers of the desert. Western monks were never without the writings of the most important Greek Fathers, at least in translation, and records show that these were not doctrinal

³ *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York, 1967), pp. 250-51.

⁴ See Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker (London, 1964), p. 108. For a sense of the continuing impact of the Genesis story, see the listings of the numerous works on the "first things" in "Indices" of Migne's *Patrologiae . . . Graeca*, ed. F. Cavallera (Paris: Fratres Garnier, n.d.), cols. 144-45; and the "Index Patristico-Theologicus," *PL* 218.1201-04.

works, controversial and dialectical in nature, but devotional guide-books for the spiritual life.⁵ If monastic spirituality shows a general allegiance to the East, so in the matter of the celibate life its principles can be traced to a distinctively Christian-gnostic tradition on sexuality.

This choice of terms is purposive; it is meant to suggest conspicuous similarities between "Christian gnosis" and heterodox or pagan gnosticism, the most fundamental of which is a radical metaphysical and anthropological dualism in which the spiritual is practically equated with good and matter with evil. Here is the essence of what Hans Jonas has called the "gnostic principle," the most basic premise underlying a "profound spiritual ferment" of salvational movements – earliest Christianity was one – in the eastern Mediterranean world at the beginning of the Christian era.⁶ Nearly every sect based on the gnostic principle held to the following points of doctrine:⁷

1. the disintegration of an original spiritual "Pleroma" or fullness of Spirit;
2. the formation of the physical universe, either by a demiurge or through the process of progressive emanations out of the Pleroma;
3. the intermixing of particles of divine light in certain human natures as the world was being formed, with a consequent "libidinous longing," on the part of those affected, toward the Primal Light;
4. the practice either of radical asceticism or of a radical libertinism as a protest against the essential evil of the physical world; and
5. *gnosis* itself, conceived of as the process of self-realization wherein the soul becomes aware of its divine origin and identity.

It is far beyond our purpose to determine the extent to which early Christianity might have been influenced by these radically dualistic

⁵ *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York, 1961), pp. 111, 116–117. While Augustine's works were to be found in most cloister libraries, monastic authors were inclined to use his thought for their own purposes, often for "the testimony of the mystic" (p. 124). One should not forget that the knowledge of Greek survived into the Dark Ages. Bede, for instance, testifies in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, IV, ii, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols. (1896; rpt. London, 1956), I, 205: "usque hodie supersunt de eorum discipulis, qui Latinam Graecamque linguam aequae ut propriam, in qua nati sunt, norunt."

⁶ *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. rev. (Boston, 1963), pp. xvii, 31.

⁷ Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Judenchristentum, Gnosis* (Tübingen, 1956), pp. 37–39, judges these elements of belief "einen Querschnitt durch die reichlich bizarren und voneinander recht variierenden Systeme."

tenets, and the question of the historical interrelationship between pagan gnosticism and Christian orthodoxy is most complex.⁸

⁸ It used to be customary to draw a contrast between Christianity and gnosticism as between orthodoxy and heresy, perhaps because so much of the evidence available concerning gnosticism was apologetic in character, consisting in refutations of gnosticism by antagonistic Christian commentators such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian. But the habit of emphasizing differences can impair the perception of similarities, and it is what the two systems have in common that is the concern of the present chapter.

As to the sources of gnostic dualism and its connections with Christian thought, it was first believed that gnosticism was an outgrowth of Greek Orphism, and could best be explained as a combination of a few distortions of Christian dogma heavily overlaid with Platonic philosophy, "the acute Hellenization of Christianity," in Adolph von Harnack's phrase. The recent discovery of original gnostic texts, however, has shown that much of the mythological material in gnosticism was also oriental – Babylonian, Egyptian, Iranian – in origin. See Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, trans. P. Mairet (New York, 1960). Finally, scholars have suggested an indebtedness on the part of pagan gnosticism to heterodox Judaism, on the strength of the discovery at Qumran of Essene writings that manifest the same basically gnostic world view that appears in later heretical writings. For example, Jean Daniélou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity*, trans. S. Attanasio (Baltimore, 1958), pp. 97–98, notes the putative "founder" of gnosticism, Simon the Sorcerer, was a disciple of the encratite Dositheus, who "clearly seems to have been an Essene." He continues: "It is therefore very possible that gnosticism, through Simon, may be a radical exaggeration of the Essenian dualism, perhaps as a result of Persian influences. In this case one of the greatest enigmas of the history of religion is on the road to being solved."

The last possibility is exciting less for what it says about the origins of pagan gnosticism than for what it implies about the presence within normative Christianity of a strong gnostic principle at work from the very beginning and exercising an influence over the source of doctrinal development. Such a "Christian gnosis" may well have been an organic outgrowth from the dualist tendency in Essene thought. Fr. Daniélou infers (*ibid.*, p. 92) that the people Christ termed "the true Israelites" were actually members of the Zadokite sect located at Qumran until the Roman devastation of A.D. 70. He further suggests that both John the Baptist and John the Evangelist were strongly influenced by Essene thought; and that Paul, in many ways the chief artificer of Christian doctrine, was indebted for his first instruction in its principles to the Essene-Christian community at Damascus (*ibid.*, pp. 23–26, 100–03). See also Gilles Quispel, "Christliche Gnosis und jüdische Heterodoxie," *Evangelische Theologie*, n.s., 9 (1954), 474–84. For a general discussion of the link between Essene writings and early Christianity, see A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, trans. G. Vermes (Cleveland, 1962), pp. 368–78.

While an investigation of early Christian doctrine for what gnostic elements it may have inherited from non-rabbinic Judaism is beyond the competence of this study, the fact of such filiation indicates that an airtight distinction between Christian orthodoxy and gnosticism is out of the question. As Hans Jonas points out, the more recent investigations of gnosticism have "gradually enlarged the range of the phenomenon beyond the group of Christian heresies originally comprised by the name, and in this greater breadth . . . Gnosticism became increasingly revealing of the whole civilization in which it arose and whose all-pervading feature was syncretism" (*The Gnostic Religion*,

One gnostic belief is particularly crucial for this investigation, and ought to be treated in some detail. It is that the presence of evil in the world and man's participation in it are ultimately to be attributed to a primeval fall from a condition of perfect felicity. This is by no means the orthodox Christian concept of the Fall, however; the pagan gnostic premise is that evil is to be defined as the descent of spiritual substance, or Soul, into matter. As Ricoeur puts it, "The being of man is itself the result of a drama anterior to man; the evil is that there are human beings; the genesis of evil coincides with anthropogony."⁹ More relevant to the question of virginity is the fact that the fall and the resulting creation of the physical world are associated with an original transgression of a distinctly sexual nature. In most of the multifarious elaborations of its cosmogonic myth, pagan gnosticism attributes the break-up of the primal Soul to a sin of lust. In the belief of the Harranites of Mesopotamia "The Soul once turned toward matter, she became enamored of it, and burning with the desire to experience the pleasures of the body, she no longer wanted to disengage herself from it. Thus the world was born. From that moment the Soul forgot herself."¹⁰ The Hermetic treatise *Poimandres* describes primal man as created by Mind and sharing in its image. But "Nature" sees the deiform man, falls in love with him, and the two are united; their offspring are beings that are both sublime and bisexual. But as a result of the original intercourse "the bond uniting all things was broken by the will of God. For all

p. xvi). For this reason, it seems more practicable to define gnosticism in latitudinarian fashion, not limiting the application of the term only to the doctrine of those sects condemned by the Fathers as unorthodox, but freely extending it, with Jonas, to any and all manifestations of the "gnostic spirit": "In weitester Bedeutung bildete er [the concept of Gnosis] schliesslich den Titel und gleichsam das Stichwort für die ganze Fülle mythischer (auch quasi philosophischer) Spekulationen und soteriologischer Kultpraxis, in denen sich die von Osten her vordringende eschatologische Weltstimmung der Zeit ausdrückte" (*Gnosis und spätantiker Geist: Erster Teil, Die mythologische Gnosis*, 3rd ed. rev. [Göttingen, 1964], p. 5). The virtue of such an appraisal is that it opens the way to speaking of a gnostic tradition *within* Christianity itself, one that shares, to a greater or lesser degree, many of the beliefs held by heretical gnosticism, despite the fact that those beliefs came to be regarded with increasing suspicion by a Church growing more conscious of the need to uphold the unity and authenticity of its creed.

⁹ *Symbolism*, pp. 232-33. One outstanding feature of pagan and heterodox gnosticism was its constant and enduring concern with the problem of theodicy. It was these "heretics" and philosophers whom Tertullian describes as "always asking the same questions: 'Whence came evil, and in what does it exist?' and 'Whence and how came man?'" (*De praescriptionibus*, vii [PL 2.22], trans. in Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee* [Cambridge, 1947], p. 5).

¹⁰ "El Chatibi on the Harranites," qu. in Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 63.

living creatures, previously bisexual, were parted, as was man; they became on the one hand male, on the other female."¹¹ Dositheus, whose eight books are lost except for the description of them contained in the *Apocritikon* of Macarius Magnes, reputedly held that the world had its beginning by sexual intercourse, and would see its end in the triumph of continence.¹² Indeed, a standard interpretation of the sexual fall centers on a sin of adultery between the virginal Eve and the fallen angels. According to the Sethian Ophites, Adam, possessed of the "moist nature of light," observes Eve's promiscuous encounters with a troop of demiurgical aeons. Aroused by her seductions, he falls in with her, and by their sin both are emptied of divine substance and plummet from heaven to this world. There they realize they are naked, that is, alienated from the perfection of pure spirituality: they recognize the flesh is not their proper nature, and grow ashamed of it.¹³ A similar version appears in the apocryphal writings of Christian sects heavily influenced by gnosticism. In the *Secret Book of John* of the second century, the aeon Ialdabaoth sees the virgin Eve and seduces her. Adam, innocent but ever observant, grows jealous: "Marital intercourse arose through the First Archon. He planted in Adam a desire for sowing."¹⁴ It is needless to multiply further such citations out of the wealth of gnostic mythology, for as Gilles Quispel has put it, "Die eigentliche Ursache des Falles ist die Libido."¹⁵

Consonant with this view is the implication of certain passages in Genesis which suggest a sexual fall from grace (and which, incidentally, also seem to indicate the presence of something like the gnostic cosmogonic myth in earliest Judaism). The passages are verses two and four of chapter six, and have to do with the "Watcher" angels commingling with the "daughters of men": "The sons of God seeing the daughters of men, that they were fair, took to themselves wives

¹¹ Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York, 1961), pp. 213-5. The same treatise ascribes the physical part of man to "the Darkness" (p. 216). Irenaeus accuses the arch-gnostics Saturninus and Marcion of blaming the Hebrew God for the division of man into sexes, in *Adversus haereses*, I, xxviii (PG 7A.690-91). For definite traces of primal bisexuality in Judaism see George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1954-58), I, 453; and William D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948), pp. 46, 48, 54.

¹² J. P. Arendzen, "Encratites," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann, et al. (New York, 1907-22).

¹³ See Grant, *Gnosticism*, pp. 54-56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁵ *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zürich, 1951), pp. 29-30.

of all which they chose. . . . Now giants were upon the earth in those days. For after the sons of God went into the daughters of men, and they brought forth children, these are the mighty men of old, men of renown." These verses from the Yahwist source contain a trace of polytheism from a far earlier age, in which the Elohim, the sons of God eventually identified with the angels, commit the original sin of deserting the abode of heaven and mingling the divine essence with the seed of man.¹⁶ Gnostics of the Christian era doubtless found the *descensus angelorum* passage to their liking, but the antiquity of the verses indicates that the concept of a sexual fall was also part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition very early.¹⁷

Even more telling than gnosticism's view of the nature of the original sin is its assessment of its principal effect; that, too, is intimately conjoined with the mystery of sexuality. In the *Poimandres*, it is the disintegration of human nature into male and female that prompts God's command to increase and multiply. Under such a dictum, however, it is hard for man to "recognize himself as immortal and know the cause of death is *love*." The *Gospel of Mary* describes Christ as teaching that because of "what is of the nature of fornication, which is called 'sin,' . . . you come into existence and die."¹⁸ The unavoidable inference is that, just as sexual intercourse provides for the replenishment of physical life, it also ensures the continuation of death. In the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, to the question "How long shall men die?" the Lord replies, "So long as women bear children." The ethical corollary to this gnostic belief, reports Clement of Alexandria, was a life of complete continence; he quotes the

¹⁶ Norman F. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (New York, 1927), pp. 20-22. Probably the most important occurrence of the *descensus angelorum* outside the Genesis vi account is in the Book of Enoch, printed by R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1913), II, 170 ff. For the survival of the idea of a sexual fall in Rabbinic literature, and for the interesting idea that the Book of Enoch "may perhaps represent the final fusion of the watcher story with that of Adam and Eve," see J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 32-33, 46-55, 60.

¹⁷ See R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem: A Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy* (London, 1958), p. 75; and Schoeps, *Urgemeinde*, pp. 44-61. For the argument that in strict rabbinical tradition even the sin of Adam and Eve by which they attain to a "knowledge of good and evil" was interpreted as a lapse into sexual awareness of "the divine secret of creation," see Robert Gordis, "The Significance of the Paradise Myth," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 52 (1935-36), 91-94. See also S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1963), pp. 135-38.

¹⁸ Qu. in Grant, *Gnosticism*, pp. 215 (emphasis added) and 65.

gnostic contention that "the Saviour himself said: I came to destroy the works of the female." Clement explains that "By *female* he means lust; by *works*, birth and decay." The restoration of the pristine state of human nature will come about only when men "have trampled on the garment of shame [the body], and when the two become one and the male with the female *is* neither male nor female."¹⁹ One must conclude that most gnostic sects not only identified the original sin with a trespass upon a sexual prohibition, but brooked very little vagueness over the statement that "the wages of sin is death." Specifically, they saw death as the perfectly condign punishment for a sexual sin. While normal sexuality in fact allays or forestalls the effects of death upon the race by bringing new life to birth, in the elemental metaphysic of gnosticism the terrible cyclic argument of the human condition, that of "birth, copulation, and death," was only to be broken by the removal of the middle term.

What bearing has this upon the orthodox Christian concept of the Fall? Or, to put it another way, what does the fall of Adam and Eve, which accounts for evil in the Christian economy, owe to the gnostic idea of a sexual fall of Soul into matter? For an answer it is necessary to go back to the point when Christianity could still be identified as a sect of Judaism; the first figure who demands consideration is neither a Christian nor a Gnostic, but a Jew, Philo Judaeus.

2. *Christian Gnostics and the Book of Genesis*

The purpose of much of Philo's writings was the reconciliation of Greek philosophy with Hebrew scriptural tradition, an end for which he found it necessary to treat Genesis as allegory. It is his method which is important, as an allegorical interpretation was also to become the means by which Christian commentators were to bring the essentials of the gnostic principle into agreement with an orthodox reading of the story of Adam and Eve. Philo himself was not too far from subscribing to many of the beliefs of gnosticism, as he received them through the refining medium of Greek philosophy. For him God alone is perfect and the source of all existence that is good. Evil springs from another source entirely, though it is not certain whether he views it as matter.²⁰ While his conception of

¹⁹ *Stromata*, III, ix (PG 8.1165-69), trans. in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), pp. 10-11.

²⁰ See Wilson, pp. 44-45. If Philo suspected the physical world to be evil, his belief might as easily be traced to a Platonic source as a gnostic one (cf. p. 45, n. 174).

human nature is one wherein man is made up of dust and the spirit that God breathes into him (a Hebrew concept), he also considers him to have been banished into a lower "sphere" than he had occupied originally (a gnostic concept).²¹ For a grasp of the allegorical exegesis by which Philo was able to sustain this hybrid view, it will be helpful to explore briefly his understanding of Genesis.

Philo sees the angels of Moses as corresponding to the "demons" of the Greek philosophers, souls that people the air and on occasion descend from their spiritual state to clothe themselves with matter and become men. Thus the *descensus angelorum* interpolation of Genesis vi.1-4 is an allegorical account of the descent of souls into bodies.²² The Garden of Paradise is symbolic of the uncontaminated spiritual life of Primal Man, who, like the angels, was pure, incorporeal, and neither male nor female.²³ Adam's sexual innocence also figures man's pristine spirituality: his physical union with Eve is to be read allegorically as the confusion of the spirit with matter, reason with sense.²⁴ That Genesis lacks any mention of sexual activity within Eden is confirmation enough that man's original condition was that of a bodiless, pure spirit. The importance of this interpretation for our purposes lies in the influence it was to exert upon later Christian writers of the Alexandrian school, who generally believe with Philo that the Garden story is a wholly symbolic depiction of man's first state. It needs to be emphasized that this disposition is crucial to the place of virginity in Christian gnosis, for in a wholly allegorical reading, Adam and Eve have only figurative existence. Together they represent the (sinful) union of the spirit and the flesh;

²¹ Wilson, p. 45, who adds a cautionary note: "All such ideas, Platonic, Stoic, Orphic, Philonic, have as a basis a dualistic conception of the world as divided into regions of sense and of spirit. . . . This world is evil, because matter is evil, whatever be the technical terms used to distinguish between the two spheres. Man really belongs to a higher sphere, but has fallen or been banished to the lower."

²² *De gigantibus*, vi-vii, in *Philo*, ed. F. G. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1929-61), II, 448. See also *De gigantibus*, iv, *ed. cit.* II, 452-55. Cf. Wilson, pp. 199-200.

²³ *De opificio mundi*, xlvi, liv; *Legum allegoria*, "Analytical Introduction to Book I," I, xliii-xlvi, lvi-lviii; ed. Colson and Whitaker, I, 106-17, 120-23; I, 141, 174-77, 182-85.

²⁴ *Legum allegoria*, "Analytical Introduction to Book II"; II, xxxviii-xxxix, xlix-lii, ed. Colson and Whitaker, I, 220, 248-51, 254-57. In *De opificio mundi*, liii, *ed. cit.*, I, 118-21, woman becomes for man the "beginning of the blameworthy life"; intellectual love leads to pleasure, and pleasure [i.e. sexual pleasure] eventually leads to mortality. Cf. *De opificio mundi*, lv-lix, *ed. cit.*, I, 122-33.

the inner logic of the allegory thus demands that Adam and Eve remain apart.²⁵

Philo's method was a system unto itself, logically to be accepted whole, or simply dismissed in full in favor of a literal reading of Genesis. For a long time, however, Christianity could do neither, but rather adopted a method of selective allegoresis which caused inconsistencies. The principal difficulty arose with the need to literalize Adam and Eve. Had they been allowed to exist merely as mythic prototypes of soul and matter, their sexual union beyond the gates of Eden would have remained *only* symbolic of a primeval contamination of spirit with flesh, an alternative to the symbolism of the fall of the angels. But this position grew untenable when it became clear that the redemptive mission of the second Adam was to be predicated upon an original transgression by an individual first man; a real redemption required a real sin. Historically it was St. Paul who was most responsible for the success of the literal interpretation of the Adamic myth. As Ricoeur explains,

while it may have been disturbing to see St. Paul contributing to the Adamic mythology and congealing the Adamic symbol in literalism by regarding Adam as an individual situated at the beginning of history, it must now be granted that it is that mythology which keeps St. Paul from turning to dualism. The same pages that make the individual Adam the counterpart of Christ, called the second Adam ("as by one man . . ."), have a new ring when they are compared with the quasi-dualistic texts. . . . Thus it is the Adamic mythology that strikes a counterblow in opposition to the drift towards gnosis.²⁶

But a purely literal reading of the Fall account, revealing no trace of Adam's sin as a sexual offense (but as one of disobedience through pride) was not to be accomplished immediately. There remained a

²⁵ In this connection it is perhaps not too early to stress, with Fr. Leclercq, that "For the Fathers of the Church and for our own monastic fathers, paradise is a descriptive and symbolic biblical analogy by which they express not primarily a place or a moment of time, nor an historical state of humanity, but a certain theological state of man" ("The Monastic Tradition of Culture and Studies," *American Benedictine Review*, 11 [1960], 10-11).

²⁶ *Symbolism*, p. 334. It should be added that this literal interpretation of Adam's sin is absent in the thinking of the earlier, "apostolic" Fathers, and seems to have made no substantial impression upon theological speculation until the second half of the second century. See Julius Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte des Erbsündendogmas* (München, 1960), p. 73; and Henri Rondet, S.J., *Le Péché originel dans la tradition patristique et théologique* (Paris, 1967), p. 47.

residue of essentially gnostic antipathy toward sexuality which, strictly speaking, ought to have applied only to sexual congress conceived of as a symbolic mixing of soul and matter, after the manner of the fall of the angels "into" the daughters of men.²⁷ The opposition to sexuality did not disappear in the newer exegesis, but seems to have attached itself to the sexual act now as literally conceived. In other words, the force of the allegorical reading of Genesis was evidently sufficient to associate the spiritual fall of man with sexual intercourse itself. As a glance at the thinking of certain Fathers of the eastern Church will show, the emphasis placed upon the question of sexuality in the estimate of Primal Man's original condition and the quality of his sin comes to typify a gnostic tradition within Christianity, and to distinguish it, eventually, from the Augustinian tradition.

Let us consider first views of unfallen man's nature. Clement of Alexandria, Origen's mentor, intending to refute heretical gnosticism by transcending it, sought to demonstrate that the "true gnosis" is Christianity. His view of the nature of Paradise, like Philo's, is allegorical. The Garden represents the wholly spiritual state of man, a condition comparable to the innocence and simplicity of childhood. Seduced by desire, the childlike soul succumbs to the power of the flesh and becomes man, a soul imprisoned in a body.²⁸ For his part Origen did believe in the literal existence of an eschatological Paradise, a sort of "half-way house" where the saved would tarry and be given the knowledge necessary to understand all that they had seen on earth.²⁹ But Origen denies the physical existence of the original Paradise while according it an important allegorical meaning. He asks,

And who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, "planted a paradise eastward in Eden," and set in it a visible and palpable "tree of life," of such a sort that anyone who

²⁷ The Book of Enoch, which details the fall of the angels, was considered canonical until the fourth century; see Charles, *Apocrypha*, II, 163, 181-84 for a list of references to the Book of Enoch in earlier patristical writing. Under the ban of Hilary, Jerome, and especially Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, XV, xxiii, 4 and XVIII, xxxviii *passim* [PL 41.470-71, 598 ff.]), it fell into disuse. It continued to be read, however, by Marcionites, Valentinians, and Manichaeans, and by other encratic sects.

²⁸ *Protrepticus*, XI, iii, 1-3 (PG 8.228-37).

²⁹ *De principiis*, II, xi, 6, ed. and trans. G. W. Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles* (New York, 1966), pp. 152-53. It is interesting that Origen situates paradise immediately below the "spheres," by passage through which - according to gnostic commonplace - the soul reached the heavenly kingdom.

tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life . . . ? I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events.³⁰

Origen, in fact, saw man's primal nature as purely spiritual, incapable of possessing sexuality, at least in the sense that fallen man possesses it; his physical nature is the result of the sin of the soul.³¹ Methodius of Olympus, whose *Symposium* or *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* is one of the first Christian works devoted wholly to the idea that perfection resides in virginity, holds a view of the original human nature clearly as Platonic as Origen's, but more gnostic as well. Though he has little to say of Paradise itself, it is clear he considers man's soul to be pure, displaying most radiantly the image of its Maker, before it dons the fleshly covering it must have to enter the physical world.³² Significantly, Methodius describes the original state of the bodiless soul as virginity, an ontological kinship with the divine existence which gives it the ability to comprehend Perfection. The obscuration of that bond of union took place through the contamination of the soul with flesh, a process Methodius quite logically regards as a *loss* of virginity.³³

Gregory of Nyssa understands the place of Adam and Eve in the Garden in similar fashion. Like Philo and Origen Gregory saw Adam as a representative of the spiritual element in man, Eve of the fleshly. Their life together until the Fall is without sexual experience, signifying the virtuous forbearance the spirit once showed toward the body.³⁴ Acknowledging the force of the Pauline orthodoxy which

³⁰ *De principiis*, IV, iii, 1, ed. Butterworth, p. 288; cf. *Contra Celsum*, IV, xxxix (PG 11.1092).

³¹ *De principiis*, II, viii, 3, ed. Butterworth, pp. 122-27. For the generally gnostic bias of Origen's system, see Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Zweiter Teil, erste Hälfte: Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie* (Göttingen, 1954), pp. 203-23.

³² Saint Methodius, *The Symposium, A Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, S.J., *Ancient Christian Writers*, 27 (Westminster, Md., 1958), Logos VI, i, pp. 90-91. Musurillo's note (p. 212, n. 1) seems to avoid the obvious inference that it is contact with the flesh that corrupts the soul. Support for this view is to be found earlier in the *Symposium*, in III, i-iv (pp. 58-61), where Methodius states emphatically that the foreshadowed union of Adam and Eve "two in one flesh" (Genesis ii. 24) is only to be taken allegorically (as a type of the union of Christ and his Church), the implication being that sexual intercourse was impossible for pure spirits.

³³ *Symposium*, I, iv, p. 46. Further, he conceives of Christ's mission to the world as one of restoring virginity to the race. How virginity was lost is suggested by Methodius's view of the Tempter's motive (VI, i, p. 91): he is said to have been jealous of Adam's perfect celibacy.

³⁴ *De hominis officio*, xvii-xviii (PG 44.189-96). Adam represents the

made Adam and Eve real beings with flesh-and-blood existence in a real Garden, Gregory was constrained to assert that Adam and Eve remained physically virginal before their Fall. Had their sin not occurred they would have continued so, fulfilling God's command to propagate by a kind of spiritual emanation in a manner similar to that of the angels.³⁵ Both themes, the angelic life of our first parents and their perfect *apatheia*, recur often in the Fathers. But it is important to see how in Gregory's thought they stand in a directly causal relationship with the fact of Adam's prelapsarian virginity: Adam's perfect *apatheia* is considered a property of the angelic life, but Adam possessed the *vita angelica* because he was a virgin. In Gregory's mind the principal characteristic of the angelic life is asexuality.³⁶ John Chrysostom is in substantial agreement. For him there is no question but that the Garden of Eden literally existed, as did our first parents. Despite their flesh and blood, Adam and Eve led a life resembling that of the angels before their fall from grace. Their proper mode of existence was asexual, a condition which freed them from concupiscence; in their state of angelic innocence Adam and Eve were able to live together as if they had no bodies.³⁷ Had man not sinned, God would have multiplied the species of man in the same way He created him and the millions of angels that inhabit the heavens.³⁸

If the strain of Christian thought with a gnostic bias shares some of the views of heterodox gnosticism concerning Primal Man's original condition, it also shows a certain affinity to such pagan thought over the nature of man's sin and the effects of that sin upon the race. Clement of Alexandria, who saw the innocence of our first parents as similar to infancy, compromises with the text of Genesis by asserting that their disobedience consisted in their having abandoned themselves to *lust*. They allowed their youthful passions to carry them to intercourse before the time God had appointed for their union. The effect of their sin is the loss of man's innocence and spiritual freedom, the imprisonment of the soul in mortal flesh.³⁹ Ori-

universal nature of man, bi-sexual and undifferentiated into individual persons. Although equipped with the tools of physical generation by a fore-knowing God, Adam had no use for them before his sin.

³⁵ *De virginitate*, ii (PG 46.324).

³⁶ *De beatitudinibus, oratio* iii (PG 44.1228); *De hominis opificio*, v, xvii (PG 44.137, 188-89).

³⁷ *In Genesin homiliae*, XV, iv; XVI, i; XVIII, iv (PG 53.123-24, 126, 153).

³⁸ *De virginitate*, xiv (PG 48.544).

³⁹ *Stromata*, III, xvii (PG 8.1206); *Protrepticus*, XI, iii, 1-3 (PG 8.228-29).

gen's views on the original sin are not so clear as they would be were his writings extant in the original Greek, but there is no doubt he regarded the sin to have entailed a fall of the soul from pure spirituality into flesh.⁴⁰ In Origen's thought, "to become flesh" signifies a descent from the essential destiny of man, an utter derangement of the inner man which makes him inimical to the Divine Being. If Adam is the type of the moral agent in general, his succumbing to Eve and his subsequent union with her has prototypical significance as the very essence of human sin, precisely because the natural effect of their intercourse was the physical increase of the race. It is in this sense, therefore, that we may speak of sexual intercourse as the "exemplary" sin in Origen's system.⁴¹

In spite of his antipathy toward Origen, Methodius of Olympus seems to share with him similar convictions. In the beginning man was equal to the angels. "But then it happened that he transgressed the Commandment and suffered a terrible and destructive Fall and was transformed into death: for this reason, the Lord tells us, He came down from the heavens into the world."⁴² Though Methodius does not identify the "Commandment," the transgression must have been in some way sexual, for in his view pre-Christian history is to be divided into successive periods of incest, polygamy, and monogamy. Only under the Christian dispensation could man once again sustain the condition of virginity.⁴³ The Cappadocians find themselves in broad agreement with Methodius. Gregory of Nyssa believes the original sin contaminated man's pristine spirituality. Sexuality is intimately involved with the transgression, because for Gregory it is absolutely antithetical to the original state of human nature.⁴⁴ Normal sexual life and the condition of mortality are conjoined as the

⁴⁰ See *Selecta in Ps. CXXV* (PG 12.1641), and *In epistolam ad Romanos*, v (PG 14.1010-11, 1029), where the fall of Adam and Eve is mentioned as corresponding to the sin of the "watcher" angels. Cf. *Comment. in Johann. xiii*, xliii (PG 14. 477).

⁴¹ The tradition of Origen's self-castration on religious grounds should not be overlooked in any estimate of what he really believed. Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 109-12, cautions against regarding the act as the eccentricity of a frantic zealot, suggesting that "this phenomenon was not altogether uncommon."

⁴² *Symposium*, III, vi, pp. 62-63. Musurillo comments (p. 199, n. 23) that the word translated by the English "transformed" is *ἀναστοιχείω*, used by the Stoic Chrysippus for "the resolution of the material elements of the world," by Galen to denote the dissolution of the body. The idea of *disintegration*, in other words, is paramount.

⁴³ *Symposium*, I, iv, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁴ *De virginitate*, ii (PG 46.324); cf. *De anima* (PG 46.148-49), *De virginitate*, xii (PG 46.369), *In cantica canticorum homilia*, xii (PG 44.1020-21).

most important effects of the sin, while only virginity represents a return to the authentic nature of man.⁴⁵ On this point John Chrysostom concurs; in regard to Genesis iv.1, the first reference to the sexual intercourse of Adam and Eve, he considers it no coincidence that the act of copulation takes place outside the Garden. He looks upon it as a kind of adultery that destroyed their "dual virginity," the distinguishing characteristic of their original nature. It is still the devil who tempts Eve to the first sin, but it is interesting to examine his motive: John writes that the demon could not tolerate man leading the angelic life in a human body.⁴⁶ Evidently Satan's jealousy sprang from the fallen angel's own awareness of two facts: that the angelic life, above all else, consists in asexuality, and that his own fall from the ranks of the blessed angels came about not through pride but lechery.

We have seen, then, that as there is unanimity over the original sexual state of man among these Christian thinkers, there is also a certain like-mindedness about the nature of the original transgression and its tragic effects for the race. In a word, man's first sin was somehow equivalent to sexual intercourse; its principal effects were death and sexuality itself. The idea is not found stated explicitly; rather, it remains recessive, something subscribed to which will not bear outright expression.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the proposition that "the original sin was sex" is a premise implicit in, and logically necessary to, the arguments these Fathers make over the nature of the first things. It takes the shape of a sustained intuition about the character of Christian perfection, and, as such, continues to exert an influence upon subsequent thought far beyond the point at which it would have become unacceptable as explicit doctrine.

⁴⁵ *De virginitate*, xiii (PG 46.381). See also F. Flöeri, "Le Sens de la 'division des sexes' chez Grégoire de Nysse," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 27 (1953), 105-111. For the view that Gregory's theories on asceticism are a result of the "overwhelmingly strong" influence of Origen, see Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature* (1954; rpt. Leiden, 1965), pp. 106-07.

⁴⁶ *In Genesin homilia* XVIII, iv; XV, iv (PG 53.153, 126).

⁴⁷ See Joseph Coppens, *La Connaissance du bien et du mal et le péché du paradis*, *Analecta Lovaniensia Biblica et Orientalia*, Ser. 2, Fasc. 3 (Louvain, 1948); and Ricoeur's discussion of the recessiveness of the sexual interpretation, *Symbolism*, pp. 248-49, n. 8. The role of the serpent, an animal associated in the oriental mind with the fecundity of the earth and the cyclic regeneration of life, also bespeaks a primitive belief in an original sexual cause to man's ills. An indication of how submerged the sexual character of the sin could become, however, is Basil's opinion on the "bait" the devil held out to Adam and Eve: not lust *per se*, nor the lust for knowledge, but the lust of the belly (i.e. gluttony) was the cause of Adam's fall (*De renuntiatione saeculi*, vii [PG 31.640]).

Our examination of the position of Christian gnostics regarding the momentous events at the beginning of salvation history suggests some conclusions of crucial importance for understanding the esteem in which monasticism was later to hold the ideal of virginity. First, it is a profounder truth than may have been imagined that "the punishment fits the crime" in the gnostic economy. To a single, primal transgression are attributed all the evils of human life that require accounting for. But in any view of the human condition the consummate evil is death; presumably every religion attempts in some way to circumvent it. The Christian gnostic tradition (as also the Augustinian tradition, as we shall see) manages this by the simple assertion that death had no place *in illo tempore*. The supremely important corollary to that proposition, however, now grown somewhat less obvious, is that creatures free of death had no need of sexuality. Under the impetus of attempting to construct a workable theodicy, it was easy enough for the Christian gnostic tradition to turn the badge of immortality – sexlessness – into the prerequisite for it. To explain mortality this radically dualistic religious consciousness had only to point an accusatory finger at sexuality, inextricably bound up as it was with the mysterious cycle of birth and death, for the answer to its most fundamental theodical question. The explanation of death lay in a primordial and cosmic derangement of a sexual nature: according to the gnostic principle sexuality is the means of the replenishment of life *because*, ultimately, it is the cause of death. But as sexuality is linked with death, so is asexuality associated with life. The double equation can be found in both the heretical and orthodox applications of the gnostic principle. With much the same force with which the *Gospel of the Egyptians* holds that death will last until women no longer bear children, John Chrysostom can enunciate a similarly radical view, that only a cessation of sexual activity can bring about a life without death: because where there is marriage there is death, when there is no marriage death will be no more. The implications of such a view for a doctrine of perfection based on virginity are manifest.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For the gnostic *Gospel of the Egyptians* see James, pp. 10–12; for Chrysostom's view, *De virginitate*, xiv (PG 48.543–44) and *In Genesin homilia*, XVIII, iv (PG 53.53–54). A commentary on Psalm 50 attributed to Athanasius likewise suggests God's original plan for the race did not include marriage, which is described as the concomitant of sin (PG 27.239). Gregory of Nyssa considers marriage to be in the service of mortality (*Exhortatio ad virgines* [PG 37.632–40]), and Jerome regards death as its inevitable outcome (*Adversus Jovinianum*, I, xxxvii [PL 23.273–76]).

An equally important effect of sin in the Christian gnostic tradition is sexuality itself, the fact of male and female. It stands as undeniable evidence of a decline from a state of primal unity, homogeneity, or simplicity, to a condition wherein man's being is fragmented, multiple, complex. This degeneration from a state of original purity (considered in an ontological sense, and symbolized – if not, indeed, “sacramentalized” – by his condition of sexual innocence) is the most recognizably gnostic effect of the Fall. Man's being had once been spiritually pure and unalloyed, projecting a perfect likeness of the Creator in whose image he was made. But his sin brought about what it also signified, the corruption and deprivation of his deiform nature through contact with the evil principle of matter. Origen asks:

Now since the world is so very varied and comprises so great a diversity of rational beings, what else can we assign as the cause . . . except the diversity in the fall of those who decline from unity?⁴⁹

In Christian gnosis the place of sexuality in a fallen world seeking reintegration with the divine becomes clear: there is, strictly speaking, *no* place for it. Historically, it would not have been considered even a necessary evil, since expectations of an imminent second coming must have encouraged a belief that the increase or continuation of the race was irrelevant. It is easy to see that under such doctrinal presuppositions, virginity could be the only praiseworthy course.

3. Augustinian Orthodoxy and the Original Sin

The Christian-gnostic view of original sin and sexuality was a strong force in eastern areas of the Church throughout the patristic period. One comes to appreciate better how exceptional an appraisal it was when a contrast is drawn with the tradition whose approach to the book of Genesis eventually came to prevail in western Christianity. It is not inappropriate to call this reading of Genesis “western” be-

⁴⁹ *De principiis*, II, i, 7, ed. Butterworth, pp. 76–77. The comparative studies of Alan Watts have some relevance in this connection. He points out that Plato's *Symposium* makes the division of man into two sexes a penalty for the fall; and that, generally, “In mythology, male and female, *yang* and *yin*, signify duality rather than sexuality, and the Fall is the subordination of the human mind to the dualistic predicament in thinking and feeling – to the insoluble conflict between good and evil, pleasure and pain, life and death.” See *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (New York, 1953), p. 52, n. 2.

cause, even though it found expression all across the Empire (as did the Christian-gnostic position), it does seem to have been more common among the Fathers of the Latin West. Far more important than any geographical consideration, this western tradition adopted a methodological orientation toward scriptural exegesis quite opposed to the thoroughgoing allegoresis of the Alexandrian school that sustained so many of the Greek Fathers. Another closely related distinction can be made between the two traditions as to their respective attitudes toward the moral value of the physical world. It is not an obvious difference, as both traditions are Platonic in cast, viewing the realm of the spiritual as more real than matter. The distinction lies in the fact that, while Christian gnosis is more rigorously dualistic and inclined to see matter as morally tainted, the western tradition views the material world as distinctly the creation of God, and hence originally good, though disadvantaged or deprived by the Fall.⁵⁰

The western tradition, generally speaking, was founded upon an approach to the scriptures which presumed the literal reading to be the primary one. While Origen, following the precedent of Philo's allegoresis, could treat the description of Paradise purely as a figurative representation of the felicities of man's originally spiritual state of being, the bias of the Latin West made it extremely difficult to consider Genesis only as allegory. Tertullian is the first important Father to treat Genesis as literal truth. He is followed by such Fathers as Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, and Cyril of Alexandria. But undoubtedly the most important exponent of a literal reading was Augustine himself. As George Boas puts it, "One must not, Saint Augustine warns us, fall into the error of thinking that our first parents lived a purely spiritual life. The allegorical interpretation of Genesis is proper and useful, but it is only one way of reading it."⁵¹ The consensus of belief in this western reading lay in the literal exist-

⁵⁰ The western tradition was deliberately anti-gnostic in its formulation of doctrine, but in practice it eventually came to a more encratic position on sexuality than that associated with the Eastern Church, as can be seen, for instance, in the views of Roman and Greek congregations on the question of priestly celibacy.

⁵¹ *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948), p. 47. See *De civitate Dei*, XIII, xx-xxi (PL 41.393-95). Rondet comments: "Il reste que chez Augustin, l'origénisme [i.e. the notion of a purely spiritual fall] a été assez vite dépassé et cela, non à la manière d'Ambroise ou des Cappadociens, mais par un littéralisme qui, pour ne pas exclure les interprétations spirituelles, nous gêne passablement aujourd'hui, car il a créé toute une tradition en Occident" (p. 141). Evans, *Paradise Lost*, p. 75, calls Augustine's literalism "a drastic reorganization" of the thinking of Philo.

tence of an earthly Eden, though now abandoned and inaccessible, a real physical location on earth. So, too, Adam and Eve had been real beings; both possessed the composite (although still integrated) nature of spirit and clay. And finally, they were viewed as the progenitors of the human race through the means of their "natural" sexual activity. Their sexuality – two sexes manifestly distinct – was considered to be an integral part of their nature, and the practice of intercourse nothing less than a virtuous obedience to the command to be fruitful and multiply.⁵²

This is the position that Augustine came to enunciate so formidably. His thought may be the wellspring of much of medieval Christian thought, but it is also useful to regard it as part of a tradition of literal exegesis that extends at least back to St. Paul. We have already noted that by insisting on the flesh-and-blood existence of the first man and thereby safeguarding the authenticity of the mission of the second Adam, Paul grafted onto budding Christianity a principle which was to distinguish it fundamentally from the Essenian context where it had found its first roots, and to shape its future growth. Tertullian's reading of Genesis is almost as important for Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Interested principally in refuting Marcionite statements on the origin and nature of evil, he stays totally to a literal interpretation: God formed Adam out of the slime of the earth, and gave him the breath of divine life, producing a creature of both flesh and spirit. The dual nature Adam and Eve possessed originally is the same every other man has.⁵³ It is Adam who is the author of the world's evil, again quite literally, through the freely-willed sin of disobedience. His offense enveloped his posterity in sin, insofar as the flesh that we inherit from his is marked with his *vitium originis*. Of the immediate effect of the first transgression Tertullian goes no further than to say that it caused our first parents to forsake the Paradise of innocence or integrity.⁵⁴ He does not comment on the presumed place of sexuality in God's original plan; he is silent, for example, over the biblical passage which notes that intercourse did not occur until after the Fall.

The case of Jerome is interesting. He does not question the literal

⁵² *De civitate Dei*, XIV, xxi–xxii (PL 41.428–30).

⁵³ *Adversus Marcionem*, I, xxiv (PL 2.299–301); cf. *De anima*, xvi, xxxviii (PL 2.714–16, 759–61).

⁵⁴ On Adam's freedom of will, see *Adversus Marcionem*, II, vi (PL 2.317–19); on the concept of the *vitium originis*, *De anima*, xli (PL 2.764); on the loss of paradise, *ibid.*, xxxviii (PL 2.759–61).

existence of Adam and Eve.⁵⁵ But he does concentrate on their lack of sexual experience before the Fall, asserting that their "innocence" is to be understood primarily in sexual terms, and that present methods of conception and birth are the direct results of Adam's sin.⁵⁶ But while placing himself with Paul and Tertullian in his literal reading of Genesis, Jerome cannot bring himself to assert (as logic would require) that sexuality as we know it was part of God's first plan for human nature. Rather, he leaves open something of a doctrinal loophole, concluding – along with the mainstream of Christian gnosis – that the idea of sexual intercourse was wholly foreign to man's unfallen nature.⁵⁷

Ambrose also finds himself caught on the unsteady ground between literalism and allegory. He speaks of man essentially as a soul created in the image of God, but a soul which also possesses a body. The body is not to be derided as something evil or contemptible, and, indeed, Ambrose is sometimes almost rhapsodic in its praise.⁵⁸ Thus he is literal enough in his assertion that the first man, composed of flesh and the spirit, actually lived in a real place called Paradise located somewhere in the East.⁵⁹ Yet this paradise can also be the equivalent of the symbolic locus of Philo and Origen, coming to stand for the soul of man itself; Adam then signifies human reason, and Eve, sense. It is therefore somewhat ambiguous just what Ambrose means when he affirms in *De paradiso* that Adam and Eve lived together in the Garden of Eden in a manner corresponding to that of the angels in heaven.⁶⁰ But it is clear that room remains, as in Jerome's thought, for the re-entry of asexuality as the definition of original innocence.

Before turning to the views of Augustine on these matters, it is necessary to keep in mind his conversion from Manichaeism to orthodoxy. In his *Confessions* he tells of his retraction of a previous belief in the idea most characteristic of all forms of gnosticism, that of the

⁵⁵ See, for example *Epistola LXXIX*, x (*PL* 22.732), where Jerome writes, "Etiam de Paradiso expulsus Adam, unam uxorem habuit."

⁵⁶ *Ep.* XXII, xix (*PL* 22.406): "Eva in paradiso virgo fuit: post pelliceas tunicas, initium sumpsit nuptiarum."

⁵⁷ *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, xvi (*PL* 23.246): "Imago creatoris non habet copulam nuptiarum."

⁵⁸ *Hexameron*, VI, xlii–xliii and liv (*PL* 14.258, 264–65).

⁵⁹ *De paradiso*, I, ii–iv (*PL* 14.275–76).

⁶⁰ For paradise as allegorical, see *De paradiso*, I, vi (*PL* 14.276–77); for the comparison of the unfallen state of man with the *vita angelica*, see *ibid.*, I, ix (*PL* 14.294). In the latter connection see also *De institutione virginis*, civ (*PL* 16.345).

substantiality of evil and its dissemination in matter.⁶¹ This view must have had as its basis the notion of an original sin which consisted in the commingling of pure spirit with sinful matter, and which was represented allegorically as a sexual transgression. Augustine's belief in the literal existence of the Garden and its inhabitants, and in the composite character of primal human nature, appears after his conversion.⁶² And not coincidentally, while his earlier writings dealing with the question of sexuality in Paradise are rather narrowly encratic, his later speculation continues to move him gradually toward allowing, at least in theory, that some sexual activity could have taken place before the Fall.⁶³ He acknowledges the command to be fruitful as part of God's plan for prelapsarian man (not, as in Christian gnosis, something wholly conditional upon the Fall), allowing for the possibility of sex in the Garden because of the literal explicitness of that precept, it being unthinkable God would require man do what he was by nature incapable of. Allying himself with Fathers of the eastern Church, Augustine will assert that Adam had once had perfect *apatheia*, the stoic immovability which they considered a feature of the angelic life.⁶⁴ But his antipathy toward the gnostic principle prevents him from ascribing Adam's freedom from concupiscence to ontological asexuality. Although Adam sexuate must have had the capacity for sexual intercourse even in Paradise, Augustine could not suffer the idea that copulation would have taken place there in the same way as in the fallen world. His solution, generally speaking, was to refashion the concept of *apatheia*, defining it more as a psychological state, a

⁶¹ "From now it was with no anxiety that I sought it [a cause of evil], for I was sure that what the Manichees said was not true. . . . So I set myself to examine an idea I had heard - namely that our free will is the cause of our doing evil, and Your just judgement the cause of our suffering evil." (*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, VII, iii, trans. F. J. Sheed [New York, 1942], p. 109. Cf. *PL* 32.735).

⁶² *De Genesi ad litteram*, VIII, i and IX, iii (*PL* 34.371-73, 395). Cf. *ibid.*, XI, xli (*PL* 34.452), where he brands the idea that the original sin was sex as "ridiculum." For a survey of what Augustine rejects of the Manichaean creed, see *The Catholic and Manichaean Ways of Life*, trans. Donald A. and I. J. Gallagher (Washington, D.C., 1966), pp. 65-117. Cf. *PL* 32.1309-78.

⁶³ For an account of this change in Augustine's views, see Michael Müller, *Die Lehre der hl. Augustinus von der Paradiesesehe* (Regensburg, 1954), pp. 19-32.

⁶⁴ *De civitate Dei*, XIV, x (*PL* 41.417-18); *Contra Iulianum*, IV, xvi, 82 (*PL* 44.781). Among Greek Fathers who hold the notion of perfect *apatheia*, see Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, iii (*PG* 44.1225-28), *De hominis officio*, v, xv (*PG* 44.137, 176-77); and John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, II, xi (*PG* 94.913-16).

stoical suspension from desire, than as angelic *esse*.⁶⁵ Under these terms there would have been no lust in Paradise because there was no need of it. The complete control the mind held over the body once extended to sexual activity as well, and intercourse *in illo tempore* would have been accomplished by a pure act of the will, without the attendance of the slightest concupiscible passion. Adam had been able to move his sexual member with as much control as fallen man might exert over a finger or an arm.⁶⁶

By this redefinition of *apatheia* Augustine saves sexuality for the original human condition, a corollary to the reality and moral neutrality of the material nature of Adam and Eve. But he also preserves something that his own Manichaeism once surely argued for, prelapsarian virginity. He does so simply by limiting the term "virginity" to its strictest literal, anatomical sense. Since the sex act would have been carried out in Paradise in perfect tranquility of soul, it remained at least hypothetically plausible that Eve could have had sexual intercourse, conceived, and given birth with no loss of her corporeal integrity.⁶⁷ Eve would have retained a certain technical virginity because of the absence of the destructive force of *libido*. In other words, Augustine saw his way clear to retain both "normal" sexuality and virginity. The question that must arise is not what subtleties he used to reconcile the two, but rather what motive it was that led him to attempt to hold on to the concept of physical integrity when it was no necessary element in the logic of his system. The answer, of course, has already been implied; it is that virginity was far too intimately bound up with the early Christian understanding of life in the Garden for Augustine to have jettisoned it entirely. Such discretion in an otherwise nonconformable theologian should indicate to us something of the force and continued viability of the tradition he was trying to reinterpret: in the thought

⁶⁵ *Enchiridion ad Laurentiam*, xxvi-xxix (PL 40.245-46); cf. *De civitate Dei*, XIII, i and xix (PL 41.377, 392-93).

⁶⁶ *De civitate Dei*, XIV, xxiii-xxiv (PL 41.430-35); cf. *De Genesi ad litteram*, IX, x (PL 34.398-99) and *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, I, xxix; II, xxii (PL 44.141-42, 172-3).

⁶⁷ *De civitate Dei*, XIV, xxvi (PL 41.434-35). As Boas, p. 49, translates: with "no loss of corporeal integrity did the husband pour out his seed into the womb of his wife." Augustine goes on, adding that "at that time it was possible for the man's seed to enter into his wife's womb with the integrity of the female organ unbroken, just as now it is possible, with that same integrity preserved, for the menstrual flux to proceed from the womb of a virgin. . . . For as there were no groans of pain in childbirth, but an impulse at maturity relaxed the female organs, so for gestation and conception there was no lustful appetite, but voluntary exercise united in both natures."

of his predecessors, Augustine saw the implied equation of original perfection and asexuality, and sought to reshape it as a new equation, that of sin and passionate desire.

In the tradition Augustine gave birth to much of the speculation over the original sin has to do with the problem of its motivation. The gnostic motive of sexual desire is replaced by that of presumption, Adam's desire for a knowledge that would make him the equal of his Creator. Of course the lust for "forbidden" knowledge is itself a motif common to gnostic thought, and should not be regarded as implying a radical reversal of the Christian gnostic tradition.⁶⁸ But the emphasis upon a proud and illicit desire for *knowledge* alone provides the Latin West with a sanitary alternative to the motive of purely carnal lust. Theoretically, at least, the sin is purged of its connotations of defilement; and the first effect of the sin, rather than the ontological duality of two distinct sexes, becomes the loss of that primal *psychological* integrity by which intercourse was possible without the derangement and agitation of libidinous longing. The carnal passion that characterizes all sexual relations in the fallen world is consequently a sign both of the depravity of the nature of him who feels it, and of the transmission of sin to the offspring that may result. But concupiscence affects man's whole being, and is not to be defined as only sexual in nature; Augustine sees it as a fatal flaw in the will, an infirmity that prevents man from maintaining strict control over his material being. It must be admitted that when viewed as such, this principal result of the Fall does show a certain condignity with the first sin, for it is a sufficiently cogent explanation of the present state of the human condition, marked as it is by a lack of integration between will and desire, to say that Adam's fall was a matter of simple willfulness. Thus, while in the Christian gnostic tradition the chiefest of sins remain the carnal ones, especially lechery, in the thought of Augustine the most capital of the sins is pride.⁶⁹ Sin has become essentially psychological, linked to the dis-

⁶⁸ In gnosticism's view the errant angels commingling with men accomplish a kind of Promethean function by endowing man with powers far beyond his nature. This *gnosis*, forbidden knowledge, is conveyed through a sexual transgression, but is an *effect* of the fall, not its motive.

⁶⁹ John Cassian, "the father of the concept of the capital sins in the West," derived it from Egyptian monasticism. In his *Collationes* gluttony and lechery come first and form the roots of a symbolic tree of eight deadly sins. Gregory the Great was responsible for reducing the sins to seven and putting *superbia* in first place. See Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing, Mich., 1952), pp. 69-73. Compare the comment of Reinhold Niebuhr, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York,

integration of the personality only, and there is far less attention to the stark fact of death as its aftermath. Certainly death is one effect of the Fall, as another of God's rulings makes clear: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death" (Gen. ii.17). In Augustine's thought, however, and in a subsequent medieval western tradition, death is but chronologically the last of a series of disorders that afflict a body broken loose from the control of the will. In itself death retains no special suitability to the supposed character of the original sin, as there is nothing condign to a sin of pride in a punishment of mortality. Thus, that unique decorum of cause and effect which prevails in Christian gnosis, the logical propriety in the connection between death and sexuality, is lost sight of in the western tradition. The reason is not that the Latin West had no eye for the symmetry of cause and effect, but that in Augustine's analysis the first wrongdoing had nothing essential to do with sex.⁷⁰

The concept of a sexual fall did not die away. Augustine's re-thinking of the place of sex in the Garden could not entirely silence a persistent undertone of assumption that Adam and Eve had somehow been sexually more pure than fallen man. This sentiment, a core of often unarticulated belief that sexuality is sin, found in later centuries at an almost instinctual level of assertion, argues persuasively that the nature of the original transgression had been disguised. Augustine's treatment of sexuality does not take the form of a denial so much as of an overlay or shift of emphasis. Coition was now impossible without the contaminating influence of lust, the inevitable coefficient of every act of human procreation. To have been "conceived in sin" meant that the act was accomplished "in" – by means of – *libido*.⁷¹ The sin did not reside in copulation itself,

1949), I, 199: "It cannot be claimed that Christian thought is absolutely consistent in regarding pride as the basic sin. Wherever the classic view of man predominates, whether in early Greek theology, or medieval or modern liberal thought, the tendency is to equate sin with sensuality. The definition of sin as pride is consistently maintained in the strain of theology known as Augustinian."

⁷⁰ Augustine is not insensitive to the need for regarding the effect of the Fall as somehow condign: he will assert that since Adam fell through disobedience, it is fitting man's nature should be inflicted with a certain lawlessness and ungovernability in his organs of generation. See *De civitate Dei*, XIV, xv and xxiv (*PL* 41.422–24, 432–33).

⁷¹ *Opus imperfectum contra Iulianum*, I, lxxi (*PL* 45.1096), where Augustine speaks of being born under the "law of sin," seemingly the equivalent of the concept in Rom. vii.23, where Paul speaks of being "prisoner to the law of sin that is in my members."

however, but in the lust that accompanied it. Although the distinction is a fine one, it serves Augustine and the western tradition well, for it allows the retention of the full devotional force of the gnostic identification of sin with sexuality, while making a plausible rejoinder to the gnostic claim that evil is vested in matter. With Augustine the flesh is not absolutely evil, but only in proportion to the degree to which the will has allowed it to become dominant. The distinction between the two positions, of course, is fundamental, but the effect of each upon Christian practice over the course of centuries was destined – perhaps ironically – to be much the same.

The intent of this brief and inevitably superficial analysis of the views of Augustinianism and Christian gnosis in regard to the “first things” has been to penetrate to the hidden source of the ideal of monastic virginity. We may now turn our attention to monasticism itself, with the specific purpose of uncovering, in several commonplaces of very frequent occurrence in medieval monastic writing, the foundation in asexuality of the perfective character of the life of the cloister.

CHAPTER II

VIRGINITY AND THE MONASTIC ECONOMY OF PERFECTION

Virginity in Augustine's thought lacked clear etiological significance; it had no organic function in his system. What preserved the ideal in the West was its realization in a plan for perfect Christian living, an economy based on the complete denial of sexuality, the institution of monasticism. With reverence for its own ancient origins, the cloister brought the ideal of virginal perfection from the East and installed it in the European consciousness at the beginning of the Dark Ages. But while incorporated in the West, the soul of monasticism remained eastern; its allegiance continued to lie with the Fathers of the Christian gnostic tradition.¹ Their equation of virginity with the ontological state of prelapsarian human nature was the central concern in the panoply of now rather unfamiliar ideas that came to form the medieval monastic tradition of culture and studies.

I. Vita angelica

The association of sexuality with physical death in Christian gnosis gave rise to two closely related ideas. The first was that Christ's prophesied restoration of the world to its primal condition would inaugurate a millenium where men would live again as angels. The other was that those who lead a life of virginal perfection in the present life attain to, or even surpass, the angelic mode of existence. The former idea, connected as it was with a belief in an imminent second coming of the Messiah, was gradually to fade in importance,

¹ The historical "westward movement" of monasticism was spiritually reversed at periods of monastic reform. As Jean Leclercq remarks in *The Love of Learning*, p. 112, there is "a certain nostalgia" perceptible during "the great periods of Western monasticism," one that issues in a desire "to renew relations with this authentic [eastern] tradition."

but the latter remained an extremely important concept of the theology surrounding virginity for centuries.

In early popular eschatological belief the conviction remained strong that the millenium would be a period of asexuality.² But also in the learned tradition of Christian gnosis Gregory of Nyssa, following the text of Galatians iii.28 (in the risen Christ "there is neither male nor female"), could conceive that the restoration would end the distinction between the sexes and repair all the lesser ontological divisions that were the effects of the Fall.³ This general conviction that all would again be as it once was reflects an inclination on the part of the Christian gnostic tradition to view the whole of salvation history retrospectively. As we have seen, it is a habit of mind whose implications Augustine and a subsequent western tradition could not subscribe to or perhaps even fully appreciate.⁴ The millenium was to return men to the state of uncontaminated spirituality free of the taint of matter, a state of virginity. Ambrose writes, "In holy virgins we see on earth the life of the angels we lost in paradise."⁵ And man's practice of virginity in this life not only anticipates, but even actively hastens, the cosmic process of return to asexuality.⁶ The supposed *vita angelica* of the last age found its scriptural basis in Luke xx.34-36, where Christ replies to the question of the Sadducees over the problem of polyandry after this life:

² In many of the apocrypha of the New Testament the resurrection will not take place unless the believers practice complete continence. See the "Acts of Peter," ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. Mc. Wilson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1963), II, 275, where sexual purity is the condition of salvation. Cf. the "Acts" of John, Andrew, and Thomas (II, 188-259, 390-425, 425-531), where sexlessness is the dominant feature of the last age and a requirement for redemption.

³ *De hominis opificio*, xvii (PG 44.188-89); cf. *In Ecclesiasten Salomonis*, i (PG 44.633), and *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46.148-56).

⁴ Dom Garcia M. Colombas writes: "Au goût de St. Augustin, les pères grecs et orientaux avaient une trop grande propension à régarder en arrière, vers le Paradis terrestre; le grand évêque d'Hippone ne comprenait pas qu'ils pussent fixer à l'ascétisme et à toute la vie chrétienne un terme rétrospectif, tandis que l'*apocatastasis* du christianisme n'est pas tant une restauration qu'une nouvelle création." See *Paradis et vie angélique: le sens eschatologique de la vocation chrétienne*, traduit de l'espagnol par Dom Suitbert Caron (Paris, 1961), pp. 32-33.

⁵ *De institutione virginis*, civ (PL 16.345).

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate*, ii (PG 46.324), holds virginity has the power to reconstitute the lost state of human nature; implicit are the beliefs that man's primal nature was only spiritual, and that man's sexual life is the principal effect of the Fall. Cf. Methodius, *Symposium*, II, vii (ed. Musurillo, p. 57), who speaks of virginity as an "angelic transformation" of the body of man.

The children of this world marry and are given in marriage. But those who shall be accounted worthy of that world and of the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor take wives. For neither shall they be able to die any more, for they are equal to the angels [*isaggelos*], and are Sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.⁷

No other passage in the canonical New Testament links the angelic life with asexuality more explicitly; but note that it also connects those two concepts with immunity from death. The verses seem to sanction the view that the resurrection would finally rectify the primal disorientation of human nature, sexuality, and would open upon an era of peace and timelessness, devoid of death, multiplicity, and change. The Augustinian tradition was little inclined to embrace this view of the eschatological role of virginity. Writing from a point of view which fairly excluded belief in an imminent *parousia*, the Latin Fathers continue to allow that those who neither marry nor take wives are to occupy a position of eminence in the world to come, but they are speaking of a supraterritorial and purely spiritual heaven where there can be no question about possible birth and generation. Indeed, all will be virgins in heaven, but by necessity. There is little appreciation, in other words, of the metaphysical subtlety of the eschatological position of Christian gnosis, much less assent to the premises upon which that position was based.

Medieval monastic literature is shot through with the idea that the monk in his cloister leads a life that is essentially an anticipation of the angelic life of heaven. The notion prevails from the earliest days of Egyptian monachism down to the twelfth century and beyond. The fathers of monasticism are unanimous in asserting it. Basil's statement is typical:

He who has chosen the angelic life has raised himself to an incorporeal manner of living, since he has surpassed the ordinary possibilities of human nature. For it belongs properly to the nature of the angels to be freed from the society of marriage and not to let themselves be turned aside to the contemplation of any other beauty than that of the divine face.⁸

Citations from commentators in the Christian gnostic tradition who

⁷ Cf. Matt. xxii.30, Mark xii.25. Colombas, p. 145, n. 1, calls the term *ισάγγελος* "base de toute la doctrine des Pères concernant le point qui nous occupe. Les autres evangelistes ont: *ὡς ἄγγελοι*."

⁸ *Sermo asceticus*, ii (*PG* 31.873), trans. Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville, Minn., 1961), p. 29.

corroborate Basil's view are plentiful.⁹ In monastic lore itself an ancient tradition holds that the first rule of monks was dictated to Pachomius by an angel. Similarly, the monastic breviary describes Benedict of Nursia as a "man of God . . . adorned with angelic manners, while such lustre shone around him that, though abiding on earth, he dwelt among the heavenly spirits."¹⁰ In one of the earliest treatments of the monastic life in vernacular literature, the Old English legend of *Guthlac*, we are told that Guthlac is able to resist the temptations of the fiends with the might of angels (*engla mægne*, 325a), ostensibly because the anchorite's vocation is of angelic provenance (*engelcunde*, 101a), and because angels therefore supply hermits with their special protection:

Fore him englas stondað,
gearwe mid gæsta wæpnum, beop hyra geoca gemyndge,
healdað haligra feorh, witon hyra hyht mid dryhten.
(88b-90)¹¹

(Angels stand before them
yarely armed with spiritual weapons; they are mindful of aiding
them,
guarding the lives of holy men, whose hope they know to be in
the Lord.)

The equation of the celibate life of the monk with the *vita angelica* is so common throughout the medieval period that it needs no further comment.

But some interesting specifications of the belief deserve attention. One is actually an extension of it, a conviction that the virginal life in the cloister is in fact more meritorious than that of the angel in heaven. Angels do not share in the handicap which men suffer under through the temptations of the world and the flesh. The virginity of fallen man is a hardwon achievement, while that of the angels is the

⁹ One of the most thorough studies of the *vita angelica* and its place in the thought of early monasticism is Leclercq's chapter on "The Angelic Life" in *The Life of Perfection*, pp. 15-42. Also especially informative are Uta Ranke-Heinemann's chapter "Das Ideal des engelgleichen Lebens," in *Das frühe Mönchtum* (Essen, 1964), pp. 65-82; and Colombas, pp. 146-53.

¹⁰ See Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, pp. 42, 38.

¹¹ *Guthlac* appears in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George P. Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 3 (New York, 1936), pp. 49-88. Further references will be to this edition. For further evidence of the *vita angelica* in English thought before the Conquest, see: Bede's account of the life and death of St. Chad, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV, iii (ed. Plummer, I, 206-12); Alcuin, *De virtutibus*, xviii (*PL* 101.626); and Aelfric's *Homilia* xxxiii, *Aelfric's Lives of the Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 2 vols. E.E.T.S. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-90), II, 336-38.

created state in which they continue to reside. Something of the semipelagianism which came to characterize early medieval monastic thought is evident here, an attitude inherently more consonant with the perfectibilitarian optimism of Christian gnosis, according to which human nature in the Garden had once been no less than angelic. Ephraem the Syrian, for instance, calls Adam "the master of the angels"; the implication is that unfallen man would have become more worthy in God's sight than those pure spirits.¹² One vocal champion of virgins over angels is John Chrysostom, who admits that angels remain untouched by concupiscence, but asserts the same is also true of virgins, who have had to conquer their flesh to achieve that state.¹³ Cyprian writes that "Virginity makes itself the equal of the angels, in fact, . . . it even excels them, for it gains the victory against nature in the besieged flesh, which angels do not possess."¹⁴ Similar statements appear in medieval Latin literature, generally based on the theory that "esse angelum felicitas est, virginem esse virtutis."¹⁵ The implication is that some justice resides in awarding a higher place to the aggressively virginal than to the angels, who sit idly by, as it were, already gifted with asexuality. The view is relevant to an important motif in monastic literature, that of the monk as the "soldier of Christ." As we shall see, it is virginity that makes the monk equal in rank to the angels already enlisted on the side of Christ in the cosmic struggle against the forces of darkness.

Another significant aspect of the *vita angelica* is the notion that when the monk dons his habit it denotes his assumption of the role of an angel. In the Greek Church, clothing the novice with the monk's habit takes place in the presence of the angels; he is asked the question, "Will you receive the angelic garment and be admitted into the community of the monks?"¹⁶ Those that wear the black pallium are "like angels, namely in that they have cut themselves off from the world and . . . preserve virginity."¹⁷ To John Chrysostom,

¹² *Carmina Nisibena*, LIX, xiii, cited by Colombas, p. 29, n. 3.

¹³ *De virginitate*, x-xi, (PG 48.540-41).

¹⁴ *De disciplina et bono pudicitiae*, vii (PL 4.855), trans. in Maurus Wolter, *The Principles of Monasticism*, trans. and ed. Bernard A. Sause (St. Louis, 1962), p. 367.

¹⁵ See, for example, Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermo CXLIII* (PG 52.583), and Idelfons of Toledo, *De virginitate perpetua sanctae Mariae*, x (PL 96.93-99).

¹⁶ Goar, *Euchologion*, qu. and trans. in Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, p. 16.

¹⁷ "Acts of the Martyrs Sts. Gallactius and Epistaemius," ed. Laurentius Surius, *Historiae seu vitae sanctorum*, qu. and trans. in Wolter, pp. 283-84.

the monks' dress is "suitable to their manliness. For they are not garbed like those who parade through the streets with trailing garments, . . . but rather like those blessed *angels*, Elias, Eliseus, John."¹⁸ As Fr. Leclercq testifies, medieval monks held the same belief: "The color of the habit may vary, just as the observances may be different; but the monks all see in their habit the symbol of their angelic life."¹⁹ What may seem little more than a simple embellishment upon the principle of the *vita angelica* actually provides another piece of evidence to link monasticism and the gnostic principle, strengthening our conviction that the essence of the angelic life was virginity: the severely encratic sect of Bogomils, located in the Balkan peninsula from the ninth century on, are reported to have dressed like monks in imitation of the angels.²⁰ The evidence points to the conclusion that the individual monk was thought to lead the life of an angel ultimately because the *vita angelica* was considered a perfectly sexless existence. According to Fr. Leclercq, "The primary condition of the angelic life is a perfect chastity. Tradition has always been pleased to designate this virtue as the virtue which the angels exemplify and help to preserve."²¹

2. *Simplicitas*

The sexlessness of the angelic life is basic to several other monastic commonplaces having to do with the life of the cloister. One of these which is especially thought-provoking is the monastic ideal of "simplicity," of a human existence focused directly and exclusively upon one object, the praise of God.²² Monasticism is reductive, paring the business of living down to the point where it offers no complexities. But the psychological side of the question is less relevant than the ontological implications of *simplicitas*, for there is a sense in which the disposition to speak of the monk's life as "simple" reflects an appreciation of the unique metaphysical status his soul is thought to attain, one which depends ultimately upon the concept of asexuality. In the usage of Latin antiquity, of course, the word *simplicitas* has a

¹⁸ *In Mattheum homilia*, LXVIII, iii (PG 58.644), trans. in Wolter, p. 281 (emphasis added); note the ascription of the *vita angelica* to the prophets.

¹⁹ *The Life of Perfection*, p. 16. For a fuller discussion see pp. 15-17 and Leclercq's notes.

²⁰ See Runciman, p. 78.

²¹ *The Life of Perfection*, p. 28.

²² For the ideal of the simple life, see Leclercq, "The Monastic Tradition," 121-31.

strong ethical connotation, referring to the avoidance of luxury and sensual pleasures, the austerity of *rusticitas*. It also extends to the sense of *simplicitas mentis*, where it means something like straightforwardness, the absence of duplicity.²³ Both ideas occur in normative Judaism, as in the description of Job as “the simple and upright man” or Noah as “simple.” There the notions of innocence or mental integrity are prominent, meanings which carried over into the usage of Jewish Christianity, where *simplicitas* or ἀπλοτής signifies “singleness of heart” and is associated with the simple nature of a child.²⁴ Nevertheless, the monastic appreciation of the ideal of *simplicitas* is less indebted to these ethical considerations than to the appraisal of the very nature of the Divine Being in Christian gnosis, where the single most important attribute of God is His oneness, His *integritas*. The unity of the Godhead is also a principle of both Judaism and Platonism, of course, but the Christian gnostic tradition was syncretistic, and absorbed Greek and Hebrew elements in an almost irresolvable intermixture.

This is first evident in the thought of Philo, who describes God as one, and sees the status from which man fell as one of divine integrity. Incorporating the Platonic motif of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ (“assimilation to God”) into his ethical system, he asserts it is the practice of moral virtue, particularly *sophrosyne* (usually synonymous with *enkrateia*) that allows man to recapture the image of God in which he was made.²⁵ Clement of Alexandria follows Philo in designating oneness as one of God’s most significant attributes. Accordingly, the true gnostics are those souls that become integral through *sophrosyne*; that virtue makes the corrupt incorrupt and permits men to live as angels. At the same time, *sophrosyne* carries with it stoic connotations of simplicity, the reduction of one’s physical needs to an absolute minimum.²⁶ Origen is less stoical and more gnostic: he views the Fall as a fragmentation of Spirit, and sees salvation as a process

²³ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁴ Daniélou, *Theology*, pp. 362–64; cf. Leclercq, “The Monastic Tradition,” 123.

²⁵ *De opificio mundi*, xxxiii, xlvi–li (ed. Colson and Whitaker, I, 78–79, 106–16); and see Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 25 (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 326–27, and p. 320, where North asserts that the first Christian apologists likewise confined *sophrosyne* almost completely to the sphere of purity and chastity.

²⁶ *Sivomata*, VII, iii (PG 9.440–49); *Paedagogus*, II, x, 100.3 (PG 8.517–36). Cf. North, pp. 332–34.

directed toward the recovery of metaphysical oneness.²⁷ Virginity is the most essential attribute of the Christian, for it is the true image of the uniqueness of the divine nature. (We shall see in the next chapter that it is on this basis that Origen's *Commentary* on the Song of Songs urges the virginal soul to know itself, that it may know God better.)²⁸ With Jerome, too, God is *simplex*; his letter to Eustochium describes the virginity of Mary as having made her "ad similitudinem Dei." In the same place he refers to the concept of spiritual disintegration. Praising virginity, he mentions the "garment of raiment which was woven from the top in one piece," but now is lost to the human race.²⁹ For Gregory of Nyssa virginity is the quality of detachment from the physical world that makes union with God possible, a mode of being whereby the soul is enabled to see the purity and simplicity of God through contemplating itself as the image of those divine attributes.³⁰

Clearly, in Christian gnosis perfection lies in the degree to which individual existents attain to the ontological condition of simplicity. Only God is totally *simplex et una*; He alone comprehends all things within Himself without complexity or change or contradiction. All that is not God, on the other hand, is to some degree flawed, and exists under the conditions of temporality and multiplicity. The further an individual being tends toward division and fragmentation, the more pronounced is its ontological (and moral) lapse. In his *integritas*, the perfect entitative self-containment of the sexless state, Primal Man once lived in imitation of the divine *esse*. But he fell from simplicity to multiplicity, and something was *added* to man's make-

²⁷ Compare the essence of the pagan gnostic position, as expressed by Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 59: "The very creation of Eve and the scheme of reproduction initiated by it subserve the indefinite further dispersion of the particles of the light which the powers of darkness have succeeded in engulfing and by this means endeavor to retain the more securely. Consequently, salvation involves a process of gathering in, of re-collection of what has been so dispersed, and salvation aims at the restoration of the original unity."

²⁸ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, Md., 1957), pp. 129-30, 137-38. Cf. North, p. 337.

²⁹ *Ep.* XXII, ix (*PL* 22.400).

³⁰ In *De hominis opificio*, xvi (*PG* 44.181-84), Gregory states that God is the fullness (*πλήρομα*) of goods, while sexuality accounts for fallen man's fundamental unlikeness to God. Cf. North, pp. 348-51. In the hymn "To Sophrosyne" among his *Carmina moralia* Gregory of Nazianzen says that one reason for adopting virginity is that God and the angels are celibate (*PG* 37.643-48). Basil, too, believes that virginity "makes one like the incorruptible God. It . . . is by virginity that the soul, which is dear to God, preserves the body from corruption" (*De virginitate*, ii [*PG* 30.671], trans. Wolter, p. 367.

up, something which mires the soul in the entangled ways of the flesh. According to Methodius of Olympus, "Life is evenness; corruption is unevenness." But when man "took on disharmony, that is transgression and sin, he became disharmonious and unacceptable."³¹ Sexuate man found himself devoid of that ontological virginity which was the likeness of the divine nature, a being now ruinously enmeshed in a world of time and space and carnal generation, no longer endowed with that sovereignty over self intrinsic to the life of the solitary. For the earliest monks the means of regaining the pristine condition of *simplicitas* was, therefore, a life in imitation of Adam's asexuality. The simple life was a large part of the regimen of the Egyptian anchorites, who took names like "Paul the Simple" – others were called "simplex, simplicius," or "simplicianus" – to show the character of their new lives.³² The earliest ascetics were motivated not by an irrational hatred of the body, but by a calculated desire merely to extract the soul from the convolutions of the flesh.

In the non-monastic West there does not seem to have been the same depth to the concept of *simplicitas*. Hilarius writes, for example, that "The Lord teaches that only those who have become like little children will enter the heavenly kingdom. To put it otherwise, we must bring the simplicity of children back into the life of our soul and body."³³ Likewise, even Ambrose defines simplicity as spiritual childhood, and can write that virginity is merely the symbol of a certain *probitas*, a kind of moral integrity non-virgins do not possess.³⁴ What is noteworthy is that the ontological ideal of *simplicitas* has been reduced to an ethical innocence, a psychological integrity; the wholeness of the deiform soul is redefined as wholeness of mind. Gregory the Great shows a similar tendency to "ethicize" the ontological bearing of concepts received from Christian gnosis when he speaks of the formative power of God's love acting upon the soul in such a way as to "simplify" it.³⁵ He seems to have in mind the absence of mental or psychological complexity, not a simplicity related to the very being of the soul. By the twelfth century the transformation of *simplicitas* from a state of being to a mere virtue is practically complete. William of St. Thierry is able to write: "Holy simpli-

³¹ *Symposium*, III, vii, pp. 64–65.

³² Leclercq, "The Monastic Tradition," 124.

³³ *In Mattheum*, XVIII, i (PL 9.1018–19).

³⁴ *In Lucam*, VIII, lvii (PL 15.1782); *De virginibus*, I, vii (PL 16.209–10).

³⁵ *In evangelia*, XXX, v (PL 76.1222–24); cf. *Moralia*, X, xlvi and XII, xliv (PL 75.947, 1007).

city is the *will* remaining always the same in seeking the same good." He adds, "Simplicity is also, as a way of life, true humility."³⁶

It is still possible to find traces of the Christian-gnostic view of *simplicitas*, however, in medieval writings that seek to convey a sense of monastic ideology. In his *Ecclesiastical History* Bede tells the story of Cuthbert's entering the cloistered life and learning the monastic regimen from the exemplary Abbot Eata, "uir omnium mansuetissimus ac simplicissimus."³⁷ Rabanus Maurus writes that the active life is laborious and exhausts itself in work. "But the contemplative life is simple. It longs solely to see the beginning, Him who said, 'I who speak to you am the beginning.'"³⁸ Here is more than the simple disjunction between peace and quiet and frenetic activity; Rabanus restates the ancient commonplace that the monk's state of life imitates the divine simplicity. This rationale is more explicit in the account of the life of St. Columba; Adamnan says the monk had the simplicity of the dove, being a "virgo immaculatus, ab omni integer labo."³⁹ And in *Guthlac* evidence remains of a monastic belief in the primeval disintegration of an original cosmic unity. The narrator of the poem speaks elegiacally of the expected dissolution of this world and what seems to be its progressive degeneration toward that end. Part of this process, evidently, is the gradual *increase* in the number and kinds of creatures

ða nu under heofonum hadas cennað,
micle ond mæte. Is þes middangeard
dalum gedæled. (52-54a)

(which now under heaven bring forth kinds,
great and small. This world
is divided into parts.)

Only in a gnostic view of the world, where multiplicity is the enemy of unity, would the generation of new physical life be cause for lamentation.

Undoubtedly the most faithful exponent of the ideal of *simplicitas* during the Middle Ages was Johannes Scotus Erigena. A remarkable scholar of copious learning, he was among the few men of his age who knew Greek and were consequently in direct contact with the

³⁶ *Epistola ad fratres monte Dei*, V, xiii (PL 184.316-17).

³⁷ *Hist. eccl.*, IV, xxv (xxvi), ed. Plummer, I, 269.

³⁸ *Comm. in Genesim* III, xvi (PL 107.596).

³⁹ *Adamnan's Life of St. Columba*, ed. and trans. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (London and New York, 1961), pp. 182-83, ll. 540-41.

thought of the eastern Fathers.⁴⁰ With almost no dependence on the work of his contemporaries or recent predecessors, he built an entire systematic philosophy of profound relevance to the monastic view of Christian history. By refining the views of Origen, Epiphanius, Gregory of Nyssa and others, and by adding those of Dionysius the Areopagite, Erigena merged Christian gnosis with mystic neo-Platonism in a synthesis that constituted, in effect, a monastic metaphysics.⁴¹ But it is a measure of the distance monastic thought had traveled by the ninth century that Erigena's writings did not become influential.

Erigena's philosophy is monistic, and at its center lies a theological notion of *simplicitas* which defines God as one, perfectly *simplex* in nature, the indivisible source and repository of all real being. Man, created in His image, once possessed the same attributes, but the Fall bifurcated man's nature, separating the deiform substance into spiritual soul and material body. From this lamentable first division follows the division of all nature into sexes. History until the coming of Christ had been a process of increasing ontological disjunction in space and time, moving towards ever more complexity in the ranks of being, but then this ancient momentum was reversed. Technically the movement back toward unity (*adunatio*) begins with Christ's resurrection, "for in Christ there is neither male nor female." A last age would see man's primal sexlessness restored, and the division between spirit and matter repaired in perfect *simplicitas*. Finally, human nature would pass into and become one with God, in "a wonderful and ineffable reversion to its first state, lost by the Fall."⁴² The equivalence between simplicity and asexuality in Erigena's thought sheds light upon the continuity of the Christian gnostic tradition, but not less upon the meaning of virginity in medieval monasticism. Since sexuality is the cause of *multiplicitas*, the renunciation of sexuality is the first condition of a return to simplicity. Because the cloister is a virginal society, it constitutes the first phase in *adunatio*; it is the genuine eschatological community here on earth.

In a somewhat too harsh assessment, Erigena has been called "the

⁴⁰ Basing his conclusions on Dom A. Siegmund, *Die Überlieferung der griechischen Literatur in der lateinischen Kirche bis zum zwölften Jahrhundert* (München, 1959), Fr. Leclercq infers two principles regarding the Greek writings available to western Europe in the earlier Middle Ages: that the great majority were translated to Latin by monks, and that the Greek works most often translated and most widely disseminated were those written in furtherance of the monastic life (*The Love of Learning*, pp. 114-15).

⁴¹ See Henry Bett, *Johannes Scotus Erigena* (Cambridge, 1925), p. 164.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 65-68, 55-56, 78, 82.

least original of all Western medieval philosophers.”⁴³ Still, his indebtedness to the pseudo-Dionysius is clear, and much of what he offered his contemporaries was a systematized version of the world view that originally had lain at the foundation of the monastic life. In effect, Erigena confronted monasticism with its first principles in rather stark and uncompromising form. It is not surprising that after more than five hundred years of development the institution did not entirely recognize them. For as early as the ninth century the continuing ascendancy of Augustinian premises had diminished the ontological attribute of *simplicitas* to the relatively inconsequential notion of single-mindedness. The same trend appears in respect of another important monastic theme, that of contemplation.

3. *Contemplation and Prophecy*

Contemplation is the monastic term for noetic communion with God. In the later Middle Ages, and certainly in present-day monasticism, the word signifies a special mental intimacy with God for which the ascetical practices of the monk are preparatory. In its highest form it is often presumed to be “mystical,” involving the intuitive perception of truths otherwise incommunicable, and is even thought to extend at times to the vision of the Godhead. Thus, as presently defined contemplation is primarily a psychological process which Fr. Leclercq, for one, is not averse to calling a kind of *gnosis*:

On the whole, the monastic approach to theology, the kind of religious understanding the monks are trying to attain, might better be described by reviving the word *gnosis* – on condition naturally that no heterodox nuance be given it. The Christian *gnosis*, the “true *gnosis*” in its original, fundamental and orthodox meaning is that kind of higher knowledge which is the complement, the fruition of faith, and which reaches completion in prayer and contemplation.⁴⁴

Granting Leclercq’s restriction as to a “heterodox nuance,” the monastic ideal of *gnosis* is nevertheless heavily indebted to the *Christian* gnostic tradition, where the idea of hidden knowledge reserved for an elite believership is a recurring motif. Jean Daniélou has shown that *gnosis*, regarded as a higher and more exclusive kind of knowledge, was a feature of Essene Judaism.⁴⁵ The term was used to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁴ *The Love of Learning*, p. 266.

⁴⁵ *Theology*, pp. 365–69.

denote “the saving knowledge of the Christian faith” in earliest Christianity, that is, when membership in the limited number of the faithful still connoted the possession of secret truth.⁴⁶ Methodius’s *Symposium* refers to an “inner eye of reason” capable of a sharper vision of the truth. The verb used is ἐποπτέω, a word also commonly used “in reference to the final revelation of the mystery religions.”⁴⁷ In Christian gnosis communion with the Divine Being involved the perfected believer in the relationship of secret knowledge, and this view strongly influenced the early monastic understanding of the nature of prayer. Both the ancient ideal of *gnosis* and the medieval monastic act of contemplation were once felt to be conditional upon the Christian’s attainment of asexuality, a higher level of being. But in this, as in most things monastic, speculation reverts again to the Garden.

In Christian gnosis there is agreement that Adam in Paradise had the gift of what Thomas Aquinas was also to call *gnosis*, a power which elevated his natural intelligence and permitted him to know God through interior illumination. In effect, Primal Man knew God precisely as did the angels.⁴⁸ He possessed the intimate friendship of God, which, for John Chrysostom, made him a fellow of the angels.⁴⁹ According to John of Damascus Adam in Paradise had no other occupation than to praise God and enjoy contemplating the divine essence.⁵⁰ One of the important attributes Adam lost in the Fall was what Chrysostom refers to as the easy familiarity (ὁμιλία) he had enjoyed with God.⁵¹ By sin Adam plunged the race into noetic darkness, from which only the Light of the World could rescue it. But, of course, not just knowledge was lost; the loss of original *gnosis* was but one effect of an ontological lapse occasioned by a sin whose dominant characteristic was sexuality. Man’s intellect was darkened when he became sexuate, but the angels, whom the first man was thought to equal or even surpass in knowledge, remained asexual and thus still able to know God immediately. As Christ said, “The angels look continually on the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. xviii.10). In the mind of the continuing tradition of Christian

⁴⁶ Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Symposium*, VII, ii, p. 98; and see p. 217, n. 10.

⁴⁸ *De veritate*, q. 18, a. 2. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, trans. James V. McGlynn, S.J., 3 vols. (Chicago, 1953), II, 346–49.

⁴⁹ *In epistolam I ad Corinthios homilia*, IX, i (PG 61.76–77).

⁵⁰ *De fide orthodoxa*, II, i (PG 94.916).

⁵¹ *III homilia dicta praesente imperatore*, i (PG 63.473); man had enjoyed God’s conversation, while the angels (cherubim and seraphim included) were only capable of trembling before God’s throne.

gnosis, angelic contemplation became the monastic ideal only because it served to define the noetic powers associated with man's original sexual innocence, a *vita angelica*. Fr. Leclercq writes that "If the monastic life is an angelic life, this is first of all because it is contemplative."⁵² But a more proper ordering of the facts would seem to be that the monk's life is angelic because it is asexual, and that it is contemplative for the same reason. The physical purity of Primal Man was the condition of his retaining the angelic state and all that belongs to it, including intuitive knowledge.

The monk's virginity reestablishes in his human nature the image of God in which it was created. It was precisely that image, imprinted on the soul, which had enabled prelapsarian man to know God intuitively. In other words, that in which the perfected soul resembles the divine essence most closely, its virginal *simplicitas*, is the means through which it comes to apprehend it. The monk in contemplation comes to know God by reflecting upon the metaphysical implications of his own virginity. In pagan gnosticism, the noetic task of the "perfect" (the highest caste of believers, who generally did not qualify for that rank without renouncing sexuality), was to awaken to the fact they bore within them a share or "spark" of divinity. Similarly, within Christian gnosis, Clement of Alexandria asserts that the process of noetic assimilation to God is enhanced, above all else, by chastity.⁵³ Athanasius, in a homily on virginity, apostrophizes that state as the "image of immortality" and the "face of God immortal."⁵⁴ In Origen's *Commentary* on the Song of Songs the mission of the soul is to restore her own primal beauty, the likeness of God.⁵⁵ Virginity is both the condition of perfect knowledge and the medium for it in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzen.⁵⁶ In the same vein Jerome says that it is impossible for the married man to pray "without distraction," for "either we are virgins and pray unceasingly, or we leave off

⁵² *The Life of Perfection*, p. 19.

⁵³ *Paedagogus*, II, i, 15.1 (PG 8.401); and *Stromata*, II, xviii, 81.1 and VII, xii, 72.1-2 (PG 8.1020, 9.500-01).

⁵⁴ *S. Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*, ed. L.-Th. Lefort (Louvain, 1955), pp. 19-20, qu. and trans. in Herbert Musurillo, S.J., *The Fathers of the Primitive Church* (New York, 1966), pp. 249-50.

⁵⁵ *Commentary*, II, i, ed. Lawson, p. 92: on the text of Cant. i.5-14 [Vulg. i.4-13], "I am dark and beautiful," etc., the Bride is paraphrased as saying, "I am indeed black. . . . But I have my own beauty, all the same. For in me too there is that primal thing, the Image of God wherein I was created."

⁵⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, XVI, i (PG 44.177-88); Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oratio*, XLV, vii (PG 36.629-32).

praying to serve in marriage."⁵⁷ The identical emphasis continues in the literature of monasticism. Cassian's *Tenth Conference* uses the examples of Moses and Elias to illustrate the need for a pure heart, free of the contamination of human society, with which to contemplate God: "Prophetic contemplation tends toward God alone and implies a life without division; it involves celibacy."⁵⁸ In reference to the monastic practice of chanted prayer, Bernard of Monte Cassino testifies that "To praise God is not for impure men. It is the characteristic of the Angels. Such an activity is not proper to a man whose mind is out of tune with purity, but to one whose voice accords melodiously with the purity of his mind."⁵⁹ In early monastic thought it is clear that virginity remains the prerequisite for true Christian *gnosis*.

Another aspect of the idea of perfect noetic communion deserves mention here. It is the admiration felt by monastic authors for the Old and New Testament prophets, and for the idea of prophecy itself. In modern usage, the term denotes the ability to forecast future events, but this emphasis neglects an older and more fundamental significance, in which prophecy was thought to be essentially an intimate noetic union with the Godhead (out of which derives the ancillary power of prediction). Prophecy is the other side of the coin of contemplation; it is likewise bestowed only upon those who, by their virginity, have attained an angelic existence. In Essene Judaism sexual intercourse was thought to preclude prophecy; indeed, non-rabbinic Jewish literature has many references to prophets practicing continence.⁶⁰ Heretical gnosticism is known to have linked prophecy to the *vita angelica*: Simon Magus thought that the Old Testament prophets had spoken their prophecies "under the inspiration of the angels who made the world."⁶¹ Followers of Saturninus also thought that prophecy, when it appeared among men, was a result of the influence of inferior angels.⁶² In earliest Jewish Christianity, the clergy were divided into two groups, the "stable priest-

⁵⁷ *Ep.* XII, xxii, (*PL* 22.409); cf. I Cor. vii.35.

⁵⁸ *Collationes*, X, vi and XVIII, vi (*PL* 49.827, 1101-02).

⁵⁹ *Speculum monachorum*, ed. Hilary Walter (Freiburg-im-Bresgau, 1901), II, 147-48, qu. in Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, p. 29, n. 85. Similarly, the heretic Tatian believed that sexual union destroys the *symphonia* or harmony between the soul and God which makes prayer possible. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, III, xii, 81 (*PG* 8.1181).

⁶⁰ J. Massingberd Ford, *A Trilogy on Wisdom and Celibacy* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1967), pp. 53-54.

⁶¹ See Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 25; cf. p. 34.

⁶² Wilson, p. 103.

hood" and the missionary priesthood (ἀπόστολοι or "prophets"), who were essentially preachers of the Word. It is noteworthy that the latter preserved the evangelical counsels, especially virginity.⁶³

As might be expected, the Fathers of Christian gnosis give no less general assent to the idea that the prophets received their extraordinary vision on account of their angelic way of life. Jerome writes that Elias – a type of the mystical life for medieval monasticism – led his life on earth in a manner that was already heavenly; his virginity qualified him for bodily ascension to heaven.⁶⁴ He is also of the opinion that God permitted Ezechiel to exercise his prophetic calling only after the death of his wife had released him from his marriage bond.⁶⁵ Ambrose says that Eliseus lived the prophetic life of an angel because he was a virgin.⁶⁶ John Chrysostom, too, holds that the prophets shared the sexlessness of the *vita angelica*.⁶⁷ The connection between prophecy and virginity carries over into monasticism, which was inclined to regard the prophets of the Old Testament as the first monks, that is, the first humans to lead the angelic life after Adam.⁶⁸ Cassian, in referring to the hard-won chastity of those who achieve "integrity" and "incorruption," states that "This virtue is attributed *par excellence* only to those who remain virgins in body and soul. Such, as we know, were both Johns in the New Testament and Elias, Jeremias and Daniel in the Old."⁶⁹ The Old English poem *Daniel* characterizes that prophet, generally a type of virginity or purity in medieval exegesis, as "drihtne gecoren, / snotor and soðfæst . . . ; Him god sealde gife of heofnum / þurh hleoðorcwyde haliges gastes" ("God's chosen, wise and truth-

⁶³ Daniélou, *Theology*, pp. 350–51.

⁶⁴ *Ep.* XXII, ix (*PL* 22.400); cf. Gregory the Great, *In Ezech.*, II, i, 17 (*PL* 76.948).

⁶⁵ *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, xxxiii (*PL* 23.267–68). Jerome makes much the same point about John the Baptist in his *Ep.* CVIII, xxii (*PL* 22.900): the Precursor was called an angel even in this life because he was a virgin. For more instances of the prophets as exemplars of virginity, see Matthäus Bernards, *Speculum Virginum: Geistigkeit und Seelenleben der Frau im Hochmittelalter* (Köln, 1955), pp. 57–58, 61–65.

⁶⁶ *De virginibus*, I, viii, 51 (*PL* 16.202).

⁶⁷ *De virginitate*, lxxix (*PG* 48.591).

⁶⁸ The notion that Adam himself was the first monk – a rather bizarre confirmation that the monastic life recapitulates the virginal life of Primal Man – appears in the thought of Uthred of Bolton; see Leclercq, "The Monastic Tradition," 111–12.

⁶⁹ *Institutes*, VI, iv (*PL* 49.270–71). Notably, the analogy between monks and the prophets was reemphasized in periods of monastic reform, in the eleventh century by Peter Damian, for example, and again in the twelfth century by Rupert of Deutz and Bernard of Clairvaux. See Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, pp. 43–47.

ful. . . . Him God gave a gift from heaven, of prophecy of the Holy Ghost").⁷⁰ A chief trait of the virgin saint or virgin martyr in earlier medieval legends is an intimate knowledge of the mind of God. It is especially conspicuous in *Guthlac*, where the hermit boasts to the fiends who attack him that he is inspired in his defiance by the gift of *gnosis*:

Ne eam ic swa fealog, swa ic eow fore stonde,
monna weorudes, ac me mara dæl
in godcundum gæstgerynum
wunað ond weaxeð, se me wraþe healdeð.
(246-49)

(I am not so destitute as I stand before you,
without a band of men, but within me a greater share
of divine mysteries
dwells and increases which gives me support.)

In similar fashion, Bede's *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, largely concerned with matters related to the monastic life in Northumbria, speaks of the English monk "growing strong in the spirit of prophecy."⁷¹ As Guthlac approaches the hour of his death, he rises for the last time to declare the divine mysteries. His words profoundly impress his faithful disciple,

swa he ær ne sið
æfre to ealdre oðre swylce
on þas lænan tid lare gehyrde,
ne swa deoplice dryhtnes geryne
þurh menniscne muð areccan
on sidum sefan. Him wæs sopra gepuht
þæt hit ufancundes engles wære.
(1118b-24)

(in such a way as he
never in this life, in this fleeting existence,
such prophecy as that had heard;
nor so profoundly the mystery of God
set forth through the mouth of a man
of expansive mind. More truly it seemed to him
that it was the speech of a heavenly angel.)⁷²

⁷⁰ *Daniel*, ll. 150b-51a, 154-55, in *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. George P. Krapp, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 1 (New York, 1931), p. 115. For Daniel as a type of purity, see Cassian, *Collationes*, iv (PL 49.585); Aldhelm, *De virginitate*, xxi (PL 89.118).

⁷¹ *Cap.* xi (PL 94.749).

⁷² For the translation of *lare* (1120b) as "prophecy," see Albert S. Cook, ed., *The Christ of Cynewulf* (1900; rpt. Hamden, Conn., 1964), p. lxxxii, n. 1.

Another account adds, "him spræc an godes engel to æghwelce æfenne ond eft on ærne mergen ond him sæde heofonlico geryno," ("an angel of God spoke to him every evening and again early in the morning and told him heavenly mysteries").⁷³

In time, the concept of prophecy was to lose its relevance to *gnosis*, the intimate and secret knowledge the angels are privy to, and fade into the prosaic notion of mere forecasting. The later Middle Ages seem to show little realization that contemplation and prophecy were once essentially the same thing. That which linked them was virginity, but when prophecy began to be viewed as something other than the natural concomitant of virginity, the idea of monastic prayer, contemplation, was inevitably reduced to signifying little more than mental illumination, a concept far removed from the angelic *gnosis* Adam possessed before the Fall.⁷⁴

4. *Milites Christi*

The concept of the *vita angelica* in Christian gnosis has one more ramification of special importance for the interpretation of medieval monastic writing. It is the belief that in more than just a figurative or symbolic way the man who chooses the life of the monk has enlisted for battle as a *miles Christi*. Fundamental to the notion of a soldier, of course, is the idea of conflict, struggle, *agon*. Now, the theme of warfare between the forces of good and evil, of cosmic

It is clear that Guthlac belongs to the special *had* ("degree, rank, order," or "condition") of the monk (*Guthlac*, 30-32a, 60-61), and that the distinguishing mark of his "rank" is his angelic virginity. The angel who, at the very outset of the prologue (1-5) is said to receive the blessed soul into heaven, *hafað yldran had* ("holds rank of precedence") over it.

⁷³ *An Old English Martyrology*, ed. G. Herzfeld, E.E.T.S. 116, (London, 1900), pp. 56-57.

⁷⁴ Mention should be made here of the Montanist heresy, which held the Holy Spirit continued to expose new facets of revelation through new prophecies and visions. Tertullian maintained that such individual revelations are given only to "veiled virgins"; see *De velandis virginibus*, I (*PL* 2.937-38). It is interesting that, like pagan gnosticism, Montanism made no distinctions of sex. The Holy Ghost inspired both men and women and, in effect, made them like God (i.e. sexless); see Runciman, p. 18. The position of orthodoxy was that the Christian message was not subject to constant revision, and (more pertinently) that the gift of knowing the mind of God was not available to individuals to the exclusion of the Church as a whole. But monasticism retained what might be viewed as a kind of Montanist bias. That is, the proclaimed "heretical" character of the idea of individual "prophecy" did not prevent medieval monks from speaking, alternatively, of the gift of individual "contemplation," by which they meant nearly the same thing, a special privy with the mind of God.

dimensions and with metaphysical overtones, belongs to the essence of the gnostic principle. According to the dualistic mentality that views the physical world as fundamentally evil, man properly belongs on the side of the good angels in their continuing campaign against the fallen angels or demons. Moreover, that prototypical cosmic struggle is reproduced in the breast of each living man as a conflict between the spirit and the flesh. Because of original sin man is bound up with the material world and must fight actively to be free of its contamination.

The spiritual life as warfare was a feature of both heterodox gnosticism and Jewish Christianity.⁷⁵ It was also especially prominent in the thought of the Essenes, who went so far as to organize their community like a militia, with all the apparatus of rank and seniority.⁷⁶ In Christian gnosis, Origen is an important spokesman for the view that the Christian soul is pitted against some kind of "embodied" evil, either its own body or, more commonly, the person of the devil.⁷⁷ And monasticism, the historical extension of Christian gnosis, readily adopted the principle as the rationale for a life of asceticism. Cassian asserts that the religious is "semper belli positum," while the Rule of St. Benedict has several references to monks as a *militia Christi*.⁷⁸ Fr. Leclercq has noted that "in monastic literature, the statement that the monk is a soldier is so frequent that it must correspond to a profound reality."⁷⁹ He is correct; the profound reality which lies at the heart of the quasi-military nature of the monk's spiritual endeavor is the mystery of asexuality. The soldier of Christ is still most essentially a virgin.

Although Christian gnosis defined the *vita angelica* as sexlessness, it often bodied it forth in military terms. It did not deprive the angels of an important part of their traditional character and function, their service as an army dedicated to the overthrow of the Prince of Darkness and all his minions. Powerful, militant, and destined to be triumphant in the final engagement led by the *Christus Victor*, the angels were not the effeminate young men of quattrocento art, but a proud and vital race of demigods. They were the *milites Christi* supreme, compared to whom cloistered monks were

⁷⁵ Daniélou, *Theology*, pp. 358-62.

⁷⁶ See André Dupont-Sommer, pp. 47, 375.

⁷⁷ *In libro Jesu nave*, V, ii; XI, iv (*PG* 12.847-49, 885).

⁷⁸ *Institutes*, I, ii (*PL* 49.60); *Regula*, Prologus iii, xl, and Cap. I, ii; II, xx; LVIII, x, and LXI, x (*PL* 66.216-18, 245-46, 264, 804, 854).

⁷⁹ *The Life of Perfection*, p. 103; see the wealth of citations in Bernards, pp. 102-06.

rather more an expeditionary force.⁸⁰ Monasticism drew its picture of the perfect Christian life along martial lines in imitation of the angels' military prowess. But what lay behind the invincibility of those heavenly hosts was the principle of sexlessness, and it is that which gives logic to the application of military metaphor to the monk. The explanation is to be sought in the ancient belief, still in evidence among contemporary peoples at the level of folk lore, that abstinence from sexual intercourse adds to one's might. As Havelock Ellis has written of this use of chastity,

We find it pronounced among savages, and the special virtues of savagery – hardness, endurance, and bravery – are intimately connected with the cultivation of chastity and asceticism. . . . They esteem chastity for its values, magical or real, as a method of self-control which contributes towards the attainment of important ends. The ability to bear pain and restraint is nearly always a main element in the initiations of youths at puberty. The custom of refraining from sexual intercourse before expeditions of war and hunting, and other serious concerns involving great muscular and mental strain, whatever the motives assigned, is a sagacious method of economizing energy.⁸¹

In Christian gnosis virginity was regarded in much the same way, as the means of preserving the potency of the soul in combat with the forces of evil. Acceding to physical desire would mean a defeat for the soul, while abstinence would safeguard its deiform integrity, the essential condition of salvation in such a dualistic system. In that virginal integrity – absolute spiritual self-containment – lay the Christian's power to resist the flesh and the devil. Thus Ignatius of Antioch writes to Polycarp in commendation of virginity as a symbol of the strength available to the new Christian.⁸² Eusebius Emesenus refers to it as eradicating the "weakness" of concupiscence.⁸³ In the

⁸⁰ Thus Colombas: "Les anciens moines savaient parfaitement qu'ils ne combattaient pas seulement le démon pour défendre leur âme et sauver le trésor de grâce qu'ils possédaient caché en elle, mais qu'ils livraient en même temps, en troupes avancées de l'Eglise, la grande bataille cosmique du règne de Dieu" (p. 134; cf. pp. 135-40). Ambrose notes why angels are so willing to come to the aid of monks in distress: "There is nothing extraordinary in the fact that the angels fight for you, for you *in the manner of your life* fight as do the angels" (*De virginibus*, I, viii, 51 [PL 16.214]). For an illuminating discussion of the muscular conflicts between the first monks and the demons see Uta Ranke-Heinemann, "Die ersten Mönche und die Dämonen," *Geist und Leben*, 29 (1956), 165-70.

⁸¹ *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 6 vols. in 2 (New York, 1936), VI, 145.

⁸² *Epistola ad Polycarpum* (PG 5.724).

⁸³ See David Amand de Mendieta, "La virginité chez Eusèbe d'Émèse et l'ascétisme familial dans la première moitié du IV^e siècle," *Revue d'Histoire*

Symposium Methodius speaks of "undefiled conflicts of chastity," and exhorts virgins to arm with breastplate, greaves, and helmet of salvation. He believes that continence actually preserves the health and vitality of the body: "Chastity contributes not a little towards the ready attainment of incorruptibility: it makes the flesh buoyant, raising it up and drying out its moisture."⁸⁴ By contrast, the effects of sexual intercourse, according to the so-called *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* (dating from at least the ninth century and circulated throughout the Middle Ages), are "destruccio corporis et abbreviatio vite et corrupcio virtutum . . . et mores generat feminicios."⁸⁵ Fundamental to the idea of virginity as a prophylaxis is the notion that contact with matter is corruptive and debilitating, an idea based ultimately on the gnostic equation of sexuality with sin. As Jerome explains to Eustochium, the devil's mastery over males is localized "in the loins," while that over women is "in the navel"; that is, the devil's power manifests itself through the sexual organs.⁸⁶

The concept of bodily integrity as the key to spiritual prowess is apparent in the literary productions of Anglo-Saxon monasticism. (Until recently critics regarded the martial cast of Old English Christian poetry as an ethnic phenomenon; their "Teutonic" bias caused them to see the *miles Christi* motif as a manifestation of a pagan Germanic warrior ethic. This approach has now been rightly called in question, as it fails to consider that most elements of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry, no matter how congenial they may seem to a native Germanic tradition, had an authentic Christian patrimony.⁸⁷) Guthlac, one of the first of English anchorites, engages in what amounts to the founding of a monastery, winning back and securing

Ecclesiastique, 50 (1955), 784. In his account of the willing suicide of two "brides of Christ," Bernice and Prodoce, to protect their virtue, Eusebius sees the strength of their virginity as compensation for the "fragility" of their feminine nature; see Amand de Mendieta, 814-15.

⁸⁴ *Symposium*, VI, v; VIII, xii; VIII, iv, pp. 95, 118-19, 108-09. The Anglo-Saxons also assumed that virginity immunizes the body against corruption; when the bodies of Ethelthryth and Ethelberga were disinterred they were discovered to be undecayed - a proof they had lived virginal lives. See Bede, *Hist. eccl.* III, viii; IV, xix, ed. Plummer, I, 144, 243-46.

⁸⁵ Qu. from the fourteenth-century "*Sermo Epinicius* Ascribed to Thomas Bradwardine (1346)," ed. H. A. Oberman and J. A. Weisheipl, *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 33 (1958), 324. For the Anglo-Saxon prose version of the *Letter* see *Three Old English Prose Texts*, ed. Stanley Rypins, E.E.T.S. 161 (London, 1924), pp. 1-50.

⁸⁶ *Ep.* XXII, xi (*PL* 22.400-01).

⁸⁷ See E. G. Stanley, "The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism," *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 11 (1964), 204-09, 242-50, 282-87, 324-31, 455-63, and 12 (1965), 203-07, 285-88, 322-27.

a parcel of land from the fiends.⁸⁸ This *beorg*, or “barrow,” a fortified enclave raised above the material domain of the demons and consecrated to *Christus Victor*, comes to stand as a symbol of Guthlac’s virginity, if we understand virginity in its classic sense as asexuality, eremetical non-involvement in material reality, combined with a sort of irredentism of the spiritual. Throughout the poem Guthlac’s prowess is linked with his asceticism. An angel is sent to help him abate his sinful appetites (112–13), and self-denial brings him closer to secret wisdom (159–69): exemplary conduct for a warrior of Christ (344–47). The devil, unable to harm him, upbraids Guthlac with the fact that while his monastic profession contains the implicit boast of spiritual preeminence, many religious lead dissolute lives. But the important thing is that the speech attests to the idea that virginity affords supernatural protection:

ða þu gehete þæt þec halig gæst
 wið earfeþum eaðe gescilde,
 for þam myrcelse þe þec monnes hond
 from þinre onsyne æþelum ahwyrfde.
 In þam mægwlite monge lifgað,
 gyltum forgiefene; nales gode þigað
 ac hy lichoman fore lufan cwemað
 wista wynnum. (456–63a)

(Then did you vow that the Holy Spirit
 from sufferings would easily shield you,
 because of the sign [the tonsure] by which the
 hand of man
 from your noble appearance changed you.
 In that virgin-form many live,
 given over to guilty deeds; they partake not at
 all of God,
 but the body they gratify out of love
 for delightful delicacies.)

The Old English *Judith*, endorsing the view that the perfect life will have nothing to do with sexuality, strongly implies Judith’s own invulnerability derives from her virginity.⁸⁹ She is depicted as a

⁸⁸ *Guthlac*, 200–32. The name “Guthlac” translates as “the reward of (spiritual) warfare”; see W. F. Bolton, “The Background and Meaning of *Guthlac*,” *JEGP*, 61 (1962), 595–603.

⁸⁹ For *Judith*, see *Beowulf and Judith*, ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 4 (New York, 1953), pp. 99–109. For Aelfric, the significance of the Book of Judith was “hu clænlice heo leofode ær Cristes acennednysse” (“how chastely she lived before the birth of Christ”). See his

“holy virgin” (56b), a “holy maid” (260a), “the virgin of God” (261a). Correspondingly, Holofernes is “se galmoda / egesfull ond afor” (“the lecher, terrible and fierce,” 256b–57a), as also “pysne morþres bryttan” (“this dispenser of death,” 90a). His illicit sexual intentions seem appropriate to the devil himself:

Ða wearþ se brema on mode
bliðe, burga ealdor, þohte ða beorhtan idese
mid widle ond mid womme besmitan. (57b–59a)

(Then the renowned one in his heart grew
happy, the ruler of cities, and intended the radiant
virgin
to dishonor with filth and stain.)

But the Lord intervenes on the virgin’s behalf to bestow unwomanly resolve upon her.

Certain legends of female virgins, particularly those of virgin martyrs, also suggest that virginity is the source of their ability to resist temptors and tormentors alike. Cynewulf’s *Juliana* does this in a graphic way.⁹⁰ Persecuted for her refusal to give up her Christian beliefs, Juliana is put through a series of monstrous tortures: she is beaten, laid under a wheel set with swords, and set afire (finally to be boiled in molten lead!) But,

Da gen sio halge stod
ungewemde wlite. Næs hyre wloh ne hrægl,
ne feax ne fel fyre gemæled,
ne lic ne leoþu. Heo in lige stod
æghwæs onsund. . . . Wæs seo wuldres mæg
anræd ond unforth, eafodā gemyndig,
dryhtnes willan. (589b–93a, 600b–02a)

(Still the holy one stood
with her brightness *unblemished*. Neither hem nor robe
neither hair nor skin was *stained* by the fire,
nor body nor limbs. She stood in the blaze
completely *intact*. . . . The glorious maiden was
resolute and bold, mindful of her own might
and the will of the Lord.)⁹¹

Homily on the Book of Judith, ed. Bruno Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben* (1889; rpt. Darmstadt, 1964), p. 115, l. 435.

⁹⁰ For *Juliana*, see *The Exeter Book*, pp. 113–33.

⁹¹ In the legend of *Agnes* by the German nun Hroswitha of Gandersheim, ed. Karolus Strecker, *Hrotsvithae opera* (Lipsiae, 1930), pp. 98–111, esp. 108, the saint is also thrown into a fire. She is not injured because her chaste body

It is Juliana's staunchness that allows her physically to subdue the devil who visits her in the guise of an angel, and to force him to confess his wiles. As seems usual in such saints' lives, the devil is an informed witness; in a bemused but not ill-natured fashion he attributes Juliana's preternatural brawn to a transformation wrought in her by virginity:

Hwæt, þu mec þreades
 þurh sarslege! Ic to soþe wat
 þæt ic ær ne sið ænig ne mette
 in woruldrice wif þe gelic,
 þristran geþohtes ne þweorhtimbran
 mægþa cynnes. Is on me sweotul
 þæt þu unscamge æghwæs wurde
 on ferþe frod. (546b-53a)

(Look, how you have punished me
 with painful blows! I know for sure
 that I have never met any woman
 in this world like you,
 of bolder purpose nor one more cross-grained,
 among the class of maidens. It is clear to me
 that you have become completely unabashed,
 wise in spirit.)

In this matter virginity was no respecter of sex; in the strangely oriental legend of *Malchus*, the male hermit undergoes a number of fabulous, physically threatening adventures, but comes through them whole. The reason he remains unscathed lies implicit in the rather pointed moral of his exploits, which is to "retain your cleanliness," "þæt sio geþungennes ne mæg næfre wesan besmitan" ("that purity may never be defiled").⁹²

"needed" no punishment for any defilement, "since the passion of carnal love had not enkindled it" ("sed corpus castum nulla de sorde piandum, / Ardor carnalis quod non succendit amoris"). See also Elsie W. C. Parsons, *Religious Chastity: An Ethnological Study*, by John Main [pseud.] (New York, 1913), pp. 260-61, for a list of *legenda* in which men try to deprive female saints of their virginity in order to remove their power.

⁹² Ed. William H. Hulme, *JEGP*, 1 (1897), 431-41; see esp. 441. Aelfric evidently regarded the life of Malchus as particularly illustrative of the power of virginity. In his *Homily on the Book of Judith*, ed. Assmann, p. 115, he says to his female audience (442-45): "ic wylle eac secgan, min swustor, / þæt mægðhad and clænnys mycele mihte habbað, / swa swa we gehwær rædað on martira þrowungum / and on Vitas Patrum, swa swa Malchus . . ." [MS breaks off], ("I also want to say, my sisters, that virginity and chastity possess great might, as we everywhere read in the sufferings of the martyrs and in the Lives of the Fathers, just as Malchus . . .").

All these works, products of a monastic culture, leave the impression that virginity is the source of inviolable strength and vigor. This vitalizing effect ought to be regarded as an extension of the Christian-gnostic position that continence and virginity are life-giving, while sexuality breeds death. From that point of view monastic virginity takes on profound metaphysical significance: it becomes far more than bodily integrity, but a symbol, in some way, of the invincibility of the soul which renounces contact with matter. This is best seen in *Juliana*, whose author is celebrated as an artist of the symbolic imagination. As Gordon Gerould has pointed out, Cynewulf's version expands that portion of his source which deals with Juliana's efforts to avoid marriage; establishing the fact of the saint's virginity and describing her theological motives for retaining it take up fully one-third of the poem.⁹³ The real threat to her virginity is the devil, in whose mouth Cynewulf puts his symbolic description of the effect sin has upon the soul. Under the constraint of Juliana's strong right arm the devil admits:

Ic þe, ead mæg, yfla gehwylces
 or gecyðe oð ende forð
 þara þe ic gefremede, nalæs feam siðum,
 synna wundum. (352-55a)

(Blessed maiden, to you of each of the evils
 I confess the beginning and the end,
 which I accomplished no few times
 by the wounds of sins.)

The idea that sin "wounds," though hardly a novel motif – it appears, for instance, in the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius – is entirely apposite to the rather martial cast of the poem.⁹⁴ But what is important is that Cynewulf extenuates the symbolic action of wounding so as to demonstrate both the damaging effect of sin and the preservative effect of virginity. For example, the devil complains he occasionally finds a

metodes cempan
 wið flanþræce, nele feor þonan

⁹³ *Saints' Legends* (Boston and New York, 1916), pp. 67-68. See also Theodor Wolpers, *Die englische Heiligenlegende des Mittelalters* (Tübingen, 1964), pp. 120-21.

⁹⁴ See E. G. Stanley's discussion of the motif of the baleful wound of sin in "Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Penitent's Prayer*," *Anglia*, 73 (1955-56), 418-25. Cf. Cynewulf's *Christ* (II), 756-78, *The Exeter Book*, p. 24.

bugan from beaduwe, ac he bord ongean
 hefeð hygesnottor, haligne scyld,
 gæstlic guðreaf. (383b-87a)

(warrior of the Lord
 withstanding the attack of arrows who will not far
 hence
 flee from the fray; but he his buckler again
 raises up, the wise one, the holy shield,
 the spiritual armor.)

It should be noted that when the devil describes his *success* at tempting the righteous, the diction seems burdened with distinctly sexual connotations: the devil "sweetens" (*geswete*, 369a) the pleasure of sin; the sinner feels a "wicked affection" (*mæne modlufan*, 370a); the devil "sets him afire" (*onæle*, 372b) and leaves him "burning" (*byrnende*, 373a). The tempted is no longer able to pray (373b-76a), a clear reminiscence of the Christian-gnostic belief that sexual activity precludes prayer. The devil goes on to boast that, upon finding a weaker *miles Christi*:

Ic þæs wealles geat
 ontyne þurh teonan; bið se torr þyrel,
 ingong geopenad, þonne ic ærest him
 þurh eargfare in onsende
 in breostsefan bitre geþoncas. (401b-05)

(I the gate of the wall
 open by assault; when the tower is pierced
 the portal opened, then I first
 by a flight of arrows send into his
 breast stinging thoughts.)

This is the familiar metaphor of the castle-of-the-body besieged.⁹⁵ It is important that the walls are not broken down; rather, it is the *portal* that is assaulted. In other words, the physical outworks of the soul are penetrated where ingress would normally take place. Again the diction establishes the implication that the devil's penetration is symbolic of sexual sin. His arrows tempt the soul to the "lusts of the flesh" (*lices lūstas*, 490a). And Juliana's reply to the demon's speech is a question whose terms indicate the sexual nature of his attack:

⁹⁵ See Stanley, "Old English Poetic Diction," 418-25. The unbreached castle commonly symbolized the virginity of Mary. For a full discussion of the motif, see Roberta D. Cornelius, *The Figurative Castle* (Bryn Mawr, Penn., 1930).

Saga, earmsceapen, unclæne gæst,
 hu þu þec geþyde, þystra stihtend,
 on clænra gemong? (418–20a)

(Say, miserable, impure spirit,
 how have you thrust yourself, prince of darkness,
 into the assembly of the pure?)

In both passages the prevailing imagery is that of assault, penetration, intrusion. It is in service of the theme of the baleful wound of sin, and placed in a context wherein virginity is strongly emphasized. For Cynewulf, therefore, not only does the unbreached castle represent the physical integrity of the body, but that integrity, in turn, stands for a profound spiritual reality, the ontological impermeability and, so to speak, indiscerptibility of the virgin soul, totally insulated from the corruptive impingement of matter upon spirit.

The idea of virginity as a protection and source of strength in the battle against evil was able to remain in force so long as churchmen acknowledged the ontological significance of asexuality in a dualistic system. But as the Augustinian compromise with the physical world gradually undermined this critical foundation-stone of monasticism, virginity began to be thought of merely as the highest form of asceticism. Correspondingly, the concept of the soldier of Christ was to lose some of its metaphysical implication. Like "virginity," the term "asceticism" admits of more than one meaning. In Christian gnosis *askesis* has a distinctly cosmic and eschatological significance, as opposed to a merely personal one; it is the means of depriving the powers of darkness of their theatre of operations, the flesh and the desire for worldly attachments. So conceived, as a kind of "scorched earth policy" of spirituality, asceticism prevents the demons from gaining a foothold in their assault against the soul. In the tradition following Augustine, on the other hand, the asceticism of the soldier of Christ esteems the body while at the same time attempting to stamp out its concupiscence. It is based on a stoical psychology, involving a test of the will. But it is interesting to note that the first Christians saw *askesis* – essentially a pagan idea – as something quite different from virginity, which they considered not a matter of resolve at all but a *charisma*, a free gift of God. Indeed, the earliest Church felt it had to combat the idea that celibacy was only asceticism; nevertheless, it was not long before it was compelled to compromise with the stoic view because of creeping "libertinism and

quietism."⁹⁶ Still, the agonistic function of individual asceticism was more obviously retained within monasticism, where virginity as a necessary condition for combat against the personified forces of evil remained a literary theme well into the Middle Ages. The so-called "classic" theory of Christ's atonement, which prevailed in medieval theology until as late as the eleventh century, was actually little more than the standard expression of this militaristic spiritual ethos.⁹⁷

The conception of the monk as a member of an elite corps fighting as the vanguard of a Pantocrater Christ accords perfectly with the semipelagianism that characterized monastic thought in the early Middle Ages, especially in southern Gaul. Two of the most influential exponents of this view, Cassian and Faustus of Riez, were outspoken in their opposition to Augustine's formulation of the nature and effects of the original sin.⁹⁸ With its slightly antinomian belief in human perfectibility, semipelagianism naturally tended to enshrine virginity as the visible sign of membership in the group of the elect, a fact which helps to explain why a sense of elitism often pervades both patristic and medieval treatments of the virginal life.⁹⁹ On the other hand, it is not surprising that in the variety of monasticism most closely indebted to Augustine's thought on the value of ascetical practice this elitist bias is severely chastened. Chapter five of Benedict's Rule, on obedience, calls for total self-abnegation of the will, and speaks of the monastic life as "servitium sanctum," while the seventh chapter details the twelve steps of the "ladder of humility."¹⁰⁰ The whole force of Benedict's Rule was to recommend to western man the measured and equable life of the cenobite as preferable to the rather presumptuous austerities of those soldiers of Christ who had gone out into the eastern deserts alone.

Like the other habitual themes of monastic thought we have examined here – the *vita angelica*, *simplicitas*, contemplation and prophecy – that of the *miles Christi* is essentially a corollary to the dualism of the gnostic principle. The use of the metaphor to describe only a regimen of personal asceticism is derivative; it no longer

⁹⁶ See Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 53–54.

⁹⁷ See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York, 1961), pp. 263–65. The classic idea was "the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history" (p. 6).

⁹⁸ See J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost*, pp. 110–11.

⁹⁹ See Bernards, pp. 45–46, for a list of references to the idea that virgins constitute an elite class of Christians.

¹⁰⁰ *PL* 66.349–50, 371–76.

expresses what lies logically at the basis of the military symbolism, asexuality. Virginity is not just the ornament of a militant Church, it is the source of her inviolable strength in the performance of her ordained mission, the subjugation of the material world to the rule of the *Christus Victor*. One other monastic theme not touched upon so far is of the first importance for evaluating the complicated development of virginity in later medieval spirituality, the concept of the virgin as the "bride of Christ." Indeed, one writer has suggested that "it does not appear possible to understand fully the mystical nature of Christian virginity without it."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Perrin, *Virginity*, p. 27.

CHAPTER III

SPONSA CHRISTI: VIRGINITY AND EPITHALAMIAN MYSTERY

1. *The Song of Songs and Christian Exegesis*

The designation of the Christian virgin as the bride of Christ goes back at least as far as the third century, and is first noted in the writings of Tertullian.¹ In the fourth century Athanasius asserts that virgins are “customarily” called brides of Christ, while Ambrose says that “a virgin is one who gives her hand in marriage to God.”² Nevertheless, the ultimate origin of the *sponsa Christi* motif must be sought at least in part within pagan gnosticism, where it is common to find the relationship of the individual soul to a higher spiritual being, or to the Godhead itself, depicted through the metaphor of the sexual relationship.³ The idea that the soul has a heavenly counterpart may derive from Zoroastrianism, or it may have developed out of three distinct sources concurrently: the *ἱερός γάμος* of the mystery religions, the Hebrew concept of the marriage of God with His people Israel, and the soul-nuptials in Plato’s *Symposium*.⁴ In any case the notion was common in nearly all the various forms of

¹ *De oratione*, xxii (PL I.1296–97).

² *Apologia ad Constantium*, xxxiii (PG 25.640); *De virginibus*, I, viii, 52 (PL 16.214).

³ Karl Müller, *Die Forderung der Ehelosigkeit aller Getauften in der alten Kirche* (Tübingen, 1927), pp. 12–13, writes: “Im Pleroma, dem Himmel der Geistesträger, sind die obersten himmlischen Wesen paarweise geordnet in *σζυγία*, und jeder Gnostiker ist selbst wieder dazu bestimmt, künftig eine solche *σζυγία* mit einem Wesen dieser oberen Welt einzugehen.” It is worth pointing out that the *Greek-English Lexicon* of H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, 9th ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1948), II, 1670, gives as the substantive meanings of the word *σζυγία*, “a union,” “a yoke of animals” or, generally, a “pair”; and – significantly here – “coupling” or “copulation.”

⁴ For the first view, see Wilson, p. 248, n. 236, and Wilfred L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 137; for the latter, Henri Crouzel, *Virginité et mariage selon Origène* (Paris, 1963), p. 15, n. 2.

dualistic belief that flourished in the Near East around the time of Christ.

Both partners in this union of love, or *syzygia*, are wholly spiritual entities, and admit of no sexuality. It is therefore not exceptional to find references within gnostic literature to the notion of men as female, and, as such, ordained to be the "brides" of angels. In the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostle Thomas* the Lord Jesus dissuades a newly-married couple from intercourse, promising them "an untroubled life, free from grief and care" if they remain virginal. He counsels them to look forward beyond this world "to receive that marriage incorruptible and true; and you will be in it companions of the bridegroom, going in along with Him into that bridal chamber full of immortality and light."⁵ The Solomonic literature of the Old Testament, especially the Song of Songs, lays heavy emphasis on the "bridal idea," and for that reason seems to have occupied a special place in the awareness of both heterodox gnosticism and the Christian gnostic tradition. Some heretical gnostic sects during the early Christian era would accept from the Hebrew Bible only certain prophetic books, the Psalms, and the Song of Songs as canonical.⁶ Their own writings are often imitative of biblical passages which exhibit some kind of sexual passion or express religious emotion in lyrical fashion.⁷ The Song of Songs, particularly, was thought to give voice to certain articles of gnostic belief, especially the nuptial relationship between the soul and God, and the romantically sexual nature of that union. It is not surprising that it inspired imitations such as the semi-Christian *Odes of Solomon*, the third of which is an epithalamium expressing the soul's love for Christ. In the fifth verse the soul declares: "I love the Beloved, and my soul loves Him: / and where His rest is, there also am I." In the forty-second *Ode* Christ is the speaker; he says, "like the arm of the bridegroom over the bride, so was my yoke over those that know me: and as the couch that is spread in the house of the bridegroom and bride, so is my love over those that believe in me."⁸

⁵ *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 24 vols. (Edinburgh, 1967-72), XVI, 395.

⁶ See Runciman, pp. 150-51.

⁷ According to Musurillo, *The Fathers*, pp. 23-24, "The Syrian Gnostics seem to have been the first to use vernacular songs and hymns in connection with their liturgy and devotions." Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion*, p. 1, notes that "der Manichaeismus war eine singende Kirche."

⁸ *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, ed. James Rendel Harris (Cambridge, 1909), pp. 89, 137. Cf. *Ode 38*, p. 133. Although five of the odes are also found in the gnostic *Pistis Sophia* in Coptic, some commentators are unwilling to

In the Christian gnostic tradition it is Origen, especially, who establishes this "pneumatic" interpretation of the bridal imagery in the Song of Songs. In his homily on Numbers, for instance, he writes that "The Betrothed, then, the husband of a pure and chaste soul, is the Word of God who is Christ the Lord, as the Apostle says, 'I would present you all as pure virgins to the sole Spouse.'" Expanding the sexual imagery, he goes on to speak of the virgin soul receiving the seed of Christ's word.⁹ The idea of the soul wedded to God appears in both Christian gnosis and (less frequently) in the more normative, western tradition; but it needs to be emphasized that the concept is more accurately considered the property of the former. Philo, whose method of scriptural exegesis and whose views on the nature of man's fall were so authoritative for the eastern Fathers, also seems to have made his voice heard over the matter of the *syzygia*. In one place he refers to God as

the husband of Wisdom, dropping the seed of happiness for the race of mortals into good and virgin soil. For it is meet that God should hold converse with the truly virgin nature, that which is undefiled and free from impure touch; but it is the opposite with us. For the union of human beings that is made for the procreation of children, turns virgins into women. But when God begins to consort with the soul, He makes what before was a woman into a virgin again.¹⁰

Such is also the spirit of Origen's *Commentary*, the first great work of Christian mysticism and a source for many subsequent writers on the Song.¹¹ Methodius of Olympus composed a commentary on the Canticle which is now lost, but it very probably celebrated the marriage of the individual soul to Christ; and Gregory of Nyssa has fifteen homilies on it which lay nearly exclusive emphasis on this pneumatic interpretation.¹² The Origenist reading seems to have

admit they are of gnostic origin. Musurillo, *The Fathers*, p. 125, believes they were originally Jewish, probably Essene, psalms. Daniélou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 119, thinks they stem from the Christian Church at Antioch.

⁹ *In Numeros homilia*, XX, ii (PG 12.728).

¹⁰ *De cherubim*, xlix-li, ed. Colson and Whitaker, II, 38-39. Cf. *De somniis*, I, cc, ed. cit., V, 402-03, where "all right thoughts and reasonings of wisdom" are encouraged to mount and impregnate the soul. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, p. 211, comments on Philo's idea of men as female, destined as brides of the angels: "Sophia is now female, mating with the patriarchs, but again male, implanting in them the seeds which they as female bring to birth."

¹¹ Ed. Lawson, p. 6.

¹² See Musurillo, ed., *The Symposium*, p. 10; and Gregory, PG 44.755-1120, esp. 763 ff. The remaining commentators in this tradition are less well known: Isidor of Pelusium (PG 87/2.1546-1754); Nilus the Elder (d. c. 426) whose

found continuance in the western parts of the Empire. Its popularization there, although never extensive, was mainly the result of translations by Rufinus and Jerome, both of whom had traveled to the East to learn the monastic life.¹³ In addition, we know of at least three commentaries on the Song composed before A.D. 350 which have not survived. All three, by Victor of Pettau (d. ca. 304), Reticus of Autun (*fl.* 313), and Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367), probably showed the influence of Origen's mystical reading; any one of them might have helped transmit that interpretation to the West.¹⁴

Among the Latin Fathers, it is Ambrose whose analysis of the Song is of most significance for later Christianity in the West. He wrote no single, complete exegesis, but his many-faceted interpretation is available in a number of works that employ the *sponsa* motif. In fact, he is the first to have left behind comments on nearly all of the Song.¹⁵ Perhaps because of the nature of this approach, his appraisal of the meaning of the bride of Christ is unsystematic and variable. Ambrose views the Song as a conversation between Christ, the Word of God, and his bride, the Church, conceived of as a group of souls, a *congregatio religiosa*. But this "ecclesiological" interpretation is not his only way of reading it. In his commentary on the Psalms, for instance, he often makes use of the formula *ecclesia vel anima* in reference to the bride. In the *De Isaac vel anima* (whose title belies that it is mainly a commentary on the Song) he depicts the mystical union of the soul with God in terms reminiscent of Origen's *Commentary*: God embraces the soul passionately and bestows a kiss upon it. Here the ecclesiological reading has been relegated to the background. Indeed, it is in his pneumatic interpretation of the Song that Ambrose serves – along with Origen – as the

commentary was obviously gnostic in cast; Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 457), (*PG* 81.27–214); and Maximus Confessor (*PG* 87/2.1756–1780). See Leopold Welseheimb, S.J., "Das Kirchenbild in der griechischen Väterkommentare zum hohen Lied," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie*, 70 (1948), 393–449.

¹³ See Claude Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ: An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity* (London, 1940), p. 177.

¹⁴ See Friedrich Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Hoheliedauslegung des Abendlandes bis zum 1200* (Wiesbaden, 1958), pp. 26–28. Every student of the exegesis of the Song of Songs finds himself indebted to Ohly's thorough survey.

¹⁵ Ambrose's opinions on the Song are to be found scattered among such works as the *De virginibus*, *De institutione virginis*, *Expositio psalmi cxviii*, and the *De Isaac vel anima* (*PL* 16.197–244; 16.319–48; 15.1257–1604; 14.523–60).

source of a much later revival of epithalamian mysticism in the West.¹⁶

Generally speaking, those exegetes of the Song whose views on the role of sexuality in man's original nature mark them as "Christian gnostics" are in substantial agreement on its significance: it represents for them a spiritual, and finally ontological, union between the soul of the individual Christian and a vivifying Christ. The pneumatic reading of the *sponsa* metaphor is inherently more consonant with the beliefs on sexuality typical of that tradition, a fact which becomes clear when the metaphoric function of sexuality is examined in greater detail. As we have seen, Christian gnosis believed union with the divine was possible only through the release of man's genuine spiritual being from its material bonds; but the most resistant of these ties was precisely the desire for sexual intercourse. How was it possible for Christian gnosis to embrace the metaphorical language of a contemned sexuality to describe the union the soul seeks with God? The answer lies in the rigorous dualism of all gnostic belief, according to which only the union of spirit with matter is evil, because it involves contamination or defilement; the union of spirit with Spirit is entirely praiseworthy. By the former man enlarges and makes more potent the rule of the physical over the spiritual. By the latter, on the other hand, he renounces any further fragmentation and dispersal of soul in flesh, in favor of the entirely proper *re*-union with its primal source. Such a spiritual embrace, spoken of in terms of sexual passion, is an analogue to the physical union by which the female is impregnated with new life. It is not really a paradox that, in spite of the connection of sexuality with sin, Christian gnosis saw the *sponsa Christi* motif as the most serviceable means of expressing the present eschatological reality, for the redemptive action of Christ's coming meant for each individual soul the infusion of a new principle of vitality. The visitation of the Bridegroom to the bride, with its attendant connotations of passionate expectation, sexual awakening, and intimate union with the Lover, was an appropriate way of describing this spiritual state. But the metaphor of sexual

¹⁶ *De Isaac*, I, iv-vi (*PL* 14.533-34); cf. Ohly pp. 35-39, who writes: "In dieser frühen Zeit christlicher Hoheliedexegese sind wie bei Origenes im Osten in Abendland bei Ambrosius schon Möglichkeiten der Auslegung angebahnt, die weite Ausblicke auf die spätere Bedeutung des Hohenliedes für die Mystik eröffnen und schon jetzt erkennen lassen, wie weit zurück die Quellen jenes mystischen Stromes liegen, der schon hier das Verständnis durchzieht und es einmal ganz erfüllen soll." For Ambrose's writings on the Song as an important source of Cistercian mysticism, see Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York, 1940), p. 70.

union was apposite to the predicament of fallen man in a sense far more profound: since it was by a sexual transgression that the meaning of the Fall was expressed, how more appropriately could the significance of its remedy be described than by a metaphor of sexual fulfillment? If it were through coition that sin and death entered the world, a version of sexual congress on the level of pure spirituality serves as its natural antithesis, thus satisfying the instinct in Christian gnosis for symmetry in salvation history.

It is significant that the pneumatic meaning of the *sponsa Christi* metaphor seems to have passed out of the picture after the less than whole-hearted treatment of it by Ambrose; indeed, it was eclipsed by alternative readings of the Song. The fact points to a decreasing emphasis upon the ideal of mystical union and may provide further testimony to the abatement of the gnostic principle in the mind of the western Fathers and in the early medieval Church. As Friedrich Ohly writes, the appraisal of the Song as an allegorical conversation between Christ and the soul disappears from earlier medieval commentaries, and does not undergo a rebirth until an impulse to mystic union in the twelfth century made it again appropriate.¹⁷

The most important alternative to the pneumatic reading of the bridal idea is the ecclesiological interpretation, a product of a typological reading of the Old Testament. The idea proceeds from the Hebrew idea of the people of God as wedded to Him; basically Pauline, it became traditional after the definitive treatment given it by the Alexandrian school.¹⁸ The first known commentary taking the position that the unsullied (virgin) bride of Christ is the Church is that of Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235). Addressing his work to the Jews, he interprets the loved one of the Song, who yearns for a kiss from the bridegroom, as the Synagogue. The Bridegroom is Christ, and on the bridal bed of Solomon the fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah takes place when the Synagogue is transformed

¹⁷ *Hohelied-Studien*, p. 45.

¹⁸ See Hos. ii, Ezech. xvi, Psalm xlv.11-18; cf. II Cor. xi. 2 and Eph. v. 32. For Christ's designation of himself as the Bridegroom, see Matt. ix.15, Mark ii.18-20, Luke v.33-35, and John iii.27-29. Karl Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater chez les pères des trois premiers siècles*, trans. P. Vergriete and E. Bouis (Paris, 1964), pp. 112-13, discusses the exegetical lengths Clement of Alexandria went to in finding every sort of feminine figure in the Old Testament a type of the Church. Roland E. Murphy, "Recent Literature on the Canticle of Canticles," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 16 (1954), 9, argues the ecclesiological approach is "the traditional Catholic interpretation," one that is owing to "the explicit presence of the marriage theme in the prophetic literature."

into the Christian Church.¹⁹ The tradition of ecclesiological interpretation that descends to the West by way of Hippolytus is extraordinarily rich.²⁰ One should bear in mind the distinctly apologetic purpose it serves, something perhaps best observed in the thought of Augustine. He follows Tertullian and Cyprian, especially, who employ the *sponsa Christi* metaphor to argue the unity of the Church and the invalidity of the baptism practiced by heretical sects. Augustine himself attacks the position of the Donatists, arguing that the Song of Songs identifies the bride as the orthodox Christian community, the City of God on earth.²¹ The overwhelming influence of Augustine's concept of the two cities no doubt had something to do with the popularity the ecclesiological reading enjoyed in the literature of the earlier Middle Ages.²²

Embodying an interesting hermeneutic compromise are two homilies on the Song's first eight verses by Gregory the Great, where the emphasis lies heavily upon the relationship between God and the soul, despite the fact that the bride of Christ is portrayed as the Church: Gregory's view is that the Church is made up of the totality of the human race from the beginning of the world until the end. Thus, in effect, it is the "soul of mankind," rather than the souls of individual men, that comprises the spouse of Christ.²³ It seems obvious that Gregory detected the basic dissimilarity between the Origenist and ecclesiological readings of the Song, and was trying to find an accommodation between the two. But they are not so easily reconciled. The difference involves more than the opposition between the individual soul and the collectivity or group of souls which make up the number of the saved. For one thing, in the pneumatic reading the virginity of the bride points directly to the asexuality of the soul and all that that implies in Christian gnosis about its sinless condition: its virginal status is the prerequisite for its acceptance by the Bridegroom. For practical purposes, the ecclesiological interpretation makes this concept irrelevant, as it does

¹⁹ See the Commentary on the Song in *Studien zu den Kommentaren Hippolyts zum Buche Daniel und Hohen Liede*, ed. G. N. Bonwetsch (Leipzig, 1897); and Ohly, pp. 15–16.

²⁰ For a full account, see Ohly, pp. 5–63 *passim*.

²¹ *De civitate Dei*, XVII, xx (PL 41.566); cf. Ohly, pp. 46–48.

²² The most important early medieval commentator to further the ecclesiological reading was Bede, whose *Expositionis in Cantica canticorum libri septem* (PL 91.1065–1236) was the standard interpretation of the Song until the end of the eleventh century. Cf. Alcuin's *Compendium in Canticum canticorum* (PL 100.639–64). The ecclesiological reading of the bridal metaphor dominated English religious thought in the Anglo-Saxon period.

²³ *Super Cantica canticorum expositio*, i (PL 79.478); cf. Ohly, p. 60.

not stipulate that individual members of the virginal Church actually be virgins. Second, as the two readings proceed from entirely different sources, the gnostic impulse on the one hand and normative Hebrew thought on the other, they express (as one might expect) widely divergent, perhaps even incompatible notions of the relationship in which God is thought to stand with His people. The Jewish conception of a nation wedded to God describes a public, covenantal relationship, while the *sponsa* motif in Christian gnosis is concerned with a spiritual bond of union that is private, personal, and ultimately mystical.

The other momentous development in the metaphor of the bride was the gradual movement toward a purely "monialic" meaning, in which the *sponsa* was defined simply as the virgin woman dedicated to Christ. Strongly anti-docetist in their Christology, the Fathers of the Latin West were less inclined to look upon the Bridegroom of the Song as the gnostic Word, as had Origen, than as the Man-God Christ. It was a view which demanded at least the acknowledgement of his human sexuality, something which henceforward made it inappropriate to apply the idea of nuptials to the spiritual relationship between the monk and Christ. Tertullian is the first to subscribe to this interpretation. In *De oratione* Christ is portrayed specifically as the Bridegroom of those virgins and holy women who have dedicated their lives to chastity.²⁴ Cyprian applies the bridal idea almost exclusively to female virgins in his *De habitu virginum*, warning them against the attempt to make themselves attractive to mortal men.²⁵ Not least among the Fathers who advocate the monialic reading is Jerome, who interprets the Song as a foreshadowing of Christian female asceticism. This point of view appears in his letters on the subject of chastity, especially his epistle *Ad Eustochium*: "Let the seclusion of your chamber ever guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within. If you pray you are speaking to your Spouse."²⁶ Nor was it long before the figurative marriage between Christ and the virginal woman or nun began to be treated, in its ceremonial aspects, like a real marriage. As early as the fourth century Ambrose reports that the rite for the consecration of virgins was similar to that used in the actual nuptial ceremony.²⁷ In the *Sacra-*

²⁴ Cap. xxii, (*PL* 1.1290-98); cf. *Liber unus ad uxorem*, iv (*PL* 1.1392-94).

²⁵ *PL* 4.451-78. See Roy J. Deferrari, ed., *Saint Cyprian: Treatises* (New York, 1958), pp. 31-52, esp. 34, 50.

²⁶ *Ep.* xxii, 25, trans. F. A. Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, Loeb Classical Library (New York, 1933), p. 109.

²⁷ *De virginibus*, II, i-iii (*PL* 16.219-24); *De institutione virginis*, XVII, civ-cxiv (*PL* 16.333-36). Cf. *Sacramentarium Leonianum*, xxx (*PL* 55.129).

mentarium Gregorianum the nuptial veiling of a virgin was performed both for the bride of Christ and the bride of a man. The custom continued into medieval practice, and can be observed in the profession rites for nuns used throughout Christendom.²⁸

The importance of distinguishing between these various interpretations of the *sponsa Christi* motif will become apparent when we consider the revival of epithalamian mysticism in the twelfth century. But to shed more light on the relevance of that phenomenon to traditional monastic thought, it will be useful first to examine the role which marriage itself – the ground of the nuptial metaphor – occupied in Christian gnosis.

2. *Encratism and Marriage*

The application of *sponsa* imagery to the professed nun was seldom left unsupported by an ancient mainstay of Christian thought on sexual questions, the idea that there were three grades of perfection available to believers, each defined by the degree of asexuality it demonstrated. Except for the periods of the persecutions, when martyrs were often accorded the highest place, the triple hierarchy was made up of virgins, widows, and the married; and from the beginning all three categories included both male and female Christians.²⁹ Like the concept of the *syzygia*, that of three *status* of perfection is ultimately of gnostic origin. Normative Judaism knew nothing of the idea, and testimony that it formed a part of the creed of almost every pagan gnostic sect is abundant. Irenaeus and Tertullian affirm that most divided mankind into three categories, the “spirituals,” the “psychics,” and the “materials,” and that this division (with these designations) was the usual one throughout the period of gnostic florescence, the second century.³⁰

²⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery*, trans. N. D. Smith, 2 vols. (New York, 1965), II, 307. For the virginal nuptials of nuns in the Gallican usage, see Louis Duchesne, *Christian Worship*, trans. M. L. McClure, 4th English ed. (London, 1912), p. 426. The most important statement of the monialic view in pre-Conquest England is Aldhelm's *De laudibus virginitatis*, written for Abbess Hildelid of Barking (PL 89.103–162). For the influence of Aldhelm's work see Sr. Mary of the Incarnation Byrne, *The Tradition of the Nun in Medieval England* (Washington, D.C., 1932), pp. 25–40, 65–67.

²⁹ For a useful survey of the history of the three grades of perfection, see Bernards, pp. 40–44.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, I, vii, 5 (PG 7.517–20); Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, xvii–xviii (PL 2.608–10). The division generally conformed to

It is clear that the three-fold hierarchy among the gnostics was based upon absolute contempt for sexuality. According to the "Naassene Exegesis," for example, that of a second-century sect, sexual intercourse was "the work of swine and dogs," something only men of the lowest or carnal class indulged in. No carnal man could enter heaven, nor any "psychic," for the house of God was reserved for "spirituals" alone. Furthermore, "those who come there must put on the wedding garments and all become bridegrooms, made more masculine by the virginal spirit."³¹ In this version the perfect class, the spirituals (or *pneumatikoi*) are distinguished by their achievement of perfect asexuality, symbolized here by the nuptial imagery favored by the gnostic sects. Ptolemaeus, a follower of the gnostic Valentinus, divided men into three classes as well: the carnal, for whom there is no hope of salvation; the psychic, who might be saved through faith and application to their devotions; and the pneumatic, whose natural purity and *gnosis* insure their return to the level of divine existence.³²

Almost precisely the same differentiation between levels of perfection on the basis of the degree of estrangement from the corporeal is to be found in Christian gnosis, along with the occasional implication that only those "spirituals" who have shown themselves capable of a life of virginity will belong to the class of the chosen. The apologist Justin holds for this hierarchy in his *Apologia prima pro christianis*.³³ Origen incorporates the idea into his first homily on the Song; there the bride is said to represent the rank of the perfected, while the men in company of the Bridegroom are seen as the psychics, and so on.³⁴ And Methodius of Olympus seems to believe that it is *only* the perfect – the virginal – who together constitute the bride of Christ, or the Church.³⁵ Still, the ranking of Christians in classes did not go

the Platonic division of human nature into spirit, soul, and body. Musurillo, *The Fathers*, adds that "Most such systems have three tiers of supramundane beings descending from the Godhead" as well, although some gnostic sects saw just two ungenerated beings, the Father and a feminine principle, e.g. Sophia.

³¹ Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, V, viii, 5–6, trans. Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 113.

³² Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, I, vi (PG 7A.504–12), trans. Grant, *Gnosticism*, pp. 175–76.

³³ *Apologia*, I, xxix (PG 6.373).

³⁴ Ed. Lawson, pp. 267–68. Cf. PG 14.293–301.

³⁵ *Symposium*, III, viii, pp. 66–67. But Musurillo argues (pp. 201–02, n. 40) Methodius really means the Christian community is made up of the perfect and imperfect alike, excluding only carnal men who live according to the body alone. In the early Church postponement of baptism until late in life and the establishment of a catachumen class fulfilled the gnostic-inspired need to

without strong opposition in the patristic period. Jovinian, the celebrated foe of Jerome, held the view that virginity was no more meritorious a way of life than marriage, and that all Christians would receive the identical reward in heaven despite their sexual status on earth. Jovinian argued that to oppose marriage was tantamount to Manichaeism, and that if all were to become virgins the human race would perish. Jerome replied contemptuously, voicing the traditional belief that asexuality, above all else, constitutes the mark of Christian perfection.³⁶ Indeed, the Church's retention in one form or another of the concept of levels of perfection remains one of the surest ties between gnosticism and Christianity.

Asexuality as a gauge of election in Christian gnosis bears further enquiry. During the first centuries of the Church, the ceremony of initiation into the Christian mysteries was closely associated with the maintenance of perfect chastity. The act of coition was thought contrary not just to the priestly office, but to baptism itself.³⁷ The connection between virginity and the significance of adopting Christianity is a particularly close one in the teachings of some of the Fathers we have consulted before. In the *Symposium* Methodius categorically identifies chastity with the *gratia Christi*, the new dispensation. Since the Mosaic law was not sufficient to free men from corruption, Christ was sent to bring chastity to the world; he "armed the flesh with the ornament of virginity."³⁸ The same idea is implied in the statement of Origen on the practice of observing birthday celebrations. In his commentary *On Levites* he writes that Christians should not only not celebrate their natural birthdays, but should look upon them with disgust, since they are the anniversaries of the contamination of the soul with flesh. If Christians want to celebrate a day of birth, they should honor the day of their baptism, on which

preserve a spiritual "upper class"; see Runciman, pp. 171-80. Later only monasticism maintained the concept of a spiritual aristocracy, as reflected in the comment of Athanasius: "There are two Christian lives and ways of conducting oneself. One is mediocre and adapted to the tendencies of human life: the married state; the other, angelic and apostolic and incomparably higher: the state of virginity and of monastic life" (qu. in Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, pp. 63-64).

³⁶ *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, xli (PL 23, 282); and see John G. Nolan, *Jerome and Jovinian*, Catholic University Studies in Sacred Theology, Second Series, 97 (Washington, D.C., 1956), p. 43.

³⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 26-28. Cf. Müller, *Ehelosigkeit*, and A. Vööbus, *Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951).

³⁸ Logos X, i, pp. 140-42. Elsewhere it is asserted that the coming of the Word, "did not completely abolish procreation" (II, i, p. 49). It is interesting that such a concession needed to be made at all.

they once again took up the pure and untrammelled life of the spirit.³⁹ Jerome would also identify life under the New Law with the triumph of virginity. In his letter to Eustochium he writes that death entered the world through the sin of Eve, but that life returns to men through the virginity of Mary. He shares with Methodius the concept that Christianity marks a final stage in the moral evolution from the Old Law: at first after the Fall only a few men were continent, but with the virginity of Mary – and what it signifies – all human beings might again presume to that gift.⁴⁰ In view of what we have learned about the doctrinal congruity between Christian gnosis and heterodox gnosticism, it is not remarkable to find that this rather stringent position on continence is the mirror image, though somewhat less sharply articulated, of the view of the gnostic heretics. Virginity was for them a prerequisite for initiation into the mysteries of their faith. The arch-heretic Marcion felt that since marriage and physical generation aided the Prince of Darkness in his work, the baptized Marcionite could have no earthly partner; he could only be married to Christ.⁴¹ Some contemporary apocryphal works, gnostic in spirit, contained the notion that marriage makes salvation impossible. These continued to be read as devotional material by orthodox Christians even as late as the fifth century.⁴² Wherever there was rigorous application of the gnostic principle asexuality remained a condition for salvation. As Karl Müller writes, “Da aber die Reinerhaltung des Fleisches auch die des Siegels, d.h. der Taufe ist, so muss man folgen: wer die Taufe übernimmt, übernimmt damit zugleich die Verpflichtung zum jungfräulichen Leben.”⁴³ Gnostic baptism remedied the most starkly fundamental of the last things, death; the recipient was raised to the level of eternal life, but only through a complete renunciation of the corporeal. In effect, the baptized person is delivered from physical death by disclaiming the fact of his physical sexuality. Even after orthodox Christianity had long since ceased entertaining the notion that celibacy was necessary for membership in the Church, the correlation between sexuality and the sovereignty of death remained implicit in monasticism’s insistence on the ascetic cultivation of physical purity.

It is not surprising that Christian gnosis did not extend itself in

³⁹ *De Leviticum*, VIII, iii (PG 2.494-96).

⁴⁰ *Ep.* XXII, xxi (PL 22.407-09).

⁴¹ See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, III, iv (PG 8.1129-44); and Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem*, I, xxix (PL 2.306-08).

⁴² See Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ *Ehelosigkeit*, p. 16.

any endeavor to provide the institution of marriage with theological dress comparable to that bestowed on virginity. For marriage, which, in the extreme view, generated the spreading stain of new corporeal existence, was antithetical to the character of original (and eschatological) innocence. While opinions on marriage in the tradition range from condemnation to grudging tolerance, nowhere does one find any admission that it deserves the same degree of theological consideration as virginity. Correspondingly, in eastern churches during the second and third centuries especially, the state of marriage underwent an inevitable degradation. The practice of celibacy by the baptized Christian was the mark of his inclusion among the elect, and at times there was doubt about whether a married person could be saved. Around the year 170 Dionysius, bishop of Knossos, wrote to his fellow bishop Pinytus, reproaching him for "requiring the heavy yoke of virginity to be laid upon the faithful."⁴⁴ For his part, Origen believed that those who performed the sexual act in marriage were not capable of the fullness of the Christian life.⁴⁵ Attempts by some Fathers to defend the spiritual value of marriage were destined to remain half-hearted, for the fact is that in the early centuries the Church saw true perfection only in *enkrateia* or continence.⁴⁶ Methodius of Olympus is a "strict constructionist" when he deals with the scriptural *locus classicus* over the counsel to virginity, I Cor. vii.1-2, 6:

... It is good for man not to touch woman.

Yet, for fear of fornication, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. . . .

But this I say by way of concession, not by way of commandment.

Methodius interprets Paul to mean that men are commanded by God to a life of perfect chastity, but that marriage is permitted (only) by way of indulgence.⁴⁷ Perhaps the best evidence virginity was

⁴⁴ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV, xxiii, 7 (PG 20.384-88), trans. in Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ *In Numeros homilia*, XXIII, iii (PG 12.748-49).

⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 27, 29-30.

⁴⁷ *Symposium*, III, xi-xii, pp. 68-71. Musurillo (p. 203, n. 56) calls the passage "a complete distortion of the obvious sense of the Pauline text" and notes that "Methodius curiously takes celibacy as the commandment." The editor disregards the fact that Methodius writes in a tradition which virtually equates virginity and Christianity; the concept of marriage as a dispensation only is entirely consistent. For later, despite St. Paul's indulgence to virgins to marry, Methodius interprets him to mean: "Nonetheless, even though you become impatient with the burden of chastity and change to marriage, I

thought to be the distinguishing mark of the Christian lies in the condemnations of encratism by the representatives of orthodoxy, for the strength of the attacks indicates how widespread the problem was. For example, in a council of Gangral in Paphlagonia, Bishop Eustathius of Sebasteia was condemned in 343 for condoning such excesses among the faithful as the total rejection of marriage and the shunning of those who engaged in intercourse (for whom no hope of salvation was held out), desertion of one's spouse and children, and even female transvestitism.⁴⁸ To be sure, some of the Fathers are tolerant of normal sexuality. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, one of the greatest admirers of virginity, refuses to permit anyone to censure marriage or those who feel they must practice it.⁴⁹ There is no question, however, that the married state was generally held to be decidedly inferior to a life of virginity.

One intriguing phenomenon of the earliest Christian centuries serves to illustrate the point further, and provides a backdrop for viewing both the makeup of early medieval monasteries and certain developments in female spirituality in the twelfth century. It is the practice of what amounted to a virginal marriage in certain ascetical communities made up of both male and female celibates. The Christian concept of a sexless nuptial relationship may owe something to the Jewish institution of the Therapeutae, the contemplative community made up of both sexes living together in perfect continence, similar in that respect to certain Essene communities of male and female anchorites.⁵⁰ In the early Church, before the formal institution of eremitic communities, that is, before about the middle of the fourth century, those interested in practicing asceticism often did so without withdrawing from the world. Rather, both male and female ascetics joined together and established something like a familial relationship in a single home. The pseudo-Clementian epistles *Ad virgines* assert that such a portion of the Church lived in a "spiritual marriage" as brothers and sisters.⁵¹ Another practice, widespread before the founding of convents for women, was the introduction of female virgins into the protection and guidance of male ascetics who

think it will be advantageous for you to control your carnal inclinations and not to abuse your vessels for uncleanness just because you are married." This, in the immediate context of St. Paul's counsel (I Cor. vii.29) "that those who have wives should be as if they had none" (*Symposium*, III, xiii, p. 72).

⁴⁸ See Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁹ *De vita Moysis* (PG 44.420).

⁵⁰ Ford, *Trilogy*, pp. 34-36.

⁵¹ PG I.379-452.

were to oversee their spiritual development.⁵² In Jewish Christianity, according to Fr. Daniélou, there even seems to have existed a formalized relationship of spiritual union between an apostolic priesthood of "prophets" and such women. In the *Didache* these prophets are said to perform the "cosmic mystery of the Church," or what Daniélou takes to be a union of spiritual marriage between man and woman symbolic of the union of Christ with his Church. It is probable, furthermore, that there was much in this mystery rite that was common to similar liaisons in contemporary gnostic sects.⁵³

Abuses called the whole concept severely into question, but the number of attacks upon the practice of cohabitation suggests that it was flourishing. John Chrysostom, a champion of virginity, wrote two works condemning it.⁵⁴ Eusebius of Emesa warns that cohabitation causes the ruin of the soul, and, at the least, raises grave suspicion.⁵⁵ What must have disturbed the critics most was its alarming similarity to the usual gnostic practice of mixing the sexes in furtherance of either radical asceticism or radical libertinism. The sect known as the Adamites (whose name is, of course, significant), mentioned by Epiphanius and Clement of Alexandria, professed to have regained primal innocence; they condemned marriage, worshipped in common, and called their church "paradise."⁵⁶ A group with similar beliefs and rites, the Euchites, appeared in Thrace around 400; male and female members lived together in common, carried on constant prayer, and believed themselves possessed of the special gift of prophecy.⁵⁷ And in the sixth and seventh homilies of Aphraates, a monk of the Syrian church around the middle of the fourth century, a group considering themselves the sons and daughters of Eve are spoken of as having become perfect by ridding themselves of lust and cupidity, the legacy of the first woman.⁵⁸ The concept of cohabitation presumably free from the compulsion of

⁵² For a discussion of the so-called *virgines subintroductae*, see Johannes Leipoldt, *Die Frau in der antiken Welt und im Urchristentum*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1955), pp. 211-16, and Hans Achelis, *Virgines subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII. Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig, 1902).

⁵³ *Theology*, pp. 351-52.

⁵⁴ *Adversus eos qui apud se habent virgines subintroductas*, and *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* (PG 47.495-514, 513-32).

⁵⁵ See Amand de Mendietta, 799.

⁵⁶ Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses*, lii (PG 41.953-60); Clement, *Stromata*, III, iv (PG 8.1129-44). Cf. Augustine, *De haeresibus*, xxxi (PL 42.31) and Theodoret, *Compendium haereticarum fabularum*, I, vi (PG 83.351-54).

⁵⁷ See Müller, *Ehelosigkeit*, p. 23.

⁵⁸ See Francis C. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (London, 1904), pp. 81-95.

physical desire survives well into the Middle Ages. The heterodox gnostic tradition which can be traced from the time of the apostles down to the twelfth-century Cathars of southern France preserves both the theory, and in some recorded cases, the practice of the double monastery.⁵⁹

Within Christian orthodoxy, on the other hand, the feeling against cohabitation effected the separation of the sexes in ascetical practice and even in the Church's liturgy by the end of the fourth century. One commentator has speculated that the division represents a victory, in a sense, for the normative Jewish ethos in Christianity, noting that heretical gnostic sects had liberally permitted women an equal place in their spiritual life, while the Synagogue had always insisted on the segregation of the sexes.⁶⁰ Although the concept of cohabitation died out in Christian orthodoxy, the closely related ideal of *conhospitio* – the conventual life shared by both sexes under the same roof but with restricted contact between them – remained a feature of the monastic tradition throughout the earlier part of the Middle Ages. English monasticism illustrates best the workable adaptation of this ascetic ideal to Anglo-Saxon society.⁶¹ *Conhospitio* never became very practicable in the West, but the ideal which lay behind it, that of a spiritual virginal marriage, was to remain influential.

In the tradition of Christian gnosis, the continuing viability of the ideal of virginal perfection forced normal Christian marriage to accept an inferior role. It was thought to acquire any eminence it may have possessed in large part by virtue of its being a *symbol* of that higher mode of union available to the perfect virgin soul. That is, its principal value was as a metaphor. Gregory of Nazianzen is of this opinion when he says that "Virginity fulfills what marriage merely signifies."⁶² In Platonic terms, the physical marriage act was thus

⁵⁹ Runciman, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Leipoldt, pp. 191–93, 216.

⁶¹ Bede, *Hist. eccl.*, IV, xxiii, ed. Plummer, I, 252–58, celebrates Abbess Hild, who presided over the monastery at Whitby that included both men and women within its walls. Another abbess, Bugga, the daughter of King Centwine, is reported to have ruled over a double monastery in Wessex at the end of the seventh century; see Eleanor Duckett, *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Scholars* (1947; rpt. Hamden, Conn., 1967), p. 67. According to Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963), pp. 84, 87, 94, Queen Aethelburg's foundation at Liming (Kent) had its buildings so arranged as to accommodate both sexes; in documents concerning the monastery there is no distinction between men who took the tonsure and women who accepted the veil.

⁶² *PG* 37.632–33, trans. in Perrin, p. 33.

but a bed at second remove, a poor corporeal representation of an eternal and divine love act between God and the virginal soul. This glance at early Christianity's assessment of the value and meaning of marriage has helped to show that, for the first few centuries after Christ, there was a continuing struggle between the parties of moderation and of encratism over the question of the place of sexuality in the continuing eschatology; for a very considerable time there was some doubt as to which side would win.⁶³ The emphasis of the tradition of Christian gnosis, for its part, was to make the marriage of the soul to Christ virtually the only true marriage available to the believer.

3. *Epithalamian Gnosis*

We have noted previously how virginity was thought the prerequisite for *gnosis* properly so called, the secret knowledge that comes through contemplation or "prophecy." It remains to show the relationship between *gnosis* and the idea of the bride of Christ that existed in the mind of the Christian gnostic tradition. In the gnostic hierarchy of three grades of perfection only the perfect class was felt to be privy to secret mysteries. The lowest grade of mankind, with no knowledge of their divine potential, live according to the flesh alone. The middle class, the psychics, are those for whom salvation is possible but by no means assured. The idea of an increasing hierarchy of *gnosis* was a feature of the semi-Christian system of Valentinus, for example, who saw mankind divisible into three grades according to their reception of the Christian gospel. The carnal men were those who paid no heed to the good news, while the psychic men were the equivalent of the members of the orthodox Christian Church. These latter received the gospel as it was normally preached and kept this faith, but had not the gift of true *gnosis*, for which the gospel was merely a primer.⁶⁴ The idea of a noetic hierarchy is of the essence of gnosticism, of course, but some of the Fathers retain it in their Christian teaching. Clement of Alexandria holds for a three-fold classification of Christians;⁶⁵ and Origen likewise believes souls

⁶³ Consider the assertion of Methodius of Olympus, that without chastity "no one will attain the promised rewards" (*Symposium*, IX, iv, pp. 138-39), in the light of Fr. Leclercq's statement that "the Fathers of ancient monachism, and St. Benedict in particular, do not distinguish between the requirements of perfection and those of salvation" (*The Life of Perfection*, p. vi).

⁶⁴ See Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ *Paedagogus*, III, vii, 8 (PG 8.609-11), and see Walther Völker, *Der wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus* (Berlin, 1952), pp. 549-50.

are to be divided into three grades, according to the degree to which they are free from the ties of matter and thus receptive to the Christian message. The *pneumatikoi* are alone capable of mystical noetic union with the Logos.⁶⁶ Methodius asserts that the perfect Christians are those who have both "embraced the truth with more perception" and "detached themselves from the absurdities of the flesh."⁶⁷

In both the heretical and orthodox strains of a broad gnostic tradition, then, *gnosis* is reserved for the highest, virginal class of believers, and the mystical interconnection between virginity and higher knowledge finds its most profound expression in the idea of *syzygia* or marriage to God. With its connotations of mutual tenderness, frank trust, and total intimacy, the marriage metaphor sheds light on the new awareness of God's being imparted to the soul. Thus does Origen comment on Solomon's supposed allegorical intention in the Song of Songs:

In this he instils into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and the Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love.⁶⁸

Far more important, however, is the sexual content of the *sponsa* metaphor, considered, of course, from the female point of view, for it is that which best approximates the consuming passion of the soul's final union with the Divine. True *gnosis* had nothing to do with self-possessed and dispassionate scrutiny of divine truth. That was the level at which the merely "psychic" believer approached God's historical revelation of Himself. The bridal mystery of the Song could not be entrusted to him until he attained a higher stage of perfection. Origen remarks that the Song comes last among the Solomonic books "that a man may come to it when his manner of life has been purified and he has learnt to know the difference between things corruptible and things incorruptible."⁶⁹ Only when he is thus perfected can the Christian come to know the spiritual response of the bride, a sense of total excitation, a keenly new and beautiful susceptibility to the overmastering puissance of the Divine Being. The final revelation of

⁶⁶ See Jean Daniélou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (New York, 1955), pp. 216-18; and Walther Völker, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes* (Tübingen, 1930), pp. 98-99.

⁶⁷ *Symposium*, III, viii, pp. 66-67.

⁶⁸ Ed. Lawson, p. 41.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

true *gnosis* comes as in sexual rapture. Origen speaks of the Word as kissing the soul; through the act "He enlightens the mind and . . . makes plain whatever is unknown and dark to her."⁷⁰ For her part, the soul prays that "her pure and virginal mind may be enlightened by the illumination and the visitation of the Word of God Himself," for "then she may believe she has received the kisses of the Word of God Himself."⁷¹ Origen's sexual imagery is more graphic in his second homily on the Song, where he exclaims:

How beautiful, how fitting it is to receive a wound from Love! One person receives the dart of fleshly love, another is wounded by earthly desire; but do you lay bare your members and offer yourself to the chosen dart, the lovely dart; for God is the archer indeed.⁷²

Not paradoxically, it is only the virginal who can experience such spiritual transport, for it is virginity which grants total emancipation from the slavery of the flesh. Significantly, Methodius gives the etymology of *parthenia* as *partheia*, that is, "closeness to God," and goes on to explain that "virginity alone makes divine those who possess her and have been initiated into her pure mysteries."⁷³ In fact, the view that virginity brings with it a special intimacy with God was so general among the Fathers that one seldom finds it argued explicitly, but simply repeated as a commonplace fact.⁷⁴

In Christian gnosis, at least before the fourth century, the marriage act often had far more value as a symbol than as an existential reality; ontologically it was at default in comparison to what it was taken to stand for, the passionate union of the virginal soul with God. In the Augustinian West, on the other hand, marriage acquired respectability in its own right, even though the sexual act was never quite freed from disrepute, nor absolved of the charge that it propagates original guilt. This more normative tradition remained committed to the *sponsa Christi* motif as a metaphor standing for the Church, but it should be noted that, in the extremely influential

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62. In his prologue to the *Commentary*, Origen uses the word "passion" (*adama*; LXX: ἐράσθητι; Vulg: *dilige*) to characterize the love the soul has for Wisdom, in reference to Prov. iv.6, 8 and Wisdom viii.2 (ed. Lawson, p. 31).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 61.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 297; cf. p. 198.

⁷³ *Symposium*, VIII, i, p. 105. He interprets the "concubines" of Cant. vi.7, for instance, as the (virginal) Old Testament prophets, in whom God sowed the spiritual seed of salvation, but did not espouse openly (*ibid.*, VII, iv, pp. 100-01).

⁷⁴ See Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, p. 56.

opinion of Augustine, the bride was thought to be the actual *wife* of the Lord in flesh, and not merely his virginal spouse.⁷⁵ The difference is rather crucial. The intent of the use of the sexual metaphor in Christian gnosis – as metaphor only – is partly, at least, to depreciate the real act. But Augustine's ecclesiological reading of the *sponsa* idea serves to validate physical marriage, according to the analogy between human sexual love and the love Christ bears his Church in Eph. v.25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for her." The upshot of this fundamentally anti-gnostic approach to the mystery of sexuality was to lend to the sex act an eminence it could not have had in earlier Christianity. Thus it also raised the repute of marriage, even though Augustine himself remained sceptical of it except as a concession to human frailty. But if the bridal metaphor idealizes physical marriage, can it any longer lend eminence, even primacy, to virginity? Clearly not, and therefore at least one effect of the Augustinian reading of the *sponsa Christi* motif was to create an inconsistency which subtly eroded the position of virginity atop the traditional three-fold hierarchy of perfection.

While the pneumatic or mystical interpretation of the marriage metaphor is dominant in the Christian gnostic tradition, in all of Augustine's writings there seems to be only one reference to the soul as the bride. A close student of the motif would go so far as to state categorically that "the marriage of Christ and the Church is the core of St. Augustine's thought."⁷⁶ The difference between the two readings is fundamental. In Christian gnosis the motif is finally to be viewed as complementary to the use of human sexuality as an etiological metaphor describing the evil of man's fallen condition. The system which opposes a sexual union with God to a sexual commingling with matter or the principle of evil preserves a compelling balance of proportion between the first things and the last things. Marriage to the Word betokens eternal life, while the physical union of earthly marriage actually causes death and delays the millennium. The Augustinian tradition, on the other hand, ignores the logic of this relationship, and particularly the profound eschatological meaning of the metaphor and its referent, virginity. The ecclesiological interpretation prevails, which might perhaps with more justice be termed "mystical," since it is merely a literary con-

⁷⁵ *Enarratio in psalmum xlv*, iii (PL 36.494–95); *In Joannis evangelium tractatus cxxiv*, VIII, iv (PL 35.1452).

⁷⁶ Chavasse, p. 135; cf. Bernards, p. 187.

ceit (of however long and hallowed standing) whose basis in existential reality is surely more difficult to perceive than the grounding of the gnostic metaphor in the rudimentary concerns of birth, copulation, and death.

The opposition between the mystical and corporate meanings of the *sponsa Christi* motif did not disappear at the end of the patristic period, but lived on as something of a point at issue characterizing the divergence of monasticism from the scholastic tradition in the Middle Ages.⁷⁷ The disparity helps clarify a crucial difference between Christian gnosis and the western, Augustinian tradition, for the two interpretations of the Song reflect two fundamentally distinct views of the very role of sexuality in Christianity, and are symptomatic of the division that was eventually to separate cloister and cathedral over the question of clerical celibacy.

We have already taken note of the popularity of the monialic reading of the *sponsa* motif. Generally, the restriction of the bridal idea to the individual female virgin had the effect of diluting the ontological import of the soul marriage and of obscuring its ties with Christian gnosis. As a result, in the early Middle Ages it was more often the concept of the soldier, not that of the bride, to which male monasticism turned for the more authentic expression of its traditional world view. But within the history of the medieval cloister, there was at least one attempt to restore the pneumatic significance to the bridal metaphor, and it proved to be of crucial moment. It occurred, notably, during a period of monastic reform. Fr. Leclercq has shown that such movements generally drew their inspiration anew from the thought of the eastern Fathers, and especially from Origen. He argues that

in every period or place where there was a monastic renewal, there was a revival of Origen. It is true of the Carolingian reform; it is even more definite, or in any case more readily apparent, in the monastic revival of the twelfth century.⁷⁸

It is to this thoroughgoing attempt to reestablish the ancient concept of the soul marriage in the high Middle Ages we turn to now.

⁷⁷ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 106-07, notes that the scholastic commentary on the Song was generally "collective," while the subject of the monastic exegesis was "God's relation with each soul, Christ's presence in it."

⁷⁸ *The Love of Learning*, pp. 118-19; cf. pp. 112-13.

CHAPTER IV

VIRGINITY SEXUALIZED

We have determined that the ideal of virginity, conceived of as ontological asexuality, lies at the center of monastic life, giving life and logic to other themes conventionally associated with the cloister. The medieval monastic ethos, which sprang from Christian gnosis and drew upon that tradition periodically at times of reform, often found itself at odds with an Augustinian theological tradition whose presuppositions it did not share. Had Christian gnosis not been institutionalized in monasticism, it probably would have gone the way of the heterodox gnostic creeds. And it was, it did not manage to survive intact and "incorrupted" its embodiment in the structure of the western Church. Medieval history shows the cloister growing increasingly more receptive to western interpretation of its fundamental beliefs, to the detriment of its own uniqueness as a spiritual culture. It is only at periods of reform that the institution reawakened to the meaning of its gnostic heritage; such a period was the twelfth century. The time was an exciting one for the number of intellectual currents that met there in conflux. One of the most forcible of these, and no small component of the whole intellectual history of the period, was the attempt by monasticism, largely in the persons of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Victorine school of commentators, to expose the original nucleus of meaning implicit in its practice of celibacy. It centered on the realization that the proper significance of monasticism was virginity; the very traditionalism of the movement, however, specifically its close adherence to the Origenist interpretation of the *sponsa Christi* motif, caused it to fail. The reason lay in the fact that the historical circumstances into which the idea was reintroduced had grown wholly unsuitable to such a tactic.

I. The Twelfth-Century Context: Ideas and Influences

A number of contemporary movements in Christian thought, while not all directly relevant to the question of Christian sexuality, bear strongly upon the status of monastic virginity in the twelfth century. The first of these was the official extension of the requirement of celibacy to the clerical Church in the reforms of the eleventh century. The accession of the Benedictine Hildebrand to the papacy in 1073 was followed by a decree outlawing marriage among the secular clergy, something that amounted to the imposition upon the whole Church of the ideal of monastic virginity. It has been fancifully described as an attempt "to turn the world into a monastery with a universal abbot demanding obedience from all rulers."¹ The doctrinal infighting that resulted from Gregory's insistence that the ideal of perfection was now expected of all who took orders marked the starting point of an exciting period in the history of Christian mysticism.² It might be assumed that making virginity the universal standard would have lent a certain eminence to the ideal, but the opposite is true. As perfect chastity came to be expected of all, the air of exclusiveness that had surrounded the practice of virginity in the cloister dissipated. If every rude clerk were henceforth to be admitted to the number of the perfect, what eschatological value remained in the life of the monk? What, indeed, could be said to be extraordinary about it? It appears to have been questions like these that monastic theologians of the twelfth century asked themselves as a result of the blanket extension of virginity to the whole clergy. Their concern eventually prompted some of them to try to redefine that ideal in terms reminiscent of Christian gnosis.

A second contemporary movement was perhaps even more decisive for the way in which virginity came to be understood in the twelfth century. It was the rapid growth of enthusiasm for the so-called "juridical" theory of atonement generated by the publication of the enormously influential treatise *Cur Deus Homo* by Anselm of Canterbury. In essence the theory was hardly new, since a semi-juridical idea of atonement had been proposed by Irenaeus as a defense against Syrian and Egyptian gnosticism, and was developed as a kind of legalistic explanation for the motive of Christ's redemption by Tertullian in the early third century. As formulated by

¹ Norman F. Cantor, "The Crisis of Western Monasticism, 1050-1130," *American Historical Review*, 66 (1960-61), 65.

² See Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, pp. 42-48, esp. p. 44.

Anselm it proposed that moral logic had required Christ to become man, because only a member of the human race could have been able to make satisfactory reparation for the original sin a man had committed. The guilt could be removed, and the "debt" paid, only by one who shared the human nature to which that sin attached:

God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should be perfect God and perfect man.³

Despite the logical and rhetorical balance of this formulation, the effect of the juridical view of atonement was to throw the weight of emphasis upon Christ's humanity, somewhat at the expense of his divinity. His redemptive mission now demanded he possess the fullness of human nature, and this shift, a movement away from a classic view of atonement and a Pantocrater Christ, had the eventual effect of undermining the monastic ideal of virginity. The classic atonement retains its meaning only within the context of a dualistic world view, and we have already noted in our examination of the *miles Christi* motif that virginity was the ethical correlative to the philosophical dualism of monastic ideology. With the growth in popularity of the juridical atonement, the idea that salvation history was to be conceived of as a kind of *agon*, together with the notion that the monk was the soldier of Christ, receded as inevitably as did the concept of *Christus Victor*.

In placing new emphasis upon Christ's humanity, the juridical theory also allowed for an entirely new category of speculation over the meaning of the redemption: the severity of Christ's passion and death seemed the proof of a corresponding intensity in his love for the human race. The suffering Jesus became the centerpiece of medieval piety; the theme was based on the belief that he had undergone the torments of the Passion for the purpose of winning man's love.⁴ The new emphasis marks a severe departure from the more traditional view of his death, one thrown into bold relief by the contrast in general spirit between Bernard of Clairvaux's hymn "O

³ Trans. in S. N. Deane, *Prologium; Monologium; . . . Cur Deus Homo* (La Salle, Ill., 1944), pp. 246-47; cf. *PL* 158.404-07. For the prevalence of the juridical theory in Middle English literature, linked (as it is) with the Augustinian formulation of the Fall from grace, see Evans, *Paradise Lost*, pp. 168-91, esp. pp. 175-78.

⁴ See Rosemary Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 13 (1962), 1-2. For Anselm on the meaning of Christ's passion see *Oratio XX* (*PL* 158.903).

Sacred Head Surrounded” and the much earlier, and much more “classical” *Vexilla regis* of Venantius Fortunatus.⁵ And this “humanization” of Christ allowed for one other extremely important attribution; it permitted the believer to focus on what the unerring fixation upon his divinity had all but obscured, the fact of Christ’s human sexuality. In the semi-docetist point of view of Christian gnosis Christ had been, in effect, almost the equivalent of an aeon or an angel, a virgin and virgin-born; the question of his sexuality had simply not been raised. The Gospel of John pictures Christ as the incarnate Word, and the synoptic gospels ignore his maleness. By the twelfth century, however, the Anselmian view of the atonement had removed the obstacle, as it were, to seeing Christ as a man, both human and male. The importance of this sequence of events is that it opened the way to speaking of Christ in the metaphorical terms of human sexual love. The portrayal of Jesus as the rival with other men for the affections of holy women was a unique by-product of the Anselmian atonement. This “sexualization” of Christ was clearly a step toward revolutionizing the devotion given his death on the cross, but it also portended a significant change in the monastic understanding of virginity. As we shall see, monasticism felt itself constrained to adapt its own view of the atonement to this new understanding of Christ’s person.

A third contemporary movement with significant influence on the monastic ideal of virginity in the twelfth century was the founding of the Cistercian order. While it was Anselm, with his meditations upon the meaning of Christ’s passion, who must be counted “the founder of this new type of ardent and effusive self-disclosure” in spiritual writing, and the figure most responsible for inspiring the “urge towards a greater measure of solitude, of introspection and self-knowledge,” it was actually Cistercian writers who were the “chief agents in turning the thin stream of compassion and tenderness of the eleventh century into a flood.”⁶ Essentially the Cistercian movement was a reformation, a reaction against the increasing worldliness and corruption that had infected the Cluniac form of Benedictine life. Its systematic program of turning inward to search the soul was coupled with a return to pristine ideals as expressed in

⁵ Bernard, *Ad faciendam*, part of *Rhythmica oratio ad unum quodlibet membrorum Christi patientis et a cruce pendentis* (PL 184.1323–24); and Venantius, *Vexilla regis* (PL 88.95–96), e.g.: “Salve ara, salve victima / De passionis gloria / Qua vita mortem pertulit, / Et morte vitam reddidit.”

⁶ Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953; rpt. London, 1967), pp. 217, 222.

the writings of the eastern Fathers and of the founders of monasticism. Robert of Molesne is reported to have urged the new Cistercian order to "Read the acts of Sts. Anthony, Macarius, Pachomius. . . . We are no longer following in the footsteps of our Fathers, the Egyptian monks, of those who lived in the Holy Land or in the Thebaid."⁷ It is not surprising that the Cistercian reform should have focused largely on the concept of asexuality, since what was called for was a reaffirmation of the ideological basis for the cloistered life. It is striking, then, to learn that the writers to whom the Cistercians turned were those who stood most firmly within the Christian gnostic tradition. Not only did they make use of the thought of Origen, but there is also evidence that the order was exempt from the papal ban on the writings of Johannes Scotus Erigena, and that some Cistercians were strongly influenced by his thought.⁸ The most important figure in the movement was, of course, Bernard of Clairvaux, who attempted to revitalize the ideal of monastic virginity through a return to the Origenist interpretation of the Song of Songs. As legitimate as the attempt may have been, it was to fail in its intended effect precisely because of a certain typically monastic aloofness regarding the contingencies of profane time. But before turning to the accomplishment of Bernard, it will be useful to consider one more important idea in twelfth-century thought, one that has immediate relevance to the question of Christian sexuality: Hugh of St. Victor's doctrine of the spiritual marriage.

2. *Victorine Spiritual Marriage*

The definition of the essence of human marriage as a spiritual relationship was not new to the twelfth century, for it is contained in germ in two passages from St. Paul: "But this I say, bretheren, the time is short; it remains that those who have wives be as if they had none"; and, again, "he who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with him" (I Cor. vii.29, vi.17). We have noted the sexless unions between

⁷ Qu. in Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 112-13.

⁸ Bett, p. 190, citing M. Jaquin, "L'influence doctrinale de Jean Scot au début du XIII^e siècle," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* (1907), 104-06. He notes "the striking fact that Isaac de Stella, Garnier de Rochefort, and Alain de Lille . . . were all influenced by Erigena's doctrine"; adding that "Erigena's influence upon mediaeval mysticism, and upon later philosophies, is much more considerable than has been generally allowed." The Cistercians evidently also disregarded Origen's reputation for heretical tendencies; see Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 120-21.

male and female ascetics in earliest Christianity and the stringent encratism that characterized some of the eastern churches. The latter impulse could lead Eusebius of Emesa to urge Christian married couples to abstain from sexual contact altogether, and Athenagoras to suggest that Christians put off marriage until they reach advanced age in order to find a closer union with Christ.⁹ What is novel about the re-emergence of the idea of spiritual marriage in the twelfth century was the occasion that gave rise to it, the vexed question of the nature of the marital bond between the Blessed Virgin and Joseph. It was Mary's virginity that was at issue, but it is noteworthy that Hugh of St. Victor's interest in the problem reveals the same mental habit of *quondam* retrospection that had characterized early patristic thought on the nature of man in Paradise. He focuses on the problem of *libido* in marriage as defined by Augustine, and he agrees with the position that its attendance upon every act of sexual congress since the Fall testifies to the unavoidable transmission of Adam's original guilt.¹⁰

Such is the context in which the question of Mary's relation to Joseph is raised: did not her childhood vow to remain a virgin throughout her life stand in express contradiction to her willingness to engage in marriage with Joseph? The question cast suspicion upon her probity, since a secret refusal of the physical bond would have been a breach of the marriage contract. On the other hand, had Mary intended a normal marriage, she would have been guilty of breaking her sacred vow. What was the answer to this dilemma? According to Hugh of St. Victor the solution lay in determining more clearly the essence of the marriage contract. The high point of his thought on marriage is his identification of the nature of marriage as a spiritual bond, one that involves two souls in a pact of mutual love and regard which has nothing properly to do with coition. This solution, which appears in Hugh's *De beatae Mariae virginitate*, constitutes an acceptable answer to a problem which even Augustine saw but was not able to solve.¹¹ In Hugh's opinion the physical aspects of marriage in the fallen world are totally foreign to the original nature of that union according to God's original plan of creation. The ideal of marriage is actually most fully realized when marriage is *not* physically consummated, for the unavoidably sinful

⁹ For Eusebius, see Amand de Mendieta, 796-98; for Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis*, xxxiii (PG 6.965), and cf. Daniélou, *Theology*, p. 375.

¹⁰ See Augustine, *De bono conjugali*, vi, xviii (PL 40.377-78, 387-88); cf. Isidore of Seville, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, II, xx (PL 83.809-14).

¹¹ PL 176.857-876.

act simply tends to undermine the "union of love" of two human wills acting in perfect consort.¹² This approach to the problem of Mary's virginal marriage both preserves the Augustinian belief that *libido* carries the stain of original guilt, and "saves the appearances" of Mary's relationship to Joseph. On the other hand, of course, it could not but downgrade the physical basis of marriage, and mar attempts to establish the sacramentality of the sexual union.

The relevance of Hugh's interpretation for the monastic ideal of virginity is not far to seek. He makes it clear that the essential sacramentality of marriage (now conceived as a spiritual love-union between two souls) lies in its symbolism of that spiritual conjunction which exists between God and the human soul.¹³ In other words, the ideal or spiritual marriage signifies the same pneumatic union manifested in the Origenist reading of the *sponsa Christi* metaphor. This emphasis constitutes a sharp departure from contemporary thought in the Augustinian tradition, which had increasingly come to hold that *normal* marriage, when it stood for anything, stood for the ecclesiological union of Christ and his Church which Paul speaks of in Eph. v. 21-33. It should be recalled that what had represented the union of Christ and the body of believers in the early Church was the state of *virginal* espousal. It was only after the reaction to encratism that marriage, too, came to be regarded as a symbol of Christ's union with the Church.¹⁴ The whole thrust of Hugh's thought, however, is toward reasserting such an encratic bias into the medieval speculation on marriage, as he implies that not a normal marriage, but precisely an asexual one, best represents Christ's nuptials with the Church. In effect, it is the semi-gnostic "cosmic mystery of the Church" of the *Didache* once again.

Clearly, these ideas are in perfect harmony with traditional monastic thought, for they allow physical sexuality no real place in the life of perfection. They also imply that a genuine marriage contract, real and actual in every respect, could be established between two persons choosing to renounce the flesh entirely, that is, in effect, between two spiritual beings. The essence of the marriage bond was therefore available to those who chose to forsake a human partner in favor of a divine. While it was no doubt Hugh's intention to champion the pneumatic interpretation of the bridal idea, it seems

¹² *PL* 176.859-60, 874.

¹³ *PL* 176.874-76; cf. *De sacramentis*, I, viii, 13 and II, xi, 3 (*PL* 176.314-15, 481-82).

¹⁴ See Schillebeeckx, *Marriage*, II, 308.

in retrospect inevitable that his concept of virginal marriage would have served to popularize the interpretation in which the individual female religious actually takes Jesus as her husband. The Victorine concept of virginal marriage fused the pneumatic reading with the monialic, and raised the combination to a new level of meaning. It also put the marriage to Christ on an equal footing with human marriage, defining both as the same kind of relation. It followed logically that the union with a heavenly spouse had far more to recommend it than marriage with a merely human one.

Much of the devotional literature for women produced in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries contains this line of argument. One of the best examples of the view appears in the treatise on female virginity, *Hali Meidenhad*, a work that provides the thematic keynote to the Katherine Group.¹⁵ The idea of the nun or anchoress as a bride of Christ runs through the whole work, as in the statement that the virgin is "godes spuse, ihesu cristes brude, þe laurdes leofmon" (p. 5). What is more relevant, the treatise seeks to depict Christ as the "worthiest lover" and most handsome husband, who far surpasses the earthly spouse as a provider. The author praises the wise virgin who has been canny enough to choose the far more estimable union with Christ,

se freo of hire self. þat ha nawiht ne þarf of oðer þing þenchen bute
an of hire leofmon wið treowe luue cwemen. for he wile carien for
hire þat ha haued itaken to of al þat hire biheoueð hwil ha riht
luued him wið soðe bileaue. (p. 5)

(so mistress of herself that she need think nought of any other
thing but her lemman, how to please him with true love; for he
will care for her, he that has taken heed of all that she wants, while
she rightly loved him with true faith.)

He goes on to urge the virgin who desires a powerful man to choose Christ, who rules the universe; or if she desires a rich husband, then also Christ, to whom even the poorest spouse is acceptable. And if she would want a handsome husband, she is advised:

¹⁵ Ed. Oswald Cockayne, E.E.T.S. 18 (London, 1866). Further quotations are from this edition. Among the Katherine Group the work most obviously Victorine in spirit is *Sawles Warde*, an adaptation of part of Hugh's *De anima*. See R. M. Wilson, ed., *Sawles Warde*, Leeds School of English Language Texts and Monographs, 3 (Leeds, 1938), p. xxxiii. *Hali Meidenhad*, by contrast, gives every evidence of being an original composition, a fact which makes its preservation of certain elements of Christian gnosis that much more significant.

nim him of hwas wlite beoð awundret þe sunne 7 te mone. upo
hwas nebschaft þe engles ne beoð neuer fulle to bihalden. (p. 39)

(take him at whose beauty the sun and the moon are astonished,
upon whose countenance the angels are never satiated.)

In an effective contrast to the marriage to a heavenly spouse, the author offers a vivid picture of the disadvantages the maiden would encounter in a natural marriage. The negative side of the argument reaches painful proportions, rising at times to outright contempt for marriage and motherhood. Compared to the union with Christ, human marriage is a debasing thralldom for the female:

Nis ha þenne sariliche as ich seide ear akast. 7 in to þewdom
idrahen þat fram se muchel hehschipe 7 se seli freedom schal lihte
se lahe in to a monnes þewdom. (p. 5)

(Is she not, then, as I said before, sorely cast down and drawn into
servitude, who from so high an elevation and so happy a freedom
shall plunge so low into a man's service?)

Whether or not this might be an accurate sociological appraisal of twelfth-century marriage, it has behind it a long and unholy tradition of vilification of the institution which can be traced directly to the encratism in Jerome's *Epistolae* and the *Adversus Jovinianum*, and beyond that to the classical satire of Theophrastus and Juvenal.¹⁶ It is interesting that arguments once employed as negative evidence over the question "utrum vir sapiens uxorem ducat" appear in the twelfth-century *Hali Meidenhad* in support of the liberated woman.

The most telling arguments in favor of marriage to Christ are drawn from life, however, and these tend to be cynical. The virgin is told that, in the long run, her vow to remain unattached will profit her more, since the loss of her virginity would involve both a spiritual decline and a decrease in social standing. In answer to the argument (itself rather mordant), that the sexual act is the price a woman must pay to keep a male provider, *Hali Meidenhad* asserts that coition is selling one's maidenhead at too low a price! (pp. 5-7, 27). To a formidable list of moral deficiencies that attend the sexual act are added all the quotidian cares that afflict the married woman: the constant getting and spending, the ceaseless lust of one's husband,

¹⁶ See David S. Wiesen, *St. Jerome as a Satirist*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 34 (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 113-65.

the pangs of childbirth and child-rearing (pp. 25, 29, 31, 35).¹⁷ The familiar description of the harried housewife completes the picture, a vivid piece of genre art drawn with disagreeable realism:

And hwat gif ich easki zet þat hit þunche egede hu þat wif stonde
þat ihereð hwen ha cumeð in hire bearn screamen Seoð þe cat at
the fliche. 7 te hund at te huide. Hire cake bearneð o þe stan. 7 hire
calf sukeð. þe croh eorneð ipe fur 7 te cheorl chideð. (pp. 37-39)

(And what if I ask besides, that it might seem odious, how the wife stands who hears when she comes in her bairn screaming, sees the cat at the flitch and the hound at the hide, her cake burning on the stone hearth and her calf sucking all the milk, the crock running into the fire and the churl chiding.)

The general cheapening of earthly marriage in favor of a spiritual union with Christ is characteristic of the devotional literature of the period, but *Hali Meidenhad* seems unmatched at times in the virulence with which it contemns the physical bond. It is important to notice that this approach does not simply propose marriage to Christ as *analogous* to earthly marriage, but as a much more preferable version of the same relationship. Echoing Hugh of St. Victor is the persistent implication that the essence of the marriage contract is ideally virginity itself, defined as a spiritual union of two wills joined in pure and unselfish love. *Libido*, the quintessential form of concupiscence in Augustine's view of sex, is exactly antithetical to the nature of pure love, since it is self-seeking, solipsistic, and oriented toward possession. In *Hali Meidenhad* the sexual act is basically selfish:

is al to muchel lauerddom 7 meistrice þrinne þis cunde imerred tus
þat dð clepeð þus ti faderes hus. þat is te lust of leccherie þat
rixleð þer wið inne. (p. 11)

(There is all too much lordliness and mastery therein, in this nature thus marred, which David thus calls "thy father's house," that is, the lust of lechery that rules therein.)

¹⁷ In the same tradition of *deprecatio partus* Osbert of Clare catalogues the effects pregnancy has upon a woman's body in a letter to his niece Cecilia: "intumescit uterus, pallestit facies, vena grossescit, cavantur oculi, macrescunt digiti, ubera distenduntur. . . ." See *The Letters of Osbert of Clare*, ed. E. W. Williamson (London, 1929), *Ep.* xxii, p. 93. Pursuing the same theme elsewhere (*Ep.* xl, pp. 136-37), he begins with the general statement, "Magna differentia est inter caelestes nuptias et terrenas," then proceeds to paint a truly dismal and noxious picture of earthly marriage in contrast with the marriage to Christ.

An ideal marriage would be devoid of this form of cupidity, but only the spiritual marriage to Christ, achieved through perfect virginity, can satisfy this requirement. Although the Victorine concept of spiritual marriage is indebted to the Augustinian categories of thinking on sexuality, and seems outwardly to have little to do with the gnostic view of sexuality as ontological contamination, it is by no means cut off from the monastic ideal of virginity. The two traditions meet in twelfth-century spirituality in the concept of the bride of Christ.

3. *St. Bernard and the Song of Songs*

As far as the later medieval period is concerned, it was Bernard's *Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles* that effectively reestablished the worship of Christ as the Bridegroom of the soul. The Song, together with numerous commentaries upon it, had long been a conventional part of monastic spiritual reading, but a great resurgence of interest in it took place in the eleventh, and particularly the twelfth centuries. Most of the medieval copies of Origen's commentary on the Song were done during this period.¹⁸ And it is remarkable that the twelfth century produced more commentaries on the Song than had all of previous Christendom.¹⁹ Fr. Leclercq explains the reason for this burst of enthusiasm:

what we know of eschatological desire in milieus consecrated to a life of prayer, sufficiently explains their special affection for the Canticle of Canticles. What they saw in it above all is the expression of that desire. . . . The Canticle of Canticles is a contemplative text: *theoricus sermo*, as St. Bernard would say; . . . with its ardent language and its dialogue of praise, it was more attuned than any other book in Sacred Scripture to loving, disinterested contemplation.²⁰

Of course this appraisal has reference mainly to monasteries for men. In the preface to his *Sermons* Bernard writes, "It is fitting,

¹⁸ Ohly, p. 7; cf. p. 306. Werner Jaeger (p. 108) notes that Origen "contributed to an incalculable degree to the development of the religious life and to the formulation of the theological consciousness of later monasticism."

¹⁹ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 118; cf. Ohly, pp. 134-35.

²⁰ *The Love of Learning*, pp. 107-08; the Song is "the poem of the pursuit which is the basis for the whole program of monastic life: *quaerere Deum*." An anonymous treatise on the Benedictine Rule printed by Leclercq as Appendix I, pp. 331-32, goes so far as to call the Canticle "the complement of the monks' rule."

brethren, that I should speak to you. . . ."²¹ It should not escape our attention, therefore, that the twelfth-century popularity of the *sponsa Christi* motif was very decidedly something more than another illustration of the feminism of that period.²² Bernard no doubt considered he was speaking less to men than to *man*, to human nature in the person of the male religious. We have seen, however, that before the twelfth century the metaphor was most often restricted in its application to individual female virgins. In fact, by the time Bernard wrote the bridal motif was established as a symbol of the spiritual relationship between the nun and a man-God Christ whose humanity had already begun to play a role in the significance of that union. The question arises, then, why Bernard (who could not have been unaware of this meaning), should have chosen precisely that motif to express the intimacy of the wholly spiritual union of contemplation.

The answer lies partly in the currency the Origenist or pneumatic interpretation of the Song enjoyed in male monasticism at this time. Bernard's interest in that reading typifies a general attempt on the part of the institution to return to a more authentic understanding of virginity in the monastic economy. It was a revival of the desire for mystical union with the Godhead, and it should be added that the mysticism of the bridal idea was still the only sort available in the West in Bernard's age.²³ Bernard himself was exceptionally taken with the general tenor of Origen's approach, in respect of both its psychological penetration and its florid style.²⁴ And, like Origen before him, he intended the Song be read only as allegory. He writes that

²¹ *Saint Bernard on the Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (London, 1952), p. 21. Italics added. Cf. *PL* 183.779-1198.

²² The "second founder" of Cistercianism also took an active interest in female monasticism; see his *Epistolae* to professed women, nos. 113-15, 391 (*PL* 182.256-62, 597-98). The female Cistercian movement spread nearly as rapidly through western Europe as did the male. Henri Daniel-Rops, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (New York, 1964), pp. 212-13, notes that by 1200 there were 860 houses of Cistercian nuns, 700 of them outside France. On the mystical character of the movement in the thirteenth century, see: Simone Roisin, "L'efflorescence cistercienne et le courant féminin de piété au XIII^e siècle," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 39 (1943), 342-78; and Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages*, trans. S. P. Jacques, 4 vols. (Westminster, Md., 1953), II, 80-92.

²³ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 15, notes "the almost complete absence, in monastic tradition, of the pseudo-Dionysius, who had . . . little or no influence until the twelfth century."

²⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 119-21. For the indebtedness of Bernard's *Sermons* to the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, see Ohly, pp. 141-42.

This commingling of the Word with the soul is purely spiritual, and has nothing corporeal or concrete in it. The rapture of the pure soul into God, and God's most blest descent into the soul, these constitute a union which takes place in the spirit.²⁵

Not surprisingly, however, what had been meant for male virgins allegorically was adopted in a provocatively literal sense by women.²⁶ Though well acquainted with the identification of the *sponsa* with the nun, Bernard nevertheless thought to transcend that interpretation by adopting the doctrine sacred to Christian gnosis. He did not anticipate interference from this more westernized view of the nuptial metaphor because he evidently considered the Origenist definition to include it. But the popularization of his reading actually resulted in an apotheosis of the woman's marriage to Christ, such that, eventually, the Christian-gnostic soul marriage became almost the exclusive province of female virgins. This second expropriation of the bridal idea by the female sex was uniquely important from a historical standpoint, for in the twelfth century the *sponsa Christi* metaphor attracted to itself the suggestive dress of a thinly veiled literary eroticism which was to characterize the testimony of female mystics throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance.

Bernard's revival of Origen's reading of the Song shows remarkable fidelity to the Christian gnostic tradition on sexuality. Perhaps the most important element in his commentary is the idea that virginity restores the image of God in the soul, or that it is, in effect, that image. According to both writers this is the essence of the mystical and ontological union of the soul with God.²⁷ Such a union imparts the sense of the continual presence of God, while transforming the higher faculties of the soul in such a way as to give them an intuitive grasp of the divine essence. An important feature of Bernard's treatment of the Song is the emphasis on this kind of *gnosis*, which begins with contemplation of one's virginal likeness to God:

²⁵ *St. Bernard*, p. 90.

²⁶ Since Bernard wrote for monks and not nuns, the suggestion that he might have been trying to counter the effects of a still-embryonic tradition of courtly love poetry upon innocent and impressionable female virgins – by fighting fire with fire – is untenable. For the latter thesis, see Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion, rev. ed. (New York, 1956), p. 110.

²⁷ For a discussion of the traditional doctrine of the "image" in monastic thought, see Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 275–77.

The knowledge of yourself is thus the first step towards the knowledge of God; He will become visible to you through His own Image which is being renewed in you, the while you are being transformed from splendour unto splendour.²⁸

Another factor in the Bernardine exegesis is the description of the spiritual union in the passionate language of sexual intercourse between man and wife. The bond exists in the intimacy and conformity of two wills. Speaking of the divine love-affair, he asks

What could be lovelier than this conformity? What more to be desired than this charity, which makes the soul, content no longer with a human master, boldly approach the Word Himself, cleave to Him and consult Him about everything with a quickness of perception proportionate to the intensity of her desire?

Or again, Bernard characterizes the contemplative life of the soul as a kind of erotic ecstasy:

It is when the soul is ravished by the Word's unutterable sweetness that she is thus stolen by Him from herself, as it were, in order that she may enjoy Him. . . . And truly the mother is happy in her offspring; but the Bride in the arms of her Spouse is happier still. Dear indeed are the children, the pledges of His love; but she prefers His kisses. . . . Sweet intercourse it is, but brief and rare.²⁹

In a proper reading of Bernard the mystical marriage is predicable of both men and women, since the soul admits of no sexuality. The concept was a prominent one among the intellectual equipment of the Cistercian movement, and was carried nearly everywhere Cistercian influence reached.³⁰ A twelfth-century *Epithalamium between Christ and the Virgins* by a monk of Hirgau, preserved in a Cistercian manuscript, adopts the pneumatic reading of the bridal idea.³¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach speaks of a certain old monk of Villers who prophesied near his death that he would attend the "marriage supper"; when he expired, his soul was borne by angels to "the heavenly bride-chamber of the lamb and was brought to the embrace of the

²⁸ *St. Bernard*, pp. 109-110. William of St. Thierry writes in the *Prologus to De natura corporis et anima* (PL 180.695), that *nosce teipsum* is one important teaching implicit in the Song of Songs.

²⁹ *St. Bernard*, pp. 257-58, 266.

³⁰ See Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 106. See also C. H. Talbot, "Die Entstehung der Predigten über Cantica Cantorum," in *Bernhard von Clairvaux, Mönch und Mystiker: Internationaler Bernhardkongress, Mainz 1953*, ed. Joseph Lortz (Wiesbaden, 1955), pp. 202-14.

³¹ *Analecta hymnica mediæ ævi*, ed. Guido M. Dreves, 55 vols. (Leipzig, 1886-1922), L, 499-506.

bride-groom."³² Cistercianism's entry into English religious life saw a large number of monasteries established within a remarkably short period; along with their architecture and a reformed Benedictine regimen, the monks brought with them the epithalamian mysticism of St. Bernard. The native form of English Benedictinism, however, had never used the *sponsa Christi* motif in reference to male virgins. As we have noted, the ecclesiological approach to the bridal metaphor remained in force in early English thought through the writings of Bede, Alcuin, and Aelfric.³³ And perhaps the more popular interpretation, indebted to Aldhelm's *De laudibus virginitatis*, was the one that restricted the meaning to the female religious, and specifically to the large number of nuns and professed holy women Anglo-Saxon Christianity produced.³⁴ One might have guessed, then, how readily an overtly mystical reading of the nuptial imagery of the Song would have attached itself to this strong native tradition of feminine spirituality. By its advocacy of the Origenist interpretation the Cistercian movement was soon to find itself in subtle conflict with the somewhat more western-oriented English monasticism. The differences between English and continental monastic forms, of course, ran deeper than their views of the Song of Songs. Fr. Leclercq speaks of "a certain diversity in monasticism itself," and would differentiate between the Anglo-Saxon monasteries and those of France and Italy especially: "The monasteries of the first group were a part of the hierarchy of the Church. In England particularly, several were Cathedral monasteries that had played a part in the conversion of England."³⁵

The pneumatic interpretation is manifest in female devotional literature produced under Cistercian influence in England. In the section of the *Ancrene Riwle* on "Love," the author (whose references to St. Bernard are scattered throughout the rule), speaks of the sinner's reconciliation with Christ:

³² *The Dialogue on Miracles*, IX, xxxi, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. S. Bland, 2 vols. (London, 1929), II, 134.

³³ See Ohly, pp. 64-72. Interestingly, M. J. Swanton, "The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration," *Anglia*, 82 (1964), 269-90, makes a case for interpreting those two poems as complementary poetic expressions of the ecclesiological meaning of the sponsa metaphor. Cf. W. F. Bolton, "The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration Revisited," *Archiv*, 205 (1968-69), 341, who points out that the two Old English poems use only passages from the Song without erotic content.

³⁴ Aldhelm, *De laudibus virginitatis* (PL 89.103-62). For examples of the monialic interpretation in Bede's *Hist. eccl.*, see III, viii; III, xxiv; IV, xix, ed. Plummer, pp. 142-44, 178-79, 243-46.

³⁵ *The Love of Learning*, p. 237.

ne beo neuer his leofmon uor hored mid so monie deðliche sunnen. so sone so heo kumeð aȝean to him, he makeð hire neouwe meiden. . . . So muchel is bitweonen godes neihlechunge 7 monnes to wummon, þet monnes neihlechunge makeð of meiden wif. and god makeð of wif meiden. Restituit inquit iob in integrum. Gode werkes 7 treowe bileaue. þeos two þinges beoð meidehod ine soule.³⁶

(in no matter how many deadly sins His lemman has prostituted herself, as soon as she returns to Him, He makes her a virgin again. . . . So great is the difference between God's approach, and that of a man to a woman, that that of a man turns a virgin to a wife, while God makes of a wife a virgin. "He has restored me to the whole," says Job. Good works and true faith, these two things are virginity in the soul.)

The sexual terminology of this passage is the vernacular equivalent of Bernard's stylistic embellishments upon the simple bridal metaphor in his *Sermons*. The essential point is that *neihlechunge* with God restores the soul's virginity, that is, its ontological integrity. It restores it, in other words, to the condition of *meidehod* required for its final union with Him. Despite the obvious appeal to a female readership it is the union of the individual soul with the Word that is the primary meaning here. The author is well aware of the core of Origenist significance in the Cistercian ideal.

The tendency was always present, however, to reduce the *sponsa Christi* motif to something rather less exalted than Bernard had intended, a tendency born of three distinct but related factors whose peculiar influence upon Middle English devotional literature for women we shall turn to presently. First and most important was the dominant place of the monialic idea in English thought. Second was the general celebration of the humanity of Christ, and particularly of his sexuality, which followed upon the whole-hearted acceptance of the Anselmian theory of juridical atonement. The third factor was the doctrine of spiritual marriage as refined by Hugh of St. Victor; by raising its spiritual aspect to the first rank in importance he offered a substantial philosophical basis on which to "mysticize" the marriage of the individual nun to Christ. The collective force of these intertwined phenomena caused a deflection of the Origenist meaning of the *sponsa Christi* motif, really nothing more than an

³⁶ *The English Text of the Ancrone Riwe* (Cotton Ms. Nero A. XIV), ed. Mabel Day, E.E.T.S. 225 (London, 1952), p. 180. For additional references to the pneumatic character of the marriage to Christ in the *Riwe*, see pp. 4, 129, 140, 167. Further quotations from the *Riwe* are from this edition.

attenuation of the ontological meaning Bernard had been trying to revive. They were to combine with intellectual cross-currents in the secular realm – such as courtly love – to create a situation in which it became unthinkable to speak of the monk as the “bride of Christ.”³⁷

4. *The Katherine Group and Erotic Spirituality*

Nowhere is this effect more manifest than in the Katherine Group, where it is clear that Christ has undergone a substantial change in character. First, an entirely new concentration upon his humanity, considered as the means of our redemption, signals a departure from the classic view of Christ’s salvific act. Under the older scheme the Christ to whom the nun espoused herself had been a transcendent and unapproachable Word of God; in the Katherine Group the Bridegroom generally becomes a vulnerable and afflicted suffering Jesus. In *Saint Katherine* the holy virgin is careful to be explicit about the part played by Christ’s humanity in the overthrow of the fiends:

Nes nawt iteiet to þe treo
þer he deide upon, to drahen
buten fleschtimber.
Ah swa he, wiðuten woh,
adweschte 7 adun warp
þene wiðerwine of helle,
mon, i monnes cunde.³⁸

(There was nothing bound to the tree
that he died upon, to suffer,
but corporeal matter.
But thus he, without wrong,
as man, in human nature,
overthrew and cast down
the hellish adversary.)

Because of the way Christ appears in the sources Katherine’s biographer used the atonement still has some of the qualities of the

³⁷ While the spread of Provençal love poetry during this period may have been an additional factor in reducing the concept of the soul-marriage to that of the nun’s marriage to Jesus, determining its effects upon female devotional literature must lie outside the scope of this study.

³⁸ *The Life of Saint Katherine*, ed. Eugen Eickenel, E.E.T.S. 80 (London, 1884), p. 56, ll. 1186–92. Further quotations are from this edition.

classic confrontation between Good and Evil. But no longer is man saved by Christ's invincible divinity, but specifically by virtue of the exposed corporeality of his human nature. The author of *Ancrene Riwe* goes further; in describing the pain Christ felt on the cross, he enthusiastically pursues the psychology of human suffering. Through the sense of touch

Ure louerd i þisse witte nefde nout in one stude; auh hefde ouer al pine. nout one 3eond his bodi. auh hefde 3et wiðinnen in his seli soule. In hire he hefde ðe stich of sori 7 seoruhful pine. (p. 48)

(Our Lord in this sense suffered not only in one place, but felt pain all over; not only throughout his whole body, but also within, in his innocent soul. There he felt the stab of sorrow and grievous pain.)

To the question of whether Christ could not have delivered mankind with less suffering on his part, the author of the *Riwe* replies:

3e siker fullihtliche. auh he nolde. hwareuore; vorte bininem us euerich bitellunge; a3ean him of ure luue; þet he so deore bouhte. Me buð lihtliche a þing þet me luueð lutel. he bouh-te us mid his heorte blode. (p. 178)

(Yes, certainly, quite easily, but he didn't want to. Why? To take from us any excuse for not giving him our love, which he so dearly bought. A thing little loved is cheaply bought; he bought us with his heart's blood.)

Here is the essence of the juridical atonement, that the sufferings of Christ in his human nature are sufficient payment of the debt of sin. But that Christ went so far as to overpay the debt many times is taken as proof that his love for men overflows, a theme that becomes the source of a lyrical celebration of the details of Christ's passion. The speaker of *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* scans Christ's "lovely body" and notes with chilling realism the savagery wrought upon it by various methods of torture:

bote mare schome þu þoledes hwen þ̄ te sunefule men ipi neb spitted. A iesu hwa mihte mare þolen cristen oþer heaðen; þen mon him for schendlac i þe beard spitted. . . . hu ha þe bunden swa hetelifaste þ̄ te blod wrang ut at tine finger neiles as halhes bileuen. . . . þer þu wes for mi luue wið cnotti swepes swungen swa þ̄ ti luueliche lich mihte beo to torn 7 to rent.³⁹

³⁹ Ed. W. Meredith Thompson, E.E.T.S. 241 (London, 1958), pp. 30, 32. Further quotations from this and other works in the "Wooing Group" are from this edition. Cf. *On Lofsong of Ure Lefdi*, pp. 17-18.

(But more shame thou didst endure when the sinful men spat in thy face. Ah, Jesu! who might more endure, Christian or heathen, than when one spitteth in scorn upon his beard? . . . How they bound thee so cruelly fast that the blood was wrung out at thy fingernails (as saints believe). . . . There thou wast, for love of me, with knotty whips beaten, so that thy lovely body might be torn and rent asunder.)

Although such lurid scenes may suggest to some a baroque excess, it is clear the author of the *Wohunge* is exhorting his female audience to return Christ's love in kind, that is, with the same lacerating physical sensibility he demonstrated toward them in his passion. It is to his character as a human lover they must now attribute their redemption; their response is also to be a "wooing," an approach consistent with Christ's own tormented love affair with the race.

Once the humanity of Christ was established for doctrinal purposes, a full range of human qualities associated with the husband or lover became available for increased devotion and meditation. We have seen in *Hali Meidenhad* that Christ the Bridegroom becomes the competitor for the love of the virginal woman, and that a pronounced distinction is drawn between him and a merely earthly husband. But there is a distinctly "classic" flavor to the description of Christ in that work, for his riches and beauty and power are still expressly *super*-human. In several other works of the Katherine Group, however, as well as in the *Ancrene Riwele*, Christ begins to compete for the love of the English nun solely as a man. The emphasis upon his new-found humanity leads, in fact, to the portrayal of Christ as the perfect knightly lover.⁴⁰ In *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, the gap between Christ and an ordinary husband is pointedly drawn as the difference between a knight and a churl. The speaker admits women's frailty in yielding their honor all too often to men of quality and cavalier disposition:

Ah noble men 7 gentile 7 of heh burðe ofte winnen luue lihtliche cheape. for ofte moni wummon letes hire mensket þurh þe luue of wepmon ƿ is of heh burðe.

(But noble men and gentle and of high birth often obtain the love of women at a very small cost, for oftentimes many a woman loses her honour through the love of a man that is of high birth.)

If that is the case, then why not make spiritual capital of this in-

⁴⁰ Compare the *Luue Ron* of Thomas of Hales, ed. Bruce Dickens and R. M. Wilson, *Early Middle English Texts* (New York, 1951), pp. 103-09.

herent susceptibility for gallant young aristocrats who steal women's hearts?

penne swete iesu up o hwat herre mon mai i mi luue sette. hwer mai i gentiller mon chese þen þe ƿ art te kinges sune þat tis world wealdes. . . . A mi deorewurðe druð swa gentile 7 swa hende. ne pole me neauer mi luue nohwer to sette o karlische þinges. (pp. 24–25)

(Then, sweet Jesu, upon what higher man may I set my love? where may I a nobler man choose than thee, that are the king's son that wields this world? . . . Ah, my precious Lord, so noble and so gracious, suffer me never to settle my love on churlish things.)

The idea of Christ as the supreme exemplar of all that is worthwhile in the courtly system finds extended treatment in a well-known episode in the *Ancrene Riwele*. There the soul, besieged in the castle of the body by her enemies, is rescued by a king who falls in love with her, takes on her defense (knowing it will cost him a death-wound) and is finally captured, tortured, and killed. Even as early as the turn of the twelfth century, one senses a twinge of nostalgia for a bygone age of chivalry in the author's explanation of the allegory: the knightly champion is, of course, Christ,

and he ase noble woware efter monie messagers 7 feole goddeden : com uorto preouen his luue. and scheauwede þuruh knihtschipe. þet he was luue-wurðe. ase weren sumehwule knihtes i wuned for to donne. (p. 178)

(and he, as a noble wooer, after many messengers and many good deeds, came to prove his love, and showed by knightly gests that he was love-worthy; as knights at one time were accustomed to do.)

Since the readers of the first *Ancrene Riwele* were doubtless gentle-born ladies the depiction of Christ as the flower of chivalry has a certain inevitability about it. What is less to be expected, particularly in view of the worshipful distance between the holy woman and Christ that the courtly metaphor of espousal maintains, is the warm-blooded fascination which certain works in the Katherine Group show for the sensuous aspects of Christ's person. In the legend of *Saint Katherine*, for example, the experience she has of Christ is described as hazy, dreamlike softness which gladdens her and casts a delicious sweetness over all that befalls her (pp. 71–72). Christ's presence is the source of a similar reaction in *Seinte Marherete*, where that saint declares that Christ is "loeflukest to lokin upon 7 swotest

to smellen: he his lufsumlec neuer mare ne mei lutli ne aliggen" ("loveliest to look upon and sweetest to smell; nor can his loveliness ever more lessen or perish").⁴¹ The Christ of these older legends, however, pales beside the Jesus of the *Wohunge*, where the speaker exclaims:

Ah hwa ne mej luue þe luueliche iesu? for inwið þe ane arn alle þe þinges igedered þ̅ eauer muhen maken ani mon luuewurði to oðer. feirnesse 7 lufsum neb. flesh hwit under schrud makes moni mon beo luued te raðer. 7 te mare. (p. 20)

(Ah, who may not love thee, lovely Jesu? For within thee alone are all the things united that ever may make any man worthy of love to another. Beauty, and lovable face, flesh white under clothing make many a man the rather and the more to be beloved.)

A similar outburst occurs in the closely related *Ureisun of Ure Louerde*, which, if anything, is even more sensual. In one instance in the poem, however, the speaker envisions the figure of Christ on the cross with outstretched arms, and it seems as if

he openeþ swa þe moder hire earmes hire leoue child forto cluppen; 3e so es 7 tu deorwurpe louerd. gostliche to us 7 to deorlinges wiþ þe ilke spredunge gest. asþe moder to hire child.⁴²

(he openeth them as doth the mother her arms to embrace her beloved child. Yea, of a truth! And thou, dear Lord, goest spiritually toward us and to thy darlings with the same embrace as the mother to her children.)

This sudden shift of the metaphorical sexuality of Christ from male to female is a disquieting phenomenon, particularly since the lines immediately preceding these strongly imply Christ's arms are stretched out in anticipation of a sexual embrace. The change from Christ-as-lover to Christ-as-mother raises a question as to the real

⁴¹ *Seinte Marherete*, ed. Frances Mack, E.E.T.S. 193 (London, 1934), pp. 110-111. Further quotations are from this edition. Wolpers, p. 182, notes that in *Seinte Marherete*, "Immer wieder wird das Ideal der Keuschheit verherrlicht"; he concludes the legend was composed for a monastic audience. Cf. Mack, pp. xxx-xxxii. Gerould, *Saints' Legends*, pp. 134-35, infers from the seven vernacular accounts of Margaret surviving from the Middle English period "that the life of St. Margaret caught the popular fancy more completely than any other legend." Doubtless the English cult of Margaret in the thirteenth century (see Mack, pp. x-xii), was closely related to the peculiar esteem which that and the following century felt for the pearl, traditionally the symbol of virginity. See C. A. Luttrell, "The Mediaeval Tradition of the Pearl Virginity," *Medium Aevum*, 31 (1962), 194-200.

⁴² Ed. Thompson, p. 2.

nature of the psychological relationship implied in the *sponsa* metaphor. It is an important issue, for the depiction of Christ as female is not uncommon in devotional writing for women. In the Middle English translation of Ailred of Rievaulx's *De vita eremitica*, for example, there are references to Christ as a mother whose breasts are the source of spiritual nourishment for the anchoress.⁴³ The attribution of a mother's role to Christ presumably would please a female reader; perhaps more relevant, it might be considered attractive for women by a male author. In any event, the shifting basis of the metaphor of the love-relationship may indicate that what we are dealing with is a subtler and more complex eroticism than may have been suspected. It suggests, in fact, that the response of the female audience may have been what churchmen have always insisted it was, not so much deflection of sexual impulses as an overflowing emotional rapture that could not be confined to a solitary means of expression.

Let us assume that the writings of the Katherine Group provide a reasonably accurate picture of the range of feminine response to a humanized and sexualized Christ, and go on to consider in more detail the female psychology that is so much a part of their appeal. Some of the works make little attempt to analyze the psychology of the marriage to Christ. In *Seinte Marherete* the saint simply declares – one gets the impression she is shouting –

Ich hehe, quoð ha, heh-feader, healent in heouene, 7 his deorwurðe sune, Iesu Crist hatte; 7 him ich habbe, meiden, mi meiðhad izettet, 7 luuie to leofmon 7 leue ase lauerd. (p. 8)

("I honor," she said, "the high Father, the saviour in heaven, and his precious son, Jesus Christ; and to him I, a virgin, have granted my maidenhood, and I love him as a lemman and honor him as lord.")

It is noteworthy that Margaret's protestation includes reference to the Father as well as Christ; she seems to be wary of slighting the omnipotent Father in favor of the Son. More important, her pledge of virginity here has the air of an indenture or legal contract. The spirit of the work is similar to that of *Hali Meidenhad*, where there is also no real attempt to explore in detail the personal relationship

⁴³ Ed. C. Horstmann, *Englische Studien*, 7 (1884), 304–44; see particularly 329. A similar designation of Christ as a mother appears again in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, 58–60, ed. Grace Warrack, 13th ed. (London, 1950), pp. 141–51.

between the virgin and Christ. On the contrary, the emphasis falls upon the virgin's strict performance of her side of the agreement: should she preserve herself *intacta* the reward designated for those in her condition will follow automatically, *ex opere operato* as it were. Indeed, in some works of the Katherine Group the marriage to Christ remains more a state of being than a state of mind.

In others, however, a fairly explicit psychology of the married state prevails. Perhaps the most penetrating glimpses into the emotions of the spouse of Christ come not in the celebration of the joys of intimate union, but in the description of the emotional emptiness and poignant sense of loss resulting from the virgin's estrangement from Christ through sin. In *On Ureisun of Ure Louerde*, the female speaker cries out to him:

hwi art tu me swo fremede. hwi ne con ich woze þe wiþ swete luue.
uor alle þinge swetest. alre þinge leoflucest. 7 luue wurðest. wei.
wei. þe bitternesse of mine sunnen attri is þe lettunge. (p. 3)

(Why art thou so strange toward me? O that I could woo thee with sweet love, for of all things art thou the sweetest, and of all things the loveliest, and most worthy of being loved! Alas! Alas! the bitterness of my venomous sins is the hindrance.)

In the *Ancrene Riwele* the author warns his readers not to be frightened if, after some years in an anchoress's life, they begin to experience temptation. God has not cast them away; rather, He is merely testing their resolve, as a wise husband does a new wife. When he feels assured she loves him, a husband will become stern and strict toward her in order to correct her faults. Once they are amended, he shows his love to her again, and even resolves to carry out her every wish (in effect giving over the "maistrie"):

3if iesu crist ower spus deð also bi ou mine leoue sustren; ne þunche ou no wunder. vor iðe urumðe nis ter buten oluhnunge; uorte drawn in luue. auh also sone ase he euer understont ðet he beo wel akointed mid ou; he wule uorberen ou lesse her. auh efter ðe spreoue on ende; þeonne is ðe muchele ioie. (p. 97)

(if Jesus Christ your spouse does the same with you, my dear sisters, do not be surprised; for in the beginning there is nothing but courtship, so that you are drawn into love. But as soon if ever he understands that he is well acquainted with you, he will forbear you less. But after the trial is at an end, then is there great joy.)

With discriminating insight into the feminine mind the author deepens and enhances the significance of the simple metaphor of espousal by deftly probing the emotional vicissitudes that befall courtship and early marriage. In another place in the same section of the *Riwle* the sense of spiritual alienation is raised again. The author speaks about the "comforts" Christ has ordained for those in the throes of temptation:

De sixte kunfort is. þet ure louerd hwon he ipoleð ðet we beoð itented; he pleieð mid us; ase ðe moder mid hire zunge deorlinge. vliþð from him 7 hut hire 7 let hit sitten one. 7 loken zeorne abuten 7 cleopien dame dame. 7 weopen one hwule. (p. 103)

(The sixth comfort is that Our Lord, when he suffers us to be tempted, plays with us as the mother does with her young darling. She flees from it and hides herself, and lets it sit alone and look longingly about and call, "Mama, Mama!" and weep a while.)

The mother, like Christ, immediately returns to embrace her child, comfort it, and wipe its tears. The anchoress may recognize the anguish of the abandoned child in some of her own experiences in the spiritual life, but she is also fortified in her piety through the glimpse which her own maternal instincts give her of Christ's attitude toward her, that of a high-spirited young mother toward her baby. Thus, while the metaphor of marital union in the *Ancrene Riwe* remains in the forefront as a means of describing the psychological response of the virgin to Christ, at times it appears less than equal to expressing the full range of female emotions involved. In a similar way, Saint Margaret, threatened by the tyrant Olibrius and forsaken by her earthly father, prays to her heavenly spouse:

Du art hope 7 help to alle þet te herieð. Du art foster 7 feader to helpless children. . . . þe ich halde, healent, ba for feader 7 for freond. (p. 18)

(Thou art hope and help to all who honor thee. Thou art the foster-father to helpless children. . . . Thee I hold, Saviour, both for father and friend.)

Again, *Hali Meidenhad* (p. 7) describes the status of the professed virgin who has renounced an earthly husband as "godes brude 7 his freo dohter, for ba to gederes ha is" ("God's bride and his noble daughter, for she is both together"). The two passages convey the child's longing for the security a father's strength can give, but the latter goes further, cautiously avoiding the implication that mar-

riage, even to Christ, could in any way bring on a reduction in the virgin's dignity. Evidently, the concept of becoming a "princess of God" had a slightly stronger appeal, in terms of the independence and freedom of action that virginity bestowed on the English woman, than the idea of marriage to Him. But against this tendency to exploit the fullness of female psychology by portraying Christ as a mother, a father, a faithful friend – a tendency which minimizes the importance of Jesus's male sexuality – must be balanced the fundamentally erotic response that is evoked when that sexuality is taken quite literally.

It is basically the "Wooing Group" of prayers and orisons that places an almost exclusive emphasis upon the spiritual marriage of the virgin to Christ and describes the psychology of that state in erotic terms. Admittedly, it is possible to find sexual language in the more conservative *Hali Meidenhad*, as when the professed virgin is spoken of (p. 39) as retaining her maidenhead even while Christ conceives on her the immortal offspring of virtues; or when (p. 45) virgin saints are said to "blisse perfore bituhhe godes armes cwenes of heuene" ("revel between God's arms as queens of heaven"). But there is no celebration of the physical for its own sake. In the *Ancrene Riwele*, as well, there is some patently erotic language; speaking of the reception of the Eucharist the author urges the anchoress,

per uorziteð al þene world 7 þer beoð al vt bodi. þer in sperclinde
luue bicluppeð oure leofmon, ƿ into ower breoste bur; is iliht of
heuene. 7 holdeð hine ueste uort he hadde igranted ou al ƿ 3e
euer wulleð. (p. 14)

(there forget all the world and be completely out of the body.
There embrace your lemmen in burning love, who has come into
the bower of your breast, down from heaven. Hold him fast until
he has granted you all that you ask.)

But here, of course, the language is used as Bernard had employed it, to depict the raptures of the marriage of the soul to Christ; the whole premise of this epithalamianism is the pneumatic interpretation of the *sponsa* motif. The author cites the line from the Song of Songs, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," and explains the allegorical meaning:

þes cos leoue sustren is a swetnesse. 7 a delit of heorte; so unimete
swote 7 swete; þet euerich worldes sauur. is bitter. þer azeines. auh
ure louerd mid his cos-se ne cusseð none soule ðet luueð ei þing
bute him. (p. 45).

(This kiss, dear sisters, is a sweetness and a delight of heart so immeasurably sweet that every savour of the world is bitter in comparison. But Our Lord with his kiss does not kiss any soul that loves anything but him.)

In the "Wooring Group," on the other hand, one encounters not only erotic language, but that which the language refers to, the putative emotional response of the female religious, is itself erotic. Another significant difference, about which it is hard to say too much, is that the pneumatic interpretation of the *sponsa* ideal is seldom mentioned. Its absence invites the inference that the marriage to Christ is here proposed as a kind of "fleshing out" of the rather spare and time-worn concept of the nun's profession as a kind of nuptials. The imagery of *On Ureisun of Ure Louerde*, as we have already seen in part, is especially forthright, even daring. The speaker talks of casting herself into the outstretched arms of Christ, extended in a somewhat morbid lover's embrace upon the cross-bar of his gibbet (p. 2). She goes on to exclaim,

A swete iesu hwi w[ið] earmes of luue ne cluppe ich þe swa faste. ƿ na þing ne þeonne me maʒe breide min heorte. hwi ne cusse ich þe sweteliche ine gaste wið swote munegunge. of þine god deden. . . . hwi ne fele ich þe in mi breostes swo swote ase þu art. (p. 3)

(Ah, sweet Jesus, why do I not embrace thee with arms of love so fast, that nothing from thence may tear away my heart? Why do I not sweetly kiss thee in spirit with sweet remembrance of thy good deeds? . . . Why do I not feel thee in my breasts as sweet as thou art?)

Particularly noticeable is the overwhelming emphasis on feeling, the sensuous apprehension of religious experience, something which recurs in other places in the lyrics and orisons of the Katherine Group. The opening of the same poem, for example, is a series of alliterative formulas after the manner of Anglo-Saxon epithet (as foreign as they might be in mood to the spirit of most Old English poetry):

Iesu soð god. godes sone. ihesu soð goð. soð mon. Mon Maidene bern Iesu min hali loue min sikere swetnesse. Iesu min heorte. Misel. misaule hele. Iesu swete. iesu mi leof. mi lif. mi leome. Min halwi. Min huniter. þu al ƿ ic hopie. Iesu mi weole mi wunne. Min bliþe breostes blisse. (p. 1)

(Jesus, true God, God's son! Jesus, true God, true man. Man of maiden born! Jesus, my holy love, my sure sweetness! Jesus, my

heart, my soul, my soulheal! Jesus, sweet! Jesus, my love, my life, my light! My healing oil [balm], my honey-drop, thou all that I hope for! Jesus, my weal, my winsomeness! Blithe bliss of my breasts!)

The driving, throbbing rhythm of these short outbursts of sensuous endearment, coupled with the woman's rapid breathing as she speaks them aloud, seems finely calculated to transport her to a state of more than spiritual rapture.

Under the classic theory of atonement, as we have seen, the role of the virgin had been essentially an active one, conjoined to the continuing redemptive struggle of a Pantocrator Christ against the powers of darkness, a struggle in which both male and female virgins took part. With the feminization of virginity, however, the new role of the virgin was made to conform to the passive role of the female in the normal sexual relationship. In *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* the speaker describes herself yielding to Christ's supreme act of love, his passion and death, in terms usually reserved to fervid surrender:

Broht tu haues me fra þe world to bur of þi burðe. steked me in chaumbre. I mai þer þe swa sweteli kissen 7 cluppen. 7 of þi luue haue gastli likinge. (p. 35).

(Thou hast brought me from the world to the bower of thy birth, enclosed me in thy chamber. There I can thee so sweetly kiss and embrace, and of thy love have spiritual delight.)

Yearning to requite Christ's love in some poor way, she resolves to offer her weak and wretched body to his service, but in a manner reminiscent of a distinctly fleshly school of spirituality:

Mi bodi henge wið þi bodi neiled o rode. sperred querfaste wið inne four wahes 7 henge i wile wið þe 7 neauer mare of mi rode cume til þ̄ i deie. . . . A. iesu swa swet hit is wið þe to henge. (p. 36)

(Let my body hang with thy body nailed to the cross, enclosed transversely within four walls, and I will hang with thee and nevermore come down from my cross until I die. . . . Ah! Jesus, so sweet it is with thee to hang.)

It is worthy of note that the emphasis in these lines, and in the entire context from which they are taken, is exclusively on the body (despite an occasional sanitary *gastliche*). It is Christ's body which accomplishes the redemption and evokes passionate sympathy; it is the virgin's body which she offers to him, and which she contrasts with his own as being unworthy, quite literally, to hang on the same

cross. The *Wohunge* is one of the first devotional works in western vernacular literature to have accomplished the sensualization of the spiritual marriage.⁴⁴

In general, the erotic response depicted in certain works of the Katherine Group is simply a transgression of the bounds of symbolism, a desacramentalization, as it were. The metaphor of the spiritual marriage is literalized, the *literae* becoming objects of devotion in their own right. As emphasis on Christ's humanity focused attention on his male sexuality, so the latter provoked increased interest in the femaleness of the professed virgin. The result was a new concern to show her drawing upon distinctly female resources to attract and hold the love of Christ. *Hali Meidenhad* (pp. 44-45) encourages the virgin to practice meekness and humility to please Christ, "pat tu ne punche peostri, ah schine as te sunne ipi weres sihpe" ("that thou seem not darksome, but shine as the sun in thy husband's sight"). In the *Ancrene Riwele* the anchoresses are urged to cultivate their physical beauty only for their beloved Christ (p. 43). The very title of the lyrical *Wohunge* implies the exercise of feminine wiles in a love-song designed to elicit from Christ that which, doctrinally speaking, he has already given. If the virgin is steadfast in her attempts to woo Christ, the *Ancrene Riwele* advises, she may rightfully feel she will come to possess him:

strik pine luue to iesu criste; 7 þu hauest i wunnen him. rin him mid ase muchele luue ase þu hauest sumne mon sumecherre; and he is þin. uorto don al þet þu wilnest. (p. 186)

(stretch out thy love to Jesus Christ, and you have won him. Touch him with as much love as you sometimes show for a man, and he is thine, to do with all that you will.)

Note particularly the underlying conviction that the male Christ is something of an easy mark for female blandishments. As he grows more masculine and more sexually susceptible, the figure of the nun or anchoress becomes more realistically feminine; these complemen-

⁴⁴ Compare the devotions of Mechthild of Magdeburg in the thirteenth century: when she asks the Lord where it is she can lay her heart's desire, he replies, "Thou shalt lay thy heart's desire nowhere else than in my divine heart and on my human breast. There only wilt thou be comforted and kissed with my spirit." See *Das fliessende Licht*, I, iii, qu. in H. O. Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1930), I, 483. As late as the seventeenth century, Francis de Sales speaks to a female audience of the "interior sweetness and caress of our Lord" (*Vrays entretiens*, xx, qu. in Leclercq, "The Monastic Tradition," 118).

tary tendencies amount to the same thing, a movement away from the ideal of asexuality.

The feminization of the soul marriage has one interesting by-product that finds expression in the Katherine Group. In one sense it is the exact counterpart of the *sponsa Christi* motif, the notion that the professed virgin *monk* becomes the bridegroom, or at least the suitor, of the Blessed Virgin Mary. One might expect to discover indications that male religious felt left out of the new celebration of the sensuous in twelfth-century religious devotion, and perhaps the presence among the Katherine Group of *On God Ureisun of Ure Leſ-di*, composed by a monk to serve as a companion piece to the orisons directed by female speakers to Christ, is just such a piece of evidence.⁴⁵ The poet begins with the same kind of breathless epithets we have noticed in the invocation of *On Ureisun of Ure Louerde*. The work has the same general structure as that prayer and much the same reverential tone. Despite some suggestion that the poem to Mary was influenced by the conventions of troubadour poetry, its association in manuscript with the other Katherine Group orisons and its rhetorical similarity to them suggest that it must have been thought of as the obverse of their female devotionism. One of the most interesting works of the "Wooing Group" in this connection is the prose prayer *On Lofsong of Ure Louerde*.⁴⁶ It is curious to find it in this context, since it was surely composed by a man for a male audience. Compared to other hymns in the group, it is decidedly masculine in tone, avoiding excess emotion and skirting any celebration of the physical characteristics of Christ's person; its mood and theme are reminiscent of an Anglo-Saxon elegy. On the other hand, it is impossible not to notice that the *Lofsong* – the rather unsuitable title was given it by its first modern editor – is similar to the other prayers in diction and imagery; in its adoption of motifs common to the others (Christ's body as a shield, Jesus's softness and sweetness, a sense of estrangement from Christ); and in its use of passages from the Song of Songs. We seem to be faced with a hymn inspired wholly by contemporary feminist spirituality, but one that preserves its own unique masculinity. One quirk in the poem is particularly enlightening. Citing the verse of the Song, "My beloved's left arm holdeth up my head, and his right arm shall embrace me," the speaker strives actively to avoid being confused with a female

⁴⁵ Ed. from MS. Cotton Nero A. XIV by Richard Morris, *Old English Homilies*, First Series, Part II, E.E.T.S. 34 (London, 1868), pp. 190–99.

⁴⁶ Ed. Thompson, pp. 10–15. See also Morris, pp. 208–17.

virgin. He says (p. 13) "auh leue me ðet ich mote so liche seggen *wið ðe meiden* þet of þe seið þeors wordes" ("but grant that I might truly say, *with* the maiden that saith of thee these words . . ."). One might logically expect the male speaker to exploit the pneumatic reading of the *sponsa* motif. He does no such thing, however; rather, he lamely interprets the "left arm" allegorically as "worldly gifts," the right as "endless blessings." Thus, while the author is careful to avoid the monialic interpretation of the bridal idea, he seems totally unaware of the other. In this instance the exaltation of the female religious as the bride of Christ has entirely obscured the Christian-agnostic concept of the nuptials of the soul.

The overall effect of the confluence of the Anselmian doctrine of atonement, the Victorine speculation over the nature of marriage, and Bernard's commentary on the Song was the "sexualization" of the *sponsa* metaphor and the feminization of religious psychology for a substantial period of time in the Church's history. The feminine response to Christ's love which we have seen manifested in its various forms in the Katherine Group was to exert a profound influence over the way Christ's role in the drama of salvation was viewed throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages. It made an unavoidable distinction as to gender in respect of Christ's love for the human race, his motive for undertaking the redemption. The effect was in some sense to disqualify male monasticism from the fullest measure of that love, cut off as it was from the most important source of twelfth-century spirituality. Despite Bernard's own allegiance to the school of exegesis of Philo and Origen, the allegorical significance of his *Sermons* seems to have been eclipsed, at least in England, in the general application of the bridal idea to the situation of female readers. Certainly the style of Bernard's work, with its enthusiasm for minute examination of the symbolism of sexual details, its baroque embellishment of one meaning by another, and the general floridity (and one might say abandon) of its tone throughout, seems to have been intended to produce a highly emotional rather than merely reverent reaction.⁴⁷ Small wonder, then, that an approach that was calculated to evoke precisely that response among a male audience should have had the effect of popularizing a wholly female approach to the idea of the soul marriage.

⁴⁷ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 248, quotes M. Hubert, "Aspects du latin philosophique aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles," *Revue des Études Latines*, 27 (1949), 212, to the effect that Bernard's ornate style is nevertheless "a rigorous technique which has nothing to do with the mystico-lyrical elucubrations of medieval decadence."

The most fundamental change which Bernardine mysticism wrought with respect to the perfective ideal of virginity was to make it permanently a female concern. But however feminist in tone was the devotional literature produced for women, those works do retain many of the commonplace features of the more authentic understanding of virginity as asexuality. They do so, perhaps as one might be led to expect, usually without any apparent realization that the older ideas stand in contrast (and sometimes logical contradiction) to the new emphasis upon virginity as an exclusively feminine attribute. In the Katherine Group it is possible to observe the concept of a wholly spiritual nuptial union actually shading into and blending with that of a physical one. But to the eye already acquainted with the severely-drawn contours of the monastic ideal of ontological asexuality, it becomes clear that this unwitting permutation of Bernardine mysticism does not sweep everything before it. In fact, the tenacity with which ideas born of the tradition of Christian gnosis endure in the Katherine Group serves somewhat to temper the eroticism of the marriage to Christ, often to the extent that there exists a vital historical tension between the new and the old. A closer look at this sometimes subliminal opposition may discover the late twelfth-century mind in transition, on a subject of crucial importance for the history of medieval Christianity.

CHAPTER V

SURVIVING ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN GNOSIS

I. Sin as Sexual

In Chapter I we observed how Christian gnosis described the original sin as a sexual transgression, and how Augustine came to redefine it as one of pride. Because of the overwhelming influence of his thought the concept of a sexual fall was well on the wane by the close of the twelfth century, but occasional allusions to it remain. The attitude toward normal sexuality in *Hali Meidenhad*, for instance, is grossly encraticistic, rather more reminiscent of Tatian than even Jerome. The author counsels the bride of Christ to

forzet ec þi fader hus as dauīð read þrafter. Ði fader he cleopeð þat unþeaw þat streonede þe of þi moder. þat ilke unhende flesches brune. þat bearninde zecðe of þat licomliche lust. bifore þat wlatefulle wer. þat beasteliche gederunge. þat schomelese somnunge. þat fulþe of fulþe stinkende 7 untohe dede. (p. 9)¹

(forget also thy father's house as David afterward counsels. Thy "father" he calls the impure deed that begot thee of thy mother; that same low burning of the flesh, that fiery itch of bodily lust before that hateful work, that bestial coming together, that shameless union, that filth of a deed stinking of filth and depravity.)

In what strikes one as a grudging and uneasy accommodation to the Augustinian position, the author admits that sex is "summes weis" to be tolerated in marriage, even though copulation was not part of God's original plan: "Godd ne schop hit neauer swuch. Ah Adam 7

¹ A similar virulence regarding marriage is to be found in contemporary gnosticism. See Arno Borst, *Die Katharer* (Stuttgart, 1953), pp. 89–98, who describes an upsurge of Manichaeism in the Rhineland in the twelfth century, attested to by such holy women as Everwin von Steinfeld, Elizabeth von Schönau, and Hildegard von Bingen.

eue turnden hit to beo swuch þurh hare sunne. 7 merden ure cunde" ("God never created it such. Rather, Adam and Eve turned it into such a thing through their sin, and marred our nature"). The treatise also retains the Christian gnostic idea that marriage is only a dispensation allowed for those unable to sustain a life of perfect virginity (p. 21): "for þi was wedlac ilahet in hali chirche as bed to seke, to ihente þe unstronge" ("therefore wedlock was legalized in Holy Church as a kind of bed for the sick, to sustain the unstrong"). Reminiscent of the gnostic association of sexuality with death is the author's reference (p. 17) to the sex act as "þat dreori dede" which "on ende 3iueþ þat deapes dunt" ("that sorry" – or even "bloody" – "deed" which "at the last gives the dint of death"). *Hali Meidenhad* also reasserts the fundamental importance of virginity in salvation history. The author says the devil so hates virgins because he knows it was through virginity he lost his sovereignty over the world:

for þurh ure lafdi meidenhad þat hit bigon earst þe meiden marie.
he forleas te lauerddom on moncun on eorðe. 7 wes helle irobbed 7
heuene beð ifulled. He seð þe folhen hire treoden. (p. 15)

(for through Our Lady's maidenhood, who began it first, the Virgin Mary, he lost the dominion over mankind on earth, and hell was robbed and thus heaven is to be filled. He sees thee following her steps.)

Similar statements occur in the saints' lives of *Seinte Iulienne* and *Seinte Marherete*. Virginity is the thing which causes the devils the most pain, and all the powers of hell are no match against it. But the devils' special hatred of virginity is best explained as their reaction to the fact that Christ's redeeming mission was essentially one of restoring the lost virginity of the race. The devil in *Seinte Marherete* says, "For Iesu Crist, godes bern, wes of meiden iboren; 7 þurh þe mihte of meiðhad wes moncun iborhen" ("For Jesus Christ, God's bairn, was born of a maiden; and through the power of virginity mankind was redeemed").² What is implied here is a Christian gnostic dualism somewhat reminiscent of that of Methodius of Olympus, wherein virginity, release from the contamination of the world and the flesh, is the means of redemption and therefore the demons' nemesis.

There is an unambiguous allusion to a sexual fall in the *Ancrene Riwele*. In the second part, dealing with the custody of the senses, the

² Cf. pp. 30, 32, where the devil admits that the majority of his temptations are to sins of lust, which he then proceeds to describe with enthusiastic detail.

author supplies three examples in support of Augustine's dictum, "Inpudicus oculus inpudici cordis est nuncius," warning his female audience against becoming the cause of a man's temptation through the sense of sight. They are the cases of Dinah and Bathsheba (Gen. xxxiv.1 and II Kings xi), both notably sexual in content, and that of *Eve*. The apple our first mother gave to Adam has allegorical significance:

Lo hu holi writ spekeð 7 hu inwardliche hit telleð; hu sunegunge bi-gon. þus eode sihðe biuoren 7 madeke wei to vuel lust. 7 com þe deað þer efter; þ̄ al monkun iueleð. þes eppel leo-ue sustren bitocneð alle þe þing þ̄ lust falleð to; 7 delit of sunne. hwon þu biholdest te mon. þu ert in eue point. þu lokest open eppel. (p. 23)

(Lo, how Holy Writ speaks, and how covertly it tells how sinning began. Thus sight went before and made a way for foul lust, and the death came thereafter which all mankind feels. This apple, my dear sisters, signifies all the things that pertain to lust, and delight in sin. When thou lookest upon a man, thou art in Eve's case: thou lookest upon an apple.)

At least a trace of the sexual fall can be seen in another place in *Hali Meidenhad*, where the author describes pride as antithetical to the state of virginity. It is asserted (p. 43) that pride arose in heaven: "Ha cwikede of cleane cunde as is in engles euene 7 clenneste bresten bredeð hire zette" ("it grew from a pure nature, the equal of an angel's, and it breeds yet in the purest breasts"). The opposition between purity and pride suggests that the sin carries with it here the secondary significance of lust, and that we are again dealing with a vestige of the ancient concept of a sexual transgression as the cause of the fall of the angels. What overcame an angel (Lucifer) is still able to overcome even the purest of men.³

The reader of *Hali Meidenhad* is left with the impression that lust is the most archetypal of sins. That inference is confirmed by the statement that the sex act, among all sins, is particularly damning:

³ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Piers Plowman and the Three Grades of Chastity," *Anglia*, 76 (1958), 227-53, discusses the historical connection between pride and lust in a long medieval tradition wherein the sin of Lucifer was assumed to be lechery. The idea appears in the fourteenth-century *Purity (Cleanness)*, 193-208, ed. Robert J. Menner, Yale Studies in English, 61 (New Haven, 1920), p. 10; and is alive even in thinking of James I, who asserts that "the first great sinnes in the originall world" occurred "when the sonnes of GOD went in to the daughters of men." See "A Speach in the Parliament Houe . . .," *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain, Harvard Political Classics, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), p. 281.

Alle oðre sunne ne beoð bute sunne. ah þis is sunne. 7 eke un-
cunnelicheð þe 7 unwurðeheð þi bodi. Suleð þi sawle. 7 makeð
schuldi toward godd 7 fuleð þi flesch ec. (p. 35)⁴

(All other sins are nothing but sins, but this is Sin; and it also
denaturalizes thee and dishonors thy body. It soils thy soul and
makes thee guilty before God and befouls thy flesh also.)

The effect of the sin is to contaminate the virginal purity of the soul
and hence to disqualify it from salvation. And the other idea ex-
pressed here, that sexuality could be “denaturalizing” or perverse,
makes sense only if genuine human nature consists in virginity. But
that is precisely the view of the author of *Hali Meidenhad*, who urges
his virginal audience to rebuke the devil who would tempt them to
lust, with the following words:

Ichulle halde me hal þurh þe grace of godd as cunde me makede.
þat paraise selhðe underfo me all swuch as were ear ha gulten his
earste hearmen. (pp. 45, 47)

(I will hold myself whole through the grace of God, as nature made
me, so that the joys of paradise may receive me [in] such [a condi-
tion] as its first cultivators were [in] before they sinned.)

As in the thought of the Fathers of Christian gnosis, virginity here
defines man’s primal integrity, the condition of Adam and Eve
before their sin. Complementing the idea of pristine asexuality is the
belief that the principal effect of the Fall is a plunge into the prison
of the flesh. The author tells the virgin that, should she lose her
particular gift, she too would fall

of englene ilicnesse. of ih’u cristes leofmon. of leafdi in heuene; in
to flesches fulðe. in to beastes liflade. in to monnes þeowdom 7 in
to worldes weane. (p. 25)

(from the likeness of angels, from being Jesus Christ’s lemmann,
from being a lady in heaven; into the filth of the flesh, into the
manner of life of a beast, into the thralldom of man and the sorrows
of the world.)

In other words, he equates virginity with the *vita angelica*, and, in

⁴ Cf. the “specific” significance of the verb “sin” in the *NED*: *Sin*, v. 1c. *spec.* “To commit fornication or adultery *with* (or *on*) one.” Earliest quotation (from the *Ancrene Riwele*) *ante* 1225. Also note Chaucer’s use of the substantive in his General Prologue description of the Miller (A 561), whose stories were “moost of *synne* and harlotries,” *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 22.

gnostic fashion, a life of normal sexuality with filth and bestiality. The descent of the soul into the confines of matter is combined, although somewhat clumsily, with the traditional concept of the three grades of perfection. While virgins are said to occupy the highest place in heaven,

De iweddede þonken him [God] þat ha lanhure hwen ha alles
walden fallen duneward; ne fellen nawt wið alle adun for wedlac
ham ikepte þat ilke lahe þat godd haueð istald for þe unstronge.
(p. 19)

(The wedded thank Him that, when they would have fallen downward completely, they at least did not fall so utterly down; for wedlock preserved them, that same law that God established for the weak.)

Clearly, then, at least one author of the Katherine Group sees original sin as equivalent with the sexual act. It seems to be precisely this bias in his thinking that accounts for what has been regarded as the singularly crabbed and mordant spirit of his work. *Hali Meidenhad* is a testament to the survival of elements of Christian gnosis in late twelfth-century England. Nevertheless, there and in other works of the Katherine Group one can observe an inevitable mitigation of the rigor of the gnostic principle with regard to other aspects of the ideal of virginal perfection.

2. *Traditional Features of Virginity Deontologized*

In monasticism the preservation of physical integrity remained the visible sign of having attained the highest level of the Christian life. We have seen, however, there was constant pressure from the Augustinian tradition to reduce the mystery of asexuality from ontological to psychological terms. Symptomatic of this tendency was the frequent association of virginity with the virtue of humility. Augustine, of course, had viewed pride as the motive for the Fall and the chiefest of the deadly sins, and it is entirely consistent that the perfection of virginity should have come to be associated very closely with pride's opposite. There is something of an anti-Pelagian consensus within the Augustinian tradition to the effect that pride makes virginity useless and vain, and this emphasis increases during the course of the Middle Ages.⁵ It is not long before the idea enters the monastic tradition, and has the effect of moderating the rigorous requirement

⁵ See Bernards, pp. 51–52, 79 ff, and Sr. Byrne, pp. 29–30.

of physical integrity. Eventually candidates for the monastic life were only required to demonstrate the interior humility that had become merely an essential characteristic of virginity. In *De laudibus virginittis* Aldhelm warns nuns against arrogance; lest they feel too much of a sense of security in their position as virgins he asserts that pride is both the ruin of humility and a threat to chastity.⁶ Aelfric explicitly values humility above bodily integrity. He praises “pæt wif, þe wunað on sinscipe” (“the woman who dwells in marriage”) in humility and obedience before God, and criticizes the virgin “þe modig bið on heortan / and gode ungehyrsum, þonne heo hæfð twa ðing, / clænnysse and modignysse, micel god and micel yfel” (“who is proud in heart and disobedient to God, for she possesses two things, purity and pride, great good and great evil”).⁷ Thus did humility come to be regarded as a necessary condition for the unblemished life, even while physical integrity remained its emblem. The Katherine Group illustrates both these ideas at once, suggesting on the one hand that only the *virgo intacta* is perfect in God’s sight, and on the other, that physical integrity means nothing if tarnished by pride. The former properly seems part of a strict encratic bias, while the latter, far less concerned with the wholeness of the body than with the integrity of the personality, must be ascribed to the ethicizing tendency of the Augustinian tradition. *Hali Meidenhad*, for instance, praises virginity as a supernatural gift from God which, once lost, can never be restored. Virginity is a

mihte ouer alle mihtes 7 cwemest crist of alle. for þi þu a hest meiden se deorewurdliche to witen hit. for hit is se heh þing 7 se swiþe leof godd 7 se licwurðe. forþi hit is an lure þat is wiðute coueringe. (p. 11)

(virtue above all other virtues, and of all the most pleasant to Christ. Therefore, maiden, thou hast ever so precious to guard it, for it is so high a thing, so dear to God, and so praiseworthy. Thus it is a loss beyond recovery.)

Here the emphasis on physical integrity seems absolute.⁸ But the *Ancrene Riwe* suggests that bodily virginity is less important than a kind of mental maidenhood of the undivided will. The anchoress is

⁶ Cap. x (*PL* 89, 110).

⁷ *De sancta uirginitate*, ed. Assmann, p. 40, ll. 396, 401–03.

⁸ Compare the Middle English poem *Of Cleue Maydenhod*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, *E.E.T.S.* 25 (London, 1867), p. 6, where the loss of virginity seems equal to the loss of eternal, divine life: “he hit kepe, he is unslæze” (“whoever retains it is ‘unslain’”).

urged (p. 16) to praise Mary's maternity, accomplished "wið vte neuerich bruche mid ihol meidenhod" ("without any breach, with whole virginity"); and to beseech her, "hel me þ̅ am þ̅uruh wil tobroken as idrede, hwat se beo of dede" ("heal me that am, as I fear, broken in will, whatever I be *in fact*"). *Hali Meidenhad*, too, contains references to the notion that virginity is defective and sterile without humility. As the author says,

zif þu haues wið meidenhad meokelic 7 mildschipe; godd is iþin heorte. Ah zif þer is ouerhohe oðer eni prude in; he is utlahe prof. for he muhen ha nanes weis bedden in a breoste. (p. 43)

(if thou hast with virginity meekness and mildness, God is in thy heart. But if there is presumption or any pride in it, He is an outlaw from it; for these can not bed together in one breast.)

Although quick to assert that maidenhood surpasses the states of widowhood and marriage, the author must admit (p. 43), "tah is betere a milde wif oðer a meoke widewe þen a prud meiden" ("yet a mild wife or a meek widow is better than a proud virgin"). In Christian gnosis virginity was condign to the offense that made redemption necessary: asexuality was the remedy for an original sexual transgression. In the western tradition following Augustine, however, it is clear that pride can cancel out the value of virginity. In fact, virginity comes close to being merely a function of the exercise of humility, the virtue most directly antithetical to the supposed nature of the original sin in the West. In other words, by the twelfth century, the recessiveness of the idea of a sexual sin had disguised the essential structural link between virginity and the Fall.

Another sign of a reduction in the ontological content of *virginitas* is the diminution of the eschatological role of asexuality. As previously noted, Christian gnosis saw virginity as an anticipation of the sexlessness of the millenium (and of Paradise). The idea appears in *Hali Meidenhad*, the most conservative work of the Katherine Group, where virginity is the quality which

iþis deadlich lif scheapeð in hire estat of þe blisse undeadlich iþat eadi lond as brud ne nimeð gume, ne brudgume bruide. 7 techeð her on eorðe in hire liflade þe liflade of heuene. (p. 13)

(in this mortal life creates in its estate the immortal bliss in that blessed land where bride takes not groom, nor bridegroom bride; and that teaches in its mode of life here on earth the heavenly mode of life.)

Virginity on earth anticipates the celibacy of Paradise; the author of *Hali Meidenhad* is therefore consistent in portraying the “maidens” of that place as being both male and female. They are those who join in the angelic song

pat nane halwes ne mahen bute meidenes ane singen in heuene. 7
folhen godd almihti euch godes ful hwider se he eauer wendeð as þe
oðre ne mahen nawt þah ha beon alle hise sunnen 7 alle hise
dehtren. (p. 19)

(that no saints but virgins alone may sing in heaven; and who follow God almighty, the fullness of good, whithersoever he wends, as others cannot, though they be all his sons and daughters.)

In the legend of *Saint Katherine*, too, the 144,000 gathered about the throne are virgins of both sexes. The virgin Katherine appears “mid monie / hwite wurðliche men, / 7 meidnes inohe / al abuten biset” (“with many / venerable men clothed in white / and maidens not a few / placed all around,” p. 76).⁹ But in *Sawles Warde* the eschatological drama pictures the “eadi meidnes ilikest towart engles” (“the blessed maidens most like to angels”) standing *below* the “holy confessors” (and others) in the heavenly hierarchy, even though it is admitted that their virginity “overcumeþ cunde” (“overcomes nature”) and permits them to sing the song no others may join in.¹⁰ Their removal from the immediate vicinity of the throne can probably be explained as the result of male prerogative, since it is clear from the context that the virgins in question are now *only* women.¹¹

It is in details such as these that the competition between the older monastic tradition on virginity and the insistent feminism of the twelfth century becomes plainly visible. While the concept of strict asexuality is certainly in decline, deep-rooted Christian gnostic premises will occasionally surface through the overlay of feminist emphasis to create curious inconsistencies that writers are put to odd shifts to avoid. The ancient idea that virginity is equivalent to the *vita angelica*, for example, though still very much alive in the twelfth

⁹ See also p. 82, where the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem are said to be “alle singinde somet / ase lif leowie / euch an mid oðere” (“all singing together as true lovers, each one with another”) – a feature strikingly reminiscent of the gnostic *syzygia*.

¹⁰ Ed. Morris, *Old English Homilies*, p. 261 (*Sawles Warde* appears on pp. 244–67).

¹¹ In the back of the author’s mind may well have been Rev. xiv.4, which speaks about the 144,000 “who have not been defiled with women.”

century, has undergone an obvious reduction of its original content. For one thing the identification of virginity with the female sex attracts to the putative nature of the angels a certain femininity. Correspondingly, there is a tendency to demobilize the heavenly hosts, to deprive them of their military function, heretofore a principal feature of the monastic world view. One wonders whether the celestial hierarchy would not have found it demeaning to be pressed into service – no matter how appropriately – to protect the virginity of exclusively female saints, as quite often happens in the legends of the Katherine Group. In *Seinte Iuliene*, for example, God speaks to the imprisoned Juliana through the voice of an angel, who, with fine tactical sense, counsels her to leap upon Belial (who is himself impersonating an angel) and subdue him by main force.¹² In *Saint Katherine*, when that lady is fixed to a horrible engine of torture, she prays that God will confound her enemies:

þis wes uneaðe iseid,
 ƿ an engel ne com,
 wið ferliche afluhte
 fleoninde aduneward,
 7 draf þerto dunriht
 as an þunres dune. (p. 100)

(this was scarcely said,
 that an angel came
 with wonderful flight
 flying downwards,
 and drove straight down to it
 like a thunder clap.)

He strikes the device such a forceful blow that it clatters and breaks into peices. Over against this sort of conduct, the angels in *Hali Meidenhad* who witness the loss of virginity by a mortal (p. 17), are curiously only “isweamed” (“fluttered”) “þat seoð hare suster swa sorhfulliche afallet” (“to see their sister so sorrowfully fallen”). In turn the devils observing the same event are also a far remove from the formidable fiends of *Guthlac*; more comical than awe-inspiring, they “hoppen 7 kenchinde beaten hondes to gederes” (“hop and laugh aloud and beat their hands together”).

Bound up closely with the concept of the angelic life, as we have seen, was the idea of *simplicitas*. The more gnostic interpretation of

¹² *De Liflade ant te Passium of Seinte Iuliene*, ed. S. R. T. O. d’Ardenne, E.E.T.S. 248 (London, 1961), p. 33. Further citations are from this edition.

this *topos* survives in early thirteenth-century writing, although not without an erosion of meaning that occurs in the process of adapting it to a feminized ideal. The genuinely monastic conception of simplicity is present in *Hali Meidenhad*, where it is urged that maidenhood is dear to God because it is connatural with Him:

ʒif hit is godd leof þat is him self swa ilich. hit nis na wunder for he is leofluket þing. 7 wiðuten eauer euch bruche 7 wes eauer 7 is cleane ouer alle þing. 7 ouer alle þing luueð cleannesse. And hwat is lufsumre þing 7 mare to herien bimong eorðliche þinges þen þe mihte of meidenhad bute bruche and cleane ibroiden on himseluen. þat makeð of eorðlich mon 7 wummon. heouene engel. (pp. 11, 13)

(if it is dear to God, that is, so like Himself, it is no wonder: for He is the loveliest thing, ever without any breach, and was ever, and is pure beyond all things; and above all things loves purity. And what more lovable thing and what more to be extolled among earthly things than the virtue of virginity, without breach and in purity modelled on Himself, which makes heavenly angels of earthly men and women.)

The author obviously belongs in the Christian gnostic tradition, wherein virginity is the image of the divine essence. The concept would have been readily available to him in the writings of Bernard, who sees the deiform soul wandering in the world, the “Land of Unlikeness,” tempted by images of corporeal things, but coming eventually to realize that it bears “the image of Purity Itself.”¹³ Still, the more common reaction to Bernardine mysticism in this sort of devotional writing, an affective and even passionate response to the love of a highly sexualized Christ, made it practically impossible to retain the concept of asexuality as imitative of the divine nature. What the Katherine Group again serves to illustrate is a thorough reduction of the entitative implications of *simplicitas* to the merely psychological. In the *Ancrene Riwele*, where the author speaks of the love an anchoress should have for God, he names as a prerequisite for it a singleness of moral purpose defined as a “pure heart”:

hwat is schir heorte; ich hit habbe iseid er, þet is. ðet ʒe no þing ne wilnen. ne ne luuien: bute god one. and þeo ilke þinges uor god: ðet helpeð ou toward him. . . . Schirnesse of heorte: is godes luue one. i þissen is al ðe strençde: of alle religiuns. and þe ende of alle ordres. (pp. 175–76)

¹³ *St. Bernard*, pp. 106, 167.

(What is purity of heart? I have said it before, that is, that you should not desire or love anything except God only, and those things for His sake that help you toward Him. . . . Purity of heart is the love of God alone. In this is all the strength of all religious life, and the purpose of all orders.)

In a modern definition of *simplicitas* Fr. Leclercq describes it as the avoidance of that "complexity which is the characteristic of a mind attracted to multiple and varied objects." As such, however, it is little more than a kind of meekness or humility, and he is not averse to calling it that. "In all eyes," he writes (from a modern point of view, of course, but with remarkable relevance to the changing situation in the twelfth century), "'holy simplicity' is the humility which safeguards the integrity of the *mind*, which ensures the search for God alone."¹⁴ The concept no longer bears any relation to asexuality, except insofar as sexual relations are regarded as one more factor tending to complicate the quest for God. However valid the latter notion may be from a psychological point of view, it remains essentially a kind of attenuation of the original ideal of *simplicitas* as conceived by Christian gnosis.

Another concept transformed in English devotional literature is the idea of contemplation, heir to the ancient concept of *gnosis* itself. We have seen that early monasticism conceived virginity, the soul's renunciation of all contact with the material world, to be the first condition of intimate communion with God. Secret knowledge belonged only to those who managed to reverse the noetic effects of Adam's sexual fall. A semblance of this idea appears in the legend of *Saint Katherine*, the virgin-martyr whose life and death presumably find their exemplar in the life of Hypatia, the Egyptian female philosopher. Here virginity and gnosis are closely linked: it is implied that Katherine's indomitable virginity somehow bestows on her the intellectual capacity to match wits with fifty "scolmeistres" called in by the pagan emperor Maxence to vanquish her arguments in favor of Christianity. After a visit from the angel Michael, who bears a promise of victory, Katherine triumphantly asserts that secular knowledge is meaningless and that only Christ gives true understanding (pp. 33-34, 36, 41). The depiction of Katherine as a *sponsa Christi* occurs several times, and in one instance the concept of spiritual nuptials is directly related to the theme of divine knowledge. In that passage Katherine declares that when she saw the light of true learning that leads to eternal life,

¹⁴ *The Love of Learning*, pp. 253-54; emphasis added.

ich leafde al þ̅ oðer,
 7 toc me him to lauerd
 7 makede him mi leofmon,
 þe þeos word seide
 þurh an of his witezen:
 "Ichulle fordon þe wisdom
 of þeos wise worldmen,
 he seið, 7 awarpen þe with
 of þeose world witti." (pp. 24-25)

(I left all that other,
 and took him for my lord
 and made him my lemman,
 who these words said
 through one of his prophets:
 "I shall destroy the wisdom
 of those wise worldlings,
 he saith, and cast down the understanding
 of the prudent of this world.")

Katherine's intimate knowledge of the mind of God derives from the spiritual marriage; the idea recalls the noetic power the soul marriage bestows in the thought of Origen and Bernard.¹⁵ Generally speaking, however, the author of *Saint Katherine* seems to use the *sponsa Christi* motif with something less than a clear understanding of its once organic ties with virginity as the criterion of *gnosis*.

In sum, when the Katherine Group records the traditional monastic themes of the *vita angelica*, *simplicitas*, and contemplation, these often seem to sound only faint echoes of the meanings they had in the Christian gnostic tradition. In the adaptation of these variations upon the theme of asexuality to an audience grown keenly aware of a distinctively female style of spirituality, the devotional works of the period by and large tend to obscure the profundity of the gnostic principle. The notion that a virgin possesses secret knowledge, for instance, is corollary to a radical understanding of virginity that has precious little relevance to twelfth-century feminism. This blurring of Christian-gnostic premises, however, is best seen in what happens to monastic *topoi* related to the dualistic world view and the classic theory of atonement.

¹⁵ Cf. Wolpers, pp. 180-81.

3. *Virginity and Moral Conflict*

Perhaps nowhere is the disparity between the classic theory of atonement and the juridical view so pronounced as in the large number of inconsistencies produced by the survival of the *miles Christi* motif in twelfth-century literature for women. By that time, the sexualization of the nuptial idea had changed the general tone of female spirituality from one of asceticism, self-denial, and a certain emotional asperity more characteristic of the earlier Middle Ages, to one marked by strong sentiment, a certain willingness to luxuriate in emotion, and a tenderness of response inspired by contemplation of the suffering Jesus. Under such conditions, the application to the nun or anchoress of terms usually reserved for the *milites Christi* would seem highly inappropriate. Nevertheless, the Katherine Group and related writings preserve a remarkable number of references to the motif of the soldier, a fact which indicates that the period was one of gradual transition, and of no sharp break, in the thinking on virginity. In the *Ancrene Riwe* the author advises his women of the militaristic nature of Christian asceticism, and asks:

and nis he akang knit. þet secheð reste in ðe uihte. 7 eise ipe place?
 Milicia est uita hominis super terram. al þis [lif] her; is ase uiht ase
 iob witneð. auh efter þisse uiht her. 3if we wel uihteð; menke 7
 reste abit us et hom. in ure owune londe. þet is hoerliche. (p. 162)

(and is he not a foolish knight who looks for rest in the fight and ease in the place of combat? "The life of man upon earth is a warfare." This whole life here is like a battle, as Job witnesses. But after this combat, if we fight well, honor and rest abide us at home in our own land, that is, in heaven.)

The Katherine Group, particularly, shows a certain dependence upon the fundamental dualism out of which the *miles* idea at first developed. *Hali Meidenhad* counsels holy women to follow the advice of Paul in I. Cor. ix.25-27, where he writes of chastising one's body for the reward of an imperishable crown; only by this means will the battle with the devil be won (p. 47). Here it does seem that the classic concept of salvation history as a pitched battle with the fiends remains in the background, and that the author is using it more in the manner of a time-tested literary motif. But in the much older legends, the classic understanding of the *miles Christi* is intrinsic to the life of perfection. In *Saint Katherine* the *agon* with the forces of evil takes the form of an energetic debate against the repre-

sentatives of pagan error. There is an emphasis, as we have seen, upon the “true gnosis” of Alexandrian Christianity, but no less weight is placed on Katherine’s combatative instincts. Before the disputation begins, she arms herself

mid soðe bileaue
 7 wrat on hire breoste
 7 biforen hire teð
 7 tunge of hire muð
 þe hali rode taken
 7 com leapinde forð. (p. 11)

(with true faith
 and marked on her breast
 and before her teeth
 and the tongue of her mouth
 the sign of the holy rood,
 and then came leaping forth.)

Similarly, there is no doubt in *Seinte Marherete* about virginity’s being in the nature of a robust athleticism. The saint is assaulted by the devil in the form of a horrible dragon. Not content that evil simply defeat good, but hoping even to devour it, the dragon

sette his sariliche muð, 7 unmeaðlich muchel, on heh on hire
 heaued; 7 rahte ut his tunge to þe ile of hire helen, 7 swengde hire
 in, 7 forswelth into his wide wombe. (p. 24)

(set his wretched and immeasurably great mouth on high on her
 head, and reached out his tongue to the skin of her heels, and
 flung her in and swallowed her into his wide stomach.)

Margaret escapes intact, however, as the sign of the cross and her prayers cause the dragon’s body to explode her out. When the devil reappears, this time in the guise of a black man “muche deale blackre þen eauer eani blamon” (“a great deal blacker than ever any blackamoor”),

pet milde meiden Margarte grap þet grisliche þing þet hire ne
 agras nawiht, 7 heteueste to him bi þet eateliche top 7 hef him up 7
 duste him dunriht to þer eorðe, ant sette hire riht-fot on his ruhe
 swire 7 feng on þus to speokene: –

Stute nu, earme steorue, 7 swic nuðe lanhure, swikele swarte
 deouel, þet tu ne derue me nawt mare, for mi meiðhad ne helpeð
 þe nawiht. (p. 28)

(That mild [!] maiden Margaret grasped that grisly thing which

frightened her in no way, and firmly took him by the hideous hair of his head, and hove him up and dusted him adownright to the ground, and set her right foot on his rough-neck, and began thus to speak:

“Lay off now, wicked plague, at least now that – deceitful dark devil – thou afflictest me no more, as my virginity has been little help to thee.”)

With something like Anglo-Saxon understatement, the holy spitfire thus proclaims that the source of her superhuman strength in the battle against personified evil is her maidenhood. *Seinte Iuliene*, too, manifests the sort of saintly belligerence that characterizes the female as a soldier of Christ. Juliana undergoes tortures that would destroy the resolve of a Tamburlaine, but her indomitable virginity provides her with the firmness not to succumb, and, in fact, prevents her from being harmed at all. Her evident relish for hand-to-hand combat is anything but ladylike: when confronted by Belial in the disguise of an angel, she is suspicious, leaps upon him, wrestles him down, and extracts a confession of the fiendish wiles he uses to lead men astray. How far-removed is the mettlesome pith of this Juliana (and this Margaret) from the tender feminine susceptibility of *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd!* The classical ideal of virginity, regarded as a kind of divine militancy against demons, remains doggedly present in later devotional literature, although its logical and tonal inconsistency with the sentimentality that attached to the *sponsa Christi* motif is obvious.

Occasionally, however, the Katherine Group shows instances where the classic concept of salvation history finds a happy rapprochement with feminized spirituality. Toward the end of *Hali Meidenhad*, for example, the author continues with his commentary upon I Cor. ix.25, a *locus classicus* for the notion of the soldier of Christ:

Hwen þu as te apostle seið ne schalt beon icrunet bute þu beo asailzet. for godd wile cruni þe; he wile leote ful wel þe unwiht asailze þe. þat tu earni þer þurh crune upo crune. (p. 47)

(When thou, as the apostle saith, shalt not be crowned except thou be assailed – for God will crown thee – He will allow the evil one to assail thee, that thou may earn thereby crown upon crown.)

Despite his somewhat deserved reputation for cantankerousness, the author does show surprisingly tender regard for the sensibilities of his female readership when he goes on to counsel them to a decidedly unmuscular response:

for þi hit is þe meast god. þat hwen he greueð þe meast. 7 toward þe wið fondinge wodeluker weorreð. 3if þu wel hiles te under godes wenges. (p. 47)

(hence it is of most benefit for thee, that when he [the devil] grieveth thee most, and with temptations warreth more madly upon thee, if thou wilt hide thyself under God's wings.)

The *Wohunge* also attempts to reconcile the fierceness of the classic *agon* with the savory associations of a feminized bridal idea. Discoursing upon what must qualify as a kind of dark night of the soul, the speaker complains to Christ:

Arh ich was meself 7 wah 7 neh dune fallen. 7 mine fan derue. swa buchede 7 swa kene ꝥ hwen þai sehen me swa wak 7 swa forhuhande 7 buhunde toward ham. þei . . . grennede for gladschipe euchan toward oðer as wode wulues ꝥ fainen of hare prairie. Bote þer þurh understonde i ꝥ tu wult hauei me to leofmon 7 to spuse. ꝥ tu ne þoledes ham noht fulli fainen of me. (pp. 27–28)

(Fearful I was myself and sorrowful and nigh dejected; and my foes were bold, so blustering and so keen that when they saw me so weak and so fearful and so yielding toward them, they . . . grinned with gladness each one to the other, as mad wolves that rejoice over their prey. But thereby I understand that Thou wilt have me for thy beloved and for thy spouse, that Thou didst not permit them fully to rejoice over me.)

Remarkably, the author has perceived the tonal clash between the violence of the classic struggle and the sense of quiet comfort that comes with the marriage to Jesus; with something less than total success, he has tried to resolve it by stressing almost exclusively the passivity of the female role.

Besides the *miles Christi* motif itself, there are several other indications in the Katherine Group that virginity constitutes an effective protection against the attacks of evil. As the devil in the legends makes his appearance principally to “merren wið his mucele mein þe mihte of . . . meiðhad” (“mar with his great might the power of virginity”); so it is precisely the condition of *virgo intacta* that saves the saint. The encratic view of virginity as a prophylaxis against the contamination and disintegration of the body appears as living doctrine in *Hali Meidenhad*, where the author asserts:

Pis is 3et þe uertu þat halt ure bruchele feat þat is ure feble flesh as sente pawel leareð in hal halinesse. And as tat swote smirles 7 deorest of oðre þat is icleopet basme. wit þat deade licome þat is

ter wið ismittit from rotunge. alswa deð meidenhad meidenes
cwike flesch wiðute wemmunge halt alle hire limen. (p. 13)

(This is yet the virtue that holds our breakable vessel, that is our feeble flesh, in whole holiness. And as that sweet unguent and dearest beyond others that is called balm protects the dead body that is rubbed therewith from rotting, so also does virginity a virgin's living flesh, maintaining all her limbs without stain.)

In at least two instances in the Katherine Group legends, the deprivations worked upon the bodies of the persecuted female virgins deprive them of one kind of physical integrity. In *Saint Katherine* angels appear on the scene to minister to the saint, who has just been given a thrashing with knotty scourges. They anoint the holes and wounds in her body,

al tobroken
of þe beatinge,
þæt tet flesch 7 te fel
wurðen swa feire,
þæt ha awundreden ham
swiðe of þæt sihþe. (p. 78)

(all broken
from the beating,
that the flesh and the skin
became so fair,
that they [the bystanders] wondered
greatly at the sight.)

The implication is that her virginity, as much as the ministrations of the angels, accounts for her marvelous recovery. In *Seinte Iulienne* the great spiked wheel used to tear the saint's body to pieces has already begun to do its work when an angel arrives from heaven to destroy the fearful engine and loose her bonds. Juliana is preserved "ase fischhal as þah ha nefde nohwer hurtes ifelet" ("as fish-whole as though she had felt no hurts at all," p. 53). In both cases the essence of a more primitive conception of virginity, bodily integrity, is wonderfully restored after the assaults of those who are, in effect, deputies of the fiends of hell. Even as late as the thirteenth century we are still apparently dealing with the archetypal notion that virginal wholeness, considered as a kind of sacramental emblem, preserves the life and health of the body. We have already seen *Hali Meidenhad* refer to the loss of virginity as a "death-stroke"; a variation of that idea occurs in the *Ancrene Riwele*, where the author cites

the story of the sons of Remmon, the murderers of Isboseth (II Kings iv.5–6). Using the story as an exemplum to illustrate laxity in the face of temptation, he explains

þet nis nout to uorȝiten. ðet ase holi writ telleð heo þuruh stihten isboset adun into schere. her seið seint gregorie. Iningune ferire est uitam mentis carnis delectatione perforare. þe ueond þuruh stihð ðet scher. hwon delit of lecherie; þurleð ðe heorte. (p. 122)

(that is not to be forgotten, that as Holy Writ tells, they stabbed Isboseth in the groin. Of this Saint Gregory says: "To strike in the groin is to pierce the life of the soul with fleshly delight." The fiend stabs in the groin when delight of lechery pierces the heart.)

Although the sexual wound in the thinking of Gregory (and of the author of the *Riwele*) is but a metaphor for a spiritual condition, it seems directly reminiscent of the Christian-gnostic belief that the soul is defiled through the impact of the material world upon it.

In Christian gnosis Origen, for one, had also countenanced the frightening notion of a sexual union with demons as the moral antithesis to the spiritual marriage with the Word.¹⁶ This fascinating corollary to a strict dualism appears to have survived well into the thirteenth century. In *Hali Meidenhad* it is used, significantly enough, only as a metaphor for the psychological state of pride. Normally the virgin is the favorite of God:

Ah þah þu meiden beo wiðute bruche of þi bodi 7 tu habbe prude onde oðer wraððe ȝiscinge oðer wac wil inwið ipin heorte; þu forhores te wið þe unwiht of helle. 7 he streoneð on þe þe teames þat tu temest. (p. 41)

(But though thou art, maiden, without breach of thy body, and have pride, spite, or wrath, covetousness or wicked will within thy heart; thou whores with the evil one of hell. And he begets on thee the offspring that thou bearest.)

The figurative sexual union between professed virgin and devil appears to be a vestige of the ancient gnostic belief according to which both vicious and virtuous conduct were ultimately to be judged as a species of *syzygia*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Völker, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal*, p. 105, n. 1. comments: "Wie die Engel in den Dämonen ihre Gegenspieler haben, wie der Schutzengel in dem bösen Engel seinen Gegner hat – eine ganz unpaulinische Vorstellung – so hat auch die enge Verbindung mit Christus ihr Gegenstück in einer umgekehrten 'unio mystica' mit der feindlichen Macht."

¹⁷ As late as the thirteenth century, Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus*

Another manifestation of the basically dualistic world view of monastic thought was the use of the monastery itself to symbolize certain aspects of the monk's embattled virginity. As we have seen in the case of Guthlac's *beorg*, a fortified enclave carved out of the material domain of the demons stands for virginity in its classic sense: asexuality, eremitical non-involvement in the world of matter, combined with a sort of irredentism of the spiritual. In devotional literature written for women, the symbolic rendering of virginity by means of the metaphor of the fortified place is also common, but, as in the Old English *Juliana*, in the form of an allegory of the castle of the body, where the body's integrity safeguards the resident soul.¹⁸ In *Hali Meidenhad* "the high tower of Jerusalem" typifies the state of virginity, wherein the maiden stands and looks down upon those leading a less exalted life:

Syon was sum hwile iclepet þe hehe tur of Jerusalem. And seið syon ase muchel on englische leodene. ase heh sihðe. And bitacneð bis tur. þe hehschipe of meidenhad. (p. 5)

(The high tower of Jerusalem was once called Sion. And "Sion" is as much as to say, in English, "exalted vision." And this tower signifies the elevated state of virginity.)

The author of the *Ancrene Riwele* seems to be dealing with much the same image when he speaks of the life of the anchoress as a "tower" more exposed by its lofty stature to the winds of temptation. He continues, comforting the virgin with the fact that

þe tur nis nout asaield ne ðe castel ne ðe cite hwon heo beoð biwunnen; also ðe helle weorrur. ne asaield nenne mid fondunge ðet he haueð in his hond. (p. 101)¹⁹

(the tower is not assailed, nor a castle nor a city, after they are won. And so the hellish warrior does not assail with temptation any he has already in his hand.)

Most interesting is an example in *Sawles Warde*, a piece that might seem perfectly neutral as far as the question of sexuality were con-

miraculorum, III, vi-xii, *ed. cit.*, I, 134-40, relates a number of stories he professes to believe in which nuns and (especially) monks have sexual relations with incubi or succubi.

¹⁸ See above, and also Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, "General Index," s.v. "Castle."

¹⁹ See also pp. 109-10, where the moated castle stands for the good man against whom the fiend wars, while the moat is "the deep ditch of deep humility."

cerned, since the inhabitants of the allegorical castle are the faculties of the soul, without regard to whether Man be male or female. But the presence of this work in the Katherine Group makes it worth examining for what it suggests about the use of a locus to represent virginity. Whereas Guthlac's defense of his monastic foundation implied a dualistic belief in the ability of God's virginal warrior to wrest some part of the corrupt material world from the sway of the fiends, the fortress in *Sawles Warde* would logically seem to represent only the physical body manned by "Wit" and "Will," who defend the treasure of the castle, "Soul," from the attacks of vices. It is significant that the devil is no longer a *helle weorrur* who would batter down the walls of the castle and be content; rather, for the purposes of the allegory, the archfiend of *Sawles Warde* is cast as a thief:

forte breoke þis hus efter þis tresor, þat godd bohte mid his deað.
ant lette lif o rode; is moni þeof a buten. (p. 247)

(for to break this house after this treasure that God bought with His death and let out his life for on the rood, there is many a thief about.)

It should be noted, however, that the narrative becomes inconsistent on the literal level: we learn that thieves would force entry into the castle not in order to *steal* the treasure (the soul), but "to a murðrin hire þrinne" ("to murder her therein"). This discrepancy in the motivation of a simple "thief" (quite unexpected in allegory), might be the result of the author's dissatisfaction with the dramatic possibilities of thievery. More probably, however, it suggests an inability to escape completely what must have been the received and conventional significance of such "castle allegory": spiritual warfare, waged most often to protect a spiritualized locus whose impenetrability traditionally betokened virginity.

The *Ancrene Riwe* exhibits the successful conjunction of this theme and the later medieval notion of Christ as the handsome and knightly lover. Deftly integrating the old into the new, the author portrays Christ as the champion of the (female) soul, who offers to marry the lady besieged in her castle. The emphasis lies not upon the knight's prowess as a warrior – indeed, the knight is "defeated" – but on his human willingness to die for the love of the lady. He pledges to her that

ich chulle uor ðe luue of ðe. nimen þis fiht up on me. and aredden
þe of ham; þet schecheð þine deað. ich wot þauh for soðe: þet ich

schal bitweonen ham underuongen deaðes wunde. and ich hit wull-le heorteliche. uor to ofgon þine heorte. (p. 177)

(I shall for love of thee take this fight upon myself, and deliver thee from those who seek thy death. I know, though, forsooth, that I shall among them receive a death's wound; but I will take it heartily, in order to win thy heart.)

The sexualized *sponsa Christi* motif gains impact here through its ties with the romance tradition and courtly love, but it does so in such a way as to avoid obliterating what remains of the idea of the fortified *castellum* as a symbol of virginity.

One more element of the classic view of atonement ought to be glanced at again for its changing meaning in the context of female spirituality. It is that virginity is both the sign and condition of election to the number of the perfect Christians. The legends of the Katherine Group, especially, imply that virginity is to be identified with Christianity itself. This vestige of Christian encratism seems to run through *Seinte Marherete*, where the girl's defense of the faith is effectually equated with the preservation of her virginity against the lecher-idolator Olibrius. He casts Margaret into prison ostensibly for her refusal to worship idols (a refusal coupled with a pledge of her virginity to her beloved Christ). But the author's very next breath links idolatry and the loss of virginity, as Olibrius is said (p. 10) to "hefde betere bi-poht him o hwucche wise he walde merren hire meiðhad" ("have bethought him better of what way he would mar her maidenhood"). In the legend of *Seinte Iulienne* we hear the saint assert, in reply to an offer of marriage from the pagan Eleusius, that she will give up her virginity reluctantly, and then only to a Christian man, implying, evidently, that it is somehow a special mark of the Christian (pp. 11, 21).²⁰ There is no doubt that virgins remain the specially chosen, the "elect" of God. Saint Margaret, standing with her foot on the devil's neck, reprimands him thus (p. 28): "Stute nu, alde monslahe, þet tu ne slea heonneuorð Cristes icorene" ("Lay off now, old manslayer, lest thou henceforth slay Christ's chosen one"). In *Hali Meidenhad* virginity is termed a "seal" of God's special grace; the author warns:

²⁰ Perhaps the doctrine of "disparity of cult" is involved with the mystery of Christian virginity. In *Seinte Iulienne*, p. 13, the virgin asserts that marriage with a pagan would imply eternal death. Cf. Aelfric, *Homily 35, De Crisanto et daria*, in *Aelfric's Lives of the Saints*, ed. Skeat, II, 380, where Chrysanthus's tempters seek to dissuade him from his Christian beliefs by proposing that he marry.

þu þenne seli meiden þat art ilote to him wið meidenhades merke,
ne brec þu nawt tat seil þat seiled inc to gederes. (p. 11)

(then thou, innocent maiden, that art allotted to Him with the
mark of maidenhood, break not that seal that seals you two
together.)

Threatened with death for her refusal to bow before pagan gods,
Margaret also boasts of her intimate relationship with Christ:

He haueð his merke on me iseiled wiþ his in-seil; ne mei vnc lif, ne
deð noþer, twemen otwa. (p. 12)

(He has sealed his mark on me with his seal; neither life, nor death
either, can rend us asunder.)

In contrast to these survivals of the older view of the special relationship between the virgin and Christ is the dominant twelfth-century position on the question of the physical loss of virginity. At issue was whether women who had had sexual intercourse could be admitted into the convent, the company of the perfect. While there does seem to have been a substantial residue of belief that only bodily integrity qualified one to become a nun, in the more conciliatory position taken, for example, by Rupert of Deutz in *De laesione virginittatis*, the criterion of physical integrity is far less important than the interior, psychological disposition of the candidate for profession. He discounts the opinions of those who hold the contrary on the basis of tradition alone.²¹ But that Rupert felt it necessary to write such a tract should be an indication of how much influence the more conservative view still held.

In summary, then, the Katherine Group and related writings reveal a substantial amount of interference and interaction between older monastic modes of expressing the reality of *virginitas*, and those which developed out of the feminist spirituality of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The older view remains, as it were, "frozen" in place even in the very context of the new. In general, its presence may be accounted for by the strong conservatism of the monastic tradition of culture and studies, and in particular, by the eclecticism of a work such as *Hali Meidenhad* or the surprisingly strict hagiographical traditionalism of the saints' legends. Allied as it was with a moribund classic theory of atonement, the conception of virginity inspired by the tradition of Christian gnosis was by the thirteenth century no longer in a position to influence the course of doctrinal

²¹ *PL* 170.545-60.

speculation over the place of sexuality in Christian life. What it could and did do was to leave evidence in devotional writing for women of a critical transition going on in that intellectual undertaking, one that finally was to move Christianity from the position of outright disavowal of sexuality, basically monastic in character but with roots in a gnostic tradition of the earliest eastern Fathers, to the modern standpoint of western orthodoxy, which consists even today in a rather begrudged embrace of the facts of life.

It is time to summarize the development of the ideal of virginal perfection in medieval Christianity and to consider, in a general way, some of its implications.

AFTERWORD

The ideal of virginity endured for more than a thousand years in the conservative environment of medieval monasticism, where it lay at the heart of the body of monastic ideology and gave life and substance to the regular activities of the cloistered life. Rooted ultimately in the austere dualistic tradition of Christian gnosis, to which it paid renewed allegiance at each period of reform, the institution generally equated virginity with the total abjuration of the material world, regarding it as the unique means of spiritual perfection. We have seen that Christian gnosis revered virginity as the moral antithesis to an original sexual sin. At the very least, it posited the loss of virginity as the metaphor of existential guilt and primal alienation, and some form of asexuality as characteristic of restored innocence. For Christian gnosis ontological *virginitas* was the focal element in the profound symmetry of salvation history.

In the western tradition of Augustine the original sin is explicitly denied to have been sexual in nature; for that reason the restoration of man to the condition of sinless perfection no longer depends upon sexlessness. Augustine's identification of sin and *libido* (as opposed to the equation of sin with sex itself), still allows virginity a certain acclaim, it is true, but rather as the highest degree of a stoically-conceived asceticism than as the imitation of Adam's angelic nature. The effect is a profound shift in emphasis, from ontological ideal to ethical: what in Christian gnosis had referred more to a unique status of perfected *being* is transformed into merely visible evidence of a habitual state of the *will*. Thus, while the broad stream of ascetical practice indebted to Augustine's thought continues to pay a certain homage to virginity – that status, for example, continues to pay a hundredfold reward – there is no question but that it also comes to terms with the material world and the very fact of sexuality. By

doing so, it dispenses with any remaining philosophical rationale, solidly grounded in ontology, for continuing to assert that the cloistered life constitutes Christian perfection.

The important changes in the ideal of virginal perfection we have observed through the shifting focus of the *sponsa Christi* motif point to a gradual modification of monastic philosophy under consistent pressure from the Augustinian position on sexuality. They indicate something of the degree to which that philosophy became estranged from the principles which had given it first impulse. The tendency of monasticism to grow less heedful to voices out of the eastern deserts and more acquiescent to its historical circumstances was checked in the twelfth century by a reform involving a reaffirmation of essential premises. As we have seen, the urge to revitalize the institution embodied the crucial attempt by Bernard of Clairvaux to re-establish the Origenist interpretation of the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs as a basis for monastic contemplation. Contemporary cross currents, however, nullified Bernard's intention of equipping monasticism once again with a genuine epithalamian mysticism, and his own *Sermons* became the principal ingredient in a fairly sweeping feminization of religious devotion. The *sponsa* metaphor was taken in a frankly literal sense; it was used to celebrate the humanity of the Bridegroom and to express the spiritual relationship of the virgin woman to Christ in the explicit language of sexual passion. It is no coincidence that, at precisely the point that devotional literature for women is said to have become "mystical," the male sex began to be dispossessed of the ideal of virginal perfection. The result of the misapplication of Bernardine mysticism, in other words, was the irretrievable identification of virginity with womankind.

An appreciation of virginity's altered role in the economy of salvation may provide a new perspective on the decline of monasticism in the later Middle Ages. By the twelfth century Satan and his battalions were no longer so serious a menace to the spiritual defenses of the institution; rather, it was scholasticism, the method of study advocated in the cathedral schools, that threatened to undermine its intellectual and theological foundations. Fr. Leclercq has outlined the differences between the monastic and scholastic traditions, suggesting that they resolve themselves into a basic distinction between spiritual methodologies.¹ But what we have learned of virginity as

¹ See *The Love of Learning*, pp. 6-7, where it is asserted that monastic education was oriented more toward spirituality than simple learning, toward *experiendum*, not just *sciendum*. Fr. Leclercq considers the differences be-

the focus of spiritual energy and strength within the monastic tradition argues that there are also real differences in the content of the two traditions. For beyond the fact of two spiritual cultures, beyond the existence of two fundamentally dissimilar modes of theologizing, remains the question of how it was these two traditions came to be two, and what it was that formed the ultimate issue over which they disagreed. The answer may well be that from the beginning the most elemental point of contention between the two was the place of sexuality in Christian life.

To suggest that the opposition between monastery and cathedral is finally a contest between the rejection or the acceptance of the very fact of human sexuality is at once both radical and commonplace. Putting the distinction in the form of a dichotomy throws new light on the popular wisdom that scholasticism is somehow more "worldly," the cloister more "otherworldly," in fundamental orientation. There is practical advantage in thus being able to define more exactly the spirit and motives behind the productions of a monastic culture, for it is only through a complete understanding of that culture that we can hope for significant enlightenment of the hidden recesses of the medieval mind. Even more important, perhaps, the issue of assent or non-assent to the fact of original human sexuality may help to explain the decline of monasticism, the early stages of which coincide with the impoverishment of the classic ideal of virginity that was taking place through the feminization of the soul marriage. Discussing the ways in which monasticism came to acknowledge the historical opposition of cloister and school, Fr. Lecerq notes that it was during the twelfth century that "monastic theology emerges with all its distinguishing characteristics clearly delineated."² We have seen that Bernard's attempt to endow with new appeal the ancient and venerable metaphor of the marriage to Christ played a notable role in that phenomenon. The question that should be asked, then, is whether monasticism's unique preoccupation between monastic and scholastic "cultures" in detail in Chapter IX, pp. 233-86. See also his article, "Y a-t-il une culture monastique?" in *Il monachesimo nell'alto medioevo e la formazione della civiltà occidentale*, Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 4 (Spoleto, 1957), pp. 347-56, where he characterizes the monastic tradition *vis-à-vis* the scholastic tradition as oriented toward the liturgy and the *lectio divina*; as much more dependent upon the Fathers; as less encyclopedic in its learning but more profound; and as possessing a certain homogeneity that allowed it to cross geographical and political boundaries.

² *The Love of Learning*, p. 236. See also p. 244, and the list of references to twelfth-century monastic works which take as one of their principal themes the ideological opposition between cloister and school.

tion with the *sponsa Christi* motif during this period was entirely fortuitous, or whether in fact the redefinition of the ideal of virginity which it hoped thereby to compass was a conscious effort to shore up the most fundamental premise of the monastic world view, the idea that perfection consists in asexuality. Indeed, it seems plausible that this outburst of epithalamianism was less a rallying cry than a kind of holding action against intellectual forces resolutely opposed to monasticism's view of salvation history – the rear-guard tactics, as it were, of a retreating *militia Christi*.

The sexualization of virginity unwittingly spawned by Bernardine mysticism first occurred in England, where, in the context of a monastic Christianity strongly tied to Rome and to the Augustinian tradition, the *sponsa Christi* motif had applied almost exclusively to female virgins. The concept of the soul marriage was quite alien to English tradition, and, as we have observed, the native version of the bridal metaphor quickly absorbed the novel and esoteric Cistercian view. The resulting amalgamation was a curious hybrid of the nuptial idea which restricted the metaphor to female virgins while begrudging them none of the passion of the Bernardine allegory. In the hands of a competent and sophisticated author sensitive to Bernard's intentions, like that of the *Ancrene Riwe*, the bridal union with a sexually attractive Christ remains carefully defined as allegorical only. But with lesser men the distinction between the literal and the figurative disappears; the soul marriage is reduced to a sensuous union between the female religious and a quite literally human and masculine Christ, as in *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*. The latter sort of devotional literature presents the passionate union with Christ inconsistently, that is, neither as fully allegorical nor as fully literal, but somewhere between. It thus represents an imperfect literary adaptation of an authentic mystical impulse. We have noted that the traditional means of expressing genuine mystical longing until the twelfth century was the Origenist concept of the marriage of the soul to the Word; with but few exceptions, the doctrines of the pseudo-Dionysius did not become widely known until somewhat later. It thus appears that one reason for the surprising growth in popularity of Dionysian mysticism within male monasticism of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was that the female sex had wholly appropriated the epithalamianism which Bernard had tried to revive.³

³ See Helen L. Gardner, "Walter Hilton and the Mystical Tradition in England," *Essays and Studies*, 22 (1937), 103–27, esp. 123.

The purpose of this study has been only to show how central is the place the ideal of virginal perfection occupies in the total structure of monastic thought, not to advance a hypothesis about the break-up of the institution itself, an extremely complex phenomenon which might more properly be the concern of the social and economic historian. On the other hand, it would be shortsighted to discount the continuing and pervasive influence of ideology as a factor in the institution's long tenure, as perhaps also in its decline. For social and economic theories of causation do not always penetrate to such empyrean realms of religious aspiration as that wherein the monastic impulse was first born and to which it returned periodically for spiritual revival. And if we have learned anything from this undertaking, it is that that impulse, without which the institution that grew around it would have appeared to those who embraced it an empty shell, was *essentially* idealistic, an utterly transcendental yearning for spiritual perfection.

The examination of the changing significance of the *sponsa Christi* metaphor has shown that until the twelfth century such presumably disparate elements of the monastic world view as the *vita angelica*, the notion that prophecy is the special prerogative of virgins, and the perception of virginity as spiritual prophylaxis, were at bottom divergent but corollary expressions of a single theological proposition growing out of the Christian-gnostic understanding of the first sin as a sexual transgression. If this can be admitted, then it becomes apparent that monasticism was possessed of a strength of doctrinal organicity to which the Church as a whole did not attain until the period of high scholasticism. For centuries the extraordinary structure of monastic ideology managed to survive well enough the vitiating effect upon its exterior members of a theological environment made somewhat alien by Augustine's "compromise" with human sexuality. But when that monastic Tree of Perfection became infected in its most radical ideal, the whole institution was bound to be shaken.

In its own growth western monasticism had undergone a kind of tropism in response to the lustre of the Augustinian tradition, but the non-Christian offshoots of the gnostic principle, shaded as they were under a cloud of "heresy," grew true to their original form. We have not attempted to trace the tradition of heterodox gnosticism that runs parallel to the development of monasticism throughout the Middle Ages, but to do so would be to show the sporadic resurgence of dualism at its most inveterate. The Cathars of southern France

provide the best medieval example of the pull the gnostic principle was still able to exert in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Despite the devastation wrought upon these gentle *katharoi*, their ideas did not die, but simply continued their growth underground. The impulse to create the community of the perfect on earth based primarily on the attainment of sexlessness by its members – a large part of what gave rise to Christian monasticism – has been felt fitfully ever since, especially in the impact that various pietistic and millenarian sects had in their attempts to set up theocratic utopian settlements in the New World. Mention could be made of the celibate communities of the Labadists in Maryland, the German Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata, Pennsylvania, or the Rappites at New Harmony, Indiana.⁴ But the most instructive case is that of the Shakers, the sect whose spiritual leader, the Englishwoman Ann Lee (b. 1736), regarded herself as the incarnation of the second coming of Christ, “the female element that supplemented Jesus and thus completed the revelation to the world of a father-and-mother-God.”⁵ Besides this belief in the androgynous deity of pagan gnosticism, the Shaker creed also included such tenets as the imminence of the millenium, individual prophecy and revelation through visions, and the perfectibility of human nature through renunciation of the flesh.⁶ The cornerstone of Shaker spirituality, however, was the practice of absolute celibacy, which, in turn, was solidly grounded on a vision in which Ann Lee saw “Adam and Eve in the Garden committing the act that resulted in their expulsion from the Garden and in saddling mankind with a heritage of sin.”⁷ Shakerism renounced physical marriage in favor of a spiritual *syzygia*; Ann Lee describes the marriage of the flesh as “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell,” and advises a male believer that “if you want to marry, you may marry the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸ Although the Shakers did not utterly condemn marriage among the “world’s people,” they re-

⁴ See Mark Holloway, *Heaven on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1680-1880*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), pp. 35, 53, 90-91. For a discussion of George Rapp’s views on Adam’s original bisexuality, which are astonishingly reminiscent of those of Gregory of Nyssa, see William E. Wilson, *The Angel and the Serpent* (Bloomington, Ind., 1964), pp. 21-25.

⁵ See Marguerite F. Melcher, *The Shaker Adventure* (Princeton, 1941), p. 13.

⁶ The best single statement of Shaker theology is *The Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing*, by Benjamin S. Youngs (Lebanon, Ohio, 1808). For a synopsis see Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York, 1953), pp. 96-99.

⁷ Melcher, p. 10; cf. pp. 114-15.

⁸ Qu. in Andrews, p. 22; cf. pp. 11-12, 20.

garded the sexless existence as an incomparably higher and purer state of life.

At least since the twelfth century orthodox Christianity has regarded such irruptions of the gnostic principle as rather fantastical, in part, of course, because of obvious doctrinal considerations, but also, one could argue, because of the subtle rapprochement reached at that time between the facts of human sexuality, both physical and psychological, and the mystery of a wholly spiritual and sexless conjugation with the Divine. This "incarnation" of the traditional *syzygia* which began with Bernard may have invalidated the use of the spiritual marriage by male monasticism, but it clearly invigorated that concept in the writings of subsequent female mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila. Concerning *Canticles* iv.7 she writes:

O soul beloved of God! Trouble not yourself; for, when His Majesty brings you here and speaks to you as delectably as He speaks to the Bride in the *Canticles*, – using many such phrases (as I have said) as "Thou art all fair, O my love," to show the pleasure which He takes in her – it is to be supposed that at such a time He will not allow you to displease Him; rather He will give you what you cannot yourself provide so that He may take the greater pleasure in you. He sees that the Bride is lost to herself and enraptured for love of Him, and that the very strength of love has taken from her the power of understanding, so that she may love Him the more.⁹

Teresa writes as a woman first, and only then as a saint and mystic. The profound insight and delicacy of her observations, here and elsewhere, has lent the enormous richness of flesh-and-blood femininity to the concept of the bride of Christ.

A survey of modifications in the idea of virginity must naturally place its emphasis upon the fact of change. Perhaps it needs to be pointed out, therefore, that, taking the longest view of things, the concept of virginity throughout the Christian era even up to the present day has shown a remarkable permanence and continuity. Even the palpable changes of the twelfth century were not so thoroughgoing as to obliterate the tradition. The fact that virginity, or, more precisely, asexuality, has remained so vital a concern of Christians that it is still to be reckoned with as an important issue in the twentieth century, is testimony either to the tenacity with which sexual concerns are embedded in the depths of the human psyche, or to the presence of an enduring encratic bias within Christianity. Or, most likely, to both, insofar as those two things verge on identity.

⁹ *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers, 3 vols. (New York, 1946), II, 393.

APPENDIX

THE VIRGIN MARY: VIRGIN BIRTH AND IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Any study of virginity would be incomplete without a discussion of the virginity of Mary, a source of contention in early Christianity but the object of tremendous popular devotion in the later Middle Ages. One could object, of course, against what might at first appear the irreverence of relegating the Queen of Heaven to an appendix. But the order of priorities implicit in this arrangement helps to right the historical balance between the Christian-gnostic ideal of asexuality and the heavy weight of piety that has attached itself to Mary's virginal motherhood. Mary's virginity is not essential to an understanding of virginal perfection in monasticism. In fact, the reverse is true; to comprehend the full significance of her virginity we must view it in the context of what virginity stood for in Christian gnosis, for the purity attributed to Mary is part of the general apotheosis of sexual purity we have observed in the early eastern Church. Our main interest here, therefore, is in seeing the relationship between Marian virginity and the gnostic principle. The broader questions of Mariology remain quite beyond the scope of an appendix; unfortunately, for example, it can be no part of our undertaking to deal with the development of the Mary-cult in the later Middle Ages, however significant that phenomenon might be as an index to the pervasive sexualization of spirituality that occurred at that time.¹ Our focus will be on narrow but profound concerns: the structural place of Mary's virginity in the system of Christian gnosis; the changing role of the dogma of the virgin birth; and the signifi-

¹ For the spread of the Mary-cult see Walter Delius, *Geschichte der Marienverehrung* (München, 1963), pp. 52-148; see also Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1963), and Leo Scheffczyk, *Das Mariengeheimnis in Frömmigkeit und Lehre der Karolingerzeit*, Erfurter Theologische Studien, 5 (Leipzig, 1959).

cance behind the development of the idea of the Immaculate Conception.

It is necessary at the outset to draw a distinction between Mary's virginity and the concept of the virgin birth, that is, between her own sexual status in and of itself and the idea that Christ was born through a miraculous virginal parturition. In regard to the former, the gospel account makes it clear that Mary was specially chosen from among all women. Luke i.27, 30, records Gabriel coming "to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary." And "the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God.'" She is called a "virgin" (*almah*), which the Septuagint renders as *parthenos*. The Greek version thus fixes Christianity's attention upon Mary's sexual purity as her supreme qualification for God's special favor. After the gospels, the first place where the virginity of Mary receives mention is in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, and, significantly, in certain gnostic-influenced works like the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Odes of Solomon*, where such factors as her total immunity from the pains of childbirth serve to emphasize Mary's near-angelic status.² It was not long before her virginity became an article of common belief. A cult of the Virgin first developed in Syria, but eventually spread throughout the Greek-speaking Church. Mary was proclaimed the *theotokos*, or "God-bearer," at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the perpetual virginity of Mary eventually followed, declared as dogma at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553 and reaffirmed at the Lateran Synod of 649.

Generally, the Fathers regarded Mary's unique position as a virgin as intimately related to the role of sexuality in original human nature, and much of their speculation draws a parallel between Mary and Eve. The first woman is nearly as central a figure in Christian redemption history as Mary, for it was she who banished Adam from the garden of original innocence and condemned the Second Adam to a death on the cross. But it is an incomplete view that seeks totally to oppose Eve and Mary, for the two women have one crucial quality in common: both are virgins. The statement may seem paradoxical, but it would have seemed the simplest truth in Christian gnosis, where Adam and Eve were thought to have lived in virginal innocence before the Fall, and where the original sin had involved a loss of that virginity. This typological linking of Eve and Mary seems to be based ultimately on the notion that what was lost by the

² See Graef, I, 33-35.

first woman was restored to the race by means of the virginity of the Redeemer's mother. We have already seen how certain Christian-gnostic Fathers such as Methodius of Olympus viewed Christ's mission as one of restoring virginity to mankind. Justin Martyr explains the suitability of Mary's virginity in such a scheme: "Christ became man by the Virgin so that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might be destroyed in the *same way as it originated*. For Eve, being a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word from the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death."³ Ephraem the Syrian blames Eve for fashioning the "garments of skin," that is, the sexuate bodies of fallen man; "through Eve was lost and through Mary returned the glorious, desirable splendor that had gone from Eve."⁴ In his great scheme of "recapitulation" Irenaeus develops the typology of Eve and Mary at length, the virgin obedient to the words of the angel as against the virgin seduced by the serpent, "virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience."⁵ It is important, however, that the point of opposition between the two is no longer the question of the preservation of virginity itself. In opting for the issue of obedience or disobedience, Irenaeus edges around the gnostic position that had opposed Mary's redemptive purity to Eve's damning sin. This is clearest where, in the same place, he adduces a type of Christ's virginal birth: he links Christ born of a virginal womb to Adam formed out of a virginal *earth*. In other words, he expressly avoids associating Mary with Eve, implicitly denying that the loss of her primal virginity – her giving birth to Cain and Abel – played any role in the mystery of the redemptive economy.

Irenaeus' position reflects a strong anti-gnostic bias; but the more popular view tended to preserve the antithesis between Mary and Eve in the matter of sexuality, even well into the Middle Ages. According to the Carolingian theologian Ratramnus (d. after 868), Mary's sexual innocence is to be compared to Adam and Eve's before the Fall.⁶ In the legend of *Maria* by Hroswitha, Mary is seen as the virginal restorer of that life lost by the virgin of old.⁷ In the "Advent

³ *Dialogus cum Tryphone judaeo*, c (PG 6.710), trans. Graef, I, 38.

⁴ *Hymn on the Church*, 45, 3, trans. Graef, I, 60.

⁵ *Adversus haereses*, III, xxii, 4; V, xxiii, 2 (PG 7A.958–59, 7B.1185–86). Cf. V, xix, 1 (PG 7B.1175–76).

⁶ *Liber de navitate Christi*, iii (PL 121.85).

⁷ Ed. Strecker, p. 4, ll. 3–4: "Quae parens mundo restaurasti, pia virgo, / Vitam quam virgo perdididerat vetula!"

Lyrics" of the *Exeter Book* Mary herself speaks of her own role in the Redemption:

ac crist onwrah
in dauides dyrre mægan
þæt is euan scyld eal forpynded. (25b-27)⁸

(but Christ did reveal
in David's dear kinswoman
that the sin of Eve is wholly nullified.)

Mary's eminence, in other words, derives from her virginity, which annulled the primal sin of Eve. As late as the fourteenth century, the poem *Cleanness* speaks of the punishment for the original sin, death, as condign to the first sin:

De defence watz þe fryt þat þe freke towched,
& þe dom is þe deþe þat drepez vus alle.
Al in mesure & meþe watz mad þe vengiaunce,
& eft e amended with a mayden þat make hade neuer.⁹

(The prohibition was the fruit that the man touched,
And the judgment is death, that destroys us all.
Entirely in measure and proportion was the vengeance
made,
Later to be amended by a maiden that never had a mate.)

If a sexual sin brought down God's vengeance, then the "amendment" of the sin through a virgin was likewise "in mesure & meþe" to the nature of the first offense. In consenting to be the virginal Mother of God, Mary accomplishes a kind of fulfillment of the virginal innocence of our first mother. The logical purpose of the typology of Eve and Mary is to oppose sin and redemption, contamination and purification; the antithesis retains its force through the inherent parallel based on virginity.

It could be argued that it is not so much virginity that Eve and Mary share as motherhood. The argument is a valid one if properly understood, but it must be understood in the following sense. The gist of the comparison in Christian gnosis is that Eve's motherhood, involving the loss of her virginity and of the primal simplicity of human nature, caused the multiplication of the race and made

⁸ Text and trans. in Jackson J. Campbell, *The Advent Lyrics of the Exeter Book* (Princeton, 1959), pp. 52-53.

⁹ Ed. Richard Morris, *Early English Alliterative Poems*, 2nd ed., repr., E.E.T.S. 1 (Oxford, 1965), pp. 44, ll. 245-48.

Mary's unique motherhood necessary. The latter marks the beginning of the restoration by the Messiah, a process that will terminate in a state of permanent asexuality. It is entirely fitting, therefore, that the return to the original state be initiated by a virginal birth of him who is destined to bring it about. In the symmetry of Christian gnosis Mary's virginity is paired with Eve's loss of that state not because a virgin birth was necessary to prove Christ's divinity (although that rationale appears often enough in other contexts), but because he who was sent to free the world from sin could not himself have been conceived in the manner in which sin entered the world, sexual intercourse.

In Christian gnosis Mary's virginity is the equivalent of the angelic state of human nature that Primal Man had enjoyed in Paradise. It permitted her to live the life of the pure spirit even while residing in a body. According to popular belief, reflected in the second-century *Protoevangelium of James*, Mary never touched the ground with her feet until she was presented at the Temple at age three. Thereafter she received her food at the hands of angels.¹⁰ The latter motif is also common in the *Vitae patrum* and in the lives of early ascetics of the East. It is typical of the ontological concept of virginity we have met with before, wherein sexual purity confers sacramental immunity from the world of corruptive matter. Mary's virginity leaves her wholly uncontaminated by any contact with the material world and thus a suitable vessel for the Word. The meaning of her virginity in the dualism of early Christianity, therefore, is simply her existential purity.

In this system, then, as also in medieval monastic thought, the virginity of Mary is more important for its ontological significance than its forensic usefulness regarding the birth of Christ. Never in doubt about whether Christ was actually the Word made flesh, Christian gnosis felt little need of a proof of Christ's divine origin. In fact, it was often more concerned to avoid the extreme position of Docetism by insisting that Mary was *not* a virgin *in partu*, but gave birth to Christ in the normal human manner. Origen, probably the first to use the term *theotokos*, denies Mary remained a virgin through parturition, though he affirms the idea of Mary's virginity otherwise, in part because of its suitability to the divine nature.¹¹ Tertullian

¹⁰ Ed. and trans. M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924), pp. 41-42.

¹¹ See *In Lucam homilia*, xiv, viii (PG 13.1833-38, 1819-22); *Contra Celsum*, I, xxxiv-xxxvii (PG 11.725-34).

also rejects Mary's virginity *in partu*, as does Jerome; both feel that evidence for the view is lacking in the scriptures and rests only on apocryphal texts like the *Protoevangelium*.¹² Acutely aware of pagan gnosticism's contention that Christ merely "passed through" the body of Mary and emerged without taking on flesh from her, these and other Fathers insist that Christ was born exactly in the manner of all other men. On the other hand, two of the staunchest supporters of Mary's purity, Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose, hold for her perpetual virginity, including, of course, virginity *in partu*.¹³ Gregory's reasons are instructive. Asserting that childbirth did not destroy Mary's virginity, he argues that "it was fitting that he who entered human life that it might have incorruption, should let incorruption begin with her who ministered to his birth."¹⁴ The overriding consideration here is the nature of Christ's redemptive act, one of recalling mankind to its original state of ontological purity.

Irrespective of the differences that may exist concerning the actual manner of Christ's passage into this world from Mary's body, there is total agreement over the decisive question of his conception in a virginal womb. The reason lies in the universal esteem in which virginity itself was held in Christian gnosis. Mary's virginity has its own superabundant value on account of its connaturality with the divine nature. Her virginity was the appropriate mode for the Godhead to enter the world because of what virginity in general signified under the dualistic assumptions of Christian gnosis, utter immunity from the corruptive contact of matter. The doctrine of the virgin birth clearly pertains more directly to Mary's virginity than it does to Christ's divinity.

But if the eastern Church felt no pressure to use the virgin birth as evidence of Christ's godliness, the case was somewhat different in the West. We have noted above that the Pauline equation "As by one man . . .," which emphasized Christ's inheritance of Adam's human nature, was successful in counteracting the docetist impulse of pagan gnosticism. But the emphasis on Christ's humanity carried with it the potential for denying the fullness of divinity to the Son of God, and it was not long before precisely that contention took shape in the West in the form of the Arian heresy. It is in this context that Mary's virginity became especially important as proof of Christ's

¹² Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, xxiii (*PL* 2.821-22); Jerome, *Commentariorum in Ezechielem*, XIII, xlv, 1 (*PL* 25.427-30).

¹³ See Graef, I, 65-67, 79-82.

¹⁴ *Oratio in diem natalem Christi* (*PG* 46.1136), trans. in Graef, I, 66.

divine patrimony. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 Athanasius was the principal defender of the orthodox view that Christ was divine and "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) with the Father. It is Mary's virginal purity that insures that Christ had only God for a Father.¹⁵ Against the same Arian arguments Athanasius had encountered Ambrose uses Isaiah vii.14, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel," as evidence that Christ participated fully in the Godhead.¹⁶ In several places Augustine, too, reaffirms the same position.¹⁷ Partly because of the persistence of Arianism this forensic aspect of the doctrine of the virgin birth assumed a normative role in the western tradition. In England Alcuin echoes the received opinion when he writes that the divinity of Christ would have been compromised by anything less than a virginal birth.¹⁸ In the entry for December 25 in an Old English martyrology, a number of natural wonders are reported as having occurred at Christ's birth. In this somewhat more popular opinion,

eall þis tacnode þæt seo clæne fæmne cende sunu, swa hire næfre wer ne gehran, ac se þe hæfde fæder on heofonum butan meder ond hæfde þa modur on eorþan butan fæder.¹⁹

(all this showed that the pure virgin brought forth a son, so that never a man touched her but he that had a father in heaven without a mother, and a mother on earth without a father.)

In general, the mainstream of medieval theology held the virgin birth to be proof of Christ's divinity. But we should note that under these terms the dogma is no longer the focal element in a symmetrical Christian soteriology. When Mary's virginity is but the guarantee of Christ's godliness the typology of Mary and Eve as *virgins* is no longer of immediate relevance, as Mary's purity does nothing to right the wrong of Eve's cataclysmic loss of virginity. In other words, insofar as her virginity has only evidentiary value, it is bereft of its attendant implications concerning a primal ontological fall.

As emphasis shifted from Mary's asexuality to her virginal parturition of Christ, it was perfectly natural her virginity should receive less praise on its own account, and more for its role in the central

¹⁵ *Orationes* II, vii and III, xiv, *Contra Arianos* (PG 26.161, 349).

¹⁶ *De fide*, V, xix (PL 16.725-26).

¹⁷ *Sermones*, CLXXXVI, i; CXCv, ii; CCXV, iii (PL 38.999, 1018, 1073-74).

¹⁸ *Adversus Felicem*, II, xiv (PL 101.156-57).

¹⁹ Ed. and trans. Herzfeld, pp. 2-5.

event of human history. In the early Middle Ages Idelfons of Toledo (c. 610–667) voices the prevailing opinion when he asserts that her virginity, while praiseworthy enough in its own right, received untold glory and qualified her for a place above the angels in heaven because it was the mode of the birth of Christ.²⁰ Her virginity was ennobled by what has thus begun to seem the Father's almost adventitious decision to have his Son born in this manner. The shift is radical: it is no longer Mary's virginity that certifies the authenticity of Christ's purifying atonement; rather, it is his mission as the divinely-sent Redeemer that lends eminence to Mary's virginity. From this reversal of original priorities, it is but a short step to the position of advocating that women practice virginity because it imitates Mary's moral preeminence and less because that condition has supreme entitative value of its own. Sedulius Scotus suggests that the virgin birth constitutes an added honor and privilege for all "daughters of Eve."²¹ Aldhelm holds that it was God's choice of a virgin to be His mother which indicates His predilection for it as a way of life.²² Paul the Deacon writes that God wanted Mary to remain a virgin not only for the sake of Christ, but to serve as a model for present-day virgins to emulate.²³ Indeed, it was during the flourishing Mariology of the Carolingian period that Mary's virginity took on the dimensions of a virtuous and ascetical ideal toward which Christian women should aim in their own lives.²⁴ But in the devotional literature produced in England throughout most of the Middle Ages the Blessed Virgin

is consistently given, as in Aldhelm, as the supreme model. Venerable Bede presents her in the poem *De die iudicii*, as she is shown century after century, reigning over the courts of heaven where the resplendent virgins throng. Boniface represents her so. In the *Christ* of Cynewulf and again in *Hali Meidenhad*, in *The Pearl*, and in the *Ormulum*, the Blessed Virgin is exalted as the first among women to consecrate her virginity to God.²⁵

The general effect of enshrining Mary's virginity as the prototypical ethical ideal for Christian women was inevitably to make the traditional monastic criterion of perfection (the perfect ontological sim-

²⁰ *Liber de virginitate perpetua sanctae Mariae*, x (*PL* 96.93–99).

²¹ Unpubl. MS. Cod. Phill. 1660, saec. X. Preussische Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, f. 14^r, qu. in Scheffczyk, p. 191.

²² Cap. vii (*PL* 89.107–08).

²³ *Homilia* II (*PL* 95.1573).

²⁴ Scheffczyk, p. 177; see also pp. 238–77.

²⁵ Sr. Byrne, p. 53.

plicity of the sexless state) a handmaiden to a concept of one woman's personal piety.²⁶

This broad movement is manifest in a number of significant, though minor, embellishments upon the doctrine of the virgin birth. We have already observed that because the Augustinian tradition saw pride as the motive for the Fall and the root of human evil, it came to associate the perfection of Christian life less with virginity than with humility. We have also noted how the application of this view to the case of female virgins resulted in the belief that the preservation of virginity was of less moment than the maintenance of a humble disposition. Given these tendencies, as well as the Gospels' portrayal of Mary as meekly submissive to the message of Gabriel, it was almost predictable that theologians such as Radbertus should single out not her virginity but her humility as the foundation of her ideally virtuous life.²⁷ In other words, her humility – a wholly ethical criterion – comes close to replacing Mary's asexuality as the reason God granted her his special favor. Another contemporary development that diminishes the significance of Mary's virginity was the speculation over whether Mary actually suffered martyrdom. Radbertus, the principal ninth-century exponent of Mariology, felt that she would have lacked some slight degree of perfection without the "credentials" of martyrdom, which he defines in her case as a kind of inner suffering out of love.²⁸ The idea is certainly not typical of his time, but it is important for the underlying motivation it reveals, one toward transforming the Mother of God into the focal ideal for almost every species of ascetical virtue.

A third phenomenon reveals this motive perhaps to best advantage. It is the radical transfiguration of Mary, the bride of the Holy Ghost, into the bride of Christ. With proper logic the notion of Mary as a *sponsa Christi* might seem a perverse derangement of the significance of the virgin birth, but in fact it simply represents the logical extension of the concept that every pledged virgin is the bride of Christ. Since each woman living chastely possessed that spiritual relationship, it could not conceivably be denied to that woman whose purity was the exemplar for all Christian virgins. It is Radbertus, again, who is responsible for this significant new direction: he believes Mary was as much a bride of Christ as any other virgin so

²⁶ Graef, I, 49–52, shows that this process had actually begun as early as the fourth century, as a burgeoning ascetical movement in the East increasingly found its ethical model in Mary.

²⁷ *Sermones*, I, II (PL 96.241, 254).

²⁸ *Sermo* II (PL 96.252).

vowed, differing from them only in the fact of her physical motherhood.²⁹ As Leo Scheffczyk writes, "Die Erfassung dieses Verhältnisses unter dem Brautsymbol stellt eine Vergeistigung und Sublimierung dar, die nicht ohne ein tieferes Eindringen in das Individuelle und Personale der Mariengestalt möglich war. Dieses Eindringen machte aber in der Karolingerzeit immer weitere Fortschritte."³⁰ But in spite of the Carolingians' heightened sensibility of the intimacy existing between Christ and his mother-bride, the more important fact from our point of view is that the metaphor of the bride (by this time almost exclusively applicable to female virgins, it would seem), had become so influential a mode of describing the individual ideal that, like humility and the concept of martyrdom, it helped to refashion the meaning of Mary's virginity and of the mystery of the virgin birth. These modifications were naturally at the expense of the meaning of the virgin birth in the tradition of Christian gnosis: the view that Mary's virginity was the redemptive recapitulation of the state of asexuality lost by our first mother was almost totally obscured in the attempt to make of it merely history's most eminent example of ascetic piety.

This appears to be one reason, at least, why the eastern doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was so enthusiastically received in the West; monks of the seventh and eighth centuries regarded it as a reassertion of the essential significance of Mary's virginity in Christian gnosis. Now, it is something of a truism that the doctrines of the virgin birth and the Immaculate Conception are not seldom confused in the minds of those not well versed in Catholic dogma, for the reason that both seem to deal with the same subject, the sexual purity of the Mother of God. In fact, of course, the two are quite different, but their similarity in supposed general effect suggests a certain redundancy in the dogma declared *ex cathedra* only so recently as 1854, and raises the suspicion that the Immaculate Conception is little more than a gratuitous piece of Mariolatry. The purpose of the remainder of this section is not to defend the dogma, but to examine the structural relationship that exists between it and the concept of the virgin birth.

We have noted how in Christian gnosis Mary's virginity, as the antithesis to the sinful sexuality of Eve, was endowed with a definite eschatological significance, as the means through which Christ would

²⁹ (Pseudo-Jerome:), *De assumptione beatae Mariae virginis*, xvi (*PL* 30.144-45); *Sermo* I (*PL* 96.242).

³⁰ *Das Mariengeheimnis*, p. 258.

restore incorruption to the fallen world. But these profounder implications of the virgin birth were overlooked as that doctrine came to be used as evidence of the divinity of Christ, and when Mary's virginity itself became the touchstone for practically every virtue. In the East, however, certain Fathers continued to uphold the original meaning of the virgin birth by the manner in which they established and extolled Mary's absolute purity. Indeed, in their view the concept of the virgin birth closely resembles what today is technically termed the Immaculate Conception; for them it is the proof of Christ's own immunity from contamination, and not of his divinity *per se*. In his commentary *In Leviticum* Origen writes:

Every man undergoes defilement in coming into this world. . . . From the very moment that he inhabits the womb of his mother, having received from his father the material of his body, he is already "defiled in his father and his mother." . . . Only my Saviour Jesus entered into this world without defilement; in his mother he was not impure, he entered into a body that remained intact.³¹

To Origen it is clear that Mary's virginity, that is, her virginal conception and birth of Christ, is principally the safeguard of Christ's ontological purity; her lack of stain, which derives solely from her virginity, insures his. Jerome's view of Mary's purity also suggests only her immaculate condition and not any kind of evidentiary demonstration of Christ's godliness. He describes her as "simple, pure, unsullied; drawing no germ of life from without, but *like God Himself*, fruitful in singleness."³² Ephraem of Syria, thought by some to be the first Father to have held the concept of the Immaculate Conception, composes a hymn to Christ in which he says, "You alone and your Mother are good in every way; for there is no blemish in thee, my Lord, and no stain in thy Mother."³³ Later, another Syrian, Jacob of Sarug (c. 451-521) asserts that Mary, "who was full of beauty both by nature and by her will" – evidently a reference to her virginity – "and was never defiled by bad desires, had remained from childhood steadfast in stainless justice."³⁴ Another early defender of Mary's purity was John of Damascus. He avows that she was born free from all taint of original guilt, but considered in a dualistic sense as substantive evil. To Mary, as to no other human being, the sinful powers were alien and unknown, and never had the

³¹ *In Lev.*, XII, iv (PG 12.539).

³² *Ep.* XXII, xix, *Ad Eustochium* (PL 22.405-06).

³³ *Nisebene Hymns*, 27, 8, trans. Graef, I, 57.

³⁴ *Ode on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ll. 143 ff., trans. Graef, I, 120.

chance to hold her in bondage. In the fleshly part of her being Mary was wholly uncontaminated; her body was so totally under the spiritualizing influence of her soul that it seemed she possessed no body at all.³⁵ All of these Fathers assert Mary's existential purity, and thus seem to approach the modern formulation of the Immaculate Conception. The crucial difference, however, is that they make their case exclusively on the basis of her virginal status. Because Augustine's views on the nature of original sin and the mode of its transmission, formed in the crucible of the Pelagian controversy, had not yet penetrated the theological consciousness of the East to any great extent, these Fathers obviously did not feel obliged to adduce evidence in support of an immaculate conception of Mary in her own mother's womb. Rather, it is clear that her own steadfastly sexless manner of life, which John of Damascus suggests approached that of an angel, was sufficient to insure her immunity from contamination and to earn God's special favor.

The idea of Mary's absolute purity was especially popular in Syria, the classic homeland of Christian encratism; it spread thence throughout the Byzantine world, entering western European thought in part through the migration of churchmen and monks out of the areas of Arab conquest, and to some extent through contacts which some western monasteries had with foundations in the East.³⁶ Mary's absolute sinlessness appealed to the medieval monastic tradition in the West, but in slightly different form than that given it by eastern writers. In England Alcuin writes that the virgin birth may well prove Christ's divinity, but that it is further necessary that the mother of Christ be perfectly sinless and *plena gratiae*.³⁷ Alcuin's position was the typical one during his time, especially among monastic commentators, although it is difficult to prove that these writers had arrived at a fully developed notion of the Immaculate Conception. What can be shown is that Mary's purity was being praised in ever more elaborate and sophisticated ways.³⁸ In reference to Gabriel's addressing Mary as "full of grace," for example, Paul the Deacon asks:

What righteousness or sanctity could this Virgin have lacked, who received the fullness of grace through such efficacious benevo-

³⁵ *Homilia in nativitate beatae virginis Mariae*, VI, vi (PG 96.668-72); *Homilia in annuntiationem beatae Mariae* (PG 96.653-56).

³⁶ See Theodor Klausner, *Abendländische Liturgiegeschichte* (Bonn, 1944), pp. 19 ff.

³⁷ *De fide sanctae et individuae Trinitatis*, ii (PL 101.39).

³⁸ See Scheffczyk, pp. 306-44.

lence? Who could imagine in her soul or body any room for vices?³⁹

Here the emphasis is on the Augustinian concept of the fullness of grace, but the tenth-century legend of *Maria* by Hroswitha suggests the older, eastern view of Mary's purity. The Virgin is pictured receiving her daily sustenance at the hands of an angel, with the implication that she owed nothing to the powers of darkness which ruled the material world.⁴⁰

It was in England in the twelfth century that the doctrine of Immaculate Conception emerged in nearly its present form. One important treatment of the concept is Anselm of Canterbury's *De conceptu virginali* (1099), where the doctrine is present in all but name. Anselm asserts that "it was fitting that she be clothed with a purity so splendid that none greater under God could be conceived."⁴¹ The first detailed exposition of the Immaculate Conception was Eadmer of Canterbury's *De excellentia virginis Mariae*.⁴² While Eadmer's statement of the doctrine seems indebted to the flourishing Mary-cult, it is known that he himself was well-read in the Greek Fathers and had had personal contact with the Byzantine Church, which had venerated Mary's conception as holy and without sin.⁴³ The essence of Eadmer's position, as indeed of the modern doctrine, is that Mary was conceived in the womb of Anne in a manner that was completely pure and untainted by sin. But to hold that position in the twelfth century, at a time when the Augustinian concept of the transmission of original guilt through *libido* was the standard view of the mystery of man's fallen nature in the West, required one also to believe that God had granted Joachim and Anne the unique gift of perfect *apatheia* in the act of coitus that produced Mary. While it was entirely appropriate to believe the *theotokos* should have been specially exempt from the universal guilt that afflicted Adam's progeny, it is essential to note that her virginity, even her perpetual virginity, was by no means sufficient to exempt her from that ban. On the contrary, no matter how far removed

³⁹ *In assumptione Mariae virginis* (PL 95.1567).

⁴⁰ Ed. Strecker, p. 14, ll. 367-68: "Usque per angelicum sumpsit sacra virgo ministrum / Omni namque die missam sibi caelitus escam."

⁴¹ Cap. xviii (PL 158.451).

⁴² PL 159.557-80; see esp. Cap. ii (559-60).

⁴³ G. Geenen, *Virgo Immaculata*, Acta Congressi Mariologici, 5 (Roma, 1955), pp. 122-24, qu. in Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 274. For evidence of the popularity of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in England, see A. W. Burridge, "L'Immaculée Conception dans la théologie de l'Angleterre médiévale," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 32 (1936), 590-97.

Mary herself had remained from the contaminating influence of sexual contact, in the Augustinian view she would still have been guilty of sin unless her parents had been free from all trace of sexual desire in her conception. Bernard saw this central difficulty with precision, and even as devoted a Mariologist as he consequently felt he could not accept the doctrine on these terms. To the canons of Lyons, who had entered the feast of the Immaculate Conception on their liturgical calendar, he writes, objecting to the idea of a special dispensation for Joachim and Anne: "How could sin not have been present where concupiscence was not absent?"⁴⁴

Our conclusion must be that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception which eventually took hold in the West in spite of the efforts of Bernard and others to oppose it, was an attempt to preserve the unique privilege of Mary as the *theotokos* which Christian gnosis had been able to ascribe to her solely on the strength of her virginity. It was essentially a readjustment of the basically Christian-gnostic view of Mary's ontological purity – still enormously popular as an article of medieval belief – to the prevailing Augustinian premises concerning the nature of original sin. Beneath the complexities of the dogma remained the elemental suspicion that the sin from which Mary was free was positive, substantial, real: the very term "immaculate" suggests the original dominance of the gnostic principle, even though it eventually became a mere metaphor for *plena gratiae*. The alacrity with which Mariologists continued to seek comparisons for Mary's condition in the *vita angelica*, or in the primal innocence of Adam and Eve, indicates the essential equivalence between the Immaculate Conception and the Christian-gnostic view of her virginity. That tradition had consistently held that from the moment she possessed being, Mary lived in the state of the virginal soul, like that of Adam and Eve before their sin, but possessed this status *after* the Fall, to a degree that no other human being ever shared. This view of an immaculate Mary was in reality an assertion of the critical role her sublime virginal purity played in the mystery of the Redemption.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* CLXXIV, *Ad canonicos lugdunensis* (PL 182.332–36).

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INDEX

- Acts of Andrew, The*, 31n
Acts of John, The, 31n
Acts of Peter, The, 31n
Acts of Thomas, The, 31n, 60
 Adamites, gnostic sect, 73
 Adamnan, 39
Advent Lyrics, Old English poem, 143-44
 Aelfric, 33n, 51n, 53n, 94, 116, 131n
 Aethelburg, Queen, 74n
 Aethelwold of Winchester, 3
 Ailred of Rievaulx, 101
 Alain of Lille, 84n
 Alcuin, 65n, 94, 147, 152
 Aldhelm, 46n, 67n, 94, 116, 148
 Ambrose, St., 22n, 24, 31, 38, 45, 49n, 59, 62, 64, 66, 146-47
Ancrene Riwele, The, 3, 94, 97-99, 102-04, 107, 112-13, 116-17, 120-21, 123, 127-31, 137
 Angels: as virginal, 2; in Watcher Story, 10-11, 13, 15, 18n; as asexual, 13; mode of propagation of, 17; and prophecy, 42, 44, 47-46; and spiritual warfare, 48-49, 119. (See also *Vita angelica*)
 Anne, St., 152-54
 Anselm of Canterbury, 81-83, 153
 Anthony, St., 84
Apatheia: of Adam and Eve, 17, 25-26; in parents of Mary, 153
 Aphraates, monk, 73
 Arianism, 146-47
Ascension of Isaiah, The, 142
 Asceticism: in gnosticism, 7; in Christianity, 56-57
 Asexuality: as monastic ideal, 2; of Primal Man, 13, 38; as property of the angelic life, 17, 19; as mark of immortality, 20; and Christian dualism, 56. (See also Virginité)
 Athanasius, 20n, 43, 59, 68n, 147
 Athenagoras, 85
 Atonement: juridical theory of, 81-83, 97, 109; classic theory of, 82, 106, 123, 132
 Augustine, St.: his works as monastic reading, 7n; on original sin and the Fall, 6, 21-29, 111, 115, 134, 152; on the Book of Enoch, 15n; and Manichaeism, 24-26; on *libido* in coition, 28-29, 85-86, 134, 152; on virginity, 30-31; on asceticism, 56-57; on the bridal idea, 65, 78; on Adamites, 73n; on sexual temptation, 113; on the virgin birth, 147
 Baptism, 65; and purity, 68n, 69-70
 Basil, St., 19n, 32-33, 37n
 Bede, 7n, 33n, 39, 46, 50n, 65n, 74n, 94, 148
 Benedict, St., 33, 75n; Rule of, 3, 6, 48, 57, 90n
 Bernard of Clairvaux: on analogy between monks and the prophets, 45n; and monastic reform, 80; on Christ's Passion, 82-83; on the Song of Songs, 84, 90-96, 104, 109, 120, 122, 135-37, 140; and female monasticism, 91n; on the Immaculate Conception, 154
 Bernard of Monte Cassino, 44

- Bisexuality, 9-10, 12, 16n, 139n
 Bogomils, gnostic sect, 35
 Boniface, St., 148
 Bridal idea, 64, 68, 86-87, 117, 123. (See also *Sponsa Christi*)
 Bride of Christ (see *Sponsa Christi*)
 Bugga, abbess, 74n

 Caesarius of Heisterbach, 128n
 Cassian, John, 27n, 44-45, 46n, 48, 57
 Castle of the body, allegory of, 55-56, 99, 129-31
 Castration, 18n
 Catachumens, 68n
 Catharism, 74, 138-39
 Celibacy, clerical, 1n, 4, 81. (See also Virginité)
 Chastity, 49-50. (See also Virginité)
 Childbirth: without pain, 26; as repugnant, 89n
 Christ: as second Adam, 14; as Christus Victor, 48, 51, 58, 82; as the Bridegroom, 83, 95-110; as figuratively female, 100-01, 103
Christ, Old English poem, 148
 Chrysippus, Stoic, 18n
 Cistercianism, 3, 63n, 83-84, 91n, 93-94
Cleanness, Middle English poem, 144
 Clement of Alexandria, 11-12, 15, 17, 36, 43, 44n, 64n, 70n, 73, 75
 Cohabitation, virginal, 72-74
 Columba, St., 39
Conhospitio, 74-75
 Contemplation, monastic, 2, 41-44, 47, 57, 121-22
 Courtly love, 96
 Cuthbert, St., 39, 46
 Cynwulf, 52, 54, 56, 148
 Cyprian, St., 34, 65-66
 Cyril of Alexandria, 22

Daniel, Old English poem, 45-46
Didache, *The*, 73, 86
 Devils: as opponents of virgins, 50-57, 119, 123-32; as sexual partners, 128
 Dionysius, bishop of Knossos, 71
 Dionysius the Areopagite, 40-41, 137
 Docetism, 145-46
 Donatism, 65
 Dositheus, encratite, 8n, 10

 Eadmer of Canterbury, 153
 Eata, abbot, 39
 Elias, 35, 44-45
 Eliseus, 35, 45
 Elizabeth of Schönau, 111n
 Encratism: in early Church, 22n, 67-75; and marriage, 85-86, 88, 111
 Enoch, Book of, 11n, 15n
 Ephraem the Syrian, 34, 143, 151
 Epiphanius, 4, 40, 73
 Essenes, 8n, 41, 44, 48, 60n, 72
 Ethelberga, virgin, 50n
 Ethelthryth, virgin, 50n
 Euchites, gnostic sect, 73
 Eusebius of Caesarea, 71n
 Eusebius of Emesa, 49, 73, 85
 Eustathius, bishop of Sebasteia, 72
 Everwin of Steinfeld, 111n
 Ezechiel, 45

 Faustus of Riez, 57
 Francis de Sales, 107n

 Galen, 18n
 Garnier of Rochefort, 84n
 Genesis, Book of, 2, 6, 10-16, 19, 21-29
Gnosis, divine knowledge, 7, 41-48, 68, 75-79, 92-93, 121, 124
 Gnosticism, 6-12, 27, 44, 59-60, 70, 122, 138-39
Gospel according to the Egyptians, *The*, 11, 20
Gospel of Mary, *The*, 11
 Gregory I, 27n, 38, 45n, 65-66, 128
 Gregory VII, 81
 Gregory of Nazianzen, 37n, 43, 74
 Gregory of Nyssa, 16-19, 20n, 25n, 31, 37, 40, 43, 61, 72, 91n, 139n, 146
Guthlac, Old English poem, 33, 39, 46, 50-51, 119, 129-30

 Habit, monastic, 34-35
Hali Meidenhad, 3n, 87-89, 98, 101-04, 107, 111-20, 123, 125-29, 131-32, 148
 Harranites, gnostic sect, 9
 Hilary of Poitiers, 15n, 22, 38, 62
 Hild, abbess, 74n
 Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII), 81
 Hildegard of Bingen, 111n
 Hildelid, abbess, 67n

- Hilton, Walter, 137n
 Hippolytus, 8n, 64-65, 68n
 Hroswitha of Gandersheim, 52n, 143, 153
 Hugh of St. Victor, 84-87, 89
Husband's Message, The, Old English poem, 94n
 Hypatia, philosopher, 121
- Idlefons of Toledo, 34n, 148
 Ignatius of Antioch, 49, 142
 Immaculate Conception, 142, 150-54
 Irenaeus, 8n, 10n, 67, 68n, 81, 143
 Isaac of Stella, 84n
 Isidor of Pelusium, 61n
 Isidore of Seville, 85n
- Jacob of Sarug, 151
 James I of England, 113n
 Jerome, St., 15n, 20n, 22, 24, 37, 43-45, 50, 66, 69-70, 88, 111, 146, 151
 Joachim, father of Mary, 153
 Johannes Scotus Erigena, 39-41, 84
 John Chrysostom, 17, 19-20, 34-35, 42, 45, 73
 John of Damascus, 25n, 42, 151-52
 John the Baptist, St., 8n, 45n
 John the Evangelist, St., 8n, 35, 83
 Joseph, St., 85
 Jovinian, 69
 Judith, Book of, 51n
Judith, Old English poem, 51
 Julian of Norwich, 101n
Juliana, Old English poem, 52-56, 129
 Justin Martyr, 68, 143
 Juvenal, 88
- Katherine Group, the, 3, 87, 96-133
- Labadists, utopian sect, 139
 Leander, St., 5
 Lechery, as capital sin, 19, 27
 Lee, Ann, Shaker foundress, 139
Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, The, 50
Libido: and the Fall, 7, 9-12, 17, 19n, 25-29; in marriage, 85-86; as antithetical to marriage, 89-99; and transmission of sin, 153-54
- Macarius, St., hermit, 84
 Macarius Magnes, bishop, 10
Malchus, Old English legend, 53
 Manichaeism, 15n, 24-26, 60n, 69, 111n
 Marcion, gnostic, 10n, 70
 Marcionites, gnostic sect, 15n, 23
 Margaret, St., English cult of, 100n
 Marriage: 67-75; as virginal or spiritual bond, 2-4, 59, 72-74, 84-90, 95, 109, 128; associated with death, 20; precludes salvation, 70; as concession to the weak, 71, 78, 112, 115; as symbolic of soul's union with God, 74, 86; as contemptible, 88-89
 Mary, 70, 85, 112, 141-54
 Maximus Confessor, 61n
 Mechthild of Magdeburg, 107n
 Methodius of Olympus, 16, 18, 31n, 38, 42, 50, 61, 68-71, 75n, 76-77, 112, 143
Milites Christi, 2, 34, 47-58, 82, 123-26
 Millenarianism, 30-31
 Monasticism: 1-2, 6, 30-58; and the Song of Songs, 79, 90; reform of, 80, 83, 135; decline of, 135-38
 Montanism, 47n
 Moses, 44
- Naassene Exegesis*, 68
 Nilus the Elder, 61n
 Numbers, Book of, 61
- Odes of Solomon, The*, 60, 142
Of Clene Maydenhod, Middle English poem, 116n
On God Ureisun of Ure Lejdi, 108
On Lofsong of Ure Lejdi, 97n
On Lofsong of Ure Louerde, 3n, 108
On Ureisun of Ure Louerde, 3n, 100, 102, 105-06, 108
 Ophitism, 10
 Origen: on the Paradise myth, 15-16, 22, 24; on the Fall, 17-18, 36-37; on the bridal idea, 37, 43, 61-62, 66, 76-77, 86, 90-91, 109, 122, 128; and monastic reform, 40, 79, 84; on spiritual warfare, 48; on the three-fold hierarchy of perfection, 68, 75-76; on baptism, 69-70; on sexual intercourse, 71; on Mary, 145, 151
 Original sin: as sexual transgression, 9-14, 18-19, 64, 111-113, 134, 145; as

- motivated by pride, 14, 23, 27-29, 111; motivated by gluttony, 19n; and juridical theory of atonement, 81-82
Ormulum, 148
 Orphism, 8n
 Osbert of Clare, 89n

 Pachomius, St., 33, 84
Parousia, 32
 Paul, St., 8n, 14, 23-24, 28n, 71, 84, 86, 123
 Paul the Deacon, 148, 152-53
 Paul the Simple, anchorite, 38
Pearl, Middle English poem, 148
 Pelagianism, 115, 152. (See also Semi-pelagianism)
 Peter Damian, 45n
 Petrus Chrysologus, 34n
 Philo Judaeus, 12-16, 22, 24, 36, 61, 109
 Pinytus, bishop, 71
Pistis Sophia, 60n
 Platonism, 8n, 21n, 59, 67n
 Pleroma, 7
Poimandres, Hermetic treatise, 9, 11
 Polycarp, St., 49
 Prophecy, 44-47, 57, 138
 Prophets, 35, 45
Protoevangelium of James, 145-46
 Prudentius, 54
 Pseudo-Clement, 72
 Ptolemaeus, gnostic, 68

 Qumran, 8n

 Rabanus Maurus, 39
 Radbertus, 149-50
 Rappites, utopian sect, 139
 Ratramnus, 143
 Reticus of Autun, 62
 Robert of Molesme, 84
 Rufinus, 62
 Rupert of Deutz, 45n, 132

Sacramentarium Gregorianum, 66-67
Saint Katherine, The Life of, 3n, 96-97, 99, 118-19, 121-24, 127
 Saturninus, gnostic, 10n, 44
Sawles Warde, 3n, 87n, 118, 129-30
Secret Book of John, The, 10
 Sedulius Scotus, 148

Seinte Iulienne, De Liplade ant te Passium of, 3n, 112, 119, 125, 127, 131
Seinte Marherete, 3n, 99-101, 103, 112, 124, 131
 Semipelagianism, 34, 57. (See also Pelagianism)
 Seventh Day Baptists, utopian sect, 139
 Sexual intercourse: and the Fall, 9-21, 113-115; associated with death, 11, 20, 112; alien to original innocence, 24, 111-112; and concupiscence, 24-29; as contrary to salvation, 63, 69, 72; symbolizing spiritual union, 77-78; opposed to true nature of marriage, 85, 89-90; with devils, 128
 Shakers, 139-40
 Simon the Sorcerer, gnostic, 8n, 44
Simplicitas, 2, 21, 35-41, 43, 57, 119-22
 Soldier of Christ (see *Milites Christi*)
 Song of Songs, the, 59-67, 90, 104-05, 108, 135, 140
Sophrosyne, 36
 Spiritual marriage (see Marriage)
Sponsa Christi, 2, 58-80, 86-110, 121-22, 125-26, 131, 135-39, 149-50. (See also Bridal idea)
Syzygia, 59-61, 67, 76, 118n, 128, 139-40

 Tatian, gnostic, 44n, 111
 Teresa of Avila, St., 140
 Tertullian, 8n, 9n, 22-24, 47n, 59, 65-67, 70n, 81, 145-46
 Theodore, bishop of Cyr, 61n, 73n
 Theophrastus, 88
 Therapeutae, 72
 Thomas Aquinas, St., 42
 Thomas of Hales, 98n

 Uthred of Bolton, 45n

 Valentinians, encratic sect, 15n
 Valentinus, 68, 75
 Venantius Fortunatus, 83
 Victor of Pettau, 62
 Victorine School, 80
 Virgin birth (of Christ), 141-49
Virgines subintroductae, 72-73
 Virginity: as highest Christian perfection, 1, 4, 16, 67-71, 78, 134; central in monastic ideology, 2, 30-58, 134-

- 38; predicable of both sexes, 4; as prelapsarian ontological status, 12-29, 30, 114, 117, 134; as connatural with God, 16, 36-41, 120, 146; loss of, 16, 88, 98, 116, 132, 134; and eschatology, 16n, 18, 30-31, 40, 112, 117-18, 134; and election, 18, 57, 69-72, 131-32; as physical integrity, 26, 115-17, 127, 132; antithetical to pride, 27-28, 113, 115-17, 149; as angelic, 30-35, 114 (see also *Vita angelica*); as image of God in soul, 37, 43, 92, 120; and noetic intimacy with God, 41-47, 75-77, 92-93, 121-22, 138; and moral prowess, 49-56, 58, 123-33; as prophylaxis, 50, 54, 56, 126-28, 138; and symbol of fortress, 51, 55, 129-31 (see also Castle of the body); as asceticism, 56-57; as perfection in gnosticism, 67-70; of Mary, 70, 85, 112, 141-54; required of all clergy, 81
- Vita angelica*, 17, 19, 24, 30-35, 42-49, 57, 113-14, 118-20, 138, 145, 154
- Vitae patrum*, 145
- Widows, 67
- Wife's Lament, The*, Old English poem, 94n
- William of St. Thierry, 38-39, 93n
- Wohunge of Ure Lauerd, De*, 3n, 97-98, 106-07, 125-26, 137
- Wooing Group, the, 3n, 104-09
- Wound of sin, symbolic, 54-56, 77, 127-28
- Zadokites, Essene sect, 8n
- Zoroastrianism, 59