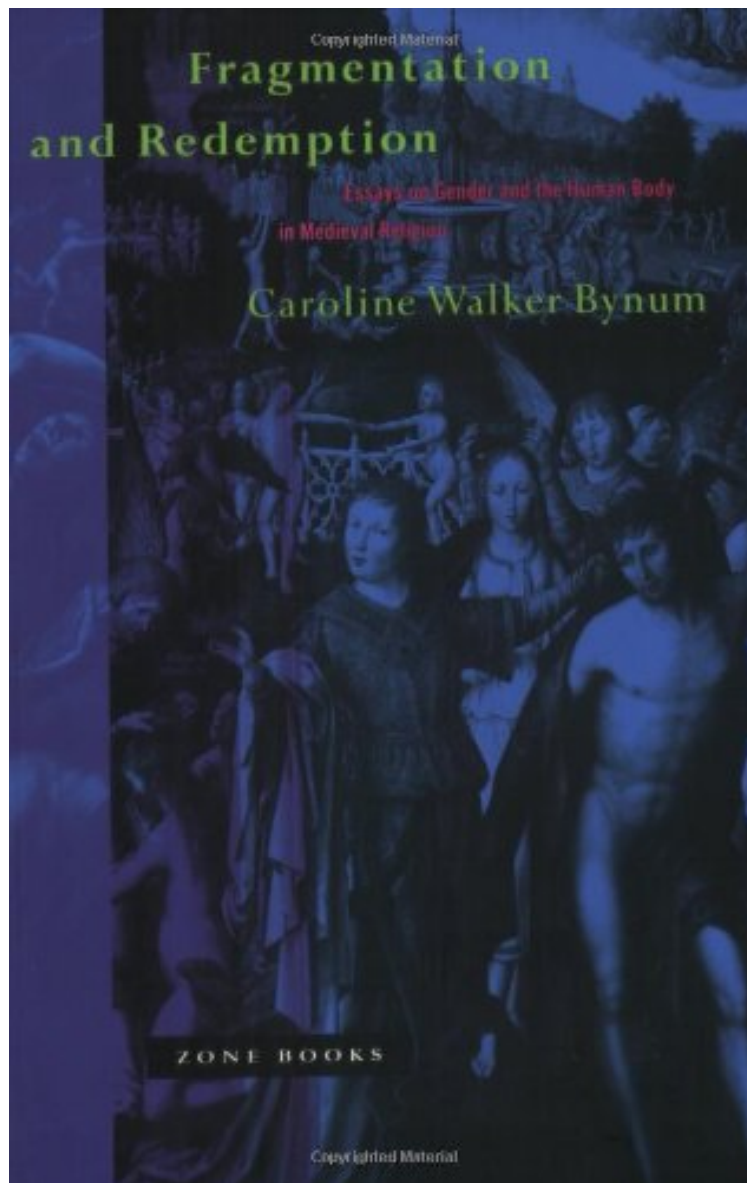


(Library ebook) Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion

Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion

Caroline Walker Bynum

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Caroline Walker Bynum : Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion:

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Cultural analysis v. social scientific method of medieval religiosity

By Rachel L. Steen

In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Carolyn Bynum refutes modern misconceptions about spirituality and symbols in the European Middle Ages. More importantly and relevant to her book, she addresses misinterpretations of female spirituality in the same period. The author faults some of the models of prominent modern social scientists, arguing that they are not suitable to explain the content of religious symbols of this time. Bynum instead counters this trend with an in-depth analysis of the cultural setting from which these symbols and spirituality emerged. Bynum also argues that the female aspect of spirituality has not been taken seriously and studied properly, thus giving rise to speculations and methods of analyses that do not elucidate properly about the experience of religious women in the late medieval period.

First, Bynum makes a critique of the application of Victor Turner's theory of liminality to the analysis of women spirituality of the late Middle Ages. Bynum specifically questions Turner's social drama analysis of narrative and ritual experience. According to Turner's theory, there is a phenomenon called liminality--the reversal or elevation of roles at the ritual level of a human's religious experience. Bynum cites the medieval texts about the lives of female saints and finds that liminality was not central to female spirituality. The term is applicable for male spirituality, because reversal of roles was a way to emphasize their rupture with wealth and status, and in general, to criticize the male-dominated established order. Men like Francis of Assisi took vows of poverty and often identified themselves in female terms. In this instance, Turner's theory of liminality applies to the study of male spirituality.

Female religious experience was different. When there was reversal of roles, according to what we can discern from the saints' biographers, it was for purely practical reasons. Such reversals were not central to women's spirituality, Bynum maintains. This is best illustrated by the "dominant symbols" of women during their experiences. If we look at female mystics such as Margery Kempe, Gertrude of Helfta, Hadewijch, or Beatrice of Nazareth, medieval women who wrote their stories, we find that the dominant symbols were Eucharistic miracles, fasting, virginity, roles of mothers, and even of lovers of Christ. These were themes that reflected their role in society (i.e. food, nurturing, motherhood, etc.), according to Bynum. Continuity--association with and identification of women's societal roles in visions, miracles, and other mystical experiences--was the norm in women spirituality. Bynum refutes Turner's notion that women, because of their inferior status in medieval Europe, assumed roles of empowerment in that society, that is, of male figures. He assumes a supposed "symmetry" in the liminalities of both sexes, according to Bynum. Women were liminal to men, but not the other way around. The purpose of role reversal for men was to criticize their society, and to renounce the power that society gave them as a dominant group. One of these reversals was to associate often with women, either by directly assuming a spiritual role as a woman or by drawing influence from female mystics. Liminality was only applicable to men's experience, but not so much to explain women's religious experience. Women were only liminal to men, who chose a reversal of roles. Women instead sought what Bynum calls "continuity" of roles in religious experience.

Bynum also argues against the common assumption that female mystics and saints would naturally be inclined to associate their gender with female religious imagery, such as that of the Virgin Mary. But the goal of female religiosity was always *imitatio Christi*, Bynum argues, and women did not appropriate the image of the Virgin Mary as their center of devotion and imitation, a tendency that we assume they would take given the misogyny of the period in which they lived. Women's goal was to identify with the suffering and nurturing nature of Christ, not so much with the assumed female role of motherhood of the Virgin Mary.

The reversal of roles, contained in the concept of liminality, did not occur among women as much as it occurred among men. The medieval religious man made this reversals and often identified themselves with women, assuming female roles in their spirituality as a way to distinguish their life of renunciation from that of the secular clergy. But their identification of the female was also in part explained because of women's reputation of being closer to God by way of mysticism and asceticism. Thus the female became a model of not only humility, but also of perfect devotion to Christ. This prompted male biographers to admonish their fellow men for allowing "the `inferior sex' to reach greater heights of spiritual achievement" than them (156).

Bynum argues that whereas men saw God's motherhood as a symbol of affectivity, female embraced both, the affectivity and the authority-protective attributes of Christ. For men, motherhood in this sense was more associated with tenderness and emotionality, whereas women associated it more with food and suffering. Women also needed not reverse gender role, Bynum argues, because they saw their own gender as a positive vehicle to get closer to God. While men were preoccupied with the rejection of male identity in their spirituality, women were not looking at male-female opposites as the basis of role reversals, but embraced their own sex because they were concerned with body--the female, as opposed to spirit, the male-- and the physicality of Christ.

Bynum also refutes Leo Steingberg's notion that Christ's body in medieval art meant sexuality. Instead, she argues that medieval people saw the body of Christ not as a symbol of sexuality, but as a symbol of suffering. Even in some cases, the body of Christ's association with female bodily functions. Common strands to explain body symbolism was to draw the traditional dichotomies between spirit/man and body/woman. Bynum also argues that there were physiological reasons to associate Christ's body with the female, such as seeing bleeding as an act of cleansing. Women's bleeding was a way of purging away impurities, drawing an analogy with Christ's bleeding, which was meant to be the purging away and redemption of humankind sins. Another view was that Christ's own flesh was made up of female body, because it came from the flesh of the Virgin Mary. Bynum therefore emphasizes the

nature of Christ's body more as a symbol of suffering and redemption than of the male sexuality of Christ. Bynum on the other hand would have considerably strengthened her position regarding her criticism of the social scientists; for example, by explaining the concept of *communitas* and the dichotomy between *communitas* and "anti-structureness" in Turner's theory. The beguines, for instance, were a complex women's movement that lacked structure in the conventional sense; it did not have leadership, set of rules, clergy, etc. But it was a preferred alternative for many women, alternative to life in the convent or as recluses. Bynum could have taken this fact to further refute Turner on the grounds that his model was not applicable to explain this particular social movement. Another point of contention is Bynum's explanation of Weber's dichotomy of asceticism/mysticism and inner-worldly/world-rejecting. Bynum cites a brief passage in which Weber defines innerworldly asceticism as a "...concentration of activities leading to salvation (that) may require participation within the world on the basis of the individual's commitment and the qualifications as the elect instrument of God." Judging from what we learned from Bynum's understanding of female spirituality, would not the concept of "innerworldly asceticism" be compatible with the life of renunciation and service that characterized women's religiosity in the late Middle Ages? Bynum does not agree, adding that laywomen, beguines and nuns "cannot be located within either pole of this dichotomy (inner-worldly/world-rejecting)" The refutation of these models is understandable from the point of view of the intentions and limitations of the sociologists. Although Bynum in few cases finds Weber's and Troeltsch's typologies helpful, she argues that both were interested in the period of the Reformation and the religious changes in society in the sixteenth-century. They therefore were limited to study only male religious piety, ignoring the influence of female piety, against which the sixteenth century reformers reacted. The twentieth-century sociologists ignored women religiosity of the late Middle Ages, argues Bynum, and that is why their dichotomies and typologies could not be applied to the religious women of this period. Bynum seems also to suggest that both sociologists' methods were not applicable either because their studies were male-centered and meant to interpret religious social changes in traditions outside medieval Catholicism (i.e. sixteenth century Protestantism) Fragmentation and Redemption invites us to seriously evaluate the importance of female spirituality in the late Middle Ages, which had been misunderstood in modern times. This spirituality was not based on their being victims of misogyny and masochism, but on their voluntary willingness to interpret their ascetic practices as bringing them closer to God. Our evaluation of religious symbols and their meanings also gives us a more in-depth understanding of medieval spirituality. For example, Christ's nurturing and giving birth through his side wound was a popular motif, shown in both images and writing, and we now grasp the understanding of this symbolism given our knowledge of the importance of body and female bodily functions in medieval spirituality. A major strength of the book is the inclusion of both female and male saints' testimonies, in which they indicate clearly Christ's association with female attributes, functional (nurturing, lactating) and bodily (female physical appearance). Bynum also succeeds in refuting long-standing misconceptions about the complexities of religious life--namely ascetic and mystical practices-- and the connection between this life of renunciation and devotion to the world of symbols in Christ's bodily representations in the late Middle Ages.

28 of 31 people found the following review helpful. "Love and Inestimable Satiety" By saint eyebeat Fragmentation and Redemption is a series of seven essays spanning the topics of gender, religious relics, sex, mortality, gender and the miraculous. The essays and the accompanying images are graphic and unforgettable. For example; "The ill clamored for the bathwater of would-be saints to drink or bathe in and preferred it if these would-be saints left skin and lice floating in the water." If you are interested in the cult of relics and medieval mysticism then this book will be a valuable resource. Ecstatic, erotic medieval religious frenzy are chronicled in detail in the highly readable and lively text. I find myself returning to these essays over and over again as I read other, more specific, books on western medieval religious traditions. This is a must have for your reference desk.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. So although I can't say I loved it, it was extremely interesting and informative about ... By Customer I found it fascinating, although it is very dense. I had to read it for a class on christian anthropology. So although I can't say I loved it, it was extremely interesting and informative about religion during the medieval times, especially its impact on women. And since those are all of our ancestors, it bears reading, if you've got the time.

These seven essays by noted historian Caroline Walker Bynum exemplify her argument that historians must write in a "comic" mode, aware of history's artifice, risks, and incompleteness. Exploring a diverse array of medieval texts, the essays show how women were able to appropriate dominant social symbols in ways that revised and undercut them, allowing their own creative and religious voices to emerge. Taken together, they provide a model of how to account for gender in studying medieval texts and offer a new interpretation of the role of asceticism and mysticism in Christianity. In the first three essays, Bynum focuses on the methodological problems inherent in the writing of history. She shows that a consideration of medieval texts written by women and the rituals attractive to them undermines the approaches of three 20th-century intellectual figures - Victor Turner, Max Weber, and Leo Steinberg - and illustrates how other disciplines can enrich historical research. These methodological considerations are then used in the next three essays to examine gender properly. While describing the "experiential" literary voices of medieval women, Bynum underlines the corporality of women's piety and focuses on both the cultural construction and the intractable

physicality of the body itself. She also examines how the acts and attitudes of men affected the cultural construction of categories such as "female," "heretic," and "saint" and shows that the study of gender is the study of how roles and possibilities are conceptualized by both women and men. In the final essay, Bynum elucidates how medieval discussions of bodily resurrection and the obsession with material details enrich modern debates over questions of self-identity and survival. Caroline Walker Bynum is a MacArthur Fellow and recipient of the Schaff Prize for Church History for her highly acclaimed *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*. She is Professor of History at Columbia University.

In 1188, the Benedictine monk Gervase of Canterbury wrote that, compared to the plodding chronicler, 'the historian proceeds diffusely and elegantly.' On the strength of her writing style and her sophisticated, sensitive deployment of prodigious knowledge, Caroline Bynum is surely a historian by Gervase's standards.... She provides an encouraging model for both historical endeavor and the management of an increasingly fragmented modern existence. (Christopher Hughes, *Voice Literary Supplement*) About the Author Caroline Walker Bynum is University Professor at Columbia University. She is the author of *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone Books, 1991).