

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

The heart of God – generous and overflowing

The legacy of Gertrude of Helfta

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IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE WOMEN MYSTICS had considerable influence in encouraging and propagating a focus on Jesus' heart in the context of their devotion to the humanity of Jesus and the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Jesus' wounds, his blood, his body and his heart were central to their religiosity.¹ It is interesting to notice the different registers they used to describe the heart of Jesus as a figure of thoughtful love, compassion, bodily nurture and suffering.² While some wrote of the side wound as the doorway leading into the ark of Christ's heart, others thought of the wound as the key to the heart's treasury of grace. They drew on the similarity of their own bodies to that of Christ's. They thought that the side wound was the birth canal leading to and from the heart of Christ's womb. The heart was for them the locus for the mystery of the divine/human Christ and the dwelling of the Trinity.

The thirteenth-century German mystic, Gertrude of Helfta, is one who has left a legacy of writing on the heart of Christ. Gertrude, often now called 'the great', lived in the Helfta monastery,³ a well-established house of learning and devout observance of an adapted version of the Benedictine Rule and Cistercian spirituality. In the late thirteenth century it housed the notable contemporaries, confusingly identical in name but distinct in personality and writing: Gertrude of Helfta (c.1256–1302), Mechtilde of Hackeborn (c.1241–1298), who was of similar age and mystical gifts to Gertrude, Mechtilde of Magdeburg (c.1220–1282), older than the other two and who had for some years been a beguine in Magdeburg before coming to Helfta,⁴ and the younger Mechtilde's sister, Gertrude of Hackeborn (1231–1292), who was the Abbess at Helfta for forty years. Gertrude of Helfta had lived in the Helfta monastery since she was five but she gives no inkling of her family situation. When she was old enough she joined the community

of nuns. Her extant writings reveal her scholarship; she wrote in educated Latin, unusual for women writers of her period.

Christ's compassionate heart

Early in her monastic life Gertrude experienced a turning point which throws light on her fundamental confidence in God's generous provision. When she was about twenty-five she slipped into a period of profound depression from which nothing could shift her. Her account of her recovery, couched in the language of a vision, bears the hallmarks of her reflection on this part of her life. She relates how one evening she was in the dormitory when one of the older nuns came towards her and Gertrude bowed to her in observance of the Rule. When she looked up again, the nun and the dormitory had disappeared and she was in a garden with a young man 'lovely and refined, . . . about sixteen'. The youth said to her:

'Your salvation will come quickly; why are you consumed by sadness? Do you have no counsellor, that sorrow has overwhelmed you?' . . . I looked and saw between us there was a hedge of such endless length that I could not see where it ended in front or behind me. On its top the hedge seemed to bristle with such a great mass of thorns that I would never be able to cross it to join the young man. While I stood hesitating because of it, both burning with desire and almost fainting, he himself seized me swiftly and effortlessly, lifted me up, and set me beside him . . . I recognized on that hand . . . the glorious gems of those wounds which cancelled the debts of all . . . From that time forward, calmed by a new joy of the spirit, I began to go forth in the delightful perfume of your balm, so that I too thought easy the yoke and light the burden which a little before I had reckoned unbearable.⁵

Gertrude's recovery after this personal experience of Divine love radically affected her commitment to a wholehearted and overflowing love of God. Finnegan notes that her experience of love was more convincing than all the theological formulae and conclusions she had learnt in the monastery school and went far beyond intellectual illumination.⁶ From that time Gertrude knew that at the heart of Christianity is the belief that Christ has cancelled humanity's debts of sin and will supply from the treasury of his heart whatever we lack. Moreover, Christ desires nothing else than to draw all humanity into the heart of the triune God. We have only to want this for God to fulfil and complete our desire. In her discovery Gertrude recovered her joy-

ousness and her awareness and love of nature. The seasonal changes, the fertile landscape and monastery gardens featured often in her writing, signifying her understanding of the creative at-one-ment of God with Creation.

Christ's inclusive heart

One of Gertrude's favoured images was of Christ's heart in an embrace of at-one-ment, encompassing the Trinity, as well as Mary, the communion of saints, the choirs of angels, the souls in purgatory and the living. Many of her mystical experiences revolve around her preparation for and reception of the Eucharist and most of her insights into the heart of Christ come from this liturgical context – for her a scene of generous hospitality. The following extract from a vision recorded by Gertrude's biographer⁷ illustrates her sense of being within the eucharistic heart of Christ.

The vision begins while Gertrude is preparing to receive communion. She recalls that she felt like:

a frail little plant, placed close to the inextinguishable furnace of the divine heart, receiving the benefit of its warmth, burning within herself, as if naturally, yet fading away from hour to hour through her faults and negligences till at length she was brought almost to nothing, lying there like the smallest of burned-out coals. Turning then to Jesus, the Son of God, her loving Mediator, she prayed that he would deign to present her, just as she was, to be reconciled to God the Father. Her most loving Jesus seemed to draw her toward himself by the breath of love of his pierced heart, and to wash her in the water flowing from it, and then to sprinkle her with the life-giving blood of his heart.⁸ With this action she began to revive, and from the smallest cinder she was invigorated and grew into a green tree, whose branches were divided in three, in the form of the fleur-de-lys.⁹ Then the Son of God took this tree and presented it, with gratitude, to the glory of the ever adorable Trinity. When he had presented it, the whole Trinity with great graciousness bowed down toward the offering. God the Father, in his divine omnipotence, set in the upper branches all the fruit that this soul would have been able to produce, were she to correspond aright to divine omnipotence. In the same way, she saw the Son of God and the Holy Spirit setting in the other two sections of the branches the fruits of wisdom and goodness.¹⁰

In the vision Gertrude is transformed from 'frail little plant' into a 'green tree' in the 'form of the fleur-de-lys' – a transformation into the

image of the Trinitarian God. At the outset of the vision Jesus' heart is the galenic furnace-like organ. Gertrude experiences herself diminishing and dehydrating in its heat. Her appeal to Jesus encapsulates characteristics of her doctrinal and soteriological understanding. 'Jesus, the Son of God', underlines her belief in the hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Jesus.¹¹ While Jesus' heart was formed in Mary's womb it was also 'substantially united to the Word of God', the Second Person of the Trinity. It was not only the mystery of hypostasis of the two natures that Gertrude discovered in the heart but the relationship of Christ in the Trinity 'in which I (Christ) live and reign, true God, for ever and ever'.

Gertrude's call to the 'Loving Mediator' focuses on the role of the divine/human heart of Jesus in humanity's salvation as drawing all humanity into the love of God. It is Gertrude's redemptive focus on the heart of Christ rather than on the Cross, that moves her from the sufferings of Christ's Passion and death, to his resurrected heart which she finds is an abyss of grace for humanity. This union of humanity with God is for all who desire it. Gertrude's transformation when Christ breathes on her, washes her with water and sprinkles her with blood, she wants everyone to know, is available to all.

Gertrude concentrates on the efficacy of the breath, water and the blood of Christ supplying her with life, which revives, invigorates and transforms her. God's generous supply of grace from the 'treasury' of Christ's heart gifts her and all humanity with divine dignity.¹² As she points out, each person of the Trinity participates in supplying her with a particular grace. Her conception of Trinitarian life is that of boundless love expressed in hospitality, generosity and gratitude.

After Gertrude receives communion her vision continues and she sees herself:

in the likeness of a tree fixing its roots in the wound of the side of Jesus Christ; she felt in some new and marvellous way that there was passing through this wound, as through a root, and penetrating into all her branches and fruit and leaves a wondrous sap which was the virtue of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. Thus, through her soul, the work of his whole life took on more splendour, like gold gleaming through crystal. Hereupon not only the blessed Trinity, but also all the saints, rejoiced with delight and wonder. They rose up in reverence and, as though on bended knee, offered their merits, represented like crowns, hanging them on the branches of the tree we have mentioned, to the praise and honour of him the splendour of whose glory shone

through her and gladdened them with fresh delight. As for her, she besought the Lord that all those in heaven and on earth and even in purgatory (for indeed, all would have benefited from the fruits of her works had she not been negligent) might now have at last some share in those fruits with which she had just been enriched by his divine generosity. As she was praying, each single one of her good works (symbolised by the fruits of the tree) began to distil a beneficent liquid. Part of this liquid spread over the blessed, increasing their bliss; part of it spread over the earth, increasing the sweetness of grace for the just, and for sinners the bitterness of repentance.

Although the vision may sound bizarre to a contemporary reader, the images powerfully reveal Gertrude's theological reflection on God's relationship with creation. She experiences communion as a tree rooted in the broken body of Christ. She inhabits the body that was broken for her and poured out on the cross and in the Eucharist. She stretches down through the wound in Jesus' side to the heart of the 'humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ' from where his sap flows through her, so that 'the work of his whole life took on more splendour, like gold gleaming through crystal'. She is divinized through him and appears before the heavenly multitude – one in Christ – so transformed that 'the Trinity and all the saints give praise and honour to the one whose glory shone through her'.

The eucharistic transformation described by Gertrude's biographer might be read as a metaphor of eucharistic 'transubstantiation' taught in the theological schools and defined earlier at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE). While the doctrine held that the outward appearance of eucharistic bread remains, the whole reality, the substance, changes into the body and blood of Christ.¹⁴ Gertrude's vision stretches the definition. She imagines a mutual eucharistic 'transubstantiation' of the bread and herself where both change substantially. When she ate the bread of the eucharistic body of Christ she experienced herself embedded in and growing out of his heart. Christ's words to her on the feast of the Nativity as she held his infant body in her arms, seem to confirm this sense of transubstantiating, divinizing flow from body to body:

As I am the figure of the substance of the Father (Heb 1:3) through my divine nature, in the same way you shall be the figure of my substance through my human nature, receiving in your deified soul the brightness of my divinity, as the air receives the sun's rays and, penetrated to the

very marrow by this unifying light, you will become capable of an ever closer union with me.¹⁵

Notably Gertrude's vision does not end with her transformation into the body of Christ and her place in glory as the focus and delight of heaven forever after. She is rooted in the concerns of Christ's heart, which then become her own. She too participates in Christ's mission to create a communion of all humanity with the effective generosity of God. From her transubstantiated body/tree liquid falls and spreads over humanity – sinners and just in heaven, purgatory and on earth – as it had first fallen on her from the pierced heart of Christ. She participates in the flow of divine generosity and gratitude emanating from the heart of Christ embedded in the Trinity, spreading out to envelop all humanity and drawing all into the community of Trinitarian love. Herein all humanity is caught up in the compelling, dynamic and redemptive generosity flowing from and into the heart of God.

Christ's generous heart

Gertrude's image of Christ's heart was an expression of God's compassion. This insight has two related forms in her writing. First is the unshakeable belief that for God the desire is accepted for the deed. Gertrude reiterated that, just because we experience the contrast between what we desire and what we actually do, we should not give up. We should rather find our limitations a cause for joy in the face of God's generosity. Gertrude's biographer provides another account of her theological reflection:

The Lord could not bear her sadness and gave her with his own hands as it were, his divine heart in the form of a lighted lamp, saying: 'Behold here is my heart, the sweetest instrument of the adorable Trinity. I hold it in front of the eyes of your heart; it will supply all that you lack, faithfully making up for all you entrust to it. And so everything will appear most perfect in my sight. Because, like a faithful servant who is always ready to do what his lord pleases, from now onward my heart will always cleave to you, so that it may make up at any time for all your negligences.'¹⁶

The image of the lamp is interesting in this context as it shifts Gertrude's focus from reproaching herself to the insight that Christ's love is for her as she is. Just as the lamp dispels darkness, so did the heart of Christ lift her sadness, generated by self-knowledge, to reveal

his willing generosity. Fire and flames have dramatic biblical associations with God's immanence. Moses sensed God's presence in the burning bush (Exod 3:3–6), the pillar of fire and cloud was God's tangible presence for the Israelites in their desert wanderings (Exod 14:24; 40:38), and Pentecostal flames marked the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples (Acts 2:3–4). Gertrude's vision of a domestic flame, a lamp, maybe suggested by a chapel decoration or sanctuary lamp, marked God's presence as much as the column of fire for the Israelites in the vastness of the desert.¹⁷ However, unlike the burning bush and pillar, the heart/lamp was not an untouchable figure for her gaze. Christ connected her body to his with a divine straw:

The Lord who, though he inhabits the highest heaven, loves to impart his grace to the humble seemed to send down a sort of golden tube, like a drinking straw, from his heart which was hanging suspended like a lamp over the soul who was cowering in the valley of humility. Through this tube He caused to flow into her in a wonderful way all that she could desire. For instance, if she, remembering her defects, were to humble herself, the Lord would have pity on her at once and from his most blessed heart there would flow into her the spring-like flowering of his divine virtues. These, blotting out all her faults, did not let them appear anywhere in the sight of his divine benignity . . . she felt herself drawn in an indescribable way, through the tube we have mentioned, into the heart of the Lord, and she had the happiness of finding herself within the very being of her spouse and lord. What she felt, saw, heard, tasted, touched, is known to her alone, and to him who deigned to admit her to such a union . . .¹⁸

The flowing and overflowing from one body to the other in mutual desire and love, a variation of the transubstantiation of the eucharistic vision, also models the love and mutual gratitude among the Persons of the Trinity.¹⁹ As in the eucharistic vision, Gertrude is again hydrated, this time through the umbilical cord with the two-way flow from the reservoir of the 'abyss' of Christ's heart. An important feature of this vision is her fulfilment within Christ's body. All her senses are alive in this flowing and she gives delight as she receives.

The second part of her theological thought is related to and builds upon the first. Gertrude believed that God supplies what we lack. The following extract of a conversation between Gertrude and Christ is representative of this theology:

How can it be, my dearest Lover, that in your love you deign to conceal from yourself all the evil there is in me, since, after all, the sublime perfection of your works, my Lord, cannot displease me – something that proceeds not from my virtue but from your perfect sanctity? To which the Lord said in reply: ‘When the characters in a book seem too small to be read easily, one uses a magnifying glass to make the writing appear larger; it is not the book which has wrought this change but the lens. Even so, in the abundance of my love, I make up for whatever defect I may find in you.’²⁰

The idea of God’s supplying is closely bound to the heart of Jesus as the treasury and of the Trinity. Although her theological beliefs were fundamental to her living, Gertrude was never complacent in Christ’s love. She followed the fast and ascetic practices of the monastic Rule but she did not indulge in the excesses of bodily self-abuse and abnegation practised by many mediaeval religious women.²¹ Where her contemporary Mechtilde of Magdeburg bewailed the limitations of her woman’s body, Gertrude, seemingly satisfied, commented little. While she believed she was a speck of dust in relation to God, this was not from self-hatred or a cause for despair. She knew that God, the ‘Omnipotence, the Wisdom and the Goodness’, loved her. She was a speck of dust but a well-loved speck who named and counted the favours she received as a way of praising the ‘overflowing, immense and boundless generosity’ of God. Her biographer claims that Christ dwelt in a special way in the soul of Gertrude, but for her, this inhabiting was reciprocal. Christ invited her into his heart, his body became her cloister,²² but also she nursed him in her heart and he flowed into her as a life-giving liquid. She captured her delight at divine excess in an image of union in Christ’s heart, as singer and musical instrument:

With these words and all the others which now crowd into my mind, I want to render that which is your due. With the sweetly melodious harp of your divine heart, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, I sing to you, Lord God, adorable Father, songs of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of all creatures in heaven, on earth, under the earth; all which are, were, and shall be.²³

As in her eucharistic vision it is a bodily union, this time she is holding the harp of Christ’s heart in her arms and together, mediating for all creation, they pour out praise and gratitude in music.

Although Gertrude held no 'official' position in the monastery, i.e. abbess, prioress or novice mistress, she was in demand as a teacher and spiritual guide both in her community and by visitors to the monastery. Her reputation as a spiritual director came from her sense that her ministry was authorized by Christ and accepted as such in her community.²⁴ She recorded her mystical experiences reluctantly and in her anxiety suffered writer's block,²⁵ despite her work in the community as writer and copyist where her assiduity was admired and appreciated.²⁶ One of her contemporaries left an apt portrayal of her influence in the following:

With the pen of her tongue dipped, as it were, in her heart's blood she formed in her zeal such gracious words of love and wisdom that the hardest hearts were softened by her words and the most perverse of her hearers, if they had but a spark of piety, conceived the will, or at least the desire, to amend their lives.²⁷

The metaphor links Gertrude with the Word incarnate and echoes her own sense of transformation in the eucharistic vision. She too is the word become flesh; the body poured out, the one who melts hard hearts in the mission of Christ. Gertrude, of course, would not see this as particular to herself. She believed that each of us belongs in the heart of God and that no one is left outside. Our part is just to desire the experience of being loved.

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NOTES

1 See the work of S. Beckwith, *Christ's body: identity, culture and society in late medieval writings*; E. Brunn and G. Epiney-Burgard, *Women mystics in medieval Europe* (New York, 1989); C. W. Bynum, *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the high Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982); Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley, 1987); Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays in gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1992); S. Kay and M. Rubin (eds), *Framing medieval bodies* (Manchester/New York, 1994); B. Newman, *From virile woman to womanchrist*, *Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1995); E. A. Petroff, *Medieval women's visionary literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Petroff, *Body and soul:*

essays on medieval women and mysticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in the late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1992); Paul Szarmach (ed), *An introduction to the medieval mystics of Europe* (Albany, 1984); Jean Leclercq, F. Vandenbroucke and L. Bouyer (eds), *The spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London, 1968).

2 See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), pp 340–343.

3 Sited near Eisleben in Saxony.

4 It appears that Mechtilde entered Helfta as a refuge from her vulnerable position as a beguine and mystic after outspoken criticism of corruption in the Church. The first page of *The flowing light of the Godhead* announces her danger: 'I have been put on my guard about this book, and certain people have warned me that unless I have it buried, it will be burnt . . . Yet I in my weakness have written it, because I dared not hide the gift that is in it.' Lucy Menzies (trans), *The revelations of Mechtilde of Magdeburg (1210–1297) or The flowing light of the Godhead* (London, 1953). For studies of Mechtilde see F. Beer, *Women and mystical experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1992); F. Bowie, *Beguine spirituality* (New York, 1989); E. Brunn & G. Epiney-Burgard, *Women mystics in medieval Europe* (New York, 1989); F. Tobin, *Mechtilde of Magdeburg: a medieval mystic in modern eyes* (Columbia, 1995).

5 *The herald* (Paulist Press, 1992), bk 2, ch 1, pp 101–102. Although Gertrude does not mention the heart of Jesus in this account she paraphrases Matthew 11:30 which is the only place in the gospels where Jesus refers to his heart. Biographer's account of her conversion, *The herald*, bk 1, ch 1, pp 52–55; Her account, bk 2, ch 1, pp 94–96; ch 23, pp 128–134.

6 M. J. Finnegan, *The women of Helfta* (Georgia, 1991), p 64.

7 This is most probably one of the Helfta community, a confidant of Gertrude, possibly Mechtilde of Hackeborn.

8 Her exegesis of John 19:34.

9 The fleur-de-lys was a Trinitarian symbol in mediaeval Europe as the shamrock was in Ireland.

10 *The herald*, bk 3, ch 18, pp 176–177.

11 A constant theme in her writing, e.g. 'For in my body, which is united with my divinity, my elect always have an advocate who compels me to have compassion on their various needs.' *The herald*, bk 3, ch 7, p 161.

12 Another time at Mass she offered her heart to the Lord with these words: 'See Lord, here is my heart, empty of all creatures. I offer it to you with my whole will, praying that you will wash it in the sanctifying water from your most sacred side, and that you will adorn it becomingly with the precious blood of your most sweet heart, and then you may prepare it for yourself most fittingly in the fragrant ardour of your divine love.' Then the Son of God appeared, offering to God the Father her heart united with his divine heart, in the likeness of a chalice, made of two parts, joined with wax. 'She said: 'Grant . . . that my heart may cling always to you . . . that you always at your pleasure, have it at hand, clean, and ready to pour into it or out of it at any time you please, and for whomsoever you please.' The Son of God kindly accepted this and said to the Father: 'To you eternal praise, O holy Father, may that heart pour forth all that my human heart contains for distribution.' *The herald*, bk 3, ch 30, p 193. Note in this section that the water is associated with Jesus' side and the blood with his heart.

13 *The herald*, bk 3, ch 18, p 177.

14 See P. J. Fitzpatrick, *In breaking of bread* (Cambridge, 1993), particularly pp 4–20. I am not suggesting that Gertrude saw her experience of eucharistic change in Aristotelian categories as Aquinas did. As a monastic woman in northern Europe she would not have had access to the Aristotelian texts but she does highlight the experience of many mediaeval women of being and enacting the body of Christ bringing the word and flesh together in their lives.

15 *The herald*, bk 2, ch 6, p 106.

16 *The herald*, bk 3, ch 25, pp 188–189. See also, bk 3, chs 40–41, pp 209–211.

17 See also Luke 11:33–36; 15:8–10 for more domestic images of the lamp.

18 *The herald*, bk 3, ch 27, pp 190–191; bk 3, ch 30, pp 192–203 speaks of the golden tube as free will.

19 In this sense, rather than suggesting gratitude as from an inferior to a superior, its meaning is in the Aquinian sense of the benefit which comes not from a superior but from an equal. *Summa theologiae* Ia IIae, q 106.

20 *The herald*, bk 1, ch 16, p 86. Cf. *The herald*, p 93.

21 Bynum says this is 'the characteristically Christian idea that the bodily suffering of one person can be substituted for the suffering of another' which must be 'one of the most puzzling, characteristic, glorious, and horrifying features of Christianity'. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast* (1987), p 418, n 54.

22 *The herald*, bk 3, ch 28, p 191.

23 *The herald*, bk 2, ch 23, p 132; Cf. *The herald*, p 168.

24 For example, Mechtild of Hackeborn relates her vision of Gertrude as a bridge supported on one side by the humanity of Jesus Christ and on the other by his divinity and saying to her, 'None of those who try to come to me by this bridge can fall or go astray.' *The herald*, bk 1, ch 14, p 81; see also bk 1, ch 16, pp 82–84.

25 Like others, e.g. Julian of Norwich, Gertrude wrote only because she was asked to by Christ. She agonized over how to record her experiences in a way that made them accessible and true to the meaning of the experience. The enormity of that task seem to paralyze her writing at times as she confesses in *Herald*, bk 2, ch 10, p 109.

26 One of the Sisters recounts Gertrude's industry in writing. She collected, copied, annotated and distributed everything that 'might be of use to others . . . if she heard that in certain quarters books of holy Scripture were lacking she endeavoured to obtain them'. *The herald* bk 1, ch 4, pp 60–61.

27 *The herald*, bk 1, ch 6, p 63.