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Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography

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Almost every woman who produced religious writings in the Christian Middle Ages claimed to receive the authority for her teaching, and often the content of that teaching itself, directly from God. Submission of one's own will to that of the divine was the precondition for women's agency within the religious sphere, either in the form of textual production or institutional development and reform. Late twentieth-century reappraisal of medieval Christian women's writings, then, which began in the 1980s with the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, Peter Dronke, Elisabeth Petroff, Barbara Newman, and others, hinges on the categories of legitimization and authorization.¹ These and other scholars most often interpret the complex rhetorics and practices of femininity and submission that shape the texts of medieval religious women in terms of agency and authority.²

Although some medieval Christian men rested their religious authority on prophetic, visionary, or mystical claims, these were the primary modes of religious authorization available to women.³ In addition,

¹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Saint Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

² For the phrase rhetoric of femininity, see Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³ See, e.g., the visionary exegesis of Rupert of Deutz (ca. 1070–1135) and Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202). For the two monks, as for their contemporary Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), visions provided direct insight into the interpretation of Scripture. Bernard McGinn, "Apoc-

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the complete loss of will or of the self in the divine, which legitimates almost all of the women's and some of the men's textual production and religious authority, is often explicitly gendered. Not only is the soul usually (although not always) read as feminine in relationship to a male divinity, but women's putative passivity and malleability render them particularly apt sites of divine agency on earth.⁴ Medieval women make use of the very gender subordination that constrains them as the condition for and source of agency, an agency ultimately ascribed not to religious women themselves, but to God.⁵

My own work on the thirteenth-century semireligious woman, Mechthild of Magdeburg, follows in this broad line of interpretation. In *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*, I show that Mechthild accentuates her humility, even abjection, as female in order to become the site of divine agency on earth. Worried by the disparity between her lack of learning and status and the task of teaching and prophecy assigned her by God, Mechthild laments that God did not choose someone better suited to make his word known to humanity. To this God replies, "where I gave especially my grace, there I sought ever the lowest, smallest, most secret place. The highest mountain on earth cannot receive the revelations of my grace, for the flood of my Holy Spirit flows naturally to the valley. One finds many a master wise in the scripture who in himself, in my eyes, is a fool. And I say to you still more, that it is a great honor to me

alyptic Traditions and Spiritual Identity in Thirteenth-Century Religious Life," in *The Roots of the Modern Christian Tradition*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cisterican, 1984), pp. 1–26, and *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), pp. 325–41; and Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 309–50.

⁴ Elizabeth Robertson, "The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), pp. 268–87, and "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Susan Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 142–67; Dyan Elliott, "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval, 1997), pp. 141–73; and Nancy Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," *Comparative Study of Society and History* 42, no. 2 (2000): 268–306.

⁵ The ubiquity—and cogency—of this paradigm for both the medieval and early modern periods is signaled by Diane Watt's *Secretaries of God*, the title of which is derived from a phrase found in the *Book* of the fifteenth-century English laywoman, Margery Kempe. Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997). The extent to which women make explicit the need for special legitimation because of their sex differs, both between women and within writings by the same woman. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, pp. 170–262; and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), esp. p. 61.

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before them and strengthens holy Christianity in them very much, that the unlearned mouth teaches learned tongues of my Holy Spirit.”⁶ This dynamic, whereby the highest must flow into the lowest, is central to the theology of the *Flowing Light*. God as love always flows out to those below him. Hence the more humble Mechthild is—as a weak, changeable woman—the more receptive she is to God. According to this reading of the *Flowing Light*, Mechthild explicitly grounds her authority on a rhetoric of femininity that both constrains and empowers her.⁷

Despite the obvious cogency of this interpretation and its grounding in Mechthild’s text, it seems to suggest that Mechthild strategically—whether consciously or unconsciously need not concern us here—uses theological language to enable and mask her own agency.⁸ Yet in the *Flowing Light*, this account of Mechthild’s receptivity is ascribed not to Mechthild, but to God. Does insistence on Mechthild’s agency—be it conscious or unconscious—undermine the radicality of her book and its mode of production? Is there any way—or any reason—for a twenty-first century feminist historian to take seriously Mechthild’s claim that God speaks directly through her? If we do so, do we thereby undermine Mechthild’s agency in ways inimical to the project of feminist historiography? Conversely, what—if anything—are we missing by moving too

⁶ Hans Neumann, ed., *Mechthild von Magdeburg, “Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit”: Nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, 2 vols. (Munich: Artemis, 1990), vol. 2, bk. 2, chap. 26, p. 69. For an excellent English translation of the text, see Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1998).

⁷ As Judith Butler shows, the split between agency and determination or victimization so often deployed in feminist studies is deeply problematic, for the very conditions that bring about subordination are themselves the source of subjectivity and hence of agency—however limited or constrained that agency might be in particular situations of subordination. As Amy Allen explains, subjectivity for Butler is taken on through a complex series of performative citations of the norms that constitute subjectivity within a given society: “However, the very fact that it is *necessary* for norms to be reiterated or cited by individuals in order for them to maintain their efficacy indicates that we are never completely determined by them. . . . If we were completely determined by gender norms, there would be no need for us to continually cite and reiterate them; that we are continually compelled to do so gives us good reason for thinking that we are not so determined.” For Butler, our very ability to act in meaningful ways depends on our becoming (at least marginally) recognizable subjects (to at least some social group or subgroup). See Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999), p. 73; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸ For parallel accounts of—and potential problems with—social scientific accounts of spirit possession, see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 50–53.

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quickly to claims about agency, legitimation, and authorization, thereby bypassing what Mechthild's own text claims about its production?

I might respond to my own worries by deploying the distinction between description or understanding and explanation.⁹ With regard to religious studies, Wayne Proudfoot argues that while descriptions of a person's or group's experience must be made in terms that such a person or group would themselves understand (otherwise it would not be a description of that experience), explanations are under no such constraint. The best explanation of an event or experience may or may not be one provided by or even available to the person who or group that undergoes the experience. Proudfoot thus tries to save the religionist from the charge of reductionism, arguing that while descriptive reductionism is a problem in that it fails to capture that which it purports to describe, explanatory reductionism is both desirable and inevitable if we are to come to the best explanation of any given experience or event.¹⁰

Proudfoot recognizes that descriptions of an event or experience generally contain within them some explanation, however implicit, of that experience, thereby potentially rendering social scientific explanations in conflict with descriptions given by the person who or group that has the experience. The aim of Proudfoot's entire argument is to demonstrate that this potential conflict is not epistemologically or morally pernicious. It just is the case, he implies, that people are sometimes wrong about the best explanation for their experience—hence, their descriptions of that experience, even arguably the experience itself, are epistemologically flawed.

This seems to be particularly the case for religious experience. Proudfoot goes to some lengths to show that experiences are defined as religious on the basis of the claim that they were brought about by some supernatural agency. Hence the very description of an experience as religious depends on an explanation of that experience as caused by God or some other supernatural being. According to Proudfoot, one of the problems with scholarly accounts of religious experience like

⁹ For a review of the debate in philosophy of science and the social sciences, see Karl-Otto Apel, *Understanding and Explanation: A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective*, trans. Georgia Warnke (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). See also Robert Segal, *Explaining and Interpreting Religion: Essays on the Issue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); David Ray Griffin, "Religious Experience, Naturalism, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion," Samuel J. Preus, "Explaining Griffin," and Robert Segal, "In Defense of Social Scientific Naturalism: A Response to David Ray Griffin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 1 (2000): 99–125, 127–32, and 133–41.

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those provided by Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James is that they have permitted religious explanations to stand without question, either accepting (Schleiermacher) or bracketing (James) claims to divine causality. Schleiermacher and James participate in what Proudfoot refers to as a “protectionist strategy,” which attempts to safeguard religious experience from social scientific explanations. Protectionism and the charge of reductionism, then, go hand in hand. For Proudfoot, however, supernatural explanations are never adequate to the phenomena and always require correction. Hence his carefully made distinction between descriptive reductionism (which is impermissible) and explanatory reductionism (which seems to be required in religious studies).¹¹

Yet if the description itself contains an explanation, then the scholar of religion is perforce situated in opposition to her subject matter, for her explanation of religious experience will ultimately be at odds not only with the religious person’s explicit explanation of his experience but also with the explanation of that experience embedded within the description. Unlike other kinds of experience, moreover, religious experience seems to be by definition inadequately explained. Hence the religious person’s explanation of his or her experience (and note that Proudfoot continually suggests that it is a single explanation) is not even considered as one possible explanation of the experience by the social scientific researcher. Moreover, given the interplay of description and explanation, it seems unlikely that the scholar of religion, who presumes the primacy of naturalistic explanations, will be able to describe religious experience without recourse to categories derived from such explanations.¹² Social scientific descriptions themselves are often subtly at odds with the experiences they purport to describe.

¹¹ Proudfoot never explicitly denies the possibility of supernatural explanations being warranted, but the entire tenor of his argument works against such a possibility and in fact seems to be premised on its denial.

¹² In one of many possible examples, the early modernist Brad Gregory argues for the importance of understanding over explanation, insisting that to understand early modern Christian martyrdom, one must take with utmost seriousness the power of religious beliefs over those who hold them. (Unlike Gregory, I find it very rare for historians of religion *not* to take seriously the power of religious belief. The problem, as I will show, lies deeper.) Gregory thereby attempts to avoid what he sees as the reductionist tendencies of social scientific explanations, which often rest on presumptions foreign to the texts, documents, and artifacts under analysis. Despite arguing strenuously for the centrality of understanding over explanation and the inadmissibility of modern social scientific, philosophical, and literary categories of analysis within historical work, however, Gregory goes on almost immediately to discuss the shift between early Christian martyrdom and monasticism’s heroic asceticism in terms of “sublimation.” Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 8–15, 50. The term “sublimation” itself serves as a useful reminder of the historical transmutation of terms. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sublimation first names a chemical process (fourteenth century) and is then extended by analogy to the social (fifteenth century), religious (seventeenth

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In relation to the first problem, we have my reading of Mechthild, which implicitly argues that even if Mechthild did not know it, what she was really doing in ascribing her writing to God was engaging in a project of self-authorization. Although we might legitimately understand authorization as one of the effects of women's experience of the divine, to render it a cause of these experiences undermines medieval women's own self-understanding and practice. Yet in relation to the second problem outlined above, medieval women claim that they receive authority only insofar as what speaks through them is not their own will but that of the divine, thereby challenging predominate contemporary assumptions even about the effects of their experience. In other words, even if we understand authorization as merely an effect of that experience, we engage in a description of that experience shaped by modern naturalistic categories of thought.

This is, implicitly at least, the way that I have told Mechthild's story. The distinction between understanding and explanation does not help with my initial worry, for that distinction rests on a privileging of explanation and of naturalistic explanatory categories that make sense to me and my putative audience, rather than of those that make sense to my subject and hers. These explanatory categories, moreover, affect the ways in which experiences are described. All of this suggests that there might be good epistemological, ethical, and political reasons to question the extent to which we allow modern categories of analysis (be they geared toward description or explanation) to shape our reading of the past, particularly the religious past.¹³ (And when it comes to religion, the same questions can easily be asked of the present.)

Yet how are we to render the past comprehensible without recourse to the categories of understanding and explanation available to us? And can we engage in critical engagement with the past under these terms?

century), geological (nineteenth century), and finally psychoanalytic (twentieth century) registers. Gregory would no doubt argue that he is using the term in its seventeenth-century sense—one never, of course, completely lost. Yet the psychoanalytic overtones are very hard not to hear. Similarly, although Mechthild herself clearly worries about authority, thereby rendering it an important descriptive term, it is very hard not to hear twentieth-century feminist resonances (and putative explanatory categories) in its deployment within recent scholarship.

¹³ For the claim that at least one mode of modern history writing was grounded in the desire for just such emancipatory accounts of the past and emancipation of the voices of the past, see Carolyn Steedman on Jules Michelet in her *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002). Steedman's is just one of a number of recent reevaluations of Michelet, grounded in the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Although one might argue that the conception of history derived from Michelet, Barthes, Foucault, Jacques Rancière, and others engages with the other in a mode like that which I seek here, an analysis of the supernatural in their work would be required in order to solidify the claim.

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For help with these questions I want briefly to show the ways in which a historian of South Asia, Dipesh Chakrabarty, argues that postcolonialist critiques of historicism lead to questions about divine agency and history similar to those I ask about medieval Christian women writers. For Chakrabarty, writing in the context of postcolonialism, the stakes of these questions become particularly clear—as do the possibilities and dangers of at least momentarily suspending naturalist categories of analysis and explanation.

Chakrabarty states the issue succinctly in his account of the double bind attendant on the writing of democratically minded histories of modern India. Describing the argument of Ranajit Guha's essay, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," Chakrabarty follows Guha in asking "what it means when we both take the subaltern's views seriously—the subaltern ascribes the agency for their rebellion to some god [Guha here refers to the Santal, a tribal group in Bengal and Bihar who rebelled against the British and non-local Indians in 1855, ascribing their actions to supernatural agency]—and want to confer on the subaltern agency or subjecthood in their own history, a status the subaltern's statement denies?"¹⁴ Guha, according to Chakrabarty, resists "analyses that see religion simply as a displaced manifestation of human relationships that are in themselves secular and worldly (class, power, economy, and so on)" (p. 104). Yet Chakrabarty argues that Guha's move remains inadequate. Guha, like other historians, Chakrabarty claims, "will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practice" (p. 104).¹⁵ Yet Guha refuses to ascribe any real agency to the supernatural, for to do so goes "against the rules of evidence that give historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past" (p. 104).¹⁶ "The historian, as historian and unlike the Santal, cannot

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 103. Further citations to this work are cited parenthetically in the text. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. chaps. 1–3.

¹⁵ Gregory claims that in using social scientific modes of analysis, historians refuse to acknowledge the power of religious beliefs over those who hold them. This is rarely the case, however, as Chakrabarty shows with regard to Guha. Similarly, it is very clear that historians of medieval women both acknowledge the religious beliefs of their subjects and also read their work in terms of agency, authorization, and legitimization.

¹⁶ In her study of gender and possession, Keller argues in a similar manner that attention to the beliefs of the other are inadequate, for within the social scientific literature on possession these beliefs are always presumed to be false. Keller suggests, in fact, that the category of religious belief emerges as a way of isolating the false beliefs of those putatively other than the social scientific investigator: "On the one hand, the possession is described as a *real belief*, but on the other hand it is *not* the belief of the scholar, who then presents an alternative interpretation of the *real* process at hand" (p. 29).

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invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event” (p. 106). (So my inability to grant that God legitimated Mechthild’s book through a particular account of her femininity.)

How then does one engage in an alternative subaltern historiography, one that takes with utmost seriousness the ways in which subaltern peoples account for their own pasts (and presents)? For Chakrabarty this is an ethical and political question, but also an epistemological one, for the tenets of modern historiography crucially limit the life worlds and modes of temporality that are available to knowledge. According to Chakrabarty, “the Santal with his statement ‘I did as my god told me to do’ also faces us as a way of being in this world, and we could ask ourselves: Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present? Does the Santal help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances?” (p. 108). Unlike Guha, who even while he acknowledges the power the Santal’s belief has over the Santal himself immediately translates that belief into categories assimilable to modern Western historiographical consciousness, Chakrabarty argues that a truly subaltern history must “stay with the heterogeneity of the moment,” both the heterogeneity of the Santal’s self-understanding to the historian’s own and that between two different kinds of historical projects.

Chakrabarty defines the two historical projects in the following way: “One is that of historicizing the Santal in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicize and of seeing the Santal as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present” (p. 108).¹⁷ “Taken together,” Chakrabarty argues, “the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present” (p. 108). Subaltern pasts render visible the disjunction that exists within the present by making other modes of being intelligible. (Furthermore, Chakrabarty explicitly connects subaltern pasts and medieval European pasts, claiming that both [can] demonstrate “the noncontemporaneity of the present with itself” [p. 109].)

¹⁷ Historicization here seems to imply the reading of the Santal in terms of political agency (i.e., in terms of categories meaningful to modern Marxian and liberal historiography). This again works to homogenize the past with the present, a central project of historicism according to Chakrabarty. Although Foucault and others argue for a view of history as disruption, not unlike Chakrabarty’s second description, further work would be required to see the extent to which they allow the supernatural to disrupt history in the first mode described here. This may be the point on which otherness ultimately collapses. (Arguably this is not true for Georges Bataille, hence the difficulty of assimilating his work within modern accounts of history. See Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], esp. pp. 60–87.)

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Modern liberatory narratives cast time as “secular, empty, and homogenous” (p. 23).¹⁸ Chakrabarty asks what happens to this conception of time when it encounters other modes of temporality, particularly those that posit a supernatural time and agency. Western historicist narratives cast this alterity as “medieval,” hence attempting to render it other, past, and no longer intrusive on the contemporary world. Secular history, then, routinely translates supernatural agents into terms intelligible to it—hence my reading of women’s claims to divine agency in terms of women’s own agency, legitimization, and authorization.

Chakrabarty proposes a number of alternatives to this mode of translation. First, he looks to other modes of translation that do not pass through the universal (p. 86). His example is the proximate translations that occur between Hindu and Muslim deities and religious conceptions in South Asia. Such translations remain embedded within the life worlds of two particular traditions, yet Chakrabarty argues that “the very obscurity of the translation process allows the incorporation of that which remains untranslatable” (p. 86). Later in the same essay, however, Chakrabarty suggests that historians will continue to, perhaps even must, use putatively universal terms (e.g., “god” or the “gods”) to translate the past, but that they can do so in ways that “ask how this seemingly imperious, all-pervasive code might be deployed or thought about so that we have at least a glimpse of its own finitude, a glimpse of what might constitute an outside to it” (p. 93).

In an earlier essay in *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty suggests that we should think of history as (at least) double. He therefore differentiates between what he calls “History 1,” which stands in an objectifying relationship to reality (comparable with Heidegger’s account of the “present-at-hand”) and “History 2,” in which an everyday, preanalytical, unobjectifying relationship to reality comes to the fore (comparable with Heidegger’s “ready-to-hand” [p. 68]). Chakrabarty’s distinction is complex, and I can only point to a few of its features here. Most pertinent for my purpose, the distinction renders visible different kinds of life worlds, which include different relationships to and/or conceptions of temporality itself. For those whose world is imbued with supernatural agents, time itself operates and is experienced differently than it is for secular, post-Enlightenment Europeans and Americans. (What to do with nonsecular post-Enlightenment Europeans and Americans—the

¹⁸ Chakrabarty borrows this characterization from the work of Walter Benjamin, another important source for alternative conceptions of history.

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extent to which they occupy the rift between Chakrabarty's History 1 and History 2—remains an open question.)¹⁹

Deriving the distinction from Karl Marx's account of the dual history of capital, Chakrabarty shows that History 1 constitutes "a past posited by capital itself as its precondition" (p. 63), whereas History 2 is the multiple possibilities that History 1 must subjugate or destroy in order to render its logic inevitable.²⁰ "Marx appears to suggest that entities as close and necessary to the function of capital as money and commodity do not necessarily belong by any natural connection to either capital's own life process or to the past posited by capital. Marx recognizes the possibility that money and commodity, as relations, could have existed in history without necessarily giving rise to capital. Since they do not necessarily look forward to capital, they make up the kind of past I have called History 2" (p. 64). History 2, then, has the capacity constantly to interrupt "the totalizing thrusts of History 1" (p. 66).

According to Chakrabarty, the triumph of capitalism renders the potentially liberatory narratives of History 1 essential to any politically engaged writing of history. Yet at the same time, he argues that History 1 is always already disrupted by the traces of History 2 and that a truly subaltern historical practice must render that interruption visible. Only in this way can the historian approach the reality and force of life worlds other than those of capitalism. Translated into the terms of my own analysis of medieval Christian women's religious writings, this suggests that the historian must both recognize the legitimating function of claims to divine authorization and take seriously claims to divine agency within these texts, a move that will inevitably disrupt History 1's accounts in as yet not fully discovered ways. (But what does this "taking seriously" entail? Not merely the recognition of the power of beliefs over those who hold them, Chakrabarty argues, but the possibility of the truth of those beliefs. The difficulties of this for the modern Western historian are, I think, precisely the point.)

So, while one might be tempted to assimilate Chakrabarty's distinction between History 1 and History 2 to the distinction between explanation and understanding or description that underlies much modern historiography and religious studies, both the Santal and Mechthild's

¹⁹ On this issue, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Although derived from Chakrabarty's engagement with marxist historiography, I think that the distinction has salience beyond that context. Insofar as history engages in the work of explanation, it tends to posit some set of antecedent events as the cause of that which follows. Hence there will always be the shadow of that which does not fit within this causal narrative.

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Flowing Light insistently remind us that accurate descriptions of another's experience generally include within them an explanation of what generated that experience. To presume, as modern historians (like Proudfoot) tend to do, the ultimate validity of naturalistic explanations immediately puts the historian in the position of History 1, in which other modes of explanation (and hence of existence) are invalidated from the outset.

If part of the project of women's history is to hear the other—in all of her alterity—we cannot unquestioningly presume that our own explanatory and descriptive categories are valid and those of our subject are invalid. Yet the dilemma—how to take seriously the agency of the other (the goal of emancipatory historiographical projects associated, by Chakrabarty, with History 1) when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God (the complexity of agency uncovered by alternative histories)—remains unresolved.

In her study of gender, agency, and spirit possession, Mary Keller follows Talal Asad in suggesting that one solution to such a dilemma lies in separating agency and subjectivity. According to Asad, “contrary to the discourse of many radical historians and anthropologists, *agent* and *subject* (where the former is the principle of effectivity and the latter of consciousness) do not belong to the same theoretical universe and should not, therefore, be coupled.”²¹ As Keller goes on to explain, “agency does not reside in individual subjectivities; it resides in the interrelationships of bodies with systems of power such as economic systems and religious systems with the regimes of *disciplina*.”²² Decoupling agency and subjectivity offers the possibility of thinking about agency in new ways, in particular in terms of what Keller calls “instrumental agency.” Keller's interest lies primarily with those forms of possession in which the possessed has no consciousness of that which occurs. These traditions speak of the possessed as “mounted, played, pounced, wielded, emptied, and entered” by the possessor.²³ The idea of instrumental agency allows Keller to ascribe agency to the possessed body without eliding the agency of the spirit or deity who possesses that

²¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 16, cited in Keller (n. 8 above), pp. 63–64. Foucault's and Butler's accounts of subjectivity, of course, radically undermine the identification of subjectivity with consciousness, hence potentially rendering the distinction Keller finds in Asad moot.

²² Keller, p. 73. Again, this account of agency fits well with Butler's recharacterization of subjectivity.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

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body (even as she recognizes that she cannot make any epistemological claims about these entities).

The nuances of Keller's conception of instrumental agency render it a particularly apt way of thinking about possession, yet certain problems remain. First, in the case of Mechthild and most other medieval Christian women of whose experience we have some record, consciousness is not completely overcome in the way it putatively is for those about whom Keller writes. This highlights a more substantive concern with the idea of instrumental agency: To what extent does it reduce possessed persons to bodies? (Although arguably that is what the spirits or gods do in the cases cited by Keller.) Medieval women themselves wrestle with this problem in their writings, a number of women rejecting the cultural ascription of bodily sanctity to women in favor of an emphasis on the role of the will and understanding in the relationship between God and the soul.²⁴ This is not to deny the centrality of bodily, spiritual, and mental practices to medieval subjectivities. However, ascription of agency to bodies, used as instruments by gods or spirits, potentially simplifies rather than highlights the complexity of these practices and the structures of power in which they are performed.

Medieval women's critiques of cultural presumptions about women, agency, and sanctity suggest another problem with Keller's model. It is not clear that she allows any room for critical reflection—either by women and men within the cultures and societies that she describes or by scholars studying those cultures from the outside. Keller's primary contemporary examples of spirit possession involve dispossessed bodies through whom gods or spirits act in order to restore aspects of traditional culture effaced by global capitalism (women workers possessed by spirits in the high-tech factories of Malaysia) or to incite revolutionary action against colonial powers (the women possessed by ancestral spirits who preached revolution in Zimbabwe). In both cases, many readers will be sympathetic to the causes espoused by the spirits.

But what about the case of Uganda, where Alice Auma, possessed by an Italian spirit named Lakwena, helped overthrow the Ugandan president Milton Obote in 1985. The resultant government was unpopular, leading to civil war. As Frederick Smith explains, following the ethnography of Heike Behrend, Auma then “founded an army called the ‘Holy Spirit Mobile Forces’ (HSMF), directed by Lakwena. . . . Everyone, so the ideology went, was free to be possessed, but in general spirit pos-

²⁴ Amy Hollywood, “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer,” in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 78–98, and *Sensible Ecstasy*, pp. 236–73.

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session involved the duty to kill.”²⁵ Although Behrend imputes the devolution of spirit mediumship into an outlet for killing to the disenfranchisement of indigenous religions—the role of Christianity in the story is far too complex to outline here—the fact remains that few will feel comfortable simply accepting the agency of the spirits without critique.²⁶

Similar problems arise in the case of the medieval Christian women about whom I write. Most famously, God incites Joan of Arc to lead men in warfare.²⁷ Moral and political problems are endemic, moreover, to any attempt to acknowledge agency as the source of women’s and men’s words and actions. If nothing else, the very form of these accounts often divinely sanctions gender subordination and particular constructions of gender.²⁸ (Arguably, the construction of gender and of the divine go hand in hand in many religious texts and practices, although this position implies precisely the kind of naturalizing, social-scientific explanation whose hegemony I here question.)

A desire to maintain the space for critique leads Chakrabarty to remain committed to the emancipatory narratives he believes are only made possible by what he refers to as History 1.²⁹ In other words, for Chakrabarty there must be a constant interplay between the emancipatory and critical categories of modern historiographical analysis and the alterity of voices, bodies, and practices rendered visible through alternative histories, histories sensitive to precisely that which does not fit within modern, secularizing, and naturalizing narratives. To dismiss these histories too quickly, Chakrabarty insists, is to miss the possibility of alternative life worlds and temporalities; to refuse to subject these life worlds and temporalities to critique, however, would be similarly pernicious.

From a somewhat different angle, Chakrabarty argues in *Habitations of Modernity* that historical investigation “must be possessed of an open-

²⁵ Frederick M. Smith, “The Current State of Possession Studies as a Cross-Disciplinary Project,” *Religious Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (2001): 210. Smith refers to Heike Behrend, “Power to Heal, Power to Kill: Spirit Possession and War in Northern Uganda (1986–1994),” in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, ed. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), pp. 1–35.

²⁶ See Behrend, p. 31.

²⁷ The incitement of others to kill can also be discerned in many medieval religious women’s approval of the Crusade against the Cathar heretics and similar events.

²⁸ The tendency in feminist history to valorize agency has rendered it difficult to discuss—or even to recognize—those moments in which women have been agents of evil, violence, or oppression. As Susannah Heschel has put it to me in conversation, much feminist historiography still remains caught in a hagiographical mode in which women are seen either as victims or as passive—and hence not fully responsible—agents.

²⁹ Also see Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (n. 14 above), pp. 20–37.

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ness so radical” that he can only express it, he says, in Heideggerian terms: “the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand.”³⁰ Yet this alternative history can never be written in pure form: “The language of the state, of citizenship, of wholes and totalities, the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism will always cut across it.” The goal is to open ourselves to disruptive histories that will “grant our social life a constant lack of transparency with regard to any one particular way of thinking.”³¹ This does not require an abdication of critical capacities—rather Chakrabarty here suggests that radical openness to the other will hone and enhance critical capacities with regard both to the past and the present, with regard both to others and to ourselves.³²

A number of interrelated questions remain. First, if historians pursue alternative histories, taking seriously claims to divine agency within history, to what extent will the emancipatory narratives of what Chakrabarty no doubt too dichotomously refers to as History 1 be disrupted in ways that render it unrecognizable? In other words, can Chakrabarty remain committed to the goals of emancipatory historical narratives—and to the critical stance they enable with regard to issues of race, class, gender, and religious difference—while allowing them to be disrupted by alternative histories? Seen from the perspective of my own work, can a feminist historian allow alternative histories to disrupt emancipatory feminist histories without renaturalizing and/or relegitimizing the former’s often deep misogyny?

By contrast, is Chakrabarty wrong in his presumption that emancipatory political possibilities are available only through what he calls History 1? Might there be other emancipatory possibilities in the life worlds rendered visible through alternative histories? Perhaps even more radically, should we assume that agency, as understood within secular historiography, is the only way in which to think about politics

³⁰ Ibid., p. 36. Chakrabarty calls for something like what Bynum recently pleads for with regard to medieval religious historiography. “We write the best history,” she argues, “when the specificity, the novelty, the awe-fulness, of what our sources render up bowls us over with its complexity and its significance. Our research is better when we move only cautiously to understanding, when the fear that we may appropriate the ‘other’ leads us not so much to writing about ourselves and our fears as to crafting our stories with attentive, wondering care. . . . We must rear a new generation of students who will gaze in wonder at texts and artifacts, quick to puzzle over a translation, slow to project or to appropriate, quick to assume there is a significance, slow to generalize about it.” The difference is Bynum’s anxiety about the interpenetration of past and present, exactly that toward which Chakrabarty points the historian. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), p. 74.

³¹ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, pp. 36–37.

³² On the centrality of radical openness to moral inquiry within religious studies, see Robert A. Orsi, “Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion,” in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 98–118.

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(either in the past or in the present)?³³ If it is not, what happens to the very demand to make the other an agent of history that dominates the projects of subaltern and feminist history themselves?

And finally, are there ends other than those of emancipation to which we must attend in our desire to understand, explain, and promote the flourishing of women's lives?³⁴ Might attention to alternative histories help us to see them? Mechthild desires freedom, but a freedom very different from that sought by modern feminisms. Perhaps only a suspension of disbelief—one that allows Mechthild's self-abjection in the face of the divine other to pierce feminist historiography's emancipatory presumptions—will enable us to glimpse this other freedom.³⁵

³³ Although arguably working fully within the terms of History 1, Amanda Anderson makes an important argument for the necessity of distinguishing between historical agency and critical reflection. Looking at recent historical work on Victorian women, Anderson argues that Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, and other scholars "position women as continuous with modern discipline or regulation" and thereby "create not exactly an empowered but rather simply a powered subject." Most women are presented as "passive agents," enacting changing cultural scripts with little or no critical detachment or self-reflection on their role as agents of social, cultural, and political change. The central importance of critical detachment to emancipatory agency hence remains untheorized. In other words, Anderson suggests, agency itself is an inadequate category for emancipatory political projects, a position perhaps inevitable after Foucault and Butler. See Amanda Anderson, "The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity," *Victorian Studies* 43 (2000): 57, and *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁴ On the limits of emancipatory conceptions of the self for analytic feminism, see Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 202–36.

³⁵ And of course, women—even feminists—desire many things in addition to freedom.