

Caroline Walker Bynum. *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. xviii + 402 pp. + 32 b/w pls. index. illus. map. bibl. \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-8122-3985-0.

Wonderful Blood is Bynum's latest masterpiece of hermeneutical exegesis, in which she analyzes in great detail how Christ's blood came to be the center of

devotional practices and theological discourses between ca. 1300 and 1500. Starting with a historical overview of how, in northeastern Germany, the veneration of bleeding hosts and other blood relics emerged and developed, Bynum moves on to investigate the meaning of sacred blood in the context of a theology that stressed Christ's sacrifice as a means to salvation. Carefully analyzing major texts of late medieval German, but also Italian theologians, she discusses questions such as: how could God not only become manifest in matter, but obey the rule of material continuity after resurrection? How did blood, signifying rupture and breaking forth, but potentially also pollution and decay, come to replace emphasis on the Eucharist, symbol of the bounded unity of the church? How did Christ's blood, product of a violent death, acquire its significance in devotional practices and spiritual literature as a red, throbbing, holy matter, sign of life? How could Christ's blood signify both the continuity and bounded nature of a living body, but also death and rupture as a result of it being shed? Bynum unfolds these and other paradoxical discursive formations with the interpretative clarity and scholarly acumen that we have come to expect from her.

Despite my admiration for the author's command of medieval theology, and the precision with which she explains complex debates between Franciscans and Dominicans on, for example, the nature of Christ's blood during the *triduum mortis* (the three-day period before the resurrection), I wonder whether a more situated approach to the question of blood might not have sharpened rather than diluted her analysis. Why not investigate the analogy between Christ's blood and Mary's milk more systematically, as Giovanni Tiepolo did in his *Treatise on the Most Holy Relics Recently Found in the Sanctuary of Saint Marc's Chapel* (1618), celebrating the rediscovery of medieval blood- and milk-relics during reconstruction works at Saint Marc's? Or look at the importance of (male) blood in secular, legal discourse, especially in Italy, where many of the theological discussions surrounding Christ's blood took place as well? After all, the transmission of a father's blood to his descendants in a linear, exclusive, and legally regulated manner structured heirs' access to secular goods, in open contrast to the unpredictable, unending, and indiscriminate gushing forth of Christ's blood, which was the means by which believers imagined gaining access to salvation. In my mind, a comparative discursive analysis might have emphasized and clarified, rather than confused, the distinct ways in which late medieval Christians approached blood in different contexts.

But the most important question that *Wonderful Blood* raises, in my opinion, is the question of whether late medieval theology exploring the redemptive meaning of Christ's blood — analyzed here so carefully for its intrinsic hermeneutical content — ought not to be approached in the wider political context of what it meant to be excluded from the unified body of all Christendom. While the author shows in her first chapter how the discovery of miraculously bleeding German hosts was often the direct result of Jews "torturing" such consecrated wafers, she insists in her subsequent analysis of spiritual treatises that some of the authors' anti-Jewish sentiments ought to remain inconsequential for an understanding of what Christ's blood meant to late medieval believers. This is all the more perplexing

since later on, Bynum explains how the redefinition of Christ's violent death and sacrifice as a "free gift" emerged at the very time that anti-Jewish blood libels sky-rocketed. When, in her conclusion, Bynum reiterates that her "argument explains religion by and through religion, culture by and through culture" (255), I must confess I wished she had engaged in more border crossings, integrating political and social concerns into an otherwise breathtakingly erudite analysis.

JUTTA SPERLING
Hampshire College