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The Doctors' Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought

By Charles T. Wood

Because menstruation is a normal process in women of the child-bearing years, historians long tended to overlook its potential interest.* Anthropologists might ponder such matters as the rites and taboos with which it was often invested, but theirs was a less prudish field, one that also saw itself as being mainly devoted to the study of unchanging features in traditional cultures. Until recently, on the other hand, historians conceived of their discipline as being primarily concerned with the very process of change; and since, like the poor, taxes, and death, menstruation has always been with us, it seemed a subject scarcely in need of historical explanation.

After World War II, however, different attitudes began to emerge. The veil of prudery was rent, and as historians started to explore such subjects as demography and the nature of family structure, it became almost impossible for them entirely to avoid a function as basic as menstruation. If, for example, they found that European women in the 1840s achieved menarche nearly five years later than they do today, that discovery had an inevitable impact on their analysis of changes in family structure, birth rates, the age of marriage, family size, the frequency of illegitimacy, and a whole host of other issues intimately related to the central facts of reproduction.¹

Similarly, insofar as the ages of menarche and menopause depend not so much on genetics as on such variables as diet, exercise, and the ratio of fatty

* This article grew out of ideas first presented in a paper given on 28 October 1976 at the Institute of the History of Medicine, The Johns Hopkins University Medical School. For arranging that session as well as for helpful criticism, I should like to thank Dr. Lloyd G. Stevenson, Director of the Institute. Many others have cheerfully provided further suggestions, but I am especially indebted to John F. Benton, Elborg Forster, Alan T. Gaylord, John S. Major, Paul J. Meyvaert, Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Charles H. Stinson, and Lucy E. Wood, M.D. For making possible the time needed for final research and writing, I am grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies, whose fellowship assistance was itself made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

¹ For a graph of the mean ages of menarche in seven European countries and the United States from the 1840s to the 1960s, see J. M. Tanner, "Growing Up," *Scientific American* 229,3 (September 1973), 25-43, at 43. But for reservations about the validity of some of the high ages reported for the nineteenth century, see Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York, 1976), p. 45. Their doubts do not seem applicable, however, to similar British data reviewed by Rose E. Frisch in the first article cited in the following footnote.

to other tissue,² historians began to appreciate that simply to determine the mean ages for the onset and ending of menstruation was also to gain valuable insights into past levels of health, work loads, the nutritive value of food, and its general availability, at least to women. The collection of reliable data for the Middle Ages has proved admittedly difficult, for direct documentation is exceedingly rare, but the work has begun, and everything suggests that further progress will soon be made.³

Nevertheless, important as these developments unquestionably are, they represent no more than a fraction of the subject's total historical interest. In the Middle Ages as at other times, the nature of menstruation provided a curious meeting ground for religious thought, scientific theory, practical physiology, and popular prejudice; and in that conjunction one can gain remarkable insight not just into the medieval value system, but more especially into the interplay between received opinion and observed reality, an interplay that is crucial to any accurate understanding of the ways in which medieval thinkers attempted to reconcile their authorities and their observations when the two came into conflict. Moreover, the subject sheds considerable light on how these men — the male specific is used advisedly⁴ — handled the situation when such a reconciliation was deemed impossible. In other words, to come to grips with medieval views on menstruation is at the same time to enlarge one's understanding of the entire medieval thought process and of the principles on which it operated.

It is a commonplace, perhaps, that medieval men were at best ambivalent about the role and status of women. Sexuality seemed to lie at the heart of sin, even the primal one in the Garden, and few were the thinkers who were

² Rose E. Frisch, "Population, Food Intake, and Fertility," *Science* 199 (6 January 1978), 22–30; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "L'aménorrhée de famine (XVIIe–XXe siècle)," *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973), pp. 331–348; Rose E. Frisch, Grace Wyshak, and Larry Vincent, "Delayed Menarche and Amenorrhea in Ballet Dancers," *New England Journal of Medicine* 303 (1980), 17–19; Jack Fishman, "Fatness, Puberty, and Ovulation," *New England Journal of Medicine* 303 (1980), 42–43; Vern Bullough and Cameron Campbell, "Female Longevity and Diet in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 55 (1980), 317–325.

³ E.g., Darrel W. Amundson and Carol Jean Diers, "The Age of Menarche in Medieval Europe," *Human Biology* 45 (1973), 363–368. Amundson and Diers use literary evidence to arrive at their conclusions, but one suspects that a study of the marriage ages specified for women in the various local and provincial customs as they came to be written down in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries would provide a much more accurate measure. In Anjou, for example, when the nobles compiled the customs in 1246, they found that there was no general custom specifying when a woman should come of age; as a result, they legislated that fifteen was henceforth to be accepted: *Layettes du Trésor des Chartes*, ed. A. Teulet et al. (Paris, 1863–1909), 2, no. 3521. Fifteen, a year older than Amundson and Diers suggest, may thus be taken as the presumed age of menarche in Anjou in the mid-thirteenth century, at least among the nobility. But this kind of data would not necessarily be reliable for peasants, people not always covered by the customs and who, in any event, worked much harder than the nobility and enjoyed a diet that was considerably poorer.

⁴ A notable exception to this rule is the twelfth-century Rhenish mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. When her views differ substantially from the male ones emphasized in the text, they will be cited.

prepared to entertain the possibility that sexual relations had from the beginning been a part of the divine plan. Notable exceptions here were Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, for the bishop of Hippo held that sin had introduced not sexuality, only concupiscence and lust,⁵ whereas the Angelic Doctor was also sure that sex had existed before the fall. Indeed, because the body in its "purer nature" must have had greater corporeal sensitivity than it does in sin, sexual relations before the expulsion must also have involved "even greater sensible delight." Further, if God had created Eve as a helpmeet for Adam, it followed that He must always have intended her to have a sexual role since, as Thomas argued, in all other respects a male helper would clearly have been preferable.⁶

It would appear, then, that even the two greatest Doctors of the Church viewed women's differing sexual nature with an acceptance that was muted at best, little more than resigned acceptance of the Creator's mysterious ways. Moreover, few others shared their relative breadth of vision. Misogyny permeates the assumptions of most medieval writers, and to illustrate the point in its theological dimensions, one has only to peruse the familiar *Malleus maleficarum*, which two German Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and Jakobus Sprenger, produced at papal request in 1486. Anxious to explain "why a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men," they argued that it was because a woman

. . . is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. . . . And all this is indicated by the etymology of the word; for *Femina* comes from *Fe*, and *Minus*, since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith. . . . Wherefore St. John Chrysostom says on the text, It is not good to marry (Matthew xix): What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colors: . . . To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. . . . Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils.⁷

In reading such passages, one can only conclude, perhaps, that celibacy held its terrors, even for the Dominicans. Nevertheless, the views expressed, while extreme, reflect the generally hostile framework within which women were seen and understood throughout the Middle Ages. After all, the authorities

⁵ *De civitate Dei* 14:20, 23, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 48 (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 443, 445.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Edmund Hill, O. P. (New York, 1964–1976), 13:156, 154 (la, qu. 98, art. 2).

⁷ Heinrich Kramer and Jakobus Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. and tr. Montague Sommers (London, 1928), pp. 41–48.

on almost any subject were apt to be clerics, so it is hardly surprising to find that here, as elsewhere, their attitudes appear to have been shaped less by the opinions of their sources than by the doctrines of faith as influenced and none-too-subtly molded by the temptations, realized or not, which were the inevitable result of their vows. Still, more fully to grasp the relationship between faith and sexuality, one should turn to the more moderate views of Pope Gregory the Great, last of the Latin Fathers, who in 597 responded to a number of doubts raised by St. Augustine of Canterbury, among them the question whether a pregnant woman could be baptized:

Why indeed should a pregnant woman not be baptized, since the fruitfulness of the body is no sin in the eyes of Almighty God? For when our first parents had sinned in Paradise they forfeited by God's just judgement that immortality which they had received. And so because Almighty God had no desire to wipe out the human race entirely on account of its sin, He deprived man of immortality because of his transgression and yet in his loving-kindness and mercy He preserved man's power of propagating the race after him. For what reason then is that which has been preserved for human nature by the gift of Almighty God a cause for debarring anyone from the grace of holy baptism?⁸

In other words, by sin not just death entered the world, but also fertile carnality; and in women, as Gregory and all later authorities would insist, menstruation was both a mark of that sin — the curse of Eve — and the necessary companion of their fertility. Moreover, because that fertility was a sign of God's unmerited mercy and grace, and because "in the New Testament careful heed is paid not so much to what is done outwardly as to what is thought inwardly,"⁹ Gregory's position on menstruation was significantly more charitable than that to be found either in the *Malleus maleficarum* or in Leviticus, the Old Testament work from which most sexual taboos in the Judeo-Christian tradition ultimately derive. For, he argued, "if no food is impure to him whose mind is pure, why should that which a pure-minded woman endures from natural causes be imputed to her as uncleanness?"¹⁰ Nowhere is this attitude more clear than in his response to Augustine's question whether a menstruating woman could be permitted to attend church or to receive the sacrament:

⁸ Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and tr. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 88–91. Although the translators' verb "preserved" implies, and rightly I think, that Gregory thought that fertility had existed before the fall, the original *reseruaui* is imprecise enough, if analysis is limited to this passage alone, to allow the view that he thought that God may have created reproductive capacity only afterwards. In general, medieval tradition was uncertain on the point, but tended to believe that fertility had come only with sin. On the other hand, Aquinas assumed (loc. cit., note 6 above) that insofar as the differing male and female sexual organs had existed in Eden, it followed that God must have created them for productive use.

⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 94–95.

¹⁰ Ibid.

[A] woman must not be prohibited from entering a church during her usual periods, for this natural overflowing cannot be reckoned a crime: and so it is not fair that she should be deprived from entering the church for that which she suffers unwillingly. . . . Consider then, most beloved brother, that all that we suffer in this mortal flesh through the infirmity of nature is ordained by the just judgement of God as a result of sin. For hunger and thirst, heat, cold, and weariness are the result of the infirmity of our nature. And if we seek food when hungry, drink when thirsty, fresh air when hot, clothes when cold, and rest when weary, what else are we doing but seeking a remedy for our sicknesses? So a woman's menstuous flow of blood is an infirmity. Therefore, if that woman who, in her infirmity, touched our Lord's garment was justified in her boldness, why is it that what was permitted to one was not permitted to all women who are afflicted through the weakness of their natures? . . . [W]hen we are hungry it is no sin to eat even though our hunger is the result of the sin of the first man. A woman's periods are not sinful, because they happen naturally. But nevertheless, because our nature is itself so depraved that it appears to be polluted even without the consent of the will, the depravity arises from sin, and human nature itself recognizes its depravity to be a judgement upon it. . . .¹¹

Although, in the passage above, Gregory refers to "the sin of the first *man*," not of Eve, as the ultimate cause of all "infirmities," it should not be thought that his intent was in any way to relieve her of primary blame for the human race's fallen plight. On the contrary, if Adam's was the greater sin, this was because his was the greater capacity — and hence the greater fall. "For," as Gregory says, "all sin is committed in three ways, namely by suggestion, pleasure, and consent. The devil makes the suggestion, the flesh delights in it and the spirit consents. It was the serpent who suggested the first sin, Eve representing the flesh was delighted by it, and Adam representing the spirit consented to it. . . ."¹² Thus, far from absolving Eve, Gregory merely downplays her responsibility by implicitly denigrating her capacities, for, like all medieval thinkers, he knew that spirit was greater than flesh, and hence that greater sin was imputable to Adam.

Nor, in taking this position, does Gregory evade the issues potentially inherent in it. When, for example, Augustine asks whether a man, after a nocturnal emission, can receive "the Body of the Lord" in the eucharist or, if a priest, "celebrate the holy mysteries," his response parallels that offered in the case of menstruating women: "And indeed when it happens through a natural superfluity or weakness, the illusion is not in any way to be feared; for though it is a matter of regret that the mind unwittingly suffered it, it did not bring it about." Nevertheless, if the man delights in the event, or consents to it (possibilities that would appear irrelevant in the case of menstruation), then imputable sin not only "begins to arise," but with con-

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 92–93. When Gregory uses the terms "nature," "natural," and "naturally," one should note that he is always referring to the infirm state after the fall. This is also the usage of all later medieval thinkers quoted unless a specific statement to the contrary is made.

¹² Ibid., pp. 100–101.

sent "is seen to be complete."¹³ The fault, then, is clearly greater than with menstruation.

Relatively sympathetic and humane though these judgments may be, at least when compared to those of the *Malleus maleficarum*, they are still far from accepting any notion of equality between the sexes. Males were unquestionably superior because, even though their potential for sin was greater, that "fact" derived from a view of the world in which men were associated with mind and spirit whereas women were confined to the realm of flesh and earthly delight. One understands, then, why medieval literature places such an inordinate stress on female carnality: the opinion depended not so much on the furtive imaginings of a celibate clergy — though heaven knows that seldom proved a hindrance — as it did on the normal medieval reverence accorded to received tradition, that Authority with a capital A on which so much of theology is frequently thought to depend.

Yet, simply to drop the subject with that observation would be badly to warp our understanding of it, for later evidence demonstrates the surprising extent to which attitudes came to be based on observation, not just Authority. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for example, medical and theological studies employed a much wider range of texts than those easily available to St. Gregory, but at the same time these resources were being increasingly augmented and, if need be, challenged by empirical data. And nowhere is this fact more apparent than in some of the controversies which again brought the whole question of menstruation to the fore.

Diverse as the classical and Arabic medical sources became, in theological circles the explanation of fertility and conception most often advanced derived in large part from the views of "The Philosopher," that newly rediscovered Aristotle who had analyzed the sexual act primarily in terms of his usual categories, form and matter. In his opinion, menses were formless matter which, in the course of each month, accumulated gradually in the womb. Semen, on the other hand, represented pure male form (*homunculi*) which, by imposing itself on the menstrual matter in the act of conception, created the fetus — formed, be it noted, in the image of man even as man had been formed in the image of God. By an extension of this reasoning, the female child was necessarily a bit defective even as Eve, the original woman and formed out of that misshapen rib, had herself been defective. And, of course, if matter and form were not thus conjoined in the act of conception, menstruation was the inevitable result, the expulsion of useless matter that had failed to receive its form.¹⁴ Perhaps needless to say, this "image-of-man" approach was indeed a happy one for a society so patrilineal in its organization and prejudices.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., pp. 98–101.

¹⁴ These views became standard from at least the thirteenth century on, but their clearest and fullest expression is to be found in Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 15, *Tractatus II, De natura spermatis*, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1891), 12:98 ff. See also John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965). pp. 281–282.

¹⁵ Since, in some matrilineal societies, intercourse begins before puberty, and no paternity for

Moreover, this explanation (or variations on it) led to practical advice offered by doctors of theology and medicine alike. Those desiring children (the principal reason for sexual union) were enjoined to concentrate their efforts in the week following the end of a period, for that technique would insure that the semen would be properly forming the menses from the moment of their first appearance in the womb. To engage in intercourse later in the cycle, when the menses (or, alternatively, the *menstruum*, the seed) were less fresh and less sensitive to form, was to increase the likelihood first of female offspring (i.e., only slightly deformed); then of badly defective ones; and then of none at all. A scientific explanation, one that St. Thomas Aquinas was quick to adopt, was thereby created to buttress the prohibition, so strongly put in both Leviticus and Ezekiel, of intercourse during menstruation itself, for that was an action which could produce only monstrosities at best, or, more likely at worst, that truly medieval and Augustinian horror, pure nothingness.¹⁶

Lastly (and here thinkers appear to have modified their sources in the light of observed reality), this view of conception was often closely linked to assumptions about the relative intensity of sexual appetites. Women were clearly the more concupiscent sex because, in John Benton's words:

The medical theory inherited from antiquity was that both men and women are driven toward intercourse by their physiology. Women were thought to produce a seed (or *menstruum*) which collects in the womb and which gives rise to increasing sexual desire as it accumulates. Menstruation was considered the equivalent of a man's *pollutio* and to provide periodic relief; during pregnancy, when the *menstruum* was retained to nourish the fetus, a woman was at the peak of her sexual desire. Although medical treatises are imprecise in their terminology, orgasm seems to have been the indication of the emission of the female seed in intercourse. In any case, a woman's emission of seed, necessary for conception, was thought to be as pleasurable as that of a man; in fact, women were said to have twice the pleasure in intercourse as men, for they not only expelled seed but received it.¹⁷

children is formally admitted, it used to be thought, by Sir James Frazer and others, that no connection between intercourse and reproduction was seen — surely an equally happy view for matrilineal cultures. But for convincing doubts about the validity of this interpretation, see Edmund Leach, "Virgin Birth," *Genesis as Myth* (London, 1969), pp. 85–112.

¹⁶ Noonan, *Contraception*, p. 282. For the most recent data on varying fertility during the monthly cycle and on the effect of that cycle on sex differentiation, see Susan Harlap, "Gender of Infants Conceived on Different Days of the Menstrual Cycle," *New England Journal of Medicine* 300 (1979), 1445–1448. In general, it seems clear that if this medieval medical advice had actually been followed, it would help to explain the relatively low fertility rates of the Middle Ages, but since, in fact, many fewer males than females are produced in conceptions occurring early in the cycle whereas medieval sex ratios, insofar as they can be determined, go as high as 160–170 males for every 100 females, either the doctors' advice was not followed or the data are even more unreliable than we have always assumed them to be. With regard to intercourse during menstruation, Hildegard of Bingen's more woman-centered explanation of the divine prohibition is that the "hidden organs" of the uterus become loose during a period and hence might tend to reject the semen: Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, PL 197:397–398.

¹⁷ John F. Benton, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," *The Meaning of*

Here, one suspects, the modern observer is being confronted not only by a recognition of that multiple orgasmic capacity so cherished in some circles today, but also by a further explanation of that fear of female carnality so prevalent in medieval thought and writings.¹⁸

Be that as it may, this kind of medico-theological analysis ran into an increasingly intractable problem in the course of the later Middle Ages: the Virgin Mary. For Mary was different, as even the authors of the *Malleus maleficarum* were prepared to admit:

[I]t is true that in the Old Testament the Scriptures have much that is evil to say about women, and this because of the first temptress, Eve, and her imitators; yet afterwards in the New Testament we find a change of name, as from Eva to Ave (as St. Jerome says), and the whole sin of Eve taken away by the benediction of Mary. Therefore preachers should always say as much in praise of them as possible.¹⁹

Mary's virginity before the birth of Christ found validation in no less an authority than St. Luke, himself a person whom tradition accepted as a physician; and a belief was quick to arise that this virginity had continued, even physically, after that birth. In the seventh century, for example, Ildefonsus of Toledo proposed that Christ had been born as a ray of pure light "e clauso utero," a view which not only explained all the light in the stable, but which was heartily endorsed by Bede and Alcuin in the eighth century as well as by Rabanus Maurus and Paschasius Radbertus in the ninth. Without doubt, then, throughout life Mary had remained a *virgo intacta*.²⁰

Courtly Love, ed. F. X. Newman (Albany, 1969), p. 32. This "double-seed" theory does not entirely agree with Aristotle's form-and-matter approach, but reflects, rather, the non-Aristotelian sources of most of the purely medical literature. In any event, medieval thinkers appear to have been unbothered by the discrepancy, and St. Thomas Aquinas assumed that in a normal conception, both *sanguinis menstruus* and a *menstruum* are needed: *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Roland Potter, O. P., 52:52–55 (3a, qu. 32, art. 4).

¹⁸ Hildegard of Bingen seems to have doubted whether women were in fact more carnal than men, largely because women, unlike men, have an open space in the abdomen (i.e., the uterus) in which "storms of passion" can expand and dissipate their violence. On the other hand, because of uterine moisture, those storms may affect them more frequently, a statement which may or may not reflect an awareness of multiple orgasmic capacity: *Hildegardis Causae et Curae*, ed. P. Kaiser (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 69, 76, 77.

¹⁹ *Malleus maleficarum*, p. 44.

²⁰ Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De virginitate perpetua sanctae Mariae*, PL 96:54–110; Bede, *De Evangelio Lucae*, PL 92:342; Alcuin, *Quaestiones de Trinitate . . .*, PL 42:1171–1176; Paschasius Radbertus, *De partu Virginis*, PL 120:1368 ff. For a recent analysis of these views, see Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (New York, 1963–1965), 1:162–180; present thinking on Mary's virginity is summarized in Raymond E. Brown, S. S., *The Virginal Conception & Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, 1973), pp. 21–68. To explain how the Holy Spirit had earlier impregnated the Virgin also without violating her, some authorities held that it had done so again as a ray of pure light (by which was meant, significantly, all light and absolutely no heat). Many further believed that insofar as Christ is the Logos, the Incarnate Word, the Holy Spirit must have impregnated her through the ear. Nonetheless, these are pure hypotheses, not yet proved, though they do explain why painters in the Renaissance tended to portray the Virgin of the Annunciation with a ray of light entering her ear.

Nor was popular spirituality content to let the matter rest there. Always sensitive to the foreshadowings of the New Testament to be found in the Old, in due course medieval Christians began to ponder the meaning of the passage in *The Song of Songs* (4.7) which they were sure referred to Mary and which reads: "Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee." Concentrating on the meaning of "no spot," popular belief gradually arrived at the view that these words meant that the Virgin herself had been born without sin, specifically without that heritable taint of Original Sin which had characterized all humanity since Adam and Eve had so unwisely eaten from the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. In turn, since it was generally accepted that Original Sin had necessarily to be transmitted in the act of conception itself,²¹ this interpretation of "no spot" led inexorably to the equally necessary conclusion that Mary must have had an Immaculate Conception — that is, one in which the sin of her — and our — original parents had not been passed on to her. Although the Immaculate Conception did not become dogma until proclaimed by Pius IX in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854, it was nonetheless widely accepted as a standard part of Marian piety by the early years of the twelfth century.²²

Moreover, this developing belief had further consequences because, as Genesis stated (2.17, 3.19), it was by sin that death had entered the world. If, therefore, Mary had been conceived without sin, the possibility arose that she may likewise not have experienced a fully normal death; and this hypothesis tended inevitably to reinforce early, though non-biblical, tradition that she had ascended bodily into heaven. Again, this latter belief was not dogmatically defined until Pius XII's bull *Munificentissimus Deus* of 1950, but like the Immaculate Conception, the Bodily Assumption had become an accepted part of the cult of Mary long before the Middle Ages drew to a close.²³ In every way possible, popular religion thus placed the Virgin far beyond the pale of sinful flesh, with the result that she became superior to all mortals except her Son, a Person to whom the complete range of normal human considerations obviously did not fully apply. One understands, then, why Mary posed such a challenge to all medieval medico-theological theories about the nature of the reproductive process.

Most simply put, the specifics of Marian theology would seem to deny the very possibility of a regular menstrual cycle. For how, using the standard assumptions of the Middle Ages, could thinkers ever have logically reconciled the phenomenon of menstruation with what were taken to be the known facts of Mary's case? If she had had "no spot" — and possibly it was

²¹ For a brief but good discussion of the problems associated with the transmission of Original Sin in the act of conception, see the editor's comments in *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, tr. Bruno Scott James (London, 1953), p. 289.

²² Graef, *Mary*, 1:passim; Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976), pp. 236–254.

²³ Graef, *Mary*, 1:passim; Warner, *Virgin Mary*, pp. 81–102.

this apparent pun which led believers to think that The Song of Songs had foretold her coming — she was not subject, presumably, to the curse of Eve. Further, just as her Immaculate Conception should have exempted her from the penalty of periodic distress, so, too, should her freedom from sin have made it unnecessary to procreate, a process which was in any event deemed impossible without that curse. Indeed, the seeming contradictions were even greater than that: Mary had, after all, nursed her Child, and it was widely recognized that lactation was intimately connected both with pregnancy and with those menses which made it possible. As St. Isidore of Seville had explained the connection early in the seventh century:

Lac (milk) derives its name from its color, because it is a white liquor, for the Greeks call white λεῦκος and its nature is changed from blood; for after the birth whatever blood has not yet been spent in the nourishing of the womb flows by a natural passage to the breasts, and whitening by their virtue, receives the quality of milk.²⁴

In short, even as the cult of the Virgin gained increasing popular support (and the movement at its most ardent was almost entirely a popular, not an intellectual, phenomenon), belief in her Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption threatened quite unexpectedly to confront speculative theology with unthinkable consequences. Serious thinkers had but to ponder some of the likely effects to see the extent to which acceptance of these views might lead to a situation in which Mary, “the mother of God” — the *Theotokos* over whose very title the patriarch of Constantinople Nestorius had created such a controversy as far back as the fifth century²⁵ — would be left with absolutely none of the attributes needed for her role. Moreover, it was impossible, because potentially heretical, to seek a solution in the miraculous. If, for example, one were to argue that since God is omnipotent, fully capable of doing whatever He wills, Mary was better to be understood as no more than the human receptacle for that Divine Seed that the Holy Spirit had implanted in her (and to which she had contributed nothing save nurture), that would have been completely to deny the Saviour’s essential humanity. Such a position would patently have been well beyond the limits of orthodoxy since, from the fourth century on, it had been a central tenet of Christology, dogmatically accepted, that Christ had been, was, and is both God and Man. If He were thus to be perceived only as God, with none of His mother’s natural humanity, that would have been to make a mockery of the entire mystery of the crucifixion, of the atonement, and, indeed, of the whole of Christendom’s well-founded hope in its ultimate redemption. In fact, such a

²⁴ *Etymologiae* 11.1.77, as translated in Ernest Brehaut, ed. and tr., *An Encyclopedist of the Dark Ages* (New York, 1912), p. 217.

²⁵ Graef, *Mary*, 1:101–111; A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, 2nd English ed. (Madison, 1952), pp. 98–99.

position would thereby have totally vindicated the basic beliefs of heretical gnosticism.²⁶

From the surviving evidence it is difficult to judge the extent to which these considerations influenced medieval intellectuals in what were often their hesitant views of Mary. They failed, typically, to address the question of her physiology directly, and if it is likely that they found menstruation too distasteful a subject for open discussion, it is also true that the Virgin supplied them with other grounds for their worries, notably her maddening tendency to intervene successfully with her Son on behalf of sinners whose hopeless depravity should have condemned them, in scholastic logic, to eternal damnation.²⁷ It is even possible, though not overwhelmingly so, that theological unease was influenced by some kind of atavistic memory of those endless fertility goddesses of classical antiquity to whom Mary was, anthropologically speaking, the somewhat-more-than-natural successor.²⁸ Yet, whatever the case, intellectuals replied with vigor to what they took as the pretensions of Marian piety. Even as fervent a devotee as St. Bernard bridled at the thought of actually celebrating the Feast of the Immaculate Conception:

Whence therefore the sanctity of the conception? Can it be said that she was conceived holy because she was already holy before her conception . . . ? . . . Or was sanctity present in the act of her conception, so that she would be holy at the same time as she was conceived? But reason cannot accept this, for how can anything be

²⁶ For a somewhat oversimplified, though adequate, discussion of the significance of Mary's physiology in its potential relationship to gnosticism, see Warner, *Virgin Mary*, pp. 29, 43–44, 57, 63, 83, 195, 229, 252.

²⁷ The *locus classicus* for discussion of the theological problems created by Mary's "illogical" compassion remains Henry Adams, "Les miracles de Notre Dame," *Mont-Saint-Michel & Chartres* (Garden City, 1959), pp. 277–318. St. Thomas Aquinas did discuss Mary's physiology fully, but on the subject of menstruation was both ambiguous and seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, he says that in the conception of Christ the Virgin provided no ordinary menstrual blood since that kind "gets tainted with lust inasmuch as by sexual intercourse the blood is drawn to a place apt for conception." On the other, elsewhere he states that Mary, like any mother, was required to "furnish . . . the matter, which is menstrual blood," though not the seed normally needed for conception. My reading of these ambiguities is that Thomas, no supporter of the Immaculate Conception, probably assumed that the Virgin menstruated, but was anxious to deny that she had any sexual desires or the need for a *menstruum* since, as per the text at note 17 above, this seed was released only during active lust and/or orgasm: *Summa Theologiae* 52:26–29, 52–55 (3a, qu. 31, art. 5, and 3a, qu. 32, art. 4); see also Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi* (Paris, 1929–1947), 3:168 (dist. 4, qu. 2, art. 1). Still, because tradition held so firmly that menstruation had begun only with the fall, it may be that he believed that Mary had menses without need for a period, the logic being that if her body was free from sin and therefore incorruptible, her menses (presumably like Eve's in the Garden) would have remained forever pure, fresh, and sensitive to form, thus obviating the need for monthly replacement. There is, however, no easy solution, since even the one suggested would result in the creation only of males.

²⁸ The evidence is overwhelming, though, that the Mary of art owed not a little to the images of pagan fertility cults: Warner, *Virgin Mary*, pp. 255–269 and plates 32–36.

holy without the presence of the Sanctifying Spirit, and how can the Holy Spirit have any part in sin, and how can there not be sin where there is carnal lust?²⁹

Still, for all the apparent silence on the subject of Mary's reproductive processes, indirect evidence suggests that they had indeed captured the attention and concern of serious thinkers. In the case of the Dominicans, for example, it is hard to believe that they would have approached aspects of the cult quite as they did unless one is prepared to admit that they were deeply troubled by the Christological difficulties which might arise if Mary were found to have had a physiology wholly uncorrupted by the consequences of sin.³⁰ For, as possibly befitted preachers and frequent inquisitors, they avoided direct mention of the Immaculate Conception almost entirely, choosing instead to strike a positive note by proudly advancing the claims of the lactating Virgin. If Europe reeled as a result under wave after wave of chaste and virginal milk, in that flood a properly sly and syllogistic point was being made: if, as St. Isidore had averred, lactation depended on surplus menses; and if menstruation depended on that curse which had so justly been placed on Eve; then Mary, Queen of Heaven though she might be, had no more right to an Immaculate Conception than did anyone else. This Dominican approach may inadvertently have made the Virgin appear a bit bovine, but, unfortunate as that result may have been, these heirs to Sts. Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas could nonetheless hope that in this addition to the cult they had managed to preserve the full range of Mary's humanity.³¹

If, however, theologians had difficulty in reconciling what they saw as the implications of the Immaculate Conception with the Christological necessity of a Virgin endowed with a normal physiology, Mary's popular following experienced no such problem. After all, precise theological reasoning is seldom of great concern to most believers, and the fact of the matter is that Christology itself contains some crucial anomalies, notably a doctrine of atonement which depends for its effectiveness on the fact that Christ suffered death upon the cross even though in logic He should not have experienced it. Marian piety was quick to draw an appropriately imitative conclusion. As Henry de Bracton, England's great thirteenth-century lawyer, put the case when arguing for a king under law:

[T]here is no *rex* where will rules rather than *lex*. . . . And that he ought to be under the law appears clearly in the analogy of Jesus Christ, whose vicegerent on

²⁹ *The Letters of St. Bernard*, p. 292 (Letter 215).

³⁰ This discussion is not meant to imply, however, that the Dominicans were totally hostile to Mary. On the contrary, Albertus Magnus granted her truly remarkable intellectual powers, arguing that while on earth she had acquired at least a "summary knowledge" of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: cited by Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1957), p. 358.

³¹ Warner, *Virgin Mary*, pp. 204, 251. Warner documents Dominican sponsorship of the lactating Virgin, but fails to grasp the relationship to menstruation and the argument being implicitly made against acceptance of the Immaculate Conception.

earth he is, for . . . he [i.e., Christ] willed himself to be under the law that he might redeem those who live under it. . . . And in that same way the Blessed Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord, who by an extraordinary privilege was above the law, nevertheless, in order to show an example of humility, did not refuse to be subjected to established laws.³²

Furthermore, whatever the useful parallels drawn with Christ, it was also true that the earliest works on which the Marian cult was based, notably the third-century *Protevangelium of James*, presented a Virgin with all of the more obvious female attributes. For according to that text, Mary in her youth had been raised in the temple, but

. . . when she was twelve years old, there took place a council of priests, saying: "Behold, Mary has become twelve years old in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her, that she may not pollute the temple of the Lord?" And they said to the high priest: "You stand at the altar of the Lord; enter the [sanctuary] and pray concerning her, and what the Lord shall reveal to you we will do."³³

Perhaps needless to say, the solution turned out to be Mary's espousal to Joseph, an event which removed the Levitical threat of menstrual pollution from priests and temple alike. As a result, even though opponents of the Immaculate Conception were ultimately to lose that fight, at least within the Church of Rome, evidence such as the above continued to insure that, contrary to the theologians' fears, the Virgin would remain fully a woman, ever subject to the curse of Eve.³⁴ The data of observed reality, when combined with the needs of Christology, proved more than enough to win out over what otherwise should logically have been the conclusions of abstract religious thought. Thus it is that even today, at the Church of the

³² Samuel E. Thorne, ed. and tr., *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968-), 2:33. With the exception of the first sentence here quoted, Thorne reports that the rest of the quotation represents "Bracton's interlinear additions or supplementary passages, later taken into the text by his editor or redactor." Authorship is thus technically in doubt, though for present purposes, content alone is what matters.

³³ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., and R. McL. Wilson, tr., *The Protevangelium of James, New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia, 1963), 1:378-379. Interestingly enough, when Jacobus de Voragine retold the story in the second half of the thirteenth century, he advanced Mary's age at the time of this crisis from twelve to fourteen: apparently the age of menarche that seemed reasonable in the third century was so no longer by the thirteenth: *The Golden Legend*, tr. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (London, 1941), 2:523-524.

³⁴ That such continues to be the case, and that the Marian cult continues to employ analogies with Christ, are suggested by an informal poll of convent-educated friends that the author found himself unexpectedly taking in the course of his research. The data base is too small for meaningful quantification here, but the results indicate that when these women were having their first periods, a high percentage were privately taken aside by nuns who wished to present them with the consoling *exemplum* of Mary. Usually it was urged that just as her Son had taken on the sins of the world even though He Himself was without sin, so, too, had the Virgin taken on the burden of menstruation although not herself under Eve's curse. Whether this bit of piety goes back to the Middle Ages is impossible to say, though Mary "did not refuse," as Bracton says, "to be subjected to established laws."

Annunciation in Nazareth, pilgrims and tourists alike can still visit the site of Mary's *mikveh*, where French Franciscans stand ready to show them the tub in which she washed away the ritual defilement periodically caused by her quite normal physiology.³⁵

In much the same way, religious doctrine and the presumed physiology of menstruation also proved useful in reconciling the scientific conclusions of the Philosopher himself with the nature of observed reality when those two came into conflict. Aristotle had held, as was undoubtedly true in his day, that men lived longer than women, and he saw this difference as a natural one, explaining that men were inherently the "warmer" sex. By the thirteenth century, however, life expectancies had changed, and it had become increasingly apparent that women on the whole were now living longer than men.³⁶ Did this mean, then, that Aristotle had been wrong? The task of answering that question fell to Albertus Magnus, unquestionably the leading scientist of his day and, next to his pupil St. Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest Aristotelian thinker of the age. Admittedly Albert's solution is in some respects incomplete, but at the same time, the near-universal assumptions of his century allow one to reconstruct the full scope of his thought with more than the usual scholarly diffidence.³⁷ And once that is done, it becomes clear that Albert's approach, like that of those favoring a normal physiology for Mary, was not one to be content with conclusions based purely on authority as buttressed by syllogistic reasoning uninformed by empirical data.

In Albert's mind there was undoubtedly a predisposition to assume that Aristotle had at one time been right. If so, though, it was very likely that the Greek sage had been referring not to men and women as they existed in the thirteenth century, but rather as they had been in their perfect natures before the fall. Under conditions such as had prevailed in the Garden of Eden, Eve had clearly not been the equal of Adam, for, as Gregory the Great had taught, Adam was mind and spirit whereas Eve was mere flesh. Thus, by the process of hierarchical reasoning so characteristic of medieval thought,

³⁵ For a full description of a visit to the site, not to mention photographs of the relic in question, I am grateful to Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., who reports that his attending Friar was a bit startled to have explained to him the real purpose of the "Jewish bath" he was exhibiting. Insofar as Franciscans, notably Duns Scotus, were among the leading medieval proponents of the Immaculate Conception, whereas Dominicans had used Marian physiology precisely to argue against its acceptance, there is a certain irony, perhaps, in Franciscan guardianship of the *mikveh*, but such are the ways of history. For a presentation of Franciscan views, remarkable in their range though irrelevant to the purposes of the present article, see Graef, *Mary*, 1:281–294, 298–305, 315–318, 320–322.

³⁶ David Herlihy, *Women in Medieval Society* (Houston, 1971), pp. 4–7; and "The Natural History of Medieval Women," *Natural History* 87,3 (March 1978), 56–67.

³⁷ Herlihy, *Women*, p. 16, n. 13, reprints the crucial passage from *Quaestiones super de animalibus* 15, qu. 8, in *Opera Omnia* (Monasterium Westfalorum, 1955), p. 262, but does not himself speculate on the context within which Albert appears to have viewed the problem.

Albert appears to have arrived at the conclusion that Adam's had *naturaliter* to be the stronger — read “warmer” and longer-lived — sex.

Be that as it may, inexorable change came with expulsion from the Garden. In particular, Eve and all her female descendants began to menstruate. On the one hand, of course, this was her — and their — curse, God's punishment of our first mother for having listened to the serpent in the first place and thus for having got the human race into its present sinful predicament. Yet on the other, just as Gregory the Great had argued that in this punishment there was also a secondary benefit insofar as God “in his loving-kindness and mercy . . . [had] preserved man's power of propagating the race after him,” so, too, Albert argues that in the curse of Eve there is another hidden mercy. For, he says, not only is the sexual act more fatiguing for males (and hence more injurious to their health); but also, because of menstruation — consequence of the fall though it may be — women alone are enabled periodically to purge the poisons from their humors in a monthly effusion of blood. Therefore the curse now allows them *per accidens* to live longer than men. In this way, Aristotle thus becomes both right and wrong; and reason is neatly reconciled with revelation, reality with authority, in a perfect thirteenth-century synthesis.³⁸

As medievalists well know, first encounters with medieval thought can frequently prove a disconcerting experience. Many of its premises are totally foreign to a modern sensibility, and the process by which it wends its way from first principles to final conclusions can appear bizarrely arcane. Yet medieval thinkers — doctors of medicine and theology alike — lived in a universe far removed from our own, and precisely because it encompassed both this world and the next, the framework within which issues were viewed was understandably apt to include aspects of time and eternity in proportions notably different from those governing the typically scientific and secular assumptions of the twentieth century.

³⁸ The question at issue was “whether the male or the female is of longer life,” to which Albert responded in part: “Per accidens tamen longioris vitae est femina, tum quia minus laborant, propter quod tantum consumuntur, et magis mundificantur, per fluxum menstruorum et etiam minus debitantur per coitum; ideo magis conservantur. Et istae causae accidentales sunt.” Because the first sin was voluntary, not predestined or a necessary consequence of human nature as first created, all results of that sin, including menstruation, could therefore be considered accidental, as Albert does here. Nevertheless, to have granted Aristotle a knowledge of what nature had been like in its uncorrupted state was to see in him even greater powers of intellect than were normally assumed. Moreover, the approach is unusual since, as mentioned in footnote 11 above, the accepted convention was always to think of nature in its sinful state. At the same time, though, one should note that the idea of menstruation as yet another form of purgative bleeding was not original with Albert, but appears to derive from Greek medicine, especially of the Hippocratic school. Indeed, his fellow German Hildegard of Bingen had already argued in a work probably known to him that menstruation provided a necessary cleansing of a woman's blood and humors, necessary because a woman's body contains more humors than does a man's: *Causae et Curae*, ed. Kaiser, pp. 77–78, 102–108, 121 (passages, incidentally, where discussion of the full range of traditional menstrual complaints will be found). Still, whatever the debt to others, the uses to which Albert put this theory are highly original.

Nevertheless, alien though the world of the Middle Ages may often appear, one should never allow that fact to obscure the extent to which those doctors wrestled faithfully with alternate forms of recognizable reality. Logic might tell them that a Virgin with an Immaculate Conception ought not to menstruate, but Christology, observation, and common sense told them she must have. So menstruate she did. Similarly, if experience suggested that women lived longer than men whereas Aristotle had held the contrary view, ways were found to vindicate the Philosopher's judgment without in any way denying the validity of their own more immediate data. It may be a commonplace among non-medievalists that the Middle Ages was a period in which empirical evidence always gave way to the forces of Authority and blind superstition, but that in itself is a blind superstition, impossible to prove either here or in most other cases. Insofar as menstruation was concerned, unusual as were the specifics with which the doctors dealt, their conclusions showed a marked preference for documentable reality whenever that reality contradicted received opinion, and this whether the opinion was classical, biblico-religious, or both. Although care was normally taken to save the appearances, the fact remains that these thinkers were far from being the credulous syllogizers of popular mythology.

Moreover, though in much the same way, it would be equally misleading to dismiss medieval attitudes toward women as nothing but pure misogyny, for the truth of the matter was far more complex. It is easy enough to demonstrate that no one, not even Hildegard of Bingen or Christine de Pizan, stood ready to accept women as the intellectual or physical equals of men, and few today would want to dispute the fact that diatribes such as those to be found in the *Malleus maleficarum* largely reflect the kind of hostility which had for too long permeated European culture — and not just during the Middle Ages. Indeed, even though modern analysts would readily grant that medieval authors could often display greater honesty about the real nature of a woman's sexual being than ever the Victorians did, probably most of them would then go on to add that if these men also betrayed a misogyny unique in its fervor, the intensity of their dread owed not a little to the character of their new Christian faith, and especially to those sexual tensions which were the inevitable result of its ascetic impulses, its distrust of the flesh and the world.

Still, unexceptional as these observations may be, they fail to convey the full story. If the doctors frequently joined witch-hunters like Kramer and Sprenger in reviling "the fragile feminine sex" for what they saw as its excessive carnality, they also knew, with Gregory the Great, that this defect was just another aspect of "all that we suffer in this mortal flesh," men and women alike, "through the infirmity of nature . . . as a result of sin." And, over time, that belief was to have profound consequences, ones intimately related to a growing acceptance of women and to possibilities for future change in their status. For, in accepting the naturalness of life after the fall, Gregory had further stressed that no sin was ever "complete" without the

individual's consent, and in his judgments he had placed great emphasis on the implications for Christians of their new Pauline freedom from the law. Given that three-fold combination, the standards of his world could never be those of classical or Jewish antiquity. As a result, to answer Augustine's doubts on menstruous women, that remarkable pope had needed only the briefest of rhetorical queries, one which noted that "if no food is impure to him whose mind is pure, why should that which a pure-minded woman endures from natural causes be imputed to her as uncleanness?"

That response is surely not one of a misogynist. On the contrary, its quiet sanity marks a milestone in the history of women, a milestone which announced that henceforth Christianity was abandoning all those demeaning taboos with which most earlier cultures had invested menstruation, thereby limiting the freedom of half of their people. With Gregory, the old Levitical prohibitions were gone forever, dropped by a man who had begun to see that, much as he and his intellectual heirs might continue to fear the sexual attractiveness of women, the menstrual process itself was less a defiling threat than a normal and natural phenomenon, at least as such phenomena existed under the constraints imposed by the fall.³⁹

Moreover, any adequate discussion of the extent of medieval misogyny must further be tempered by a proper appreciation of the role and place of the Virgin. She was, doubtless, the polar opposite of Eve, and in her purity she provided a telling example to anyone wishing to castigate the conduct of all the other daughters of Eve. In that sense, she clearly became an unwitting source for misogyny. On the other hand, for all her remarkable traits, Mary remained imperturbably and ineluctably female, and even though men did their best to rid her flesh of all carnal taint, they were forced in the end to recognize that she, too, had possessed all those sexual attributes which had so often become the target of male abuse in the case of others. Because of that fact, the real effect of the Virgin's continuing presence was, again over time, significantly to mitigate the traditional hostility with which women had

³⁹ Insofar as Gregory retains churching, insists on the Old Testament rules against incest (later interpolation though this may be), and praises those who observe the other Levitical laws of their own volition, it could be argued, perhaps, that his position here really involved no radical new departures. Yet his basic values seem profoundly different. Several of the earlier Fathers, notably St. Jerome and St. John Chrysostom, had written attacks on women of surprising virulence, and the very way in which *The Protevangelium of James* tells the story of the crisis provoked by Mary's impending menarche (above, at note 33) demonstrates that its author expected a Christian audience in the third century to be fully conversant with the Levitical menstrual taboos, thereby implying that they may still have been widely observed, at least in the Middle East where he was writing. Further, even though St. Augustine had long pursued a monastic vocation before coming to England, the very fact that he found it necessary to write the pope on these matters suggests the extent to which Gregory's reply was breaking new ground since, presumably, even the most otherworldly of monks would have known the proper answers if they had long been standard. For a work which arrives at similar conclusions on different grounds, see: Raymond Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters* (Bonn, 1964).

for so long been viewed. Thanks to her, as even the *Malleus maleficarum* put it, "preachers should always say as much in their praise as possible."

Lastly, if the doctors could openly entertain the belief that women had "twice the pleasure in intercourse as men," we might do well to remind ourselves that most of them, given their clerical condition, had precious little with which to salve their bruised male egos except, perhaps, for the biblical reminder that it was, after all, more blessed to give than to receive. Yet that injunction could scarcely have been a consoling one for those whose very vows had made the testing of it a mortal sin. In short, fervently though men may have hoped that the *Eva* of the Old Testament had become the *Ave* of the New, still, in their heart of hearts they knew that the curse of Eve was ever with them, serving always to remind the forgetful of both sexes' enduring humanity.

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