Medieval Women Philosophers...

Spring, 2014
Duquesne University / Department of Philosophy
PHIL 624-01 / M 5:00-7:00 / College Hall 551
L. Michael Harrington

Introduction

In Christian Europe, the dichotomy of faith and reason did not develop in the theoretical discourse we imagine taking place in the medieval universities. It was not a matter simply of determining what human beings can know through their own powers, and distinguishing it from what they can only know through the assistance of a higher power. Faith parted from reason “on the ground,” as it were, in an attempt to identify and cultivate a division between living human beings, as for instance between women and men. Augustine saw that women did not have the time for learning; Aquinas supposed that they did not have the capacity for learning. In either case, women were not invited to direct themselves in the pursuit of learning, but were given the guidance of another’s hand. They were asked to have faith, and not reason.

The women we will read this term present themselves as something of a contradiction, since they do not merely repeat the conclusions of faith in their writing and their teaching. We will try to understand the kind of rationality they exercise: not the scholasticism of the universities, nor something totally different, but a kind of counter-rationality: a reason that asserts itself only while recognizing its own impossibility.

We will pay special attention to the attitude they take toward themselves as women. Do they simply repeat the standard claims about women voiced by the tradition around them? If so, how do they justify their writing and teaching? Or do they redefine themselves, and, if so, what does this redefinition look like?

Calendar

Jan. 13 What is Medieval Philosophy?
Jan. 27-Feb. 10 Heloise: On Concepts and the Medieval Concept of Women
Feb. 17-24 Herrad of Hohenbourg: Philosophy in Citation and Imagery
Mar. 10 Beatrice of Nazareth: Introduction to Mysticism
Mar. 17-Apr. 7 Hildegard of Bingen: Gendered Mysticism
Apr. 14-28 Hadewijch: Philosophy Outside the Convent