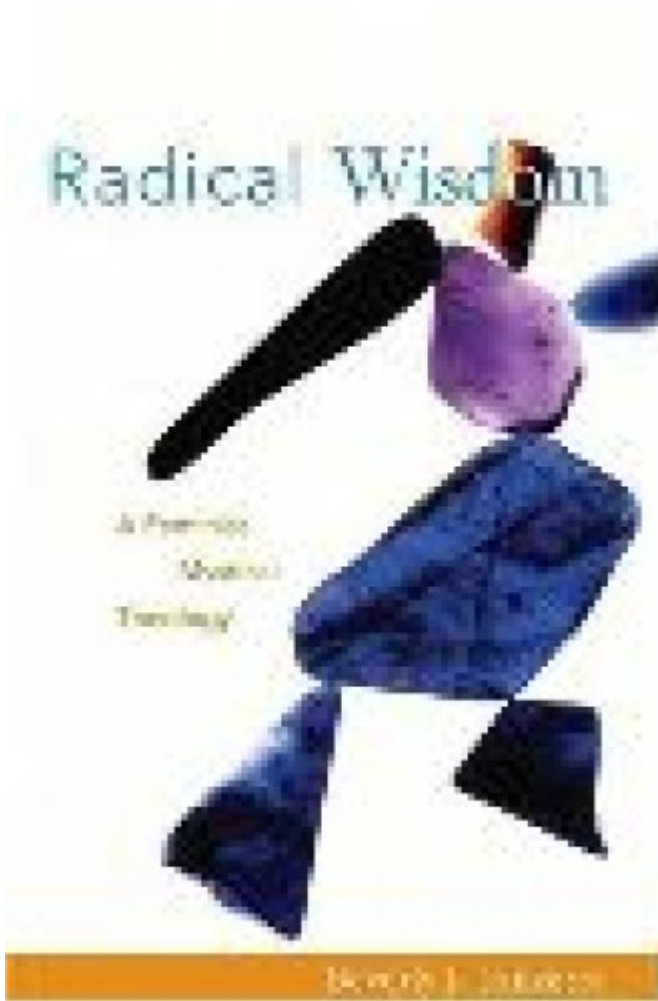


Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology

reviewed by [Lauve H. Steenhuisen](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology

Beverly J. Lanzetta
Fortress

Feminism and mysticism have always held a wary view of each other: feminists borrowed from Marx the belief that spirituality functions as a narcotic that anesthetizes the pain of oppression rather than harnessing it to fuel the engine of social change; religious leaders feared that committed social activists would lose their souls while saving the world. Beverly J. Lanzetta addresses these conflicts by analyzing two issues that split the values of feminism and mysticism: finding oneself and losing oneself in the Divine.

Early feminists analyzed how women's expressions of self—the identity, perspective, voice and experience of being a woman—were erased by patriarchy from history, literature, theology and politics. Such societal deauthorization separates women from the elements of self—the instincts, needs, drives and spirit that shape a woman's being and presence in the world. Lanzetta argues that shattering this patriarchal constraint and reclaiming an authentic self through unitive experiences with the Divine radically affirms women's being.

According to Lanzetta, the ways in which women struggle spiritually with patriarchy in all its forms create a unique spiritual contribution to Christianity, a “via feminina,” or “way of the feminine.” The soul wounds that women experience carve out interior cavities for the realization and activation of God's intimate and affirming presence. These “crucibles of experience” become the modalities through which women's symbols, images and metaphors for the Divine are formed. Women craft a self through suffering, resistance and divine love.

Lanzetta addresses with depth and finesse the second point of conflict between feminism and mysticism: the loss of self in service to others. The “radical wisdom” of a feminist mystical relationship with the Divine is that one can give to others only from a fully embodied self. Here Lanzetta explores the revolutionary power of spirituality to lift women from soulless selfishness to soulful selflessness as she examines the subversive contemplations of Teresa of Ávila and Julian of Norwich.

In Teresa's time, the church controlled literacy and placed prohibitions on women reading theological Latin. Teresa was also forbidden to read books in the vernacular. Mourning the loss of reading, she received a revelation from God that she would be taught all she needed to know through an interior source, a “living book.” Sharpening her intuition as a receptor of the Divine, Teresa crafted a spirituality that she taught her nuns and wrote of in service to others. Her radical access to God challenged the controlling “salvation through sacraments” clericalism of medieval

Spain.

Julian of Norwich, another religious leader of a prominent community who wrote liturgy, theology and spiritual devotions, had a similar path to relationship with God. Her divine revelations came in imagery for the work of the Holy Spirit, “mothering” and “greening” and “one-ing,” which served in her teachings and writings to construct an embodied and earth-valuing spirituality over against a hypertranscendent Christianity. Both women resisted male religious leaders’ efforts to silence and suppress them, and their resistance sharpened the assault. This punishing sanctioning forced them to embrace the cause of their new spirituality, despite the suffering it provoked, as a form of service to the Divine and to the world. In their oneness with God they found existential presence.

For both Julian and Teresa the way to save themselves became the way to save the world: undertaking a painful construction of self through resistance to diminishment and through loss of self in sacred service, they were able to take up their cross and be present in the world. Solitude thus crafted service, and self-sacrifice became a path for self-discovery. In the dialectical dynamic between dying and being formed anew, a “mystical circle” of contemplation and social action was formed.

Lanzetta argues convincingly that if Christians are to believe that God reveals divine knowledge to all those who love God, not just to clerics or to men, then to exclude women’s revelations is to exclude revelations that God is providing. When the Divine is imaged only as male, despite scripture’s witness, feminist mysticism can correct patriarchal blindness by revealing the feminine dimension of God’s nature. *Radical Wisdom* shows how earthshaking power can be harnessed by women whose self-liberation aligns with political liberation. Social movements, as anthropologists have noted, have been birthed and brought to triumph on nothing else.

Lanzetta’s book is crucial to postmodern understandings of feminism. In arguing for a “contemplative ethics” in which women have the spiritual right to image and express the Divine, she breaks through to a new source for political re-visioning.