

Chapter 1

Women in/and Early Ecclesiastical Culture

An Overview

This book seeks not to define or locate a true female subject for the early Middle Ages, were that even possible, but to examine subject possibilities as they evolved through the dynamics of ecclesiastical reform and then resistance to reform measures within an extremely complex intermingling of two distinct cultures—Germanic and Mediterranean. More specifically, this study focuses intently on the mirroring and rupturing that occur in the formation of female Christian subjects during three of the least stable and most productive moments of reform and resistance in the Germanic early Middle Ages: the early Carolingian reform movement under Charlemagne (ca. 742–814), with particular attention to Alcuin (ca. 735–804); the Alfredian and Benedictine reform movements in Anglo-Saxon England (in the late ninth through eleventh centuries); and, finally, the impressive career of Hrotsvit von Gandersheim, in the midst of the Ottonian renaissance and monastic reforms of tenth-century Saxony. These diverse Germanic cultures during three distinct moments of ecclesiastical development exhibit radically different possibilities for the materialization and dematerialization of culturally intelligible female subjects.

To understand what happened in Germania, we need first to consider how women's roles changed in early ecclesiastical culture in the Mediterranean regions and how these roles were introduced into Germanic regions. We need to understand the conflicting perceptions of women's status in the early Church as contextualized in the late antique Mediterranean regions and also to consider the gendering of the *imago Dei* implicit in early Judeo-Christian perceptions of the relationship between body and soul. We also require some grasp of the position of women

in early Germania in order to comprehend better the complex cultural negotiations necessitated by the spread of Christianity to the northern European regions. Specifically, we need to look briefly at some of the larger moments of conversion and reform in Germanic regions up to 1000 CE.

Emerging from the Mediterranean regions, the early Church followed patriarchal Greco-Roman and Judaic ideologies, which, with few exceptions, defined men alone as fully autonomous beings; women were necessary as helpers and to bear children, especially male children, but they were not considered subjects in their own right.¹ Church leaders came together as a political body to discuss, confirm, or reject certain views or beliefs. Women had no representation in that inner circle, even if they were primary players in the spread of Christianity. Apparent contradictions regarding women's status in the earliest writings of the Church point to internal contradictions in Christian doctrine. The dominant Christian ideology of the early Church seems not to have acknowledged women as subjects in their own right. In the mainline Christian reading of the Genesis story, for example, Eve's intellectual incapacity and inherent seductiveness demonstrate that women cannot be trusted to make the right choices and therefore must be supervised by their male guardians. Paul's statement in his first letter to the Corinthians corroborates this view of female deficiency when he explains that women must cover their heads, but men must not, because men are made in the image of God but "woman is the glory of man" (I Corinthians 11: 7). At the same time, the author of 1 Timothy 2:11–12 commands: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."²

And yet two traditions emerge in the early history of the Church, both of which may certainly be considered orthodox. As Suzanne Fonay Wemple observes:

One was the tradition of the organized Church, which reflected the prejudices of the patriarchal societies where Christianity was born and propagated. The other was the contemplative and prophetic tradition, which kept alive the principle of equality proclaimed in the Gospels. (*Women in Frankish Society* 191)

Evidence for both traditions is readily available in ecclesiastical texts from the earliest Church, but the relationship is (necessarily, I think) simplified

in Wemple's presentation, since the two traditions she seeks to differentiate are inextricably intertwined throughout. Paul, Augustine, Origen, Jerome, and Gregory, to name only a few of the most distinguished figures of the Church, all wrote and preached within both traditions without any clear break between the two, seeming to support both patriarchal biases and gender equality. Despite his restrictive policies regarding women, for example, Paul imagined a paradise in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ."³ Augustine, likewise, displayed fervent admiration for his mother (who was responsible for his conversion), had female students, encouraged and applauded female piety, and seemed to admire a keen intellect in women as well as in men.

Indeed, Peter Brown has shown that Christian women in the late antique period commanded a good deal of authority: "Much though they may have wished, at times, to snub their own protectresses in the same abrupt manner, the Christian clergy of late antiquity found that, in their community, influential women were there to stay" (*Body and Society* 146). Widows especially were highly regarded within ecclesiastical circles: "They were the only lay persons who accumulated all the attributes of effective members of the clergy, barring the crucial prerogative of ordained service at the altar" (148). Widows donated large sums of time, energy, and money to the Christian cause, which perhaps won them some freedom from rigid cultural constraints. Whatever the reason, women of means became a vital source of support for the growing grassroots movement, and they even conducted what may have been the earliest eucharistic ritual, hosting symbolic sacred dinners at their homes in imitation of the last supper.⁴ From the second to the fifth centuries, women seem to have become credible members of Christian communities clustering around the Mediterranean, so that, Brown observes, "[a]ltogether, the Christian intelligentsia of the age took the presence of women, as disciples and patronesses, absolutely for granted" (*Body and Society* 152).

But lived experience, whether of few or many, can be easily obscured or even erased by an ideological program into which such experiences do not comfortably fit. While a unifying program for the early Church is not readily ascertainable amid the array of ideologies vying for dominance, the question of female subject formation in any ideology of the early Church ultimately comes down to definitions of the soul and the gendering of the *imago Dei*. Here it is useful to turn to Augustine, since he not only exerted a tremendous influence over later generations of ecclesiastics, but

he also, more than any other doctor of the Church, explored in depth possibilities for selfhood in the Christian framework, taking up ideas of gender as well as class and ethnicity in defining what it is to be human. Even for Augustine, however, there was clearly no easy way to define the female as subject in the early Church. In explaining the disjunction between Paul's mandate that the woman is the glory of man while the man is the image and glory of God (1 Cor 11:7) and his famous assertion on equality before God (Galatians 3:26–28), Augustine states:

After all, the authority of the apostle as well as plain reason assures us that man was not made to the image of god as regards the shape of his body, but as regards his rational mind. . . . But because they are being renewed to the image of God where there is no sex, it is there where there is no sex that man [*homo*] was made to the image of God, that is in the spirit of his mind. . . . Well, it is only because she differs from the man in the sex of her body that her bodily covering could suitably be used to symbolize that part of the reason which is diverted to the management of temporal things, signifying that the mind of man does not remain the image of God except in the part which adheres to the eternal ideas to contemplate or consult them: ***and it is clear that females have this as well as males. So in their minds a common nature is to be acknowledged; but in their bodies the distribution of the one mind is symbolized.***⁵

This passage renders the allegory of gender transparent, simple, and therefore harmless, since gender distinction merely symbolizes the duality of the human psyche—rational thought over sensual/material impulses. However, the allegorization of gender works because it grows out of the firmly implanted social assumption that, except in rare cases, men are superior in body and mind. In the same chapter of *De Trinitate*, explicating Paul's dictum that women, but not men, should cover their heads, Augustine naturalizes that allegory by explaining it in terms of the gender hierarchy enacted through the social institution of marriage:

. . . the woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being an assistant, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God; whereas in what concerns

the man alone he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined to him in one whole. We said about the nature of the human mind that if it is all contemplating truth it is the image of God; and when something is drawn off from it and assigned or directed in a certain way to the management of temporal affairs, it is still all the same the image of God as regards the part with which it consults the truth it has gazed on; but as regards the part which is directed to managing these lower affairs, it is not the image of God.⁶

Augustine reads Paul's statements on gender symbolically in order to articulate the mystery of the human self. Both traditions relating to women—liberal and conservative—are apparent in Augustine's reading. The symbolic allows an egalitarian interpretation whereby it is the human mind, not the body, that is created in the image of God. And yet for Augustine as well as for Paul, the symbolic is heavily grounded in the social and cannot therefore be extricated from it. In Augustine's interpretation, the man represents high reason, which contemplates the eternal wonders of God, and the woman represents lower reason, which tends to temporal things. Both men and women, Augustine remarks, have higher and lower rational capacities, a view that seems almost liberal in its provision of a loophole for women who would devote their lives to divine contemplation. But domesticity and sensuality belong to the "lower" realm, and both define women in Greco-Roman and in Judaic societies. Therefore, although women may still aspire to the image of God, they may do so only when they completely detach themselves from society and use that part of the mind that relates to things eternal. Men, however, may achieve the same simply by living their lives "naturally" and socially as men.

Whether or not women can ever fully extricate themselves from their social duties is another question entirely. Augustine's explication of Genesis, for example, states that women are important primarily as childbearers:

Or if woman was not made for the help of bearing sons (*filios*) for man, for what help then was she made? Not yet was there labor, so that he should require help, and, if there had been need, a male would become a better help. For how much more harmonious for living and conversing together that two equal friends should live together than man and woman.⁷

To Augustine it would seem that women's subservience is part of the natural order established in Genesis. Book twelve of *De Civitate Dei* argues that man is preeminent among all other creatures of the earth because he was created in the image of God. Here Augustine privileges Adam only, the male of the species, who "was created as one individual, but was not left alone."⁸ Elsewhere Augustine explains the creation of woman as supplement:

God created man as one individual; but that did not mean that he was to remain alone, bereft of human society. God's intention was that in this way the unity of human society and the bonds of human sympathy be more emphatically brought home to man, if men were bound together not merely by likeness in nature but also by the feeling of kinship. And to this end, when he created the woman who was to be joined with the man he decided not to create her in the same way as he created man himself. Instead he made her out of the man, so that the whole human race should spread out from one original man.⁹

Society and kinship emerge as vital aspects of God's plan, where women accommodate men by bearing sons and populating the earth so that men can bond socially with other men and rejoice in copies of themselves (and, of course, of God). Most importantly, tracing the human race back to one original man rather than back to both Adam and Eve as a couple precludes the possibility of an equal partnership between them and neutralizes the life-giving potential of the female body.

In *De Civitate Dei*, a work of his later years informed by a seasoned intellect and his many years as a Church leader, Augustine clearly takes masculine superiority for granted when he explains that men's beards are for ornamentation:

There are some details in the body which are there simply for aesthetic reasons, and for no practical purpose—for example, the nipples on a man's chest, and the beard on his face, the latter being clearly for a masculine ornament, not for protection. This is shown by the fact that women's faces are hairless, and since women are the weaker sex, it would surely be more appropriate for them to be given such protection.¹⁰

Perhaps he is simply thinking in terms of physical strength here, but body and soul are, for Augustine, inextricably linked. Augustine's statements cited thus far seem to suggest that women are trapped by their own bodies, which are construed as weak, seductive, and distastefully imbued with the concerns of the world. But other statements favor a more nuanced reading in which women are trapped not just by the society that has naturalized their physical and sexual inferiority, but by the souls that shaped those weak, dangerous bodies in the first place. In chapter 24 of *De Immortalitate Animae*, for example, Augustine argues that the body takes its form from the soul and that form gives the body its beauty:

It is not what pertains to the mass of a body, but that which pertains to its form, *species*, which gives a body its being. This view is established by reasoning which cannot be faulted. The more fully a body is, the more formed and beautiful it is, and the more ugly and deformed it is, the less fully it is. This loss comes about not by a reduction of the mass, which we have already discussed, but rather by deprivation of the form.¹¹

If the masculine body surpasses the feminine body in form, then, by implication, the masculine soul must surpass the feminine soul as well. Always. As much as Augustine tries to elevate women interested in propagating the faith, he always falls back on the underlying assumption of female inferiority: physical, spiritual, natural, and social, and his ideas were instrumental in promoting that view for subsequent centuries. For E. Ann Matter, Augustine's ambivalent position—that women both are and are not in the image of God—became a useful tool that allowed ecclesiastical authorities to maintain male sacramental authority and restrict female power within the Church (“The Undebated Debate”). Even if that ambiguity prompted creative solutions for certain gifted and privileged women who found communities in which they could live in the image of God, the fact that the question never came to theological debate meant that women never would officially be seen to participate in the *imago Dei* and, thus, would never be recognized as autonomous subjects in the dominant view of the Church (ibid., esp. 42, 45).

Ideally, perhaps, Christianity offered certain women the promise of active subject positions. But the Church clearly had reservations about any autonomy it offered. The Aristotelian notion that man represents

reason and woman sense becomes a defining article of gender-formation in Christian ideology throughout the early Church and into the early medieval period. The reason/sense paradigm would hinder the formation of the female subject, in that her body served as a constant reminder of human vulnerability, original sin, and the dangers of female seduction. Ambrose's cosmological order, for example, requires absolute separation of what Brown calls "potent antitheses—Christian and pagan, Catholic and heretic, Bible truth and 'worldly' guesswork, Church and *saeculum*, soul and body" (*Body and Society* 346). Such a dualistic world vision assumes the inherently dangerous quality of the feminine, where the Christian self is unmistakably male and put upon by the various feminine forces set loose in the world, as Brown convincingly argues. That Ambrose had close relations with his sister, Marcellina, and with other women who devoted themselves to Christ, does not appear to moderate either his view of the generic Christian subject as male or his implicit distrust of the female. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom Ambrose venerated highly, these female devotees had apparently so steeled their bodies that they became impenetrable, invulnerable, inviolate, and male-like.

In order for a woman to shape herself within the parameters of the Christian discourse of the late antique period, therefore, she often had to redefine herself as a man. Margaret Miles focuses specifically on this phenomenon in *Carnal Knowing*, where she argues that the early Christian self is by definition masculine. Examining patristic accounts of successful Christian women, Miles shows how women, in order to define themselves as subjects within the Christian discourse of the early Church, typically must "become male."¹² In these cultural circumstances, Miles concludes, "For women . . . courage, conscious choice, and self-possession constituted gender transgression" (*Carnal Knowing* 55). It is worth noting here that Miles uses texts dating primarily to the late antique period when the body was increasingly considered a source of pollution and anxiety. In the dominant ideology of the ascendant Church, therefore, possibilities for female subject formation are limited: a woman must construct herself as male in order to participate, and so must doubly deny her personal self in the interests of corporate identity; she must be content to subject herself to God through her subjection to a man, but never emerge as a subject in her own right; or she must resign herself to a life of abjection, a condition culturally unintelligible within the dominant ideological framework.

But the early Middle Ages is characterized by tremendous flux, and the Church, as in the late antique period, is hardly sure in its aims

and agenda. Close scrutiny of the period reveals the fluidity of Christian ideologies and what we call orthodoxy. If orthodoxy became staunchly antifeminist, as it so often seems, it is because a patriarchal ideology eventually came to dominate the contesting hegemonies of early Christianity in the West. Even such austere, self-assured Fathers of the Church as Paul, Jerome, and Augustine would alternately affirm and subvert pervasive masculinist biases. The fact that ecclesiastical councils could reject and label certain ideas heretical—as with the Pelagian and Arian controversies¹³—would seem to suggest a firm sense of orthodoxy, and the fact that the deciding body was predominantly male-biased makes orthodoxy appear antifeminist. But the early Church, unwieldy with expansion, could not yet make such clear distinctions because so much was still being discussed and debated and even left unresolved. Even when certain matters were decided, they may not have been decided unanimously or have been realistically enforceable in all cultural milieus. No longer a Mediterranean cult, Christianity had to adapt to increasingly remote and diverse cultures, resulting in greater confusion, conflict, and compromise. Orthodoxy in early medieval Frankish, Gaulish, Anglo-Saxon, or Saxon terms was a hope, but never a reality.

The continued spread of Christianity and the intermingling of Mediterranean, Celtic, and Germanic cultures that characterizes the early medieval period complicate notions of selfhood, particularly in relation to gender. The position of women in Germanic culture differed from that of their Roman and Mediterranean counterparts. Germanic societies seemed to have held women in high regard in spiritual and perhaps even intellectual matters. Tacitus provides evidence concerning Germanic women in the first century,¹⁴ exclaiming surprise at the high social status of women, who enter into marriage as equal partners:

Lest the woman think herself outside notions of virtue and beyond the dangers of war, from the very opening ceremonies of matrimony she herself is admonished to come as a partner in labors and perils, ready to suffer and to dare the same in peace, the same in war: this is what the yoked oxen, the caparisoned horse, the gift of weapons, signify.¹⁵

According to Tacitus, Germanic women were to fulfill not only the duties of wives, mothers, nurses, and providers, but also counselors: “They also believe that there is something holy and provident in women, and so they

do not spurn their counsels or ignore their responses.”¹⁶ The reputation of the Germanic prophetesses, Tacitus reminds his readers, extends to Rome as well: “We [Romans] have seen under the divine Vespasian that Veleda for a long time and according to many was considered a goddess; but also in times past they worshipped Aurinia and many others, not in adulation or as if they would make them goddesses.”¹⁷

For J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Tacitus found in Germany of the first century a virtual golden age for women:

[Tacitus] says (what Caesar confirms) that the Germans believed their women to possess a spiritual power denied to men; they had a divine spark of foreknowledge and thus their advice was not to be overlooked, even on military questions. Aside from her natural gifts and abilities, the Germanic woman was a prophetess. So, too, were Celtic women; and the two came together in western Europe to fuse into a formidable female instrument for plumbing the unseen. Moreover, she was a healer. For good or ill she was associated with magic. (*The Frankish Church* 404)

These observations suggest a fair degree of authority and social autonomy. More recent scholars are skeptical. Wemple argues that “This special regard . . . must have been limited to a few prophetesses, for women were excluded from the assemblies” (*Women in Frankish Society* 11). Tacitus’s observations must also be scrutinized in terms of his own motivations and political agenda. As Janet Nelson remarks:

Tacitus, writing not ethnology but ethics for Romans, was making the point that female hostages ought to be accepted from Germans, contrary to Roman practice, and his invocation of religious to impute political standing was a characteristic piece of elision: effective, of course, precisely because the Romans themselves were familiar with the idea that women could function as mouthpieces of “a holy something.” Yet of Germans’ attitudes to their women, Tacitus took care to add: “they never treated them with adulation, as goddesses.” (“Women and the Word” 60)

Clearly, Romans had some reference point for understanding the importance of female spirituality to the Germanic tribes, but apparently they

were unable to gauge the extent of female piety in Germanic terms. On the whole, though, scholars agree that women held some spiritual authority in Germanic areas at least into the eleventh century, though opinions vary as to degree. It is possible that women had gradually lost their esteemed position between Tacitus's time and the earliest recorded laws of Germanic tribes. Nevertheless, in light of such cultural differences regarding women, it would seem that what was ecclesiastically forbidden by the Roman Church may have been culturally viable, or even required, in the outskirts of converted territory, which by the eighth century extended north and east to Frisia and Saxony, Germanic tribal regions that still regarded women as purveyors of piety.¹⁸ Active participation of female religious in these regions may have been expected, perhaps even required.

Women also had some legal and property rights. In Anglo-Saxon England, for example, a marriage union could not be finalized without the woman's consent. And instead of a dowry, the Anglo-Saxon *morgengifu*, "morning gift," sealed the pact. The *morgengifu* was paid on the first morning of their marriage by a husband to his wife, not to her family. According to Christine Fell, that gift could be substantial and could be made in the form of land (*Women in Anglo-Saxon England* 56–57). Moreover, Fell explains: "The *morgengifu* was not the only property the wife had a right to, but different laws divide the matrimonial estate in different ways. They do, however, make it clear that within a marriage the finances are held to be the property of husband and wife, not of husband only" (ibid. 57). Not only did a woman have a say upon entering into marriage and have some control over properties independently and in conjunction with her husband, but she also, presumably in extreme circumstances, could choose to leave the marriage:

According to the laws of Æðelbert a woman had the right to walk out of a marriage that did not please her, though I do not find this particular freedom reiterated in the later laws. Since, if she took the children with her, she was also entitled to take half the property, she seems to have had reasonable independence and security. (ibid. 57)

If Germanic women were so highly regarded and if they were responsible for guarding and passing on religious obligation and observation, it is puzzling that they should so quickly have been swayed to new beliefs. From a modern perspective, they seem to have been ineffective

guardians who willfully participated in their own subjugation by accepting the Christian patriarchal ideology. The key may lie in perceptions of the female body. In early Germanic culture, the body functions as the source of both female autonomy and female subjugation. Because they were so vital to the survival and proper functioning of their tribe, Germanic women were more closely guarded and more harshly punished for their transgressions. Women had to keep their bodies—from which their special attributes came—pure.¹⁹ The primary evidence yields diverse interpretations, however. According to Wallace-Hadrill:

Married, the Frankish woman held the honour of two kindreds in her keeping: her husband's and her father's. In this respect the wife's responsibility was the greater and the risks she ran if she dishonoured either kindred correspondingly greater. Thus burdened, she was no mere chattel. She could hold and administer land, defend herself in the courts, act as compurgator, make donations and free her slaves if she wished. The higher her social rank the likelier it was that she would carry many other responsibilities than care for her household. In short, a queen was an honorary man. (*The Frankish Church* 404–405)

Wallace-Hadrill's reading of Tacitus may be overly optimistic. Wemple offers a more sobering reading:

Tacitus enumerated humiliating penalties for adultery, which applied only to wives. The female corpse found by archaeologists in the peat bog at Windeby in Domland, buried naked with a blindfold over her eyes, a hide collar on her neck, and her hair shaven, lends credence to Tacitus' description of how a cuckold husband punished his wife.²⁰

Jo Ann McNamara and Jane Tibbets Schulenburg agree that by the early Middle Ages Germanic society offered little for women but abuse and subjugation.²¹ Women may have had certain legal rights to property and protection, but for the most part they lived with the ongoing fear of rape and abuse and therefore were already subjugated to an unforgiving patriarchal order. Over a century ago, Lina Eckenstein puzzled over the question of early Germanic women in relation to the Church. To make

sense of it, she argues for a more complex view of women in Germanic society than is generally acknowledged. Whereas Tacitus provides useful clues about a particular moment in Germanic prehistory, Eckenstein argues that they should not be taken to represent ages of Germanic culture, since Germanic society evolved like any other. She postulates an earlier period, the “mother-age,” in which women were not only respected, but revered. As Roman acculturation increased and “heathendom” declined, so too did women’s position in society:

During the period of declining heathendom the drift of society had been towards curtailing woman’s liberty of movement and interfering with her freedom of action. When the Germans crossed the threshold of history the characteristics of the father-age were already in the ascendant; the social era, when the growing desire for certainty of fatherhood caused individual women and their offspring to be brought into the possession of individual men, had already begun. The influence of women was more and more restricted owing to their domestic subjection. But traditions of a time when it had been otherwise still lingered. . . . At the time when contact with Christianity brought with it the possibility of monastic settlements, the love of domestic life had not penetrated so deeply, nor were its conditions so uniformly favourable, but that many women were ready to break away from it. (*Women under Monasticism* 3)

Here Eckenstein offers a glimpse, albeit from afar, of resistant, willful, and active female subjects, and a scenario where the Church was an enabler rather than an oppressor of female autonomy. In doing so, she makes a daring comparison between prostitutes and female religious:

On the face of it, a greater contrast than that between the loose woman and the nun is hard to conceive, and yet they have this in common, that they are both the outcome of the refusal among womankind to accept married relations on the basis of the subjection imposed by the father-age. (ibid. 5)

The connection helps explain why women, who were seen as guardians of faith, so readily converted to another faith. The Christian Church, with its

emphasis on chastity and cloistered spiritual development, offered willful women an escape from domestic abuse and bondage. In this scenario, these women were not passive recipients of newly assigned roles, but active subjects redefining themselves in an increasingly hostile society.

Conversionary and cultural confusions offered women various opportunities for power and productivity in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the freedom enjoyed by early female monastics in Anglo-Saxon England, Francia, and Saxony was lamentably short-lived as Roman ideologies gained precedence. Women had served as preachers, however unofficially, missionaries, and to a large extent as public servants, much like their male counterparts.²² Under Boniface (ca. 675–754), Anglo-Saxon missionaries in the outer limits of converted territories may have enjoyed the greatest amount of freedom and autonomy, since they were desperately needed and of necessity worked with little immediate supervision. They were not just passive, virginal devotees, but teachers of the faith. The *Vita* of one particularly strong missionary woman of this period, Leoba, offers insight into the attitudes of the period, though this source, too, must be treated with caution, since it was written by a monk of Fulda in the midst of ecclesiastical reform about fifty years after her death. Leoba's learning, the monk Rudolf relates, was legendary even in her own time, but equally noteworthy was her engagement with the secular community. A parish church erected in her honor in 837, about fifty years after her death and for which Rudolf's *Vita* was probably commissioned, still stands just east of Fulda, witness to her active involvement with the public and her importance to the monastic community at Fulda and its abbot, Hrabanus Maurus, who founded the church and retired there. Although the church was dedicated to St. Peter, it is also still called Liobaskirche in her memory. Since its erection, the church has held the relics of Leoba in a wall reliquary installed by Hrabanus himself; her head and body have since been interred there in special caskets as well. In her own monastic community, Boniface placed in her both his trust and authority to rule according to her own ideals:

In furtherance of his [missionary] aims [Boniface] appointed persons in authority over the monasteries and established the observance of regular discipline: he placed Sturm as abbot over the monks and Leoba as abbess over the nuns. He gave her the monastery at a place called Bischofsheim, where there was a large community of nuns. These were trained according to her prin-

ciples in the discipline of monastic life and made such progress in her teaching that many of them afterward became superiors of others, so that there was hardly a convent of nuns in that part that had not one of her disciples as abbess.²³

Stephanie Hollis points out that it was Leoba, not Boniface, who initiated their relationship in the first place when she wrote a letter to him, accompanied by a gift, introducing herself as his kinswoman (*Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church* 277). Boniface and Leoba became close and, if Rudolf's account is to be trusted, the relationship gave her a certain amount of monastic clout:

Sometimes she came to the monastery of Fulda to say her prayers, a privilege never granted to any woman either before or since, because from the day that monks began to dwell there entrance was always forbidden to women. Permission was granted only to her, for the simple reason that the holy martyr Saint Boniface had recommended her to the seniors of the monastery and because he had ordered her remains to be buried there.²⁴

Rudolf tells us that Leoba also became a favorite at Charlemagne's court, and that Queen Hildegard held her as something akin to a soulmate.

If her *Vita* shows that Leoba exercised a degree of authority and autonomy comparable to her male counterparts, it also shows that only Leoba (or other such divinely marked women) could. Such privileges were not available to ordinary women, however devoted. Rudolf can, I think, be trusted in his account of Leoba's approved visitations to Fulda and also to Charlemagne's court, because he would have had no cause to encourage such visitations. But Rudolf underscores the monks' careful observance of the rule of separation even during her visits in order to prevent others from following suit:

The following regulations, however, were observed when she came there. Her disciples and companions were left behind in a nearby cell and she entered the monastery always in daylight, with one nun older than the rest; and after she had finished her prayers and held a conversation with the brethren, she returned toward nightfall to her disciples whom she had left behind in the cell.²⁵

Even though Rudolf writes from his own time, probably around 837, when enclosure and segregation were becoming more strictly observed, it was Boniface who, as abbot of Fulda, made segregation the rule for that monastery. Moreover, Boniface worked toward the restriction of women ecclesiastics, initiating a reform in Frankish regions where all monastic houses were forced to conform to the Benedictine rule under the supervision of a bishop.²⁶ The repercussions of this act proved more serious for women than for men, since women had no representation among the bishops. Leoba's case aside, Boniface also advocated the separation of men and women religious and strict enclosure of female monastics, a policy his successor, Lul, would enforce strictly.²⁷

Thus, during the course of the first millennium conflicting ideals served to advance and restrict, in turns, women's stature in Church and society. The cultural confusions produced by expansion allowed greater autonomy for women, both within the Church and in the newly converted territories connected to the Church, as is evident, particularly, among early Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian women.²⁸ There is no question that a woman's power was unstable and her authority open to question; nonetheless, Janet Nelson and others have shown that women were able to move much more easily between social spheres than their male counterparts—from slave girl or prostitute to queen or empress, for example. In the religious milieu, the practical needs of the expanding Church made it possible for women—as abbesses, missionaries, and even, in certain instances, preachers—to wield substantial power with relatively little supervision, in contrast to later periods. In this assertion I am not supporting the notion of an early medieval golden age for women, not even in the earliest moments of English Christianization; instead, following the differing models of Clare Lees, Gillian Overing, Shari Horner, and Stephanie Hollis, among others, I trace the complexities of ecclesiastical culture involved in shaping possibilities for women.

Female autonomy waned during various reform movements, which sought to fortify the institution of the Church against the nebulous evils of the world. The association of those dangerous forces with the female essence made women a likely target of ecclesiastical reform. The rapid spread of Christianity brought fragmentation of the Christian message, as unlearned, barely literate priests with their own vision of the faith took it upon themselves to interpret the scriptures. Councils and synods were periodically organized to address the major issues, but strenuous and concerted reform efforts were deemed necessary to stem the flow of

error and heresy. Although the institution of the Church suffered quite obviously from spreading itself too thin, too quickly, the juxtaposition of male reason against female sensuality seems to have colored the perception of such crises. Women were crucial to the conversionary efforts, but they were still women. And even though women as such are not explicitly connected with any of the major heretical movements of the late antique period and the early Middle Ages, an example of the association of error and heresy with women can be seen in the acts of the Roman synod of 745 that condemns the priests Aldebert and Clemens and removes them from the priesthood. In the course of the proceedings, Pope Zachary declares that Aldebert is mad and that all who use his letter (which he claimed to be written by Jesus himself and dropped by the Archangel Michael) are mentally deficient “and rage with certain womanly notions.”²⁹ That womanly sensibilities are associated with madness and heresy demonstrates a pervasive distrust of the feminine in the ideology of the Church. Individual women may excel, primarily by demonstrating their virility and thereby escaping the taint of their gender, but the female gender as a whole remains suspect.

The changing demands of ecclesiastical order resulted in drastically reduced roles for women within that order. As Schulenburg explains:

The Church . . . found itself in a position to attempt to enforce its gender-based restrictive policies which had been ignored or necessarily mitigated during its initial stages of development (especially during the period of the missionary movement in the north of Europe and Britain). Thus the reforms of the Carolingians (followed by those of the Cluniacs, the reforms of Gerard of Brogne, Gorze, and Richard of St. Vanne, the tenth-century English reform, and papal or Gregorian reform) introduced policies which tried to control and regularize religious activities. They worked, in general, to limit women’s public involvement and their leadership activities in the Church and society through the demarcation of a “proper” feminine sphere and a delineation of female nature, abilities, rights, and responsibilities. (*Forgetful of Their Sex* 108)

The first serious reform efforts were instituted under the papacy of Zachary by Boniface in eighth-century Francia. Although relatively minor in scale, Boniface’s efforts set in motion a series of reforms on the continent and

in England over the next two centuries. The first major reform began under Charlemagne and continued with unprecedented vigor under his successor, Louis the Pious. The Carolingian reforms in turn became a model for English reforms of the ninth century under Alfred the Great as well as the English and continental Benedictine reforms of the tenth and early eleventh centuries. Each of these reform movements had as their goal the strengthening of Church doctrine through establishment of uniform liturgical practices, scriptures, and language, as well as through improvement of educational resources, especially for the ordained. Each reform movement has been shown to have restricted drastically the roles and voice of women.³⁰ In such restrictive environments, women cannot even construct themselves as male and are denied any active, public roles. Women on the fringes no doubt formed alternate modes of discourse, but such alternate forms remained culturally unintelligible and therefore inaccessible. Moreover, any products of such radical discourse certainly would not have escaped the censorship of the Church; if vestiges survive, they are virtually undecipherable because of our training and our own cultural biases, a problem feminists are beginning to address.³¹ Resistance to reform can be detected, however, even in the most restrictive periods among the ecclesiastical elite and among women of privilege, as we shall see.

Because it is impossible to separate practice from ideology completely, it may be productive to ask to what extent ideology informs the real or experiential. We ought to acknowledge that ecclesiastical statements, conciliar mandates, and exegetical commentary were often composed in the interests of conversion and solidification and therefore provide inaccurate testimony to their own cultural circumstances. In much the same way, the state of orthodoxy the Church tried to proclaim for itself was little more than an effort toward conformity. It is difficult, therefore, to decide how much weight to give the various statements on women in the expansion/conversion periods of Christianity. Might the more egalitarian statements have been something like campaign propaganda? Or, conversely, could it be that strict policies were propaganda—drafted to placate a patriarchal elite, but never truly enforced? And how can we decide the extent to which ecclesiastical mandates were followed or enforced from one region to the next, particularly since the same statutes appear in the records synod after synod? We probably will never know, but we must keep the questions in view. As Jacqueline Murray cautions, following Caroline Walker Bynum and Joan Wallach Scott, “Our historical vantage point frequently blinds us to alternative interpretations and dissent from

the ideology which prevailed in a society” (“Thinking about Gender” 2).³² To accept uncritically the recorded hegemonic ideology as a universal is to replicate and promote that ideology even when we seek to expose it. Alerting ourselves to alternative possibilities, we may discover that “rather than a monolithic ‘medieval view,’ a monovocalic discourse of misogyny, there was a diversity of opinion, even within what might broadly be termed ‘the Church’” (ibid. 3), and even during periods of reform.

The aim of this book is not to trace historical moments, however, but to understand how women were perceived, and how they perceived themselves, within their particular social and historical circumstances—the “Real” conditions of their existence. In other words, to consider whether women are able to emerge as autonomous subjects during these moments and, if so, how. The concept of a female subject in early medieval Christianity, as in our own time, poses complicated questions and requires some theoretical underpinning. Louis Althusser’s “scientific” or structuralist approach to identity formation is helpful as a starting place, removing as it does historical and social variables and contemplating instead how individuals are formed within a larger community. For Althusser, subjects are created not in a material world, but in Ideology (or rather in not one but several ideologies or belief systems operating simultaneously), which is simply a way to imagine the relationship of the individual to the material world. In his paradigm, interpellation is the means by which ideology brings subjects into being.³³ Through language, individuals are hailed or called into being and their response signals participation in and locates them within that system. Dynamics of power and oppression are realized and reinforced through language, from the speaking subject to spoken (listening) subject. According to Althusser, “You and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (“Ideology and the State” 117).

This is not to say that the emergence of a dominant culture is a conscious process with clearly scripted roles, clear leaders, and certain paths to power; rather, the constitution of any dominant culture is itself a complex process of becoming with too many variables (political, historical, personal, social, philosophical, etc.) to be controllable or even traceable. All individuals are “always already” subjects because the ideology that informs them always precedes them. But subjectivity is a double-edged sword: the subject is both a “free agent” and a “subjected being.” We are

interpellated as subjects in the name of a unique and absolute Subject (i.e., God in the Christian order), which, according to Althusser, “means that all ideology is centred, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject . . . the *guarantee* that this really concerns them and Him” (ibid. 122). The construction of a Christian cosmology necessarily arranges beings and determines subject positions within that order. But within that order, the importance of choice must be underscored. Althusser describes a decidedly reciprocal relationship in which power is maintained and continued through the subjects’ free will: “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the subject” (ibid. 123). To be successful, subjects must (be made to) desire their own subjection to a particular world order created around an Absolute Subject. In the Christian order, this desire is effected through the full reciprocity of the subject–Subject relationship—that is, God, too, as Supreme Subject, “needs me, the great Subject needs subjects, even in the terrible inversion of his image in them (when the subjects wallow in debauchery, i.e. sin)” (ibid. 122). He does this, Althusser speculates, “as if to show empirically, visibly to the eye, tangibly to the hands . . . of the subjects, that, if they are subjects, subjected to the Subject, that is solely in order that finally, on Judgment Day, they will reenter the Lord’s bosom, like Christ, i.e. re-enter the Subject” (ibid. 122). The process of subject formation that Althusser outlines becomes more complex when contextualized in historical and social realities where multiple ideologies complement one another and also compete for subject participation. Moreover, as free agents, subjects can interpret the meaning of the initial hailing and can also resist interpellation.

For Michel Foucault, the process of identity formation is an effect of power, and that power operates at the most basic premises of existence: in the relationship between body and soul. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault theorizes a soul born of historical reality—not the idealized soul of religious belief systems. For Foucault’s immediate topic of discussion, of course, it is the soul of the condemned created by modern systems of power. But the particular noncorporeal element that Foucault defines in his discussion can be extended beyond the condemned and beyond the modern circumstance to explain subject positions in relation to power: “It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological