CHAPTER FIVE

VISIONS, POWER, AND THE DYNAMIC
OF MEDIATED REVELATION

All visions fell short of the Beatific Vision in terms of accuracy and infallibility. Nonetheless, visions often provided the knowledge necessary to get to the Beatific vision. As a result, visions caused tension in the Late Middle Ages. The Church was responsible for mediating all supernatural knowledge that was essential to one’s eternal destiny. Yet visions could bring new revelation that would be made part of essential doctrines of the faith. Thus it was critical that the Church scrutinize and verify any visions that claimed to mediate new revelatory content. Because visions, particularly prophetic visions, served along with the Scriptures as means of divine revelation, they could have great power. Visions thus both participated in and reaffirmed the fifth dynamic we will examine, that of Mediated Revelation. This dynamic gave power to medieval visions. But, ironically, it was this dynamic which would be the undoing of the medieval vision. It would be subverted by the arrival of the Reformation and its Sola Scriptura principle that significantly narrowed the hermeneutic range and thus undermined the authority implicit in revelatory visions.

The Dynamic of Mediated Revelation

This dynamic of Mediated Revelation is the fifth and final dynamic of medieval spirituality under examination here. In late medieval Christendom, all information that was critical to salvation came from God, indirectly, through mediators, to the laity.1 The primary mediator was the Church. Within the Church, revelation was further mediated through the Scriptures, through papal statements and conciliar decisions, and finally, through visions. Some knowledge about God came

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1 For discussion of visions and authority in the early middle ages, see Isabel Moreira, Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).
directly to human beings through natural theology. This data, however, was only enough to make a person responsible for unbelief but was not sufficient to provide salvation. All spiritual information essential to one’s eternal destiny came through Mediated Revelation.

This dynamic of Mediated Revelation—the driving force of epistemology in medieval spirituality—found support in the didactic visions. The visions buttressed the dynamic first by their content, including the economy of salvation, the cult of the saints, warfare against the Devil and the importance of the sacraments. As discussed below, they also added to revelation with their own new content. Third, visions participated generally in the dynamic of Mediated Revelation by their very nature. Finally, because of their powerful visual mediation of revelation, visions possessed an authority and were therefore a nexus of power. This often resulted in conflict within the Church and even extended to national politics.

Because the spiritual information in the medieval era had eternal consequences, accuracy was critical. At the point of their occurrence, visions were not under the control of the Church. It was essential, therefore, that they later be assessed and validated by the Church. The Church was committed to doctrinal purity, and considered any willful, stubbornly held deviation to be heretical. The Church sanctioned such erroneous belief heavily, often by death. Visionaries, therefore, found the stakes to be very high.

We will explore the Church’s dream and vision theories by which it sought to provide a theoretical framework to analyze the origins of visions. That framework, although neither centralized nor uniform, sought to distinguish between visions and dreams and, in both cases, between the trustworthy and the deceitful.

It is true that didactic visions in general portrayed a world with which, subject to a set of rules, the penitent could competently interact. Nonetheless, and despite the Church’s hermeneutic framework for examining visions, visionaries experienced an inherent anxiety. That unease arose primarily out of two elements, disguise and uncertainty about source. We will look at four case studies of women who struggled with these fears: Margery Kempe, Jeanne d’Arc, St. Bridget of Sweden, and Elizabeth Barton. We will see how the attitudes towards visionary experience and its reliability shifted as the Reformation entered England and brought with it a new epistemology.