

## ***Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*** **STUDY GUIDE**

**Chapter 1** introduces the concept of *via feminina*—Latin for “the way of the feminine,” or “the feminine way”—as a new spiritual path with ancient roots in women’s experience. Going beyond both the positive and negative theologies (*via positiva* and *via negativa*) depicted in classical Christian thought, *via feminina* represents a feminist contemplative path that breaks through and breaks down the historical denigration of women encoded in patriarchal religions. It employs a particular type of spiritual process—called the apophatic or negative—to find the tools women need to pull up the sources of suffering imbedded in their souls. This apophatic process functions within the spiritual life as a continual “unsaying,” a continual disruption of the previous thousands of years of “saying” of patriarchal cultures and religions.

Most significant is that this mystical process of deconstruction involves not only a woman’s personal feelings and identities, but also includes the whole range of cultural, religious, racial, and social attitudes and structures that participate in and perpetuate worldwide abuses against females. Simultaneously, this feminist path of negation heals women’s abused consciousness and restores women’s dignity and worth. It thus does not remain in a permanent suspension of unnamings and unknowings, but returns to language bearing the fruits of a new self-understanding and a new vision of the sacred. As one expression of women’s lived spirituality, *via feminina* maps out a spiritual path to women’s divine humanity.

### **Questions from Chapter 1:**

1. How does cultural pragmatism contribute to women’s suppression and to their inability to name and heal soul wounds?
2. Why is it necessary for women to name and uncover a new spiritual path outside dominant religious cultures?
3. How is *via feminina* defined in this chapter and why is it important as a particular spiritual path for women?
4. What is meant by the apophatic or deconstructive nature of *via feminina* and why is it important to women’s liberation?
5. In what way does the historical usage of the term “feminine” contribute to the subordination of women and the diminishment of men?

**Chapter 2** investigates the interrelationship of feminism and mysticism, showing the differences and commonalities between the two disciplines. Feminists have been cautious of mysticism because of the tendencies among its early researchers to emphasize its essential or universal nature, and to interpret “the mystical” as an experience common across culture, religion, and gender. To associate the mystical with feminism raises concerns about whether women are identified with a “common core” experience that is

assumed to be universal, but in fact ignores or suppresses gender disparities. For this reason, feminists have been cautious of mysticism if it is used to mask differences, make universal claims about women's spirituality, avoid social ills, or confine women to gender stereotypes. Feminists also contend that the characteristics usually associated with mysticism, such as passivity, selflessness, silence, and absence of desire, further women's oppression by assigning normative expectations to their behavior.

Other feminist scholars insist that despite the domination of male voices within mysticism, its importance is not diminished as a positive force in women's lives in every culture and religious tradition from ancient times to the present. Dorothee Soelle emphasizes that mysticism is intrinsic to feminist values in that it is based on a personal experience of the Divine; she also contends that mysticism can help women step outside the site from which they are subjugated into that reality which precedes women's oppression and patriarchal violence. Mystic and feminist, claims Deidre Green, each point toward a transformation in consciousness: the mystic searches for the true nature of reality outside of social conditioning or established religion; the feminist seeks a transformation in consciousness of women's roles, expectations, and abilities. Women's capacity to handle suffering and their ability to overcome adversity and affliction become for Ursula King the mystical foundation of women's compassion and wisdom. For these scholars, mysticism is vital to feminist issues and invaluable to women's spiritual wholeness and dignity.

### Questions for Chapter 2:

1. How would you describe the relationship between the historical usage of the terms "spirituality," "mysticism," and "contemplation"?
2. What distinguishes the mystical-contemplative from the spiritual as developed in this chapter?
3. How would you describe the feminist critique of mysticism? Does this accurately reflect your own experience?
4. What are some of the concerns that feminists raise concerning the use of mysticism with respect to women's liberation?
5. How do feminist scholars affirm the value of mysticism in overcoming the spiritual subordination of women? Do you find their perspectives helpful to your own spiritual life?

**Chapter 3** explores the historical evidence of the Feminine Divine in the religious imagination. Rarely accorded full divine status, the feminine divinity is often imagined as an attribute of God the Father, or as one of God's manifestations, consorts, or spouses. Yet traces of her full potential are present as a powerful, if latent, element in the spiritual life. The Divine Feminine is exalted in the Sophia (Wisdom) literature of the Hebrew Bible, and in later Jewish mystical texts as *Shekhinah* (feminine "indwelling presence"); she is similarly expressed in the Hindu *shakti* and in the Chinese Buddhist personification of *Kuan Yin*—Bodhisattva of Compassion—as pure light, eliminating darkness and extinguishing the fire of pain. To Muslims she is the womb (*rahim*) of the All-merciful, established in a famous *hadith*: "My mercy precedes My wrath" (*rahmatī sabaqat ghadabī*). To Jews she is the heart (*lev*) of God. As the source of life-giving mercy, her

tears overflow into creation, healing our sins and woes. She is the sacred heart of Mary and *mater dolorosa* (mother of suffering) to millions of Catholics. Through the Feminine Divine all things come to be, in her life bears fruition.

In Christian spirituality, the feminine divinity witnessed an unprecedented development during the High Middle Ages. The usage of vernacular writing, courtly personification plays, and the mutual dialogue between male and female voices, distinguish the later Middle Ages as one of the most remarkable periods in the history of western mysticism. Further, characterized by new attitudes toward the world and cloister, new forms of language, and new modes of mystical consciousness, feminine imagery found expression in ever more innovative and provocative ways by mystics of both sexes. Two important themes—the feminization of Jesus and usage of goddess figures—reclaim this period in religious thought as one of the most fertile in establishing a context within which to address women's contemporary concerns and a feminist pathway to God. Yet, as female mysticism grew in power and authority, many church leaders feared it more than heresy itself. Reaction against women's religious power and feminine images of the divine was swift, and by the end of the middle of the sixteenth century a great void silenced the voices of women and an unprecedented period in Christian history came to an end.

### Questions for Chapter 3:

1. Why do scholars think the Feminine Divine has suffered a fractured development in the religious imagination, especially in the Christian West?
2. What images of the Feminine Divine in religious thought most resonate with your own spirituality?
3. In what way did images of "Mother Jesus" infiltrate the texts of male and female mystics, and how did it assist in their understanding of God?
4. Scholars tell us that the High Middle Ages witnessed an unprecedented explosion of goddess figures in mystical literature. What distinguishing characteristics are assigned to goddess figures, and how did they inform or transform the spiritual imagination?
5. What would it mean to your spiritual life if the Feminine Divine were given full divine status?

**Chapter 4** joins together the spiritual processes that lead women to self-liberation with women's prophetic activism for social change, to develop the notion of "contemplative feminism." A postmodern version of the classical ideal, contemplative feminism studies and maps the spiritual practices and structures of consciousness of the mystical traditions as a resource in women's liberation and in the transformation of our world. It is a method of inquiry and interpretation that probes the contemplative processes, prayer forms, and mystical techniques women employ to heal inner oppression, liberate soul wounds, and empower personal dignity and self-worth. It also investigates how oppressive social and religious institutions affect a woman's ability to reclaim her original nature. Alert to the ways in which the holy has been denied and desecrated in its manifestation as mother, sister, daughter, wife, lover, and friend, the feminist side of contemplation reminds

women that their full spiritual potential is dependent on reclaiming and upholding in daily life their integrity and worth.

Aware of the emphasis feminists have placed on issues of injustice and inequity in civil society and religious community, contemplative feminism analyzes the deeper spiritual causes and consequences of a subtle but equally powerful form of oppression—the oppression of women's soul. Recognition and healing of *spiritual oppression* is fundamental to women's liberation, for it is founded on a core theological position: *women's spiritual oppression is the foundation of all her other oppressions*. This means that acts of violence against women—overt or subtle—are directed first and foremost at the core of their nature. Often fueled by unconscious motivations, spiritual oppression is the wrongful violation of the sanctity of a woman's self. Violence against women—personal and structural—can be seen as nothing less than a desire to harm or destroy women's unique and particular embodiment of the Divine. Contemplative feminism investigates how this suppression of women and girls in personal and institutional settings afflicts us in heart and soul, harming the growth of our full humanity and betraying the vulnerable and fragile in us all.

#### **Questions for Chapter 4:**

1. How is contemplative feminism defined and what characteristics are most important to its theory?
2. What importance do you place on the interrelationship between women's contemplative practice and women's social activism?
3. In what way does the concept of "soul suffering," or "soul wounds" help and/or hinder your understanding of the goals of contemplative feminism and your own interior life?
4. How is "spiritual oppression" defined? What critical point does it make about the interlocking relationship between social responsibility and spiritual health?
5. Does the section on "healing spiritual oppression" have meaning in your own spirituality? In what way can it serve as a resource in your life or be of help to others?

**Chapter 5** concentrates on the spirituality of Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila. Julian was a fourteenth century English mystic who lived as an anchoress—a female who chose a life of solitary enclosure usually connected to a church—during a time of social and political unrest, and under the scourge of the Black Death. Little is known of her life and there has been speculation that she was not a member of a religious order, but a lay woman perhaps even widowed, who was one of the great mystics and theologians of her time. In 1373, Julian had a series of sixteen revelations or visions of Christ crucified, which become the central impetus for the remainder of her life's reflection and writing. Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda was born in Avila, Spain, on March 28, 1515, and was the first woman to be named a Doctor of the Church. A descendent of *conversos* (Jews converted to Christianity), St. Teresa of Avila was a brilliant mystical thinker and an impassioned chronicler of the soul's journey to God. Her transcendent experiences, along with her active work in founding the discalced (from the Spanish *descalzo*,

shoeless, to indicate the wearing of sandals), Carmelites, distinguishes Teresa as one of the great women mystics of any generation.

An intense yearning for union with God propels the lives and the texts of Julian and Teresa. It is from this vantage point that they turn their attention to the spiritual life, often co-opted by ecclesiastical authorities and submerged in academic theology, and to the daily trials by which a soul ascends in grace. In them, we find a body of wisdom through which we can map the soul of a woman, its journey toward the highest states of enlightened consciousness, and its pains and illuminations along the way. Through their writings they map the geography of the soul, developing a comprehensive understanding of its typography, the operation on the inner life of suffering and sin, and the contemplative processes that take them from oppression to freedom and from human love to divine love. The present chapter begins the journey by looking into five essential qualities of women's mysticism—longing and love, great determination, inner monastic heart, spiritual detachment, and the annihilated self.

Links to Julian:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08557a.htm>

<http://www.gloriana.nu/julian.html>

<http://home.clara.net/frmartinsmith/julian/page2.html>

Links to Teresa:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14515b.htm>

<http://www.karmel.at/eng/teresa.htm>

[http://www.mcs.drexel.edu/~gbrandal/Illum\\_html/Teresa.html](http://www.mcs.drexel.edu/~gbrandal/Illum_html/Teresa.html)

### Questions for Chapter 5:

1. Why do Julian and Teresa consider longing and passion for God to be the central element in the spiritual life?
2. Teresa writes that three attitudes—determination, surrender, and courage—are necessary on the road of prayer. Why does she consider these qualities important and what does she instruct the individual seeker to do?
3. Julian lived as a hermit, and Teresa was a member of a cloistered religious order. Yet, they write about an inner monastic heart. How is this inner monastery applicable to your spiritual life today?
4. Why do Julian and Teresa define spiritual love and how do they recommend developing this great virtue that grows out of the life of prayer?
5. What do our women mystics mean by “mystical annihilation” and how do they see it of primary importance to women's spirituality?

**Chapter 6** continues to study how Julian and Teresa map the journey of the soul. Products of a medieval world-view, Julian and Teresa inherited a view of the soul as an indivisible whole conceptually divided into two parts or activities, the sensory and the spiritual, each with its own powers and faculties. Using images of fortified dwellings (Julian, citadel; Teresa, crystalline castle), each distinguishes between the spiritual

(higher or inner) and the sensual (outer or lower) soul. The lower or outer soul is turned toward the world, and is susceptible to human desires, attachments, and sins. This sensual soul is illustrative of what is achievable through human efforts and the ordinary help of grace, and is thus considered to be “active.” The spiritual soul remains pure and holy, turned toward communion with God, and functions through the operation of supernatural grace. It is receptive, operating in non-dualistic, unitive states of consciousness, and deals with the “passive,” or mystical, elements of the spiritual life. For both Julian and Teresa, the soul in its center is always one with Christ despite its errors, temptations, and sins.

Prayer is the mode of communion and the vehicle of entrance into the castle of the soul. The journey toward this center—that is also the divine Center—involves the mending of the inherent divide within oneself between the world's oppression and the soul's freedom. As the primary mode of communion between God and the soul, a specific type of nondual, infused prayer—Teresa's prayer of quiet, union, betrothal, and marriage; the prayer of mothering and “one-ing” of Julian—is central. If prayer is the essential doorway to entrance into the depths of the soul, the experience of suffering and exaltation, or pain and bliss, is the contemplative method or process that guides the soul toward integration and eventual centering of one's life in God. In both Julian and Teresa, this spiritual process is the direct result of their contemplation on the suffering face of Jesus, which involves identification with God's longing and concern for humanity, and bearing of the two-fold wounds of Christ's passion—one human and the other divine.

### Questions for Chapter 6:

1. How do Julian and Teresa describe the soul? In what way does their view of the soul transform the Christian understanding of sin and depict a more beneficent and whole view of the person?
2. Why do Julian and Teresa hold prayer to be an essential mode of entrance into the spiritual life? What type of prayer do they advocate?
3. Describe Teresa's seven *moradas* or dwelling places. How does this movement between the outer and inner soul restore the wholeness of a person's life in God?
4. How do Julian and Teresa describe the method of suffering and bliss, and its theological meaning in moving the soul toward healing and divine union?
5. What does the hopeful and generous way Julian and Teresa depict the soul's reunion with God mean to your own spirituality?

**Chapter 7** follows Teresa of Avila as she moves through the “dark night of the feminine” into a new understanding and celebration of her spiritual strength and authority. Teresa's life becomes an example of the “unsaying of woman”—the mystical process by which a woman deconstructs false societal and often anti-female views to gain dignity, power, and worth. Using John of the Cross's four-fold typology of the dark night of the soul as a conceptual guide, the chapter chronicles Teresa's struggle to reconcile Jesus' loving affirmation of her whole person with the harsh and punishing views directed against her. It is an unmistakable fact that Teresa is grappling in large measure with being a woman and a mystic from a society that brutally marginalized and subordinated women to the dictates of men. Teresa took her battles with the world into her interior, and wrestled

them out with God. Her confrontation with her own unworthiness, despair, and grief—magnified by the pronouncement by male spiritual directors of her lack of worth—becomes the medium of her liberation.

In her journey toward freedom and wholeness, Teresa experiences the root pain and “terrible anguish” of stripping away human and supernatural knowing. Having known God primarily through the authority of a male-dominated church, Teresa recognizes that even Church-sanctioned spiritual directors and prayers mediated by her male confessors do not capture the fullness of her spiritual life or the pain of the purgative contemplation gripping her soul. She confides in her books and letters over and over again that a critical element of her and her sisters’ spiritual struggles *as women* is left out. In the night of the feminine, Teresa’s soul experiences the spiritual violence directed against, and internalized by, women, and God’s suffering of her violation as a woman. This intensification of suffering precludes a break through into a new life of integration and affirmation, in which Teresa recognizes and claims her inner authority, discovering a feminine mystical path.

### **Questions for Chapter 7:**

1. What does St. John of the Cross mean by the “dark night” (*noche oscura*) and how does it function in the spiritual life?
2. In what way is the category “dark night of the feminine” similar to and different from John’s dark night?
3. What is meant by the “unsaying of woman” and the mystical process that deconstructs women’s false societal and religious identity?
4. How does Teresa’s specific embodiment as a woman influence her journey and what are the unique stages of her feminine dark night?
5. Do you find the category of the dark night of the feminine helpful in understanding your own or another’s spiritual process of healing and growth?

**Chapter 8** studies how contemplation empowers women’s resistance, resiliency, and dignity of spirit. From Julian and Teresa we learn that even the deepest soul wounds are not outside of God’s activity. As women risk the journey inward to the core of their beings, to confront their demons of worthlessness and self-loathing, the Feminine Divine initiates a transformation that is interior to their own depth. The pain that women carry—that they will never be free of this inner fracture—is overturned by the example of the women mystics who were determined to break down the stereotypes that conscripted them to marginalized roles, and to thus uncover their original, true self. As an act of resistance against centuries of anti-female spirituality, this is their most enduring contribution—to take the heroic risk that life lived on the edge is the best life, for it disturbs the status quo and claims a place for women becoming divine.

As women mystics in societies acutely suspicious of females and contemplation, Julian and Teresa confronted their subordination and disempowerment as women. This confrontation becomes one of their most enduring contributions, in which they reveal the soul wounds that generate moral weakness and failure, and the contemplative processes that move them from fragmentation to wholeness, dignity and empowerment. If the goal of the mystical life is becoming divine, something that Julian and Teresa both longed and prayed for with fervor and intention, then whatever impedes that realization is

against ethics. To love as God loves requires a healing of the wounds that fracture self-love and divide a person against oneself. In becoming divine, they must suffer the reign of self-violence, of an internalized social self-hate. Julian and Teresa cannot share in the fullness of the divine life, without accepting their self worth and equality in the eyes of God.

### Questions for Chapter 8:

1. Why was contemplative prayer such a threat to the institutional church in sixteenth century Spain, and what did the Inquisitional authorities do to impede its practice among women and the laity?
2. How did contemplative or mental prayer become an act of subversion against the “men of letters” and an act of affirmation toward women?
3. Julian and Teresa did not read Latin and were technically prohibited from teaching. What important function did their transcendent visions and mystical languages serve in establishing their spiritual authority?
4. Why is mental or passive prayer suspect and how does Teresa employ it to democratize contemplation, and to teach her “way of perfection” to women, *conversos*, and others marginalized by the dominant ecclesial structure?
5. What can you learn from Teresa and Julian for your own spiritual life about the power of contemplation to transform social injustices and to build a society based on spiritual dignity rather than material gain?

**Chapter 9** focuses on reading the mystical as a serious source of theological reflection on women's bodies without sentimentalizing or essentializing them. Most women, even those who have made a conscious choice to pursue an awakened life, do not imagine themselves as spiritually integrated with their bodies. The deeply ingrained division between spirit and flesh is so profoundly identified with females that it has maintained a pervasive influence on women's lives, despite the work of spiritual feminisms, goddess traditions, and other philosophies that affirm the sacrality of the female body. Bringing the intuitively mystical into conscious awareness necessitates a new reading of the body as the site of an embodied mysticism. This sacral reading of the female body begins from a different premise than the one promoted in classical Christian thought, in which women's bodies were effectively desacralized, treated as biologically inferior, morally corrupt, and wantonly carnal.

To script the text of women's wholeness, is to read women's full embodiment as a sign of the mystical. Women's bodies function not simply at the biological or material level, but as the site in which and through which women experience the presence of truth and awe. The body is always seeking to communicate its divine origins through the multiple textuality that *is* women's full presence. If we consider the following metaphor—woman's body is the body of God—we can say divinity is already imbedded in the bodies of women, engendering healing and igniting holiness from within. God loves women's bodies; anoints them as good and holy; preserves their dignity and purity; feels their violation and wounding; and draws them again and again to healing and wholeness.



**Questions for Chapter 9:**

1. What does it mean to read women's body as a mystical text?
2. How have cultural representations of women's bodies contributed to the split between spirit and matter, and to the desacralizing of women's contributions to the world?
3. In what different ways do spiritual feminists and goddess traditions affirm the sacrality of the female body?
4. How does the notion, "women's body is the body of God," affect your view of your own body and your own spirituality?
5. The end of the chapter raises two themes critical to the formation of the women mystics: solitude and sexuality. How do you read this section on "embodied contemplation" and how does solitude and sexuality become integrated in your own life?

**Chapter 10** looks at violence against women in the global arena, asking that we measure our own success or failure—even our own salvation—against the commitment to divine love and to the alleviation of the suffering of others. In countries around the world, the deplorable treatment of women tells us that God's presence and revelation in females continues to be tortured, humiliated, neglected, ravaged, and starved. Further, the majority of these travesties are carried out by males on populations of females with wanton disregard for the sanctity of their lives, and often with an intentional purpose to desecrate women's holiness. Feminist scholars contend that the atrocities committed against women are profoundly connected to the destruction of animals and earth, treatment of the most fragile and vulnerable of the world's people, and the militarization of the planet.

Women's human rights are an essential component of alleviating global violence, in particular the rights of women's souls—what is called in the text "spiritual rights"—to be free from the debilitating effects of spiritual abuse. This addition of a specific category of spiritual rights provides a way of thinking about human dignity from a slightly different perspective. Recognizing within other people the presence of the divine through which a person attains full humanity, spiritual rights place the expressly spiritual as a recognized right interdependent with and interrelated to civil and political rights, and economic and social rights. The inclusion of spiritual rights into the vocabulary of rights, reminds us not to forget that physical violence can harm not only the body but also the human spirit.

**Questions for Chapter 10:**

1. Why do scholars link violence against women to the destruction of animals and earth, and why do they consider the alleviation of atrocities committed against women to be a sacred promise?
2. What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and how does it help us think differently about the dignity and rights of all persons?
3. What international covenants have been passed protecting the rights of women as human rights?

4. How would you describe the distinctive characteristics of the category of “spiritual rights” and why are they important to the global community?
5. In what ways does intimate violence against women depersonalize women’s bodies and objectify their souls, and what are the implications of violence against women in your own spiritual life or in ministering to others?

**Chapter 11** returns to issues raised in the beginning of the book on the role of contemplation in reclaiming women’s divinity, and in remembering the sacredness of the whole world. The authority of this contemplative ethic arises out of a mystical connection to the family of creation. This means that the depth of our being is in solidarity with the depth of all beings. The divine spark in the center of our soul is sustained by and has a stake in the flourishing of all other souls and life forms. It also recognizes that our spiritual life is profoundly affected by and dependent upon the spiritual integrity of every other life. We are never free from the suffering and the happiness of the world. This *capacity* for mystical sensitivity is a fact intrinsic to what it means to be human: we are made in the divine image; we are interdependent with all beings; we are bonded together in love.

A mystical ethics is, in essence, a mothering one; it appropriates the world as a mother’s body enfolds and nurtures life within her womb. Through bearing the intimacy, love, and holiness of creation in our bodies and souls, we become participants in the divine praise that St. Francis immortalized in his wondrous hymn to brother sun and sister moon. A world ethic of spiritual rights provides a way of imagining a divine planet in which we take with utmost seriousness our participation in and responsibility for the sacredness of life. Spiritual rights break down the division between spirit and matter that has struck at the very core of human dignity and the peaceful cooperation between peoples, religions, and nations. It purposely uses a spiritual language rooted in what is most personal as an antidote to the rational words that often make us ashamed of the depth of our devotion and trivialize our passion for each other and our planet.

**Questions for Chapter 11:**

1. Why is contemplation described as an antidote to cultural materialism and dominant cultural norms?
2. How is a contemplative ethic defined and why is it explicitly linked to the mind set and spiritual awareness of the mystic?
3. What does it mean “to bear” the conditions of the world? Why are the words “intimacy,” “love,” and “holiness” important to the development of a contemplative ethic?
4. What constitutes the seven dimensions of a “world ethic of spiritual rights?”
5. How does this commitment to the vision of a divine planet impact on your life choices and on your spiritual health and dignity?