

personal identity constitute a problem for Christian moral theology, though they make sense as responses to the demands of life in a culturally hybrid urban society. Similarly, the emphasis on magical manipulation of the world in Afro-Brazilian religions is hard to reconcile with Christian doctrine. The *progressista* position on Candomblé, rejecting syncretism but bringing the two religions together in a single embrace of faith, can be maintained only by passing over these divergences. Holy water and *dendé* oil, to use Balbino's metaphor, can be shaken together but they will not stay mixed. The present tendency in Brazil, a democratic tendency, encouraged by people of goodwill on both sides, to elevate Candomblé to a place alongside Catholicism, is quite proper. But speaking of the two religions as though they were comparable in every respect may obscure the very differences that enable them to co-exist.

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**THE BEATAE:  
FEMININE RESPONSES TO CHRISTIANITY  
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CASTILE**

THE first half of the sixteenth century and the kingdom of Castile compose a spatio-temporal arena in which a struggle unfolded between Christian tradition and modernization. The leading protagonists were women seeking a solution to what is, essentially, an age-old dilemma. Let us explore the culturally specific mode of discourse and action of these deeply religious women who proposed a new, feminine approach to Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Such women were known as *beatae*, a term which, although used earlier in different contexts, began in the closing decades of the fifteenth century to be applied to women who, without being nuns, dedicated themselves to lives of marked religious observance and reflection. The word *beata*—'blessed one'—seems already at that time to have had ironic overtones: it conveyed the idea of an exaggerated, affected display of religiosity, and this slightly pejorative meaning is the one that prevails today.

*Beatae*, in the sense of contemplative, fervent and devout women, often visionaries and miracle-workers, already abounded in Castile during the final two decades of the fifteenth century; but, to be fully appreciated, their emergence must be seen against the backcloth of their curious historical period.

1. Few scholars are familiar with this feminine movement, at its height in sixteenth-century Castile, and certainly it has not to my knowledge been studied from an anthropological perspective. Its significance has not, in fact, been noticed, let alone remarked upon before. The decline of this movement had set in by the seventeenth century, and it is scarcely remembered today. The information in this essay is taken mostly from A. Hueriga, *Historia de los alumbrados 1570-1630*, Madrid 1978, and M. Andrés Martín, *Los Recogidos: Nueva visión de la mística española 1500-1700*, Madrid 1975 (Fund univ. española, Monographs nos. 31 and 13 respectively), both of which, of course, consider the question mainly from a theological point of view.

The end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth saw a complex movement of spiritual renovation. This was inspired by the Franciscans with the support of Cardinal Cisneros, himself a Franciscan and for a time regent of Spain. The point of transition from one century to another is always a dramatic moment, worthy of anthropological attention, because of its millennial overtones, the feelings of transience and the reflections on past and future that it provokes. But the fact that lends special *gravitas* or an authentic anthropological meaning to this particular turn of the century is the sudden emergence of women in the centre of the effervescent Spanish stage. Noble, plebeian, holy, sensual, saintly, pious, wanton, witchlike, enlightened, possessed, prophetic, ascetic, visionaries, mystics and miracle-workers, they burst onto the historic scene. Independent, spiritual *comuneras* (echoing their contemporary *comuneros*' fight to preserve ancient civic liberties), they are bold enough not only to invade masculine precincts and public spaces but to storm and take over intellectual and sacred strongholds. St Teresa of Avila, the writer María de Zayas, the professor Beatriz Galindo and María Jesús de Agreda, adviser to Philip IV; these are far from being isolated cases.

As the fifteenth century gave way to the sixteenth (and in keeping with the pathos of such a moment) there was unrest followed by an existential crisis among a group of Castilian women rebelling against their social niche. Isabel de la Cruz, a native of Guadalajara, was an embroideress and a member of the third order of the Franciscans; as such she was immersed in an atmosphere of Franciscan fervour, but she soon began to think for herself and evolve an original, coherent and rational set of theological ideas. As the sixteenth century opened she was already preaching the joy of God's love and the need to read the Bible, both sources of a personal inspiration which may not necessarily coincide with the official interpretation of the Scriptures. A genuine love of God, she told her listeners, generates a freedom which will never lead one astray; on the contrary, it is priests and friars who are 'bound' by the external and empty liturgical ceremony, slaves to its rules and outdated ideas about the Christian life. It is surprising that the thought and criticism of a young woman from Guadalajara should be several years in advance of that of Luther. It is also curious that a simple embroideress should become a lay preacher and teacher in a Spain well furnished with tens of thousands of clergymen, monks, friars and theologians. Furthermore, she held meetings in the homes of both poor and aristocratic people alike in the town, where she poured forth her ideas of self-abandonment to the love of God. Her gatherings were attended by men as well as women and by religious as well as lay people. Her beliefs swiftly penetrated the Franciscan monasteries, the conventicles of Pastrana, the city of Guadalajara and the castle of Escalona.

A second cameo is that of María de Cazalla, a devout admirer of Isabel. A middle-class wife and mother, and sister of the Franciscan bishop Cazalla, she preached on ways of inner recollectedness in Pastrana and among the aristocracy of Guadalajara. She was soon surrounded by a host of admirers and followers of both sexes, including a considerable number of clergy from Alcalá and friars who kissed her hands as if she were a priest. Her ideas even

infiltrated the renowned University of Alcalá de Henares itself. Another woman, Petronila de Lucena, sister of the humanist Castillo, preached the Hour of Christian Perfection both to the poor and to the Dukes of Infantado. The enlightened Francisca Hernández from Salamanca maintained constant contact with the third order of Franciscans and, more significantly, was in touch with Cardinal Cisneros. Among the circle of her followers, admirers and disciples from Valladolid were to be found theologians, clergymen, university men, Franciscans and even a bishop.

The *beata* María de Santo Domingo from Piedrahita, the 'companion and bride' of Christ, belonged to the third order of the Dominicans. But strangely enough her visionary ecstasies attracted more interest from the Franciscans; the Dominicans found themselves divided into two fiercely opposed parties, those who defended her and those who derided her, so that they felt obliged to appeal to the Pope himself. María wrote letters to her protector Cisneros and foretold the future to King Ferdinand. Rated even wiser than the leading theologians of the day, she bestowed her approval on the mysterious, wandering Friar Melchor, and in company with Francisca Hernández confirmed his prophetic character. Friar Melchor also sought the blessing of the ecstatic mother Marta, a Benedictine nun and Prioress of San Clemente in Toledo. Mother Marta was listened to and favoured by Cardinal Cisneros, with whom she corresponded. Her reputation for saintliness was such that she attracted not only simple devout lay people, contemplative friars, priests and anxious bishops to her chamber, but even the king himself. The visionary and miracle-worker Juana de la Cruz was yet another *beata* who exchanged letters with the Cardinal.

All these women, in their different ways and with varying degrees of intensity, joined in the general Franciscan movement of spiritual regeneration. Anxious to instruct themselves in order to achieve a greater degree of inner recollectedness, a higher state of perfection, they read the epistles of St Paul and other pious works which by that time the printing-press was already placing in their hands. They heard mass daily and took Holy Communion with a frequency unusual in those days. They spent their time in prayer and meditation or discoursing upon the love of God. They formed small groups, or as they called them at that time, 'secret sects' and 'swallows' nests', with their own 'teachers both male and female'. It was their method rather than their purpose, their feminine condition rather than their deeds, which seem to have puzzled their contemporaries. They did not marry; sometimes they refused obedience to their parents (and those who were already wives denied conjugal rights to their husbands); they spent all day in church or at their meetings.

As time went by their numbers increased and their organization grew. They withdrew to hermitages for spiritual retreat, they tended to confess always with the same priests in secret places and behind closed doors. The *beatae* of Seville formed societies and conventicles and debated among themselves. 'They go about in the habit of *beatae*' and dwell 'in houses on their own'. In Baeza they wore white head-dresses, brown tunics and black mantles; when they went out in the street they were ill-shod; they wore St Francis's girdle round their waists;

but many of them, in preaching among the humble, the clergy, university and laymen, came to alter their path from the original one of simple participation in the general Franciscan movement. They propagated religious ideas characterized by a more personal and direct communication with God, ideas which were at the same time congruent with (and an expression of) the prevailing cultural values of the period, which exalted the individual. (It is worth, once more, noting the chronology: in advocating such a reform of the Church at that point of Spanish history, some of these women anticipated Luther.)

Were there many of these *beatae*? Available information is scarce but enough to suggest their large numbers. Many of them, discreet and pious, led a retired, secluded life which did not attract literary notice, others, more notorious and extreme in their outward religious manifestations, drew the attention of inquisitors; all of them were representatives of the spiritual explosion in baroque Spain. There were *beatae* and houses of *beatae* in Seville, Granada, Jaen, Jodar and Ubeda. Baeza, with a total population of just over twenty thousand people, sheltered nearly two thousand *beatae*, about thirty per cent of the women of an age to take up this way of life. To the eyes of the visitor, the whole town would have appeared to be a nunnery. Toledo numbered at least eight houses for *beatae*, and Madrid also had several. Celebrated *beatae* roamed the streets of Guadalajara, Cuenca and Almagro; but possibly the best-known centres for these handmaidens of God were, among others, those at Badajoz, Zafra, Talavera, Frexenal, Fuente del Maestre, Llerena and Fuente de Cantos. We have definite information about the existence of five such women in Plasencia, eleven in Avila and a dozen in Trujillo. There were also houses for *beatae* in smaller communities such as El Toboso, Camarena, Ucles, La Solana, Villamayor de Santiago, Grinon, Villaescusa de Haro, Daimiel, and Villanueva de los Infantes. Furthermore, some set out to the newly discovered lands of America on evangelizing missions. Indeed, the number increased so rapidly in a few years that the Supreme Council of the Inquisition hastily sent out an urgent circular to all the provincial tribunals, appealing for suggestions as to how they should deal with the problems which would inevitably arise from the proliferation of the *beatae*. Many people saw them as nuns who chose to live in the world dedicated to prayer and contemplation (foreshadowing what is happening today); they gained esteem in being held to be holy, which leads one to suspect that their social origins were in general humble.

In effect, the vast majority—and I have perused the biographies of about a hundred *beatae*, although in some cases the facts are incomplete—were young women between twenty and thirty years old, from the country. They were daughters or wives of peasants and frequently single. Widows over thirty years of age and mentally unstable women formed a notable contingent. Slaves, half-breeds, servants and the occasional vagabond comprised a third group, although I have also come across the daughter of a *hidalgo* or merchant, a grocer and a clothier, which enables one to understand why, in one case, a very poor woman was not accepted in a circle of *beatae*. Many of the *beatae*, especially at the beginning of the century, belonged to one of the tertiary

orders of either the Franciscans or the Dominicans. They were all in close contact with friars or parish priests and played an active part in the local flock.

There is no doubt at all that this feminine movement, which gradually acquired baroque characteristics with the passing of time, was sending forth a human message which calls for anthropological interpretation. The *beatae* became signs, they were voices of minds in ferment, another section of the people which, like others of the period, communicated, with their own special slant, tone and style, particular statements, a hidden meaning. Socially insignificant but ardent women wanted to clamber aboard the contemporary Hispanic bandwagon and impersonate current heroic values.<sup>2</sup> From the very outset, the more sincere and spiritual among them perceived that the main obstacle to their fulfilling their vocation as preachers was their feminine condition. Isabel de la Cruz insisted to her disciple Alcaraz: 'Look, I am a woman and I cannot put into practice the desires God has instilled into me.' Yet like knights of old they kept vigil over their spiritual armour, in prayer, and struggled to overcome their difficulties. They listened to sermons and orations, they sat at the feet of teachers and missionaries, they read spiritual books. Isabel de la Cruz not only used to explain her ideas about salvation to her followers, besides urging them to 'read the Bible', but she also 'gave them books to read'. There was a *beata* in Baeza who owned 'more than fifty books', and many *beatae* showed a veritable 'passion for reading' and followed closely the academic and spiritual life of the university in Baeza presided over by the figure of St Juan de Avila. They were instructed by excellent teachers and confessors such as the missionary preachers led by St Juan de Avila, the Jesuits and the reformed Carmelites in their initial fervour. They were also guided by outstanding saints such as St Juan de Avila himself, St Juan Ribera, St Juan de la Cruz and St Francisco de Borja. They watched with interest the comings and goings of the 'nun from Avila', St Teresa, whose works they read in their mystical meetings. They were protected by bishops; the village girl Magdalena de la Cruz, a Clarissa nun who behaved as a *beata*, turned her convent in Cordoba into a famous place of pilgrimage. The Inquisitor-General and Archbishop of Seville went to visit her and she received messages from the empress. The aura of religiosity opened doors barred to the *beatae* as mere women; the greater their holiness, the greater their eminence.

Another external form of this tendency to assert and dignify themselves as women was the pretension of the *beata* to a kind of 'priestess' status. Some were entitled 'spiritual directors' and had spiritual children, very often friars, whom they instructed, advised on matters spiritual as well as temporal and for whom they even found confessors; laymen and clergy 'owed obedience' to those *beatae* whom they held as 'directors of the spirit and doctrine', and there were priests who sought their permission to celebrate mass. This familiarity with the hierarchy emboldened some *beatae* who, faithful to the premises they started

2. This is Spain's Golden Age (*Edad de Oro*), a time of territorial discovery and expansion throughout the world matched at home by intellectual ferment and achievement. It is the epoch of the conquistadors, of the *tercios* (Spanish regiments), of great saints, mystics, writers and poets.

out from, wished to follow these through to their logical conclusion—it is the humble and not the learned who really penetrate the mysteries of religion; those with inner recollectedness are guided directly by God and therefore they have no need either to submit themselves to religious authority or to observe the normal and banal ecclesiastical precepts, 'but rather give themselves up to contemplation'. Thus *coitus interruptus* or, as they called it in those days, somewhat meaningfully, 'enjoying oneself in a new way' was allowed to the *beatae*, married, widowed or single. If a father, husband or superior 'gave orders which disturbed the hours of mental prayer and contemplation', they were not obliged to obey. More directly, the *beata* in communion with God had no need to tolerate secular or ecclesiastical obedience, nor to recognize 'either King or Pope', as the extremists vociferated. From a recognition of the structural inferiority of women, they came to develop and perfect strategies of inversion and climbed into the pulpits of the parish churches to defend their cause before thousands of the curious faithful. 'Come back here little Master!' shrieked the *beata* Mari Sanchez from the pulpit to Friar Alonso de la Fuente, who had just descended thence after delivering a blistering attack on the *beatae*. The number, the idea, the action, the context and the ritual had converted them into a group, into a category, into 'a status of *beata*...the most perfect' of all.

A new status not only has to be created, it has to be made valid. It is intriguing to see how the *beatae* chose two principal means to this end, each a synecdoche of the other: religiosity and their own body, the spirituality of the material and the material of spirituality. The choice of the first is fairly obvious, considering the ideology of the period. The church was one of the few public places open to a woman; religiosity was a practice and mental state within which women could achieve the most sublime level of all—sanctity. Their bodies provided the setting in which they exhibited the outward signs of their inner holiness. The Eucharist as their only food; the stigmata of the sacred wounds on their hands, the hairs of their heads venerated as relics, trances, ecstasies, raptures, visions, bodily levitation, transports of delight, fainting fits, the noises they hear, the groans they utter and the voices they listen to, the prophecies and declarations that issue from their mouths and so forth are all remarkable signs revealing the effects of the Holy Spirit at work in their chosen, ennobled and sanctified bodies. The woman in her new status, the 'most perfect' of all, the body of the *beata* in its members and as a whole, acquires the supreme dignity, sanctity and—at the same time and at first sight vicariously—social pre-eminence, superiority, power. Here we have once more yet another of the diverse forms in which is clothed the baroque obsession with honour, with self-assertion, the determination to Be and to be More in different cultural ways and contexts. The actors change but the themes remain the same, evoking images of permanence, elements of continuity.

The centres of *beatae*, the habit, the ritual shaving of the hair, the ecstatic behaviour and the *ad hoc* semantic creation of the word *beata* were accumulated efforts to create within a structural vacuum a worthy lay-religious status, specifically and exclusively feminine. It was a semi-religious answer to a very

definite human situation. In the Golden Age in Spain, there was a notorious difference between being born a boy and being born a girl. At a time of youthful fervour and ebullience, of the exaltation of heroic, individual values, of excellence and personal merit, a boy could pursue these through various channels. Paths to glory lay open through the university (as a cleric, doctor, scholar, theologian, lawyer), through the army (soldier, officer, explorer, conquistador), or as an adventurer (in the Mediterranean, Italy, Flanders and above all the New World), writer, merchant or administrator, all of which positions fitted into the prevailing scheme of moral excellence. The sphere of possibilities and action for a girl was far more limited: while single, she obeyed her parents; when married, she attended to the tasks involved in running her home and family. The convent and the church were the only outer spaces where her presence as an individual did not strike a false note. But at the time in question, just when change was constantly being enacted on the historic stage, a series of feminine actors dissatisfied with their inferior position made their appearance. Passive and marginal roles continued to be their lot in evident contradiction to the individualist philosophy of the age. Instead of being faced with a challenge by the ethos of the age they lived in, as the young men were, it was they themselves who flung down the gauntlet, overturning the values and hierarchy which had been assigned them. It was a case of those who had been left out rejecting their unfavourable exclusion, redefining themselves, seeking their mansion, and building up their identity to be other than what they were.

The gallery of characters I have portrayed form in effect something of an infra-category according to baroque tenets: females, spinsters, tertiaries, widows, many of rural origin but living in small towns. Alone, emigrants, ordinary people from villages, they were inclined, perhaps, from the structure of their position towards the appropriation of individuating values and the exaltation of the person. Kept on the fringes, they captured the milieu from outside. They enacted the background tensions in and with their lives and they converted themselves into visionaries of reality. Spiritual *comuneras*, non-integrated, independent and with no fixed place, they were protagonists at first of a feminine reform which supported and promoted all that is free, spontaneous and individual in opposition to everything institutional and authoritarian; borderland spirits, they idealized the people of God not as the traditional hierarchic *ecclesia* but rather as a fraternal *christianitas*; ecstatic, mystical, they prized emotions and feelings above order.

To their contemporaries the *beatae* inevitably appeared to be divided souls, always with a foot on the threshold, not really belonging anywhere. Conquistadors of divine territories, they open up new horizons, yet at the same time they shave their heads, dress, speak and behave in an eccentric, outlandish manner, and wander about unwashed and unkempt like *pícaras*<sup>3</sup>—or like some of the modern punks and hippies. They seek perfection outside the convent, but meet secretly with persons of the opposite sex in nocturnal

3. The picaresque and the *pícaro/pícarra* type also flourished at this period.

conventicles. Spinsters, *anti*-everything since they speak badly both of marriage and of nuns, *without* a vow of chastity, *without* a fixed and ordered rule, they make up their own rules *without* obeying any superior. To this complex syndrome of *without*, another and parallel one must be added which we can term *neither/nor*. They are *neither* nuns *nor* wives, *neither* enclosed *nor* married, *neither* mothers *nor* daughters; their situation is not that of being, but rather of standing between. The power of the oxymoron dramatizes the incongruence and contradiction of the *beatae*: female priests, holy witches, street contemplatives, ignorant preachers, girls of doubtful reputation showing signs of great sanctity.

What drama were these women enacting? A closer look reveals an extraordinary inversion of roles, functions, sexes and hierarchies; an unprecedented conquest of positions, fields, knowledge, words and spaces; a displacement of power, of authority, of things masculine; the devaluation of the latter and the corresponding deification of the feminine element which scales the heights in assuming not only closeness to the divine but a mystical union with God. Woman comprehends, knows and speaks, Man is ignorant and listens; the embroideress shows how to interpret, clergy and university men learn; a rough village woman counsels a submissive great cardinal; prelates and monarchs humble themselves before an illiterate nun. Woman attracts, fascinates and conquers; she asserts herself and grows in stature and importance in the only cultural ambit in which she is able to do so. She is the feminine equivalent of Don Juan in a spiritual sense. This is the other face of the diorama, the reverse side, somewhat obscure and unknown of that other Spain in which an antithetic archetype, that of Don Juan, holds sway. The two facets need and complement each other.

In their dream of being lay-religious, the sixteenth-century *beatae* were ahead of their times. Today their initial vision and roles have been accepted, although not in all their aspects, as contemporary personages (mods, rockers, punks, etc.), who are far more traditional in their anti-structural *communitas* than they realize, prove. And so far, we anthropologists have made no interpretation more profound than that made by the little Master Friar Alonso de la Fuente, who saw so clearly the astructural position of the *beatae* and described it with enviable precision and conciseness:

When preaching one day in la Fuente del Maestre on the text: 'In my Father's House there are many mansions', I found a place in Heaven for all states of mankind but when I came...[to the *beatae*] I excluded them from Heaven as people without a status. There are many reasons to prove this since...they are virgins without chastity, married without conjugal duties, nuns without a rule and continent without cleanliness. Which conditions are absent from every state. So for this reason I excluded them from Heaven.

I have described the *beata* as a mystic, a visionary, a *comunera*, a conquistador and a *picara*. There is a little bit of her in all these nouns; she wants to create an individual baroque-renaissance type of self and yearns to excel, to stand out, to distinguish herself, to achieve the highest good—saintliness. The same *beata* forms a part of the contemporary cluster of semantic traits (conquistadors,

*picaras*, mystics, witches) which form a whole, an overall meaning; it is one of the variations which confirms the isotopy. An analogous model is that of the Japanese *fukiuose*, a term denoting a collection of various elements ruled by the selection of one unique same aspect. However, the *beata* has never attracted attention in the museum of baroque Spain, not even as a literary prototype. The assertion of the I-*beata* could not translate itself into an objective structure. Like the concept of honour, it needed, but never obtained, a social confirmation, a recognition by the Other; the dialectic of mutual ratification which began to operate during its early stages never crystallized.

I have made much use of prepositions (*without*, *anti*, *between*), of negative conjunctions (*neither/nor*) and of words (*borderland*, *fringes*, *threshold*) suitable as metaphors to describe a liminal status, the category of limbo or no man's land inhabited by the *beatae*. Without any doubt, we would understand the *beatae* better if we were to place them in context along with another contemporary marginal group, that of the newly converted Jews—kindred spirits, displaced persons who formed another infra-category; but this would require a further essay.