

## **Christian Embodied Mysticism**

The words 'mystic' and 'mysticism' are believed to have originated from the Greek, and to be closely related to the Greek *mystes*: "one who has been initiated into profoundly esoteric knowledge of divine things". (Summers 14) The Greek word for 'mystic' was used in close connexion with the Greek mysteries. Dionysius the Areopagite, a Greek writer from the sixth century, who wrote *Mystical Theology*, is responsible for the use of the word "mysticism" in a Christian context. In this treatise composed of five chapters, Dionysius described his teachings on the mystical ascent toward union with God as an attainment of "that divine Darkness which is radiant Light". (Summers 24-25) Dionysius' mystical theology influenced both the Greek East and the Latin West in their development of Christian mysticism. (Chidester 236)

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Greek theologians believed that, by "entering the radiance of divine light", human beings could experience God's presence directly, and ultimately reach a state of *theosis*. Symeon the New Theologian especially believed that God could be experienced directly through divine light, and he himself had had this experience. By the thirteenth century, the practice of *hesychasm*, which "transformed the practitioners...into light" just as Jesus had been in the Transfiguration on the Mount, had developed in the Greek Orthodox monasteries. (Chidester 243-244, 246) In the Orthodox Church, the hesychasts (those who practiced hesychasm) practiced "the power of prayer, including the physical discipline of the body" in anticipation of "the ultimate redemption in which the 'body is deified along with the soul'". (Chidester 247)

In the West, the theology of Christian mysticism, under the influence of Dionysius the Areopagite's theology, came to be regarded as having three main stages in the human soul's ascent to divine union with God: 'purification', 'illumination', and 'perfection'. (Chidester 241) The Eastern Church was not so systematic in distinguishing these stages. Drawing upon the biblical Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux emphasized "divine love" as the driving force in the spiritual ascent to union with God. Bernard of Clairvaux thought that "by loving, desiring, and adhering to God in this passionate embrace...the soul achieved the vision of God." (Chidester 240) In western medieval Christian mysticism, this ecstatic mystical union developed into "a spirituality of both body and soul" in which women obtained "a new intimacy with God". (Chidester 248)

There are three aspects of Christian mysticism: the intellectual, the spiritual, and the physical. In this essay, I am going to explore the physical aspect of Christian mysticism with attention to, specifically, the physical phenomena associated with it in the medieval Christian church.

In medieval Western Europe, there was a special emphasis on the physical body in relation to Christian mysticism. Thomas Aquinas' statement, in the thirteenth century, about the "hylomorphic composition of the human person" led to the necessity of bodily resurrection. (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 254) He believed that the soul shaped the body, somewhat in the same way that Aristotle said Nature determines the form of matter. Aquinas thought that although the human soul survives physical death, the "full person" ceases to exist until the resurrection, at which time "any matter which the soul informs... will be *its* body." Medieval mystics thought of the soul as having "its own sensuous body inextricable from the body proper and transformed by it" (Hale 3), and that the soul had "spiritual senses" just as real as the physical ones (Hale, 11), such as taste, sight, hearing, and touch. (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 74) In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when theologians began to discuss the doctrine of bodily resurrection, there was a proliferation of somatic miracles (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 69), and the concept of the Eucharist was changing from that of a meal in remembrance of Christ's Last Supper to an actual consumption of bread transubstantiated into Christ's "suffering and bleeding flesh". (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 252) The Host was even treated like a holy relic. In the middle ages, "dead and living bodies took on a new significance" and the "cult of relics... flourished". People venerated the pieces of, and the entire bodies of, deceased saints and martyrs. With this cult of relics, the "distinction between spirit and matter" was "abolished". (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 255) It is evident that the bodies of living holy people were also revered; people drank and bathed in water containing lice and dead skin from potential saints who had bathed in it previously; holy people spat into people's mouths, ate pus and lice off their bodies, and "kissed lepers' sores" in an attempt to cure the ill or to "convey grace". (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 70)

With the increasing emphasis on the body, and the idea that body and soul were intermingled and inseparable, or at least intimately associated with each other, it is to be expected that miraculous mystical phenomena were especially focused upon as evidence of holiness and of God's power and presence in the

world. “[T]he interior and spiritual mysticism finds expression in exterior and corporeal phenomena.” (Summers 54) Furthermore, these exterior phenomena were seen as visible “stamps” or “sealings of God” on holy mystics. (Summers 59)

According to Montague Summers, these “mysterious influences which operate in the soul of man” must be treated with utmost caution. One must be able to distinguish between phenomena originating from God and those which have “satanic and diabolical agencies” because they can appear very similar. (Summers 43-44, 54)

Many different things have been classified as physical phenomena of mysticism. Among the most well-known are stigmatization, levitation, and divine luminescence, and “incendium amoris”. Also, amongst postmortem phenomena, there are records of the “odour of sanctity” and the absence of rigor mortis, accompanied often by bodily incorruption. Some others include resistance of a holy person or a relic to fire or torture, bodily elongation during divine ecstasy, the ability of a holy person to fast for long periods - even years - or live only on the Eucharist, “supernatural lack of sleep”, bilocation, and severe molestation by demons. Other miraculous phenomena reported by the church have to do with the Eucharist - the Host - itself. All of these phenomena, as long as they were definitely divine in origin, were believed to be indicative of true holiness.

Stigmata, probably the most well-known of the physical phenomena, are the marks of the wounds Christ received in the crucifixion on the body of a holy person. Because of the emphasis, in medieval Europe, upon Christ’s “humanity [as] truly flesh and blood”, the Christian idea of imitating Christ became extremely literal. (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 255) The first case of stigmatization usually mentioned, and most well-known, is that of Saint Francis of Assisi. After he received a vision of a seraph, he received the five wounds of Christ’s crucifixion. According to Saint Bonaventure,

[t]he vision therefore, disappearing, did leave behinde, a wonderfull heate, in his harte: and a no lesse wonderfull impression of signes, in his flesh...his hands and feete seemed to be in the very middlest, peirced with nailes: the heades of them nailes appearing, in the inner parte of his handes, and the outer parte of his feete but the pointes of them, on the contrary sides...His righte side also, as being pearced through with a speare, was covered over with a redde skarre: which oftentimes, casting out holy blood: did besprinkle, his coate and breeches therewithall.

(Mullin 77)

The stigmata may include some or all of the five (the gash in Christ's side and the nail holes in His hands and feet) and sometimes even include the puncture wounds from the crown of thorns. The stigmata were not always actually physical marks; some of them were internal. "Saint Gertrude received the marks of the passion interiorly." Some saints are said to have received "rings of betrothal" from Christ, either internally or as an imprint in their flesh. (Mullin 76-78) Besides the aforementioned, people have been recorded as receiving stigmatic impressions on their flesh which reproduce "the weals of the scourging; the wound in the shoulder; on the wrists, the livid bruising of the cords; and on the mouth the hyssop mark of the sponge sopped with vinegar". (Summers 118) Stigmatic wounds often bled regularly, particularly on Fridays, which are associated with the day of Christ's crucifixion, and women sometimes even had menstrual flows along with the stigmatic bleeding as well.

Levitation is the raising of the human body, by divine power, either a few inches or many feet into the air, sometimes for an extended period of time, during an ecstatic trance. (Thurston 2) Sometimes the mystic would even be "wafted hither and thither". (Summers 61) Saint Francis is said to have been, many times, "rapt in God and uplifted from the ground sometimes for the space of three cubits, sometimes four, and sometimes even to the height of the beech tree; and sometimes he [was] raised so high in the air and surrounded with such radiance". (Thurston 5)

Many saints were said to exhibit divine illumination or radiance. According to Pope Benedict XIV, in order for this luminosity to be confirmed as true and divine in origin, it must satisfy certain criteria. The light must be visible in full daylight; it must be a steady light, continuous and clear; it must be witnessed by several people; and finally, the person must be known to be "of great virtue and very holy". The cells and hermitages of saints often "shone through the night". One story of Saint Francis tells how he and a companion were by the river Po when it suddenly became dark out. Saint Francis' companion was scared, and by God's power, light shone around them. Another instance is of Saint Cainnicus; the "five fingers of his right hand shone like candles, when he wanted to read at night." (Mullin 74)

As well, the dead bodies of saints and even separate relics are said to have emitted this divine light, whether "from 'without' as a sign of reverence" or to show their location in order that they might be

unearthed. The practice of stealing holy relics, or “sacred theft”, also known as translation of relics, was sometimes facilitated by a light that directed the seeker to where the relics could be found. (Snoek 323) Saints’ relics also shone to reveal their locations in cases of murder. (Snoek 324)

In the New Testament, there are references to light. According to Matthew, at the Transfiguration, Christ’s “face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.” (Matthew 17:2) Christ says, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) The divine illumination of the saints is seen as a physical sign of their Christian sanctity and their holiness.

“Incendium amoris” or “the Burning Fire of Love” is a very common mystical phenomenon. In the mystical experience of divine love for God, the usual physical effects of great emotion, such as “rise of bodily temperature” and “expressive flushing of the face” (Summers 70), are said to have been experienced in such an intense and excessive degree that their bodies are literally burning. Some mystics actually had to remove their clothing because they were so hot, even in the middle of winter. For example, Saint Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi is said to have been “unable to bear woollen garments, because of that fire of love which burned in her bosom, but perforce she cut through and loosened her habit”, and she was forced to drink of, and wet her body with, icy winter cold water from a well. Another example is of Saint Peter of Alcantara, who was compelled often to go outdoors and undo his habit in the winter. Some saints even appeared to have sparks coming out of their eyes, and Saint Philip of Neri is said to have been so overcome by “internal supernatural love” that his throat was “scorched and blistered”. (Summers 71) “[A] perceptible white smoke” apparently rose from the throat of the Venerable Orsola Benineasa (Summers 72), and when the Dominican nun, Suor Maria Villani, drank water, it was accompanied by “a hissing sound like that of water falling on a sheet of red-hot iron.” She was apparently compelled to drink up to about three and a half gallons of water a day. (Thurston 219) In all of these cases, the divine love, which Saint Bernard of Clairvaux believed was the motive in the mystical journey to God, became so intense that it manifested itself in the actual bodies, not just the souls, of the saints who experienced it, as an external sign of their holiness.

In an Old Testament story, King Nebuchadnezzar casts Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into a “fiery furnace” because they refuse to worship his “golden image”. These three men remain loyal to the Hebrew God, saying, “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace”. (Daniel 3:1-17) To his astonishment, although the terrible heat of the furnace killed the men who threw them into it, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unharmed; “the fire had not any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their mantles were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.” (Daniel 3:22-27). In the face of the supreme power displayed by the Hebrew God, the King is converted.

Likewise, in account of the lives of the saints, the Christian God is said to protect from physical harm those who are faithful to Him. An earliest example is that of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, who was martyred in either 155 or 156 A.D., was condemned to burn on the stake, but “the flames, forming into an arch, gently encircled the body of the martyr, inflicting no injury”. He was stabbed with a lance instead, and the blood that gushed forth extinguished the flames. (Thurston 171)

Relics were also exposed to fire in order to test their authenticity. (Snoek 329) Between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, this was done quite often. For example, the finger joint of Saint Celcus was apparently unharmed when placed on hot coals in 979 A.D. A cloth believed to have been that with which Jesus’ feet were washed at the Last Supper was thrown onto hot coal at Monte Cassino in 1012, and although it initially melted away, it regained its “original shape” when it cooled. There are many similar examples of this sort of thing recorded. (Snoek 330)

Many saints were said to have remained whole (at least spiritually and morally) and even physically unharmed despite torture and dismemberment. Although Saint Margaret was “bound on the rack, beaten with sharp instruments until her bones were laid bare, burned with torches, and plunged into water”, her body is said to be “unscathed”. A “miraculous rainfall” preserved the relics of Saint Adrian from burning. (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 79)

Two somewhat peculiar physical phenomena of mysticism are bilocation and bodily elongation. Bilocation refers to the ability of a person to appear physically in two places simultaneously. According to Montague Summers, the way in which this is brought about is that God, who is all-powerful and can

therefore do anything, “delocalize[s] the material substance” of a person so that he or she is capable of “multiple location”. He also mentions that the “spectral appearances” sometimes reported of people at the moments of their deaths must not be mistaken for divine bilocation. For example, in 1227 A.D., Saint Antony of Padua was preaching on Holy Thursday when he suddenly remembered he was supposed to be chanting a lesson elsewhere. Pulling his hood over his head, he stopped his sermon, but remained physically present in the church of St. Pierre du Queriox in Limoges. Simultaneously, Saint Antony appeared in the other location and gave the lesson, after which he was seen, back in Limoges, to remove the hood and continue preaching. (Summers 61) Perhaps the most bizarre kind of physical phenomena, reported only in some isolated cases, is that of bodily elongation. Either the holy person, in a state of divine rapture, would grow in stature, or else a particular limb would be observed to elongate. Suor Margherita Cortonesi, a nun, recorded that Sister Veronica Laparelli, who died at eighty-three in the year 1620, not only levitated during her divine trances, but that her neck actually lengthened: “she was observed to stretch out until the length of her throat seemed to be out of all proportion...to make sure, we...measured her height, and afterwards when she had come to herself we measured her again”. (Thurston 198)

A phenomenon commonly reported in the Middle Ages, especially in the lives of women saints and mystics, is the abstinence from food for long periods of time. The somatic miracles recorded after about the year 1200, according to Caroline Bynum, were mostly associated with women’s bodies, involving miraculous “breaches or exudings and extraordinary closures”, and “[t]he holy bodies so central in late medieval piety” are essentially “liminal...between life and death”. In the instances of “holy anorexia” recorded, women who abstained from food, even for years at a time, apparently neither excreted or menstruated, and sometimes were believed to neither sweat nor produce dandruff. They “display[ed] death in life”. (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 71) Often these holy people survived on the Eucharist alone. (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 93) Reverend Thomas Pater makes a connexion between miraculous fasting and Christ’s forty day fast in the desert, which is often associated with Moses’ and Elias’ fasts. (Pater 91) Among the women who are said to have fasted miraculously is Blessed Angela of Foligno, who did not eat for twelve years, and Saint Catharine of Siena fasted for eight. (Summers 63)

Not only did Saint Catharine of Siena experience a miraculous fast for eight years. She also is said to have slept less than half an hour every two days without adverse effects from her lack of sleep. This “supernatural lack of sleep” was also supposed to have been experienced by the Franciscan Saint Colette, who remained awake for a year, and by Agatha of the Cross, who did not sleep during the “last eight years of her life”. In order for this miraculous abstinence from sleep to be judged authentic and holy, the mystic had to be observed to “remain well and energetic, with no injury to health nor exhaustion, no morbid hypochondriasis.” (Summers 63)

Montague Summers also included “demoniac molestations” among the physical phenomena of Christian mysticism. Both malicious attempts to destroy Christian faith, and violent physical attack, by demons, upon mystics and saints, was seen as a sign of their sanctity; just as Christ himself “was tempted by the devil”, demons and Satan himself “assault and molest all those who...are trying to attain to the supernatural light. Mystics...will be the especial objects of his enmity”. (Summers 69)

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the heightened importance of the flesh was evident in the changing concept of the Eucharist, and the redemptive moment in Christianity was shifted from Christ’s Incarnation and Resurrection to the Crucifixion. (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 251-252) The theologians of medieval Europe believed that there was a “physical, carnal, or fleshly” presence in the Eucharist, which was transubstantiated into the actual blood and flesh of Christ. (Chidester 210) With this emphasis on the Eucharist as a bleeding sacrifice of suffering flesh (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 252), various miracles associated with the bread and wine came to be reported.

A number of mystics were supposed to have the gift of being able to discern whether or not a Host was consecrated or not by a supernatural sense of smell or sight, such as Saint Catharine of Siena, or by hearing, such as Jerome Gratian of the Mother of God, a Spanish mystic. Some mystics were reputed to have attracted the Sacrament to themselves by what theologians called “a double magnetism”. Sometimes the Host would actually “detach itself from the ciborium” and leap into their mouths, even from quite extended distances. One particularly notable instance occurred in the life of Saint Maria Francesca of the Five Wounds. The chalice containing the blood of Christ actually vanished from the altar “and was swiftly returned”. It had supposedly been “put to the lips” of this holy woman. (Summers 60) Sometimes when

priests and recipients of communion consumed the flesh and blood of Christ, they became “literally pregnant with Christ”, swelling up. (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 257)

The Host was treated as a sacred relic; just as relics were the bodies of holy people, the Eucharist was seen as, literally, the body and blood of Christ. The consecrated Host was believed to be fire-proof, just as the remains of various saints were. Saint Dominic, for example, threw a Host into an oven, where it remained for three days unharmed by the flames. (Snoek 329) The consecrated Host sometimes bled, either as proof of the real presence of Christ or as a “punishment for lack of belief, doubt and an unworthy attitude” in the communicant. (Snoek 315) Miracles involving “light-emitting” consecrated Hosts revealing their locations after “incidents of desecration or theft” were also recorded. (Snoek 323) The Host was also believed to be incorruptible, just as the relics of holy people sometimes were. Consecrated Hosts were believed capable of being kept longer before going bad since God, “the *conservator* of all”, was present in them. (Snoek 322)

Finally, the incorruptible nature of the bodies certain saints and martyrs, and even of separate pieces of their bodies, was seen as a sign of true holiness. The incorruption of the physical body signified that it had been “protected from putrefaction...in expectation of the resurrection of the dead” and that the earthly body of the holy person already, in this world, was partaking of the heavenly, resurrected body that all Christians could expect to receive at the end of time. (Snoek 319) Along with the preservation of holy flesh from corruption, the absence of rigidity in the cadaver was noted, even after hundreds of years. Often, saints’ bodies exuded sweet and fragrant oils with healing powers, and fresh blood, centuries after their deaths. In the eighth century, Saint John Damascene wrote, about the mystical phenomena of incorruption, that “Christ gives us the relics of saints as health-giving springs through which flow blessings and healing” and that “if at God’s word water gushed from hard rock in the wilderness - yes, and from an ass’s jawbone when Samson was thirsty - why should it seem incredible that healing medicine should distill from the relics of saints?” (Cruz 37)

The earliest documented case of the phenomenon of miraculous incorruption was that of Saint Cecilia. Her body was exhumed seven hundred and seventy-seven years after her death in around 177 A.D., on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1599. She was found to be lying in the position in which she died, a cut upon her neck still

visible after all those years, and “a mysterious and delightful flower-like odor...proceeded from the coffin”.

(Cruz 44) A statue was made of her incorruptible body in the same year by Stefano Maderno. (Cruz 46)

One example from the Eastern Orthodox tradition is that of Saint Innokenty of Irkutsk. He died on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1731, and thirty-three years later, when repairs were being made to the “Church of the Tikhvin Icon of the Mother of God in the Irkutsk Monastery of the Ascencion”, where he had been buried, he was found to be miraculously preserved from corruption. “[H]is body and his robes in the coffin were invented incorrupt despite the dampness of the soil.” Furthermore, pilgrims from throughout the world “received the grace of comfort and in many cases physical and spiritual healing from the saint’s relics.” (Yakovlev and Sirin 30)

According to Montague Summers, the incorruption of the corpse was seen as “sufficient testimony for official canonization” in the Russian Orthodox Church, but in the Catholic Church, the absence of decay did not have any bearing upon whether or not a person was made a saint. (Summers 75-76) This is because although many mystics have been discovered incorruptible, there were many who decomposed in the normal way, and so it is regarded as “accidental, although certainly a divine prodigy.” (Summers 77)

In the medieval church, there were many debates concerning “technical questions” about the nature of the resurrected body. (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 69) In common with the somatic miracles flourishing at the time, the discussions about bodily resurrection shared the “basic assumptions” that “body is integral to person”, “material continuity is crucial”, and the main problem is decomposition and fragmentation of the human body. The resurrection of the flesh was seen as the “central victory” over this. (Bynum, *Bodily Miracles* 77)

Some of the artwork in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries depicted this notion of the fleshly resurrection of the human body and the reassembling of scattered body parts. These images are extremely similar to the vision of the valley of the dry bones recorded in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is brought to a valley “full of bones”, of which “there were very many”, and they were “very dry”. God tells Ezekiel to “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin”. When Ezekiel did as he was told, “there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I

looked, there were sinews on them, and skin had covered them”. (Ezekiel 37:1-10) In Signorelli’s *The Last Judgment* (1499-1504), the bodies of the dead are seen to be climbing out of the earth, some only skeletons and some already en fleshed. In the *Last Judgment* by Jean Bellegambe, who died in 1553, angels are seen collecting the bones of the dead and reassembling the bodies on the resurrection day. (These pieces of artwork are shown on pages 292 and 293 of Caroline Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption*). In other portrayals of the resurrection day, animals are shown regurgitating body parts as the last trumpet is sounded, and corpses emerging from their graves are seen receiving these fragments. Some such pieces include a picture from an ancient manuscript made between 1176 and 1196 A.D. (Herald of Hohenbourg, *Hortus deliciarum*), *Last Judgment*, an image from the late eleventh century which resides in the Vatican, and a vast mosaic in the Cathedral at Torcello. (These images are shown on pages 282, 283, and 286-287 of Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption*).

People have many different opinions concerning these bodily miracles which were so common in medieval Europe. To Christians, belief that God could cause such things is simply a matter of faith. However, some people also try to explain the cause of these phenomena as psychological or scientific in nature. George Godwin, who claims that “[t]he element of the morbid is characteristic of the whole literature of sanctity” (Godwin 14) and that “the Calendar of the Catholic Church is mainly a gallery of neurotics and psychopaths, the legend of whose holiness dies, as Christianity itself is dying, by inches”. (Godwin 102) About a hundred incorruptible Catholic “saints, martyrs, and beati” exist, and about half of these are in Italy. (Pringle 67) During the past fifteen years or so, these bodies have been examined by various Italian scientists at the request of the Vatican. It was found that some were “mummified by their devout followers”. Apparently others were subject to “environmental circumstances”, such as the presence of limestone bedrock near the vaults beneath church floors, which causes groundwater to become alkaline, greatly decreasing the decomposition of flesh. (Pringle 69) Early Christians also used aromatic oils to anoint the bodies of deceased holy people, which could account for the “odour of sanctity” observed around their bodies and relics. The use of “aromatic resins and precious perfumes and white linens” was conducive to mummification. (Pringle 70) However, the pathologist Ezio Fulcheri of the University of Genoa, who began his examination of the “Incorruptibles” in 1986, asks “What is a miracle?...It’s something

unexplainable, a special even that may occur in different ways.' The causes may seem mysterious 'but don't exclude [rare] natural processes that are different from the normal course of things'" (Pringle 68) Perhaps miracles can be explained by science, but this does not completely disprove the possibility of their being caused by God's intervention and manipulation of the processes of nature.

In medieval Europe, the physical body became central to Catholic Christianity. In bodily miracles the faithful saw hope of a fleshly resurrection at the end of time. It was believed that the omnipotent Christian God would reassemble and revive the bodies of the dead on the resurrection day, and the divine gifts of miraculous physical phenomena, and the preservation of the bodies of the saints, were seen as evidence of this hope and of God's power and true presence.

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Josepha Anne Morbey  
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