

Why did medieval mystics change their attitudes about eating over time? In this research essay, Teo challenges one-dimensional interpretations. Carefully and clearly structured, this essay argues that an understanding of fasting in medieval Christianity must consider not only changing religious doctrines but also gender ideologies. (Instructor: Melissa Vise)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD FOR MYSTICS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Throughout the Middle Ages, medieval mystics' conception of food and its significance changed drastically. The Benedictines saw food as a necessary source of strength for holy men, viewing extreme abstinence as a danger of spiritual pride. Yet in the thirteenth century, the founding of the Franciscan Order saw a paradigm shift in Benedictine attitudes towards food. St. Francis preached the idea of the *vita apostolica*—choosing evangelical poverty by renouncing worldly possessions. Some scholars argue that this new way of being holy resulted in the shift from moderation to extreme fasting and Eucharistic devotion. However, extreme fasting was more prominent in female sainthood than in male sainthood, which suggests that this was primarily a gendered shift. While historians are often inclined to attribute such behavioral changes to the emergence of new religious movements and beliefs, the analysis of the gendered shift in mystics' understanding of food suggests that historians must critically consider the role of both cultural and religious factors in these changing narratives. These cultures cannot, ultimately, be separated; an understanding of the interaction between them and religion is required to explain the drastic shift in the conception of food by mystics over time.

Benedictines, such as the mystics St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), regarded food as a necessary form of nourishment for work. The Order of St. Benedict is “a monastic tradition that stems from the origins of the Christian monastic movement in the late third century”; it became “the rule of

choice for European monasteries from the ninth century onwards” (Theisen). In the chapter “On the Measure of Food,” the written *Rule of St. Benedict* stated that in monasteries, two cooked dishes shall suffice for dinner but to “let a third dish be added [if] any fruit or fresh vegetables are available.” If the day’s work was heavy, the Abbot could “add something to the fare,” although frugality was to be observed, and over-indulgence was to be strictly avoided. “The sick who are very weak” were exempted from the rule that all should “abstain entirely from eating the flesh of four-footed animals.” St. Benedict also permitted wine; this clause was a relaxation of the ascetic practice of the recent past, a pragmatic concession since monastics of Benedict’s “time” could not be persuaded that wine was improper for them (Benedict). In a commentary on *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Paul Delatte argues that St. Benedict “[did] not propose to drive all his monks to heroic mortification and extreme severity towards the flesh,” and that abbots had to sometimes persuade people to eat (293). The Benedictines “[ate] to live; [they took] what [was] needful to sustain [them] in [their] work” (Delatte 293). As monastics emphasized moderation and sustenance, there was great laxity and flexibility in their relationship with food. Twelfth-century monastics, such as Hildegard, were bolder in their reading of the dietary scriptures, suggesting that “cheese, eggs and fish might be permitted,” showing that the dietary requirements of the Benedictines had become more lax over time (Clark 119).

The founding of the Franciscan order in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) heralded a new conception of food for medieval mystics. St. Francis advocated for the *vita apostolica*, or the apostolic life: an uncompromising way of following in the footsteps of the crucified Christ by returning to the gospel. Key elements of St. Francis’s new mode of gospel life included absolute poverty (avoiding all contact with money), penance, devotion to the Eucharist, service to the Church, and “solidarity with the poor and outcasts” (McGinn 43-45). The apostolic life meant that St. Francis was not confined to a community as the Benedictines were, but was able to roam around in public to preach. St. Francis also had a striking rapport with animals, encouraging Pope John Paul II to proclaim him patron saint of the ecological movement (Burr). With the rise in popularity of St.

Francis's apostolic life, which urged the giving up of all worldly possessions to imitate Christ, one could expect a change in thinking about food for the mystics. Perhaps mystics would move from the moderation and laxity of the Benedictines to the extreme fasting of the Franciscans. G. J. M. Bartelink argues that extreme asceticism "makes possible the *imitatio Christi* and total devotion to God" because the "restriction of material needs" is the first step to attaining "inner abstinence" (205). In fact, "the expression 'apostolic life' had been applied to the manner of life of perfect, ascetic Christians" even before St. Francis's time (Bartelink 206). It can therefore be argued that the will to follow Christ's model in the Late Middle Ages made pious men and women lead an ascetic life, heralding a change in the conception of worldly food.

With both his emphasis on absolute poverty in imitation of Christ and his love for animals, St. Francis could be expected to advocate a stricter view of food. Yet St. Francis had a relatively liberal attitude towards eating. In his Rule of 1221, it is stated that "in obedience to the Gospel, they (the friars) may eat of any food put before them," even meat or delicacies (qtd. in Sorrell 75). Francis's opinion was a product of the return to an "evangelical standard that valued food as a part of God's creation and thus as good and worthy for humanity to eat" (Sorrell 75). Roger Sorrell argues that "this positive injunction which Francis accepted as the pattern for his revival of apostolic life harmonized well with his belief in creation's goodness and with his understanding of creation as an expression of divine largesse dispensed for humanity's needs" (75). His tolerance was considered liberal for an ascetic, and he was eager to show that following the apostolic standard in accepting a diversity of food did not necessarily mean saintly self-denial.

The leader of the revival of the *vita apostolica* did not turn to extreme fasting, but his followers—in particular his female followers—often did so in their interpretations. While the surge in popularity of the *vita apostolica* and *imitatio Christi* aimed at self-denial, men and women had different means of achieving these objectives: men generally inflicted pain on their own bodies through self-flagellation and the deprivation of all the pleasures and comforts that life could offer, while women chose to fast to imitate Jesus's suffering (Forcen

650). In fact, fasting in a religious context seemed exclusive to women. Between late antiquity and the fifteenth century, there were “at least thirty cases of women who were reputed to eat nothing at all except the Eucharist, but . . . only one or possibly two male examples of such behavior” (Bynum, “Fast” 3). Furthermore, 30 percent of female saints had “extreme austerities” as central aspects of their holiness (Bynum, “Fast” 3). Over 50 percent had “illnesses” (often brought on by fasting and other penitential practices) that were “major factors in their reputations for sanctity” (Bynum, “Fast” 3). It is thus evident that in the Middle Ages, fasting was more prominent in female than male practices of piety.

The lives of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Marie D’Oignies demonstrate the centrality of fasting to the lives of religious women. According to Raymond of Capua, St. Catherine’s hagiographer, after St. Catherine received Holy Communion, “heavenly graces and consolations [so] flooded her soul” that they altered “the action of her stomach” such that she could no longer eat; to eat would cause her bodily suffering, and visions incited her not to do so (160-161). St. Catherine knew by actual experience that “to abstain from food kept her well and strong, whilst to take it made her weak and sickly” (Raymond 161). Raymond writes that “while her body fasted, her spirit fed with increasing frequency and zest on the Bread from heaven” (164). Each time St. Catherine received Communion, “the overflowing grace it brought her seemed to supersede her mere sense faculties . . . and the supernatural vitality the Holy Spirit imparted to her took possession of her . . . soul and body” (Raymond 164). Medieval ascetics considered regular food corporeal. They also saw their bodies as corporeal, and thus distinguished them from spirit. In order to go beyond the corporeal into the spiritual and supernatural, one had to feed on spiritual food—“bread from heaven”—and be nourished by it. Similarly, Jacques de Vitry writes that St. Marie D’Oignies endured such extreme fasting that “she suffered pain from a cold and constricted stomach and only a little food would cause her to bloat” (23). St. Marie fasted continuously for three years on bread and water, and at times went without any food or water for months:

As long as her soul was so full and copiously overflowing with spiritual food, it did not allow her to accept any refreshment from corporeal food . . . when she had debilitated her body by fasting, by so much the more freely did she make her spirit fat. (40)

Like Raymond's description of the mystics' conception of food, de Vitry sees in St. Marie a separation between corporeal nourishment and spiritual nourishment. Unlike the Benedictines, who saw corporeal food as necessary nourishment for the body, women such as St. Catherine and St. Marie sought a spiritual nourishment through strong Eucharistic devotion and viewed corporeal nourishment as unnecessary.

In contemporary psychiatric understanding, these medieval female ascetics exhibited behaviors commonly associated with eating disorders. Rudolph Bell, in *Holy Anorexia*, argues that religious women practiced self-starvation for holy purposes because of insecurity and the need to pursue a "culturally approved objective with fanatical, compulsive devotion" (21). He compares the holy starvation of religious women like St. Catherine and St. Marie to the modern-day illness of anorexia nervosa. In both instances, self-mortification begins as "the girl fastens onto a highly valued societal goal (bodily health, thinness, self-control in the twentieth century/spiritual health, fasting, and self-denial in medieval Christendom)" (Bell 20). If these women could convince others that their fasting and self-denial were inspired by God, they would be marked with sainthood and holiness. Furthermore, from a psychodynamic point of view, some academics have understood anorexia nervosa as an act of masochism: for example, as St. Catherine of Siena suffered more, the more cathartic and holy she felt (Forcen 651). Yet to merely understand this extreme behavior from an individual psychological approach would be incomplete, for such analysis "lacks firm grounding within the cultural context of medieval Europe" (Lester 189).

In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, historian Caroline Walker Bynum contends that holy fasting was in many ways distinct from anorexia nervosa, as it occurred in an entirely different sociocultural context and for a different purpose. Then, food was important to women religiously because it was important to them socially. Because of "the tra-

ditional association of women with food preparation *rather than* food consumption,” food was “*the* resource that women control[led]”; hence, “women found it easier to renounce food than anything else” (Bynum, *Holy* 191). Since men controlled money and property, it was easy for St. Francis of Assisi to renounce such items in accordance with the apostolic life. However, since women controlled food exclusively, they “gave up food because [they] had nothing else to give up for Christ” (193). Yet fasting was not just a simple act of religious piety and renouncement; it was also a special way of imitating Christ. Bynum maintains that medieval ascetic women were not anorexics and bulimics only because their behaviors were expressed and experienced through a religious medium (207). She argues that food asceticism, for these female mystics, was not an act of masochism; rather, it enabled them to fuse with a Christ whose suffering saves the world (Bynum, *Holy* 218). Female fasting was not an effort to punish the flesh, but to use the flesh in an empowered way to imitate Christ: “the point was pain because the pain was Christ’s” (Bynum, *Holy* 218).

However, both Bell and Bynum fail to consider the dominance of patriarchy in the Church of medieval Europe. Both of the two primary sources analyzed in this essay are written by male hagiographers, which poses a “question [about the] relationship between men’s prescriptions for women and women’s own self-understanding” (Hollywood 79). Raymond of Capua, in writing a hagiography of St. Catherine of Siena, may have placed greater emphasis on her “paranormal bodily experiences” in order “to prove her holiness and establish her cult as a saint” (Scott 136). Because Raymond’s goal was to ultimately call for St. Catherine’s canonization, his account of St. Catherine focused on her mystical experiences of the body, “first by privations and fasts, and later by supernatural experiences so strong that her weak female body could survive only by receiving more and more extraordinary graces,” rather than through her theology or her public actions (Scott 142). This can be contrasted with St. Catherine’s own writings, letters and treatises that demonstrate her theological understanding and show her to “have been considerably less interested and immersed in exceptional and supernatural occurrences than [Raymond] believed her to have been” (142). Raymond describes St. Catherine’s condition as “at the same time filled and fasting; empty of

the things of the body, filled with the things of the spirit" (164). Raymond saw St. Catherine as an empty vessel through which God worked. St. Catherine was essentially 'empty,' only filled with all things spiritual through God's will. St. Catherine herself was not wondrous; rather, her significance was that God worked wonders through her. This suggests that *The Life of Catherine of Siena* was ultimately a male representation of female sainthood, and that Raymond's work established the model for female sanctity—one marked by extreme fasting—which later inspired other holy women to follow suit. The question of whether or not St. Catherine did indeed exhibit extreme fasting behavior is irrelevant; what is relevant is how male portrayal of such behaviors framed the female model of sanctity.

The influence of male representations of female sanctity was so great that female saints became synonymous with fasting, despite their theological achievements and social impact. Some historians even argue that religious fasting enabled the creation of these saints' entire personas. James White argues that St. Catherine's religious fasting enabled the creation of her public and political persona. As extreme ascetic malnutrition pushed St. Catherine's body to cease menstruation, she became masculinized via her spiritual use of food. Thus, she was able to assume the (otherwise masculine) authority to intervene in political executions, exhort monarchs, and help end the Avignon papacy (White 157). These facts further point to the dominance of the patriarchy in the Church, so much so that for St. Catherine of Siena to assert authority as a religious woman, she had to first be masculinized through fasting. In St. Catherine's hagiography, Raymond describes the mental anguish that St. Catherine went through in her deliberation between following God's will to fast and her "obedience to those over her" (162). Those over her—patriarchal leaders—concluded that "she must not follow her own judgment, but rely on the guidance of her advisers" (162). This view reflects the Church's male-centric social hierarchy and the expectation of women in the Church to heed a male style of sainthood.

The drastic change in the conception of food for medieval mystics from one of moderation and laxity to one of extreme asceticism is complex. While some scholars would claim it was a result of a change

in the theological conception of the corporeal world, others would note that this shift was a gendered one—only female mystics had such a unique relationship with food. Yet scholarship on the significance of food for female mystics in the Middle Ages often forms “a dichotomy between the cultural and the individual” (Lester 188). Bell and other psychologists examine the phenomenon of religious fasting through the lenses of the individual female saint and her psychodynamic concerns, omitting an analysis of her specific cultural context. Bynum, on the other hand, focuses more on the relevance of food within a specific cultural framework. She examines food as a cultural symbol, yet does not analyze the “possible psychological significance of food symbolism or ascetic practices for” female mystics (Lester 188). Furthermore, these schools of thought fail to critically examine their primary sources, omitting the role of the male hagiographer. Ultimately, to fully understand the reason behind this shift, we must consider a combination of the theological and individual psychological and sociocultural factors. Socio-culturally, women had an established relationship with food, and, with the rise in popularity of a new theological practice—the *vita apostolica*—women utilized food and fasting as a way of imitating Christ. Male hagiographers institutionalized this behavior to the extent that fasting became a model of female sanctity, which may have resulted in pressure for religious women to emulate later on. No individual factor can be extricated from the others in an attempt to completely understand this historical shift.

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