

## SELF-FLAGELLATION IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA

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Self-flagellation is often understood as self-punishment. History teaches us, however, that the same physical act has taken various psychological meanings. As a mass movement in the fourteenth century, it was primarily seen as an act of protest whereby the flagellants rejected the spiritual authority and sacramental power of the clergy. In the sixteenth century, flagellation came to be associated with self-control, and a new term was coined in order to designate it: 'discipline'. Curiously, in some religious orders this shift was accompanied by a change in focus: rather than the shoulders or back, the buttocks were to be whipped instead. A great controversy immediately arose but was silenced when the possible sexual meaning of flagellation was realized – or should we say, constructed? My hypothesis is that the change in both the name and the way flagellation was performed indicates the emergence of a new type of modern subjectivity. I will suggest, furthermore, that this requires a further elaboration of Norbert Elias's theory of the 'civilizing process'.

### *A brief overview of the history of flagellation<sup>1</sup>*

Let us start with the origins of religious self-flagellation. Although there were many ascetic practices in the monasteries at the time of the desert fathers, self-flagellation does not seem to have been among them. Without doubt many extraordinary rituals were performed. Extreme degrees

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<sup>1</sup> The following historical account summarizes the more detailed historical research presented in my *La chair de la passion. Une histoire de foi: la flagellation* (Paris: 2002). For this reason, footnote references have been restricted to the most essential ones. The original research project had a broader scope: starting with an observation of contemporary forms of self-flagellation in a Spanish village, I argue that a psychological hermeneutic of this practice involves doing historical research. This insight stems from psychoanalytical experience, which demonstrates that individuals cannot understand themselves without performing an anamnesis. The same applies to social phenomena; this opens up the reverse question of the psychological efficacy of historical research in general.

of fasting would give rise to intense debates concerning, for example, whether eating three or four olives a day was still compliant with the ascetic ideal, as such a small number could encourage the sin of pride. Painful situations were purposely sought, with ascetics praying in spaces filled with stinging insects, bathing in icy water or rolling in thorns. However, as far as we know, whipping oneself was not among the practices, although scourging was a common punishment, even for monks. Historians might argue that self-flagellation is so obviously classifiable as an ascetic practice that this could be the reason it is not mentioned explicitly, but from a psychological point of view this is questionable. In any case, it was certainly experienced as a different form of ascetic behaviour as soon as its practice became a public issue.

The eleventh-century monastic leader and Church reformer Peter Damian seems to have been the initiator of the practice and wrote much about it. In the monastery of Fonte Avellana, where he was prior, monks were expected to whip their naked bodies and to do this together, without being ashamed of each other's nakedness. He wrote so prolifically on the topic that many historians have assumed that, from this moment on, the practice spread throughout the monasteries and until recently was a well-established custom. However, careful reading of other sources leads us to consider that this was not the case. The Franciscans may have been an exception during the first decades of their establishment, as they are said to have influenced a first wave of public, group flagellation in Perugia in 1260. However, they then seem to have abandoned the practice for a few centuries. Lay people who flagellated themselves in public were swiftly referred to lay confraternities of 'penitents', where they could continue the practice under clerical supervision and hidden from the public.

Thus, it appears that the practice was neither widespread nor well known until the rise of an extensive flagellant movement in 1349. In the summer of this year, many large groups of flagellants wandered throughout Europe before gathering in Tournai, the seat of an important diocese in the south of present-day Belgium. The local abbot, Li Muisis, wrote in his chronicle that he had never seen such a practice.<sup>2</sup> This is even more remarkable when we consider the fact that a few

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<sup>2</sup> *Chronica Aegidii Li Muisis*, in De Smet J.J., *Recueil des chroniques de Flandre*, Collection des chroniques belges inédites, publiées par la Commission Royale d'Histoire (Brussels, M. Hayez: 1841) II, 344–359.

years earlier he had written on the customs in his abbey and described the *disciplina*, another form of whipping.<sup>3</sup> In the latter case, however, a monk was whipped by another monk, even when the whipping was not imposed as a punishment but freely chosen as devotion.<sup>4</sup> Asking to be whipped by someone else and whipping oneself were clearly considered to be very different.

Indeed, closer research does not give the impression that the practice of self-flagellation was understood as self-punishment. More precisely, it was not, in any case, an expression of humility or self-abnegation. The flagellants formed a seditious movement. They reacted against the rising power of the parish clergy, against the newly established sacrament of confession and against the withdrawal of the Eucharistic wine, Christ's blood, from the lay community. Undoubtedly, they experienced pain and inflicted it on their own bodies. In doing so, they felt superior to others, since during flagellation they experienced in themselves the suffering of Christ, as though Christ's blood was present in their bodies. Moreover, they rejected the practice of priestly mediation that the Church was trying to establish. They spoke of sin and of God's anger in order to warn others of the need to renounce their sinful lives or face the consequences in times of spreading plague, but they did not provoke confession to a priest. Thus, there was much pride in their behaviour, even a form of 'narcissism' which I will specify below, in the sense that the self-infliction of pain seemed to strengthen narcissistic feelings rather than weaken them.

The flagellant movement was brought to an end while its followers were on their way to Avignon, where they hoped to speak with the Pope, who had just issued a condemnation of the practice. The French king sent his troops to disperse them and what was left of the movement headed north, surviving for a while in the region of Erfurt, where Protestantism would later emerge. There were revivals in Spain and France, with the famous Dominican missionary Vincent Ferrer (1350–1419), accompanied by a group of flagellants, preaching from town to town. Such acts irritated the bishops meeting at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), who were trying to end the Western schism which saw two popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome, disputing the

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<sup>3</sup> Li Muisis A., *Tractatus de consuetudinibus*, in "Le Tractatus de consuetudinibus de Gilles Li Muisis (1347)", *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire – Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis* 124 (1959) 193–194.

<sup>4</sup> Li Muisis A., *Tractatus de consuetudinibus* 193–194.

Papal Sec. Jean Gerson, the famous Parisian theologian and initiator of a deliberate pastoral approach to lay people, was particularly upset. One of the direct causes may have been that during the Holy Week of 1416, Ferrer had convinced many of the Toulouse hierarchy, including members of the theological faculty, to participate in a procession in which they whipped themselves. However, attacking Ferrer too directly was hazardous. He was a mighty figure both in the Church and in secular politics, having convinced the Castilians to withdraw their support from the third pope, Peter of Luna, who had been chosen in the hope that the other two would then resign. Nevertheless, Gerson wrote a famous treatise, the 1417 *Contra sectam flagellantium*, against Ferrer<sup>5</sup> that seems to have been effective, since Ferrer continued his preaching without his company of flagellants. We do not know if he intended to dismiss them permanently, as he died soon after in Vannes in 1419, where he is buried in the cathedral.

Moving from the public manifestation of flagellation by wandering groups that accompanied preachers, we find that the discreet practice persisted in confraternities of pious lay people. Genoan sailors introduced flagellation into Spain and France – more precisely into Valencia and Marseille – at the end of the fifteenth century, and suddenly it began to flourish. Franciscans were especially active in its propagation. Several fraternities of penitents sprang up both in the Papal States surrounding Avignon and in Spain. In France, however, the lay confraternities did not practise flagellation. Some groups tried to introduce the practice with a limited amount of success, with self-flagellation being somewhat secretly inaugurated into the practices of the Blue Penitents of Bourges in 1584, and into the private *Confrérie de la mort* of King Henry III, established in 1585. The king was murdered in 1589 and Henry IV of Navarre was not in favour of such Catholic devotions, so this seems to have marked the end of lay flagellation in France.

Later, we still find some rare examples of public flagellation. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a huge controversy arose in Germany, when the Catholics announced their presence in Augsburg – a town stiff with the symbolism of the Protestant *Confessio Augustana* – with processions that included public flagellation. This gave birth to an enormous literary production on the topic, especially by the Jesuit

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<sup>5</sup> In Jean Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. X *L'œuvre polémique* (Paris: 1973) 46–51.

James Gretser (1562–1625),<sup>6</sup> indicating that there was clearly no fear of public discussion of the topic. These kinds of procession would, however, soon disappear, even in Spain, where Charles III forbade public flagellation in 1777.

The practice of flagellation was nevertheless kept alive in most religious orders and congregations, especially in newly created orders such as the Jesuits. They practised flagellation in a less harsh manner, using whips that did not hurt excessively. Significantly, the name was also changed; instead of flagellation the term ‘discipline’ was reintroduced, but with a notable shift in meaning, as the term ‘discipline’ previously referred specifically to being scourged by someone else, whereas flagellation specifically meant whipping oneself. There was also a second significant change. In the monasteries and convents where the practice was adopted or readopted, it was often not the back but the buttocks that became the object of flagellation. It is debatable whether this reorientation was commonplace, especially as recent interviews conducted by Emke Bosgraaf, who is completing a PhD thesis on the subject at the University of Groningen, have indicated that various parts of the body, including the back, the arms, the shoulders and the legs, could have been used for flagellation until the middle of the twentieth century.

We are well informed on the topic by a book by the Parisian canon, Jacques Boileau (1635–1716), the brother of Nicolas, the great poet, who sneered at the ‘newly introduced practice’ in the convents. His *Histoire des flagellants*, published in 1700 in Latin and a year later in French, for a long time remained the standard book on the topic.<sup>7</sup> It was immediately followed by a reply written by another Parisian canon, Jean-Baptiste Thiers (1636–1703), who published his *Critique de l’histoire des flagellants, et justification de l’usage des disciplines volontaires* in 1703. While the latter book is poor with respect to its argument, the list of all the religious orders and congregations that adopted flagellation and the dates of its introduction is instructive. Against Boileau, Thiers attempted to prove

<sup>6</sup> James Gretser S.J., *De spontanea disciplinarum seu flagellorum cruce* (1606), in *Opera omnia*, vol. IV (Regensburg, J.C. Peetz and F. Baader: 1743).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Boileau, *Historia Flagellantium, de recto et perverso flagrorum usu apud Christianos. Ex antiquis Scripturae, Patrum, Pontificum, Conciliorum et Scriptorum Profanorum monumentis cum cura et fide expressa* (Paris, Jean Anisson: 1700); French translation: *Histoire des flagellants. Le bon et le mauvais usage des flagellations parmi les chrétiens* (Amsterdam, François vander Plaats: 1701). A new edition, with an introduction by C. Louis-Combet but without the original notes: Montbonnot-St-Martin: 1986. The text is available on the internet at <www.cros-thanatos.com>.

that self-flagellation was not a recent practice, but he was unable to find any earlier example of the practice than that of the Capuchins in 1529, who, he had to admit, were somewhat reluctant, with the practice having to be reintroduced in 1536.<sup>8</sup>

The changed site of discipline gave the sarcastic Boileau the perfect argument to deride the practice. The reason used to justify this type of ‘discipline’, he said, was that it helped to restrain lust. However, he continued by claiming that medical knowledge revealed that being beaten on the buttocks produced the opposite. It is with his book that the possible sexual interpretation of flagellation became apparent. Religious flagellation was then treated by sexology and taken as proof that sexual masochism had always existed, something that is actually disputable. As a result of this insinuated interweaving of sexual feelings and pain in the experience of being flogged, religious flagellation was no longer discussed openly, as it had been in Gretser’s time. Nevertheless, the practice continued in secret. Young nuns and brothers entering a religious congregation were mostly not aware before the end of their novitiate that they would have to submit themselves to it once they had taken their vows.

How did the practice finally come to an end? While my own book on the history of self-flagellation, *Chair de la passion*, concludes that this still required investigation, the research undertaken since then by Emke Bosgraaf has shown that it disappeared quite suddenly in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a time in which there was an expectation of a radical change in spirituality as the Church prepared itself for the Second Vatican Council. In this context the meaning of self-flagellation was no longer obvious. Did it have to do with pain, with the act of flogging, or with the self? Let us add psychology to historical research.

### *The disciplined self and its body*

Since the publication of *The Civilizing Process* by the sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990),<sup>9</sup> we expect a given culture to evolve from a phase of

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Mais leur première ferveur s’étant un peu ralentie depuis cette première congrégation, on ne les a obligés qu’à se discipliner trois fois la semaine’, et ceci par une adaptation de la règle en 1536.’ Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Critique de l’histoire des flagellants, et justification de l’usage des disciplines volontaires Critique* (Paris, Jean de Nully: 1703) 354–355.

<sup>9</sup> Elias N., *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: 2000).

restraint imposed by others to one of self-restraint. In this process there is also a transition from shame to guilt. In the first phase individuals feel shame only when other people witness their wrongdoing. This phase is followed by one in which they feel guilty even if nobody is aware of their faults. A typical experience of this distinction in culpability can easily be had in relation to encountering a red traffic light on an empty road at night. Do you respect this sign, which an all-seeing authority would do better to switch off?

In the history of European culture the rise of modernity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has often been conceived of as the turning point in the shift from external to internal control. During this period, an increasing awareness of the value of personal life developed and, as a consequence, the individual was expected to attain a higher level of self-control. The process began in towns in the higher Middle Ages but became more manifest, and a more frequent object of reflection, in modernity. The process shows that the degree of evaluation of the individual and the propensity for feelings of personal guilt increased proportionally.

One of the first philosophers to be concerned with these issues is Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), who in his *Essays* reflects on the knowledge to be gained from personal observation, including observations of bodily experiences. Montaigne examines everything from his kidney stones to political events. In accordance with the ideas developed in *De la servitude volontaire* by his dear friend Etienne de la Boétie (1530–1563), he is struck by the fact that human beings enjoy being guided and dominated, and further notes that the achievement of freedom is not easy. Of course, the most important herald of this new awareness of the value of personal life is Descartes, who starts his *Discours sur la méthode* with the proclamation that he will never accept as truth anything that he cannot prove starting from his own experience. Modern man is convinced that the value of life begins with the individual.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the religious realm, with the Jesuits being the clearest representatives of the new cultural atmosphere. Earlier, the ultimate Christian ideal clearly consisted in a monastic life for all, although it was accepted that most were bound to adopt a more limited ideal. The Jesuits, however, were convinced that there was no universal ideal and that every human being should discover the particular divine plan made for their own life. The famous *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola were precisely aimed at discovering God's very special purpose for the individual. Somewhat ambiguously, individual

freedom was also stressed; however, in this context this did not mean being free from feelings of guilt, as we would think today, but in fact quite the opposite. Catholicism established the practice of confession extensively, with people being taught to confess more frequently and more broadly, including the lesser sins along with the ‘mortal’. They were required to provide all the details of their sins, including the inner motives and the degree of free will involved. Thus, for Catholic countries, confession was an important instrument in achieving self-control, in that to become a responsible individual, one had to rely on an authority figure.

Considered from a psychoanalytical point of view, we here confront the emergence of the superego structure that would continue to grow in Western culture until it fostered paralysing guilt, hampering both the enjoyment of life and the strength to act. The fear of possibly doing something wrong could even hamper an attempt to achieve the good. Sigmund Freud’s work can be understood as the elaboration of a technique for reducing the repressing power of the hypertrophied superego. If the superego can be understood as a mechanism of self-punishment whereby the individual’s aggression is turned back against their own person, the interpretation of self-flagellation seems obvious: it is a perfect symbol of the internalization of punishment. Things are not so simple, however, and both Freud’s view on the superego and our naive presupposition that pain lies at the real core of self-flagellation need more elaboration.<sup>10</sup> Elias was to an extent aware of this, as he frequently puts ‘superego’ between quotation marks in *The Civilizing Process*, and seems to suggest that a more precise elaboration of the Freudian concept is needed before we can use it in a sociohistorical analysis. Let us proceed in that direction.

According to Freud, the superego’s self-punishing function presupposes a deeper psychological structure, that of narcissism. It is for this reason that Freud originally coined a different term for the superego, the ego ideal, which he continued to use as a synonym later. Individuals want to act in a certain way because they consider themselves appealing when they do so. Thus, for Freud, self-love as a form of being in love

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<sup>10</sup> For the psychological theory and especially the way American Ego Psychology has dismissed essential parts of the original Freudian insights, see Vandermeersch P., “Het narcisme. De psychoanalytische theorie en haar lotgevallen”, in Huijts J.H. (ed.), *Ik zei de gek. Tussen zelf-ontkenning en zelf-verheerlijking* (Baarn: 1982) 32–58 and Vandermeersch P. – Westerink H., *Godsdienstpsychologie in cultuurhistorisch perspectief* (Amsterdam: 2007).

with an image of oneself – an essential experience which is required to establish one's own individuality and to escape psychosis – is the basis of the ego ideal or superego.

We must emphasize two elements in this narcissism. The first is sexuality: we essentially love the image of ourselves as an image of someone with a particular sexual identity. We love ourselves as male or female – something which seems to be a basic experience required at a bodily level. Secondly, narcissism is closely related to identification with others, in that the image of our sexual ego that we adopt as 'our beautiful ego' in narcissism is borrowed from other human beings. We love ourselves as if we were the other. This event of 'transitivism' is part of narcissism, and implies that self-love involves love of an alter ego.

We see how a more complete outline of Freud's superego theory puts many elements of the history of self-flagellation into perspective: the psychological structure which promotes the value of morality to an individualized subject is not just the result of an internalized fear of painful punishment. It consists primarily of internalized self-love, consequently making it possible to overcome the continuous need to be admired by others. Thus, a circular 'empathetic' drive in the identification process is established that enables individuals to experience themselves as if they were the other, without losing the feeling of being themselves.

*Is guilt the feeling of internalized pain?*

Using Elias's scheme, we can investigate the extent to which the introduction of self-flagellation as discipline was a sign of a broader turn to self-restraint. Let us start with the common assumption that flagellation is the self-infliction of pain and consequently a form of self-chastisement. We know, however, that the painful element was restricted precisely at the time that this internalization is presumed to have occurred. I have already mentioned that flagellation was performed in a less harsh manner when the practice was adopted by the Jesuits, exactly those who insisted on using the term 'discipline'. Ignatius even invented a new type of whip that was not so harmful and could be used more frequently. The two aspects are, of course, linked from a practical point of view: if you perform the ritual more regularly, you cannot be so aggressive. However, changing the frequency of the exercise and flattening the whip changed its psychological meaning. As the pain is no longer so great

and no bleeding is provoked, it is no longer the intrusion of something alien into the body. Rather, flagellation becomes a self-provoked awareness of being a mind within a skin. The body is yours and that you can appropriate it. By doing this regularly, it becomes an exercise for the self, and not a demonstration addressed to others. Rather than a form of self-rejection on the basis of one's faults, flagellation developed into a means of enhancing a narcissism of a more reflective nature. This pertained first and foremost to the psychological event of experiencing one's own body, as opposed to medieval flagellation, which fundamentally involved others in its need for a public.

Let us pay more attention to the topic of the public exhibition of flagellation, which was discredited with the rise of modernity. The members of the religious congregations that favoured the practice seem to have been faintly aware of the importance of withdrawing the element of public performance so predominant in the Middle Ages. What struck the public most in the procession on Maundy Thursday 1583 in Paris, where some flagellation was performed, was not the peculiar gesture, but the fact that the participants were wearing masks. The explanation given to the amazed spectators was that the penitents were to show humility through their anonymity.<sup>11</sup> However, people knew that there were those of high rank involved and that the king was quite surely among them, as his chapel choir was taking part. This gave rise to a very interesting debate about whether it was good for officials, especially the king, to adopt such a humble position.

Indeed, this was the very reason why priests had already been forbidden to take part in public manifestations of penance. If a priest positioned himself among the sinners, how could he be expected to preserve his authority over his parishioners? The same remark could be applied to civil authorities. However, the Jesuits and Franciscans, who were among the zealous initiators of public flagellation, replied that a distinction should be made between a penance imposed for the expiation of a personal sin, and a penance freely chosen to sharpen one's consciousness of universal human sinfulness. The latter testified precisely to the moral *sensitivity* of the penitent. Therefore a nobleman

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<sup>11</sup> De Cheffontaines C., *Apologie de la confrérie des pénitents érigée et instituée en la ville de Paris par le tres chrestien roy de France et de Pollogne, Henry troisième de son nom* (Paris, M. Julian: 1583).

participating in such a penitential ritual should be recognized as being extremely trustworthy.

We might wonder about the actual reactions of ordinary people witnessing such processions. We know from popular songs that people mocked this kind of devotion. Nevertheless, the Jesuits continued to stress the ideal of humility in the private flagellation rituals they introduced into the confraternity of the Blue Penitents of Bourges and into the private confraternity of the king. The rule stipulated that the members had to whip themselves in the dark and then leave on their own, without talking to each other. In the rules of the Spanish confraternities of disciplinants of the sixteenth century we find the same insistence on leaving individually and in silence. Thus, flagellation was to be performed in a humble manner, privately and in silence, without reducing the intensity of the bodily experience by putting it into words and sharing it with others.

To summarize, the repeatedly performed ritual of flagellation is indeed an exercise, but is more psychologically complex than the repetitive infliction of punishment through pain; rather it incorporates both an experience of pain and a sensation of being alive. While being scourged by someone else is a reminder of the requirement to do what is socially expected, self-flagellation stresses the experience of remaining an 'I' on a fundamental level, even if this identity is no longer supported by the social structure. Those who whipped themselves in the dark and left without speaking were experiencing in common a primary awareness of being a meaningful body. Regression into that primitive layer of narcissism gave them the support which allowed them to question their social identity without confronting the anxiety of becoming 'nobody', partly in the sense of literally becoming 'no body'. The silent togetherness of the event accentuated this process of regression into the primitive experience of being an 'I' linked to a body. It was a form of male bonding which ignored social distinctions.

Let us return, to our main question of whether flagellation was accepted because it was an impressive symbol of the turn to self-control. The answer seems to be that this was indeed the case to some extent, but not in any simple sense, since flagellation involved the internalization of a painful punishment. Self-flagellation came to display the fact that the body can resist the deconstruction of the subject and that the 'I' can emerge even when its identity is no longer assured by self-evident customs and rules. In this sense, self-flagellation expresses the basic autonomy of the individual that is necessary for internalization.

It does not, however, automatically enact the internalization of the will of the other. Self-flagellation is completely different from being scourged or caned.

We should not forget, finally, that the history of self-flagellation is confined to religious contexts. The fact seems so obvious that we hardly wonder why similar practices did not appear in the secular world which, much more than monasteries and convents, needed to establish self-control. Have there been similar rituals? Elias points to the influence of the French royal court, where new manners had to be learned and where it became a skill to foresee how someone in power would act in particular circumstances. However, perhaps we should direct our attention to rituals of a more basic bodily nature, providing support to modern minds that are increasingly expected to become 'themselves'. The French sociologist David Lebreton has shown how such rituals still function today, ranging from fitness centres to tattoo shops and extreme sports.<sup>12</sup> It might be worthwhile to investigate the prehistory of these modern lifestyles. It would surely be enlightening to grasp more precisely why the history of religiosity has taken a different direction to that of the secular *mentalité*.

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<sup>12</sup> Le Breton D., *Passions du risque* (Paris: 1991); *Signes d'identité. Tatouages, piercings et autres marques corporelles* (Paris: 2002); *La peau et la trace. Sur les blessures de soi* (Paris: 2003).

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