

THE ASCETICS AND THEIR BODIES

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ASCETICISM MAY ONCE HAVE BEEN PROMINENT in Christian spirituality, but now it seems to be of merely historical interest. For most people today, asceticism makes little sense. At best, practices such as self-flagellation or extensive fasting appear as attempts by our Christian forebears to discipline the physical desires that they saw as impeding the spiritual life. At worst, asceticism is interpreted as a sign of psychological illness. Christians living in the beginning of the twenty-first century are more likely to address spiritual distractions through therapy or through spiritual guidance than through ascetic practice.

Moreover, much recent theological work regarding the human body argues against any suggestion that bodily harm or suffering is good. Because bodies are constitutive of personhood, anything that harms the body harms the person. Scholars such as Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, for instance, even claim that Christ's suffering and death were not victorious in and of themselves. Rather, they were transformed into victory as, thanks to the resurrection, the cross became a symbol of hope and life.¹ A further factor contributing to the unease about asceticism and bodily suffering in Christianity is that certain groups of people, such as women, people of non-European ancestry and homosexuals, have been discriminated against on the basis of their bodies.² Their struggle for liberation has therefore included an element of reclaiming the dignity of the human body in all of its forms. Any theology of asceticism that fails to take this issue into account runs the risk of contributing to the oppression of the marginalised.

¹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1994), 105.

² Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 41–45, 103.

But this unease has some unfortunate effects. Ascetic practice has occupied a significant place in Christian tradition for much of its history. Individuals such as Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Genoa and Henry Suso have presented their readers with spiritual insights that arose from their ascetic practices, and wisdom cannot be separated from those practices without important elements being lost.

We need to find new ways of approaching the ascetics. I would like to suggest that we need to focus, not on ascetic practices in themselves, but on the theology informing them. In this light, the bodies of the ascetics appear as *symbols* of important and valid theological principles. The particular practices may, in themselves, be questionable, but they nevertheless speak about how important it is to remove distractions from the spiritual life. They also speak of how the Divine can be encountered through the body—even if the ways in which we might seek that encounter today will be different. In this light, the body appears, not as an impediment to the spiritual life, but rather as something spiritually positive. Moreover, spirituality becomes more than a matter of theory or idea: it becomes located in the specific and the physical.

The bodies of ascetics, then, communicate spiritual truths symbolically. How does this occur? I want to begin by exploring the powers of memory located in the body. We share the experience of having (or being) a human body and we can imagine for ourselves the injuries that the ascetics inflicted on their own bodies—injuries which enable them to communicate in a way qualitatively different from the words that describe their self-inflicted harm. Then I want to look further at how asceticism can help to remove distractions from the spiritual life, taking the example of Blessed Henry Suso (c.1295–1366) by way of illustration.

The Human Body as Symbolic Communicator of Meaning

The human body is revelatory: by its means people express themselves and encounter others.³ Since bodies are communicators of meaning, the bodies of the ascetics can serve to communicate certain theological realities.

³ Mary Timothy Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 39–49, 79–90.



The Penitent, by Albrecht Dürer

One model to illustrate this is that of injuries to the body under torture or in war. Such injuries serve to give concrete expression to the power of the regime or the ideology of the victorious nation.⁴ In torture, the pain can be so intense as completely to destroy the world of the individual. All that a person knows is the pain, a pain which expresses the power of the regime.⁵ As William T. Cavanaugh

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 56–59, 112–121.

⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 38–45.

commented in his analysis of the Pinochet regime in Chile, 'Torture is an efficacious sign by which the state enacts its power over its subjects' bodies in purest form'.⁶ The victim's injuries, visible or not, convey a powerful message to others that a voice simply cannot communicate.⁷ Although ascetic practices differ from torture in form and purpose, I believe that, when other people view or read about those called to the ascetic life, the body functions in a similar fashion.

In warfare, as in torture, the powerful impose their power directly on the bodies of the powerless. As Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*:

In war ... the participants must work to out-injure each other. Although both sides inflict injuries, the side that inflicts the greater injury faster will be the winner.⁸

The side that suffers an unacceptable level of injury first is determined to be the loser, and becomes subject to the ideology of the victor. And, as Scarry adds, 'What is remembered in the body is well remembered'.⁹ Moreover, the memory of the body is not limited to the individual, for the body is political as well as personal. When the body is permanently altered by injury sustained in war, it is not only the injured person who remembers, but also the culture. When people encounter wounded veterans, the histories of the war in which they fought come to mind, and these gradually contribute to a cultural identity.¹⁰

The bodies of people injured in war or by torture serve a symbolic function for those who encounter these wounded bodies. Paul Tillich's account of symbols is helpful in understanding how they communicate.¹¹ According to Tillich, symbols possess six characteristics. First, they point beyond themselves to another reality.

⁶ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 34.

⁷ Pain, according to Scarry, is by its very nature incommunicable. Words can never make known the physical agony that an individual is experiencing, and thus part of the structure of torture is to transform the victim's body into a voice in which it is not the victim who speaks, but the regime (Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 3–5, 45–51).

⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 89.

⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 152 (see also 63–91, 116, 109, 110, 112–113).

¹⁰ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 109–116.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001 [1957]), 47–50.

In the case of war and torture, the injured bodies point to the power of a regime and its ability to enforce its will. Secondly, symbols participate in the reality to which they point. The power of oppressive regimes cannot be present without the act of injuring through war and torture; and injured bodies prove the existence of oppression as well as symbolizing it. Thirdly, symbols open the consciousness of those who interpret them to deeper levels of the reality they symbolize. The horrors of war and torture are understood quite differently



when they are represented by the physical presence of victims rather than by neutral terms such as 'casualty'. Fourthly, symbols also reveal deeper levels in the people who encounter them. When people make personal contact with an injured victim, they may become more deeply aware of how they themselves experience oppression and how it affects their own character. Fifthly, symbols cannot be created intentionally: they arise out of the individual or collective subconscious of human beings. Although they may be *used* intentionally after they have come into being, symbols would be incapable of communicating meaning if they did not speak to the depths of the human person beyond our conscious control. Finally, symbols have a limited lifespan. When the conditions that gave occasion to their creation pass, a symbol ceases to speak to those who encounter it, and it dies away.

The human body as a symbol speaks with quite distinctive power. Because we are all embodied persons, we can look at bodily experiences and imagine ourselves undergoing them. Torture communicates messages about political power in this symbolic fashion. Similarly, one of the functions of ascetic practice is to send symbolic messages about purgation and growth.

Asceticism as Purgation

According to the Anglican mystical theologian Evelyn Underhill, certain obstacles must be removed from the life of the individual in order for spiritual growth to occur.¹² Relationships between God and individuals suffer if there is a disproportionate concern with matters that are less than ultimate.

When they recognise such distractions, individuals who wish to correct their priorities may undertake a process of purgation, eliminating from the self anything 'not in harmony with Reality' and cleansing their perception of the Divine.¹³ This purification is, at its heart, a matter of training someone to focus on Reality in such a way that its infinite nature, infused at all times and places with the presence of the Divine, becomes fundamental to how they inhabit the world. To attain this goal, the individual must leave behind all desires that either inhibit their approach to the Divine or actively pull them away. People who are overly concerned with the acquisition of wealth, for example, may undertake a life of poverty; people struggling with a love of food may fast or consume only bland meals; and those preoccupied with sex may go so far as to injure their bodies in order to reduce their sex drive. Whatever is distracting the individual from a deeper relationship with God is eliminated or greatly reduced, so that the person may recognise its less than ultimate nature, and put it in its proper place.

The goal of purgation is to gain a detachment from how the individual formerly inhabited the world, and this may take the form of an ascetic way of life. The purgative stage concerns attitudes rather than actions; once detachment is achieved, individuals are free to deepen their relationships with Reality unhindered by previous

¹² Although Underhill's work focuses on mysticism, she draws no distinction between spirituality and mysticism in her writing. Generally speaking, mysticism is often interpreted as the highest level of the spiritual life, its intensity being so much greater than that of other spiritual experiences that it becomes a different type of experience entirely. This is not so for Underhill. As Dana Greene puts it, 'The mystic way is the spiritual way, open to all, participated in by the many, fully realised by the few' (*Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* [New York: Crossroad, 1990], 5). Therefore, Underhill's discussions concerning mystical theology are relevant to a treatment of the spiritual life, and vice versa.

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 198–199. When Underhill writes of Reality, with a capital 'R', she is describing Reality as it truly exists, infused with the presence of the Divine. Unfortunately most people encounter reality, with a lower-case 'r'—reality as it is perceived before the lens of perception is cleansed through a process of purgation. See Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (Columbus, Oh: Ariel Press, 1986), 173–191.

misconceptions or misplaced desires.¹⁴ Thus, although purgation involves stripping away certain aspects of the self, it also brings a profound sense of freedom as false attachments are cast aside and no longer impede the self's pursuit of the infinite.¹⁵

When the bodies of the ascetics are understood in relation to this idea of purgation, their injuries communicate symbolically, just as the injuries of the victims of war or torture do. They can be seen to conform to Tillich's account of the nature of symbols. First, the injuries of the ascetics can be seen as pointing beyond themselves to the idea that for the Christian, relationship with God is fundamental to human living, and that all its other aspects are in the service of this relationship. They remind Christians that less-than-ultimate concerns can distract them from fostering their relationship with the Divine, and that they need to eliminate such diversions from their lives. Secondly, the injured bodies participate in the theological reality this implies since they are part of the process by which ascetics have realised, experienced and communicated the spiritual need to eliminate distractions. Thirdly, the bodies reveal deeper levels of this theological principle: the lengths to which ascetics are willing to go demonstrate how important eliminating distractions is for them. Fourthly, when other people see the bodies of ascetics they may learn something about themselves—about the distractions in their lives and about their own commitment or lack of it. Fifthly, although ascetics choose their way of life freely, the purification which is their goal communicates at a level deeper than reflective consciousness, and they do not deliberately create symbols to be interpreted by others. Finally, a time may come when their bodies cease altogether to function as symbolic communicators of meaning.

The bodies of the ascetics ... communicate symbolically

In any discussion of purification of the self, however, we need to be careful not to interpret such practices as merely preparatory to a more mature, or higher-level, spirituality. I believe that the

¹⁴ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210–212. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 95–102.

¹⁵ Although Underhill identifies the period of purgation as a distinct phase on the mystical path of conversion, purgation, illumination and union, she recognises that ascetic practice often continues after spiritual distractions are removed. Instances of asceticism subsequent to the stage of purgation, however, are an acknowledgment, in light of the clarity resulting from the stage of purification, that human beings always fall short of spiritual perfection and thus more work can always be done (Underhill, *Mysticism*, 204). Her point in interpreting purgation as a step in the mystic path is not that such cleansing of the soul comes to an end, but that those impediments which block advancement to the next phase, that of illumination, are removed.

asceticism associated with purgation is sometimes seen to view the body as spiritually important only until it can be defeated. Such a notion, I contend, runs counter to Underhill's mystical theology. Purification of the body is important because the body is part of human spirituality, and a proper relationship with the body must be maintained, as it must with other elements of our spirituality. Just as issues such as the desire for financial success or social standing distract some individuals from their interior lives, the body too is capable of being a diversion. For ascetics who have established a proper relationship with their bodies, the next stage of Underhill's spiritual path is open, and the body is no longer a distraction but an integral part of their spirituality. The body is not limited to a preparatory role in the spiritual life.

Asceticism as an Affirmation of the Body

There is a second significance that the church tradition has seen in ascetic practice: through asceticism the body becomes a means for individuals to encounter God. This is illustrated by the lives of women mystics in the medieval period, particularly in relation to food, and by a connection often drawn in women's spiritual writing between suffering and redemption. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Late medieval theology, as is well known, located the saving moment of Christian history less in Christ's resurrection than in his crucifixion'.¹⁶ The more I suffer, the reasoning was, the more I experience the redemption wrought by Christ.

For medieval women mystics, however, a problem existed because of the lack of control they experienced over their lives. They were considered to be inferior to men, and their role consisted primarily in serving men. This arrangement was exemplified in their relationship with food. Although women bore the burden of preparing and serving food for the men, they were often physically absent from the consumption of food during feasts, and in some cases they were obliged to watch while the men consumed the fruits of their labour.

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women', in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 149.



January, *from* Le compost et kalandrier des bergers, 1499

Ironically, however, the subservient role of women with regard to food provided them with a means by which they could exert control over their lives. Although men controlled the economic resources of the household, women controlled the preparation of meals. During the medieval period, allowing a woman in the family to starve would be a source of great embarrassment for the male head of household, because he would be failing to provide for those over whom he ruled. Therefore, hunger strikes were effective means by which women could exert influence over men.¹⁷

¹⁷ Bynum, 'Fast, Feast, and Flesh', 146–147, 149.

This source of control for medieval women was not limited to household affairs, however: it took on religious significance as women connected it with their spiritual development. The spiritual discipline of fasting enabled women to participate in the connection between suffering and spirituality. Through the suffering that resulted from the refusal to eat, women could encounter the saving reality of Christ more directly. Rather than being a rejection of the body, the fasting of medieval women was an acknowledgment of the body as a vehicle through which the spiritual life might be lived.¹⁸ In this context, to remove the body from the realm of religious experience would be to deny one means by which spiritual growth can occur, and possibly to obstruct one's relationship with the Divine.

Such an understanding of women's spirituality in the medieval period underscores the notion that bodily spirituality is not limited to a preparatory spiritual stage. Rather, the body played a significant role in the religious lives of medieval women because it was an aspect of their lives over which they had control. Instead of encountering God as men dictated, women were able to lead spiritual lives on their own terms.

My point here is not to advocate the medieval position that physical suffering leads to deeper spirituality, as medieval women and men held. I believe that, rather than promoting respect for the body, the idea that more suffering leads to a deeper encounter with Christ and understanding of him encourages harsh treatment of the body. *The body can serve as a means to encounter God* My contention is that medieval women were acting upon an important spiritual truth—that the body can serve as a means for people to encounter God. This truth, however, does not require that people of faith today imitate the women of the Middle Ages. Once the body is recognised as an avenue for spiritual experience, there are any number of actions that may reflect that truth. Today, rather than using hunger strikes, people may celebrate the loving

¹⁸ Although my concern in this article is with the role of the body in ascetic practice, the body played a significant role in other areas of women's spirituality as well. As Bynum notes, women in the Christian tradition have experienced much more frequently than men such bodily experiences as levitation, ecstatic nosebleeds and catatonic seizures in connection with their spiritual lives. Additionally, although only two men are reported to have received the stigmata (Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio), dozens of women are reported to have experienced the five wounds of Christ. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 186–187.

presence of God through such practices as tantra, liturgical dance and participating in the Eucharist.

The Asceticism of Henry Suso as Substantiation of Meaning

I shall now turn to the life of the German mystic Blessed Henry Suso for an example of how the bodies of ascetics are able to express particular theological ideas. Suso has long been recognised as one of the most extreme examples of the ascetic life. For over twenty years he engaged in such practices as carrying a cross on his back with nails that dug into his skin and wearing a hair shirt with nails on the inside. Suso's ascetic practices were so severe that they often overshadow the message of his mystical writings. William James, for example, describes Suso's ascetic practices at length in his classic study of religious experience, but limits his discussion of Suso's long post-ascetic life to a single footnote.¹⁹ Suso is, unfortunately, better known for his self-flagellation than for his often beautiful theology, although his asceticism and his theology are deeply intertwined. His theological insights and spiritual visions would not have been possible without his ascetic practices, and these severe practices would seem like senseless masochism without their fruits. I contend that these practices communicate to us today not the denial of the body, but the importance of right relation with one's body.

In Evelyn Underhill's view, the mystical path begins with an 'awakening of the self', or mystical conversion.²⁰ Certain moments in life are charged with extraordinary intensity, and these experiences of profound pain, or beauty, or deep emotion awaken the individual to deeper levels of Reality.²¹ The inner balance of the self is disrupted and must be re-examined; conversion occurs as a movement of the centre of the self towards the transcendent other.²²

For Henry Suso, this awakening happened around the age of eighteen. In his third-person auto-hagiography he writes:

The first beginnings of his life as the servant occurred when he was eighteen years old. Although he had worn the habit of his order

¹⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, edited by Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 303, 306–310, 349.

²⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 176.

²¹ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 34.

²² Underhill, *Mysticism*, 176–177.

for five years, his spirit was full of distraction. If God would keep him from those many failings, which might compromise his reputation, then, it seemed to him, things would in general not be so bad. But God somehow protected him from [persisting in] this [attitude] by his noticing an emptiness within himself whenever he gave his attention to things he desired. It seemed to him that there must be somehow something else that would calm his undisciplined heart, and his restlessness caused him torment. He continually felt something nagging at him, but he did not know how to help himself until God in his kindness freed him from this by causing a sudden conversion.²³

Suso's description is marked by elements of mystical conversion. He feels a sort of emptiness in his life that cannot be filled until God calls him to be a servant of the Divine, a role with which Suso identified so strongly



Fifteenth-century woodcut of Henry Suso

²³ Henry Suso, *The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, edited and translated by Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 64.

that he used it as the title of his life story. Following his mystical conversion, Suso embarked on the second phase of his mystical journey: purification.

Suso's purification of the self involved such severe treatment of his body that it often overshadows for commentators the wisdom received in the course of his mystical life. For Suso, the goal of the spiritual life was detachment, which 'consists in freely divesting oneself of possessiveness and losing this self by withdrawing into Christ's self'.²⁴ Reaching such a state of union with Christ that his individuality disappeared required extensive training for Suso because of his 'lively nature'.²⁵ The primary element of such training involved the rigorous imitation of Christ; and Suso principally lived out this imitation by physical suffering representing the cross.²⁶ Thus, his life was marked by practices as extreme as carrying a cross studded with nails, but also as benign as drinking five times at meals because of the five wounds received by Christ.²⁷ Through such actions, Suso sought to remove everything from his life that was not focused on the attainment of union with Christ.

Suso's asceticism ended at the age of forty, when,

God made it clear to him that such severity and all these different practices together were nothing more than a good beginning and a breaking of the undisciplined man within him.²⁸

Because bodily distractions no longer interfered with his pursuit of detachment, Suso was finally in a position to advance towards his goal through interior development.

What then is to be made of Suso's attitude towards the body? One possible answer is that he felt it necessary to beat his body into submission so that he could continue on the path to true detachment. Such an answer would be problematic in light of theological concerns regarding the importance of the body: the body itself should not be treated only as a distraction. Another, and I feel appropriate, option is to regard the goal of Suso's asceticism as not to defeat his body, but rather to come into a right relationship

²⁴ Bernard McGinn, introduction to Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, 30.

²⁵ McGinn, introduction to Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, 30; Suso, *The Exemplar*, 87.

²⁶ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 316–317.

²⁷ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 88–91, 76–77.

²⁸ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 97.

with it, a relationship that encouraged—rather than inhibited—detachment.

The first answer, moreover, may be dismissed in the light of Suso's response when God brings his ascetic practices to an end:

From now, on dear Lord, I will lead an unperturbed and free life and be good to myself. I will completely satisfy my thirst with wine and with water From now on it is time for me to relax.²⁹

This shows that Suso did not advocate the defeat or punishment of the body; his concern was only that his response to bodily desires should be appropriate, and should not distract one from the spiritual life. A young woman, coming to Suso for advice, 'asked him to tell her why he had practised such severe austerities and yet did not want to advise them for her or others'. He responded that severe asceticism is not only unnecessary for some individuals, but that,

... in general, austerity practised in moderation is better than immoderate practices. But if one finds it difficult to find a middle road, it is still more sensible to remain a little on the *easier* side than to venture too far in the other direction.³⁰

In chapter five of his *Little Book of Truth*, Suso emphasizes that the imitation of Christ which should lead to a life of detachment involves both interior and exterior elements. Of those who concentrate solely on the interior imitation, he writes the following:

Those people who saw him from inside and not from outside signify people who look upon the life of Christ with the intellect in a contemplative manner and not as a model for action; but they should be transcending their own nature through practices that imitate this image. They interpret everything from this point of view, which supports their enjoyment of natural pleasure and their exercising unrestrained freedom.³¹

But he also criticises those who emphasize the exterior imitation to the exclusion of the interior:

²⁹ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 99.

³⁰ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 140, my emphasis.

³¹ Suso, *The Exemplar*, 317.

Some others saw [the life of Christ] only from the outside and not according to its inside, and these seemed hard and severe. Based on this perspective they engage in harsh practices, living carefully and presenting in public a respectable and holy manner of life; but they overlook the interior of Christ. His way of life was gentle and generous, but these people are destructive and judge others, assuming that everything not done their way is wrong.³²

These extracts suggest that for Suso both the inner and outer elements of life are essential for the individual who wishes to achieve the life of detachment, and his whole life story tells his readers that both elements must be purified. It is not the case in Suso's theology that one leaves bodily concerns behind once physical purgation stops. Rather, the body continues to be an integral part of the imitation of Christ that leads to detachment. Once Suso had overcome the 'lively nature' of his 'undisciplined man', he was able to move on to the interior imitation because he had achieved a proper relation with his body. This idea is communicated not only through his sermons and writings, but also, symbolically, through his body as it is described in those writings. Suso's body symbolizes for his readers today the importance of achieving a proper relationship with the body for the spiritual life.

The Example of Suso

The example of Henry Suso serves to illustrate the role of the body in spiritual development in three ways. First, it demonstrates the importance of achieving a right relationship with the body: for seventeen years this struggle dominated Suso's life, testifying to the significance he attached to his purification. Secondly, it shows how the body plays more than a merely preparatory role in spiritual growth. Once he had completed his purgation, Suso recognised that the body continues to be important and emphasized the connection between the exterior and interior lives. Thirdly, I believe that in his response to the young woman Suso acknowledged that he might have gone too far in his purification of the body. Recognising the dangers of excess in the stage of purgation, Suso encouraged her to be cautious. It was

³² Suso, *The Exemplar*, 317.

only after his own purgation ended that he could understand these dangers and communicate the risks to others.

When interpreted as a symbol, Suso's ascetic life points away from his practices themselves to these three ideas: right relationship with the body is an important element of spiritual development; the body continues to be important even after purgation; and real dangers threaten the wellbeing of those who take asceticism too far. Moreover, Suso could only come to an understanding of these ideas by experiencing purgation himself. Without his asceticism, his spirituality would have been different; his ascetic practices are a part of his wisdom.

Those who turn to Suso's life for spiritual edification and growth learn about these ideas quite differently from how they would have learnt if they had only examined the issue conceptually. Encountering the self-inflicted suffering of Suso through the common experience of bodily discomfort reveals the importance of these ideas on an affective, as well as an intellectual, level. And those who examine Suso's asceticism may come to new realisations about themselves. Perhaps they have not devoted adequate attention to the elimination of distractions in their lives. Maybe they have neglected the body as a significant element in their spirituality. Or, possibly, they have gone too far.

In his auto-hagiography Suso presents himself as an example of the spiritual life, but he does not consciously interpret his body itself as a communicator of meaning. Nevertheless, the profundity of his spiritual wisdom, in which his asceticism played a part, has deeply affected people for centuries. A time may come when his asceticism is no longer capable of functioning symbolically, and Suso will only be viewed as an historical oddity or fade away altogether, but I hope that explorations such as this one will help to forestall that loss.

In sum, symbolic interpretation of the bodies of ascetics allows for a positive interpretation of asceticism, one which recognises and addresses the concerns of those theologians who argue that any harm to the body is harmful to the human person. By approaching the bodies of the mystics as symbolic substantiations of meaning, it is possible to approach the self-inflicted injuries of ascetics such as Henry Suso and medieval women mystics not as actions to be copied but as the communication of truths regarding the spiritual life. This approach rescues the ascetics from the status of historical curiosities,

because even the extreme ascetic practices of past individuals may be transformed into vehicles of wisdom for all who encounter their injured bodies through their writings. They have much to tell the Church today, but this message is no longer that of beating one's body into submission, but of realising the importance of removing spiritual distractions and of the role of the body as a means of encountering God.

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