

Embodiment Faith

Throughout the history of mankind, the body has always been essential to religious thought and spiritual expression, serving as both fascination and controversy. Is the body sacred, or is it a source of temptation and sin demanding discipline and denial? This tension shapes religious thought across cultures, where the body is simultaneously celebrated as holy and burdened as flawed. The body has been seen as sacred, a vessel for divine connection, and simultaneously as something to be denied, controlled or even punished. Despite these conflicting views, the body remains a site for spiritual expression, acting as a foundation for how faith is both expressed and understood. Whether through ascetic practices in medieval Christianity or the celebration of the body as sacred in indigenous spirituality, the body becomes a medium of spiritual expression. Robert Fuller, in *Religion and the Body*, highlights the body's role as an essential medium of religious expression, symbolizing both the connection between the physical and spiritual aspects of life and the tension between bodily desires and spiritual goals. This foundational perspective sets the stage for understanding how two distinct traditions, medieval Christian mysticism and Indigenous spirituality frame the body as both sacred and transformative. In medieval Christianity, the female body became a focal point for ascetic practices, mystic visions, and pathways to divine connection, as seen in the life of Mary of Oignies. Her experiences reflect how the body, through self-discipline and self-denial, could transcend and unite with the divine. Conversely, within Indigenous spiritual traditions like those of the Blackfoot and Lakota communities, the body is revered as an important link to the spiritual realm. Women's roles, especially in certain ceremonies and rituals such as the Blackfoot Sun Dance, emphasize the body's innate sacredness and power to sustain communal and spiritual harmony. By exploring these traditions, this project explores the comparative role of the body in these traditions, analyzing how cultural beliefs and religious practices shape views of the body as an embodiment of faith and a vessel for spirituality, offering a powerful lens to understand the interplay between spirituality and gender.

Theoretical Framework: The Body and Religious Practices

The relationship between religion and the body is deeply intertwined, shaping how people engage with their faith and connect with the divine. As Robert Fuller explains in his article "Religion and the Body", the body is not simply a vessel in religious practices but an active participant. Fuller examines religion as a cultural force that shapes attitudes toward the body, particularly through practices such as dietary restrictions, extreme fasting, bodily mortification, and ritual movements. He emphasizes that these practices are not merely symbolic, but they actively shape religious experiences, evoking emotions like reverence, humility, and connection to the divine.

Fuller argues that

“Religions, after all, quite literally map themselves onto our bodies. They invoke cosmic authority for highly specific commandments regarding our diets, clothing, sexual behavior, healing practices, and funeral customs. Ritual behavior enacts these worldviews by requiring us to adopt bodily postures (e.g., prostration, kneeling, sitting in yogic positions) deemed appropriate to our ontological status.”

These bodily actions, like kneeling, prostrating, or assuming other ritual postures, are outward expressions of inward beliefs. They serve as tools for enhancing spiritual engagement, allowing them to form a deeper connection with their faith. Fuller highlights how religious practices shape bodily movements, and in turn, how these movements influence spiritual experiences. Both medieval Christianity and Indigenous spiritual traditions rely on the body to physically manifest belief. This reinforces the idea that the body is not only a vessel but an active participant in worship and spiritual engagement. Fuller also explores how religious expressions are influenced by the body's innate response to its environment. For instance, synchronized movements in religious rituals, like dancing, can trigger neurological responses that foster a sense of connection. These responses deepen collective engagement and enhance the overall spiritual experience. In Indigenous communities, ritual postures and communal dances serve to create solidarity, while in medieval Christianity, shared acts of penance or prayer reinforce communal identity and devotion. Practices like fasting, bodily mortification, and other forms of self-discipline utilize the body as a tool to purify the spirit and draw closer to the divine. This is particularly significant for medieval Christian women, who engaged in ascetic practices as a way to elevate their spiritual lives and deepen their connection to God. These acts of bodily control were not just about self-discipline, but they were essential to their spiritual identity and devotion. Fuller's perspective directly connects to my focus on how both medieval Christianity and Indigenous spirituality use the body as a sacred instrument. In medieval Christianity, ascetic practices such as fasting, dietary restrictions, and bodily mortification were central to women's religious lives. These practices purified the body to align it with divine will, allowing for a more profound connection with God. Similarly, in Indigenous spirituality, bodily movements like ritual dances or ceremonial postures play a vital role in connecting with spiritual forces. These actions are not merely symbolic, but they reflect a deep understanding that the body is an active participant in expressing faith. Fuller's ideas about the body and religious practices show how bodily actions and ascetic practices are essential for expressing faith in both medieval Christian and Indigenous traditions. By examining these practices through a cultural lens, I will explore how both traditions, particularly for women, use the body to foster spiritual connection. This supports my thesis, demonstrating that the body is central to religious life in both medieval Christianity and Indigenous spirituality, and how these bodily practices help women connect with the divine. This connection between the body and religious practices is foundational to understanding how the body acts as a sacred instrument in both medieval Christian and Indigenous spiritual contexts.

Mary of Oigines' Role in Ascetic Practices: The Body as a vessel for Divine Connection

Introduction

In medieval Christianity, the body was seen as both a vessel of temptation and a tool for spiritual transformation. For women, this duality was especially pronounced, as the Church's teachings on ascetic practices often intersected with societal expectations around female purity and piety. Asceticism, the act of denying oneself physical comforts to achieve spiritual growth, was not only a means of devotion but also a way for women to assert their spiritual agency in a patriarchal society. The body, rather than being a mere vessel of earthly desires, became a tool for spiritual transformation, where bodily affliction could mirror Christ's suffering and facilitate direct communion with the divine.

The life of Mary of Oignies

Mary of Oignies, a prominent figure in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, embodied this radical form of asceticism. Her extreme fasting, self-inflicted mortifications, and bodily afflictions were not acts of mere piety but expressions of her deep spiritual devotion. For Mary, her body became a sacred vessel, through which she could share in the suffering of Christ and experience a more intimate connection with the divine. It went beyond mere religious duty; they became profound expressions of her mystical experiences and spiritual rebellion against societal constraints. She believed that through these extreme bodily practices, she could draw closer to Christ, sharing in His suffering and experiencing a direct connection with the divine. In her eyes, her physical afflictions, whether through fasting or self-inflicted pain, were not signs of weakness, but rather evidence of divine favor and spiritual depth.

Mary's asceticism was not just about suffering for the sake of it, it was a deliberate, spiritual act that allowed her to transcend the physical realm. For Mary, her body was both the instrument of her pain and the medium through which she communed with God. Her ascetic practices, like extreme fasting and isolation, were acts of spiritual purification that helped her embody Christ's suffering and refine her soul. She saw her body as a sacred space through which she could enter into a deeper union with God. It wasn't simply about denying physical desire, it was about elevating her body as an offering, transforming it into a vessel for divine connection. Her ascetic practices were not just acts of personal devotion; they were communal expressions of faith, offering a tangible manifestation of divine power to her community. Several holy women of the time were believed to exude miraculous fluids, like oil or milk. This ability to produce life-giving substances was seen as a manifestation of their spiritual power, further connecting the female body with nourishment and healing. Mary was specifically known for her excessive crying. Mary's excessive weeping became another profound expression of divine power. It was far from being perceived as weakness, her tears were seen as a spiritual gift from God, nourishing and transformative. James of Vitry, her biographer, described her tears as 'her refreshing,' a source of spiritual renewal that brought her closer to Christ. When a priest once sought to silence her weeping during Mass, Mary's prayer caused the priest himself to be overcome with tears, illustrating how her expressions of faith could impact others in the

community. Mary's excessive weeping wasn't merely a private act of devotion but served as a shared spiritual experience, resonating with those around her and teaching them true compassion. This communal resonance of her tears further emphasizes the way Mary's body became a bridge between the physical and the divine. Her physical suffering, which at times seemed unbearable, became a conduit through which the divine was made present to others. They reinforced the idea that the body could not only be a vessel for spiritual purification but also a source of divine grace for the community.

The Body as a Vessel for Spiritual Expression in Indigenous Traditions

In Indigenous traditions, particularly within the Blackfoot and Lakota communities, the body holds profound significance as a vessel for spiritual connection, expression, and communal unity. Unlike medieval Christianity, where ascetic practices often emphasize suffering to transcend the physical, Indigenous traditions approach the body as sacred, reflecting the deep interconnectedness of human nature and the divine. In these cultures, the body is not something to be overcome or purified but is celebrated as a channel for spiritual power. This approach recognizes that we are deeply connected to the earth and the divine, and that the physical body is an essential part of this relationship. Rather than viewing the body as a barrier to spiritual enlightenment like medieval Christianity, Indigenous traditions understand that the body plays an important role in connecting individuals to both the spiritual world and their community. Both the Blackfoot and Lakota communities recognize women's inherent spiritual power, deeply tied to their roles as intermediaries between the divine and the community. This power transcends their ability of reproduction and is expressed through their participation in sacred ceremonies, control over ritual objects, and symbolic roles that sustain the physical and spiritual well-being of their communities.

The Blackfoot Community

In the Blackfoot tradition, women are revered for their innate spiritual power, their ability to give birth, and their role as mediators between the spiritual realm and their community. This is particularly evident in their exclusive control over sacred medicine bundles, objects that are central to Blackfoot ceremonies. Only women are entrusted with the handling and opening of these sacred bundles, a practice that highlights their role as intermediaries, channeling spiritual power between the divine and the community. The Okan (Sun Dance), the Blackfoot's most significant ceremony, cannot occur without the leadership of a holy woman, a priestess who undertakes demanding spiritual work on behalf of her people. Her role requires extreme sacrifices, including fasting, prayer, and giving up her personal wealth and comforts for the good of the community. Through these embodied actions, she channels spiritual energy that brings blessings of prosperity and health to her people. This spiritual devotion shows the Blackfoot communities' understanding of the body as a vessel for spiritual power. The act of sacrifice through the body isn't just about physical survival, but about invoking divine presence to sustain and nurture the community. This embodied spirituality is a direct contrast to the medieval

Christian view, where asceticism often involved transcending or denying the body to attain spiritual purity. In Blackfoot traditions, however, the body acts as a vessel for spiritual power and a means of invoking the divine. The community's reliance on the spiritual power of women reflects the view in which the body's actions and sacrifices are vital to maintaining both the physical and spiritual well-being of their community.

The Lakota Community

In Lakota tradition, women's bodies are seen as powerful spiritual vessels, much like in Blackfoot culture. The White Buffalo Calf Woman, a key figure in Lakota traditions, embodies virtues like generosity and hospitality. Her arrival marks a pivotal moment in Lakota spirituality, bringing the sacred pipe and rituals like the Sun Dance. Her story shows the vital role women play in transmitting spiritual power and maintaining balance within the community. While the Sun Dance is led by a male intercessor (the *wicasa wakan*), women hold essential roles. They prepare food, organize gift giveaways, and offer spiritual guidance to female dancers. These actions reflect the virtues of the White Buffalo Calf Woman and emphasize women's integral role in the spiritual health of the community. The story of the White Buffalo Calf Woman continues to guide Lakota women, inspiring them to embody virtues such as generosity, industriousness, and hospitality. Her story reinforces the profound connection between women, nature, and the spiritual realm, positioning the female body as a sacred vessel capable of channeling spiritual energy and blessings for the community. Women are also entrusted with the sacred pipe, which is carefully cared for and passed down through generations. An interesting aspect of Lakota spirituality is the role of young, virtuous girls in the Sun Dance. These virgins are chosen to chop down the cottonwood tree, which becomes the sacred center pole. This task is symbolic, representing the tree of life, and honors women's spiritual significance. Women also protect the sacred tree during the ceremony, laying down their blankets to shield it from touching the earth, symbolizing their role as protectors of life. In some modern Sun Dances, women have begun to take on more physically demanding roles, like being pierced and tied to the sacred pole, challenging traditional gender boundaries. This shift reflects a growing understanding of women's spiritual power within the Lakota community.

Comparative Analysis: Embodied Faith

Both medieval Christian and Indigenous traditions viewed the body, particularly the female body, as a crucial element in embodying faith and expressing spiritual connection. However, their approaches are significantly different, due to distinct theological understandings and cultural contexts. In medieval Christianity, particularly in the case of women like Mary of Oignies, the body is often seen as a site of temptation, requiring discipline, mortification, and denial to achieve spiritual transcendence. Women's ascetic practices serve as pathways to divine union. Through these acts, the body is both purified and transformed into a sacred vessel capable of communing with God. However, this emphasis on asceticism was not solely driven by a desire to escape the physical realm. Medieval Christian women also saw their suffering as a way to mirror Christ's suffering. Conversely, Indigenous spirituality specifically in Blackfoot and

Lakota traditions on the other hand, see the body as sacred instrument which is essential from connecting the physical to the spiritual world and a medium through which blessings are brought to their communities. While their expressions of spiritual power differ, these traditions share a common ground that challenge the notion of the female body as merely a vessel and instead affirm its profound connection to the sacred, recognizing its potential to channel divine energy, bestow blessings, and ensure the continuity of life itself. Analyzing both traditions highlights the universal ways in which the body in certain practices serve as a powerful connection to the divine, showing the embodiment of faith within different religious contexts. By recognizing this shared reverence for the body, we get to appreciate the complexity of different religious traditions and show the significance of the physical body in spiritual experiences and devotion.