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# MYSTICAL CATAPLEXY AND THE MAMMALIAN ROOTS OF AN ARCHAIC RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

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## SUMMARY

The religious prostration derives from submissive behavior in animals, as pleas to God for mercy derive from the separation cry of infant animals. The neuroanatomical systems responsible for the motor routine of submission also mediate lacrimation, whose religious expression is penitential weeping. *Mystical cataplexy* is a suitable term for an archaic religious response whose motoric expression is the prostration, whose perceptual aspect is hallucinatory potential, whose emotional dimension is characterized by fear and awe, and whose internal milieu of intense autonomic arousal may lead to piloerection and profuse weeping. The responsible structures are frontal and deeply-situated; all represent early phyletic deposits.

The motor routine of the full prostration embodies worshipful obedience and must surely antedate historical images of supplicants bowing or prostrate before a god or a king. Its evolutionary roots trace to submissive behavior in animals: the cowering, lowering, and flattening that follow instinctive patterns of flexion (Burkert, 1996). Vocal expressions of submission secure food and safety and establish vital social bonds. The developmental precedent is the “separation cry” of infant mammals. MacLean (1987) assigned the cry to the thalamocingulate division of the limbic system, anterior cingulate in particular. Related basal ganglia, limbic striatum in particular, mediate display behavior and complex instinctual routines in animals. The spontaneous prostration before godly power is a comparable routine; the accompanying plea for mercy is analogous to the animal cry. The thalamocingulate division engages lacrimation, which is formalized in the religious practice of penitential weeping (*penthos*) and released in devotionally-oriented mystical experiences (Bradford, 2008; Hausherr, 1982; Patton & Hawley, 2005). “Lord, have mercy!” is the most ancient prayer of Christian monasticism (Hausherr, 1978).

Submissive behavior has been refined in humans and compounded with abstract meanings. A routine of high automaticity acquired a semi-voluntary character. The smooth animal enactment fragmented into isolated segments, as required for a bipedal creature designed for the upright posture. The animal routine is holistic, a single flowing movement; the kinetic melody in humans is angular, matching the segmentation. Multiple venues of dominance-and-submission engage the animal behavior. In humans, the triggers are fewer in number and the threshold of activation has been raised as high as heaven.

Historically, the prostration has been a regular element of liturgy and private prayer. In the monastic tradition, dozens or hundreds of prostrations might be completed in sequence. An early father enacted eighteen-hundred (in sets of one hundred) on frequent visits to a pilgrimage site (Wortley, 1992:83). When the great medieval mystic, Symeon the New Theologian, hallucinated the light he identified as God, he “fell prostrate on the ground,” reverting to an instinctually-shaped procedural memory whose physical expression was triggered by the felt proximity of holiness (deCatanzaro, 1980:200). *Mystical cataplexy* is a suitable term.

Here is a vivid description of Symeon’s:

*When a man has within him the light of the all Holy Spirit, he cannot bear the sight and so he falls prostrate on the ground. He cries out and shakes, driven out of his senses by immense fear. He is like someone who sees or feels something beyond nature, reason, and understanding. (McGuckin, 1982, p. 77)*

The “light of the all Holy Spirit” may refer to either the vision of the luminous deity or a galvanizing emotional awareness of the fearful and love-inspiring presence of God. In some instances, a seizure-related aura has probably been in question. But lesser (non-pathological) expressions of this dramatic enactment are found in minor rituals of submission, of worship, obedience, and humble welcome, such as raising the arms lateral to the body with

the elbows flexed and the hands open and supinated. This is the *orans* (praying) posture portrayed in ancient pictures and found today in certain religious settings (Murray & Murray, 1998). These are derivative expressions of mystical cataplexy; one might say they are degenerate forms of mysticism. The integral and archaic form of mystical cataplexy fragmented, its automaticity, emotional intensity, and hallucinatory pressure dissipating as its later motor expressions came to favor distal over midline musculature.

Mystical cataplexy is an archaic religious response characterized by fear, awe, and hallucinatory potential, and whose internal milieu of intense autonomic arousal may lead to piloerection and profuse weeping (Otto, 1958; van der Leeuw, 1963). The response is automatic, stereotypical, ancient, widespread, and counts as a mystical universal of a motoric kind. These features appear in many of Symeon's mystical accounts and are found elsewhere in devotionally-oriented mystical traditions. The mediating structures are frontal and deeply-situated; all represent early phyletic deposits. Divine epiphanies enforce the continuity of human experience with its early mammalian roots. Not only is God parental: He is a superior animal.

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