

The Stigmata (and Religious Phenomena in General) Are a Tradition-Inspired Product of Human Psycho-Physical Participation in the Unity and Ultimate Divinity of Reality, and Not a "Miracle" or "Proof" of an "Outside" God

The stigmata are spontaneously appearing wounds (usually, bleeding wounds) on the bodies of individuals, the majority of whom adhere to Christianity (although this is not always the case).

The most famous individual who showed these signs in the twentieth century is Padre Pio, a Catholic priest who died in 1968. Padre Pio is shown and discussed in the documentary entitled "A Modern Miracle?".¹ But many other individuals, who are simply ordinary people within the Christian tradition, also appear in this same documentary. Their various wounds are shown, and so forth.

In the typical case of a stigmatic, a kind of spotting or bruising appears on the palms, and (perhaps) also on the backs of the hands, and sometimes on the feet, and sometimes around the head. After the spots or bruises appear, the individual starts to bleed, either periodically or (more or less) continuously. Sometimes a wound also appears on the right side of the body, or on the left side. Traditionally, it is said that wounds on the right side of the body reproduce the wound that Jesus of Nazareth reportedly received from a lance or a spear being thrust into the right side of his body after his crucifixion (while he was yet suspended on the cross), but some of the individuals pictured in this documentary also show wounds elsewhere on the body, including the left side of the body. There are, in fact, various and different combinations of wounds, and not all of the most typical wounds appear in all cases.

One individual who is shown and interviewed a number of times in this documentary is a fairly young man who is unable to eat, apparently because of a tendency toward extreme nausea that is associated with his stigmatic wounds—and, therefore, he receives nutrition from a tube inserted into his nose. Female stigmatics of one or another degree of sanctity are also shown. And some of the individuals shown also indicate that they have had visions of one kind or another.

In the documentary, in addition to the showing and interviewing of individuals who manifest stigmatic signs, there are also a number of interviews with people who offer interpretations of this phenomenon. The interpretations offered are characteristically "Western", in that they are (in general) attempts to figure out how manifestations such as the stigmata could occur due to purely psychological causes. In general, these interpreters typically intend to suggest or argue that phenomena which are regarded by some to be of Divine origin are merely products of the mind and the brain. Such interpreters reason that, if similar phenomena can be produced by hypnosis (as has been demonstrated in some special cases), then the spontaneous appearance of such phenomena (without hypnosis) must (similarly) be merely a result of an individual's psychological (or mental, or brain-mind) inclinations. Therefore, such interpreters tend to argue that an individual with a certain psychological disposition, together with an association with Christianity, could develop the spontaneous wounds of a stigmatic—and, in that case, the wounds would have developed simply on that psychological and cultural basis, and (therefore) without any "outside" Divine "Influence" involved. And, of course, that can, indeed, be the case.

But what is being displayed by these interpreters—and, in general, by this documentary, as an interpretation of the stigmata—is the present-time philosophical poverty of the West. The West in the "modern" era simply does not have the necessary philosophical basis to rightly understand and evaluate religious phenomena. There is, in the "modern" West, a presumption that, if they are to be taken as indications that religion and the Divine are to be taken seriously, religious phenomena (whether physical or non-physical) should not have anything to do with the individual's mind, but should be caused entirely by some sort of Divine "Intender" (the Divine as "Will", making wounds appear on an individual's body), and that only such Divinely "Intended" phenomena can legitimately be said to be religious. In fact, this point of view represents a rather naive, popular, and conventional notion of the Divine altogether, without great philosophical depth.

In the West, the popular and conventional idea of the Divine is that the Divine is the creative "Other", and human beings are presumed to be entirely separate from that "Other". Indeed, the Western religious disposition is utterly based on the notion of the inherent separation between the human being and the Divine. Therefore, there is an idea in the "modern" West that, even in the religious life (and, certainly, in the study, investigation, interpretation, and evaluation of religion and religious phenomena), one is supposed to remain detached in mind (mentally dissociated from the Divine, even dissociated from belief, and even dissociated from response), and that, in the midst of such steadfastly maintained unresponsiveness and separateness, somehow the Divine is supposed to make Itself known, and produce miracles, and prove Its own Existence. And, of course, the Divine does not do that—because the Divine (or Reality Itself) does not function (or Reveal Itself) in response to such a limited and nonparticipatory approach to Reality.

The Divine is not merely an objective "Other", from which the human being is inherently and utterly separate. The human being always already and utterly inheres in the Divine. Therefore, this principle must be accepted as a fundamental of the religious life: The mind of the human being is supposed to participate in the religious life (and in the study, the investigation, the interpretation, and the evaluation of religion and religious phenomena). The mind is supposed to be changed, and allowed to generate religious phenomena (even physically), by virtue of the exercise of religious devotion.

"Modern" Western interpreters of religion (and of even the entirety of conditionally manifested reality) generally tend to argue that conditionally manifested existence is only materiality and separateness—and not a great (and even psycho-physical, rather than merely physical) unity, The Stigmata (and Religious Phenomena in General) arising in an Ultimate (and Self-Evidently Divine) Oneness. Such interpreters are, anciently and traditionally, called "materialists"—and, in the "modern" era, "scientific materialists". Scientific materialists also tend to argue that anything that occurs in the case of the human being is brain-based—as if the fact that the brain has something to do with all of human experience (or that the physical body, with all of its components, has something to do with all of human experience) were not known to the previous generations and cultures of mankind. Scientific materialists do not perceive, understand, and affirm the irreducible psycho-physical unity of conditionally manifested existence (and the inherence of that psycho-physical unity in the Self-Existing Consciousness and Self-Radiant Spiritual Oneness that is Real God, or Truth, or Ultimate Reality). Therefore, scientific materialists think they are granting a new revelation to mankind when they suggest that there are numerous and various mechanisms in the body and the brain that are directly associated with whatever kind of human experience may arise. That is all interesting, and certainly true. It has always been true! It has, even

anciently, been known to be so. And, in general, nobody would deny that it is so—nor, in general, has anyone, even among the ancients, denied that it is so. But scientific materialists think it is "news". This is because they, like even the ancient materialists, have added to this observation of the obvious a qualifying doctrine, an uninspected (and unproven) belief—which scientific materialists love to propagandize, as if it were a Divinely Revealed Message of Salvation. That doctrine (or belief) is this: "That's it! The brain, and even all the physical pieces of the body-mind—that is the entire and only source of human experience." And that scientific materialist doctrine (or belief) arises as a direct consequence of the non-participatory disposition (relative to conditionally manifested existence) associated with the analytical (or self-abstracting) posture characteristic of the scientific method.

Science is a good method for acquiring analytical knowledge of (and physical power over) natural phenomena, but it does not (otherwise) make good philosophy. The viewpoint of the scientific method is that of the entirely separated (or non-participatory) observer. By contrast, the natural and truly human viewpoint is that of the necessarily involved participant. And true philosophy, and, likewise, true religion and real Spirituality, depend upon the magnification (even the utter magnification) of the participatory capability of the human being. Because of the non-participatory orientation associated with the scientific method, the "philosophy" of scientific materialism is bereft of Truth. Scientific materialists view every thing and every one in the context of non-unity, separateness, and separativeness. Scientific materialists do not perceive, understand, or affirm the unity of conditionally manifested existence (as a psycho-physical whole that cannot be reduced to any separate part or, otherwise, reduced to mere materiality)—nor do scientific materialists Realize (and affirm the Reality of) the One that is the Source-Condition of all of conditionally manifested existence. And, as a result of these philosophical limitations, scientific materialists do not perceive, understand, and affirm that human beings (with all of the psycho-physical features that generally control or limit their experience) inherently participate in (and, on that basis, must reach and surrender into) the grand psycho-physical unity of conditionally manifested existence, and (beyond that conditionally manifested unity and design) the Ultimate Divine Singleness.

Of course all the physical structures and functions in the human brain (and in the human body-mind as a whole) are directly associated with the experiences human beings have! Those physical structures and functions are the gross designs that lie at the base (or lower order) of the total human design, which total design extends from that gross base into higher and higher orders of subtlety. But human beings are not separate in any absolute sense. Human beings arise in a grand unity and Oneness, and either they fully participate (and transcend themselves) in that unity and its Source-Condition or they participate only nominally (or in an otherwise limited, and, generally, only gross, manner). If an individual (or even an entire society) becomes philosophically bound up with egoity (and, therefore, with the notions of separateness and mere grossness, or materiality), the notion, the understanding, and the experience of the grand unity and its Ultimate Source-Oneness are lost. And, in that case, all human cogitations are reduced to the fastening of attention on the separateness and grossness of the body-mind. Not only does that affect philosophy—it affects the entire process of living. The body-mind can fasten on itself, and be utterly controlled by its own mechanical and material limitations—or it can feel beyond itself, and participate in the grand psychophysical unity and the Ultimate Source-Oneness. Those are the two most fundamental human options.

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Of course the brain conditions individual experience, and even all the structures of the bodymind condition individual experience! But the limitation proposed or represented by the bodymind mechanism can be transcended by intensifying and magnifying ego-transcending participation in the grand unity of conditionally manifested (or cosmic) existence, and by surrender of ego (or separateness) in the One Source-Condition. Therefore, rather than wallowing (self-contracted and ego-possessed) in the separateness and separativeness of egoity and its psycho-physical mechanics, human beings must be given over, by means of self-surrender, self-forgetting, self-transcendence, and the (more and more) participatory disposition. The brain itself must be made to feel beyond the skull. The nervous system must be made to feel beyond the flesh. The entire body-mind must be made to participate more and more in the Great Unity, the Great Force, the Great Consciousness, the Great (and Self-Evidently Divine) Self-Condition and Source-Condition and Event in which the human being is (with all, and in All) appearing. This is the fundamental matter for human "consideration". By means of its own submission, the mind must participate in the cosmic unity and the One Reality. And, that being done, of course changes occur in the mind, changes occur in the brain, and changes occur in the entire body—in accordance with the concepts, the images, the metaphors, and the imperatives associated with an individual's social, cultural, and religious (and otherwise sacred or philosophical) tradition (and his or her other familiarities). That is how religion and Spirituality work—not by maintaining one's separateness and the notion of "God" as separate, but by one's awakening and responding to the "secret" (or esoteric) Truth that conditionally manifested existence is a psycho-physical unity, and that the Divine (or the Ultimate Reality) is the One and Only Source-Condition of all and All (the Ground, the Essence, and the Very Self of all and All). When you rejoice in that, when you enter into true devotional exercise on that basis, then the body-mind participates. Therefore, and only by that participation, the mind is changed, the brain is changed, the body is changed. That is why people sometimes dance and sing and weep in ecstasy. Or they become silent and still. Or they hear and see profound things beyond. And their doings change, and even their appearance changes. And some may become stigmatics, and others may walk on fire, and yet others may do miracles of "mind over matter", and so on—each according to the concepts, the images, the metaphors, and the imperatives of his or her tradition, the effectiveness of his or her own self-surrender, and the degree to which he or she actually enters into the Profundity of the cosmic unity and the One Reality. In the face of such ecstasy, "modern" Western commentators typically argue that the phenomena of ecstasy are merely and only created by the brain (and its own, or material, mental activities), and that (therefore) such phenomena have nothing to do with Real God, or Truth, or Ultimate Reality. But such arguments only reveal the poverty of philosophy, the absence of the knowledge that conditionally manifested existence is a universally participatory psycho-physical unity, and the absence of the Realization (or even the intelligent presumption) that the Divine (or the One and Ultimate Reality) is the Ground, the Essence, and the Very Self of all and All.

The genuine (or religiously important) manifestation of the stigmata is certainly (and necessarily) the result of participation (mystically, psychologically, mentally, emotionally, physically, and altogether) in the concepts, images, metaphors, imperatives, and other influences of a particular (in this case, Christian) tradition. But that does not make the stigmata un-Divine. Genuine stigmata are, like all other genuine religious phenomena, a sign of psycho-physical participation, via tradition, in the cosmic unity and the Ultimate Source-Condition.

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In the Christian tradition, the principal concepts, images, metaphors, and imperatives are those of self-sacrifice and suffering and wounds—Jesus crucified, and so forth. Therefore, when Christian individuals become intensely devotionally responsive (or even, for any number of reasons, deeply open and vulnerable), it is rather inevitable that some such individuals will show psychological, emotional, and even (in one manner or another) physical signs of that suffering and those wounds. And that does not mean those signs are merely material, or un-Divine. Rather, the signs are simply a product of ecstasy within a particular tradition, in which particular concepts, images, metaphors (or symbols), and imperatives provide the basis for religious participation and religious demonstration. Therefore, a genuine case of the stigmata does not necessarily require any "Other" (whether the Divine, or a Spiritually Present Teacher, or whatever) to "Will" or "Intend" the bodily wounds. Rather, whatever else may pertain to the particular case, all that is actually required is self-giving participatory openness to the great unity and Oneness (in this case, through the categories of the Christian tradition). There are innumerable possible kinds of psycho-physically exhibited religious and Spiritual (or otherwise sacred) phenomena. When an individual moves beyond the separative (or selfcontracted and non-participatory) disposition and dramatization of the phenomenal ego-self, it is not just that the individual body-mind mechanism (in and of itself) starts doing spontaneous things. Rather, the individual body-mind mechanism yields to participate in the larger unity and the Ultimate Oneness—and, because of this, all kinds of contents and effects (from within the individual, and also from beyond the individual) may be manifested.

Psycho-physically displayed religious, Spiritual, or otherwise sacred phenomena are products of human religious, Spiritual, or otherwise sacred tradition and of human religious, Spiritual, or otherwise sacred responsiveness—whether or not, in any particular case, there is also an "outside" causative Means (such as the Blessing-Intention of a Spiritual Master). Therefore, the relative profundity of the individual responsiveness (or, otherwise, spontaneous openness), and the character and relative profundity of what is received through that responsiveness or openness, are the appropriate and necessary matters to be "considered" in any examination (or investigation) of religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred signs. And such examinations (or investigations) are the serious responsibility of religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred institutions or communities themselves (and they are not, in general, the proper responsibility of those who do not assume the religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred point of view)—for only such religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred gatherings (and individuals of a like point of view) are (if they are fully authentic) competent to evaluate (and, otherwise, bear sufficient authority to rightly guide) individuals exhibiting religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred signs.

There are particular psychic, psychological, emotional, and physical phenomena that tend to appear, within each particular religious tradition, when people feel free to be totally given up and to be ecstatic. Of course, for various reasons, some people may merely (and superficially) imitate (or even fake) such phenomena. Every religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred culture must responsibly instruct and guide and discipline its own, but even individuals who (because they are more superficial, and gross in their egoity, altogether) superficially imitate (or even fake) ecstatic phenomena are, basically, simply demonstrating their own real (but limited) manner of participation.

When unusual religious, or Spiritual, or otherwise sacred phenomena appear, people within (and, unfortunately, even without) a tradition tend to put a great deal of attention on the events, and especially on the individuals involved. Indeed, it is because of such fascination that this documentary on the stigmata was made.

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But, even as shown in this documentary, the stigmata may appear in many different kinds of people—including saints, genuine visionaries, religious fanatics, and ordinary (and even bewildered) people who are in a uniquely vulnerable state. Therefore, religious, Spiritual, and otherwise sacred phenomena should (in general) simply be allowed within the sphere of their own tradition or culture, and not be otherwise "made much" of (especially by "outsiders"). If such is the case, then superficial people will feel less inclined to fake such phenomena. People will understand that such phenomena are, rightly, merely a possible part of real and intensive participation in the religious, Spiritual, or otherwise sacred life, that such phenomena are not necessary (but, nonetheless, they are fairly common), that many kinds of people experience such phenomena, and that the phenomena themselves do not necessarily indicate great profundity of either practice or Realization.

The mind should, rightly, be transformed by response to what is beyond itself. Therefore, in the religious, Spiritual, or otherwise sacred life, the entire body-mind should be responsive. The entire body-mind must be let loose, allowed to be moved, allowed to be transformed, allowed to reflect or manifest the possible signs (and the characteristic concepts, images, metaphors, and imperatives) of the tradition or school that informs and guides the practitioner. All the natural signs that may occur in mature mystical life, and all the Spiritual signs that may occur in the context of real Spiritual reception, should be allowed. Of course the mind has something to do with it (including the brain, and the body, and the total body-mind)—because all of that is the vehicle (or the unified complex of designs) that is surrendered and yielded into the great psycho-physical unity that is the cosmic reality and the Ultimate Oneness That Is the Source of the cosmic reality. That is how religion works. That is how Spirituality works. That is how the sacred process of Divine (or Ultimate) Realization works. Indeed, that is how Truth works.

1. "A Modern Miracle", A film documentary investigating and interpreting the phenomena of the stigmata in the twentieth century. Directed by John O'Regan. From the Network First television series. 51 minutes. Produced by John Piper (hard to find but available on video).