

Flagellation

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Flagellation is the act of whipping the human body by using flexible instruments such as the whip, the scourge, or cat-o'-nine-tails. Flagellation can be located in the context of law, religion, medicine, or sexual excitation. In many cases the juridical and religious aspects are indivisible, whereas sexual arousal by (self-) flagellation is a distinguished phenomenon of Western modernity. In two monotheistic traditions—Roman Catholicism and Shia Islam—self-flagellation plays a role until today.

Flagellation in Antiquity The use of flogging instruments has been a long legal tradition of corporal punishment. The Latin word *flagellum* designates a multi-thong type scourge (whip, lash) with interlaced pieces of metal or bones that inflicts severe wounds on the body of the convict. The Roman law prescribed punishment by the *flagellum* either to extract a confession or as an overture to execution or as a distinct penalty. In the ancient Latin world flagellation was considered an extreme, gruesome penalty that caused not only tremendous pain but oftentimes grave mutilation and even death. Roman citizens were exempt from being sentenced to scourging whereas noncitizens were subject to it. Furthermore, the whipping of slaves was a common practice throughout the antique world.

The ritualistic usage of the whip was practiced in various Greco-Roman and Egyptian cults, namely, the cult of Isis, the Dionysian cult, the Thargelia festival, or the Roman festival of Lupercalia. Especially the old Spartan cult of Artemis Orthia was famous for its ritual flagellation (*diamastigosis*) of adolescent men (*ephebos*), as related by Plutarch, Xenophon, Pausanias, and Plato. Self-flagellation was practiced by the priests of Attis. Well documented is the ritual scourging in the course of diverse initiation ceremonies of mystery religions (especially Isis mysteries).

The motifs and motivations behind such ritualistic practices differed widely. Consequently there is no scholarly agreement on the general meaning of ancient cultic flagellation. Whipping is seen as a technique of inducing altered states of consciousness or as a ritual of manhood. Blood-letting caused by ritual scourging is interpreted as a substitute for human sacrifice or self-castration or as a means to increase fertility.

Flagellation and Self-Flagellation in Roman Catholic Christianity The first Christian emperors adopted the Roman legal system in varying degrees and by it flogging as a punishment procedure. The whip as an instrument of castigation made its way to early monastic rules. Vigorous corporal punishment was part and parcel of early Christian cloister life from Egypt to Ireland. The authoritative and most influential Rule of Benedict of Nursia (480–547), for example, prescribes flagellation of the stubborn and the hardheaded as well as the novices. Medieval Christian monasteries served as educational laboratories aimed at the fundamental transformation of the souls of monks and nuns. The Christian virtue of willing obedience was the object of the transformation. For the construction of humility and an obedient will, punishment was indispensable. In this context, the Latin word *disciplina* (discipline) was the common term for legally prescribed flogging. Monastic penance that was performed in front of the assembled monks served a dual purpose: it promoted subjection to the law and it paved the way to Christian virtue. Such rites of

penance, however, were not directed toward the breaking of the will, but to the forming of religious desires and obedience by choice.

Self-flagellation as a monastic exercise emerged from the penitential disciplina and refers to the episode of the flagellation of Christ tied to the pillar, reported in the four canonical Gospels. The scourging of Christ by Roman soldiers preceded the death penalty by crucifixion. Aside from a few exceptions, the ideal of self-mortification and the practice of self-flagellation emerged relatively late in Christianity. Saint Pardulf (657–ca. 737), an abbot in Aquitaine, is reckoned as an early practitioner if not “inventor” of voluntary flogging. The incorporation of self-flagellation in the monastic routine was successfully implemented by Peter



Flagellants, from a 15th-century woodcut. (Ann Ronan Pictures/StockphotoPro)

Damian (1007–1072), a hermit, church reformer, and cardinal in Italy. In various writings, especially in his *De laude Flagellorum* (In Praise of the Whip), he propagates ritual self-flagellation as a useful form of purification and repentance. Submitting to the whip was not understood as a denial of the body but as a spiritual *imitatio Christi*, a way to engage the body and the imagination in the task of communicating with God.

By the 11th century, a Passion-centered piety mushroomed in Western Christianity. Self-inflicted suffering became increasingly appreciated by the religious virtuoso. The willing acceptance and evocation of suffering was not only a means of expressing devotion to Christ, but also of expiating guilt in this life and of pre-empting punishment in the afterlife. German Dominican mystics, such as Heinrich Seuse (1295/97–1366), Elsbeth von Oye (1290–1340), and Margareta Ebner (1291–1351), practiced drastic forms of self-mortification, among which self-flagellation constituted the rather harmless component.

Besides the individual self-mortification of mystics hidden behind cloister walls, flagellant processions appeared in public spaces in the mid-13th century. A famous flagellant processional happened in 1260, starting in Perugia (Italy) and spreading across the Alps to Germany, Bohemia, and Poland. Earthquakes and the Black Death stirred up another flagellant movement in 1349–1350, which appeared in different waves all over Europe. Huge crowds of clergy and laypeople traveled from town to town and performed new rituals combining collective

[1121]

self-scourging with sermons and hymn chanting. The flagellant movement of 1349–1350 was accompanied by millennial enthusiasm and massacres of Jews. Due to heretical tendencies Pope Clement VI (r. 1342–1352) forbade the processions in 1349. Notwithstanding, flagellant movements, smaller or bigger, are known until the late 15th century in Germany, northern Italy, France, and northern Spain.

During the Catholic reform in the 16th and 17th centuries the Jesuits enthusiastically promoted all kinds of sensual piety such as the veneration of saints and Jesus' mother Mary, paintings and architecture, musical drama and theater. Under their dramaturgical guidance processions, especially flagellant processions during Lent, were encouraged with great ambition as well as theatrical re-enactments of the Passion of Christ.

Since the late 17th century church criticism emerged denouncing the Jesuits as perverts. In the new literary genre of pornography lascivious clerics whipping or watching whippings became standard motifs. At the same time flagellation as a technique of sexual arousal was associated with medicine. Evoking sexual fantasies by flogging was explained with reference to Galen's humoral pathology.

The non-European history of self-flagellation started in the 16th and 17th centuries. The colonial ambitions and missionary fervor of the Spaniards brought Passion plays and the practice of self-flagellation to Mexico and the Philippines. In both countries Iberian "Calvary Catholicism" was introduced with great success. Flagellation in public became popular either as a theatrical element of Passion plays or as separate performance by confraternities or by individuals. The adoption of such rites of self-mortification was accompanied by local reinterpretation. In the Philippines, for instance, self-flagellation is associated with a private vow, the well-being of the family, corporeal purification, and healing, far less with guilt and atonement. Self-flagellation as Lenten ritual is part of popular piety all over the Catholic world, be it the U.S. Southwest, Mexico, the Philippines, or Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Spain, or Portugal. Penitential self-flagellation as an individual act is tolerated and encouraged at least to some degree in lay brotherhoods or congregations (such as Opus Dei) and in penitential orders by the Catholic Church until today.

Self-Flagellation in Shia Islam Self-flagellation in Shia Islam is part of ritualized commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (626–680), son of Imam Ali (d. 661) and grandson of Muhammad, which happened in 680 CE. In the power struggle over the legitimate succession of the prophet, one faction encouraged Husayn to fight for leadership. His alleged supporters of Kufa (Iraq), however, betrayed him and his attempted coup failed. In company of only 72 devoted followers and relatives, Imam Husayn was surrounded and besieged by the troops of Omayya ruler Yazid in the Iraqi desert near Karbela. On the 10th of Muharram, day of Ashura, Yazid's army stormed the camp and massacred Husayn and nearly all of his followers. The corpses were buried in situ and there the shrine of Karbala was erected afterward.

All over the Shiite world the tragedy of Karbala is remembered as a traumatic event and has become a key element of Shiite identity. The glorification of the martyrdom of Husayn and the sorrow over the betrayal is the core of mourning rituals, which are performed annually during the first 10 days of the month of Muharram. Ritual components are the wearing of black clothes, intense weeping, reciting the death narrative of Imam Husayn, somber musical performances, and fasting. The most spectacular and violent parts are processions of men who beat their bare chests with their fists, flagellate their backs with chains (zanjir), or cut their foreheads with swords, razorblades, or knives (tatbir). Theatrical re-enactments of the Battle of Karbala and Husayn's sacrifice are called ta'ziya (Persian: 'aza dari).

Originally, some individuals who called themselves tawabun (repenters) collected at the gravesite of Husayn praising his sacrifice, regretting not fighting and dying alongside him and cursing the killers. Further commemoration gatherings (majlis) were held in private rooms, while in Karbala the ritualized visitation of the grave of Husayn (ziyarah) flourished, in spite of all efforts of Abbasid caliphs to ban the pilgrimage and to prevent the construction of the shrines. In the year 963, the Buyids, a Shiite Persian dynasty, declared the 10th of Muharram as an official feast and public processions on the day of Ashura occurred with regularity shortly afterward.

In early historical sources the blood-shedding rituals are never mentioned. In the shrine cities of Najaf

[1122]

and Karbala self-flagellation with swords and chains became customary as recently as in the early 19th century. According to the documents, non-Arab participants, Persians and Qizilbash-Turks, introduced these practices.

In the 20th century, the theatrical performances of self-mortification caused legal controversies. The practice of flagellation as a means of identification with Imam Husayn was seriously questioned. Even Ayatollah Khamenei released a fatwa against self-mutilation in 1994 but the attempts to outlaw blood-shedding in Husayn's name have remained ineffective as a whole.

During the Islamic revolution in Iran (1978–1979) the Muharram processions and the mourning slogans were successfully utilized to mobilize emotions and the mass upheavals. "Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala; every month is Muharram"—this slogan was chanted by the crowds, intoned on radio and television, and written on the walls. Since then this most important Shiite ritual has been constantly politicized by reinterpretation. In countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran the Ashura commemorations are occasionally transformed from a mourning ritual to emphasizing Islamic activism.

At present, the Muharram observances are carried out in all countries with a noteworthy Shiite population, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, India, Bahrain, and even in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Laborers from India brought the commemoration rituals to the Caribbean. The main feature of the "Hosay" festival there are colorful parades of cenotaphs for Husayn attended by all ethnic and religious communities. Flagellation, ceremonial chest beating, and other forms of self-mutilation are absent.

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