

Holy affections

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Holy Affections

Hannah Newton

This entry considers the early modern concept of the ‘holy affections’, a set of special spiritual emotions in [Christian](#) culture that were directed at God, and thought to be imbued with the Holy Spirit.¹ [Developed in the writings of the medieval theologians St Augustine of Hippo and St Thomas Aquinas](#), the holy affections included love for the Lord, praise and thankfulness, and the joyous anticipation of salvation.² What was it like to experience these emotions? Why, when, and how were they expressed? Drawing on diaries and sermons from [seventeenth-century England](#), I show that the holy affections were often found to be the most exquisite of all human feelings – they saturated the body and soul, filling it with ‘heart melting sweetness’. Exploring these delightful experiences helps rebalance our picture of the emotional landscape of early modern [Christian](#) culture, which has traditionally concentrated on the gloomier passions of guilt, grief, and fear.³ The essay’s wider aim is to demonstrate

¹ The holy affections were also known as ‘*devout and religious Affections*’: Walter Charleton, *A Natural History of the Passions* (London, 1674), 77. My thanks to Thomas Dixon for recommending this treatise.

² St Augustine, *The City of God*, Books IX and XIV, trans. P. Levine (London: Heinemann, 1966); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. The Dominican Fathers (London: Blackfriars, 1964-81), especially Ia.75-83, on ‘Man’, and Ia.2ae.22-48 on ‘The Emotions’, ‘Pleasure’, and ‘Fear and Anger’.

³ For example, Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991), argues that Christian doctrines fostered feelings of fear and guilt in believers.

the value of emotion as a category of analysis in religious history: an investigation of the spiritual feelings of early modern English men and women brings us to a closer understanding of what it was like to be a [Christian](#) at this time. [The majority of the examples cited here are from Protestant writers, but it is important to note that the holy affections were a Christian, rather than a specifically Protestant, phenomenon.](#)

The holy affections were regarded by religious writers as morally superior to all other emotions. This was because mankind was made to worship and adore God. Isaiah 43, verse 21, states, ‘This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise’. The elevated status of the holy affections was confirmed by their location in the soul: [in classical Christian philosophy](#), these feelings were envisaged as products of the top part of the soul – the rational soul – as opposed to the middle section, the animal or sensitive soul, which was responsible for all the other passions.⁴ [The physician and natural philosopher from Somerset, Walter Charleton \(1620-1707\), explained in his treatise on the passions, ‘our love of God, and all other real goods...belong only to the *Reasonable* Soul, which...\[is\] seated in a higher sphere...looking down...upon all tumults, commotions and disorders hapning in the inferior part of man’, the sensitive soul.](#)⁵ It was within this ‘higher sphere’ that the Christian’s relationship with God was conducted: the holy affections were the soul’s chief communications with the Lord, and in turn He made His presence known through the spiritual feelings. Of all the affections, the most important was love for God, on the grounds that ‘greatest commandment’ in the Bible is to ‘love the Lord with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind’ (Matthew 22:37).

⁴ [Thomas Dixon, ““Emotion”: The History of a Keyword in Crisis’, *Emotion Review*, 4 \(2012\), 338-344.](#)

⁵ [Charleton, *A Natural History of the Passions*, 55-56.](#)

The holy affections were supposed to be expressed on a daily basis, but there were certain occasions in life which demanded particularly effusive expressions of these feelings: namely, when God had shown great mercy, such as by healing the sick. Two Bible verses were cited to prove that this was so – the song of David upon his recovery from illness: ‘I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou hast lifted me up’ (Psalm 30:1), together with Asaph’s psalm, ‘Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me’ (Psalm 50:15). The duty was described in financial terms – the Lord was owed praise and love in return for His deliverance. [The London Presbyterian minister Timothy Rogers \(1658-1728\), asked his congregation, ‘What does the Great God obtain by all his Acts of Bounty...but a Revenue of praise?...therefore we should be most willing to pay him this easie Tribute’.](#)⁶ Praise and thankfulness were also considered to be natural, logical reactions to divine deliverance, stemming from a sense of common courtesy.

[Philosophers of both Protestant and Catholic faith](#) taught that the holy affections were exquisite to experience, far more delightful than ordinary emotions or bodily pleasures. The French philosopher Jean-François Senault (c.1601–72) explained in his treatise on the passions, ‘the pleasures of the Senses are limited’ because the body ‘finds no contentment which gives satisfaction to all its senses’. By contrast, the ‘pleasures of the soul’, the holy affections, ‘have no bounds’: they ‘present themselves all at once’ to the soul, enlightening the understanding, will, and memory simultaneously, so that its ‘joy is universal’.⁷ An analysis of the metaphors that were used to describe the affections confirms that in everyday life, as well as in learned philosophy, these feelings were considered delightful. Upon the

⁶ Timothy Rogers, *Practical Discourses on Sickness* (London, 1691), 263-64

⁷ Jean-François Senault, *The Use of Passions* (trans.) Henry Carey (London, 1671), 451–52.

recovery of his teenage son John from smallpox in 1669, the Essex puritan minister Ralph Josselin (1617–83) recorded in his diary, ‘I tast[e] love and sweetnes[:]...god loves me.’⁸ Sweetness was highly prized in early modern culture – in nutrition theory, the sweeter the food the more wholesome it would be to the body, and in Scripture over one hundred references to this quality can be found. Another metaphor that was used in this context involved ravishment. The Northampton attorney Robert Woodford (1606–54) noted that when the Lord did ‘heale & Cure’ his baby boy in 1637, he experienced ‘great & Ravishinge comforts’.⁹ Ravishment meant ‘to carry away by force’, sometimes implying subsequent rape; it was also denoted, ‘to fill with ecstasy, [or] intense delight’.¹⁰ These definitions suggest that reciprocal divine love was experienced as a violent pleasure.

Adding to the delight of the holy affections was the belief that they were a ‘badge of election’. Thomas Tuke (1580/1–1657), a London conformist minister, declared, ‘he that [loves God] may assure himself...that hee is...in the *ranke* and *roll* of Gods elect; these being infallible tokens...of Election, and fore-runners of eternall life’.¹¹ The enjoyment of the holy affections was also enhanced by the belief that God Himself derived pleasure from hearing

⁸ Ralph Josselin, *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616–1683* (ed.) A. Macfarlane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 547.

⁹ Robert Woodford, *The Diary of Robert Woodford, 1637–1641* (ed.) J. Fielding, Camden Society, vol. 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012), 190.

¹⁰ This is the Oxford English Dictionary definition, which is supported by quotations from the early modern period:

<http://www.oed.com.idpproxy.reading.ac.uk/view/Entry/158684?rskey=fD4hT2&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid> (accessed 12 November 2015).

¹¹ Thomas Tuke, *The High-Way to Heaven* (London, 1609), 48.

the praises. The Presbyterian Suffolk minister, James Steward (1668/9–1753), confirmed that ‘the praises of the Saints are sweet Musick, pleasant and delightful Melody in the Ears of the Almighty’.¹² Ultimately, the experience of the holy affections was regarded as the closest thing to heaven on earth, especially when the medium of song was used to express the praise. Humans were ‘beginning that blessed Work which we hope to be employed in forever’, singing God’s praises like the angels in paradise.¹³

Unfortunately, it was not always easy to rouse the spiritual affections, especially during affliction. Despite recognising that suffering was sent by a loving God for their benefit, Christians often found that the sense of the Lord’s anger made it hard to love Him, or to imagine that He loved them in return. An anonymous female relative of Oliver Cromwell confided in her diary in 1701, ‘I was under a seveal Fit of the Ston[e], which is a sad Provedence in a double Respect’ by reason of the ‘great Feare in me, lest the Lord should be angry with me’.¹⁴ In turn, a lack of a sense of divine love was the cause of great concern – it was a sign that the Holy Spirit had left the soul, and could even indicate that damnation would follow.

All was not lost, however. Clergymen taught that affections could be actively ‘stirred’. The aforementioned minister, Timothy Rogers, explained,

¹² Thomas Steward, *Sacrificium Laudis, or a Thank-Offering* (London, 1699), 15–16.

¹³ Rogers, *Practical Discourses*, 266.

¹⁴ British Library, London, Additional MS 5858, fol. 220v (diary of a female cousin of Oliver Cromwell, 1687/90–1702).

This excitation of our selves [to love] is not acquirable by a few cold and transient Thoughts...but [by] a continuance of these Acts, arguing and pleading the Case with our Souls, till the Fire of our...[love] begin to burn...Then will the Holy Spirit cherish our Endeavours.¹⁵

Loving God was thus an active process, which required sustained effort – only then would the Holy Spirit assist human attempts. The above discussions highlight an ambivalence in Christian understandings of the holy affections: human beings were regarded both as passive receptacles, and as active producers, of these feelings.

To conclude, the holy affections were double joys – not only were they sweet in themselves, but they were also signs of salvation. Such findings may help in small measure to counter the largely negative picture that has dominated historiographical views of early modern [Christianity](#). The value of using emotion as a lens into religious history is twofold: first, by analysing how past faiths made people feel, we can cultivate a greater degree of empathy for religious regimes which, from a modern viewpoint can be hard to fathom. Secondly, the exploration of early modern expressions of the affections illuminates how the emotions were conceptualised in this era. The affections could be stirred through conscious effort, but they were also sugary morsels that God delivered directly into the believer's soul. This paradox of passivity and activity is a defining feature of early modern emotions.

Further reading

¹⁵ Rogers, *Practical Discourses on Sickness*, 175–6.

Dixon, T., *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26-61; here, Dixon provides a detailed exposition of the differences between the passions and the holy affections in Christian philosophy, as developed by the medieval Christian philosophers St Augustine of Hippo and St Thomas Aquinas.

Newton, H., *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1580-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). This book is about the perception, treatment, and experience of childhood illness; chapters 4 and 6 are devoted to the spiritual and emotional experiences of sick children and their parents.

Ryrie, A., *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). This is the first monograph devoted to the emotional experiences of early modern English Protestants. He seeks to counteract earlier depictions of Protestantism as a fundamentally intellectual, rather than an affective faith; he also critiques the deeply negative picture of Protestant emotions presented by others, such as J. Delumeau.