

WOMEN MYSTICS, COUNTER-REFORMATION CATHOLICISM, AND CROSS-CULTURAL POLLINATION.

The Mystical Model in the Mediterranean and Beyond

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Abstract

Despite longstanding scholarly interest, or perhaps because of it, women mystics remain trapped between the psychological interpretations of modern academia and the idealized portrayals of Church authorities, making them figures that are still largely unknown and misunderstood. Moving beyond the limitations of psychological and theological interpretations that reduced these women's experiences, this article will compare and contrast the lives of several mystics living at the turn of the modern era. It will argue that their ability to challenge societal norms and create spaces for female community relied on their meticulous adherence to a specific behavioral pattern known as the 'mystical model,' consisting of conversion, foundation, and teaching. The careful execution of these steps across diverse cultures and geographies not only validated their deeply personal religious experiences but also granted social legitimacy to the public expressions of their spirituality. Born and developed around the wider Mediterranean, as classically defined by Braudel, the mystical model came to transcend the borders of the *Mare Nostrum* with the missionary effort that accompanied the colonial expansion characteristic of the European Age of Discovery. Aided by the printing press and in the context of the assertive and militant Catholicism emerging in the wake of the Council of Trent, missionaries, in their quest to physically expand the horizons of the Roman Church, were instrumental in diffusing the privatized, individualist religious spirit irradiating from early modern Europe. Consequently, female religious vocations started to emerge in societies where women's role in religion – and in public life – had been largely marginal. This phenomenon also contributed to the formation of new frames of reference, new archetypal categories, awarding these women with social sanction for their recently acquired religious self-awareness, as this article will prove. Examining the extra-Mediterranean expansion of the mystical model will underscore that the missionary effort cannot be exclusively understood in a one-directional sense. Instead, it must be seen as a pluri-directional phenomenon, a process of cross-cultural pollination that transformed both catechist and catechumen, simultaneously broadening their respective systems of collective representations.

Keywords: Women, Mystics, Missionaries, Catholicism, Archetypes.

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Writing in 1982, José María Román attempted to craft a psychological portrait of Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), whose personality he described as lying beyond the pale of “normalcy” (Román 1984 [1982], 89). Her mystical experiences, he went on, should be understood as psychosomatic expressions of her perturbed mental state and manifestations of the latent *child* lingering in her personality (Román 1984 [1982], 83-84, 90). Although such a pathologizing perspective had been classically criticized by Américo Castro (1972, 78), who charged against the decontextualized translation of contemporary ideas and categories to premodern societies, truth is that the academia has tended to confine mystics – and, very specifically, mystic *women* – to the realms of anecdote, mental sickness, or sexual dissatisfaction.¹

In recent decades, however, a paradigm shift has endeavored to release mystic and devout women from the hagiographical and psychiatric prisons where they were traditionally confined to approach their lives and experiences in the framework of their specific cultural and historical *milieux*. As Carolyn W. Bynum (1987) expressed in her groundbreaking *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, where she analyzed the relation between food and piety in the European Lower Middle Ages, all mystical and ascetical practices should be understood within their own cultural context. In her own words, “the practices and symbols of any culture are so embedded in that culture as to be inseparable from it” (Bynum 1987, 299). Thus, applying modern psychological diagnosis to premodern phenomena not only veers on clinical inexactitude, but also – and more gravely – limits our understanding of those phenomena and the lives of the women experiencing them.

1 Michel de Certeau famously linked the pathologizing of mysticism to two simultaneous phenomena taking place in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe: secularization and the discovery of the cultural ‘other’, which resulted in a feeling of “uneasiness” (Certeau 1992, 13). Such a feeling could only be overcome, Certeau explained, through reliance on a scientific positivism divorced from “the actual sociocultural conditions of the mystical experience” (1992, 15), which led the way to the confinement of mystical phenomena within the narrow walls of psychopathology. The best example of such a viewpoint is provided by no other than Freud himself, for whom religion itself was a “shared neurosis” (Riesman 1954, 29) and mysticism but a private, individualistic, expression of that neurosis. More recently, T.M. Luhrmann (2011, 71-85), while acknowledging the role of the socio-cultural environment in the development of the mystical phenomenon, hinted rather strongly at the influence of mental disorders – in particular schizophrenia – in shaping the outward expressions of mysticism.

Treading on Webb Keane's footsteps (2003, 222-248), this article rejects the purported universality of contemporary Western psychological categories to recenter women mystics as active agents within their corresponding societies. In fact, as will be argued below, participating in the outward manifestations of a certain *mystical/devotional* model allowed Mediterranean women to transcend the "stringent limitations imposed by tradition and social convention" in order to pursue their individual "impulses and desires" (González Fernández 2016, 91). For women like Teresa of Ávila or Thérèse of Lisieux in Europe, or Hindiyya al-'Ujaymi and Rafqa al-Rayyis in the Middle East, turning their bodies into spaces for the manifestation of the Divine served them to legitimize their will to be independent and to defy social mores. This was particularly significant in the face of increasing constraints on female spirituality following the Council of Trent (Zarri 2000, 22-25) – and before.² Therefore, the mystical/devotional model emerges as a tool enabling the recognition of female mystical and/or devotional expressions within the archetypal patterns ingrained in the collective unconscious of their societies. Indeed, the failure to align the experiences of some of the women discussed herein with pre-existing models of public female devotion in their socio-cultural contexts hindered their pursuit of spiritual graces.

Highlighting the experiences of non-European mystic and devout women, including the Chinese Candida Xu, and the Lebanese Hindiyya al-'Ujaymi, this article also aims to decenter the study of mysticism beyond its traditional Mediterranean context. It contends that the elements integrating the *mystical model* are not exclusive of the Islamo-Christian civilization as classically defined by Richard Bulliet.³ Instead, they are found

2 While the literature has given particular emphasis to the growing restrictions on individual piety emerging after the Council of Trent, truth is that the Papacy's misgivings *vis-à-vis* independent spiritual endeavors can be traced back, at least, to the fourteenth century. The promulgation of the *Cum inter nonnullos* bull by Pope John XXII in 1323, which condemned the radical viewpoints of the 'Spiritual' Franciscans, and the misgivings aroused by the activities of *beguines* and *beghards* (Gałuszka & Kras 2023; Osten-Sacken 2014, 99-116) all bear witness to the increasing rigor of a Church – and a continent – undergoing a troubled period in their histories. Furthermore, the administrative solidity that the Church achieved during her 'Babylonian Captivity' at Avignon (Rollo-Koster 2015) allowed the Holy See to police doctrine and praxis with unprecedented effectiveness.

3 For Bulliet, the term 'Islam-Christian civilization' refers to the existence of a single civilizational framework uniting the Christians of Western Europe, "not all

worldwide – in places as distant as southern India or the colonial Americas – albeit influenced by a process of Catholic-Mediterranean intellectual cross-pollination. Rather than viewing the non-Western *other* merely as a passive subject of European imperial action, this article aligns with the perspectives of Bernard Heyberger (2004), Marcello Carmagnani (2021), and Manel Ollé (2022). Following them, it advocates for an interactive view of these cross-cultural encounters, where both sides act effectively, transforming one another and synthesizing their respective traditions into a common cultural product.

The missionary experience should not, in this sense, be read exclusively in a one-directional sense, but rather understood as a cross-directional phenomenon where both the missionary and the catechumen are transformed by their mutual contact (Amsler et al. 2020, 1-12; Clark 2011, 33-51; Dempsey 2001). Indeed, as Octavio Paz (2022, 317) underlined, in reference to his native Mexico, an “invisible thread” connected the pre-Columbian world and the new Hispanic order built after 1521. Just as the Aztecs incorporated the new tools, both physical and symbolic, that the Spaniards brought with them in their advance through Mesoamerica, so were the *Castilian* – as the Nahuas referred to the invaders – decisively transformed by their contact with the New World (Gruzinski 2018, 194-200). Thus, as Ollé (2022) has convincingly proven, the early modern era stands out as a period of fertile – if ambivalent – cross-cultural pollination and co-colonization, as further underlined by the popularity of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Sacred Heart. While the former, a Spanish Marial figure, came to syncretize pre-Christian beliefs in a largely successful attempt to incorporate the indigenous population of Mesoamerica into the new European religion (Paz 2022, 97-99, 155); the latter, which grew to become one of the most prominent pictorial representations of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, may have emerged from heart-related Nahua symbolism (Kehoe 1979, 763-771) long before the preaching of François de Sales and the mystic

Christians everywhere,” and the Muslims of the Middle East and North Africa, “not all Muslims everywhere.” Bulliet argued that Latin Christendom and Middle Eastern Islam “experienced common challenges in parallel time frames [but] reacted to these challenges in different ways,” which opened the door to a clearly divergent evolution in a period extending from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Afterwards, he argued, Christendom and Islam “followed trajectories that differed markedly, [...] yet the ways in which they played their roles as rivals,” he went on, “still reflected their sibling character and their functioning within a common system” (Bulliet 2004, 10, 15-16).

Marguerite-Marie Alacoque. In this sense, the early modern era appears as a phase in human history where the Foucaultian *heterotopies*, understood as sites of “spatial and institutional difference” (Vidler *et al.* 2014, 69) were the rule, rather than the exception, thus allowing for the widening of the societal unconscious or, even, for the emergence of a timid – yet rapidly expanding – ‘mundialized’ unconscious (Gruzinski 2018, 15-20).

In order to achieve its goals, this article begins with a brief approach to the lives and experiences of Teresa of Ávila, Hindiyya al-‘Ujaymi, and Candida Xu. Taking inspiration from Marguerite Yourcenar’s words (1962, 7-33), these concise biographical sketches aspire to transcend the mere presentation of facts to provide a glimpse into the psychology of an era that stood at the intersection between the encapsulated world of the Middle Ages and the globalized realities of modernity. The second section of this paper builds upon the human materials furnished in the first part, approaching the theoretical construction of the mystical/devotional model (conversion-foundation-teaching) with special emphasis on the interaction between private experience and social perception. The conclusion of this article underscores how mystical and devout women managed to insert themselves into socially readable archetypal categories providing them with legitimacy to transcend societal expectations of female behavior.

1. *Women Mystics: A Biographical Approach*

1.1. *Teresa of Ávila*

The first woman ever to become a *doctor of the Church*, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada was born in the Castilian city of Ávila to a middle-class family whose pretensions of nobility had been explicitly acknowledged by the High Court of Valladolid. This recognition, which took place despite their Jewish ancestry, reveals that, by the time of Teresa’s birth, her family had achieved the coveted status of *crisianos viejos* (‘old Christians’⁴) in

4 In accordance with the ‘blood purity statutes’ (*estatutos de limpieza de sangre*), which had excluded persons of Jewish or Moorish descent from positions in the state and ecclesiastical administrations, the religious orders, and the universities, the *crisianos viejos* were those whose genealogy was ‘untainted’ by suspicion of heterodox or infidel intermingling. Issued as early as the mid-fifteenth century, the *estatutos* became increasingly important in the sixteenth and, in some cases,

public perception (Pérez 2007, 27). By then, however, the family's fortunes were on the decline (Bouyer 2022, 82-83) and Teresa received a comparatively poor education, being more interested in chivalric romances than in spiritual literature, as she herself recognized (*Vida* 2.1⁵). A rebellious and somewhat mundane adolescent (*Vida* 2.2), her father, "worried about her daughter's honor" (Bastida 2006, 98), forced her against her will (*Vida* 3.1) to join the Santa María de Gracia convent, where she remained for eighteen months until a sickness led to her abandoning the cloister.

It was, precisely, during her convalescence that Teresa finally decided to enter religious life, joining the Encarnación convent, despite her father's opposition (*Vida* 3.7). Although her religious vocation was fostered by the devotional literature that her uncle provided (*Vida* 3.4-5; Bouyer 2022, 82), it seems that her entrance in religion was not too enthusiastic (*Vida* 3.6) and it has been hinted that she took it as a way to escape marriage (Pérez 2007; Slade 1995). Although, at the time, the Encarnación convent followed a relaxed version of the Carmelite Rule, Teresa was seemingly unable to adapt to her cloistered existence and, once again, fell gravely ill in 1539.

After recovering from her sickness, Teresa initiated the protracted process that would conclude in her 'conversion', which was accelerated after reading, in 1554, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (*Vida* 9.7-9.8). The following year, Teresa decided to consecrate herself entirely to God and, simultaneously, started experiencing mystical episodes. "Contrary to popular opinion" (González Fernández 2016, 83), such occurrences were purely intellectual, rather than physical, phenomena resulting from a committed effort at praying and reading, as Teresa herself acknowledged (*Exclamaciones* 14.2). She was not, therefore, "a figure besotted by an excessively fertile imagination" (González Fernández 2016, 83), but rather a 'no-nonsense' woman who challenged the authenticity of her own mystical experiences (Ruano 1955, 228) and was generally wary of flamboyant spiritual displays (*Moradas* 4.3.13).

survived well into the nineteenth. These norms have been widely considered as a populist reaction against the growing prominence of *converso* families in early modern Spain. Vid. Poole (1999, 359-389) and Hering Torres (2011, 29-62).

5 Following a well-established precedent in Teresian studies, the works authored by the Ávilan saint will be quoted by their name. Reference to the specific editions used in this article can be found in the bibliography.

The intense personal transformation engendered by Teresa's conversion also serves to explain her "extraordinary missionary activity" (Bouyer 2022, 83). In the twenty years preceding her death, Teresa not only established seventeen new convents all through Castile, but also – and perhaps more importantly – promoted a reform of the Carmelite Order that restored the purity of its original rule and shied away from the relaxation that had become common at the beginning of the early modern era (Bastida 2006). Facing opposition from both civilian and ecclesiastical authorities, Teresa, endowed with an iron will and an army of powerful friends, managed to vanquish all resistances, expanding her reform in Spain and beyond. After passing away on October 4, 1582, the Carmelite reformer was canonized in 1622 alongside the prominent Jesuits Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier. This, in a certain way, reflected the long-standing collaboration between the Ávilan reformer and the Society of Jesus.

1.2. *Candida Xu*

Arguably "the most influential Chinese woman of the seventeenth century" (King 1998, 49), Candida Xu could hardly be considered a mystic. However, analyzing her life experiences will serve to highlight how Christian women, across apparently unsurmountable cultural boundaries, asserted their independence and the validity of their individual spiritual experiences by adapting, reinterpreting, and refining religious discourses and practices. Whereas Candida was by no means the only Christian woman that played a significant role during the two centuries of the Jesuit China Mission, she is doubtless the best known, in large part due to the publication of her biography, *Histoire d'une dame chrétienne de la Chine*, by her confessor, the Jesuit Philippe Couplet, in 1688. The work, which was primarily conceived as a propaganda tool to promote interest in the China Mission in Europe (King 1998, 49-50), does, however, provide us with a rare glimpse into the otherwise hidden existence of élite Chinese women in the late imperial era, when the revival of Confucian mores discernible since, at least, the Southern Song dynasty, confined them to the privacy of their own homes (Touboul-Bouyeure 1989, 953-971).

Candida Xu was born in Shanghai into a peculiar family. Her grandfather, the scholar Paul Xi Guangqi (1562-1633), had been one of the first Chinese *literati* to convert to Catholicism. Indeed, he was thereafter reputed, together with Li Zhizao (1565-1630) and Yang Tingyun (1557-1627), as one of the *three pillars* of Chinese Catholicism (Shi 2014, 199). Un-

surprisingly, the young Candida and her siblings⁶ were raised in a pious household, where they were not only instructed in “devout and zealous” religious practices, but also in the typical Confucian virtues of “hard work, frugality, righteousness, and sincerity” (King 1998, 52-53). After losing her mother at fourteen, Candida was married off to a certain Xu Yuandu, whose family had converted to Catholicism but subsequently lapsed from the faith (Couplet 1688, 12). For Candida and her sisters, the experience of marriage to non-Christian husbands turned out to be a rather traumatic episode (Amsler 2018, 117), which they bore by maintaining their sororal ties via an abundant correspondence. In these letters, they not only provided emotional support to each other, but also ensured their steadfastness in the faith through the sharing of religious experiences (“holy dreams and visions” (Amsler 2018, 125)).

After the death of her husband, who passed away in 1653, and counting on the praise wherewith chaste widows were showered in late imperial China (Liang, Wang, and Yamauchi 2020, 1-21; Carlitz 1997, 612-640; Leung 1993, 2-3, 5-6), *Madame Xu*⁷ could finally devote herself entirely “to serving God and to spreading the gospel in China” (Couplet 1668, 14). Throughout the remaining third of her life, Madame Xu, conceiving of herself “as a missionary” (Amsler 2018, 148), supported the foreign preachers financially and promoted the erection of church buildings both in her native Songjiang and across China (Tiedemann 2008, 503) with the ultimate goal of building “a Chinese Church [...] ideally embrac[ing] all people living under the aegis of the emperor” (Amsler 2018, 148). To sustain her charitable works, Madame Xu, whose exalted family origins as part of the *literati* class should not be automatically equated to pecuniary wealth, engaged with considerable success in the long-established textile industry of the Yangzi River region, becoming rich in her own right (Couplet 1688, 27-28).

6 The Xu household was quite numerous. Candida had five brothers (Michael Xu Erjue, Ignatius Xu Erjue, Matthew Xu Erdou, Thomas Xu Ermo, and Luke Xu Erlu) and three sisters (Felicitas, Monica, and Martine). Vid. Shi (2014, 201-202).

7 Traditionally, Chinese married women have been referred to by the honorific *tàitai*, which has been rendered in English, variably, as ‘madam,’ ‘madame,’ or ‘ma’am.’ Consequently, Candida Xu will be occasionally referred to as ‘Madame Xu’ throughout this text. For more contemporary uses of this style of address in English, vid. Jung Chang (2019) and Jonathan Fenby (2003), who addressed Soong Mayling as ‘Madame Chiang’ and Soong Qingling as ‘Madame Sun’. Similarly, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (2006) referred to Jiang Qing as ‘Madame Mao.’

1.3. *Anna Hindiyya al-'Ujaymi*

As her name suggests (*hindiyya* means, literally, ‘the Indian’), Hindiyya al-‘Ujaymi was born in 1720 to a rich merchant family belonging to Aleppo’s prominent Christian bourgeoisie.⁸ At the time of her birth, Aleppo was undergoing a period of economic and demographic expansion (Heyberger 2001; Khater 2008) that came accompanied by the spiritual awakening of the city’s various Christian communities (Khater 2008). These communities had precisely been the main beneficiaries of the economic bonanza due to their links, as translators and intermediaries, to European merchants.

The spiritual renewal in Aleppo was largely the byproduct of the arrival of Latin missionaries,⁹ determined both to convert the ‘separate’ Christians to Catholic orthodoxy and to purge the ‘abuses’ allegedly incurred by the Oriental Catholic communities (Rouhana, 1986). The missionaries started to promote “a series of new religious practices alien to Oriental tradition, which they presented employing the ‘modern’ language emerging after the Council of Trent” (González Fernández 2016, 9-10). With the Society of Jesus as the standard-bearer of these transformations, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of religious fraternities that, with their emphasis on personal perfection (Heyberger 1996) and their revalorization of laypeople against the priest-centered and ritualistic character of the local churches (Heyberger 2014), attracted a youth “aspiring to assert their individuality” (González Fernández 2016, 85).

It was in this context that Hindiyya was born and raised. Her family, belonging to Aleppo’s small Maronite community,¹⁰ participated fully in the

8 One of the major trading crossroads of Greater Syria, Aleppo hosted a large Christian population, including members of all major Middle Eastern churches: Melkites, ‘Jacobite’ and Maronite Syriacs, Armenians, and even a small ‘Nestorian’ community. Until the eighteenth century, when a wave of conversion to Catholicism took place, all these groups but the Maronites were, in the eyes of the Roman Church, “schismatics and/or heretics possessing their own hierarchies” (Heyberger 1988, 462).

9 In the Middle East, the followers of the Roman rite of the Catholic Church are referred to as *Latin* to distinguish them from other Catholic churches and communities.

10 Established between the fourth and eighth centuries of our era, the Maronite Church, belonging to the Western Syriac liturgical tradition and linked to Rome since, at least, the time of the Crusades, is the largest Oriental Catholic community in the Middle East. With the exception of a small community still residing

city's spiritual renewal (Heyberger 2001) and was, moreover, able to access the new religious iconography imported from Rome and Paris (Khater 2005, 10). Reflecting the *dolorist* and intimist approach to religion that was emerging in Tridentine Europe (Pasture 2012, 11), these religious stamps came to play a vital role in Hindiyya's mysticism. It was, precisely, by contemplating one of these imported representations that Hindiyya started experiencing mystical episodes in early childhood (Heyberger 2001; Makhlouf 2001). Throughout her infancy and youth, Hindiyya consecrated herself to prayer and asceticism, experiencing increasingly intense visionary experiences. However, the decidedly 'erotic' character of her visions, which included the "spiritual sensation of [Christ's] sacred body" and the kissing of his divinized – and naked – body (Hatem 1997, 453-455),¹¹ became a matter of profound concern for the young mystic, who was zealous in the preservation of her chastity. Nonetheless, she was reassured by her Jesuit confessors (Dib 2001), who aspired to "use her saintly reputation" (González Fernández 2016, 10) to establish a feminine congregation bringing together young women from all Oriental Christian communities.

Following a well-established paradigm (Cattaneo 2012, 16, 20-22; Mahfouz 1985, 42, 54-55), Hindiyya was instructed by a "figure" (Hatem 1997) to establish a congregation dedicated to the Sacred Heart (Heyberger 2001). After a complex period, during which she contended with her erstwhile protectors – the Jesuits – Hindiyya achieved her goal in 1750, when her first convent was inaugurated in the Lebanese mountain village of Bkirki. Thenceforward, and until her order's definitive dissolution in 1780, Hindiyya stood at the very heart of the trilateral conflict of interests opposing the Holy See, the Maronite Church, and the feudal lords of the Lebanese Mountain (González Fernández 2020, 19-22). Thus, for

in Aleppo, the bulk of the Maronites live in the Lebanese Mountain, where they build the region's only Christian compact minority. Ever since the nineteenth century, prominent sections of the community left their ancestral homeland and emigrated overseas, mainly to the Americas. At present, the Maronite communities in Brazil or Argentina vastly outnumber the Maronites living in the Middle East. For further information, *vid.* Hage (2021), González Fernández (2020), Truzzi (1995).

11 Jad Hatem (1997, 455) underlines how, beyond uncontextualized psychoanalytical perspectives, the eroticism of Hindiyya's mysticism was rooted in a venerable Judeo-Christian tradition that expressed the love of man for God through spousal metaphors. The *Song of Songs* and the mystical poetry of Saint John of the Cross appear as the most prominent examples of this tradition and it is likely that Hindiyya, given her social context and family wealth, may have had access to, at least, the first of these works.

the traditionalists within the Maronite Church, the young religious and her order became a sort of proto-nationalist symbols (Heyberger 2001; Khater 2005; Matar 2005; Makhlouf 2001; Makhlouf 1990-1991). Paradoxically, Hindiyya's order, devoted to such a Western devotion as the Sacred Heart and heavily influenced by Latin spirituality (Makhlouf 1993), "became a powerful symbol of the autonomy of the Oriental Catholic churches *vis-à-vis* the homogenizing pretensions of the Holy See" (González Fernández 2016, 12).

In the context of the jurisdictional battle embroiling Hindiyya's order since its establishment, a series of apostolic visits ended up discovering what Bernard Heyberger (2001, XII) described as "hell in the convent." Following those reports, it not only appeared that Hindiyya had fallen into grave doctrinal errors,¹² but, worse still, that she and her main collaborator, Sister Catherine, had systematically exerted physical and psychological violence on the other nuns (Makhlouf 2010, 16-17). Unsurprisingly, the Holy See ordered the congregation's dissolution in 1780. Abandoned by her thitherto friends and supporters (Hayek 1965, 526-527), Hindiyya spent the remaining two decades of her life as an ostracized figure, living a quasi-nomadic life, the unwanted guest of convent after convent. Furthermore,

Hindiyya's disgrace also represented the defeat of the traditionalist party in the fight for the soul of the [Maronite] Church, definitely confirmed with the ascent, in 1796, of [...] the maximum representative of the Tridentine party, Joseph Tiyan, to the patriarchal throne. (González Fernández 2016, 87).

2. *The Mystical/Devotional Model*

The parallelism between the lives of the figures examined hereinabove are striking. All of them were middle-class women, educated in devout environments, and whose societies were undergoing profound sociopolitical transformations. While their experiences were certainly anchored in arche-

12 Hindiyya went as far as to claim a personal and immediate – even physical – union with Jesus Christ, which provided her with knowledge of "all sciences" and authority over "all men, including the Pope and the cardinals" (Heyberger, 2001, 228, 177). Although claims of unity with Christ are not rare among women mystics (e.g. Saint Rosa of Lima, (Sánchez-Concha 2017, 57-58)), by the time when Hindiyya affirmed her own unitive experience, the new Tridentine rationalism had become far too embedded in the curia for professional theologians to accept her mysticism as valid.

typal categories present in the collective unconscious of their respective societies, as explored – albeit in different terms – by Louis Bouyer (2022), the truth is that they also embodied the individualistic self-perceptions that started to emerge in the early modern era. The relation between bourgeois economics and religious individualization, as classically observed by Max Weber (1964, vol. I, 368; vol. II, 893), finds in the early modern devout or mystic woman its paroxysm, insofar as their social status allowed them to “transcend societal norms” (Khater 2008, 432) and to carve appropriate niches for the expression of their newly found religious individuality.

In this sense, the possession of divine graces – whether physical, like those experienced by Hindiyya, or intellectual, like those of Saint Teresa – or the performance of culturally-rooted, socially-readable acts of virtuous behavior – as Candida Xu did by embracing chaste widowhood – appear not so much as ends in themselves, but rather as means to reach the earthly or spiritual goals pursued by the individual. Thus, the performative element in the behavior of the mystic or *dévôte* appears, simultaneously, as *essential* in endowing the woman experiencing such phenomena with social sanction to pursue her individual objectives; and *non-essential* in the construction of the individual’s own spiritual journey, where the more colorful elements of the mystical experience often play second fiddle to other religious practices. Beyond the examples explored in this article, this dual nature of the mystical/devotional performance is almost universal in the historical record. From fasting and asceticism in the cases of Saint Catherine of Siena (Scott 1992, 34-46) and, more recently, Theresa Neumann; to sickness and physical suffering in the experiences of Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity (Bouyer 2022, 111-144), or Rafqa al-Rayyis; or societal isolation, as pursued by Julian of Norwich or Jacqueline and Agnès Arnaud, these practices did not define the personal religious experience of the mystic/*dévôte*, but did provide her with the social legitimacy to pursue her individual spiritual calling.

Therefore, it can be argued, together with Anne Llewellyn Barstow (1985, 30), that the mystical and devotional practices adopted by late medieval and early modern women were “both an integrative and an activating force in [their] lives [...], enabling them to forge a new [and socially endorsed] awareness of themselves as individuals [...]” Indeed, as Barstow herself underlined in her study of Joan of Arc, the pursuit of such spiritual graces allowed women – both religious and lay – to enter the political realm and/or undertake religious teaching (1985, 31-42). However, what Barstow

failed to observe – in large measure due to the concentration of her study on a comparatively early medieval frame – was how the experience of previous mystic and devout women served to carve a common model whereupon, local adaptations notwithstanding, new generations could construct their claims to divine graces. The three concatenated elements that define this *mystical* or *devotional model* (conversion, foundation, and teaching) became universally familiar to middle-class women in the early modern era thanks to the expansion of the new *print Catholicism* that accompanied the counter-reforming efforts of the Council of Trent (Pérez 2007, 283-290; Soergel 2000; Walsham 2000, 72-123). The abundance of narrative and pictorial representations of a devotional nature that accompanied the invention of the printing press not only served to promote the renewed spirituality emerging in Counter-Reformation Europe – and beyond¹³ – but also provided new generations of religious women with easily accessible examples upon which they could construct their own approaches to religion. With the support of these materials, rendered easily accessible by the printing press, they constructed their understanding of the corporeal and psychological manifestations of such religiosity.¹⁴

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- 13 Although studies on the Catholic print culture are comparatively few and far between – particularly when compared to the many publications analyzing the connection between the printing press and the diffusion of Protestantism – it is possible to find such analyses in the work of Wilhelm Ribhegge (2000, 173-192) or Richard A. Crofts (1985, 369-381). Beyond Europe, the close connection between the printing press and the diffusion of Tridentine Catholicism has been studied, *inter alios*, by Bernardo E. Brown and Claire Thi Liên Tran (2020, 197-216), Johannes Laues (1957, 163-165), or Liam Brockey (2002).
- 14 Teresa of Ávila's religiosity was modeled on the example of Catherine of Siena and the Northern European mysticism of Hadewijch and Ruysbroeck (Bouyer 2022, 78-79), which she accessed in her uncle's library, while Teresa herself served as an inspiration for Hindiyya. Candida Xu and her coeval women of the *literati* class, for their part, were equally influenced by the life examples of female saints, whose experiences, often at odds with core Confucian principles (Menegon 2004, 202, 204-205), were accessible to them in various publications – most notably, Alfonso Vagnone's 1629 *Biographies of the Saints of the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven* (Rui Shang 2017). Beyond our study subjects, the Dominican Mission of Fujian employed the Peruvian saint Rosa of Lima – herself influenced by the omnipresent Catherine of Siena – as an example to encourage the emergence of female vocations to consecrated virginity (Menegon 2004, 217-218). In fact, these consecrated virgins, whose religious calling had initially been a matter of scandal in their Confucian milieu (Tiedemann 2008, 501-520; Menegon 2004, 221-230), played a leading role in ensuring the survival of Chinese Catholicism during the long century of proscription that followed the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (Hsia 2008, 208-224).

2.1. *Conversion*

It has already been mentioned how *conversion* is the first of the three steps in the *mystical/devotional model*. Following the example of Saint Augustine, who renounced his mundane existence to consecrate himself to God (*Confessiones* VII.9.13-VII.21.27),¹⁵ the devout and the mystic abandon the comfort of their previous lives to embrace the rigors of asceticism and prayer. However, conversion should not be merely understood as the abandonment of a worldly existence for a life of spiritual edification, but more properly construed as an acquisition of self-awareness, as Daniella Kostroum (2011, 26) elucidated in her study of the Port-Royal nuns.¹⁶ Conversion implies, therefore, the conscious assumption on the part of the individuals going through it of their “existing inner resources and capacities for self-transformation, which allows them actively to develop the individual conscience” (Keane 1997, 684). Thus, the convert not only accepts a certain religious truth but, through the act of supreme individuality embodied by such an acceptance, becomes the agent of a major transformation in her inner self. Even more importantly, conversion does not merely stop at the transfiguration of the subject’s *heart of hearts* but becomes a powerful tool to transform the society where she lives. In this sense, conversion cannot be simply understood as the realization of an individual’s own subjectivity and internal capacities, but as an essential antecedent to social transformation.

Thus understood, conversion can also be distinguished in the lives of those mystic and devout women whose existence was always characterized by asceticism, mortification, and devotion. For these women, there is also a conversion process that compels them to transcend the limitations of their previous existence and to undertake the *ad extram* fulfillment of their own subjectivity. Hence, Catherine of Siena abandoned her life as a Dominican tertiary to undertake an intense political and religious aposto-

15 Augustine’s conversion was itself a complex process that involved an initial intellectual conviction (the ‘volitional conversion’ he talks about in *Confessiones* VIII.7.17) followed by a posterior boundless commitment to his new faith resulting from a mystical experience (*Confessiones* VIII.12.29). Vid. Dobell (2009), Magnavacca (2005, 238-239).

16 More than a century earlier, William James had defined conversion as “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided, consciously wrong, inferior or unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities” (Cit. in Ullman 1989, 191).

late that led the way to her becoming a mediator in the conflicts afflicting the Italy of her time (Scott 1992). Similarly, Julian of Norwich embraced a life of intense asceticism as a recluse in a modest cell next to Saint Julian's church (Watkins 1983). Among the case studies examined in this article, and unlike the evident Teresian conversion moment, which she puts in an explicit parallelism with Saint Augustine's, the examples of Hindiyya and Candida Xu illustrate how even those women whose lives never deviated from the path of socio-religious correctness, experience a moment, a specific vital juncture, after which the realization of their internal convictions becomes independent from social, moral, or hierarchical constraints. The establishment of a religious order, in the case of the former, and the attainment of widowhood, in the case of the latter, operated, precisely, as the key episodes where the major internal transformations engendered by the mystic or *dévoté*'s newly acquired self-awareness (Iyadurai 2014, 191-192; Halama & Lačná 2011, 757-768; Paloutzian *et al.* 1999, 1,047-1,079) transcended their inner selves and become public expressions demanding – and commanding – public respect. Thus, in all the cases examined here, a given episode – be it a vision, a dream, or any other profoundly felt religious or vital experience – serves as the catalyst for the public execution of the mystic or *dévoté*'s personal will. With conversion, religious experiences and spiritual enrichment turn out to be means to justify female agency, more than ends in themselves.

2.2. *Foundation*

The foundational effort that mystic and devout women so often undertake appears as a logical consequence of the conversion process that stands as the starting point in their religious calling. Once the mystic/*dévoté* has undergone the profound transformation caused by her conversion, she requires either to create new social structures or to thoroughly modify the existing ones to have them adapted to her extremely personal worldview. Traditional religious congregations, as seen in the cases of both Teresa and Hindiyya, or conventional family life, as exemplified by Madame Xu, could no longer fulfill the transcendental aspirations of these women. In their quest to express the fullness of their self-discovered subjectivity, they opted for the profound transformation of existing congregations – as happened with Teresa – or for the abandonment of these communities to establish new ones – as was the case for Hindiyya. In other cases, like that of the already-mentioned Lebanese nun Rafqa al-Rayyis, the mystic may also

abandon a religious order to join another community whose charisma fits in better with her own *Weltanschauung*.¹⁷

The foundational emphasis discernible in most Middle Eastern mystic and devout women is particularly revealing of the importance of this step in the *mystical model*. Given the comparatively more restricted lives that they were expected to lead and the “practical absence of single women and female religious vocations” in their sociocultural context (Heyberger 2001, 34), it was only through the establishment of new religious congregations that women like Hindiyya and her contemporaries – such as the Melkite ‘*abida* Maria Qari¹⁸ – could find spaces of freedom to express their newly acquired sense of spiritual individuality.

In the world of the Chinese scholarly gentry where Candida Xu spent her entire life, the foundational effort was not constructed around the establishment of religious orders as much as the physical buildup of a Chinese Catholic infrastructure. In fact, during the three decades of her widowhood, Madame Xu endowed more than thirty churches throughout her country.

17 Born in the Lebanese mountain village of Himlaya in 1832, Rafqa al-Rayyis joined the Mariamette Order in 1854. As member of an active congregation devoted to teaching, the young nun was dispatched to various hamlets all over Mount Lebanon. However, the 1860-1861 sectarian conflict and the crisis her congregation went through in the aftermath of that episode led Rafqa to abandon it in 1871. Her decision to leave the order was further reinforced by a mystical dream where three men (a soldier, a bearded man, and an elderly figure), which she later identified as Saint George, Saint Simeon, and Saint Anthony the Great, commanded her to join Lebanese Order. The new congregation, characterized by its austere lifestyle and the severity of its ascetism, was a better fit for Rafqa’s personality, given her well-known refusal to take part in the “affairs of the world” (Mahfouz 1985, 52). After pronouncing her solemn vows in 1873, Rafqa spent the remainder of her life as a *Baladite* nun in the monasteries of Mar Sima‘al al-Qarn and Saint Joseph, where she suffered the physical ailments that built her reputation as a saint (Cattaneo 2012; Verdeil 2006, 247-264).

18 An Alepine and a member of the city’s Christian bourgeoisie, like Hindiyya, but a member of the Melkite or ‘Greek-Catholic’ community, Maria Qari, together with nine other women, was the first daughter of Aleppo that sought to establish a convent modeled on European patterns. Commonly known as ‘*abidat*’ (meaning ‘servants’), these women refused to abide by the authority of their particular Church and to follow its monastic rules and pledged exclusive allegiance to the Western missionaries. As Maria herself expressed in a letter to the Melkite Bishop Athanasius Dahhan: “I will only adopt the Augustinian Rule [...]. I will not become a nun under any other circumstances, for God has called me to be free from all that binds my spirit [...].” (Khater 2008, 421).

As her confessor and biographer, Father Couplet, did not fail to point out: “there is no chapel, oratory, mission, or congregation that does not bear the mark of her generosity” (Couplet 1688, 125). Within her role as one of the foundresses of Chinese Catholicism, Madame Xu also extended her support to one of the first groups of Chinese consecrated virgins, whom she sheltered in her household (King 1998, 64). In doing so, she followed on the footsteps of other upper-class Christian women, like Agnes Yang – herself daughter of another of the *Three Pillars* – who had already established three ‘convents’ for virgins and chaste widows in Nanjing and Hangzhou (Amsler 2018, 128).

For its part, the foundational effort in the West was primarily directed toward the thorough transformation of already existing religious orders than the creation of new ones. Mother Angélique Arnauld serves as a clear example, illustrating how the personal transformation resulting from conversion necessarily implies a profound *bouleversement* of the clerical structures to which the convert belongs. The transition of Port-Royal from being the family convent of the Arnaulds to becoming an institution adhering strictly to the minutest subtleties of the Benedictine rule could not have taken place without the previous conversion of its abbess (Barbiche 2016, 75-76; Kostroum 2011). Teresa of Ávila herself provides the best example of the foundational consequences of conversion. Not so much because she established seventeen new convents, but rather because of the profound impact that her individuality had on the Carmelite Order. Therefore, Teresa’s relevance as a foundress does not rely on her impressive conventual catalogue, but upon the revitalized religious and living model that her foundations put forward. In fact, as Carole Slade (1995) convincingly argued, the radical observance of the Carmelite rule of strict enclosure, poverty, solitude, and prayer which Teresa enshrined among her *Discalced Carmelites* transformed her convents into paradoxical vehicles for feminine self-determination.

The foundational effort, in its multiform expression, reveals how these *converted* women, armed with a new and powerful sense of their own subjectivity, carved new spaces of sociability where their individual religious experience could be freely expressed. In this sense, the *foundations* they undertook should be considered as the *ad extram* expression of the deep spiritual transformation that they suffered in their inner selves due to their previous *conversion*.

2.3. Teaching

The First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, and more specifically its chapter 14.33-35, has traditionally been regarded as the quintessential formulation of the so-called *Pauline Interdiction*, which prohibited women from studying and teaching theology. However, as will be proven herein-below, one of the most common characteristics among mystic and devout women was their propensity for teaching, which they justified by appealing to a varied set of subterfuges.

Saint Teresa's role as a theologian is well-known. Some of her works have been qualified as true treatises of mystical theology (Slade 1995), wherein she put forward her perception of God as an internal search within the human soul. Facing the prohibition of female teaching, Teresa reacted by deliberately using *plain* language and eschewing the technicalities characterizing the lingo of professional theologians (Serrano Pérez 2011, 625-645; Ricard 1982, 467-475). In a feature common to other women mystics, Teresa did not shy away from appealing to a "discourse of submission and weakness," a tactic that, according to Patricia Bastida (2006, 115), served as a "self-defense against the possible enmities generated by her peculiar position in society." In doing so, Teresa followed the example of some of her predecessors, such as Hadewijch, whose complex Trinitarian theology was built upon a deliberate emphasis on the *feminine* virtue of love (Bouyer 2022, 21-41), but also served as a model to be followed subsequent generations. Thus, Mother Angélique Arnauld of Port-Royal, who had read Teresa's autobiography, made use of the *science of saints* and a rhetorical discourse of meekness as strategies to validate both her teaching activities and her resistance to power.¹⁹

While references to female teaching in the Middle East are scarcer, it is well known that Hindiyya wrote a dozen of books (Hayek 1965, 525-636), where she intended to "explain the great mysteries of Catholic theology" (Heyberger 2001, 145). In her case, the author justified her venture into the theological realm by appealing to her own mystical experiences for, she claimed, her works had been dictated to her directly by God (Heyberger 2001). Beyond her justifications, the most relevant feature of Hindiyya's

19 Following Saint-Cyran, Daniella Kostroum (2011, 12) defined the *science of the saints* in the following terms: "[...] the opposite of scholasticism. [...] the science of saints involved receiving wisdom in ways that were "above [human] nature [and] seemingly in contradiction with reason."

works is the fact that they were written in Arabic, “language of the people and the women” (Heyberger 2001, 148), rather than in Syriac, the language commonly employed by the – male – Maronite religious hierarchy. Her choice of the common language reveals, moreover, a willingness to familiarize Middle Eastern Christian women with the new religious concepts and ideas arising from the Counter-Reformation spirit brought by the Latin missionaries to the Levant ever since the seventeenth century. Thus, Hindiyya’s works should be integrated within the religious renaissance that characterized the Christian Orient of her times.

Finally, in the case of Candida Xu, the teaching activity emerges as particularly prominent. Given the physical separation between religious women and their – exclusively male – religious mediators imposed by Confucian principles (a phenomenon which complicated the administration of certain sacraments, as studied by Pei-Yi Wu (1979, 5-38)), women were compelled to take on a leading role in the domestic congregations that dominated Chinese Catholicism in the late Ming and early Qing eras. Relying on an abundance of printed devotional materials (Standaert 2012, 73-124; Menegon 2004, 208-209), women like Madame Xu taught the precepts of the Church and instructed the members of their household in devotional practice, bringing others to Christianity, as both Gail King (1998, 62) and Nadine Amsler (2018, 119, 121) did not fail to point out. In doing so, Madame Xu and her coevals not only contributed to expand the boundaries of Chinese Christianity but also, and perhaps more importantly, challenged the predominant narrative around Confucian patrilineality, highlighting the crucial role of women – and female networks – in the transmission of the faith (Amsler 2018, 122; Menegon 2004, 211, 224, 227).

If conversion represents the initial stage in the individual transformation of the mystic or devout woman, and foundation serves as the external consequence of this profound internal metamorphosis, teaching and writing naturally follow as the third logical step in this chain of phenomena. Once the mystic/*dévot*e has attained her foundational goals, thus establishing a proper environment for the development of her religious individuality, teaching becomes the essential tool in the transmission of the charisma that inspired her. It is only through the diffusion of their deepest motives and ideas that these self-aware women could justify their activity while, simultaneously, promoting the renewed model they embodied. In doing so, they employed a wide array of rhetorical devices and subterfuges to weather the limitations that, under Biblical prescription, limited any female approach to theology.

3. Final Remarks

Throughout the early modern era, Christian women living across vastly diverging sociocultural contexts made their presence felt in the public arena through the assertion of mystical graces and/or manifestly devout lifestyles. Their experiences were, however, dismissed by the positivist scientificism dominating the academia well into the twentieth century. The physical phenomena sustained by these women as well as the apparently extreme forms of piety in which some of them engaged were relegated to the fields of mental sickness, sexual deviancy, and psychological imbalance, as criticized, *inter alios*, by Grace Jantzen (1997, 385-402). With the *cultural turn* of the 1970s and 1980s, a new appreciation for women mystics started to emerge. Yet, this perspective also fell into a reductionist trap by portraying them as revolutionaries, feminists, and women beyond their time (Herráiz García 2015, 51-68; Jantzen 1994, 186-206) – a reading that has become increasingly dominant in publications aimed at the general public (Martín Merchán 2020; Vilariño 2015; Flotats 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that both perspectives fail at properly contextualizing mystic and devout women in their specific sociocultural milieux.

This article has sought to transcend the reductionism of those perspectives by placing mystic and devout women as participants in a historical context that was witnessing the, admittedly, non-linear and protracted (Parker 2007, 1-12) emergence of the individual – her concerns, preferences, and preoccupations – as the dominant unit of experience (González Fernández 2016, 96). Thus, if Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Sienna, or Angélique Arnauld expressed their newly acquired self-awareness through spiritual phenomena and ascetical practices it was because, in their respective societies, such manifestations of individuality were readily identified as expressions of ‘saintly’ behavior. The social readability of their mystical experiences endowed these women with the latitude to transgress certain social norms and contradict solidly anchored behavioral codes. In parallel, the Chinese women of Candida Xu’s era were also living in a world where the assertion of individualism was rapidly becoming a dominant element in the psychological fabric of society, as noted by Pei-Yi Wu (1979, 21-22, 25-26, 37-38). While Madame Xu and the women of her generation remained firmly attached to the Confucian values associated with their social class, they laid out the foundations of a new Chinese female Catholicism. In the decades to come, this movement gave rise to more forceful – and

socially subversive – expressions of female self-awareness, exemplified in the case of Petronila Chen and the other sworn virgins of Fujian (Menegon 2004, 221-225).

Devout and mystic women do not, therefore, challenge the existing socio-cultural hegemony in the sense classically defined by Althusser (1995, 284), but rather operate within its framework. Indeed, as mentioned above, they appealed to practices anchored in the Jungian collective unconscious to assert their own individuality (Greenwood 1990, 488-489). With their ecstasies and visions, like in the case of Saint Teresa; their physical ailments, so common among nineteenth-century mystic figures (from Rafqa al-Rayyis to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux or Elizabeth of the Trinity); or their embodiment of social virtues, as Candida Xu did through her conforming to the model of chaste widowhood, these women were able to carve spaces of autonomous self-expression by appealing, despite their different cultural contexts, to archetypes profoundly planted in their respective milieux (Walach 1992, 133). This also explains why Hindiyya's aspirations to mystical glory failed or why the consecrated virgins of Madame Xu's era had to seek refuge in the households of prominent widows. The new spirituality that these women represented, indebted to European models, had not yet penetrated the collective reservoir of socially readable behaviors in either the Lebanese Mountain or Late Ming China. Their behaviors remained alien to the catalog of representations available in their specific chronological and cultural setting. In contrast, less than a century afterward, a new generation of mystic and devout women in Lebanon and China were able to affirm their religious individuality successfully. This posterior success was possible because the behavioral patterns they exhibited – the public presentation of their selves in Goffman's classical definition (1956) – could be read by societies whose mental frames of reference had been expanded through contact with the sociocultural *other*.

This archetypal transformation could only take place in the context of the new, assertive, militant Catholicism emerging after the Council of Trent. In this sense, the missionary efforts that congregations like the Jesuits, the Franciscans, or the Dominicans undertook, not only in the Levant and East Asia, as explored in this paper, but also in the colonial Americas and throughout the new worlds opened to European exploration after the fifteenth century (Sánchez Méndez 2010, 3-25; Armas Asín 2009; Županov 2005) was aided by a deliberate use of the printing press to diffuse the Counter-Reformation devotional charisma. Doves of comparatively ac-

cessible images (e.g., the pervasive Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Hann 2014, S185-S186)) and books entered middle-class households across the world and contributed to promote the intimist, privatized, individualist religious spirit irradiating from early modern Europe. Consequently, female vocations started to emerge in societies where women's role in religion – and public life – had traditionally been marginal at best, while also contributing to the formation of new frames of reference that granted these women social sanction for their newly acquired religious self-awareness.

Thus, the mystical/devotional model, as analyzed in this article, provided women throughout the broader Catholic world with valid examples to legitimize the public expression of their religious individuality. The diffusion of a common model of sainthood through the biographies of saints, pious images, and other devotional materials that circulated widely in the immediate Counter-Reformation period not only provided them with readily available models to follow, but more importantly, also prepared their own societies to accept their public vocations. Therefore, mystical/devotional model operated at a double personal and societal level, transforming the internal heart of hearts of the mystic or *dévôte*, while simultaneously reshaping their societies. By following the promptings of their intimate conscience, these women were certainly able to carve new spaces of female freedom and construct new approaches to Catholic doctrine and practice. However, their ability to do so was contingent upon the consolidation of socially readable archetypes at the intersection between cross-cultural contact and print capitalism.

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