

# THE HEART AS AN IMAGE OF DEIFICATION IN MYSTICAL WRITING

Magda Kučerková

## ABSTRACT

The paper explores two phenomena powerful in life and interpretive terms: the heart and deification. One is understood as deeply human, the other as metaphysically appealing. It is a connection present in the history of Christian thinking for a long time, since the heart is perceived as an inner space where God meets man, in the most intimate form, which can only acquire the character of unification. Deification, as the experience of Christian mystics and mystics shows, basically means the deepest unification with God and activation of the change in God's love. The issue examined in the paper is presented in the form of a brief guide to the theological concept of deification, and also the convergence of the historical and biblical views of the heart. The core of thinking about the topic is the interpretation of the heart as an inner image (the heart as the center, exchange of hearts) and the interpretation of the phenomenality of deification in the context of written mystical experience.

## KEYWORDS

Mystical experience. Inner image. The heart. Center. Transforming unification. Deification.

## DOI

<https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.P210-9997-2021-11>

In my paper, I examine two phenomena which are strong from the life and interpretive perspective. One is deeply human, the other is metaphysically appealing: the heart and deification. This juxtaposition has been perceived in the history of Christian religious thinking and spirituality for a long time, since the heart is understood as the inner space where God meets man, in the most intimate form, which can acquire even the nature of unification.<sup>1</sup> Deification basically means the deepest unification with God (with all consequences and gains), as I will try to point out.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hastings – Mason – Pyper 2000, 156; Álvarez Maestro – Hornáčková Klapicová – Martínez Puche 2011, 144; Farrugia 2008, 971–972.

## Deification as a theological concept

The basis of reasoning about the penetration of the divine with the human is found in Greek philosophy, which presented God's transcendence as the ideal of imitation, even eminence-unlike the Old Testament, which viewed the divine world as untouchable (Špidlík [Farrugia 2008, 971]). Greek theologians formulated this view in relation to the incarnation of Logos. Clement of Alexandria states: "The word of God has become man so that you, man, learn how man can become God" (971). St. Athanasius of Alexandria, in the work *De incarnatione* (54), follows him saying: "God became man to become God" (Farrugia 2008, 125). To further deepens the thesis it is said that "the divine Logos assumed flesh so that all humankind could be lifted up into the mystery of his divinity" (McGuckin 2000, 156). According to Athanasius, the incarnation was the "mystical reconciliation of the hitherto disparate natures of God and humanity" (156). Medieval mystical theology completely naturally adopted the concept of deification because it enabled it to express an ecstatic connection with God (156). Mystical writing reveals this remarkable phenomenality of the action of the transcendent in man over the centuries. In a striking way, this is what happens precisely in the image of the heart.

## Historical and biblical view of the heart

The heart is one of the oldest and perhaps most comprehensible images in human society. Historically, the forms of its depiction are truly rich, and its interpretations vary depending on the cultures but also the contexts that initiated and/or developed them. Evolution – the development of human thinking, skills, creativity, and the ability to observe – has naturally played an important role in this context.

Somewhere at the beginning of the imaginary tradition of creating this image by artistic means (especially artistic and verbal) we can therefore situate, say, a painting from the Stone Age – a simple red spot in the chest of a mammoth, as we find on the wall of the El Pindal cave in the Spanish region of Asturias. In both visual and verbal art, traces appear that reveal how perception and awareness of the phenomenon of the heart have changed. With the evolution of mankind, thinking became abstract, and so the material image acquired an immaterial character. Therefore, several thousand years before Christ, we already observe that the perception of the heart shifts in meaning and is not only understood as a) a physical organ located in the middle of the chest, the beating of which enables life, but also as b) the seat of emotions. Already in *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is considered the most important literary-religious work of Akkad culture, the issues of humanity arise: "the meaning of life,

anxiety in the face of death or the search for immortality” (Fernández González 2016, 98). The Egyptians viewed the heart as the seat of the soul and life experiences, and adequately shaped and subjected (for example, amulets in the form of a heart) its mythological image. Greek culture removed the heart-spirit connection and brought the concept of dualism between body and soul (Hoystad 2007 [Fernández González 2016, 101–102]).

We could, of course, continue these considerations, including artistic or graphic or iconic refinement of the form of the heart under the influence of evolving medical knowledge, but in the thematic scope of the conference it is appropriate to pause, especially by the biblical interpretation of the heart. In the Bible, it is rather rarely used in the meaning of the bodily organ, but it often appears in the form of a metaphor. A metaphor is thereby a form of verbal depiction that makes it possible to record phenomena, things incomprehensible by nature to a person, but at the same time inherent to him. It can also, as Longman – Wihoit – Ryken claim, show him “those dynamic forces that make us unique personalities” (2015, 264).

The Old Testament observes the “heart-thinking” of a person, which can be inclined to evil, which in turn provokes grief in the heart of God” (Gen 6:5–6), highlights the pure intent of man and fair action and “uprightness” of the heart (Gen 20:6; 1Kgs 9:4). Since holy books capture a person’s relationship with divinity and vice versa, it is natural that they reveal the human being as it is, in relation to things, relationships, situations that normally surround it and to which it must necessarily take “an attitude”: as the heart tends to be “afraid and weakhearted” (cf. Deut 20:8), hardened (Exod 7:22; Sir 16:11) or evil (Num 15:39; Bar 2:8). It can be full of confidence, brightness, joy, boldness and need not worry, because it “remain true to him” (Sir 22:23).

The heart is a place where both memories and statements of God are kept (Ps 119:11 [Beth]). It is the source of the desire for God and the reason for searching Him: “Yet when you seek the Lord, your God, from there, you shall indeed find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul” (Deut 4:29). Love from the whole of a human being (heart, soul, strength – cf. Deut 6:5) towards God returns from Him with the potential to convert: The Israelites receive the promise of a “new heart” and a “new spirit”, a “heart of flesh” instead of a “heart of stone”, God himself inserts “his own spirit” into their insides (Ezek 36:26–27). In summary, it could therefore be said that a human personality is injected into the biblical metaphor of the heart, i.e. thoughts, memories and mementoes, intellect, desires and will, or the choice of man in some decisive situation (cf. Longman – Wihoit – Ryken 2015, 264). This reasoning and examples could also be continued in relation to the New Testament, but since the gospel message and, in particular, the secret of incarnation and the secret of the trinity are the deepest essence of Christian mystical writing, the new-testament revelation of God will represent both an explicit and implicit starting point for further interpretation, above all of the interpreted texts.

## The heart as an interior image

In my paper, I consider what creates that interpretive power that historically motivates people to examine the connection of heart and deification, and also why these considerations are still current and attractive. Some time ago, in cooperation with Miroslava Režná, I wrote a study on internal images in Christian mystical writing (2014). We defined them as those that arise in the consciousness of mystics during a contemplative state as a result of their imaginative vision. When the mystic then wants to convey these images to their surroundings, they try to express them with words so that can best preserve the specificity of their image and bring them closer to their significance. The heart can be considered an interior image of *sui generis*. To illustrate this, I will give you a few examples.

### The heart as the center

The commonly applied allegorical meaning of the word heart is associated with the source of human feelings and attitudes, as evidenced by many well-known phrases: having a noble heart, a large heart, a hard heart, one's heart in the right place, etc. As the theologian Jean Galot notes in this context, although we may also be aware of the accelerated beating of the physical heart when feeling emotions, it is “not their source or center” (2003, 25). However, people commonly perceive the heart as the center of their inner life, which results from the need to determine the place in which “feelings originate, and also movements of will” (25). Galot places this center as an “intimate strand of personal life” on an emotional-spiritual level and defines it as the moral and psychological/affective center. According to Mircea Eliade, the Center is where everything comes from, it is a zone of sanctity, of existence that is new and which lasts, i.e. is eternal (Eliade [1993] 2003, 18–19). One and the other perspective shows that the center that people intuitively associate with their heart is a place where a person knows and can realize the deepest meaning of their being. In Jungian terms: the center is the Self, and therefore “the beginning and purpose of life, a symbol of psychic wholeness, ‘a vessel for the grace of God’, ‘a borderline term expressing unlimited reality’, [...] ‘God’s Image in Us’” (Antier 2012, 419).

As themselves in God or, more precisely, in their idea of God, people perceive the heart as the seat and source of love, therefore they express unification with God through the metaphor of the heart (for example, the connection of hearts). An apt example of such a notion of the heart in relation to the divinity is the cult of the Divine Heart of Jesus, in which the respect of Christians towards the person of Christ the Redeemer is mirrored. In it, the heart represents the “most intimate center of the incarnated person of Jesus Christ”, who could be known as “supreme love” (Figura

2000, 257).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, with respect to Jesus' heart, God tries to be a loving Father who sends his Son to redeem the world. In this context, the Dictionary of Mysticism (*Diccionario de la mística*) emphasizes as a biblical starting point respect for The Heart of Jesus and the last word of God the Father "the pierced the Heart of his Son": "They will see whom they stabbed" (Jn 19:37). The open (physical) heart of Jesus "is translated into the epiphany of his love" (Figura 2000, 258), which, through this respect, continues to take place and is made available on a spiritual level and very personally also in mystical experience.

Respect for The Heart of Jesus is shown to be central in mystical Christian tradition. It takes on a special dimension in the context of female writing (mysticism of the heart). This is mainly because it feeds semantically on a specific spiritual phenomenon – the mystical marriage to Christ (*connubium*). This metaphor, as Dinzeltbacher argues (2000, 363), enables mystics to express "the revelation of God or the Trinity in the Soul", and also its profoundly changing power. The presence of God in the soul submerges the soul into bliss, and the soul that contemplates God becomes like him. Julian of Norwich (circa 1342–1420), sees her own heart in one of the revelations she recorded in *Revelations of Divine Love*, and in the middle of it, her soul, which takes the form of a noble city.

And then our Lord opened my ghostly eye and showed me my soul in the midst of my heart. I saw the soul so large as it were an endless world ward and as it were a blissful kingdom. And by the condition I saw therein I understood, thought that it is a worshipful city. In the midst of that city sits our Lord Jesus, true God and true man, a fair person and of large stature, highest Bishop, solemnest King, worshipfullest Lord (Julian of Norwich 2003).<sup>3</sup>

This image of *the soul as a city* in which the king resides is characterized by similar expressional-value qualities to the image of the soul as presented by St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) in the work *The Interior Castle or the Mansions* (*Castillo Interior o Las Moradas*, 1577). Teresa also approaches the soul as the place where the king dwells – "a King so mighty, so wise, and so pure, containing in Himself all good"<sup>4</sup> (1 *Interior Castle* 1, 1; St. Teresa of Ávila 1921). His abode is located in the very center of the castle (i.e. soul) and this center corresponds to the last chambers, the Seventh Mansions, based on the gradual principle of the construction of the work – the deeper the soul progresses into the castle, the closer it is to the center. When it reaches the

2 In the cult of the Divine Heart, the heart of Jesus is venerated, "because only the Son was incarnated. However, the starting point of the Incarnation and, in particular, the formation of the heart of Jesus is in the Trinity." The theology of the heart must therefore develop in relation to the Trinity, as the New Testament revelation shows (Galot 2003, 27).

3 *Julian of Norwich: Showing of Love, part III*. (Julian of Norwich. 2003. *Showing of Love*. The Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey.) In Julia Bolton Holloway website "Julian of Norwich, her Showing of Love and its contexts." Available at: <http://www.umilta.net/love3.html>.

4 "un Rey tan poderoso, tan sabio, tan limpio, tan lleno de todos los bienes" (1 *Castillo Interior* 1, 1; Santa Teresa 2006).

center, it is “revealed that it has reached the center of God’s life, to its own center and to the center of god’s universe” (Sicari 2012, 731). At the climax of the experience of wandering in the interior castle, Teresa experiences a spiritual marriage: “human nature unites with the nature of God” (732). The image of the interior castle and the image of the soul as a city, inspired by material reality (the castle evokes massive walls similar to those that surrounded the centers of medieval towns)<sup>5</sup>, in the writing of both female mystics, they have a materialized character – they become an interior space of unification and sanctity. The imaginary walls surround the innermost center of the soul, in which a rare and mysterious connection with God occurs, to a safe connection in his loving presence.

### Exchange of hearts

It is one of the most famous literary images, which was inspired by a mystical experience. For example, it was experienced by St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), as she told her biographer Raymond of Capua. In her experience, there are two connected images. The first is the image of the removal of the human heart: when in prayer she asked Christ to take away her heart and his own will and give her a new heart (cf. Ps 50:12), “she dreamed that the eternal bridegroom came to visit her as always, opened her chest on the left, took her heart and left”<sup>6</sup> (Pozzi – Leonardi, eds. [1988] 2004, 249). Catherine was then sure in the knowledge (accompanied by a distinct feeling) that she was living without a heart, and she often expressed it out loud. The second image is the image of the acceptance of Christ’s heart: after one of the ecstasies when she returned home from church, she was shrouded in a light in which Jesus appeared.

In his holy hands he held the human heart, fiery red and radiant. [...] again he opened her chest on her left again and put the same heart into her that he held in his hands and said: – Dearest daughter: since I took your heart before, behold, now I am giving you my own, with which you will live forever –. When he said it, he closed the hole he had made in her side and, as a sign of wonder, a scar was left in that part of the body, which was visible to me and her companions<sup>7</sup> (249–250).

As Catherine later mentioned to Raymond, the state of transformation felt like the definitive loss of her own self (surrender of her own will), even on a spiritual level:

5 More details on the figurativeness of the castle and a definition of the concept of the castle can be found Hornáčková Klapicová 2015, 297–298.

6 “Le parve che l’eterno sposo fosse venuto come al solito a trovarla, le avesse aperto il petto dalla parte sinistra e presole il cuore, se ne fosse tornado via.”

7 “[T]eneva nelle sue sante mani un cuore umano, vermiglio e splendente. [...] apri nuovamente il petto di lei dalla parte sinistra, e introducendovi lo stesso cuore che teneva nelle mani, disse: – Carissima figliuola: come l’altro giorno presi il tuo cuore, ecco che ora ti do il mio, col quale sempre vivrai –. Ciò detto, egli richiuse l’apertura che aveva fatto nel costato di lei, e in segno del miracolo, rimase in quel punto della carne una cicatrice, come asserirono a me e ad altri le sue compagne, che poterono vederla.”

“I could no longer say ‘Lord, I recommend You my heart’” (250). This image well describes the intentionality of the mystical experience: it is not only the development of individual spirituality or the acquisition of solace which is given, but also the activation of being in the world for service to others, despite the pain expected, for example, by the acceptance of the heart of the crucified Christ. This is confirmed by Catherine’s recorded words of Jesus: “[T]hese are my second self, because they have lost and wasted their will and have joined into mine, with which they form a whole and imitate it”<sup>8</sup> (*Dialogue*, 1; Santa Caterina da Siena 2008, 30). Similarly, St. Teresa of Ávila expressed herself similarly on her spiritual journey, full of experiences of a supernatural nature (for example, the phenomenon of transverberation – the piercing of the heart).<sup>9</sup> She most valued “the imitation of Christ in his state of self-sacrifice for the whole world” (Sicari 2012, 731).

## Deification as a transformation of the heart

The previous consideration can be summarized in four words: love – center – unification – kingdom. The desire for God’s love as a mirror of *imago Dei* initiates the spiritual path of the mystic, built by prayer, fasting, renunciation, self-denial, and sacrifice. The initial need for transcendence walks hand in hand with the need for self-recognition (Knapík 2020; see also Lalinská – Šarníková 2015), self-realization and understanding of the meaning of life, and it is felt in the deepest inside, which in mystical figurativeness corresponds to the image of the heart as the center. In this intimate space of the human being, unification with Christ the Bridegroom occurs at the height of the spiritual path. God’s presence is realized by the mystic as a royal, and such deification becomes his soul: “You persevered with me in my trials, and I give you the kingdom as my Father gave to me” (Lk 22:28–29). In it, as the perfect (incarnated son of God) and absolute (God) the bridegroom’s mystic simultaneously knows “divine love that turns to mankind to save him and announce a new life” (Galot 2003, 155). The essence of this Love of God is expressed plastically by Julian of Norwich (2003) at the end of the 16th revelation:

And from that time that it was showed I desired oftentimes to know what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more I was answered in ghostly understanding, saying thus, “Would you know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did

8 “[E]ssi sono un altro me stesso; infatti hanno perduta e annullata la volontà propria, essendosi rivestiti della mia volontà alla quale si sono uniti e conformati.”

9 Less well known, but similarly strong interpretatively in this context is the image of a “strong loving beam”, as seen by St. Laura Montoya, a Colombian mystic of the 20th century: as a result she felt an injury to her chest and left hip, and with it an immense inner burning, which she likened to the revival of love. For more information see Cíváňová 2020, 29.

he show it to you? For Love. Hold yourself therein, and you shall understand and know more of the same. But you shall never know or understand therein other things without end.” Thus was I taught that Love was our Lord’s meaning.<sup>10</sup>

The mystically accepted knowledge “of the universal love of God, which is revealed to her as the basis and purpose of all creation and of every being” (Čaja 2014, 36), was an impulse for Julian of Norwich to choose the hermit’s way of life. She chooses seclusion, solitude, a limited living space, where the bricked-up doors of the cell make available “the central paradox of the gospel, according to which life is born of death” (Pezzini [1984] 1997, 19). Finally, this thesis is confirmed by Julian’s rich activity in the form of spiritual counselling and work on a new editorial of the *Revelations* manuscript – deification realized in spiritual terms gives rise in everyday life to *amor unitivus*, unifying love (one of the key elements of the definition of mystical theology, as formulated by the French medieval philosopher Jean Gerson). Only in this attitude is the experience of the epiphany of God’s love fulfilling its purpose.

Giving God’s love is the basic idea of thinking about the heart as a picture of deification. St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) characterized the nature of experience with God in contemplation as an “infused and loving knowledge of God” (*Dark Night of the Soul* II, 18, 5). At the same time, in a broader context, he pointed to the wide scope of this loving force, which influences human stories through metanoia. “If a soul is penetrated by this love and if it receives an internal stimulus from it [...], then it also participates in its fullness and its sharpness” (Grün – Riedl 1996, 44). This is confirmed by the words of St. Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510): “I see how man turns into God with love” (*Life Chapter* 14 [Sertorius 2013, 87])<sup>11</sup>.

St. Augustine (354–430) in *Confessions* reveals a remarkable gradation of the ascent into God’s presence. She and her mother look through the window of the garden and contemplate it, gradually rising “through all the levels of bodily objects, and even through the heaven itself, where the sun and moon and stars shine on the earth”. All of this happens “with a more ardent love” (*Confessions* 9, 10, 24). Spiritual theologian Francesco Asti stresses that in Augustine’s description, the state of the heart is of great importance – his total expansion, even the glowing/hot feeling, only in this attitude can one approach God. However, this is only possible because of the nature of the soul that was created in God’s image and form:

the garden becomes a spiritual space for them, from which the steps up to the fullness of Being Loved – Loving – Love. [...] Ecstasy is to step out of yourself and go towards God, and what’s more, it’s overcoming the intellectual dimension and totally immersing yourself [...] to similarity. The whole soul belongs to God; it is heavenly as God’s beauty (2009, 32).

<sup>10</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showing of Love, part III. Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Parts of this work are freely translated due to no access to the original text in Italian.

The pouring of Infusion of God's love arouses in the heart of mysticism the need for a radical diminishing of its own intentionality literally in the spirit of the gospel: to leave everything for the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:29; Mt 19:29). Only in a state of complete emptying (kenosis) is there a transforming unification, a breakthrough with God's essence, when – according to Julian of Norwich – everything becomes God: "And I saw no difference between God and our substance but as it were all God" (Julian of Norwich 2003).<sup>12</sup>

St. Catherine of Genoa, in a remarkable picture of the fire of God's love, clearly communicates the intensity and special quality of experience with God's revelation. God satiates the mystical being in a way that transcends the human abilities for reflection. Love is given to it in a way that excludes everything it knew and had experienced until then.

Finally, the abilities have lost their natural activity, they are quite captivating and burn in God's fireplace so brightly and with such clarity that they seem already to be blissful and led to the desired haven, where they enjoy the inner flames of such pure love that, with their power, would burn hell, even though it is their nature to be a flame that burns without consuming (*Life* Chapter 21 [Sertorius 2013, 8–88]).

God is so powerful that he can transform all human existence. Catherine says that "I feel such a fire without fire in myself that I wish everyone could understand it" (*Life* Chapter 9 [Sertorius 2013, 79–80]). Deification means a calling for testimony, she wants and needs to testify about what she saw and felt to make her experience life-giving. As the individual life stories of mystics show, the changing and loving scope of God (1 Jn 4:7–16) in them gives rise to the need to radically change one's way of life towards service to others, greater simplicity, or absolute poverty; it gives them the strength not to be afraid of pain or suffering. It also encourages their creative efforts to find accessible and appropriate forms of expression to express what appears to be ineffable.

## Conclusion

The subtle inner nature of the mystical experience, resisting the exactness of scientific approaches, and its semantic rooting in the word mystery, are undoubtedly an interpretive challenge. Paradoxically, the interpretive power of this comprehensive and provocative phenomenon also lies in these characteristics. After all, man has always had the need to think about himself, about the meaning of life and death, about events, deviations on his own spiritual path, whether originating in a particular

<sup>12</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showing of Love, part II* (14th revelation; Chapter 54).

Ibid. Available at: <http://www.umilta.net/love2.html>.

religious space or outside it. A person also feels the need to be silent and immerse oneself in one's own interior, an inspiration for authentic being in its environment and relationships. The mystical narrative therefore represents one of the imaginary models of the inner world of man, and its interpretation contributes to identifying the possibilities of the (in)effability of this world, as I tried to point out in this paper, describing the image of the heart in the context of the phenomena of deification.<sup>13</sup>

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13 This text is an outcome from the grant VEGA 1/0514/19 *The Poetics of Mystical Experience and the Literary Forms of Mystagogy* and it was translated by Richard Swales.

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## CONTACT

**doc. Mgr. Magda Kučerková, PhD.**

Department of Romance Languages  
 Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra  
 Hodžova 1, 949 01 Nitra, Slovak Republic  
 mkucerkova@ukf.sk