

The Gift of Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination of Western Medieval Christianity

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*This article explores the role of weeping in medieval practices of piety by performing a close reading of three medieval texts: Walter Hilton's *The Ladder of Perfection*, Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*, and Margery Kempe's *Book of Margery Kempe*. Hilton emphasized the role of weeping in the journey to a contemplative life while Catherine focused on the typology of tears; both affirmed genuine tears as a method to communicate with the divine. Margery Kempe, known for her strong emotions, often aligned with Hilton's and Catherine's views but sometimes differed, especially with her attitudes about crying in public. Even as weeping and the church became more ritualized and formalized over time, the practice remained active in the religious imaginations of people. The paper concludes by suggesting that weeping as part of pious practices continued, though changed, through the writings of more contemporary Anglicans like Jeremy Taylor and Charles Wesley, as well as in the Pentecostal tradition.*

Who has lived in this world and not shed a tear? Tears are a universal, ineffable, and complex paralanguage, defined scientifically as “the observable actions that accompany internal states.”¹ They communicate physical distress, nostalgia, attachment, redemption, release, joy, anger, and so much more, and are thus “vehicles of feelings that go too deep for language.” Tears “resist the abstracting intellectual process” and act as “gatekeepers to a level of emotion that, like holiness, eludes a certain range of normalcy.” They thus function as a “symbolic vehicle for the full load of the human experience,” such that in every religious tradition tears are “richly charged with symbolic

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¹ Jeffrey A. Kottler, *The Language of Tears* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 28–29.

meaning and ritual efficacy,” serving as forms of intercession, conduits between realms, and part of the practice of meditation and prayer.²

The aim of this paper is to trace how weeping became a more formalized spiritual practice available to all levels of Christian society as the medieval church simultaneously became more ritualized and systematized. I will begin by exploring the historical context of the medieval period, and the sociological and religious conditions that led to the formalization of weeping as a spiritual practice. Then I will compare two seminal writings on tears from the period, *The Ladder of Perfection* by Walter Hilton and *The Dialogue* of Catherine of Siena. I will move next to examine the case of Margery Kempe’s effusive emotions in comparison to these spiritual guides for weeping. Finally, I will conclude by exploring the progression of weeping as a practice of piety as the Middle Ages drew to a close. I will seek to show that even though the conversation around weeping changed in the medieval period, the universal nature and power of tears, especially within the religious imagination, remains relevant throughout history and even today.

Weeping in the Middle Ages

The medieval period saw an increased focus on weeping as a practice of piety. As E. M. Cioran noted, “The Middle Ages were saturated with tears. Their rivers of tears haven’t quite dried up even today, and whoever has an ear for pain can still hear their lamentations.”³ Medieval weeping developed from an already existing narrative within the Christian tradition; Christianity and weeping were connected in the Bible, where tears are frequently mentioned.⁴ Weeping is of course mentioned frequently in the books of the Hebrew scriptures, and the Psalter contains many references to weeping, as a source of sustenance (Psalm 42:4; 80:6; 102:10), a component of prayer (Psalm

² Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, “Introduction,” in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–4.

³ E. M. Cioran, *Tears and Saints* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29.

⁴ Piroska Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, ed. Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 122.

6), and an expression of attachment and loss (Psalm 6).⁵ Jesus includes those “who weep now” in the blessed ones of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:21), and he himself wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). One of the better-known biblical images for pious weeping is that of a woman bathing Jesus’ feet with her tears and drying them with her hair (Luke 7:38).

The desert fathers and mothers elaborated on the practice of weeping. Abba Poemen believed that weeping was the only true way into the heart: “Weep! Truly there is no other way than this.”⁶ Abba Arsenius was famous for carving a hole into his chest from continual weeping. Tears, for the desert fathers and mothers, confirmed humans’ “readiness to allow [their] life to fall apart in the dark night of the soul, and [their] willingness to assume new life in the resurrection of the dead.”⁷ They believed that vulnerability, expressed through weeping, was the “only way toward holiness.”⁸ For them, what was far more important than learning to live was in fact learning to die.⁹ Tears were a crucial piece in that process of learning how to die.

This was the tradition and the texts that the medieval Christians inherited. The Christians of the Middle Ages in no way created or finished the process of seeing tears as part of the religious imagination. With the Christianization of the Roman emperors and the entire Roman Empire the church became more fully the center of society. Baptism was required, and excommunication from the church meant banishment from the entire society. With the Gregorian reforms (c. 1050–1250), the sacraments solidified into acceptable avenues through which people could communicate with the divine. Religious weeping, influenced by the changed attitude toward sacraments, became more valued in this period as a “rare, traditionally accepted way of witnessing an *inner* communication with God.”¹⁰ Christian writers, such as Peter Damian, John of Fécamp, Walter Hilton, and Catherine of Siena, began to create instructional guides on the process of holy

⁵ David A. Bosworth, “Weeping in the Psalms,” *Vetus Testamentum* 63, no. 1 (2013): 37–41.

⁶ John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2003), 48–51.

⁷ Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 48.

⁸ Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 50.

⁹ Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 51.

¹⁰ Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” 130.

crying. Thus weeping became more systematized and ritualized in the Middle Ages, and therefore more accessible to Christians.

One aspect that set weeping apart in the Middle Ages was that it was an act of piety particularly encouraged and systematized for the common people.¹¹ People in the High Middle Ages identified class distinctions characterized as “those who pray, those who fight, and those who work.”¹² While this is a limited categorization, it will serve to help define my conception of “common people” as those whose days are spent working, rather than praying or fighting as their primary occupation. The workers include those who tended the land as well as the merchant and shopkeepers.¹³

The growth in the practice of holy crying was fitting for the medieval period because of the simultaneous rise in the popularity of embodied piety. This increase in the practice of physical prayer arose from the fact that much of the population was illiterate. These illiterate faithful were taught to read the “book” of Christ’s body.¹⁴ The handbook *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, ascribed to Bonaventure, gave “detailed directions for visualizing each scene in the life of Christ in order to arouse empathy.”¹⁵ This interest in “bodily charismas” continued to grow, and was epitomized by Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata in his hands, feet, and side.¹⁶ Weeping was also encouraged as part of the formal liturgy of the church, especially during the season of Lent. Votive masses (*Pro Petitione Lacrimarum*) included petitions for abundant physical tears. The *Stabat Mater* is another example of a ritualized focus on weeping in the medieval period. This haunting hymn, written in the thirteenth century, is a meditation on the grief of Mary over losing her son Jesus to death.

Catherine of Siena and Walter Hilton

What then did religious weeping consist of in this embodied and tumultuous age? What were the spiritual leaders suggesting, and what

¹¹ Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” 130.

¹² John P. McKay, “The Life of People in the High Middle Ages, 1000–1300,” in *Understanding Western Society: A Brief History*, vol. 1, ed. John P. McKay, Bennett D. Hill, et al. (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 261.

¹³ McKay, “The Life of People in the High Middle Ages,” 262.

¹⁴ Santha Bhattacharji, “Tears and Screaming: Weeping in the Spirituality of Margery Kempe,” in *Holy Tears*, ed. Patton and Hawley, 234.

¹⁵ Bhattacharji, “Tears and Screaming,” 234.

¹⁶ Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” 132.

were the workers of the land and the merchants doing in response? Catherine of Siena and Walter Hilton are two medieval mystics, among many, who wrote about weeping. Catherine was more focused on the typology of tears, differentiating the different motivations and functions of tears,¹⁷ while Hilton was concerned with incorporating “affections” into the Christian journey to perfect contemplation. Both of these figures could be categorized under the umbrella of “those who pray,” using the same typology introduced earlier. Hilton was formally educated while Catherine was not, but both of them lived within religious houses and were writing for people both inside and outside their own communities.

Before I embark on comparing the two mystics’ views of tears, it will be helpful to give some background on the two figures. Walter Hilton was born around 1343 in England. He was trained in canon law and studied at the University of Cambridge before becoming a member of the religious order of the Augustinian Canons. He was a popular writer in his time. His most famous work, describing the contemplative life, was *The Ladder (or Scale) of Perfection*. The exact date of the book’s composition is unknown, but it was likely written between 1380 and 1396 (the year of his death).¹⁸

Catherine of Siena is a contemporary of Hilton, born in 1347 in Siena, Italy. She was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children and received no formal education. As a teenager Catherine joined a group of Dominican laywomen, *Mantellate*, and lived a life of total solitude. It is believed that she learned how to read at some point while living with the Dominican women. At the age of twenty-one (c. 1368), she received a vision that shifted the course of her life. This vision included her “mystical espousal to Christ,” and led her to engage in a life of service with people. She became famous through her letter writing, likely modeled after St. Paul’s epistles. Catherine spoke the most extensively about tears not in her letters, but in a book she wrote called *The Dialogue* (c. 1377–1378). The goal of this book was to share

¹⁷ Heather Webb, “*Lacrime Cordiali*: Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 100.

¹⁸ Thomas H. Bestul, *The Scale of Perfection: Introduction*, Robbins Library Digital Projects, University of Rochester; <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/bestul-hilton-scale-of-perfection-introduction>.

her visions and beliefs with her disciples in the form of a conversation between God and herself.¹⁹

While these two Christian mystics are contemporaries, their backgrounds are quite different, though they both lived within religious communities and had disciples who followed the advice of their writings. It is not known if they knew of each other, although their writings were produced around the same time. Each of them recognized the importance of emotion in devotion, providing guidance and reflection on tears as integral aspects of piety.

Catherine lists five varieties of tears in her *Dialogue*. The first type of tears is those of “damnation.” They are “the tears of wicked men of the world.”²⁰ These tears are the “product of a heart in pain,” a heart that is “outside God.”²¹ The second level of crying is marked by a fear of punishment that arises from awareness of one’s sins. The tears are different in this stage, because they at least begin to reflect a belief in an external authority. They may be “selfish” and “child-like” tears, but they are necessary since “it is only by means of tears, and tears even such as these, that a soul passes from one state of grace to the next.”²² The third stage is still filled with imperfect tears, because the love of the person is still imperfect. The person has abandoned sin and is beginning to taste God’s “sweetness” and to feel joy “through the affection of love, and compassion for her neighbor,”²³ but she is still not fully changed. By the fourth level of crying, a person has “arrived at the perfect love of [her] neighbor.”²⁴ The very quality of tears then changes, becoming now “tears of sweetness, tears indeed of milk, nourishing the soul in true patience.”²⁵ The fifth stage elaborates on the fourth, the “tears of sweetness” now falling with “great peace.”²⁶ In the later stages of prayer “we weep tears that flow from a will made perfectly one with God; no longer desiring anything except what God

¹⁹ Suzanne Noffke, “Introduction” in *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, vol. 1, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1988), 2–3.

²⁰ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena*, trans. Algar Thorold (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1907, 1994), 115; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/catherine/dialog>.

²¹ Webb, “Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” 103.

²² Webb, “Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” 105–106.

²³ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 116.

²⁴ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 115.

²⁵ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 117.

²⁶ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 115.

wants, we find ourselves ‘clothed’ in charity that weeps when God is offended and ‘our neighbors hurt.’”²⁷ Catherine lists one other quality of tears not included in her initial typology: the “tears of fire of the Holy Spirit,” which are experienced both by those who cannot weep outwardly on this earth, and also by the saints and angels in heaven. She notes that once people die, “physical tears have evaporated in the furnace,” but the inward weeping of fire remains.²⁸

In her *Dialogue* Catherine of Siena notes that tears are efficacious as vessels of genuine devotion from the heart, as intercessory tools, and as necessary for proceeding from one spiritual stage to the next. Principally, she believed that “every tear proceeds from the heart.”²⁹ Thus, no matter the motivation for weeping, Catherine believed in the genuine communicative power of tears. Tears, to her, can “authorize words and can point to a divine source.”³⁰ She also affirmed the necessity of tears for proceeding from one phase of inner-spiritual growth to the next. Tears have “infinite value” because the only capacity humans have for infinite service of the divine is their affection and “holy desire.”³¹ She also affirmed the intercessory character of tears, saying that after someone has shed tears in her own “personal transition from one state to another,” she can then shed tears “for the salvation of other souls.”³²

What is perhaps most remarkable and innovative about Catherine’s typology is her emphasis on the importance of “the other” in the levels and types of tears. One’s weeping shifts in character as a person realizes her place in the world in connection to God and her neighbor. Indeed, “the heart produces tears that are better connected to God as the individual becomes better connected to the love of the divine and the love of others.”³³ For Catherine, people are “the medium through which [we] can all serve [God].” In this beautiful passage, Catherine writes that God told her that each person had been made out of God’s “pure love.” But God says, “This love you cannot repay to Me, but you can pay it to My rational creature, loving your neighbor without

²⁷ Mary Ann Fatula, *Catherine of Siena’s Way* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier Books, 1987), 103.

²⁸ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 120.

²⁹ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 116.

³⁰ Webb, “Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” 103.

³¹ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 120.

³² Webb, “Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” 109.

³³ Webb, “Catherine of Siena on the Value of Tears,” 107.

being loved by him and without consideration of your own advantage, whether spiritual or temporal, but loving him solely for the praise and glory of My Name, because he has been loved by Me.”³⁴ Perfect tears become a sign of a soul overflowing with divine presence and love of others. These tears both communicate with God and serve others.

Walter Hilton is less concerned with the motivations for different types of tears, but weeping still plays a prominent in his discussion of Christian piety. *The Ladder of Perfection*, a hybrid of Augustinian theology and medieval mysticism, outlines three parts to the Christian contemplative life. The first stage is marked by knowledge of God “gotten by reason and discourse, by teaching of men, and by study in holy Scripture.” This first stage is only a “figure and shadow of true Contemplation,” since knowledge alone, with no affection, is “unsavoury and cold.”³⁵

The second step of contemplation is focused on “affection.” This is the word Hilton uses to describe emotions, feelings, and love. He ascribes this level of contemplation to “simple and unlearned men who give themselves wholly to devotion.”³⁶ Later he includes women as possible recipients of the grace of this stage: “This part of *Contemplation* God giveth where He will, to learned and unlearned, to men and to women, to them that are in government, and to solitary also.”³⁷ Hilton lauds this stage as better than just pure knowledge of matters because it involves the hearts of the people. As with Catherine of Siena, one can see that the heart and emotions are integral in the spiritual journey. The main manifestation of this second stage is a feeling of “fervour” that “cometh and goeth as He will that giveth it.” Hilton encourages the person, as he receives this gift of emotion, to remain discrete, keeping his feelings secret “unless it be to his confessor.” He goes on to say that one must approach the emotional experience with humility and not expect the feeling to last long or come again.³⁸

The final stage of contemplation “consisteth both in knowing and affecting.” This is the stage where the human’s image becomes “reformed by the perfection of virtues to the image of Jesus.” The

³⁴ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 118.

³⁵ Walter Hilton, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1995), 39; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hilton/ladder>.

³⁶ Hilton, *Ladder*, 40.

³⁷ Hilton, *Ladder*, 44.

³⁸ Hilton, *Ladder*, 41.

person in this stage experiences a “soft, sweet, burning love in God, so perfectly that he becometh ravished with His love.”³⁹ While Hilton affirms the gift of this earthly contemplation, he makes sure to communicate that the full bliss of contemplation will only be felt in the next life.⁴⁰ Catherine and Hilton both speak extensively about the “sweetness” of these physical sensations, but both of them are also quick to emphasize that all bodily experiences of faith ultimately lead to the spiritual. Hilton instructs his followers not to hold on to the experiences even if they are delightful or comforting, because they are nothing in comparison to what people will experience with Jesus in heaven.⁴¹ He goes on to clarify that even though such episodes of fervors are felt externally, the “fire of love is not bodily, for it is only in the spiritual desire of the soul.”⁴²

Tears return to *The Ladder* when Hilton discusses the different types of prayer: vocal prayer (as from a breviary), weeping from compunction, weeping for Christ, and quiet meditation. Again, Hilton identifies crying and mourning as an integral step in the journey to true prayer. As in Catherine’s *Dialogue*, weeping begins from a place of inward-focused sorrow and guilt, and moves to a more outward expression of devotion. Hilton describes the early stages of vocal prayer as being characterized by humble weeping: “Commonly his thoughts are much upon his sins with great compunction and sorrow of heart, with great weeping and many tears humbly and busily asking mercy and forgiveness of God.”⁴³ Medieval writers often used the word “compunction” to describe a “kind of puncture of the heart that results in the efficacious religious tears, [which] cannot be provoked, formalized, or prescribed, as it depends on God’s grace.”⁴⁴ Walter Hilton affirms weeping at this stage because “this kind of prayer pleaseth God much, for it proceedeth wholly from the affection of the heart, and therefore never goeth away unsped or empty without some grace.”⁴⁵ Thus, Catherine and Hilton both see weeping as efficacious in divine communication because it comes from the heart. This stage of weeping for Hilton combines the first two steps of tears for

³⁹ Hilton, *Ladder*, 43.

⁴⁰ Hilton, *Ladder*, 46.

⁴¹ Hilton, *Ladder*, 49.

⁴² Hilton, *Ladder*, 62–63.

⁴³ Hilton, *Ladder*, 68.

⁴⁴ Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” 119.

⁴⁵ Hilton, *Ladder*, 64.

Catherine. These are tears of guilt, and asking for mercy, but they are redeemed from just being tears of “damnation” because the tearful person recognizes a higher power and is petitioning for forgiveness and mercy.

The next, more outward-focused step in weeping comes when Christians focus less on their own pitiful condition and begins to meditate on Christ. Hilton encourages people to meditate on Christ’s humanity, birth, or passion, seeking to imagine Christ “in a bodily likeness as He was on earth.” The result of such meditations is that “thou in this spiritual sight feelest thy heart stirred to so great compassion and pity of thy Lord Jesus, that thou mournest and weepest, and criest with all thy might of body and soul.”⁴⁶ Again, Hilton affirms the necessity of tears at this stage, saying that a person “shall not come to the spiritual light in *Contemplation* of Christ’s Godhead, unless first he be exercised in imagination with bitterness and compassion.”⁴⁷ Even though tears are necessary, Hilton adds an element that Catherine does not, telling his readers that discretion is necessary with one’s spiritual weeping, as with any bodily matter like eating, drinking, or sleeping.⁴⁸

After shedding tears of petition for forgiveness, and tears of compassion for Christ, a person will reach a place of “great rest and quietness” in her prayer and “an opening of the spiritual eye.”⁴⁹ But Hilton admonishes that this spiritual work will not be easy, “for this work is not of one hour nor of one day, but many days and years, with much sweat and labour of body and travail of soul.” One must not give up, but “seek busily, sigh and sorrow deeply, mourn stilly, and stoop low, till thine eyes water for anguish and for pain,” until one finds Jesus again.⁵⁰

After this brief discussion of these two conceptions of weeping, what can be said for their similarities and differences? Both Catherine and Hilton affirm that tears are from the heart, and thus are to be trusted as effective means of communication with the divine. Hilton explicitly says genuine emotion of the heart (manifested through weeping) is more desirable and advanced than intellect alone. Both

⁴⁶ Hilton, *Ladder*, 69.

⁴⁷ Hilton, *Ladder*, 69.

⁴⁸ Hilton, *Ladder*, 59.

⁴⁹ Hilton, *Ladder*, 65, 69.

⁵⁰ Hilton, *Ladder*, 86.

agree that tears must be shed in order to move from one spiritual stage to the next. Early on in conversion, Christians must humbly weep for their sins and beg for forgiveness. As the believer matures, weeping will be turned more outward to focus on things outside the individual. Hilton characterizes this turning as a turning to meditate on Christ and his earthly and heavenly experience. Catherine also sees the turning as a movement toward Christ, but she emphasizes that we are to find the divine presence in other people as well. Thus, she has more of a focus on her human neighbor, rather than on solitary meditation on Christ. Catherine and Hilton both stress that physical sensations of faith are a gift from God, and ultimately lead toward spiritual rewards. They are experienced in the body, but they are from, and for, God.

Margery Kempe

There is evidence that these guides by Catherine of Siena and Walter Hilton were not only communicated to the common people, but were actually followed as instruction manuals for an individual's pious practices. Margery Kempe, in her dictated *Book of Margery Kempe*, attests to the fact that she had read Hilton's *Ladder*. Her extensive discussion of her spiritual journey is filled with references to weeping, and while modern readers are quick to label her as "hysterical," her experience of tears in her faith life actually matches the steps of conversion and prayer that Hilton laid out in his book.⁵¹ Margery's account of tears aligns closely with some of Catherine's *Dialogue* as well, particularly with the emphasis on one's neighbor.

Margery Kempe (c. 1373–1438) came from the wealthy and powerful merchant class of Norfolk, England. She bore fourteen children and ran two businesses, one brewing beer and another running a mill.⁵² One could define Margery as part of the category of "those who work," using the medieval typology noted earlier. While she was wealthy (and thus on a higher strata of society), she was still a woman and thus put in a lower social category. Throughout the book, Margery "comes across . . . as having a strong, self-advertising character, telling us, for instance, that before her conversion, she was preoccupied with showing off in fashionable clothes. Consequently, her friends think [her weeping] is just

⁵¹ Bhattacharji, "Tears and Screaming," 233.

⁵² Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: The Autobiography of the Madwoman of God*, trans. Tony D. Triggs (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph Books, 1995), 23.

another form of self-advertisement, not appreciating that this . . . is not something she can control.”⁵³ Margery’s weeping begins after she experiences a conversion experience. She describes herself as hearing music, and then whenever she would hear the melody again she would weep “profusely, shedding copious tears of deep devotion, sobbing and sighing for the bliss of heaven without a thought for the shame and contempt of this wretched world.”⁵⁴ At this point, Margery’s weeping becomes aligned with Hilton and Catherine’s writings. In this early stage of conversion, Margery wept with a great feeling of “sorrow and compunction for wronging” God. She described herself as “face to face with [her] own wickedness.”⁵⁵ She further aligns with Hilton when she describes her tears as a gift that she could not control. Her comrades would criticize her for her effusive display of emotions, but she tells them she could not “turn [the tears] off at will.”⁵⁶ Later in her account, Margery tells of a message she received from God that almost exactly replicates Hilton’s philosophy of the gift of tears:

And don’t be afraid if I sometimes take away from you the grace of holy speech or tears, for I am working secretly in you to stop you having any vainglory, and to show you clearly that you can only have such tears and talk when God sends them to you; God gives them freely—they’re not be earned—and he can give them to whoever he likes without in any way wronging you. And therefore receive them meekly and thankfully when I send them to you. If I withdraw them accept it with a good grace but seek them conscientiously until you get them back again, for tears of compunction, devotion and compassion are the greatest and surest gifts that I can give on earth.⁵⁷

Here, in God’s words to Margery, tears are portrayed as a gift that must be received humbly and with gratitude. They are given and taken at the will of God. They are described as efficacious as tears of “compunction, devotion and compassion,” and they are called the “greatest and surest gifts” that God can give.

⁵³ Bhattacharji, “Tears and Screaming,” 230.

⁵⁴ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 24.

⁵⁵ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 26.

⁵⁶ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 26.

⁵⁷ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 39–40.

As one would expect after reading Hilton, Margery's tears move from a feeling of compunction to a greater awareness of Christ. This happens when Margery is weeping at St. Margaret's Church in Lynn and is visited by Christ in a vision. He promises to give her "deep meditation and genuine insight."⁵⁸ As her prayer life moved into the second stage of meditation on Christ and his humanity and divinity, she would conjure up images of Jesus' pain, "bathing Him in bitter tears of compassion."⁵⁹ This kind of weeping reached its climax when Margery was on spiritual pilgrimage in Jerusalem. While visiting the place where Christ was crucified, Margery wrote: "I had such great compassion and pain at seeing our Lord's suffering that I couldn't have helped crying and shouting out, even if it had cost me my life."⁶⁰

Margery's weeping becomes more aligned with Catherine's *Dialogue* when she describes the intercessory quality of her tears. During her meditations, Margery would cry for her own sins, but also "for the sins of others," and "for those in poverty or any hardship, for [she] dearly wanted to comfort them all."⁶¹ Margery was even sought out by people to weep as a kind of intercessory prayer. Once, Margery tells, a priest came to her and asked her to pray for a woman on her deathbed. Margery recounts: "And I wept for her soul, and I shed a great many tears. And our Lord granted my wish for the soul to be treated with mercy, and he told me to carry on praying for her."⁶² There were many other examples of people of varying levels of society seeking Margery out for weeping intercession.

Margery also began to see Christ in everyday life, being moved to tears imagining Christ in each person or animal she saw: "If I saw a man or any animal with an open wound, or if a man beat a child in front of me . . . I imagined that I was witnessing our Lord being beaten or wounded just like the man or the beast."⁶³ Thus, as Catherine encouraged, weeping began to have a uniting power. Margery would weep for herself, and for the other, and all of the tears would be given and received by Christ. Santha Bhattacharji describes it well

⁵⁸ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 29.

⁵⁹ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 30.

⁶⁰ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 68.

⁶¹ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 31.

⁶² Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 57.

⁶³ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 68.

(although she did not name the connection to Catherine) when she writes:

Margery's tears, on the surface, are about bitter penitence for sin and about loss: they mourn the death of Christ and participate in the mourning of the mother Mary. But when we look at them more deeply, they turn out to be tears over the closeness of Christ to human beings in his ever-present humanity and to be a blissful presence in Margery's soul.⁶⁴

What sets Margery's narrative of holy tears apart from Hilton's and Catherine's is her discussion of the publicity and subsequent function of her tears.⁶⁵ There is a persecution motif running throughout Margery's tale, when she tells of being constantly shunned and dismissed for her seemingly excessive displays of emotion. But while on her spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Margery is visited by the Virgin Mary in a vision, and Mary exhorts her not to be ashamed of the tears Christ is giving to her.⁶⁶ Later in the book, Margery is visited by Christ in a vision and he tells her not to be embarrassed by her copious grief because "I have ordained you to be a mirror among them, sorrowing so that they can follow your example and have some contrition in their hearts and gain salvation. They have no interest in contrition or sorrow, but do your duty and pray for them while you are in this world."⁶⁷ Catherine does not address the public aspect of weeping, but Walter Hilton deliberately suggests discretion and secrecy surrounding one's holy sorrow.⁶⁸ Thus, Margery adds a new element to the narrative of weeping in medieval practices of piety: weeping was a gift from God, but it was also something that was meant to be seen by others, a "mirror," so that they too could access such holy grief within themselves.

Conclusion

Walter Hilton, Catherine of Siena, and Margery Kempe all serve as different models of how weeping manifested itself as a spiritual

⁶⁴ Bhattacharji, "Tears and Screaming," 239.

⁶⁵ Bhattacharji, "Tears and Screaming," 236.

⁶⁶ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 71.

⁶⁷ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 159.

⁶⁸ Hilton, *Ladder*, 41, 59.

practice of piety in the Middle Ages. Their narratives of holy grief were common for, but not completely unique to, the period. The desert fathers and mothers, building on the tradition that was already laid out in the Bible, first elaborated on the impact and necessity of tears in the spiritual journey. What then became of this practice of pious weeping? Piroska Nagy explains that, as the Roman Empire became more Christianized, it also became more literate, and while crying was allowed as an accepted form of personal communication with the divine for a certain amount of time, eventually “weeping started to lose its role of mediating between God and humans, and was integrated into formalized and ritualized processes of collective devotion.”⁶⁹ While I do agree that weeping in the medieval period underwent a systematization and ritualization, I do not think its power of personal communication with the divine lessened in any way. The legacy of holy crying was captured in the writings of Walter Hilton, Catherine of Siena, and Margery Kempe, but by no means was it exhausted. Could it not be argued that the Christian tradition of weeping began in the Bible, carried through the desert fathers and mothers and into the medieval period, and continued after the Reformation in the prayers of Jeremy Taylor on holy dying? Surely Charles Wesley stood in this stream of tradition as he wrote his hymns on spiritual transformation?⁷⁰ Even today the tradition of holy weeping continues in the Pentecostal tradition.⁷¹ The medieval period did indeed capture a unique moment in the history of weeping in the religious imagination, but while the rituals, people, and culture may have changed, the universal, ineffable, complex paralanguage of tears remains. For who has lived on this earth and not shed a tear? The mystery and power of tears will surely continue to baffle, connect, and move people for centuries to come.

⁶⁹ Nagy, “Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West,” 131–132.

⁷⁰ See Joanna Cruickshank, “‘Appear as Crucified for Me’: Sight, Suffering, and Spiritual Transformation in the Hymns of Charles Wesley,” *Journal of Religious History* 30, no. 3 (October 2006): 311–330.

⁷¹ See Michael J. McClymond, “We’re Not in Kansas Anymore: The Roots and Routes of World Pentecostalism,” *Religious Studies Review* 31, no. 3–4 (July/October 2005): 163–169.

