SOME REMARKS ON THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MONICA, MOTHER OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

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In the Acta Sanctorum of the Fathers Bollandists occurs a remarkable passage, which refers to Monica’s religious life.

The text of this passage is as follows:

In die Cypriani, dum haec Christi ancilla meretur accipere sacramenta, dum esset in domo, fere a terra per cubitum elevata fuit, clamando, qua quietissima esse consueverat, dicens: “Volemus ad coelum, volemus ad coelum, fideles”. Quam cum post interrogaremus quid sibi acciderat, non respondebat; sed tanto gudio replebatur quod omnes ad festum perducebat, cantantes cum propheta: “Cor meum et caro mea exultaverunt in Deum vivum”. (Boll. die 4 maii).

According to M. L. Abbé Bougaud,1 referring to this passage the Bollandist author refers to a religious experience, which Monica had on the day of Saint Cyprianus, the 16th of September, in the year 387 after she had left Milan and possibly before she had arrived at Ostia, where she and Augustine had the wellknown vision of Ostia.2 Except for Monica’s Christian piety the above quoted passage of the Bollandists seems us to be interesting for some other reasons.

First of all it is explicitly said, that Monica was levitating at her devotion, which is a good reason for further comment on the passage. In the second place the words “volemus ad coelum” demand a more detailed explanation than has been given hitherto.

To start with levitation this phenomenon occurs in many religions besides the Christian.


1 Histoire de Sainte Monique, 2, ed. Paris 1866, p. 421.
3 E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational, University of California Press, 1968,
He notes that it was "attributed to Simon Magus (ps. Clem., Hom. 2, 3, 2); to Indian mystics (Philost., Vit. Apoll. 3, 15) to several Christian saints and Jewish rabbis; and to the medium Home. Also a magician in a romance lists it in his repertoire (P.G.M. 34, 8), and Lucian satirizes such claims (Philops., 13; Asin. 4)" while "Iamblichus' slaves bragged of their master's being levitating at his devotions (Eunapius, Vita soph. 458)".

Also Teresa of Avila is said to have been levitating and the same holds for Veronica Laparelli, a sixteenth century nun.

In the German Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, a levitation is defined as follows:

"Levitation ist ein freies Schweben und sich Hochheben des menschlichen Körpers über dem Erdboden. Es ist eine Begleiterscheinung der Mystik und der Ekstase. Sowohl im Heidentum wie im Christentum begegnet dieses Phänomen".

From this quotation it is clear that occasionally, when the soul is in a state of ecstasy, the human body is lifted from the earth in a manner contrary to all normal physical laws. As we have seen, the phenomenon is not limited to Christian mysticism, but appears already widespread among adherents of other religions long before Christianity came into existence.

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4 Home, who was aware of his own levitations, was seen to levitate by many witnesses, as for instance by Lord Lindsay, Lord Adare, and Captain Charles Wynne, according to Lord Lindsay's statements before the Dialectical Society of London. See Quarterly Journal of Science, January, 1874.

5 See Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche 2. Freiburg 1961 under "Levitation".


7 See note 5.

8 Long before the Christian religion came into existence levitation was a traditional mark of Indian and Chinese monks. See O. Leroy, La Lévitation, contribution historique et critique à l'étude du merveilleux, Seine-et-Oise, 1928, p. 19 who points to the fact that levitation is as old as Buddhism itself. See also R. Hardy, A Manual of Buddhism in its Modern Development, 1853; and R. Burnouf, Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, 1844. In my view it is not improbable that levitation was also