The kiss sacred and profane: reflections on a cross-cultural confrontation

WILLEM FRIJHOFF

The kiss: bodily gesture and cultural practice

Though apparently a universal gesture in the history of mankind, kissing is also one of the most difficult to study. As an intimate token of love it usually escapes formal recording or public observation which are the main sources of historical knowledge. Besides, written celebrations and depictions of the kiss often seem to reflect literary and aesthetical standards rather than actual practice. Studying the kiss of love is like violating another person's private life. It makes the historian uneasy about the limits of decency and therefore about his personal involvement in his work. Being unable to overlook the historical practice of kissing in its whole range and its full depth, he may feel tempted to rely upon his own experience. In doing so, he would imperceptibly introduce universal, unhistorical categories into his interpretation of a practice which is culture-dependent and therefore subject to changing historical conditions. So the historian should be disturbed not only by questions of ethics, but also by questions of methodology.
The kiss sacred and profane

Unlike many other gestures, kissing is at the same time a gesture and a ritual. It is a simple but complete gesture, a bodily expression of social interaction which is a cultural practice in itself. As a cultural practice, it involves both a language of gestures and a range of meanings. As such the gesture of kissing is accomplished, within each culture, in a diverse but always limited number of situations and relationships. The kiss does not forcibly remain confined to the sphere of intimacy or express passion, love, or affection. It is charged with a variety of meanings corresponding to the precise social and cultural context in which it is given. That is why Roman grammarians distinguished between three kinds of kisses: oscula (kisses of friendship and affection), basia (kisses of love) and suavia (passionate kisses) even though the distinction is not borne out in usage.

Besides its symbolic meanings such as greeting, respect, friendship or veneration, the kiss may be an instrument of peace (like the holy kiss in St Paul’s Epistles or the ritual kiss of peace during the Holy Mass), the public seal of an alliance (the feudal kiss), or an instrument of reconciliation — such as the famous, but somewhat treacherous baiser Lamourette given to each other by all the deputies of the French Legislative Assembly on 7 July 1792. And naturally, the ritual of kissing that confers and confirms fullness of life may be perverted, just like all rituals, into a ritual of death: the kiss of betrayal by the apostle Judas, or the kiss of death by a member of the Mafia. Mostly, however, positive meanings prevail. Some kisses are a supreme expression of worship or, as in the blasphemous rite of kissing the devil’s ass, of counter-worship. The story of Saint Martin healing a Parisian leper by his kiss shows that the kiss of a saintly person has curative power. And the old noble family of the counts of Habsburg was reputed to heal stammering children by a mouth-kiss. The kiss may even serve magical or counter-magical aims: kissing an artificial phallus once served the fertility of nature; as a true rite of passage, the kiss is able to change a man into an animal, and vice versa; by kissing the Sleeping Beauty, the prince breaks the spell that struck the enchanted castle more than a lifetime before.

It is scarcely difficult to draw up such an inventory of virtual meanings of the kiss, but it would be an error to believe that they can be found simultaneously in each culture or that a similarity of
forms would entail similar meaning. In fact, each culture creates its own configuration of forms and meanings. Even very close cultures may differ considerably in their use of the kiss because of the particular configuration of the variables involved:

- the object of the kiss: human persons, man-like figures, or things;
- the social sphere where the interaction ritual of kissing is permitted: public or private;
- its extent: social networks, friends, family, personal intimacy;
- the relation of the rite to age: babies, children, adults, or elderly people;
- social status: unauthorized kissing of a higher-placed person can be an injury, if not a crime;
- gender: is kissing gender-specific (only man to man, or woman to woman), mixed or indifferent, and in which situation?;
- the form of the kiss and the parts of the human body involved: the hand-kiss, the mouth-kiss (mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-cheek, mouth-to-front, etc.), the nose-kiss, the foot-kiss, and so on;
- its cultural domain: sacred or profane;
- but also its meanings: love, attachment, affection, deference, submission, etc.

Besides, the gesture of kissing is often incorporated into more elaborate and complex rites called 'kissing' only by extension or analogy: giving an accolade, embracing each other, or ritual acting in connection with the gestures or posture of prostration as kissing the earth, the King's feet, the Pope's mules. Even there, the meaning of the ritual is not fixed. Prostration, for example, may express unconditional submission, worship, or penance, but also demand, prayer, or veneration. In the case of Pope John Paul's ritual of prostration and kissing the earth on his arrival in the countries he is visiting, the respect and humility symbolized by the Pope's prostration seem counter-balanced by his taking possession of the community, symbolically expressed in the aggregation rite of kissing the soil.

All this accounts for the diversity of kissing practices even within relatively small areas. Mediterranean cultures which permit
The kiss sacred and profane

effusive forms of public kissing of sacred bodies or things may remain reluctant towards public kisses in purely profane situations, even in the personal sphere. They replace them with more complex and less unambiguous rites of embracing, preferably by persons of the same sex. Present-day northern Europe offers the reverse picture on virtually every point, though even there history shows huge variations in what a quantitative historian would surely call the kissing cycles: after the kissing-eager Middle Ages all kinds of public kissing have been gradually banished, to be readmitted only recently – but exclusively in the profane area; the taboo that actually remains attached to the sacred kiss is so strong that most northern Europeans cannot imagine that the rules of conduct of their cultural systems once resembled those of the present-day Mediterranean nations.

In spite of Western influences, certain African cultures and still more the great Asiatic cultures (e.g. those of the Indian, the Indo-Chinese, and the Chinese peoples), still predominantly consider as disgusting or immoral all the public or semi-public manifestations of the mouth-kiss performed by mutual bodily contact and consign them exclusively to the sphere of intimacy. The act of greeting involves the use of the nose (the 'sniff-kiss') or, more frequently, a bow of the body or a gesture of the hands. This does not mean that those cultures are wholly unfamiliar with mouth-kissing. They simply do not recognize this act as a legitimate public rite or even as a decent public gesture. Public expressions of love should not be physical but symbolic, even if this symbolic language can be extraordinarily crude to Western eyes. Although it might be enlightening to study the substitute gestures which express similar meanings, it will be clear that in this context the mouth-kiss itself largely eludes our historical knowledge.

THE SACRED KISS

It was for this sort of reason that I wanted to organize my reflection around a personal experience. Indeed, the conscious involvement of one's own experience in historical and anthropological analysis seems to me the only way to avoid reductionism in a field of study that still remains full of cultural prejudices and more or
less unconscious taboos, and where scholarly imagination has to be challenged by a personal interest. My case centres on a visit to Rome, where I observed the public rite of kissing the feet of St Peter’s statue in his own basilica. An old, simple and customary rite, mentioned as such in every visitor’s guide, barely spoiled by religious ideology, and apparently performed without much thinking. But on closer investigation my search for meaning led me to some substantial reflections embedded in my own experience.

As a matter of fact, nowhere in Europe is the cultural variety of the gestures of deference, devotion, and respect so strikingly displayed as in Rome. And perhaps nowhere else are conditions so ideal for a cross-cultural study of ritual gestures in the sphere of the sacred. Other famous shrines and places of pilgrimage with an international attendance, such as Lourdes, Santiago, or Fatima suffer from polemics surrounding the cult of the saints and especially the Holy Virgin. Sometimes sacred rites are so deeply embedded in local codes of cultural expression that visitors quite visibly can be divided into two categories: those involved in the ritual and the outsiders, the latter being curious about what happens but unable to join the ritual, not only mentally but even physically. In what we may call the kinesics of such religious cults — i.e. the study of the dynamics of religious expression from the beginning of the act of pilgrimage to the end — insiders do not behave in the same way as outsiders. The difference lies not so much in the emotional involvement as in body-language.¹⁰

In some major shrines pilgrims (the insiders) perform unusual body-acts.¹¹ At Locronan in French Brittany they pass underneath St Renan’s tomb. Early on Whit Monday (the second Monday after Easter Sunday) the pilgrims rush into the Church of the Madonna dell’Arco at Naples and scramble for the moisture that covers the marble key-stone of the niche containing Our Lady’s image.¹² The pilgrims’ practices at Lough Derg and at Croagh Patrick (Ireland) combine asceticism or physical exhaustion with a ritual of repeated circumambulationes around the holy places.¹³ At Fatima (Portugal) and Tinos (Greece) pilgrims crawl on their stomachs, hands firmly crossed, over holy ground which they are eager to lick with their tongues or to kiss with their mouths. Images of such prostration rites may easily communicate to us some of the emotion involved in the pilgrim’s experience — as in the
superb photographs of Spanish rituals by Cristina García Rodero, and as in the marvellous reports some years ago of the Dutch photographer Marrie Bot on penitential practices at Fatima, Lourdes, and other Christian shrines (see figure 9.1).

Of course, pilgrimage embodies the pilgrim’s own need for penance. His kissing of the earth is an expression of self-abasement and personal mortification. Therefore his emotion is different from that of observers, although even at a distance we may recognize some of his personal involvement and feel an outburst of sympathy, pity, or anger. But few outsiders share the gestures themselves with the pilgrims. The reason is not that those gestures would be extravagant as such. Anyone really familiar with pilgrimages in those Catholic regions of Europe where religious expression sometimes seems to be too exuberant to outsiders and physically unrestrained, knows that this is only appearance. In fact, the kinesics of pilgrimage correspond in each case to a customary sequence of bodily expressions, mostly executed in a quite routine way — something like a religious habitus, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call it.

More than sixty years ago, Robert Hertz was one of the first anthropologists to analyse in such terms the pilgrimage to the Chapel of St Besse at Cogne in the Alps, on the frontier between France and Italy. His description establishes a basic structure which still fits most forms of collective pilgrimage: the faithful ascend in a group to the chapel on the mountain, where Holy Mass is said and a sermon preached; then a procession goes clockwise round the mountain with the statue of the saint carried by an even number of male adolescents, the girls being somehow disguised; finally, having returned to the chapel, each of the faithful kneels down or prostrates himself before the holy image and devotionally kisses its feet. This individual kiss marks the end of the collective ritual. Then the pilgrimage is over and the agape or village fair begins. The apparently routine progress of the pilgrimage makes some outsiders speak of superficial forms of popular religion, as opposed to true religion with a heavy personal involvement of man’s intelligence and feelings. A closer look shows that this cannot be correct.

In holy places of more than local importance, such as Lourdes or Fatima, and today perhaps even Medjugorje in Yugoslavia, the
Figure 9.1 Untitled photograph, Tinos, Greece, 1980 by Marrie Bot.
customary religious routines are transmitted orally by former pilgrims, by printed pilgrim’s manuals or by the organizers of the pilgrimage. Carefully respected by all, they form the matrix for sudden individual experiences of strong religious emotions, expressed in extraordinary behaviour — extraordinary for the outsider, but not for the regular pilgrim. In May 1984, an Italian research team went to the Madonna dell’Arco, the famous shrine near the city of Naples, in order to make a video-film of this cult for an analysis of the kinesics of the pilgrimage. By chance, three days earlier, on 17 May, a miracle had occurred: the statue of the Holy Virgin began to shed tears of blood. The film clearly shows how the miracle transformed the pilgrimage: not by changing the customary ritual of the collectivity, but by intensifying, in the context of a receptive crowd, the emotional charge of individual experience until a limit was crossed and individual pilgrims went into trance, one after another, still mechanically fulfilling the customary ritual.

However, the extraordinary gestures provoked by the trances did not arouse a particular emotion among the participants — nor do they at Fatima, where pilgrims crawl and kiss the soil seeking their way amidst a barely interested crowd of people turned in upon their own form of religious experience. They never become a spectacle, unless for the outsiders. The crossing of the emotional border by individual pilgrims is immediately integrated in the customary ceremony: helpful attendants take care of the people in trance and bring them down to earth or transfer them immediately to an ambulance. But even such plain everyday solutions remain within the boundaries of the ritual. There is no amusement amongst the bystanders. All those who participate in the ritual form a single undifferentiated crowd, held together by an initial rite: kissing the earth of the holy place on arrival at the shrine. That kiss, ritual mark of deference, is the sign of recognition which effects the reception of the individual into the society of pilgrims. It is a rite of aggregation.

The difference between such shrines, even when attracting huge numbers, and St Peter’s Basilica in Rome is that there are virtually no outsiders in Rome. Everyone seems somehow involved. That is why I went to St Peter’s for a bit of participatory observation with the theme of the history of gestures in mind. It was a day of prayer
for the Lebanon (3 October 1989), and there were thousands of pilgrims on the esplanade. But what interested me was a particular rite. Indeed, the most repeated sacred kiss in Western Christianity is perhaps the kiss given to the feet of St Peter’s bronze statue which probably dates back to the early Middle Ages. One of the feet has been polished by the millions of kisses and other forms of touching. As this part of the statue is quite shiny, it immediately attracts the attention of passers-by. Non-Catholics who want to have a close look at the famous statue must approach it and, in busy periods (as was the case on that particular day of prayer), join the kissing queue. The statue itself is placed on the right side of the nave just before Maderna’s Confessio. Nobody can avoid seeing it, and as a matter of fact nobody does avoid it. The scene is therefore perfect for the student of ritual acting and body-language.

But there is a problem with the kissing ritual. From some distance I observed hundreds of visitors — not all of them pilgrims in the ecclesiastical sense of the word — all clearly involved in the multidimensional experience of visiting the central holy place of the Old and the New Rome: the tomb of the apostle of all the Christians with its architectural space effusing aesthetic and mystic perfection. Everyone wanted to pass close to the statue and in fact there was a queue, barely interrupted and continuously lengthened by newcomers who obviously did not all know what exactly they were expected to do at the statue except ‘kiss’ it — whatever that might be in their own cultural practice. But because everybody looked at the statue, they saw the ritual executed by those ahead of them. As the queue relentlessly advanced, the moment came for each person to make up his mind. Would he actually kiss St Peter’s feet or not? And if so, in what way?

Here the cultural codes come in. They show how a single ritual, unofficially codified and adopted by Roman Catholics all over the world, namely, the kissing of the statue’s feet, may assume very different forms and undoubtedly be invested with very different meanings according to the cultural code which the pilgrim or visitor brings with him. Once in a queue, as newcomers press behind him, the surprised visitor does not have enough time to elaborate a well-considered code of conduct. He has to proceed by customary rites, i.e. customary in his own ritual language, as close as possible to what is expected from him hic et nunc. The first
The kiss sacred and profane

question that arises is whether to kiss or not. Actually, very few refused to make a gesture, but it was not always a plain kiss. Those who remained reluctant either simply crossed themselves, thus marking their provenance from those areas with a Roman Catholic culture where plain kissing does not belong to religious body-language (as is the case in most parts of northern Europe), or they somehow touched the statue with their hand. As a matter of fact, few of them seemed to touch the actual foot of the statue which perhaps was too brilliantly polished. Most of the ‘not-kissing’ visitors avoided the toes, a nude part of the body, but stroked some part of the apostle’s long garment with the fingers of one hand.

Involuntarily, the historian is here reminded of similar touching procedures in history which, though not always involving direct bodily contact, have the same healing or revivifying meaning as the kiss of life through mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, already practised by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:34–5) and now legitimized by medical knowledge. There are of course several biblical examples of healing by a sacred touch (Luke 8:45–6; Acts 5:15 and 19:12). But the most famous rite in history is certainly the ‘royal touch’. This rite, notably analysed by Marc Bloch, was performed for some centuries by the English and French kings as a true mark of the sacred character of their function: the King laid his hands on the assembled infirm suffering from the ‘King's Evil’ or scrofula.²² The King’s healing power was not limited to the territory of his monarchy, but attached to his public body. It accompanied him wherever he went. Thus Charles II of England could perform a ceremony of the ‘royal touch’ at the Court Chapel of The Hague in 1660 under the troubled, but still not altogether incredulous eye of the Dutch upper class.²³ William of Orange (William III of England), who was a Dutchman himself, called it ‘a silly superstition’, but his wife and co-regent Mary continued it, as did her successor Queen Anne until her death in 1714.

Some decades later, the touch of the garment of a sacred person caused a new miracle in Holland. In 1727, after the Jansenist schism of the Church of Utrecht, Agatha Stouthandel, a 45-year old dropical woman, was instantly cured when she deliberately touched the rochet of the new schismatic archbishop of Utrecht, whose legitimacy was thus proved by Heaven itself.²⁴ This miracle presents a striking resemblance with the touching of St Peter’s
garment by present-day visitors to Rome. In both cases, it is the bishop, sacred either by martyrdom or by formal consecration, who uses the robe representing his office to communicate his 'virtue' – in the strong, archaic sense of the word – to those who touch it.

Most of the visitors of St Peter's Basilica, however, performed some form of kissing. Here again two main rites can be distinguished. A majority – at least at the moment when I observed the rite25 – bowed their body forward and touched St Peter's worn toes with their lips. Others stroked the toes with their hand, then touched their own mouth with it and finished the rite by crossing themselves. Specialists in proxemics would have noted that the gesture of kissing with the mouth required that there be a greater distance between the trunk of the kissor's body and the statue than was the case when the simple touch with the fingers was employed, this allowing closer bodily proximity of man and saint. This second method was obviously more common among those whom I assumed to be of Mediterranean stock – as far as it is possible to recognize geographical origins de visu without falling victim to grotesque clichés26 – and certainly among visitors who were regular users of the basilica. There were even some lay visitors using this form of the rite who seemed to have entered the basilica specifically to touch the statue and who left immediately having done so.

If these observations are correct, the most intimate form of bodily contact, by kissing the toes with the lips, was not the one most frequently used – in Rome – by Christians of Mediterranean cultures. Generally speaking it is true that they are more accustomed to rituals of kissing sacred places or artefacts27 – to name only some of the most famous: the kissing of the phial that contains the blood of San Gennaro at Naples, or of a ribbon attached to the statue of the Black Madonna in the national shrine of Catalonia at Montserrat, or of the tomb of Pope John XXIII in St Peter's itself. Perhaps the habit of kissing sacred things makes it emotionally less urgent that a kissing gesture should be strictly mimetic, either for a good performance or for the communication of the saint's virtue.

A contrario, I could observe this in my own behaviour. Until then, I had been an observer, not a participant. But I think
The kiss sacred and profane

historians have to share other people's experiences in order to
discover some of their depth. Having a Catholic background, I am
not unacquainted with ritual kisses in liturgy. But then, liturgy
offers the emotional safeguard of ceremony - that is, of a strictly
prescribed ritual with a fixed set of meanings. There is not enough
room for personal emotion in liturgy to cause concern when going
to a service. As I had observed at length many people behaving in
different ways at the statue, the ritual had gained an objectified
status in my mind: mentally it was difficult for me to join the
queue. It was only when the statue was free of visitors for a while
that I could bring myself to raise towards it to perform my ritual
hurriedly. As a matter of fact, I found myself kissing the toes of St
Peter - just as my present analysis would have predicted.

The profane kiss

At first sight, this conclusion appears to corroborate the common
stereotype of heavily gesticulating southern European crowds
versus northern Europeans who remain more sober in their
gestures. Even when kissing, the northern European seems to be
more direct. But he prefers not to kiss at all, at least not in the
sphere of the sacred. However, further examination of historical
evidence makes the historian more circumspect. As I said earlier,
kissing is an extremely difficult subject for historical study. The
hypothesis that the frequency of the kiss in historical sources,
either written or artistic, is not a function of reality but of
collective representation is probably correct. In medieval sculpture,
where the expressiveness of the human face plays an important
role, representations of kissing seem much more frequent than in
later centuries when other gestures prevail.28 In his study on the
kiss in Western literature, Nicholas James Perella concludes that
kissing becomes rarer in literary sources after the Renaissance.29
Naturally the evolutionary vision of Norbert Elias (cf. Thomas,
p. 4 of this volume) on the rise of self-restraint in public life
provides an obvious explanation. Kissing is represented less in this
hypothesis because, as an act of intimacy, it is more and more the
exclusive privilege of the private sphere.

Though this remains a stimulating hypothesis, I am not sure that
things are that simple. Several lines of evolution cross at this point, for historically the kiss has many meanings. The first line is chiefly concerned with literature and art. It represents what Perella calls the 'soul-in-the-kiss conceit' — that is, the Platonic (and Neoplatonic) idea that through the mouth-to-mouth kiss the couple intermingle their life-forces or souls. In the fairy-tale of the Sleeping Beauty, kissed back to life by a foreign prince, this motive finds its supreme expression. Linked with Christian themes, this kiss conceit — with its powerful background of sacred practice — develops into several amatory conceits of a more profane nature: in the Middle Ages, the kiss is mainly a kiss of love, but love at the same times means living. ‘The most important of these [amatory conceits],’ writes Perella, ‘are the migration and exchange of the souls or hearts of lovers; the union and transformation of lovers into one another; the metaphorical “death” and subsequent resuscitation (or “new life”) of lovers in the beloved; the oneness of lovers unto and beyond the grave, that is, the love-death.’ In Renaissance poetry these images come to a climax. John Donne, for example, assimilates the amatory kiss to life, but hence — in another, more sacred, sense — also to death. Love is as strong as death, and the kiss achieves what otherwise only death can — the union of the soul with God.

After the Renaissance, the spread of court etiquette all over Europe makes kisses less frequent in literature until Romantic love brings them back. But there are still some Neoplatonic accents, as in the theme of the éducation sentimentale, announced by Rousseau, lavishly described by Stendhal and Balzac, and finally celebrated by Flaubert: young male adolescents come to life and to love through kisses (ces terribles baisers) furtively received from a mature woman. As an expert in love, that woman embodies the fullness of life. She is the supreme mediatrix. The important point is not just the transformation of the sacred theme of the soul-kiss into a more profane version, the love-life-kiss, but the fact that centuries-old conceptions are still echoed in modern models of behaviour. The soul-in-the kiss conceit even makes a glorious comeback on a panel by the painter W. J. Martens (1839–95) showing young Eros inspiring true love in a woman by a mouth-to-mouth kiss. But at the same time Rodin’s Kiss (1886), and still more that of Brancusi (1908), definitively mark the secularization
of the vital union of the couple through the kiss and the embrace. As far as Western civilization is concerned, one may perhaps speak of the timeless gesture of the loving kiss. But through its change from the sacred sphere to the profane, the kiss of love has acquired a fundamentally different meaning, or should we say 'meanings', each corresponding to a specific cultural system?

There are other lines of evolution too. The kiss, a body technique as Marcel Mauss has called it, is one of those gestures which, though cultural products like others, are not necessarily used for the public expression of human relations, still less for the public presentation of the self. It may express public values – a welcome, reverence or affection – but at the same time it expresses an intimacy that wants to be preserved. The kiss of love, for example, is simultaneously – to use the terminology of the French ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep – a rite of aggregation and of appropriation, implying a separation from others. It is the more general relationship between the public and the private sphere in a given society that decides whether the kiss as a ritual of aggregation belongs to the public world of those from whom one separates oneself or to the private world of the person who appropriates. In the second case, kissing may be usual, even ritual, but is not shown in public and is therefore not necessarily an object of public knowledge.

This ambiguity is quite clear in Van Gennep's own description of marriage rituals in France before the Second World War. He analyses the public part of these rituals: embracing each other fraternally, arms around shoulders, and touching each others' cheeks in a cheek-to-cheek kiss or at most a mouth-to-cheek kiss. The kiss of love (the mouth-to-mouth kiss) belonged to the private sphere, or perhaps was not practised at all. It is hard to know which conclusion is right, because the ethnologist Van Gennep closed his eyes at the threshold of the bedroom and indeed to private life in general. Hence a strange distortion in his analysis: peasants (because the world he describes is essentially a rural world) embrace each other at virtually every stage of the marriage ceremony, but there is never really any question of a loving kiss between bride and bridegroom.

This surely reflects in some way the reality of the public ceremony. The kiss between the newly married couple recalls old
laws and customs which considered it a formal promise of marriage, or even, as in Roman law, a legal bond making the future bride a quasi uxor. Indeed, for St Ambrose the bridal kiss was ‘the pledge of marriage and the privilege of wedlock’. This wedding kiss as the public seal upon the new bond still exists in present-day marriage ceremonies. Hence perhaps, as Perella suggests for an earlier period, there lingers on a fear of some quasi-magical effect of the mutual kiss. The public kiss between bride and bridgroom had therefore to wait for the very end of the ceremony, inaugurating the consummation of the contracted marriage. And then it naturally hides itself from the ethnologist’s view. At least from the ethnologist of half a century ago.

Van Gennep’s presentation of public life in France does not leave any space for kissing in the most intimate sense of the word, i.e. the mouth-to-mouth kiss. However, he describes perfectly the aggregation rite of the cheek-to-cheek kiss, the public gesture of embracing which at present is spreading rapidly from France over several European countries, including the Netherlands. Every Dutch observer knows that this new ritual gesture of greeting and saying goodbye sometimes causes horrible misunderstandings about the number of cheek-kisses to be given: people seem either to make this number proportional to a personal scale of affection rates, or to be convinced that some hidden rule about the number exists in etiquette books. Uncertainty about the number causes visible confusion and raises doubts both about one’s public self-presentation and the real value of the affective bonds.

As a matter of fact, the gesture of embracing each other by means of holding the shoulders and kissing the cheeks seems to be – at least in France – an example of an original peasant custom adopted by urban culture, probably through migration, but with one important change: in the countryside, the affection shown by the gesture could be measured by the sound of the kisses on the cheeks; in urban culture, body sounds are reprehensible. Hence, perhaps, the reinvestment of affection in the number of the kisses. Van Gennep wrote in 1943:

Embracing in the sense of ‘giving one or more kisses’ [baisers] is rather new. In the countryside, this kiss is given on the cheeks, never on the mouth as in Russia. In most cases, it is simulated. A
person with rural savoir-vivre touches another man's cheeks only very slightly, although a real kiss is given between mother and daughter, and between sisters or close cousins. The more such a kiss sounds, the stronger is its manifestation of friendship. This friendly kiss is given two times, rarely three.40

Elsewhere, as in Flanders, one single cheek-kiss could suffice, whereas the Walloons distinguished themselves from other Belgians by embracing three times.41

Although it remains unclear to what extent embracing rituals have been gender-specific in history, there is a curious parallel between this new embracing rage in the kissing-shy Netherlands and one of five centuries ago. In 1499 Erasmus wrote about it from England to his friend Faustus Andrelinus:

Nevertheless, did you but know the blessings of Britain, you would clap your wings to your feet, and run hither... To take one attraction out of many; there are nymphs here with divine features, so gentle and kind that you may well prefer them to your Camenae. Besides, there is a fashion which cannot be commended enough. Wherever you go, you are received on all hands with kisses; when you take leave, you are dismissed with kisses. If you go back, your salutes are returned to you. When a visit is paid, the first act of hospitality is a kiss, and when guests depart, the same entertainment is repeated; wherever a meeting takes place, there is kissing in abundance; in fact, whatever way you turn, you are never without it. Oh Faustus, if you had once tasted how sweet and fragrant those kisses are, you would indeed wish to be a traveller, not for ten years, like Solon, but for your whole life in England.42

According to the amazed Erasmus, English people seem to have passed their lifetime kissing each other. Clearly, something has happened since 1499 in the kingdom of England. In his contribution to the conference on which this book is based, Keith Thomas mentioned the English movement in the direction of greater bodily reserve. As a matter of fact, the examples given by Erasmus do not give an exhaustive picture of the realm of kissing. He is only concerned by the rite of fraternal, public salutation, i.e. aggregation.
There is nothing in his text about the love-kiss, nor about the sacred kiss.

Conversely, such a text makes us wonder how, just across the North Sea, Dutch people behaved in public. Erasmus of Rotterdam was a Dutchman by birth and very well acquainted with public customs in the Netherlands as his perceptive dialogues and other works show perfectly. Yet he wonders about an apparently striking difference between the English culture and his own. In his manners book *De civitate morum puerilium* he mainly speaks of postures, much less of gestures. The salutation ritual he defines is meant to honour a person (*praestare honorem*), therefore Erasmus prescribes to *reverenter aperire caput*, i.e. to take off the cap, the hat or something similar. There is nothing in his booklet about any form of bodily contact during the act of greeting, let alone about kissing. But Erasmus wrote in order to define a standard for children’s manners, and even then in the children’s world acts of embracing or kissing may have had functions and meanings different from those in the adult world.

Besides, Dutch people deliberately presented themselves as blunt and obtuse. Whereas Erasmus still blames Dutch bluntness, Dutch authors such as the playwright Bredero (1585–1618) or the poet Roemer Visscher (1547–1620), both from Amsterdam, exalt it a century later. Ever since Erasmus’s own time Dutch lack of refinement was not so much a residue of unrefined manners as a trade mark of the original inhabitants of Holland. As such, Dutch lack of sensitivity and the lack of refinement of the gestures is consciously upheld as a positive value by an author like Roemer Visscher: he uses it to define a strategic position for the protection of the ancient Dutch culture against the threat of assimilation by the apparently more refined manners of the immigrants who came, at the turn of the sixteenth century, in huge numbers from the southern Netherlands.

Does that opposition explain the difference of opinion between two scholars from the Netherlands, Adriaen Hereboord (1614–61) and Erycius Puteenus (1574–1646)? Hereboord, a professor of philosophy at Leiden University and born in the northern provinces, agreed, in a Latin treatise, that male visitors were allowed to kiss the women present, both young and old: kisses demanded by mere politeness can be given without any *arrière-
pensée. But Puteanus, his elderly colleague at Louvain University in the southern Netherlands, underlined the danger of that custom to more sensually-disposed temperaments. Apparently, Hereboord tried to justify a precept of the new etiquette coming from the south, whereas Puteanus opposed himself to the excesses of a widespread practice. But the difference of opinion points equally to another difference: in the northern Netherlands of that time public practice seems less pervaded by private affection.

Such reflections are important for our theme, because the general orientation of a system of values can help us to reconstruct hidden gestures. Did Dutch people kiss or embrace each other as a rite of aggregation before their cultural elites adopted the French civilité style, restricting public bodily contact to the kissing of a lady’s hand – as represented by Johannes Vermeer in a painting of 1662 (Women and Two Men)? It is hard to say, but there is some evidence that bodily contact was less inhibited before the breakthrough of the court style in the seventeenth century. There is much Neoplatonic kissing in Dutch neo-Latin poetry of the sixteenth century. In his famous and influential work Basia ("Kisses"), first published in Lyons in 1539, Erasmus’s contemporary and fellow-countryman Janus Secundus (1511–36), the gifted but short-lived son of the president of the Supreme Court of the Netherlands, sings his physical love for a courtesan. This collection of nineteen poems, corresponding to as many sensual kisses beautifully described, was the main source of inspiration for generations of love poets, including Ronsard and the Dutch author Janus Dousa the Elder.

But the kiss remains virtually confined to the context of love. Kissing scenes and other forms of close bodily proximity in Dutch genre painting concern plain love affairs (without marital implications) or take place in bawdy-houses. And ever since the seventeenth century a profuse erotic literature naturally abounds with all sorts of embraces and kisses. As a rule, public kissing was characteristic of situations outside marriage, particularly in pre-marital courtship or love-games in youth-groups where there was abundant kissing but within strictly codified rules. The wedding kiss itself appears as a rite of separation: it closes the period during which public kissing is permitted and transfers the kiss of love to the private sphere where it escapes our investigation. Outside the
context of love, the kiss apparently remained gender-specific. Thus in
the flush of liberty during the Batavian Revolution (1795) women
‘embrace and kiss each other on the streets in the name of liberty
and equality’, whereas men ‘shake the hands of brotherhood’.52
And in an old aggregation ritual of new neighbours to the existing
population, once practised in the district of Nijmegen, there was
much kissing, but never between men.53
On the other hand, the sacred kiss was certainly not unknown in
the Netherlands, even outside liturgy or official devotion. In his
Dialogue on Pilgrimage, Erasmus himself ridicules the kissing of
the sacred phial containing some solidified milk from the breast of
the Holy Virgin, exposed to public veneration in the Cathedral of
Antwerp. And there exists a 1630 painting by Gerrit de Jongh with
a scene of the by then forbidden devotion practised by Roman
Catholic pilgrims around the ruined chapel of Our Lady of
Runxputte, near Heiloo in the northern district of Holland. In the
middle of the painting a man is shown prostrated on the ground,
obviously kissing it as a sign of reverence or penance, like modern
pilgrims at Fatima or Tinos (see figure 9.2).54
This painting and other representations of pilgrims’ practices
there suggest another clue. The kissing man is lying in the middle
of a circle of male and female pilgrims walking devoutly or
progressing on their knees on a circular pathway around the
chapels. This reminds us that the sacred kiss is only a specific
manifestation of a more universal need for bodily contact between
man and the sacred sphere, which the French historian and
anthropologist of religious experience Alphonse Dupront has
called the need for sensory nourishment.55 In a given cultural
system the precise practice which will be adopted for the
satisfaction of that need depends largely on the valuation of each of
the human senses in the system. Sometimes, as in Locronan in
Brittany, passing underneath the tomb of the saint will suffice. In
other cultural circumstances more direct contact will be required,
going as far as a plain kiss on the sacred object (as on the Black
Stone at Mecca), or even a copulation at the holy place.
Figure 9.2 Gerrit Pietersz de Jongh, De kapel van Onze Lieve Vrouwe te Runxpuste te Heyloe in Oesdom (The Chapel of Our Lady at Runxpute, Oesdom, near Heiloo), 1630. (Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.)
Concluding remarks

It is now time to sum up the argument. Why did I, and many other visitors, spontaneously kiss St Peter's statue in his basilica with my mouth and not by using some composite gesture of lips and hand? That was the question which arose from my participating observation. In trying to answer that question, we saw that the distinction between the sacred kiss and the profane kiss does not really matter. Another distinction seems more important – that between the public and the private sphere. Public rites of kissing and embracing – rituals which express a welcome or a goodbye, reverence, or an encouraging sign of fraternity – are mainly aggregation rites. As such, they obey cultural standards of public expression: people have to be sure that the message of union and association will be understood by the outsiders. That does not imply that such rites are pure convention. The public message does not exclude a private meaning.\textsuperscript{30}

In the private sphere, even when performed in public (such as a penitential kissing of a holy space or a kiss of love), kissing and embracing are rites of appropriation and therefore of separation from the public sphere. In this sense, the public kiss might even be considered as the most basic liminal ritual, the very gesture separating the public sphere from the private: the pilgrim kissing the ground nourishes himself – and only himself – with sensory experience of a sacred meaning; the young couple practising a mouth-to-mouth kiss build a wall around their intimacy, deny momentarily the existence of the public sphere and thus cause public scandal – as in Georges Brassens's wonderfully sensitive chanson 'Les amoureux qui se bécotent sur les bancs publics . . .'\textsuperscript{57}

If this is true, the individual decision to touch, embrace, or kiss a sacred object depends on two conditions. The first is the affective (and eventually gender-related) value of each of those gestures related to the scale of affection which is operative in a given cultural system.\textsuperscript{57} The other is the answer to the question whether, for the subject who wants to kiss, the sacred belongs to the public or the private sphere. These two conditions direct the action of the subject, consciously or not. In my individual case the sacred seems to have withdrawn from the public sphere and become a private
affair, but one requiring a highly affective investment. Hence my plain kiss of St Peter's toes.

NOTES

1 The main general works on the kiss are the very delightful little book of Christopher Nyrop, *The Kiss and its History*, trans. William Frederick Harvey (London, 1901; repr. Detroit, 1968), and the important literary study by Nicholas James Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1969), with further references. More specialized studies include: August Wünsche, *Der Kuss in Bibel, Talmud und Midrasch* (Breslau, 1911), and F. Cabrol, 'Baiser', in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1925), vol. II, pt 1, cols 117–30. Rather strangely, both the inventory of gestures and the extensive bibliography given by Desmond Morris et al., *Gestures, Their Origins and Distribution* (New York, 1979) virtually ignore the gesture of the kiss. Indeed, the fingertips kiss which their book begins with (pp. 1–14) is more a composite practice than a simple gesture.


4 Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26. Also 1 Petr. 5:14. Cf. E. Lengeling, 'Kuss', in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg, 1961), vol. VI, cols. 696–8. However, Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane*, pp. 13–27, rightly points out that with St Paul's pneumatology in mind we may well suppose a mystical background to the kiss of peace mentioned in the New Testament. It refers to the 'breath' of the Holy Spirit, to communion, union, and new life. As a matter of fact, that was exactly the Gnostic idea of a sacred kiss.

Willem Frijhoff

6 Nyrop, *The Kiss and its History*, pp. 126–30. Cf. the French word *lèche-cul* and the German expression ‘Leck mich am Arsch!’ both with a very pejorative or contemptuous meaning, exactly like the English expression ‘kiss my arse!’ (American: ‘kiss my ass!’).


11 For body-language in pilgrims’ rituals see various contributions to *Wallfahrt kennt keine Grenzen: Themen zu einer Ausstellung des Bayerischen Nationalmuseums*, ed. Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck and Gerda Möhler (Munich and Zurich, 1984), with an extensive bibliography.


17 Robert Hertz, ‘Saint Besse, étude d’un culte alpestre’ [written in 1913], in his *Mélanges de sociologie religieuse et folklore* (Paris, 1928),
The kiss sacred and profane


18 This is not the right place to deal with the current debate on popular religion. The reader is referred to my extensive international bibliography on this subject in Religieuze volkscultuur: de spanning tussen de voorgeschreven orde en de geleefde praktijk, ed. Gerard Rootjakkens and Theo Van der Zee (Nijmegen, 1986), pp. 137–71.

19 For what follows, I rely upon Mrs Mara Rengo’s presentation of this event and the video film at the research seminar of Prof. Alphonse Dupront, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, on 5 June 1984.

20 Cf. Nyrop, The Kiss and its History, pp. 115–20. Firth, Symbols, Public and Private, p. 318, considers this kiss a simple mark of respect similar to kissing a bishop’s ring. I think that this is a reduction of its full meaning, at least in historical perspective. Kissing the statue of a saint is a rite of veneration, even of worship, and sometimes involves a magical intent.

21 Cicero (Act. II In Verrem, 4.94 informs us of a similar effect of the rite: the lips and beard of the statue of Hercules at Agrigentum were worn away by the kisses of the devotees. Continuous touching by countless hands performing the customary money-spending rite (which involves the insertion of a coin into the animal’s snout) has given a similar aspect to the bronze muzzle of Il Porcellino at the Mercato Nuovo in Florence.


25 It is, of course, quite possible that the day of prayer for the Lebanon attracted a particular group of Christians, difficult to identify visually.

26 Yet such a recognition is less arbitrary than it may seem at first sight. Catholics from Mediterranean countries use the space of the church in a different way: their churches are void of pews but full of statues and
Willem Frijhoff

altars, which determines a particular way of visiting a church, less straightforward and more immediately attentive to the riches in the margin than northern Europeans, Catholic or not.

27 See for example the suggestive film Der Himmel auf Erden made by Alois Kolb (1974) on processions and pilgrimages in Southern Italy. And on the same region: Annabella Rossi, Le feste dei poveri (Bari, 1969), with a series of very perceptive photographs.


29 Perella, The Kiss Sacred and Profane, passim.
30 Perella, The Kiss Sacred and Profane, p. 9.
35 That might well be the reason why Erving Goffman in his numerous studies on public presentation of the self remains so remarkably reserved towards kissing rituals. See, for example, E. Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Edinburgh, 1956; revised edn: New York, 1959) and Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behavior (New York, 1967).
41 André Goosse, ‘Géographie du baiser’, in Enquêtes du Musée de la vie
The kiss sacred and profane


43 Het Boeckje van Erasmus aengaende de beleefdeit der kinderlijke zeden (cdn of 1678, repr. Amsterdam, 1969), p. 45. In his contribution to this volume (see pp. 28–9), Jan Bremmer rightly points to Erasmus’s dependence on the codes of behaviour of the Classics.


51 Seventeenth-century portraits of married couples virtually show no kissing scenes according to E. de Jongh, Portretten van echt en trouw: huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw

52 Extra Nationale Courant, 20 June 1795, quoted by Ter Gouw, De volksvermakken, p. 433. In the Netherlands, shaking hands formerly had a legal meaning, as Herman Roedenburg points out in his contribution to this volume (see ch. 7, pp. 171–6), but later it developed into a gesture of greeting. In 1793, however, an anonymous Dutch engraver represented a male French revolutionary embracing a Dutchman – perhaps because the Frenchman was supposed to have taken the initiative? See M. Jongedijk, ‘Nederlandse spotprenten en de Franse Revolutie’, in Het Nederlandse beeld van de Franse Revolutie in prent en film, ed. E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier and A. M. J. T. Leyten (eds), (Amsterdam, 1989), p. 45, fig. 51.

53 Ter Gouw, De volksvermakken, p. 533.

54 The painting is reproduced in Joan Bertrand, De Runxputte en Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Nood, een bekend bedevaartsoord te Heiloo (Schoorl, 1980), p. 12, and also in De Jongh, Portretten van echt en trouw, pp. 212–14, neither of whom noticed this particular sacred act.


56 Cf. on this point the classic study of Edmund Leach, ‘Magical hair’, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 88 (1958), pp. 147–64.

57 It goes without saying that the construction of such a scale will not only have to take account of social hierarchy, but perhaps even more account of the changing public discourse on expressions of affection – for example, the medical discourse (medical theory was as important in the history of gestures as it is nowadays when defining the limits of bodily approach in relation to the AIDS-problem) or the theories of the social hygienists, not to speak of gender-related changes in cultural codes. See, for example, J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (eds), Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800–1940 (Manchester, 1987).