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the cult of the saints

Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity

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Chapter One

The Holy and the Grave

This book is about the joining of Heaven and Earth, and the role, in this joining, of dead human beings. It will deal with the emergence, orchestration, and function in late antiquity of what is generally known as the Christian "cult of saints." This involves considering the role in the religious life and organization of the Christian church in the western Mediterranean, between the third and sixth centuries A.D., of whole tombs, of relic fragments and of objects closely connected with the dead bodies of holy men and women, confessors and martyrs.

The cult of saints, as it emerged in late antiquity, became part and parcel of the succeeding millennium of Christian history to such an extent that we tend to take its elaboration for granted. Its origin has received a certain amount of attention and, given the tantalizing state of the evidence, both literary and archaeological, it is likely to continue to do so. But the full implications of what it meant to contemporaries to join Heaven and Earth at the grave of a dead human being has not been explored as fully as it deserves. For to do that was to break barriers
1 that had existed in the back of the minds of

Mediterranean men for a thousand years, and to join categories and places that had been usually meticulously contrasted.

One thing can be said with certainty about the religion of the late-antique Mediterranean: while it may not have become markedly more "otherworldly," it was most emphatically "upperworldly."[1] Its starting point was belief in a fault that ran across the face of the universe. Above the moon, the divine quality of the universe was shown in the untarnished stability of the stars. The earth lay beneath the moon, *in sentina mundi*—so many dregs at the bottom of a clear glass.[2] Death could mean the crossing of that fault. At death, the soul would separate from a body compounded of earthly dregs, and would gain, or regain, a place intimately congruent with its true nature in the palpable, clear light that hung so tantalizingly close above the earth in the heavy clusters of the Milky Way.[3] Whether this was forever, or, as Jews and Christians hoped, only for the long hiatus before the resurrection of the dead, the dead body joined in the instability and opacity of the world beneath the moon, while the soul enjoyed the unmovable clarity of the remainder of the universe.[4]

Writing in the second century A.D., Plutarch had made the matter plain. Popular belief in the bodily *apotheosis* of Romulus—the disappearance of his corpse into Heaven—struck him as a sad example of the workings of the "primitive mind." For the known structure of the universe was against it. The virtuous soul could have its share in the divinity of the stars; but this could happen only after the body had been discarded, and the soul had regained its rightful place, passing to the sky, as quick and dry as a lightning flash leaving the lowering, damp cloud of the flesh.[5] In believing in the resurrection of the dead, Jews and Christians could envisage that one day the barriers of the universe would be broken: both Elijah and Christ had already done what Plutarch said Romulus could not have done. But, for the time being, the barrier between earth and the stars remained as firmly established for the average Christian as for any other late-antique men. Thus, when he came to write on the subject of the resurrection, Prudentius, a Christian of the late fourth century, could express his belief only in language which is so faithful a reversal of the traditional world view as to amount to a tacit recognition of its resilience:

> But should the fiery essence of the soul think on its high origin, and cast aside the numbing stain of life: then will it carry with it, too, the flesh in which it lodged and bear it also back among the stars.[6]

But the resurrection was unimaginably distant, and Prudentius was a singularly enterprising poet. The average Christian monumental mason, and his patrons, continued through the fifth and sixth centuries to cover tombs with verse that took the old world view for granted.[7] An early-sixth-century bishop of Lyons, for instance, was quite content not to linger among dizzying paradoxes: the immemorial antithesis was enough for him—Astra fovent animam corpus natura recepit.[8]

Yet a near-contemporary of the emperor Julian the Apostate, the rabbi Pinḥas ben Ḥama, could point to a paradox involved in the graves of saints. He used to say:

> If the fathers of the world (the patriarchs) had wished that their resting place should be in the Above, they would have been able to have it there: but it is when they died and the rock closed on their tombs here below that they deserved to be called "saints."[9]

For the rabbi was speaking of the tombs of the patriarchs in the Holy Land. Their occupants were "holy" because they made available to the faithful around their tombs on earth a measure of the power and mercy in which they might have taken their rest in the Above. The graves of the saints—whether these were the solemn rock tombs of the Jewish patriarchs in the Holy Land or, in Christian circles, tombs, fragments of bodies or, even, physical objects that had made contact with these bodies—were privileged places, where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met. Late-antique Christian piety, as we shall see through these chapters, concentrated obsessively on the strange flash that could occur when the two hitherto distinct categories joined in the back of men's minds.

By the end of the sixth century, the graves of the saints, which lay in the cemetery areas outside the walls of most of the cities of the former Western Empire, had become centers of the ecclesiastical life of their region.[10] This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be "present" at his tomb on earth. The soul of Saint Martin, for instance, might go "marching on"; but

his body, at Tours, was very definitely not expected to "lie a-mouldering in the grave." The local Jewish doctor might have his doubts: "Martin will do you no good, whom the earth now rests, turning him to earth. . . . A dead man can give no healing to the living."[11] They are not doubts shared by the inscription on the tomb:

> Hic conditus est sanctae memoriae Martinus episcopus
> Cuius anima in manu Dei est, sed hic totus est Praesens manifestus omni gratia virtutum.
>
> [Here lies Martin the bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind.][12]

The joining of Heaven and Earth was made plain even by the manner in which contemporaries designed and described the shrines of the saints. Filled with great candelabra, their dense clusters of light mirrored in shimmering mosaic and caught in the gilded roof, late Roman *memoriae* brought the still light of the Milky Way to within a few feet of the grave.[13]

To a Mediterranean man of traditional background, much of this would have been peripheral, and some of it, downright disgusting. As Artemidorus of Daldis wrote in the second century A.D., to dream that you are a tanner is a bad dream, "for the tanner handles dead bodies and lives outside the city."[14] The rise of the Christian cult of saints took place in the great cemeteries that lay outside the cities of the Roman world: and, as for the handling of dead bodies, the Christian cult of saints rapidly came to involve the digging up, the moving, the dismemberment—quite apart from much avid touching and kissing—of the bones of the dead, and, frequently, the placing of these in areas from which the dead had once been excluded. An element of paradox always surrounded the Christian breaching of the established map of the universe. But the impact of the cult of saints on the topography of the Roman city was unambiguous: it gave greater prominence to areas that had been treated as antithetical to the public life of the living city;[15] by the end of the period, the immemorial boundary between

the city of the living and the dead came to be breached by the entry of relics and their housing within the walls of many late-antique towns, and the clustering of ordinary graves around them.[16] Even when confined to their proper place, the areas of the dead, normative public worship and the tombs of the dead were made to coincide in a manner and with a frequency for which the pagan and Jewish imagination had made little provision.[17]

The breaking down and the occasional inversion of ancient barriers implied in the late-antique cult of saints seems to mark the end of a way of seeing the relation between the human dead and the universe, and, as an immediate consequence, a shifting of the barriers by which Mediterranean men had sought to circumscribe the role of the dead, and especially of those dead to whom one had to strong links of kinship or place.[18] Pagan parallels and antecedents can only take us so far in understanding the Christian cult of saints, very largely because the pagan found himself in a world where his familiar map of the relations between the human and the divine, the dead and the living, had been subtly redrawn.

Let us take one well-known example: the relation between the ancient cult of the heroes and the Christian cult of the martyrs.[19] To idealize the dead seemed natural enough to men in Hellenistic and Roman times. Even to offer some form of worship to the deceased, whether as a family or as part of a public cult in the case of exceptional dead persons, such as heroes or emperors, was common, if kept within strictly defined limits. Thus, the practice of "heroization," especially of private cult offered by the family to the deceased as a "hero" in a specially constructed grave house, has been invoked to explain some of the architectural and artistic problems of the early Christian *memoria*.[20] But after that, even the analogy of the cult of the hero breaks down. For the position of the hero had been delimited by a very ancient map of the boundaries between those beings who had been touched by the taint of human death and those who had not: the forms of cult for heroes and for the immortal gods tended to be kept apart.[21] Above all, what appears to be almost totally absent from pagan belief about the role of the heroes is the insistence of all Christian writers that the martyrs,

precisely because they had died as human beings, enjoyed close intimacy with God. Their intimacy with God was the *sine qua non* of their ability to intercede for and, so, to protect their fellow mortals. The martyr was the "friend of God." He was an intercessor in a way which the hero could never have been.[22]

Thus, in Christian belief, the grave, the memory of the dead, and the religious ceremonial that might surround this memory were placed within a totally different structure of relations between God, the dead, and the living. To explain the Christian cult of the martyrs as a continuation of the pagan cult of heroes[23] helps as little as to reconstruct the form and function of a late-antique Christian basilica from the few columns and capitals taken from classical buildings that are occasionally incorporated in its arcades.[24]

Indeed, Christian late antiquity could well be presented as a reversal of the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. The hard-bitten message of that play had been that the boundaries between gods and humans should remain firm. Whatever intimacy Hippolytus may have enjoyed with the goddess Artemis, when he was alive, the touch of death opened a chasm between Artemis, the immortal, and Hippolytus, the dying human being. She could no longer look at him:

> ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐ θέμις φθιτοὺς ὁρᾶν
> οὐδ' ὄμμα χραίνειν θανασίμοισιν ἐκπνοαῖς
>
> [It is not right for me to look upon the dead,
> And stain my eyesight with the mists of dying men.][25]

We need only compare this with the verse of the Psalms that is frequently applied by Latin writers to the role of the martyrs, "Oculi Domini super iustos, et aures eius ad preces eorum" (33:16)[26] to measure the distance between the two worlds.

Nothing could be more misleading than to assume that, by the middle of the fourth century, some insensible tide of religious sentiment had washed away the barriers by which Mediterranean pagans had sought for so long to mark off the human dead from the living. Far from it: on this point, the rise of Christianity in the pagan world was met by deep religious anger. We can chart the rise to prominence of the Christian

church most faithfully by listening to pagan reactions to the cult of martyrs. For the progress of this cult spelled out for the pagans a slow and horrid crumbling of ancient barriers which presaged the final spreading again over the earth of that "darkness spoken of in the old myths" in which all ancient landmarks would be blotted out.[27] In attacking the cult of saints, Julian the Apostate mentions the cult as a novelty for which there was no warrant in the gospels; but the full weight of his religious abhorrence comes to bear on the relation between the living and the corpses of the dead that was implied in the Christian practice: "You keep adding many corpses newly dead to the corpse of long ago. You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchres."[28] He turned against the cult practiced at the tombs of the saints all the repugnance expressed by the Old Testament prophets for those who haunted tombs and burial caves for sinister purposes of sorcery and divination.[29] As an emperor, Julian could give voice to his own profound distaste by reiterating the traditional Roman legislation that kept the dead in their proper place. How could men tolerate such things as Christian processions with relics?

> . . . The carrying of the corpses of the dead through a great assembly of people, in the midst of dense crowds, staining the eyesight of all with ill-omened sights of the dead. What day so touched with death could be lucky? How, after being present at such ceremonies, could anyone approach the gods and their temples?[30]

In an account of the end of paganism in Egypt, by Eunapius of Sardis, we catch the full charnel horror of the rise of Christianity:

> For they collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for numerous crimes . . . made them out to be gods, and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their graves. "Martyrs" the dead men were called, and ministers of a sort, and ambassadors with the gods to carry men's prayers.[31]

In the course of the late fourth and fifth centuries, the growth of the cult of martyrs caused a visible shift in the balance of importance accorded to the areas of the living and the areas of

the dead in most late-antique towns. Great architecture mushroomed in the cemeteries. To take only one example: at the beginning of the fifth century, the north African city of Tebessa came to be flanked by an enormous pilgrimage site, built in the cemetery area, presumably around the grave of Saint Crispina. The shrine was in the full-blooded, public style associated with the Theodosian renaissance. Its pilgrim's way, 150 meters long, passed under great triumphal arches and along arcaded courtyards, echoing, among the tombs outside Tebessa, the porticoes and streets of a classical city.[32] In the same years Paulinus of Nola could congratulate himself on having built around the grave of Saint Felix, in a peripheral cemetery area still called Cimitile, "the cemetery," a complex so impressive that the traveler might take it for another town.[33]

Indeed, when it came to shifting the balance between places and non-places in the ancient man's map of civilization, Christianity had a genius for impinging with gusto on the late-Roman landscape. In the course of the fourth century, the growth of monasticism had revealed how wholeheartedly Christians wished to patronize communities which had opted pointedly for the antithesis of settled urban life. In the proud words of Athanasius, writing of Saint Anthony and his monks, the monks had "founded a city in the desert," that is, in a place where no city should be.[34] In the late fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian bishops brought the shift in the balance between the town and the non-town out of the desert and right up to the walls of the city: they now founded cities in the cemetery.[35]

What is even more remarkable is the outcome of this shift. The bishops of western Europe came to orchestrate the cult of the saints in such a way as to base their power within the old Roman cities on these new "towns outside the town." The bishop's residence and his main basilica still lay within the city walls. Yet it was through a studiously articulated relationship with great shrines that lay at some distance from the city—Saint Peter's, on the Vatican Hill outside Rome, Saint Martin's, a little beyond the walls of Tours—that the bishops of the former cities of the Roman Empire rose to prominence in early medieval Europe.

We shall frequently have occasion to observe that the bishops' control of these shrines should not be taken for granted: as the Duke of Wellington said of the battle of Waterloo, the victory was "a dam' close-run thing." But the victory, once won, was decisive for the history of the church in western Europe. In a characteristically rhetorical flourish, Jerome had challenged a critic of the cult relics:

> [So you think,] therefore, that the bishop of Rome does wrong when, over the dead men Peter and Paul, venerable bones to us, but to you a heap of common dust, he offers up sacrifices to the Lord, and their graves are held to be altars of Christ.[36]

The subsequent success of the papacy could only prove that the bishop of Rome had *not* done wrong.

To gain this advantage, further ancient barriers had to be broken. Tomb and altar were joined. The bishop and his clergy performed public worship in a proximity to the human dead that would have been profoundly disturbing to pagan and Jewish feeling. Furthermore, an ancient barrier between the private and the public, that had been shared as deeply by a former generation of Christians as by any other late-antique men, came to be eroded. The tomb of the saint was declared public property as the tomb of no other Christian was: it was made accessible to all, and became the focus of forms of ritual common to the whole community. Every device of architecture, art, ceremony, and literature was mobilized to ensure that holy graves and relics were made both more eminent and more available than were the family graves that filled the cemeteries. Indeed, if for all late-antique men the grave was "a fine and private place," owned and cared for by the family, the graves and relics of the saints stood out in high relief: they were "non-graves."

The joining of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of western Europe to the tombs of the dead set the medieval Catholic church apart from its Byzantine and Near Eastern neighbors—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. In western Europe, the power of the bishop tended to coalesce with the power of the shrine.

Elsewhere, the shrine tended to go its own way.[37] The great Christian shrines and pilgrimage sites of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East—even Jerusalem—were never mobilized, as they came to be in the West, to form the basis of lasting ecclesiastical power structures.[38]

In Judaism the holy graves and the rabbinate drifted apart. The *loci* where Heaven and Earth had met, in the opinion of the rabbi Pinḥas ben Ḥama, still lacked their *impresarios*. There was no denying the existence of so many tombs of the saints nor of their importance for the Jewish communities. But the leaders of Jewish learning and spirituality did not choose to lean upon tombs, as Christian bishops did, with the result that these maintained a low profile. It is hardly surprising, given the manner in which they were taken for granted, that we have had to wait until 1958 for Joachim Jeremias to recover for us the full significance of Jewish holy graves in late antiquity.[39] In Islam, the situation is more tantalizing. The holy tomb, though of inestimable importance throughout all regions of the Islamic world, existed always a little to one side of Muslim orthodoxy.[40] Vivid ethnographic material on the function of modern Muslim shrines, which seems to carry us back directly in time into the western Europe of the early middle ages, comes not from the dry center of the Islamic tradition, but from its ever-fertile peripheries—from the mountains of Morocco and from Sufi lodges scattered between Indonesia and the Atlas.[41] Thus, holy graves existed both in Judaism and in Islam. But to exist was never enough. Public and private, traditional religious leadership and the power of the holy dead never coincided to the degree to which they did in western Europe. The state of our evidence reflects something of the evolution that we have described: we can trace the rise of the holy dead in western Europe with such clarity largely because, as in a pair of binoculars, the two sets of images, from the two lenses, the shrine and the official religious leadership, slide so easily together.

Whatever their relation with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Christian Mediterranean and its extensions to the east and northwest came to be dotted with clearly indicated *loci* where Heaven and Earth met. The shrine containing a grave or, more frequently, a fragmentary relic, was very often called quite sim-

ply, "the place": *loca sanctorum*, ὁ τόπος.[42] It was a place where the normal laws of the grave were held to be suspended. In a relic, the chilling anonymity of human remains could be thought to be still heavy with the fullness of a beloved person. As Gregory of Nyssa said,

> Those who behold them embrace, as it were, the living body in full flower: they bring eye, mouth, ear, all the senses into play, and then, shedding tears of reverence and passion, they address to the martyr their prayers of intercession as though he were present.[43]

It could be a threatening presence. Jerome wrote:

> Whenever I have been angry or had some bad thought upon my mind, or some evil fantasy has disturbed my sleep, I do not dare to enter the shrines of the martyrs. I quake with body and soul.[44]

A sixth-century layman wrote to his spiritual father in Gaza:

> When I find that I am in a place where there are relics of the holy martyrs, I am obsessed by the need to go in and venerate them. Every time I pass in front of them, I feel I should bow my head.

The old man replied that one prostration should be enough, or, if the urge is very strong, three. Should he go in, then the layman continued, whenever the fear of God strikes him?

> No: do not go in out of fear. Only enter at fitting times for prayer.
>
> But when I am just about to go in, then the fear of God really does come on me![45]

The activities of less squeamish souls reveal to us a Mediterranean landscape covered, in its most settled parts, with a grid of shrines. Around A.D. 600, a gang of burglars operating in Upper Egypt could make a start at the Place of Apa Collouthos, outside Antinoë, go south a few miles to Saint Victor the General, cross the Nile to Apa Timothy, and head downstream again at nightfall to the Place of Apa Claudius, reaping a swag of silver altar tablets, silk and linen hangings, even the silver

necklaces and the crosses from around the necks of the mummified saints.[46]

Wherever Christianity went in the early Middle Ages, it brought with it the "presence" of the saints. Whether this was unimaginably far to the north, in Scotland, where local craftsmen attempted to copy, in their "altar tombs," the shape of the high-ridged sarcophagi of late-Roman Gaul;[47] or on the edge of the desert, where Rome, Persia, and the Arab world met at the shrine of Saint Sergius at Resafa—a shrine in whose treasury even the pagan king of kings of Persia, Khusro II Aparwez, had placed a great silver dish recounting his gratitude to the saint is a style which makes this *ex voto* the last address of a Near Eastern monarch to a supernatural figure (of which one of the first was carved by the Achaemenian predecessor of Khusro, Cyrus, high on the rock face of Bisutun);[48] or even further to the east, among the Nestorian Christians of Iraq, Iran, and central Asia,[49] late-antique Christianity, as it impinged on the outside world, *was* shrines and relics.[50]

This is a fact of life which has suffered the fate of many facts of life. Its existence is admitted with a slight note of embarrassment; and, even when admitted to, it is usual to treat it as "only too natural," and not a subject to linger over for prolonged and circumstantial investigation. I would like to end this chapter by suggesting why this should have been so, and to point out the disadvantages to the religious and social historian of late antiquity of so dismissive an approach to a form of religious life that was plainly central to the position of the Christian church in late-antique society.

For it seems to me that our curiosity has been blunted by a particular model of the nature of religious sentiment and a consequent definition of the nature of "popular religion." We have inherited from our own learned tradition attitudes that are not sensitive enough to help us enter into the thought processes and the needs that led to the rise and expansion of the cult of saints in late antiquity. That such models have entered our cultural bloodstream is shown by one fact: long after the issue of the rise of the cult of saints has been removed from its confessional setting in post-Reformation polemics, scholars of every and of no denomination still find themselves united in a

common reticence and incomprehension when faced with this phenomenon. Plainly, some solid and seemingly unmovable cultural furniture has piled up somewhere in that capacious lumber room, the back of our mind. If we can identify and shift some of it, we may find ourselves able to approach the Christian cult of saints from a different direction.

The religious history of late antiquity and the early middle ages still owes more than we realize to attitudes summed up so persuasively, in the 1750s, by David Hume, in his essay *The Natural History of Religion*. The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes this essay, somewhat loftily, as "an entertaining exercise in armchair anthropology from secondary sources."[51] Yet, like weightier successors in that genre, it was precisely the "armchair" quality of Hume's essay that accounts for the continued subliminal presence of its leading ideas in all later scholarship. For Hume drew on evidence that lay to hand in classical authors, which all men of culture read and would read up to our own times. He placed this evidence together with such deftness and good sense that the *Natural History of Religion* seems to carry the irresistible weight of a clear and judicious statement of the obvious. It was difficult to doubt the soundness of Hume's presentation of the working of the religious mind in general, and impossible to challenge, in particular, the accuracy of his portrayal of the nature and causes of superstition in the ancient world, drawn as it was from well-known classical authors.

Hume faced squarely the problem of the origins and variety of religious thought. Men, he insisted, against his orthodox contemporaries, were not natural monotheists, and never had been. They had not lost, through sin, the original simplicity of faith in the Supreme Being that had been granted to Adam and the patriarchs. Though theism remained an ideal, it was at all times a precarious ideal. And this was not because of human sinfulness, but because of the intellectual limitations of the average human mind. The intellectual and, by implication, the cultural and social preconditions for theism were difficult to achieve. For theism, in Hume's view, depended on attaining a coherent—and so, rational—view of the universe, such as might, in turn, enable the enlightened mind to deduce from the order of the visible world the existence of, and the forms of

worship due to, a Supreme Being. Hence, Hume concludes, the extreme rarity of true monotheism, and its virtual impossibility in the distant, unrefined ages of the past.

Furthermore, the failure to think in theistic terms could be given a precise social *locus*—"the vulgar":

> The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind a few excepted, being ignorant and uninstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens . . . so far as to discern a supreme mind or original providence.[52]

Hume was emphatic that this failure was not due solely to the intellectual limitations of "the vulgar." These limitations reflected an entire cultural and social environment, hostile to rationality. "The vulgar . . . being ignorant and uninstructed" tended to fragment those experiences of abstract order on which any coherent view of the universe could be based. For the average man was both notoriously ill-equipped through lack of instruction to abstract general principles from his immediate environment: and, in any case, in all but the most privileged ages, and among the most sheltered elites, the natural inability of the uninstructed intellect to think in abstract terms was heightened by fears and anxieties, which led men to personalize yet further the working of causes beyond their control, and so to slip ever deeper into polytheistic ways of thought. As a result, the religious history of mankind, for Hume, is not a simple history of decline from an original monotheism; it is marked by a constant tension between theistic and polytheistic ways of thinking:

> It is remarkable that the principles of religion have had a flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism to idolatry.[53]

This characteristically sad and measured assessment of the limitations of average human thinking, and the manner in which these limitations were reflected in a constant "flux and reflux" of religious thought, provided Hume and his successors with a model for the cultural and social preconditions for religious change. For the "flux and reflux in the human mind" had a historical dimension. Some ages had it in them to be, at least

marginally, less polytheistic than others: They were more secure, their elites were more cultivated, possibly more effective in controlling "the vulgar" or, at least, less permeable to their irrational ideas. Other ages could do nothing but relapse into idolatry of some form or other. And so the respective rise and fall of rationality could be assessed in terms of the relative strength, in any given society, of the "vulgar" and of the potentially enlightened few, and in terms of the relative pressure which the views of one side could exert upon those of the other.

The greatest immediate legacy of the *Natural History of Religion*, however, was not a sense of change: it was a sober respect for the force of inertia behind the religious practices of "the vulgar." Hume had made polytheistic ways of thinking appear plausible, almost universal, and, seemingly, ineradicable. Gibbon seized at once on this aspect of the essay. It lies behind the magisterial coherence of the twenty-eighth chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, which flows from a description of the nature and abolition of the pagan religion of the Roman Empire to the rise of the Christian cult of the saints without so much as an eddy marking the transition from one form of religion to the other: "Mr. Hume . . . observes, like a philosopher, the natural flux and reflux of polytheism and theism."[54] For Gibbon, Hume the philosopher had made the transition from polytheism to the cult of the saints obvious:

> The imagination, which had been raised by a painful effort to the contemplation and worship of the Universal Cause, eagerly embraced such inferior objects of adoration as were more proportioned to its gross conceptions and imperfect faculties. The sublime and simple theology of the primitive Christians was gradually corrupted; and the MONARCHY of heaven, already clouded by metaphysical subtleties, was degraded by the introduction of a popular mythology which tended to restore the reign of polytheism.[55]

What is more surprising is that it was, if anything, the religious revival of the nineteenth century that hardened the outlines of Hume's model, and made a variant of it part of many modern interpretations of early medieval Christianity. We need only turn to Dean Milman's *History of Latin Christianity*, to see

how this could happen. Milman presented the spread of the cult of saints in Europe during the Dark Ages in a manner touched with Romantic enthusiasm. Yet Hume's model was very much part of his mental furniture.[56] For he identified the theism of the enlightened few with the elevated message of the Christian church; while the barbarian settlers of Europe, although their mental processes might be described by Milman, the post-Romantic reader of Vico, as "poetic" (and not, as Gibbon had said more bluntly of them, as "fierce and illiterate")[57] retained to the full the qualities of Hume's "vulgar." They represented modes of thinking that fell far below those of the enlightened leaders of the church. Milman merely added the whole span of the barbarian West to Gibbon's Roman canvas:

> Now had commenced what may be called, neither unreasonably nor unwarrantably, the mythic age of Christianity. As Christianity worked downwards into the lower classes of society, as it received the crude and ignorant barbarians within its pale, the general effect could not but be that the age would drag down the religion to its level, rather than the religion elevate the age to its own lofty standards.[58]

Indeed, the renewed loyalty of sensitive and learned minds to the religious traditions of the past, in Anglicanism and Catholicism alike, heightened the lack of sympathy for the thought processes of the average man. For those who wished to maintain the elevated truths of traditional Christianity had to draw with even greater harshness the boundaries between their own versions of "true religion" and the habitual misconception of these by the "vulgar."

> In the next place what has power to stir holy and refined souls is potent also with the multitude; and the religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it will ever be tinctured with fanaticism and superstition, while men are what they are.[59]

Not Hume this time—but John Henry, Cardinal Newman. It is by such stages that a particular model of the nature and origin of the religious sentiment and, especially, of the forms that this sentiment takes among "the vulgar" as "popular religion" has

come to permeate those great traditions of Protestant and Catholic scholarship on which we still depend for so much of our erudition on the religious and ecclesiastical history of late antiquity and the early middle ages.

In modern scholarship, these attitudes take the form of a "two-tiered" model. The views of the potentially enlightened few are thought of as being subject to continuous upward pressure from habitual ways of thinking current among "the vulgar." Hume was far more pessimistic than were those robust Victorian churchmen we have just described about the intellectual and religious resources of the few; but he had no doubts about who constituted "the vulgar." He was brutally plain about what he considered to be the intellectual and cultural limitations of the masses. Hume's "vulgar" have remained with us. To take only one example: the patient work of Hippolyte Delehaye in recovering the historical kernel of the *Acts of the Martyrs* is marked by a pessimism similar to that of Hume. To pass from the historical documents of the early church to their later legendary accretions was, for that sober Bollandist, to note the ease with which the truthful record of a "few enlightened minds" became swallowed up in the crowd:

> En effet, l'intelligence de la multitude se manifeste partout comme extrêmement bornée et ce serait une erreur de croire qu'elle subisse, en général, l'influence de l'élite. . . . Le meilleur point de comparaison pour en démontrer le niveau est l'intelligence de l'enfant.[60]

When applied to the nature of religious change in late antiquity, the "two-tiered" model encourages the historian to assume that a change in the piety of late-antique men, of the kind associated with the rise of the cult of saints, must have been the result of the capitulation by the enlightened elites of the Christian church to modes of thought previously current only among the "vulgar." The result has been a tendency to explain much of the cultural and religious history of late antiquity in terms of drastic "landslips" in the relation between the elites and the masses. Dramatic moments of "democratization of culture" or of capitulation to popular needs are held to have brought about a series of "mutations" of late-antique and early medieval

Christianity.[61] The elites of the Roman world are supposed to have been eroded by the crisis of the third century, thus opening the way to a flood of superstitious fears and practices introduced by the new governing classes of the Christian Empire;[62] "mass conversions" to Christianity, which are assumed to have taken place as a result of the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion, are said to have forced the hands of the leaders of the church into accepting a wide variety of pagan practices, especially in relation to the cult of the saints; a further capitulation of the elites of the Byzantine world to "the naive animistic ideas of the masses" is supposed to have brought about the rise of the cult of icons in the later sixth century A.D.[63]

Of each of these moments of "democratization" it is now possible to say:

> Oh, let us never, never doubt,
> What nobody is sure about.

Applied in this manner, the "two-tiered" model appears to have invented more dramatic turning points in the history of the early church than it has ever explained.

Let us see what can be gained by abandoning this model. I suggest that the greatest immediate advantage would be to make what has been called "popular religion" in late antiquity and the early middle ages more available to historical interpretation, by treating it as more dynamic. For the basic weakness of the "two-tiered" model is that it is rarely, if ever, concerned to explain religious change other than among the elite. The religion of "the vulgar" is assumed to be uniform. It is timeless and faceless. It can cause changes by imposing its modes of thought on the elite; but in itself it does not change.

Now it is hardly necessary to labor the point that even in relatively simple societies, shared beliefs can be experienced and put to use in widely differing ways among differing sections of a society, and that it is quite possible for one section to regard the religious behavior of the others as defective or threatening.[64] Christianity, in particular, found itself committed to complex beliefs, whose full understanding and accurate formulation had always assumed a level of culture which the

majority of the members of the Christian congregations were known not to share with their leaders.[65] Yet it is remarkable that men who were acutely aware of elaborating *dogmas*, such as the nature of the Trinity, whose contents were difficult of access to the "unlettered," felt themselves so little isolated for so much of the time from these same "unlettered" when it came to the shared religious *practices* of their community and to the assumptions about the relation of man to supernatural beings which these practices condensed.[66] In the area of life covered by religious practice—an area immeasurably wider and more intimately felt by ancient men than by their modern counterparts[67]—differences of class and education play no significant role. As Arnaldo Momigliano has put it, with characteristic wisdom and firmness,

> Thus my inquest into popular beliefs in the Late Roman historians ends in reporting that there were no such beliefs. In the fourth and fifth centuries there were of course plenty of beliefs which we historians of the twentieth century would gladly call popular, but the historians of the fourth and fifth centuries never treated any belief as characteristic of the masses and consequently discredited among the elite. Lectures on popular beliefs and Late Roman historians should be severely discouraged.[68]

The model of "popular religion" that is usually presented by scholars of late antiquity has the disadvantage that it assumes that "popular religion" can be understood only from the viewpoint of the elite. "Popular religion" is presented as in some ways a diminution, a misconception or a contamination of "*un*-popular religion."[69] Whether it is presented, bluntly, as "popular superstition" or categorized as "lower forms of belief,"[70] it is assumed that "popular religion" exhibits modes of thinking and worshiping that are best intelligible in terms of a failure to be something else. For failure to accept the guidance of the elite is invariably presented as having nothing to do with any particular appropriateness or meaningful quality in "popular" belief: it is always ascribed to the abiding limitations of "the vulgar." Popular belief, therefore, can only show itself as a monotonous continuity. It represents an untransformed,

unelevated residue of beliefs current among "the ignorant and uninstructed," that is, "all mankind, a few excepted."

Gibbon saw this implication, and exploited it with consummate literary skill, so as to introduce the still-explosive controversial issue as to whether or not the Catholic cult of saints has been a direct copy of pagan practice:

> The same uniform original spirit of superstition might suggest, in the most distant ages, the same methods of deceiving the credulity and affecting the senses of mankind.[71]

Up to the present, it is still normal to assume that the average *homo religiosus* of the Mediterranean, and more especially, the average woman, is, like Winnie the Pooh, "a bear of very little brain."[72] His or her religious ideas are assumed to be unsophisticated and tenacious of age-old practices and misconceptions.[73] We have at least added a few softening touches to the outright contempt of the Enlightenment for "the vulgar." We have developed a romantic nostalgia for what we fondly wish to regard as the immemorial habits of the Mediterranean countryman, by which every "popular" religious practice is viewed as an avatar of classical paganism.[74] We have become concerned to trace in paganism and Christianity alike a common response to the human condition.[75] These modern concerns have added genuine human warmth, precision, and vast erudition to the study of the pagan background of "popular" Christianity in the late-antique world. The concept of *Antike und Christentum* associated with the work of Franz Dölger has come to stay.[76] Nowhere has this erudition been mobilized more abundantly than in studies of the rise and articulation of the Christian cult of saints.[77] Yet it is still assumed that, however novel the views of the leaders of the church might be, the study of "popular religion" in late antiquity must be the study of continuity and not of change: for it is assumed to be a study of the unmoving subsoil from which Christianity sprang. As long as this is so, we have not moved far from the labor-saving formulas to which Gibbon once turned, with such studied detachment, to imply that there was, after all, nothing very surprising in the rise of the cult of saints.

It seems time to ask whether the late-antique historian can remain satisfied for much longer with so static and potentially undifferentiated a model. For it has left him in a quandary. He knows that the political, social, and economic trends of late antiquity led to profound and irreversible changes in the relations between men and men in their daily secular life. In western Europe, an empire fell, and throughout the Mediterranean enduring new structures of social relations replaced those current in the classical period. These changes manifested themselves differently in different regions; but they worked slowly and deeply into the lives of Mediterranean men of all classes and levels of culture, and not merely the elites. Yet the religious historian of late antiquity offers for the majority of the population of the late-antique world a vista of seemingly unbroken continuity: "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" still appears to be the guiding principle of a long and distinguished tradition of studies on late-antique "popular religion."

Yet we have seen in the beginning of this chapter that the rise of the cult of saints was sensed by contemporaries, in no uncertain manner, to have broken most of the imaginative boundaries which ancient men had placed between heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the living and the dead, the town and its antithesis. I wonder whether it is any longer possible to treat the explicit breaking of barriers associated with the rise and the public articulation of the cult of saints as no more than foam on the surface of the lazy ocean of "popular belief." For the cult of saints involved imaginative changes that seem, at least, congruent to changing patterns of human relations in late-Roman society at large. It designated dead human beings as the recipients of unalloyed reverence, and it linked these dead and invisible figures in no uncertain manner to precise visible places and, in many areas, to precise living representatives. Such congruence hints at no small change. But in order to understand such a change, in all its ramifications, we must set aside the "two-tiered" model. Rather than present the rise of the cult of saints in terms of a dialogue between two parties, the few and the many, let us attempt to see it as part of a greater whole—the lurching forward of an increasing proportion of

late-antique society toward radically new forms of reverence, shown to new objects in new places, orchestrated by new leaders, and deriving its momentum from the need to play out the common preoccupation of all, the few and the "vulgar" alike, with new forms of the exercise of power, new bonds of human dependence, new, intimate, hopes for protection and justice in a changing world.