An Age of Saints?

Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity

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RESTLESS PEASANTS AND SCORNFUL LORDS: LAY HOSTILITY TO HOLY MEN AND THE CHURCH IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Peter Sarris

In 1961, in his justly famous essay *What Is History?*, E.H. Carr wrote of the problems caused to the medievalist by an over-reliance on ecclesiastical sources: 'When I read in a modern history of the Middle Ages that the people of the Middle Ages were deeply concerned with religion', Carr declared, 'I wonder how we know this, and whether it is true. What we know of the facts of medieval history have almost all been selected for us by generations of chroniclers who were professionally occupied in the theory and practice of religion, and who therefore thought it supremely important, and recorded everything relating to it, and not much else. The picture of the Russian peasant as devoutly religious was destroyed by the revolution of 1917.'[1]

The Russian analogy that Carr draws is a highly appropriate one, especially for the Byzantinist, for in many respects the myth of 'Holy Russia' (*Sviataia Rus'*) drew upon the ideal of a Holy Byzantium to which Moscow was heir.[2] In Muscovy, as in Byzantium, the concept of the Tsar/Emperor as God's vice-gerent on earth, and of the empire as a bulwark of true religion, did much to legitimise and sanctify the state in the person of the ruler.[3] But how deep in society did such claims penetrate? To what extent did they impact upon the minds and imaginations of the Tsar/Emperor's overwhelmingly rural subjects? For Byzantium, we will never know, but the Russian evidence is highly suggestive. As Orlando Figes has put it, 'the religiosity of the Russian peasant has been one of the most enduring myths – along with the depth of the Russian soul – in the history of Russia. But in reality the Russian peasant had never been more than semi-detached

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[1] E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961), 13–14. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey de Ste Croix.

[2] See, for example, discussion in O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924* (London, 1996), 62–63.

[3] Ibid., 61–63. For Byzantium, see G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: Étude sur le 'césaropapisme' byzantin* (Paris, 1996).

with the Orthodox religion. Only a thin coat of Christianity had been painted over his ancient pagan folk-culture'.[4] Moreover, as the events of the Revolution were to reveal, a great deal of animosity and hostility had built up towards the personnel of the Church on the part of many Russian peasants. This was largely due to social tensions resulting from the reality of economic relations between peasant and priest on the ground: 'the clergy relied heavily on collecting peasant fees for their services: two roubles for a wedding; a hen for the blessing of the crops; a few bottles of vodka for a funeral; and so on. The crippling poverty of the peasants and the proverbial greed of the priests often made this bargaining process long and heated [...] "Everywhere", wrote a nineteenth-century parish priest, "from the most resplendent drawing rooms to smoky peasant huts, people disparage the clergy with the most vicious mockery, with words of the most profound scorn and infinite disgust".'[5]

It has long been noted how, in the aftermath of the Constantinian institutionalisation of the Christian Church and clergy, and as bishops in particular came to play an ever more significant role in public life, the representatives of the Church found themselves increasingly caught up in political struggles and machinations. This was not always to the Church's advantage: in Merovingian Gaul, for example, the growing involvement of bishops in court and factional politics was to lead to a strikingly high rate of episcopal murder and assassination.[6] What has received far less attention, however, are the implications of the process whereby the Church emerged as an increasingly significant landowner from the fourth to the sixth centuries, and the role played by the Church's ever more pronounced involvement in exploitative, and potentially highly antagonistic, economic and social relations, in

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[4] Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 66. For the relationship between religious folk-culture and Christianity in the early Byzantine Empire, see F.R. Trombley, 'Paganism in the Greek World at the End of Antiquity', *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985) 327–352, discussing the *Life of Nicholas of Sion*.

[5] Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 67–68.

[6] For the ongoing process of institutionalization from the fourth to the sixth centuries, see C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in An Age of Transition* (Berkeley, 2005). For episcopal murder, see P. Fouracre, 'Why were so many bishops killed in Merovingian Francia?', in *Bischofsmord im Mittelalter – Murder of Bishops*, ed. N. Fryde and D. Reitz (Göttingen, 2003), 13–36.

informing and shaping peasant attitudes to the Church, its representatives, and perhaps even its doctrines.[7]

The growth of the church as a landowning institution from the fourth century onwards was, on one level, one of the most significant economic developments of late antiquity. Through imperial grant, pious donation, and straightforward opportunism, bishops and, ultimately, monasteries came to acquire extensive estates across the Mediterranean world and its northwestern appendages.[8] As Rapp has noted, 'real estate and the income it generated, church buildings, liturgical vessels, and adornments made of gold and silver were liberally given to the Church. The *Liber Pontificalis*…gives a detailed inventory of Constantine's gifts to the churches in Rome and elsewhere in Italy. These amounted to hundreds of pounds of gold and silver in chalices, patens, candlesticks, and other adornments, in addition to income from estates and commercial enterprises worth thousands of *solidi*'.[9] This process continued apace in Italy across the fifth and sixth centuries, such that, as Robert Markus has put it, 'by the end of the sixth century [churches] were the largest landowners in Italy. In Gregory [the Great's] time the Roman Church must have been by far the richest'.[10] As Philip Booth has noted, by Gregory's day 'papal estates stretched from Gaul to North Africa, and included vast holdings within Campania'.[11] Nor was it simply the great patriarchal Sees that built up extensive property portfolios: in his classic study of 1931, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt*, E.R. Hardy speculated that, by the sixth century, the Church may have owned even more land around the Middle Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus than the regionally predominant aristocratic household of the Flavii Apiones, members of which held high office in Constantinople and dominated local politics.[12]

The expansion of ecclesiastical estates necessarily involved the Church and its representatives in what Chris Wickham has described

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[7] For peasant hostility to secular landowners and the imperial authorities themselves, see P. Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2006), 222–227.

[8] See discussion in Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 215–219.

[9] Ibid., 216.

[10] R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge, 1997), 112.

[11] P. Booth, 'John Moschus, 'Sophronius Sophista, and Maximus Confessor Between East and West', Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2007, 128.

[12] E.R. Hardy, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt* (New York, 1931), 44. For the Apion family, see Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 17–24.

as 'the politics of the land', and would appear to have elicited a certain degree of suspicion and hostility on the part of those more traditionally-minded elements of senatorial and curial society that were perhaps ill-at-ease with imperial programmes of Christianisation, and who increasingly found themselves in competition with the Church for prime agricultural real estate. As the sixth-century Greek historian Procopius complained in his *Secret History*, the Emperor Justinian 'seemed to be a convinced believer in Christ, but this too meant ruin for his subjects; for he allowed the priests to use violence against their neighbours almost with impunity, and when they looted estates next to their own he wished them joy, thinking that in so doing he was honouring the Divinity. When he judged such cases he thought that he was showing his piety if anyone for allegedly religious purposes grabbed something that did not belong to him and, after winning his case, went scot-free. For in his view justice consisted in the priests getting the better of their opponents.'[13]

From the perspective of the peasantry and agricultural labourers who worked such estates, however, this concentration of landownership in the hands of the Church is likely to have carried few tangible consequences. All it meant for them was a change of master. There is no evidence that ecclesiastical estates in late antiquity were organised or administered on terms any different to those of the lay aristocracy: both the Church and lay aristocrats made use of agricultural slaves; both the Church and the lay aristocracy made extensive use of the obligatory services of tied agricultural labourers (*coloni adscripticii*) and their families, bound in perpetuity to their estates; and the administrators of both Church and lay estates geared production towards the market, so as to maximise cash incomes, intensifying the exploitation of their labourers accordingly.[14] Importantly, the documentary record

[13] Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G.A. Williamson and P. Sarris (London, 2007), 54–55 (*Anecdota* 3.15–17.).

[14] For slaves on aristocratic estates, see K. Harper, 'The Greek Census Inscriptions of Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 98 (2008) 83–119; Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 39–40; *P.Oxy*. LVIII 3960; *P.Princ.* II 96; *PSI* VIII 953; *P.Oxy*. XVI 1913. For slaves on papal estates, see *Greg. Ep*. III.18, and T.S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy* AD *554–800* (Rome, 1984), 202–204. For *adscripticii* on papal estates, see, for example, *Greg. Ep*. IX.129. For the gearing of production to the market and the drive for cash incomes, see J. Banaji, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2007); that the Church operated in the same way is indicated by the background and terms of resolution of the land dispute recorded on *P.Oxy*. LXIII 4397. For the Church as landowner, see also Sarris,

from Egypt even attests to the employment of clergy as estate supervisors and stewards by members of the lay aristocracy.[15]

The growing involvement of the Church and its personnel in exploitative agrarian social relations is likely to have had marked implications for how elements of the peasantry viewed their ecclesiastical masters, or those priests and deacons who associated themselves with their secular ones.[16] That life labouring on the estates of the Church was regarded as far from entirely eligible is strongly suggested by a letter of Gregory the Great, in which he complains of the flight of tied agricultural labourers (*coloni adscripticii*) from Papal estates in Sicily. Gregory fulminates that these peasants, though bound by their legal status (*ex condicione ligati*) to work the estates, had the temerity to behave 'as if they are in control of their own lives and are free' (*quasi sui arbitrii [sunt] ac liberi*).[17]

Exploitation stood at the heart of relations between landowners and peasants in late antique and early medieval society. Whether the landowner in question was a secular magnate, the Church, or the Crown, such exploitation is likely both to have bred animosity and generated resistance.[18] Accordingly, it should come as little surprise that our sources record numerous examples of peasants pointedly and violently contesting the demands of the Church as a landowning institution, or the activities of its agents.

Indeed, peasant resistance to the economic demands of the Church is described in one of our earliest, and most fully formed *Saints' Lives*, the *Life of Porphyrius Bishop of Gaza* by Mark the Deacon.[19] Dating from the late fourth century, this work describes the problems and challenges faced by the text's eponymous hero in his attempts to establish

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Economy and Society, 221; M. Annick, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'église d'Egypte au IVe siècle (328–373)* (Rome, 1996); E. Wipszycka, *Les resources et les activités économiques des églises en Egypte du IVe au VIIIe siècle* (Brussels, 1972).

[15] See, for example, *P.Oxy.* I 136 – a contract of employment agreed between the Apion household and a certain Serenos, 'deacon of the Holy Church of Oxyrhynchus'.

[16] For further Oxyrhynchite evidence of the symbiosis and synergy between Church and lay landowner, see the otherwise problematic G. Ruffini, *Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt* (Cambridge, 2008), 81–83.

[17] *Greg. Ep.* IX.129. The evidence of this letter seemingly contradicts the argument of A. Serfass, 'Slavery and Pope Gregory the Great', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006) 77–103.

[18] See discussion in Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 222–234.

[19] *Marc le Diacre: Vie de Porphyre Evêque de Gaza*, ed. H. Grégoire and M.-A. Kugener (Paris, 1930).

Christianity amidst an obdurately pagan population during the reign of the Emperor Arcadius. In one episode, the hagiographer relates how Porphyrius' deacon, Barochas, 'went one day to a village not far from the city [of Gaza] to collect a sum of revenue due to the Church.' 'However', the *Life* continues, 'the person who owed the sum was a worshipper of idols. When asked for the money, the debtor sought to draw out the repayment, a request that the pious Barochas refused. As a result, they fell into argument, and the misguided wretch called upon the other agricultural labourers of his village, who were similarly inclined, and they set about beating the blessed Barochas with clubs. Then they carried him off half-dead and dumped him in wasteland outside the village, where he lay voiceless and unconscious.'[20]

Although, for obvious reasons, the hagiographer was keen to emphasise the religious identity of the deacon's assailants, the cause of the dispute described was a purely economic one: namely, what were perceived to be the unreasonable demands of the bishop's agent. That supposedly Christian villagers were regarded as capable of responding to the stewards and administrators of ecclesiastical estates in precisely the same way, is indicated by the seventh-century *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, written by the Galatian bishop's disciple, the monk George (a hagiographer, interestingly, of peasant stock).[21] As George admits: 'Theodore used to entrust the administration and the governance of the properties belonging to the Church to men of the city and injustice was done to the peasants; in one case, for instance, he had entrusted them to a leading citizen (*protikor*) of Anastasioupolis, Theodosius, by name; and he continually acted unjustly and defrauded the peasants. So they came to the servant of Christ and met him in tears, and he, moved with sympathy, grieved over them, for his holy and sensitive soul could not bear to see any one in trouble. He summoned Theodosius and with many admonitions besought him to cease his acts of injustice against the peasants. But Theodosius again invented some pretexts against the villagers and continued in his unjust treatment, whereupon in one of the villages, called Eukraous, when he was proceeding to his usual acts of injustice, the peasants of the village were roused to uncontrollable anger; they all gathered together with a com-

[20] Ibid. c.22.

[21] *La vie de Théodore de Sykeôn*, ed. A.-J. Festugière (Paris, 1930). For the social background of the hagiographer, George, see C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), 324 and 406.

mon purpose, armed themselves with various weapons and swords and catapaults, and took up their stand outside the village to meet him, and threatened him with death if he did not turn back and leave them'.[22]

Again, the episode has been filtered through the literary demands of the genre of hagiography, in this instance with a view to establishing the wisdom and *philanthropia* of Theodore. But that the Church was deeply implicated in the brutal realities of provincial social relations, and was viewed with rather less than unquestioning devotion on the part of elements of peasantry, is also evident from the non-hagiographic sources. In a law of 548, for example, Justinian decreed that that the governor or *moderator* of the Pontus was to restrain the hand of all malefactors 'be they priests, holders of imperial office, landowners, or private citizens'.[23] Likewise, as noted elsewhere, in the fifth-or sixth-century papyrus *P.Oxy*. XVI 1832, we possess a highly suggestive letter probably written from one estate official to another: 'the author of the letter informs his correspondent that a woman from Kegethis in the Oxyrhnchite had stolen "the holy treasures of the Church of Aspidas" and that "the headman of the villagers" was refusing "either to surrender the holy treasures or hand over the woman".'[24] There was no surfeit of piety here.

Nor is our evidence for peasant hostility to the Church or its agents limited to the late antique and early Byzantine East. The *Chronicle of Hydatius*, for example, records how in 449 a band of peasant rebels or *bacaudae*, under the leadership of a certain Basilius, entered the Iberian city of Turiasso and 'killed the bishop Leo in his church'.[25] A still more revealing episode is recorded for sometime in the early eighth century in the Frankish marchlands. According to the *Passio Thrudperti*, the holy man Thrutpert was granted an estate in the region of the Sornegau by a sympathetic lord. Thrutpert proceeded, however, to work his serfs so hard that ultimately they could bear no more, and one of them

[22] Ibid. c. 76: the translation is taken from E. Dawes and N.H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford, 1948), 139.

[23] *J. Edict* 8 (*proemium*).

[24] Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 221–222.

[25] E.A. Thompson, 'Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain', *Past and Present* 2 (1952) 11–23 at 16; Hydatius *Chron.* Sub anno 449: *Basilius ob testimonium egregii ausus sui congragatis Bacaudis in ecclesia Tyriassone foederatos occidit. Ubi et Leo eiusdem ecclesiae episcopus ab isdem, qui cum Basilio aderant, in eo loco obiit vulneratus.*

crept up to him as he dozed one afternoon and stabbed him to death.[26] On other occasions, issues of status and self-worth appear to have been at the forefront of peasants' minds: as Fouracre notes, *The Lives of the Fathers of Merida* record the murder of a certain Abbot Nanctus, 'whose unkempt and lowly appearance horrified the people who were to serve him. Seeing that he was all alone, they broke his neck.'[27]

The Nanctus episode aside, at the heart of the acts of violence depicted in the *Life of Porphyrius of Gaza*, the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, or the *Passio Thrudperti* were clearly economic issues and complaints. Peasant hostility to the Church and its representatives in late antiquity and early middle ages was also, however, clearly further fuelled by resentment at the introduction of a new religion that was, for the most part, imposed from above.[28] The most vivid sense of this is conveyed by Bede in his *Life of Cuthbert*. In the third chapter of this work, Bede describes how a body of monks from a monastery near the mouth of the River Tyne, who had set off by raft to collect some timber, found themselves being pulled out to sea. 'On the other bank of the river', Bede records, 'stood no small crowd of the common people, and he [Cuthbert] was standing among them. These were watching the rafts on which the monks [in the monastery] were sadly gazing, being carried so far out to sea that they looked like five tiny birds riding on the waves, for there were five rafts. Thereupon they began to jeer at the monks' manner of life, as if they were deservedly suffering, seeing that they despised the common laws of mortals and put forth new and unknown rules of life. Cuthbert stopped the insults of the blasphemers, saying, "Brethren, what are you doing, cursing those whom you see even now being carried away to destruction? Would it not be better and more kindly to pray to the Lord for their safety rather than to rejoice over their dangers?" But they fumed against him with boorish minds and boorish words and said: "Let no man pray for them, and may God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows".'[29]

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[26] *Passio Thrudperti*, ed. B. Krusch, *M.G.H. S.R.M.* IV: 352–363, c. 4–5, 358–360. I was alerted to this episode by a seminar paper given by Professor Paul Fouracre in Oxford many years ago.

[27] Fouracre, 'Bishops', 26.

[28] See B. Dumézil, *Conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares d'Occident* (Paris, 2005).

[29] B. Colgrave, ed., *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), 163–165.

In the early medieval West, moreover, animosity towards holy men, monks, and clergy was given added piquancy by broader processes of cultural change and, in particular, by the militarisation of elite culture resulting from the chronic military insecurity and 'barbarian invasions' of the fifth century.[30] The extrovert, military culture of the emergent elites of the Romano-Germanic successor kingdoms of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, with its emphasis on martial prowess, boastful and exuberant virility, sumptuous feasting and general excess, was in many ways the precise antithesis of the concept of the ideal man embodied in the ascetic self-denial, restraint, and humility of the model Christian holy man, bishop, or monk.[31] The dissonance between such markedly divergent models of masculinity and such contrasting visions of the ideal man inevitably led to tension and, at times, conflict. The celibate bishop, in the company, perhaps, of monastic attendants, must have seemed a strange and alien sight to the eyes of many an early medieval warlord: Gregory of Tours, for example, in the late sixth century, records how a certain Palladius, Count of Javols, barracked the Bishop Parthenius at the court of the Frankish King Sigibert: 'Palladius accused the bishop of being camp and effeminate. "Where are all your little husbands", he declared, "with whom you live in such filthy debauchery?".'[32] As Jinty Nelson has noted, tensions between the martial vocation and spiritual aspirations of young male aristocrats are a noteworthy feature of the Frankish sources down to the ninth and tenth centuries.[33] In one episode, the father-less Rigramnus, a noble Frankish boy from Le Mans, revealed to his uncle his wish to become a monk. His uncle responded furiously: 'How could you prefer the life of pigs in a vegetable-garden? What about the joy

[30] C.P. Wormald, 'The Decline of the Western Empire and the Survival of its Aristocracy', *Journal of Roman Studies* 66 (1976) 217–226.

[31] For the ascetic ideal, see Rapp, *Holy Bishops*. For the *mores* of the warrior aristocracy, see M. Rouche 'Violence and Death', in *A History of Private Life From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. P. Veyne (Harvard, 1992), 485–518; and C.P. Wormald, 'Kings and Kingship', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History* I: *c.* 500–*c.* 700, ed. P. Fouracre (Cambridge, 2005), 571–604, 590–603.

[32] Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 4.39.: *mollem episcopum, effeminatum Palladius vocitaret: 'Ubi sunt mariti tui, cum quibus stuprose et turpiter vivis?'* See discussion in J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1980), 184.

[33] J.L. Nelson, 'Monks, Secular Men and Masculinity, c. 900', in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D.M. Hadley (Harlow, 1999), 121–142.

of hunting? What about the voluptuous touch of a woman?'.[34] Only with the emergence of Crusading warfare and the cult of Chivalry in the eleventh and twelfth centuries would such tensions ultimately be resolved.[35]

Resistance or hostility to the Church, its teachings, and representatives in late antiquity and the early middle ages was not limited, therefore, to the ranks of dissident theologians or conservative intellectuals.[36] Rather, the more the Church found itself politically institutionalised and economically embedded, the more the realities of social and economic relations on the ground are likely to have generated tension, animosity and conflict, focused on the Church and its agents. As a result, the 'Christianisation' of the peasantry is likely to have been a far more haphazard, piecemeal, and gradual process than is commonly supposed. Rather, there are long likely to have been many who, like Bede's Northumbrians, would have been quite content to see their neighbourhood monks, and probably bishops and clergy too, drift slowly out to sea.

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[34] Ibid., 133.

[35] See M.H. Keen, *Chivalry* (London, 1984).

[36] On which see M.J. Dal Santo 'Gregory the Great and Debate concerning the Cult of the Saints in the early Byzantine Mediterranean and its Hinterland during the later Sixth and Seventh Centuries', Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2008; and, in this volume, id. 'The God-protected empire? Scepticism towards the cult of saints in early Byzantium'.

METHODOLOGY, AUTHORITY, AND SPONTANEITY: SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL TRUTHFULNESS IN LATE ANTIQUE TEXTS AND LIFE

Peter Turner

Introduction: Literal Truthfulness in Religious Writing[1]

Late antiquity was traditionally regarded as a period of widespread superstition and excessive religiosity. Edward Gibbon famously attributed a portion of the Western Empire's collapse to the rise of Christianity and, in particular, to the otherworldliness of its monastic elite.[2] E.R. Dodds described the late Roman world as an 'Age of Anxiety' in which a metaphysical transcendentalism flourished and the phenomenal world ceased to seem entirely real.[3] It can hardly be denied that the intellectual culture of the period embraced religious concerns to a great and unprecedented extent. In hagiography – a genre of historiography notorious amongst modern scholars for its miracles and idealized religious content – the period made its most distinctive contribution to literary history.

This image of late antiquity has been challenged over the last four decades by a revisionism whose most prominent exponent is Peter Brown. In a celebrated article published in 1971 Brown deployed the tools of anthropology and sociology to remove holy men from the distortions of a heroic literary lens, and to reveal instead their proximity to, and continuity with, the quotidian concerns of ordinary people.[4] In Brown's account, the holy man remained sacred, and embodied an idea of the Christian God, but he was also a powerful patron in a world where mundane social, economic, and judicial responsibilities

[1] I would like to thank Matthew Dal Santo and Phil Booth for the valuable observations and comments they offered on earlier versions of this paper.

[2] E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in *The Portable Gibbon*, ed. D.A. Saunders (New York, 1977) 622–624.

[3] E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christianity in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965) 7.

[4] P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) 80–101, repr. in idem, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (1982), 103–152.

constituted the main sphere of his activity.[5] Only by recognizing this broader context could the holy man reveal himself; without it, the temptation is always to see in hagiography only evidence of widespread popular credulity.[6]

The importance of Brown's work in advancing our understanding of the religious life of late antiquity cannot be overstated.[7] Nonetheless, Brown's initial foray into the world of holy men contained a number of problems, many of which were later highlighted by the author himself. To cite just one example, Brown declared that he had examined sanctity from a purely third person perspective, and overlooked the equally important question of how holy men pursued their own quest for sanctity;[8] to extend the point somewhat, it is not entirely clear how stories about holy men relate to the religious lives of people of the same period. This springs, in my view, from a question at the heart of Brown's analysis which is never completely resolved: how literally should we interpret hagiographies? How literally were they read and/or meant to be read at the time? Brown is certainly right to point to the dual role of holy men as both representatives of a divine ideal and agents in a complex social world, but he leaves ambiguous the point at which symbol and practice met. In stating that holy men revealed 'the nature of the average man's expectations and hopes for himself',[9] is he referring to career choices or to latent psychological fantasies? When he claims that 'the occasional *coup de théâtre*…(was) rather like the cashing of a big cheque on a reputation', are we supposed to imagine such events (which, presumably, include miracles) as the closing episodes of genuine social processes, or rather as symbolic episodes which somehow encapsulate those processes only textually?[10] When he high-

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[5] Ibid., 105–106.

[6] 'Faced with so many accounts of the miraculous, the historian of Late Antiquity usually relieves the strain placed on his own credulity by vastly inflating the credulity of his subjects…To be content with such a judgement is of no help to the historian whatsoever': Brown, 'Rise and Function', repr. in *Society and the Holy*, 141–142.

[7] For excellent (if now somewhat dated) reviews, see M. Vessey, 'The Demise of the Christian Writer and the Remaking of "Late Antiquity"': from H-I. Marrou's *Saint Augustin* (1938) to Peter Brown's Holy Man (1983)', *JECS* 6 (1998) 377–411; and P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity: 1971–1997', ibid., 353–376.

[8] Ibid., 368.

[9] P. Brown, 'Rise and Function', in idem, *Society and the Holy*, 104.

[10] 'The occasional *coup de théâtre*…(was) rather like the cashing of a big cheque on a reputation' seems to suggest the former: ibid., 105–106. His analysis of curses and exorcisms (122–124) suggests the latter. A certain ambiguity also prevails in his

lights the tendency of the cult of saints to locate sanctity in a world which was geographically and temporally close to the reader's own,[11] does it mean that ordinary people were actually likely to encounter holy men, or was this local, recent emphasis a fiction which ensured they had an uncanny habit of slipping just beyond the horizon of anyone's direct experience?

It is with these questions in mind that the current paper addresses the literal truthfulness of late antique hagiographies. It must be stated at the outset that, since the vast bulk of the information contained within such hagiographies is unverifiable even when it is not incredible, the question is impossible to answer directly, and this explains the tendency of many modern scholars to circumvent the issue entirely. However, it is important to recognize several reasons why it remains important. Firstly, the question was clearly a major concern of hagiographers themselves as is shown by the various guarantees of truthfulness their works contain. In the absence of testable information, the analysis of such guarantees yields a vital insight if not into the historicity of specific incidents, then at least into the forms and structures of belief which underpinned statements about holy men. By examining a wide range of late antique authors – not just Christian hagiographers, but also their pagan counterparts – this paper will consider three very different types of guarantee.[12] Furthermore, it will compare third person hagiographies with descriptions of spiritual experience in the first person, a project intended to go some way to addressing Brown's desideratum that the concept of sanctity should be considered

later essay, 'Arbiters of the holy: the Christian holy man in late antiquity', in P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred* (Cambridge, 1995), 55–78. The essay begins by discussing the rôle of holy persons in the late antique Christian imagination (58) before moving onto their practices (60ff). But how the imaginative and historical aspects related to one another is never made entirely clear.

[11] Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 57–58.

[12] Throughout this paper 'hagiography' is used as a convenient term for religious/philosophical *Lives* generally, i.e. pagan as well as Christian works. This convenience follows the welcome trend amongst some modern scholars of comparing works on either side of this religious divide: e.g., P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley, 1983); M. Edwards, 'Birth, Death, and Divinity in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*', in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau (Berkeley, 2000) 65. For Plotinus and Proclus as 'Saints', see *Neoplatonic Saints: the Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students*, trans. M. Edwards (Liverpool, 2000); S. Pricoco, *Monaci, Filosofi, e Santi: Saggi di storia della cultura tardoantica* (Messina, 1992).

not just in terms of the reputation for it that some men acquired, but also in terms of the personal quest it entailed.

Secondly, it is very striking that the sorts of belief hagiographies contain may well have been contested at the time. However sympathetically the religious life of the period is treated, the overwhelming quantity of its religious literary output has led to an implicit assumption that it was at least representative of most people; but guarantees of the type mentioned above can equally be seen as evidence of quite concrete, corresponding doubts. This is, of course, one of the reccurent themes of the present volume, and a similar case has also been made by Gilbert Dagron. Focusing on the slightly later early and middle Byzantine periods, Dagron identifies 'des doutes, des réticences, des résistances' about the cult of saints, often of a very subtle and sophisticated nature.[13] If this is an accurate observation of a Byzantine society which had already accepted the broad outline of Christian monotheism, we may perhaps expect it to have been still truer in the immediately preceding late Roman period which underwent such massive religious change from being a world of many different cults at the end of the third century, to one dominated by various strands of Christianity (both sanctioned and unsanctioned) by the early sixth. This period furnished, in other words, a highly competitive religious landscape in which various cults were, by turns, revered, doubted and ridiculed; a world containing not just different religions but also different extents of commitment towards religion. We only have to think of how Ammianus Marcellinus, whose own persuasions are moderate to the point of ambiguity, criticizes the superstition of the otherwise heroic emperor Julian, to recognize how personal a matter religious conviction could still be.[14]

A final reason for addressing the question of literal truthfulness in hagiographies is that, as Brown recognized, the historian's own convictions are bound to be affected by that of his subjects.[15] This is the case whether we see hagiographies first and foremost as intellectual documents or, in a more positivist spirit, scrutinize them for hard facts: the

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[13] Gilbert Dagron, 'L'ombre d'un doute: l'hagiographie en question VIe–XIe siècle', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992) 59.

[14] Julian was a 'superstitiosus magis quam sacrorum legitimus observator': Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 25.4.17, ed. W. Seyfarth, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1978). For Ammianus' religious position, see J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London, 1989), 427–451.

[15] See n. 6.

status of information is a vital theoretical and epistemic question in the first case; in the second, our ability to judge its historicity depends partly on the original intention behind it. The question of literal truthfulness, therefore, goes to the very heart of the problem which lurks behind any discussion of hagiography: is it more akin to theology or to historiography? Does it (as Claire Stancliffe puts it) refer more to an ideal or a person?[16] The question is, of course, eternally vexed, and both the genre as a whole and particular instances of it will evoke very diverse responses. Nonetheless, we may legitimately draw a basic distinction between what we might call an internal, systemic logic i.e. a logic which demonstrates a certain consistency as long as a series of premises are accepted and, on the other hand, a more familiar realism, accessible to the commonsense and to the personal experience of those who read it. Were these two forms of truthfulness entirely distinct? If not, how did they relate to one another? To examine these questions is not the same thing as explaining the structure of religious texts; nor is it simply to establish with greater precision the boundary between historical fact and literary idealization. Rather, it is to ask in what way the idealized, literary aspects of religious texts – i.e. all those things most characteristic of hagiography – were themselves continuous with the religious and spiritual habits, experiences, and attitudes of late antique people. This paper will thus begin by discussing third-person religious writing before comparing it to first-person religious writing. Since the questions with which this paper is concerned could potentially be brought to many religious texts from the period, the answers it gives will necessarily be incomplete and sporadic. But by investigating truthfulness as a concept, the aim is to open up a new perspective from which historians may reflect on the relationship between text and life.

Methodology and Authority: Theodoret's Religious History

Around 440 A.D. Theodoret of Cyrus wrote a *Religious History* dedicated to the most prominent monks that had lived in his homeland of

[16] C. Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983), 315.

northern Syria over the preceding century.[17] Theodoret prefaced his work with a substantial prologue which introduced his subject matter, himself as author, his motivation for writing and his literary strategy. Like many hagiographers, he used his prologue to guarantee that an absolute commitment to truthfulness pervaded the entire work.

Theodoret's bold assertion had several subtle strands. At its heart was the extraordinary nature of his inspiration – 'excellent men, the athletes of virtue'.[18] Such spiritual excellence demanded to be recorded for posterity, even if narration could only be a substitute for the lives themselves. Theodoret also sought to win the reader's trust by explaining his meticulous research methods: he had recorded only events to which he was eye-witness, or which he had heard about from trustworthy associates of the monks themselves. He could maintain with confidence, therefore, that the events he described demanded belief no less urgently than those of the Bible. It was by the measure of Scripture that readers should judge the monks rather than by their own abilities and by the standards of the familiar world around them.

Theodoret's prologue is clearly much more than a bland assertion of truthfulness. Rather, the guarantees it contains are precise, systematic and sophisticated, and imply, amongst other things, confrontation of quite specific forms of doubt that could potentially be raised against them. On the most basic level, there was the concern about factual accuracy: hearing, like the other senses, is designed to distinguish the true from the false. The desirability of a critical attitude towards what we hear, the necessary possibility of doubt, is therefore both recognized and encouraged. Presumably, he has is mind the criticism voiced not least by many modern scholars that tales about holy men get exaggerated with each telling. He responds to this by highlighting his research methods which are designed to ensure that his account relies ultimately, and more or less directly, on the version of events validated by the holy men themselves.

In various ways, assurances of this sort are common in late antique spiritual biographies. Sulpicius Severus goes even further than Theodoret: he claims not to have recorded information to which he alone was witness, unless it came from Martin's own mouth.[19] In a way

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[17] Here I follow R.M. Price's calculation in his translation of Theodoret: *History of the Monks of the Syria* (London/Kalamazoo, 1985), xv.

[18] 'ἀρίστων ἀνδρῶν καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀθλητῶν': Theodoret, *History*, Prologue 1.

[19] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* 1.7–9; 24.8 ed. K. Halm, CSEL 1 (Vienna, 1866).

which could be said to anticipate the Islamic *isnad* system through which the prophet Mohammed's sayings were transmitted, Eunapius of Sardis places himself in an educational chain, and therefore a chain of information, which stretches back to Plotinus, the first subject of his collective biography;[20] he claims that the sacred task of recording the truth was imposed on him by his master Chrysanthius.[21] All of these statements acknowledge the form of scepticism that derives from a suspicion of falsely transmitted information. In the introduction to *On the Pythagorean Life*, Iamblichus provides a picturesque characterization of the process of Chinese Whispers by which information about holy men and their teachings undergo distortion from generation to generation.[22]

For hagiographers, however, literal truthfulness, whilst an essential value, was not enough. The stories about holy men they recorded also had to be truthful in a second sense, namely that they pointed to eternal realities about the nature of God, his universe, and his relationship with humankind. For Christians, Scripture served as an absolutely authoritative guide to all these questions, both a record of historical fact and container of inexhaustible spiritual meaning, an eternally relevant guide to the present. Thus when Theodoret invokes the Bible as the appropriate yardstick with which to judge his holy men, he is making a statement of truthfulness of a different and subtler kind. Throughout the work he emphasizes his holy men's place in sacred history by drawing many comparisons between the behaviour and achievements of his monks and those of their biblical predecessors. To cite just one example, Marcianus is classed with Elijah and John the Baptist because of his habit of wandering through the wilderness in

[20] Eunapius was the pupil of Chrysanthius, who had studied with Aedesius (*Vitae Philosophorum ac Sophistarum*, 500 in *Philostratus and Eunapius: Lives of the Sophsists*, ed. and trans. W.C. Wright (London/New York, 1921, repr. 1968). Aedesius was Iamblichus' leading student (ibid., 458), himself a close associate of Porphyry (ibid. 457), Plotinus' student (ibid., 455). The link is almost made explicit at ibid. 458. For Eunapius, communitarian aspect, see R. Goulet, *Études sur les vies des philosophes* (Paris, 2001) 20; D.F. Buck, 'Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists*: A Literary Study', *Byzantion* 62 (1992) 150; P. Cox Miller, 'Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography: Constructing the Subject as Holy', in *Greek Biography and Panegyric*, ed. Hägg and Rousseau, 238–239; T. Watts, 'Orality and Communal Identity in Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists and Philosophers*', *Byzantion* 75 (2005) 336ff.

[21] Eunapius, *Lives* 499.

[22] Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica Liber* 1 (2), ed. L. Deubner (Leipzig, 1937).

animal skins.[23] Analogies of this sort are common in many late antique spiritual biographies. Hilarius, for example, compares Honoratus to Moses,[24] just as Eugippius does in the case of Severinus.[25] Sulpicius declares Martin to be not just a saint but 'in very truth an apostle'.[26] Nor is this type of device exclusively Christian. In Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, Eunapius' *Lives*, and Damascius' *Philosophical History*, the heroic intellectual figures of Pythagoras and Socrates – themselves figures of an alternative sacred history – are invoked as yardsticks for the qualities of contemporary philosophers.[27]

It is important not to assume that such analogies are merely decorative or inflationary. Instead, we should see them as precise and measured arguments for establishing the grade and nature of a holy man's sanctity. What made such validations necessary was not so much the risk of accusations from overt religious opponents (who, after all, would reject the entire tradition) than the highly controversial nature of particular expressions of asceticism within one's own religious community. A number of monastic texts, such as the *Rule of the Master*, not only describe appropriate ascetic practice, they also warn against monks who practice it in the wrong way, or from the wrong motivations.[28] Clearly, people in late antiquity could be sensitive not just to religious opponents but to freaks and phoneys within their own religion. The potential threat of such accusations can be gauged by Theodoret's defence of Symeon Stylites. The hagiographer was aware of the criticism that could be levelled against a saint who spent his entire later life standing on top of a pillar since this bizarre form of asceticism apparently lacked any clear biblical precedent and, as Bernard Flusin rightly observes, such a precedent was for Theodoret the only absolutely reliable measure of spiritual significance.[29] But Theodoret argues that many inexplicable biblical incidents carried out at God's

[23] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Religious History* 3.1, ed. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, 2 vols. (Paris, 1977–9).

[24] Hilarius Arelatensis, *Vita Honorati* 3.17 in *Vita Hilarii in Vitae Sanctorum Honorati et Hilarii, Episcoporum Arelatensium*, ed. S. Cavallin (Lund, 1952).

[25] Eugippius, *Vita Severini* 44.5 in *Eugippe*: *Vie de Saint Séverin*, ed. and trans. P. Régerat (Paris, 1991).

[26] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* 7.7.

[27] Porphyry, *De Vita Plotini et Ordine Librorum Eius* 23, ed. A.H. Armstrong, in *Plotinus* vol. 1 (7 vols., London/New York, 1966, repr. 1995); Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica Liber*, *passim*; Eunapius, *Lives* 462, 498, 501; Damascius, *Vitae Isidori Reliquiae* 116e, ed. P. Athanassiadi (Athens, 1999).

[28] *Regula Magistri* 1.13–74 ed. A. de Vogüé, 3 vols. (Paris, 1964).

[29] 'Il n'y a pas de miracle sans un précédent biblique… ce que Dieu a accompli, il

command – for example, Ezekiel lying on his right side for forty days and on his left for one hundred – also necessarily lacked a precedent when they were first performed. Ingeniously, the very originality of Symeon's habit is thus presented as the basis of its legitimacy.[30]

In his study of religious doubters in the Byzantine period, Dagron is careful to delineate the precise scope of the objections they raised: in a society in which atheism was almost inconceivable, Dagron found, scepticism was directed not 'aux fondements de la foi mais aux tricheries et excès de l'imagination'; each doubt concerned 'un problème spécifique, qui n'était pas celui de la vérité de la religion.'[31] The distinction is extremely important and equally valid in the late antique context. It shows that belief and doubt concerning the cult of saints was not a crude opposition, nor did it necessarily follow the contours of a modern historical scepticism. A person in the fourth century might believe in principle that saints existed, led extraordinary lives and continued to intervene after death in the affairs of the living; however, he might also doubt a particular report of a recent miracle or post-mortem healing, and doubt for any number of reasons: because there were too many such stories floating around, because the reputation of the saint concerned was controversial, because he had never seen such an event himself. (In this sense, the situation differs from the more theologically sophisticated, and politically pregnant debates about the cult of saints in late sixth-century Byzantium described by Matt Dal Santo in his contribution to this volume). Although all these cognitive stances were possible, we must not imagine that the border between core beliefs and specific doubts was entirely self-evident and uncontroversial; indeed, one of the most effective ways a hagiographer could guarantee the truthfulness of his own claims was by challenging the legitimacy of such a distinction. Theodoret's answer to doubters does precisely this: it promotes a strongly hierarchical structure of belief based on various appeals to authority. The possibility of narrative exaggeration is answered by showing the holy man himself to be the source of stories about him; the Bible is invoked as evidence of the reality of human sanctity and of the miracles that result from it. Theodoret clearly feels able to take his audience's most basic religious

l'accomplit encore': B. Flusin, *Miracles et Historie dans l'œuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis* (Paris, 1983), 157.

[30] Theodoret, *Religious History* 36.12.

[31] Gilbert Dagron, 'L'ombre d'un doute', 60. See also ibid., 68.

commitments, which include the absolute truthfulness and authority of Scripture, for granted; lesser objections are not contested piecemeal but by exposing their incompatibility to the belief system *in toto*: to doubt the miracle would be to doubt the holy man; to doubt the holy man would be to doubt the Bible.

It may seem surprising at first glance that, in a genre so insistent on the truthfulness of its own content, we should consistently find repeated and indeed encouraged one very specific form of doubt, namely that the author had fallen short of his intended aim:

> I, too, am aware than no words can attain to their virtue … We shall not try to transmit to history the way of life of all the saints who have been prominent everywhere, for neither do we know those who have been prominent everywhere, nor is it possible for them all to be written down by one man.[32]

Far from going against the grain of truthfulness, expressions of this sort are an important aspect of it, and not merely by tempering unrealistic expectations in some general sense. In a transcendental world view, sanctity is a condition of the invisible soul; it both demands a stance of truthfulness and also renders absolute truthfulness impossible. As Theodoret says, there are too many saints and words cannot do them justice. His claim is entirely in keeping with those of many late antique hagiographers – both Christian and pagan – who highlight the impossibility of depicting accurately a holy man as great as their own.[33] The effect of such claims is to rebut the suspicion of exaggeration; the only type of distortion they leave possible is understatement. Scepticism is deflected away from the saint himself and towards the medium – whether that is the biographical genre specifically or, more generally, human language – through which his life is recorded. The truth of the holy man and of the God he represents, i.e. the broader, systemic truth, is thus left intact, as something capable of explaining everything and washing away all doubts if only we could perceive it clearly. Although this recognizes a certain incompleteness and indeterminacy at the heart of its analysis, nothing could be further from the post-Structuralist ethic of openness to alternative readings. Instead, in a way we might regard as somewhat paradoxical, the humility of hagi-

[32] Ibid., Prologue 7.9, trans. Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 7.

[33] E.g. Eunapius, *Lives* 454–455; Marinus, *Vita Procli* 3; Hilarius, *Vita Honorati* Prologue.

ographers supports a spirit of dogmatism: by so insistently confessing its own limitations, it adopts a stance entirely closed to competing views.

Marinus' Life of Proclus *and the 'Spontaneity Principle'*

A guarantee of thorough methodology on the one hand; an appeal to the integrity of the faith on the other: these elements correspond closely to the distinction drawn earlier between two alternatives sources of truthfulness, one outward-looking and experiential, the other internal and systemic. But whilst both these things appeal to the reader in different ways, we have so far demonstrated only their role as literary strategies. It is not yet clear if, and how, these sources of truthfulness applied beyond a purely textual realm to a broader world of spiritual experience beyond it.

To consider this further question, we must turn to a passage in the *Life of Proclus* by the Neoplatonic biographer Marinus, a close contemporary of Theodoret:

> He set off for Athens, escorted as it were by all the gods and good daemons who are custodians of the oracles of philosophy… This was proved conspicuously even by the events prior to his residence, and the truly god-sent omens… For when he arrived at the Piraeus and those in the city were informed of this, Nicolaus… went down to the harbour as though to an acquaintance. He led him therefore toward the city, but Proclus, feeling fatigue on the road because of the walk, and being close to the Socrateum – *though he had not yet learned of nor heard that honours were being paid to Socrates anywhere* (οὔτω εἰδὼς οὐδὲ ἀκηκοὼς ὅτι Σωκράτους αὐτοῦ που ἐγίγνοντο τιμάι) – begged Nicolaus to stop there awhile and sit, and at the same time also, if he could obtain water from anywhere, to bring it to him. For he was possessed, as he said, by a great thirst… Nicolaus noted the omen, which he now perceived for the first time, that he was sitting in the Socrateum, and first drank the Attic water from this place. Proclus for his part rose, made a sign of obeisance, and went on to the city. And as he was climbing to the top, he was met at the entrance by the doorman, who was already about to insert the keys – so much so that he said to him (*I shall repeat the fellow's very words* – ἐπ᾿αὐτῶν δὲ ἐρῶ τῶν τοῦ ἀνθρῶπου ῥημάτων), 'Honestly, if you had not come, I was about to close up.' What omen, now, could have been more clear that this…?[34]

[34] Marinus, *Vita Procli* 10, ed. R. Masullo (Naples, 1985) and trans. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 70–72.

It is not in the extent of their dogmatism that the claims Marinus advances about his hero differ from equivalent passages in Theodoret's *Religious History*. Marinus is no less demanding of his readers in terms of the interpretation of events he records: Proclus' physical thirst near Socrates' statue reveals the authenticity of his thirst for truth; the gate, which is about to close, symbolises the decline of philosophy in a Christian empire – a common theme in pagan biography;[35] nor are his claims any less grandiose: Proclus' destiny is to defend this sacred tradition.[36] What is distinctive, however, is the rationale he includes for considering these things as miracles: only because their occurrence is absolutely spontaneous and unaffected can these events be accorded the status of omens; conversely any suspicion of human interference would be legitimate grounds for doubt and must therefore be refuted. The relevant type of human interference in this case, however, is not only the suspicion of a retrospective exaggeration, but that of affectation on the holy man's part. One could easily imagine how a man as religious as Proclus might desire signs and seek them out, might deliberately take a route to the city which led past a spiritually significant spot and, displaying the appropriate reaction, might arrive at the city gates at an ostentatiously symbolic time. Rather than simply appealing to authority, therefore, Marinus defends his interpretation using a criterion posited as objective – namely Proclus' own ignorance of the event's significance and the fact that only his companion Nicolaus is (unexpectedly) struck by it. Similarly, Marinus clearly recognizes how the words of the doorkeeper might be misremembered to fit the desired interpretation. But these doubts too are headed off at the pass, and we are assured that the doorman's words are quoted *verbatim*. By referring to the doorman with the familiar term *anthropos*, Marinus also emphasises the incident's spontaneous, unaffected quality: here was an ordinary man just doing a regular job, and he was therefore completely ignorant of his words' deeper meaning.

The truthfulness of this incident does not depend on an appeal to the reader to believe in extraordinary events and people. Indeed, in themselves none of the episode's constituent details – Proclus' tiredness, the water break, the gatekeeper's irreverence – challenge natural

[35] Goulet, *Études*, 20.

[36] Further confirmation of this symbolism is found in the penultimate chapter of the work, where the darkness of an eclipse portends the eclipse of philosophy: Marinus, *Vita Procli* 37.

laws; rather they imply a realism rooted in the world of the familiar, and we are surely here very close to what Roland Barthes termed the *petits faits vrais*, which bestow on a narrative *l'effet de réel*.[37] But in combination, they constitute much more than this: not just an effect of reality, but what we might term a 'principle of spontaneity',[38] a criterion of sacred significance established only once all human factors – desire, forethought, and affectation – have been discounted and which may subsequently serve as the measure of the episode's sacred significance.

Is this third form of guarantee entirely different or is it related to the other two? In a sense, it combines them. On the one hand, it is a focused instance of the guarantee of literal truthfulness: precision, plausibility, and an insistence on the absolute accuracy of literal reportage. The reader is asked to believe that, had he been present at the events described, he too would have witnessed precisely the same details. But he is also assured, and no less directly, that he would have attributed to it the same significance, namely that of an omen. In this sense, the episode is accorded a place within a broader system of truth. The fact that the events could not possibly have been contrived by humans is not the end of the story; the reader is not asked merely to gawp at a coincidence; rather, the elimination of all other possibilities leaves only one explanation possible, that of a deeper, spiritual significance, of divine intervention.

Of course, it would be foolish to imagine that the invocation of the spontaneity principle eliminates all subjectivity on the part of the viewer: that the events in question should underline Proclus' special destiny would seem far more reasonable to a pagan Neoplatonist than to a militant Christian; such a comparison would rarely be tested, however, since we may safely assume that hagiographers, whatever their religious persuasion, preached mainly to the choir. Nonetheless, the idea of spontaneity as an objective category of significance remains important. This is not because it explains why particular stories about holy men were believed (although we cannot discount the possibility that the spontaneity principle sometimes persuaded the genuinely undecided). Rather, and more significantly, it is because it may cast some light on the much murkier problem of how the miraculous

[37] Roland Barthes, 'L'Effet de réel', *Communications* 11 (1968) 84–89.
[38] I am grateful to Matt Dal Santo for suggesting this expression.

stories so characteristic of hagiography first came into being, that is, before there was an authority who had identified them as such. Generally, their origins seem so remote that modern historians tend either to dismiss their historicity entirely or, in attempting to empathize with the beliefs of their subjects, suspend the question of historicity indefinitely. Whilst it certainly does not provide a direct lens into the objective truth about such episodes, the spontaneity principle at least suggests a third possibility: namely that people did attribute spiritual significance to coincidences they found genuinely extraordinary and that many hagiographical miracles reflect processes of this type rather than merely a more or less willing retrospective fabrication. What made at least some events miracles, in other words, was not only a particular ontological threshold but a certain epistemic stance – to use Erich Auerbach's phrase, an *Interpretationswille*.[39] The case of Marinus clearly supports this view by exposing the rather meagre nature of the phenomena capable of achieving such spiritual significance.

First-Person Writing and Religious Experience: Julian and Augustine

To consider further the significance of this form of truthfulness our discussion must turn away from hagiography to first-person writing. Literature of this sort in late antiquity is rather diverse in character; it is often said with justice that, in contrast to hagiography, no genuine genre of autobiography emerged in late antiquity. Nonetheless, important accounts of spiritual experience, including miraculous events, are contained within first-person works, and it is somewhat surprising that these have generally not been systematically compared with their equivalents in third-person writing. The motivation for such a comparison is not the expectation that first-person writing will automatically yield a more direct access to an objective historical truth; indeed, autobiography's innate and profound subjectivity is a dictum of modern philosophy observed by countless thinkers from Sartre to Derrida.[40] Nonetheless, it presents writers with a different challenge, namely one in which no external authority can validate their claims, and where,

[39] E. Auerbach, 'Figura', *Archivum Romanicum*: *Nuova Rivista di Filologia Romanza* 22 (1938) 451.

[40] M. Schramm, 'Augustinus' *Confessiones* und die (Un-)Möglichkeit der Autobiographie', *Antike und Abendland* 54 (2008) 173–192.

therefore, potential sources of doubt are more likely to be countered with criteria they present as objective.

The emperor Julian leaves us one of the most substantial bodies of first-person writing in late antiquity. It is also apparent, both from his own writings and from other sources such as Ammianus Marcellinus,[41] that he was guided throughout the course of his life by a sense of divine destiny and by many religious omens. Although on several occasions Julian reports these only in passing,[42] he goes into more depth when recounting some of his life's most crucial moments, such as in the *Letter to the Athenians* when describing his elevation to the purple:

> For one day, they (the legions) halted, and till that time *I knew nothing whatever of what they had determined* (ἄχρις ἧς οὐδὲν ᾔδειν ἐγὼ τῶν βεβουλευμένων αὐτοῖς); I call to witness Zeus, Helios, Ares, Athene, and all the other gods that no such suspicion even my entered my mind until that very evening…suddenly the palace was surrounded and they all began to shout aloud, while I was still considering what I ought to do and feeling by no means confident…through an opening in the wall *I prayed to Zeus* (προσεκύνησα τὸν Δία). And when the shouting grew louder still…*I entreated the god to give me a sign* (ᾐτέομεν τὸν θεὸν δοῦναι τέρας) and thereupon he showed me a sign and bade me yield and not oppose myself to the will of the army. Nevertheless even after these tokens had been vouchsafed to me *I did not yield without reluctance but resisted as long as I could* (οὐκ εἶξα ἑτοίμως, ἀλλ᾽ἀντέσχον εἰς ὅσον ἠδυνάμην), and would not accept the salutation or the diadem.[43]

No one would deny that this passage is highly idealized and self-justificatory: Julian declares his political mission on earth to be decreed by Zeus himself. What is significant for our purposes, however, is the nature of the arguments he advances in defence of this radical claim. It is not difficult to imagine the sorts of criticism people might have levelled against Julian upon learning that the Caesar in Gaul had become emperor: was Julian not just another usurper who had abused his legitimate military authority? Was he really as pious as he claimed, and as loyal to his cousin Constantius? Was the whole coronation in fact a piece of theatre cooked up by him and his lieutenants? As in

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[41] See n. 14.

[42] A useful introduction is provided by A. Monique, 'Fragments autobiographiques dans l'œuvre de Julien', in *L'invention de l'autobiographie d'Hésiode à Saint Augustin*, ed. J.-C. Fredouille (Paris, 1993), 285–303.

[43] Julian, *Letter to the Athenians* 284 b–d in *Fragmentum Epistulae, Iuliani Imperatoris quae supersunt*, ed. F.C. Hertlein, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1876) and trans. W.C. Wright, *Julian: Works*, II (London/New York 1913, repr. 1969), 281–283.

the case of Proclus, his defence rests on a principle of spontaneity: the proof of Zeus' hand in events, Julian asks us to believe, is his genuine unwillingness to accept the diadem, indeed his ignorance of the very possibility.

Just like Julian's contemporaries, the modern reader may, of course, choose to believe or disbelieve his account of events and of the state of mind in which he experienced them. Did he speak truthfully? Did he idealize his past in retrospect? There are any number of ways in which either, or both of these possibilities may be true, and we have no way of testing them. What we may observe, however, is the relative frequency with which Julian evokes the spontaneity principle as a measure of spiritual significance when describing his own life. For example, he begins the *Hymn to King Helios* autobiographically, and describes how, even as a youth he felt an extraordinary attraction to the sun and the other heavenly bodies, and somehow experienced an accurate intuition of their workings long before he read any books on the subject, or met scholars versed in that field: his kinship to Helios is, by these details, authenticated.[44] That this may have included an element of wishful thinking is of only secondary importance; more relevant to our present discussion is the probability that anyone able to give an idealized personal account of this type was also very likely to be highly alert towards the possibility of spiritual significance in the present. Indeed, it is a short step from such alertness to a more or less conscious provocation. Julian ends his *Hymn to King Helios* by telling its dedicatee Sallust that he wrote it over only three nights and, as far as possible, from memory. Far from being an expression of humility, this fact achieves a great spiritual significance: the period of composition reflected the threefold power of Helios.[45] In the same way, he concludes the *Hymn to the Mother of Gods* with the claim that he had written the piece in a single night, and had no conception of its form until the very moment he asked for writing tablets.[46] Thus it is by imposing on himself artificial strictures that Julian achieves a sense of proximity to the gods.

[44] Ibid., *Hymn to King Helios Dedicated to Sallust* 130b–131b.
[45] 'Ταῦτά σοι, ὦ φίλε Σαλούστιε, κατὰ τὴν τριπλῆν τοῦ θεοῦ δημιουργίαν ἐν τρισὶ μάλιστα νυξὶν ὡς οἷόν τε ἦν ἐπελθόντα μοι τῇ μνήμῃ καὶ γράψαι πρὸς σὲ ἐτόλμησα': ibid., 157c.
[46] Ibid., *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods* 178d–179a.

It is informative to compare Julian's account with the most famous description of personal spiritual experience from late antique literature, namely Augustine's dramatic conversion in the garden at Milan which he recounts in book eight of the *Confessions*:

> Behold, suddenly I heard a voice from the house next door; the sound, as it might be, of a boy or a girl, repeating in a sing-song voice a refrain unknown to me: 'Pick it up and read it, pick it up and read it.' Immediately my countenance was changed, and *I began to ponder most intensely* (*statimque…intentissimus cogitare coepi*) whether children were in the habit of singing a chant of this sort as part of a game of some kind, but *I had no recollection of having heard it anywhere* (*nec occurrebat omnino audisse me uspiam*). I checked my outburst of tears and arose, taking this to be nothing other than a God-sent command that I should open the Bible and read the first chapter I found, whatever it might be.[47]

Like Julian, Augustine not only recounts a set of phenomena with a particular symbolic potential; rather, he insists on their absolute spontaneity and this serves as the principle by which their authenticity can be asserted in the face of possible doubts concerning over-enthusiasm or over-interpretation. Indeed, both Julian and Augustine effectively place themselves on the side of a sceptical reader, claiming to have countenanced, then overcome, those very doubts which were capable of undermining each episode's religious significance.

It is particularly interesting to consider these guarantees in relation to the wider problem of the historicity of Augustine's conversion and of the *Confessions* more generally. It is not possible here to review this vast and very old debate in depth. Broadly, however, Augustinian scholars have tended either towards a reading of the text as essentially fictional on the one hand, or towards a historicist reading on the other. The principal obstacle facing the first group has been to reconcile Augustine's dogged insistence on the literal truthfulness of Scripture with his apparent willingness to fabricate, or at least to embellish, his own life story. The challenge for the second group is to account for the uncannily fortuitous constellation of symbols present in the garden in terms other than pure chance. Various middle positions, such as Courcelle's argument that Augustine recounted an inner experience

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[47] Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.12.29, ed. J.J. O'Donnell (Oxford, 1992) and trans. P. Burton, *Augustine: Confessions* (London, 2001), 182–183.

in a consciously allegorical way, do not satisfactorily resolve this fundamental dilemma.[48]

Augustine's subtle invocation of the spontaneity principle provides a new argument for supporting the historicist position. To date, controversy about the historicity of the incident has focussed on Augustine's retrospective view: how willing and able was he to tell the truth about the detail of his conversion some ten years later? But if we recognize the spontaneity principle not just as a textual device designed to persuade others, but as a test of reality applicable to one's immediate situation, then we can consider the possibility that the doubts he recorded and overcame were not at all decorative, but in fact a definitive element of the episode and precisely what allowed him to treat it as an epiphany. This is consistent with Crosson's astute observation that the episode posits no challenge to natural laws: Augustine does not question the existence of a real child in the next-door garden any more, we may add, than Marinus questioned the physical existence of the statue and the doorman.[49] Once the essence of the miracle is recognized to be Augustine's epistemic stance, then the onus of explanation no longer falls on the phenomena themselves, whose heavy symbolism might otherwise prove suspect. Whilst no-one would dispute that the accuracy of Augustine's memory is an entirely unknown quantity, this reading at least removes the idea of a necessary conflict between the author's commitment to truthfulness and the episode's symbolic content. Augustine is no longer just the recorder of a text over which he assumes ownership, but can legitimately be seen as something much closer to what he claimed to be: the interpreter of events whose author was felt to be God.

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[48] 'Il est difficile de parler des choses de l'au-delà sans images ni affabulation': P. Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1963) 181. Works broadly in this tradition include J.J. O'Meara, 'Elements of Fiction in Augustine's *Confessions*', in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. J. McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario, 1992), 77–95. O'Meara emphasises the inevitability of fictitiousness in any description (p. 78). See also P. Frederiksen, 'Paul and Augustine Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions and the Retrospective Self', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.1 (1986) 3–34; L. Ferrari, 'Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: the End of a Modern Debate?' *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989) 235–250; A. Kotzé, *Augustine's* Confessions: *Communicative Purpose and Audience* (Leiden, 2004), 67. G. Bonner, by contrast, defends the incident's historicity: 'Augustine's Conversion: Historical Fact or Literary Device?' in *Augustinus*: *Charisteria Augustiniana*, ed. P. Merino and J.M. Torrecilla (Madrid, 1993), 112–114.

[49] F.J. Crosson, 'Structure and meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*', in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. G.B. Matthews (Berkeley, 1999), 32.

It is crucial to recognize that this reading in no way suggests a perspective which is somehow more neutral or more objectively reliable. Whilst it shifts the explanatory emphasis from the motives and capacities of his retrospective position ten years after the conversion towards his epistemic stance at the time, there is no reason to regard this as any less psychologically complex or ideologically susceptible. The incident did not, in other words, simply come out of the blue, but bore the heavy imprint of expectation. As shown by his profound response to Cicero's *Hortensius*[50] and the *libri Platonici*,[51] Augustine was no stranger to dramatic moments of philosophical inspiration. By the time of his conversion, he had long been, by his own admission, impatient for a clear sign capable of guiding his spiritual search;[52] he even confessed the continuing temptation of asking God for signs at time of writing.[53] It is often remarked that book eight of the *Confessions*, which closes with Augustine's own conversion, also concerns those of several other people: Marius Victorinus, Ponticianus and Saint Anthony. It is crucial to recognize why these models had such a deep and direct impact on Augustine. Firstly, as Michael Williams rightly stresses, Augustine had no doubt about the historicity of these conversions; in fact, he regarded this as one of the most striking aspects of the Anthony story.[54] Secondly, the sources of these stories – Simplicianus on Marius Victorinus, Ponticianus on himself and Anthony – had related them with the specific intention that Augustine should follow their example.[55] His acceptance of them, therefore, constituted a belief both in the nature of God's intervention in the world, even in a post-biblical age, and also of what he could reasonably one day expect for himself.

It is a short step from recognizing the importance of such models to regarding the conversion episode itself as an instantiation of his own expectations: precisely the relationship between stories of holy men and the personal hopes of individuals that Brown regarded as the fundamental appeal of hagiographies to contemporary readers.[56] Nonetheless, this step must be explained in as much detail as possible.

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[50] Augustine, *Confessions* 3.4.7.

[51] Ibid., 7.9.13.

[52] Ibid., 5.14.25; 8.7.18.

[53] Ibid., 10.35.56.

[54] Ibid., 8.6.14; M.S. Williams, *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine* (Cambridge, 2008), 164.

[55] Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.5.10; 8.6.14.

[56] See n. 9.

Whilst we may theoretically accept that the conversion was the product of a certain epistemic stance, the argument will remain limited as long as we can show how this stance manifested itself only on a single day and in one particular place. Are we, as in the case of hagiographical miracles, forced merely to imagine the fertile soil which bore this single, spectacular fruit?

A Spiritual Lifestyle? Augustine at Cassiciacum and Beyond

Apart from the relative detail they contain, one thing that makes Augustine's *Confessions* so valuable as an example of autobiography is the opportunity to compare them to his so-called Cassiciacum dialogues. Written in 387, apparently shortly after the dramatic conversion recorded in the *Confessions*, three of the four dialogues (the exception being the *Soliloquia*), describe the events and conversations that took place amongst Augustine's companions during a spiritual and intellectual retreat in the Italian countryside and therefore offer autobiographical statements of a somewhat different kind. Indeed, some obvious differences between the two accounts – most famously, the dialogues make no mention of the conversion in the Milanese garden and attribute Augustine's academic retirement more obliquely to a *pectoris dolor*[57] – have been exploited by those attempting to challenge the historicity of one or other account.[58] Nonetheless, the dialogues at least purport to be more or less precise transcriptions of real conversations recorded by a secretary (*notarius*), and whilst we may certainly assume some form of redaction, their historicity has been convincingly defended by Madec who argues that the *notarius* should be seen not as an affectation of a literary nature but as the no less self-conscious expression of celebrated social practice.[59]

In the present context, the dialogues are significant because they offer an insight into a spiritually charged atmosphere very close in time to Augustine's conversion. One striking feature of the prevailing

[57] *Contra Academicos*, ed. P. Knöll, CSEL 63 (Vienna/Leipzig, 1922) 2.2.2.

[58] See note 48 for question of the historicity of the *Confessions*. J.J. O'Meara dismisses all assurances of truthfulness in the Cassiciacum dialogues as 'worthless': 'The Historicity of Augustine's early Dialogues', in idem, *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 316 n. 7.

[59] G. Madec, 'L'historicité des *Dialogues* de Cassiciacum', *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 32 (1986) 207–231.

social atmosphere is how religiously symbolic the world becomes; how many events potentially evoke spiritual interpretation. The sound of running water on stones in the night becomes an opportunity to reflect on God's hidden ordering of the universe;[60] a visit to the toilet is symbolic of the physical depths from which god rescues mankind.[61] A certain metaphorical or symbolic significance is detected in a great diversity of phenomena. What is striking is not only their plausibility, but also how consistent their identification and interpretation is with normal conversational habits. At the most minimal level, there were mere humorous comparisons: don't think you can get away with a Tuscan argument just because you're on a farm![62] Other analogies were more ambiguous: when the rich birthday meal is compared to a rich spiritual feast,[63] when the bright weather inspires the group to brighten up their minds,[64] are these mere pleasantries or do they have a genuine spiritual meaning? The difficulty in answering this question is precisely the point: Augustine's perception and discourse, like those of most people, are full of metaphors of many different kinds; what marked Augustine and his companions out was their relative willingness at least to consider deeper truths in these parallels.

Nor are these habits of scrutiny limited only to observable phenomena. Against the backdrop of a beautiful dawn, Augustine's disciple Licentius, who confessed to an excessive interest in secular verse, claims to have been suddenly and reluctantly (*tam aegre*) overcome by a feeling of disinterest in poetry, and by a corresponding enthusiasm for the greater beauty of Philosophy. 'In very truth', he asks, 'is not this a conversion to God?'[65] The content of this spiritual moment – a sudden change in mood – is not phenomenal at all but purely internal. Nonetheless, the significance Licentius attributes to it still depends on a principle of spontaneity, the firm conviction that it was against his will. And Licentius is not the only companion of Augustine to locate such significance in introspection. According to the *Confessions*, Monica often felt herself able 'as if by a taste not explicable in words' to distinguish between the word of God and the musings of her own

[60] Augustine, *De Ordine* 1.3.6, ed. J. Doignon (Paris, 1997).
[61] Ibid., 1.8.22.
[62] Ibid., *Contra Academicos* 3.4.9.
[63] Ibid., *De Beata Vita* 2.9, ed. P. Knöll in CSEL 63 (Vienna/Leipzig, 1922).
[64] Ibid., *Contra Academicos* 2.4.10.
[65] 'Non hoc est vere in deum converti?' ibid., *De Ordine* 1.8.23 and trans. R.P. Russell, *On Order* (London, 1939), 260.

mind[66] – a capacity fully in keeping with the *inflammatio* attributed to her at Cassiciacum.[67]

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that Augustine's conversion was much more than an isolated incident; indeed, it was more than the product of his own particular epistemic stance. Rather, it sprang from something more substantial and normative, something we should perhaps term a way of life both in the sense that it was sustained over extended periods of time and that it was shared and encouraged by companions. But whilst this reading reveals the continuity of Augustine's conversion with much broader spiritual habits, it is also crucial to recognize what made it exceptional and the methods behind such a judgement. Augustine's reaction to Licentius' putative conversion is highly revealing in this respect: he may treat it benignly but, in complete contrast to his own conversion, he reserves judgement on the episode's authenticity and the moment seems to pass. We may suspect the reasons why: Licentius' youthful enthusiasm, and the heady atmosphere of intellectual and religious companionship were an intoxicating mixture; the mere sense that the change in mood had happened reluctantly was not sufficient to dispel these lingering doubts. In a life capable of producing so many signs, not every passing sentiment could legitimately be treated as epiphanic. A certain discernment was vital, and the same spontaneity principle which could identify phenomena as truly exceptional necessarily had to be capable of identifying the far greater number of incidents which fell short of this threshold.

It is instructive to imagine the nature of this lifestyle, the consequences of these beliefs on one's daily experience of the world. Essentially, what animated it was the tension between two poles: on the one hand, an extremely open system of signification, the extraordinary ubiquity of possible spiritual meaning, rooted in a concealed and all-embracing order. Of the authors we have considered in this paper, only Augustine, and to a lesser extent Julian, allows us to glimpse anything more than the outline of this atmosphere, although I strongly suspect that, if the sources existed, something similar could be said of many spiritually-minded people in late antiquity. But spiritual interpretation required another pole: namely a genuine sense of certainty, a

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[66] 'dicebat enim discernere se nescio quo sapore, quem verbis explicare non poterat, quid interesset inter revelantem te et animam suam somniantem': ibid., *Confessiones* 6.13.23.

[67] Ibid., *De ordine* 2.1.1; *De beata vita* 4.35.

measure of which was the spontaneity principle. Such certainty could only take the form of a sense of a externality to oneself, even if that meant nothing more concrete than an unfamiliar 'taste' or a surprising and unwilled thought.

Scholars of Augustine have long debated both the historicity and the relative importance of the conversion in the garden. In the scheme of things, how much did the events of that day count, and how much did they represent – whether symbolically or psychologically – much longer processes? A consideration of Augustine's spiritual lifestyle in the round suggests a nuanced answer to this question. On the one hand it was a life of intense and long-term attentiveness, a life of prolonged trial and error; on the other, it was a life inevitably shaped by its intellectual prejudices. As long as Augustine believed in the historical reality of conversion as a human possibility, then his own dramatic conversion was, in a certain sense, inevitable. It is true that the events of the garden, which were pregnant with symbolism and the necessary spontaneity did verify the possibility of true conversion. But to focus on these events alone conceals a still more fundamental truth: namely that no number of less dramatic events could ever, to borrow Karl Popper's words,[68] falsify the hypothesis that God did communicate through moments such as these, and to people like Augustine. Because the system of trial and error was ultimately geared towards achieving a single definite conclusion, all these lesser moments indicated was the temporary unreadiness of his soul, and therefore served merely as a motivation for renewed patience. However much they appealed to purportedly objective criteria, the doubts that kept Augustine waiting, like those of a basically sympathetic audience addressed by hagiographers did not in themselves threaten the whole edifice of belief from its foundations.

Conclusion: Text and Life

Our enquiry began by asking whether hagiographies and other spiritual writings from late antiquity were more akin to theology or to historiography, whether they contained only an internal logic or whether they were open to the world of familiar experience – questions of great

[68] K. Popper, *Science*: *Conjectures and Refutations* in *Philosophy of Science*: *the Central Issues*, ed. M. Curd and J.A. Cover (New York, 1988) 3–10.

importance both for the intellectual contents of such works and also for any modern use of them. In doing so, we compared three different kinds of guarantee such works contain: the first, a commonsense guarantee that the method of composition was thorough and honest; the second, an appeal to authority based on an accepted core of belief; the third, a principle of spontaneity which in a sense combined the others and purported to be an objective criterion. Our answer is necessarily a complex one. On the one hand, this third source of truthfulness, for all its aspirations to objectivity, is likely to have been equally imbued with the same ideological assumptions which were basic to the first two. On the other hand, the logic which informed it, far from being enclosed within a purely textual realm had a great applicability to the phenomenal world, even to the extent of forming the basis of a spiritually-focused lifestyle.

Our analysis would be incomplete without two final points. Although we have referred many times to religious doubt throughout this paper, it may seem that, by equating the guarantees of truthfulness offered in religious texts with a certain spiritual lifestyle we have ultimately reaffirmed late antiquity's outmoded reputation for excessive superstition. But at least in one very important respect, this characterization would be erroneous. Ever since Malinowski, scholars have argued that the essential motive for superstitious behaviour is the attempt by humans to assert control over unpredictability and uncertainty by mastering the hidden mechanisms of reality.[69] The techniques of spiritual scrutiny described above aimed, in a sense, at precisely the opposite of this: the discovery of, and submission to, a reality entirely and demonstrably independent and distinct from the chaos of the phenomenal world and from human influence. Since, within this intellectual context, the object of submission was the only reality which could be regarded as absolutely objective, such a quest can hardly be regarded as superstitious or, for that matter, irrational.

This is, of course, a point of great significance for intellectual historians who wish to understand the nature of hagiographies and other spiritual texts. But if such texts were products of intellectual processes which preceded the act of writing, processes which were geared towards phenomenal reality, then it also has important lessons for scholars of a more positivist bent. By following a definition of reality rooted in

[69] B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York, 1948, repr. 1978), 139–140.

contingency and suspicious of textuality, historians of this type can underestimate the concrete effects of an alternative definition of reality contained within the sources: namely one rooted in eternity and transcendence, and of which a complete and perfect textuality, embodied for Christians not only in the Biblical text but also in the events of sacred history, was the only definitive earthly expression. The challenge this poses goes beyond empathy; rather it invites us to recognize that the mere human expectation of a reality communicated in this form can act as a means of ordering the very phenomena which constitute the historian's subject matter. By sifting through hagiographies for information which is, in Ferdinand Lotter's phrase, *tendenzneutral*,[70] we can overlook how deeply events were already infused with textual influence long before anyone put pen to paper.

[70] F. Lotter, *Severinus von Noricum: Legende und historische Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1976), 2, 79.