



Enjoying the saints in late antiquity

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The discovery at Mainz by François Dolbeau of a new collection of sermons of Augustine has enabled us to study, in far greater detail, the attitude of Augustine to the reform of the cult of the martyrs between 391 and 404. This study aims to understand Augustine's insistence on the need to imitate the martyrs against the background of his views on grace and the relation of such views to the growing differentiation of the Christian community. It also attempts to do justice to the views of those he criticized: others regarded the triumph of the martyrs over pain and death as a unique manifestation of the power of God, in which believers participated, not through imitation but through celebrations reminiscent of the joy of pagan festivals. In this debate, Augustine by no means had the last word. The article attempts to show the continuing tension between notions of the saints as imitable and inimitable figures in the early medieval period, and more briefly, by implication, in all later centuries.

Let us begin with Augustine, preaching in Carthage in 412:

Brethren, see how it is that when a feast of the martyrs or some holy place is mentioned, to which crowds might flow to hold high festival. See how they stir each other up, and say, 'Let us go, let us go.' And each one asks the other, 'Where to?' They say, 'To that place, to that holy place.' They speak to each other, and as if each one of them were set alight, they form together one single blaze.¹

Augustine addressed a congregation that needed little encouragement to enjoy such occasions. The Christians of Carthage and elsewhere came from societies which had, for millennia, identified religious festivals with moments of frank remission. In the words of Strabo: 'although it has been said that human beings then act most like the gods when they are doing good to others, yet one may better say that they are closer still to the gods when they are feeling good – when they rejoice and hold high festival'.²

¹ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 121.2, ed. E. Dekkers and A. Fraipont, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 40 (Turnhout, 1956), 3:1802.

² Strabo, *Geography* 10.3.9, ed. H.L. Jones (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 5:92.

For Plutarch, the high cheer of festivals proved conclusively that the Epicureans were wrong. The gods were not, as the Epicureans claimed, mere persecutory projections of human fears, chill Super-egos characterized by vengeance and wrath. The relaxed mood of a religious feast proved the exact opposite. On such occasions, human beings stood in the real presence of serene and eminently fun-loving beings.³ Greek etymologists derived the verb *methuein*, 'to be drunk', from *meta thuein*, 'to be in on the sacrifices', even from *methienai*, 'to participate' – to share, for a blessed moment, in the heady, joyous essence of the gods.⁴

Given such long-established expectations, it is not a matter for surprise that, in every region and in every period of late antiquity, Christians, too, should just want to have fun. They also were *philheortoi*, impenitent 'lovers of high festival'. In southern Gaul, at saints' festivals in the countryside outside Arles, crowds would stream in from the surrounding villages. They sung songs, they danced, they drank heavily, with many toasts for the saints. The young men fought each other, and their elders settled law suits.⁵ It would have been a scene not unlike the great *patterns* that were still to be seen in early-nineteenth-century Ireland, named, significantly, from the *patrín*, the *patronus*, the patron-saint of the region. Such a one was the Pattern of Cloghane, in the Dingle peninsula: 'a day of games, athletics, vaulting over horses, dancing, singing and courtship, of faction fighting and feasting'. It was a day renowned, also, for its fine meat pies.⁶

At the other end of the Christian world, at the great pilgrimage site of Qala'at Sem'an, the peasants danced around the column of Saint Symeon Stylites. When the first outriders of the Muslim armies fell upon the pilgrims, in 637, Christians of stricter views thought that it had served them right: they had angered God by their drunkenness at the festival.⁷

As this last, sharp remark shows, the enjoyment of the cult of the saints remained a problematic issue in Christian circles, as it had not been, to so great an extent, among pagans. Preachers at such festivals, even at the most euphoric of them, were careful to point out how little Christian occasions resembled what they considered to be the coarser junketings of Jews and pagans. Preaching at Christmas, Gregory

³ Plutarch, *A Pleasant Life is Impossible* 1101E–1102D, ed. B. Einarson and P.H. de Lacy (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 14:114.

⁴ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 2.11(40A), ed. G. Kaibel (Stuttgart, 1965), p. 93, and Philo, *de plantatione* 163, ed. J. Pouilloux (Paris, 1963), p. 100; see esp. A. Dihle, 'La fête chrétienne', *Revue des études augustiniennes* 38 (1992)pp. 323–35.

⁵ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 13.3–4, 47.5 and 55.2, ed. G. Morin, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 103 (Turnhout, 1953), 1:66–7, 214 and 242.

⁶ M. MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (Oxford, 1962), 2:104.

⁷ Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.14: *Patrologia Graeca* 86:2461A; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 11.6, trans. J.B. Chabot, *Le Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris, 1901), 2:422.

Nazianzen enumerated in quick succession twenty-two different ways in which the feast was *not* to be enjoyed.⁸ Twenty-two negative clauses in one paragraph is a lot of negatives – even for a Cappadocian Father. Yet, when it came to the issue of control of the festivals of the saints in late antiquity (in effect, in this case, control of the feasts – the *natalia*, the *natalicia* – of the martyrs) the most prominent figure is, without a doubt, Augustine of Hippo.

We have long known of the determination which Augustine showed, from the moment of his ordination to the priesthood at Hippo, in 391, to reform the manner in which the cult of the martyrs was celebrated in Hippo and Carthage. As a priest, he abolished the songs and solemn drinking associated with the *Laetitia*, the day of solemn good cheer, that accompanied the memory of Leontius, a former bishop of Hippo.⁹ At the same time, he had gone out of his way to obtain the collaboration of his senior colleague, Aurelius of Carthage and, by implication, of the other Catholic bishops of Africa, in undertaking what was nothing less than a thorough-going reform of Catholic piety, especially as it related to the cult of the martyrs.¹⁰ The Mainz collection of sermons of Augustine, discovered and now edited by François Dolbeau, has added precious evidence to the dossier of a reform of Christian worship that may have been unique for its times in its determination and trenchancy.¹¹

It is certainly the most fully documented example of such a reform in Christian late antiquity. The new sermons have provided us with an unexpected glimpse of Augustine in action, when faced with the long-established religious habits of his fellow-Christians. It is a disturbing glimpse. Here was a Christian preacher who was quite prepared to bring to bear, within his own, Catholic congregation, a searching critique of

⁸ Gregory Nazianzen, Oratio 38.5; *Patrologia Graeca* 36:316A–317B, trans. C.G. Browne, *Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1974), 7:346. See esp. M. Harl, 'La dénonciation des festivités profanes dans le discours épiscopal et monastique en Orient chrétien à la fin du iv siècle', *La fête, pratique et discours*, Annales de l'Université de Besançon 262 (Paris, 1981), pp. 123–47, at p. 129.

⁹ Augustine, *Ep.* 29, to Alypius of Thagaste: see P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981) pp. 26 and 34–5 and V. Saxer, *Morts, Martyrs, Reliques en Afrique chrétienne aux premiers siècles*, *Théologie Historique* 55 (Paris, 1980) pp. 133–47. It is perhaps important that Leontius was not a martyr: he was celebrated as builder of the basilica. Thus, the *Laetitia* may have originated as a more 'social' event than was the cult of a martyr. For that reason, the *Laetitia* may either have been more rowdy than those at the feast of a martyr, or, alternately, Augustine may have found it easier to abolish.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Ep.* 22, to Aurelius of Carthage.

¹¹ Now edited by F. Dolbeau, *Vingt-Six Sermons au Peuple d'Afrique* (Paris, 1996) – using the French title, Mayence, for Mainz – and translated by E. Hill, *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the Twenty-First Century. Sermons III/1: New Discovered Sermons* (Hyde Park, NY, 1997). The most relevant of these are *Mayence 5/Dolbeau 2: On Obedience*, first edited in *Revue des études augustinienne*s 38 (1992), pp. 50–79, and *Mayence 62/Dolbeau 26: Against the Pagans*, first edited in *Recherches augustinienne*s 26 (1992), pp. 69–141, now edited in *Vingt-Six Sermons*, pp. 315–44 and 345–417, and trans. Hill, *Sermons*, pp. 331–42 and 180–237 respectively.

‘superstition’ and of *imperitia*, of culpable ignorance in matters of religious practice, such as had usually been deployed, by Christians, only against the cultic practices of pagans outside the church.¹² In a sermon preached on 23 January 404, Augustine rejoiced that, through the firmness of Aurelius and his colleagues, the exuberant practices (the singing, the drinking and the easy mingling of the sexes in night-long vigils) associated with the shrine of Saint Cyprian – the greatest cult-site in Christian Africa – had been brought to an end: ‘Where in those days the din of dirty songs was heard, nowadays it is the singing of hymns that lifts the roof ... in a word, where God used to be offended, God is now being propitiated’.¹³ In other regions of the late antique Christian world, language such as this would only have been used to celebrate the victory of Christian over non-Christian, pagan cult.¹⁴

Faced by what he considered to be disorderly and irreligious behaviour, associated with the cult of the martyrs, Augustine repeated, over and over again throughout his life, variations of a single, basic formulation: festivals occur, he said,

‘ut per eas congregatio membrorum Christi admoneatur imitari martyres Christi. Haec omnino festivitatis utilitas. Alia non est’ (‘so that through those festivals the congregation made up of members of Christ should be prompted to imitate the martyrs of Christ. That is the one and only *raison d’être* of a festival. There is no other’).¹⁵

For a religious historian, the problem with Augustine is that he is almost invariably entirely right. It is difficult to gainsay a statement that is the condensed essence of a religious system which has, to a large extent, formed the religious common sense of western Europe. Seen in its eschatological context – that is, as Augustine tended to see it, from the lofty but ultimate standpoint of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God – it was obvious that those who wished to join the martyrs in heaven must, in their own way, follow Christ as the martyrs had done. In the words of the Visigothic liturgy of Toledo, those frail worshippers who had tended, in the dangers of the present life, to look to the saints as guardians and as patrons, as *comites* and *patroni* – as sources of help in day-to-day matters rather than as models of behaviour – must also strive to live in such a way as to be welcomed into heaven by the saints as their

¹² P. Brown, ‘*Qui adorant columnas in ecclesia*. Saint Augustine and a practice of the *imperiti*’, in G. Madec (ed.), *Augustin Prédicateur (395–411)*, (Paris, 1998), pp. 367–75, esp. pp. 371–74.

¹³ Augustine, *Sermon Mayence s/Dolbeau 2.5.95, Vingt-Six Sermons*, p. 330, trans. Hill, *Sermons*, p. 334.

¹⁴ See the inscription of the church that claimed to have replaced a pagan temple at Azra’a in Syria: ‘Where God was angered once, now God is made content’. *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 4, no. 8627 (Berlin, 1977), p. 295; see P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 98.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Sermon 325.1: Patrologia Latina 39:1447*.

socii. They had to become true companions of the saints, worthy of the company of Christ, because transformed by Christ's grace in the same manner as His grace had once, to a high degree, transformed the martyrs of old.¹⁶

But heaven is a long way off, and western Christendom is a complicated phenomenon, made up of many currents of belief and practice, spread over an extensive geographical area and subject to constant change over the millennium of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The clear intuitions of one religious genius can not be expected to embrace such diversity, still less should Augustine's standard of correct worship be allowed, by scholars of late antique and medieval religion, to act as the tacitly-agreed yardstick by which to judge the intrinsic religious worth of the many, various ways in which late antique and medieval persons conducted the cult of the saints.

What strikes the historian of medieval religion is the fact that the notion of the imitation of the saints, though it may seem eminently sensible from a religious point of view, fits awkwardly into the overall development and elaboration of the cult of saints in Europe. The ideal of the imitation of the saints was usually invoked so as to place a check upon powerful opposing notions. Often, it was invoked to spoil the fun – to criticize what were presented, by preachers and moralists, as the more 'earthy', less religious forms of Catholic worship.

In the case of Caesarius of Arles, in the early sixth century, the notion of the imitation of the martyrs was invariably invoked by him so as to attack current practices. He presented such imitation as the only permissible alternative to the rambunctious scenes that we have already described, in connection with saints' festivals in Arles and in the surrounding countryside.¹⁷ With Caesarius (and also with many phrases of the Roman liturgy) one gets the impression that the idea of imitating the saints was interposed, like a screen, to hold the believer back from more exuberantly physical forms of worship. In much the same manner, Gregory the Great had insisted that religious pictures should be *read, ut scriptura*. In so doing, he attempted to substitute a more detached, intellectual activity – the act of reading – for the more direct, physical manifestations of adoration – the bowing, the kissing, the candles and the heavy whiff of incense – usually associated with sacred paintings.¹⁸ In both cases – in the insistence that the martyrs should be 'imitated' and that religious paintings should be 'read' – we are dealing with a formula of control that privileged the intellectual over the physical, and that

¹⁶ *Liber Sacramentorum* 23.208, ed. M. Férotin, *Le Liber Mozarablicorum Sacramentorum* (Paris, 1912), p. 96.

¹⁷ see above, n. 5 and *Sermon* 233.1–2, p. 882.

¹⁸ P. Brown, 'Images as a Substitute for Writing', in E. Chrysos and I. Wood (eds.), *East and West: Modes of Communication* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 15–34, at pp. 23–5.

insisted that contemplation of the meaning of objects of Christian worship was superior to all other forms of access to them – whether this was unmediated participation in the joy of festivals or loving ‘adoration’ of holy images.

We must, therefore, make an effort of the imagination to recover something of the full *religious* weight of the expectations of those who, in fourth-century North Africa and, indeed, in all subsequent centuries of the western Middle Ages, enjoyed the saints without necessarily feeling obliged to imitate them. I use the word ‘religious’ advisedly. The effect of Augustine’s rhetoric has been to drain away from our image of such feasts the heavy charge of sacrality that lay at their centre. He singled out for denunciation the elements of moral disorder and of inappropriate excitement associated with the cult of the martyrs. The impression that he leaves is that the *hommes moyens sensuels* of Carthage came to the feasts to have fun, when they should have come to have religion. As a former *jeune homme sensuel*, Augustine knew of what he spoke. I never dreamed, until the publication of the Dolbeau sermon *On Obedience*, that I would hear Augustine, the Catholic bishop in 404, speak with such candour about his own behaviour in the 370s: ‘When I went to vigils as a student in this city, I spent the night rubbing up beside women, along with other boys anxious to make an impression on them and, who knows, should the opportunity present itself, to ‘make it’ with them’.¹⁹

But such engaging candour on Augustine’s part should not cause us to forget that such ‘happenings’ belonged to the highly-specific excitement of a specific occasion: disorderly though they were, they were only the outermost shock waves, on the fringes of the martyr’s festival, that registered the detonation, in its midst, of a heavy charge of religious feeling, associated with a particular notion of the sacred. Let us attempt to measure the mass of this charge, set up by a structure of distinct imaginative associations, connected with the cult of the martyrs throughout the fourth-century Christian Mediterranean.

It is best to begin with a remark of the wry pagan, Ammianus Marcellinus. Everyone, so he implied, knew what Christian martyrs had been like: though forced to abandon their beliefs, they had found their way to a ‘glorious death’ brought about by *cruciabiles poenae* – by ‘excruciating torments’.²⁰ It is the image of the *cruciabiles poenae*, of the

¹⁹ Augustine, *Mayence 5/Dolbeau 2, On Obedience* 5.79, *Vingt-Six Sermons*, p. 330; Hill, *Sermons*, p. 333. On the strength of a discreet mention in *Confessions* 3.3.5, I had proposed (as befitted a young Oxford don of the early 1960s) a considerably more chaste interpretation: see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967), p. 41.

²⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 21.11.10, ed. R.C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA, 1956), 2:262. Ammianus wrote as he did so as to ensure that the lynching of George, the high-handed Christian bishop of Alexandria, would not be considered as a ‘true’ martyrdom: see T.D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), p. 236. His criteria, therefore, were not dissimilar from those of Shenute!

excruciating torments which had accompanied the deaths of the martyrs, that surged forwards, in the late fourth century if not earlier, to take centre stage. We move, within a century, from the curt, judicial records of the martyrs of the time of the Great Persecution – where torture is used only to discover information, in the ‘aseptic’ manner of a late Roman *cognitio* procedure – to a world awash with blood.²¹ To Shenute of Atri, in the first part of the fifth century, it was easy to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic accounts of the martyrs. Any account that did *not* recount how the martyr had died under great torments, that did not report that the martyr’s eyes had been torn out, that the martyr’s body had been chopped limb from limb, that did not describe how scorching fires had been applied to the martyr’s sides, and that did not conclude with an account of how the martyr had been weighted down with stones and thrown, in vain of course, into the river Nile – such an account could not be authentic: it was a *martyros n̄noudj*, an account of a martyr based on lies.²² It was the same for Victricius of Rouen when he preached in around 396 (that is, at the time when, in distant Africa, Augustine and his colleagues had embarked on their reforms): ‘Let there be no day, dearest brothers, on which we do not meditate on these stories. This one did not pale before the tortures ... this one greedily swallowed the flames ... another was cut to pieces, yet remained whole’.²³

Those who came to the feasts of the martyrs came to participate in the unearthly ‘glory’ of a moment of total triumph over pain and death. Men and women alike, the bodies of the martyrs stood out as the centre of attention. For the martyrs had been rendered immune by God to the horrors inflicted on their flesh. In the words of an inscription of the martyrs at Haïdra (Ammaedera), they were the ones ‘cui divinitus inspirare hoc in animo dignatus est’ ‘to whom God has deigned to place in their soul the breath of divine spirit’.²⁴

²¹ As is shown in the newly discovered *Acta Gallonii*: P. Chiesa, ‘Un testo agiografico africano ad Aquileia. Gli *Acta* di Gallonio e dei martiri di *Timida Regia*’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 114 (1996), p. 241–68, at p. 252. On judicial torture in the later Roman Empire, see now J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 122–9. A similar, curt original account of an Egyptian martyrdom has been discovered among the papyri of Duke University: P. Van Minnen, ‘The Earliest Account of a Martyrdom in Coptic’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 113 (1995), pp. 13–38. It is significant that, in a tantalizingly incomplete letter, newly discovered by Johannes Divjak, Augustine expressed his strong preference for such *Acta*, over and against contemporary attempts to re-write the tales of the martyrs: *Ep.* 29*, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 46B: Lettres 1*–29**, Bibliothèque augustiniennne (Paris, 1987), pp. 414–16; trans. R. Eno, *Saint Augustine. Letters VI (1*–29*)*, Fathers of the Church 81 (Washington, DC, 1989), pp. 193–5.

²² J. Horn, *Studien zu den Märtyrern des nordlichen Oberägyptens. 1 Märtyrerverehrung und Märtyrerverlegende im Werk des Shenute*, Göttinger Orientforschungen: IV Ägypten 15 (Wiesbaden, 1986), p. 8. See in general T. Baumeister, *Martyr Invictus* (Münster, 1972).

²³ Victricius of Rouen, *In Praise of the Saints 12: Patrologia Latina 20:456CD*, trans. J.N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750. The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986), pp. 27–8.

²⁴ Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae. Le culte des martyrs en Afrique du ive au viie siècle*, Collection de l’École française de Rome 58 (Rome, 1982), nos. 51A and 52 at pp. 108 and 110–12.

The emotion which the sight of the violated yet unmoved bodies of the martyrs evoked was not one of sympathy and admiration for human courage. It was, rather, a sense of awe such as had always fallen heavily on the hearts of ancient persons, when confronted with a fellow-human being in whose strangely altered body they sensed the presence of a mighty god. This is what made Saint Eulalia so stunning to the readers of the *Peristephanon* of Prudentius (written in around 400). In applying to the words of Eulalia before her persecutors the classical phrase *infremuit ... spiritus*, 'her spirit raged', Prudentius chose to use the language of the ancient oracles, to describe the raw 'frenzy' of a young girl's spirit, that had 'breathed in' the power of God.²⁵

Prudentius, I suspect, shared with many of his contemporaries what has been somewhat unfairly labelled (in comparison to the Neo-Platonic notions of Augustine) as a 'material' view of the soul. It is better to talk of a 'localized' view of the soul. For Prudentius, the soul lay in the depths of the body, beyond the reach of human probing. With the martyrs, this inner soul finally 'leapt free', unscathed, to regain its home beyond the stars.²⁶ The notion of a 'localized' soul gave rock-like, ontological solidity to the belief that the martyr, possessed by God, had remained throughout inviolate: 'There is another, within the body, whom no man is able to outrage ... free, undisturbed, unharmed, exempt from grievous pain'.²⁷ The body of Eulalia was 'painted scarlet with new blood'.²⁸ But that blood had touched her hidden, inner self as little as a wash of red paint affected the cool, smooth surface of a wall down which it dripped.

The miracle of impassivity, associated with the torments of the martyrs, tilted over into a yet greater miracle. So great was the disjuncture between the observed, outside state of the martyr, brought into contact with sources of excruciating pain, and the inviolate state of his or her inner being, that the associations of human pain, as it were, passed through the looking glass: pain was transformed into its very opposite. The searing flames outside became like cooling water to the soul; or they came to seem as cold as ice compared to the firestorm of the spirit of God that raged within the martyr.²⁹ In a dream-like moment of

²⁵ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 3. 31–4, ed. H.J. Thomson (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 2:144.

²⁶ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 1.30, p. 100. See esp. J. Fontaine, 'Images virgiliennes de l'ascension céleste dans la poésie latine chrétienne', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum: Ergänzungsband 9. Gedenkschrift für A. Stuiber* (Münster, 1982), p. 55–67. The notion of a 'material' soul was more widespread than we realize: see E.L. Fortin, *Christianisme et culture philosophique au ve siècle. La querelle de l'âme humain en Occident* (Paris, 1959) and M. Di Marco, *La polemica sull'anima tra [Fausto di Riez] e Claudiano Mamerto*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 51 (Rome, 1995). The effect of this notion on late antique Christian piety has not been fully explored.

²⁷ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 5.157, p. 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.143, p. 152.

²⁹ e.g. *Liber Sacramentorum* 47.880, ed. Férotin, p. 393: an image constantly employed on the martyrdom of Saint Laurence.

God-possessed dissociation, all meanings became reversed. The martyrs lay upon the burning coals of their bonfire as if they were reclining 'amid red roses'.³⁰

We can catch a hint of the crackle of awe generated by so total a disjuncture between observed torment and the miracle worked by God's presence in the martyr if we look at Byzantine illuminations of just such scenes. Leslie Brubaker has remarked, most acutely, of ninth century renderings of the deaths of the martyrs, that these were models of classical restraint: 'the dying saints ... seem to us detached; they do not elicit our sympathy'. Yet Byzantines expected that to contemplate just such illuminations would provoke an outburst of 'warm tears'.³¹ For in the miniatures, one was given a glimpse of the bodies of the martyrs as they appeared, at the time of torment, to the souls of the martyrs. The believer would supply the rest. We are dealing, here, with an exquisitely late antique structuring of the emotions, by which a scene in which one element is uncannily absent acts as a trigger, to unleash the full horror and wonder of a moment charged with the presence of God. For this was how martyrs were thought to feel their own martyrdom. His mind and soul filled with God, the martyr Dativus (from Abitina, near Carthage, in 304) 'viewed the ruin of his body all the while like a spectator, rather than feeling its pain'.³²

What matters, in such an imaginative structuring of the cult of the martyrs, is that the martyr (as, later, the ascetic or the saintly bishop) stands isolated. He or she is sheathed in the majesty of the full presence of God. The martyr's festival was a *spectaculum* in the most profound and ancient sense: it was a showing of God. The sufferings of the martyrs were offered to believers – in a manner that I am tempted to speak of with a term more usually applied to late medieval Eucharistic devotion – as a *heilbringende Schau*, a sight which in and of itself unleashed salvation. It was a *spectaculum*, also, in that the believers were drawn by the deeper imaginative logic of the occasion to *participate* in the glory of the martyrs rather than to imitate them. They gathered so as to share, for a time of high celebration, in the original, death-defying moment of 'glory' associated with God's triumph in the saint. In that way, the cult of the saints took up, and rendered that much more physical, more local and more frequent the supreme moment of Christ's triumph over death, celebrated every year at the feast of Easter. Easter, also, was an occasion for a frank explosion of physical joy and, among

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *de sanctis martyribus* 1: *Patrologia Graeca* 49:708.

³¹ L. Brubaker, 'Byzantine Art in the Ninth Century: Theory, Practice and Culture', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 13 (1989), pp. 23–93, at pp. 24–5; see now *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium. Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 260.

³² *Passion of the Martyrs of Abitina* 10, ed. J.L. Maier, *Le Dossier du Donatisme* (Berlin, 1987), 1:72.

some believers, for heavy use of the bottle.³³ As with Easter, there was a strong, non-verbal element in such participation. One was expected to join, body and soul, in a great event that shook, for a moment, the boundaries of the possible. The high cheer and 'oceanic' feelings induced by wine; the chanted songs (songs whose wild pitch, rather than their words, may have shocked stricter, ancient ears as 'obscene'); the potential for the breaking of the boundaries between the sexes; and, above all, the gravity-defying leaps of the dancers: these were physical expressions of a moment of vast release, that marked the passing of a great soul, through torments, to beyond the stars. Equally non-verbal and equally dramatic were the healings which the saint was believed (in all later centuries) to bestow on the faithful, throughout the year but most especially at the high moment of the festival of the saint. For this was the moment when the iron constraints of pain and death, that held the lives of the faithful in their grip, had suddenly sprung open, for the martyr, at the touch of God.³⁴

It was to the isolation of the martyrs from other members of the faithful, implied in this powerful model – and hence to the essentially participatory relationship established between the martyrs and their devotees – that Augustine addressed the full force of his own, most deeply meditated religious convictions. He aimed to leave the imprint of a very different notion of God's grace – a notion equally dramatic but more evenly distributed between martyrs and faithful – on the burgeoning cult of the saints. Put very briefly, while never denying for a moment the majesty of God's presence in the martyrs, he went out of his way to insist that the martyrs did not enjoy an outright monopoly of the overwhelming grace of God. The working of God's grace in every heart was, in itself, a miracle. It was surrounded by the same sense of amazement as was the blood-soaked glory of a Lawrence, a Cyprian or a Eulalia.

Much recent scholarship, now ably interpreted by Carole Straw, has stressed the extent to which, from his very first years as a bishop, Augustine's thought on grace grew out of the deep taproot of his daily involvement in the African cult of the martyrs.³⁵ The martyrs were spectacularly visible creatures of God's grace. They owed their 'glory' to God alone. Nobody doubted that for a moment. They were the 'predestinate' members of the elect *par excellence*, made plainly visible on

³³ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.33.1–2, ed. A. de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand: Les Dialogues*, Sources chrétiennes 265 (Paris, 1980), p. 108, gives an example of drunkenness after the Easter Vigil and of its chilling consequences.

³⁴ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, pp. 80–5.

³⁵ C. Straw, s.v. Martyrdom, *Saint Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia*, ed. A.D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), pp. 538–42. See also P.M. Hombert, *Gloria Gratiae* (Paris, 1996), with P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, repr. with Epilogue (London, forthcoming), and 'The New Augustine', *New York Review of Books* 46:11 (24 June 1999), pp. 45–50, at p. 49.

earth by the nature of their lives and by the glory of their passing.³⁶ Everyone agreed with that. What Augustine went on to say, as often as he could, was that exactly the same grace might stir – discreetly at first but eventually, perhaps, triumphantly – in the hearts of every one of his hearers: ‘God who gave grace to them can give it to us ... By that grace they became his friends; we can, at least, by the same grace become his servants ... and, why not, then also his friends: through his grace, that is, not through our own will’.³⁷

At one stroke, Augustine had taken possession of the reservoir of raw charisma, associated with the persons of the martyrs, and had led it, along innumerable, hidden paths, into the lives of every Catholic Christian. He did it, largely, by placing the martyrs in the larger context of the Church. All Catholics were subject to the command to ‘follow’ Christ. All were bound to Christ – even if with widely varying degrees of prominence – as ‘members’ of his body, the church.³⁸ At Upenna (Henchir Chigarnia in modern Tunis), a list of otherwise unknown and local martyrs was given new majesty, at some time in the fifth century, by being copied on to a mosaic, in such a way that they now appeared ranged on either side of a great, jewelled cross.³⁹ In the same way, in Augustine’s vision of the church, the faithful were encouraged to crowd in behind the martyrs, because equally dwarfed by that great Cross, ranged behind the image of Christ to which all believers, in their different ways, strained to conform themselves:

The martyrs followed Christ right up to the shedding of their blood, up to a likeness of His own Passion. They followed him, but they did not do so alone. It is not as if, once they passed, that bridge would be lifted; nor, once they had drunk of the fountain [of God’s grace] that fountain had dried up.⁴⁰

Augustine’s notion of the ‘imitation of the martyrs’, therefore, was founded on the need to throw a bridge across the crevasse that appeared to separate the martyrs from the faithful. It was based, in part, on his extraordinary ability to reduce the spiritual struggle to a universal common denominator. On that theme, Augustine could be trusted to wax eloquent: ‘We have always drawn attention to this, brethren. We have never ceased to say it. We have never been silent: life eternal is what

³⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* 312.6, 1422, on Saint Cyprian; compare the mid-fourth-century Donatist *Passio Marculi* 2, ed. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme*, p. 278: *Ille ... olim praelectus et praedestinitus a domino*.

³⁷ Augustine, *Sermon* 335H, *Revue bénédictine* 68 (1958), p. 103 = *Patrologia Latina Supplementum* 2:831.

³⁸ Augustine, *Sermon* 280.6, 1283.

³⁹ Duval, *Loca sanctorum*, no. 29, fig. 42 at p. 65.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Sermon* 304.2.2, 1396.

we should love; this present life, what we should scorn'.⁴¹ Before grace had worked upon them, the hearts of the martyrs had been divided by just such a conflict between two loves as was the heart of the simplest Christian. It was not the distant, blood-stained bodies of the martyrs that spoke most directly to the faithful: the martyrs, rather, spoke heart to heart to every believer of a struggle that they also had experienced – the struggle between the love of God and the deep, fierce love of the soul for its own body and for the present life.⁴²

Thus, when it came to the issue as to how exactly each individual saint might be imitated, Augustine remained gloriously unspecific. Apart from the occasional praise of women martyrs, so as to shame the men and to prove that any woman might expect to enjoy the full measure of God's grace;⁴³ apart, also, from a pointed reference to martyrs who had been married women and mothers of children, so as to rebuke nuns who were tempted to despise married persons,⁴⁴ Augustine never offered the behaviour of any specific saint for imitation by any specific group. He felt that he did not need to do so. All the faithful should admire and imitate all the saints, for they all had faced the same, basic struggle as they faced themselves. The struggle of the love of God to overcome love of the world was the only confrontation that mattered. All must face it, as the martyrs had faced it, irrespective of class, race or gender; and no one could hope to triumph in that struggle unless they came as utter paupers, stripped of social and cultural particularity, to the rich banquet of God's grace.⁴⁵

We should remember that Augustine, for all his brilliance and considerable idiosyncrasy, was a man of his generation and the inheritor of a dense Christian tradition. His insistence on Christ as the primary model and the only help of the martyrs both followed the teachings of Cyprian and also echoed faithfully the *Epigrammata* of his near-contemporary, Pope Damasus: 'possit quid gloria Christi' 'believe then what Christ's glory can achieve'.⁴⁶

What is significant, however, is the difference between the physical setting in which such piety was shown. The piety of Damasus was elaborated in little masterpieces of calligraphic style, discreetly displayed in quiet burial chambers for the benefit of literate visitors of meditative

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 302.9, 1389.

⁴² e.g. Augustine, *Sermon* 284.4, 1279 and *Sermon Frangipane* 6.2, ed. G. Morin, *Miscellanea Agostiniana* (Rome, 1930), 1:221.

⁴³ Augustine, *Sermon Denis* 13.2, ed. Morin, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *de virginitate* 44.45.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Mayence 24/Dolbeau* 9 5.123, *Vingt-Six Sermons*, p. 33, Hill, *Sermons*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ Damasus, *Epigrammata* 8.9; cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 11.386: *possit qui virida virtus*. See esp. J. Fontaine, 'Damase poète théodosien: l'imaginaire poétique des epigrammata', *Saecularia Damasiana* (Vatican City, 1986) pp. 115–45, at p. 134. On Cyprian, see esp. S. Deléani, *Christum Sequi. Étude d'un thème dans l'oeuvre de saint Cyprien* (Paris, 1979), pp. 75–95 and 106–110.

disposition.⁴⁷ Augustine wished to impose such views, also, on large, tumultuous assemblies.

One can sense, in Augustine's insistence on the personal workings of grace that made the examples of the martyrs directly relevant to ordinary persons, the ground-swell of an African Christian community that had become ever more complex in its social and intellectual structures. Differing groups of the laity pressed forwards for special attention. Among the well-to-do, especially, one may suspect that there were many who did not want to feel as distant from the martyrs as everybody else, because equally deprived of the supreme charisma of their unearthly death. They did not wish to lose their identities by sinking back into the crowd, in great, participatory rituals. They wanted their own, more personal share in the 'portion of the saints'.

To take one small but revealing example of these pressures. In the higher empire, the educated gentry began to accord to their own beloved forms of funerary remembrance modelled on the cult of the gods and of the heroes of old. Private 'heroization' became widespread.⁴⁸ It is possible to talk, for the late fourth century, of a similar drift towards a 'martyrization' of the deceased. Take the example of the young Christian lady Proiecta. Proiecta may have been buried, in Rome, in a chamber as impressive as that of any martyr. Damasus had no hesitation about writing of her as if she were already in heaven, with the martyrs, and even hinted that, from heaven, she now brought comfort to her entire family.⁴⁹ At Thabarka, in North Africa, the deacon Crescentinus was portrayed, in the mosaic above his tomb, trotting jauntily across the countryside. But the inscription speaks of him in such florid terms, as 'guest of the angels, companion of the martyrs', that it is only recently that Professor Yvette Duval has struck him from the register of saints, placing the young deacon, firmly, in an appendix devoted to 'faux martyrs'.⁵⁰ Crescentinus had been 'martyrized' by his loved ones, much as his pagan predecessors had 'heroized' their dead. Furthermore, the increasing practice of *depositio ad sanctos* points in the direction of a sincere wish on the part of the deceased (and not only on the part of those who preserved their memory) to draw closer to the martyrs by imitation. Burial beside the saints was not only an occasion for the rich and for the clergy to show their special status in the community: for

⁴⁷ J. Guyon, 'Damase et l'illustration des martyrs. Les accents de la dévotion et l'enjeu d'une pastorale', *Martyrium in a Multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans*, ed. M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun (Louvain, 1995), pp. 157–77.

⁴⁸ H.I. Marrou, *MOYCIKOC ANHP. Etude sur les scènes de la vie intellectuelle figurants sur les monuments funéraires romains* (Grenoble, 1938), pp. 231–57; H. Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum. Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz, 1981).

⁴⁹ Guyon, 'Damase', pp. 177–9.

⁵⁰ Duval, *Loca sanctorum*, nos. 208–9, fig. 281 at p. 431.

some pious persons, it marked the end of a life characterized by continuous effort to imitate their chosen saints.⁵¹

Altogether, religious history would be immeasurably poorer if it were not for the unflinching pretentiousness of members of the sub-élites. Augustine's world was marked by the constant presence of relatively well-to-do persons, inhabitants of the fluid urban worlds of Carthage and of Hippo – women quite as much as men, married persons quite as much as celibates and members of the laity quite as much as those associated with the clergy. The discreet upward pressure of so many little groups of men and women ensured that Augustine's system of grace maintained a strong 'democratic' flavour. For Augustine's insistence on the accessibility of the grace that rendered possible the spiritual struggle and, so, the imitation of the martyrs, was a challenge addressed to all categories of persons within the Catholic church. There were always some persons, at least (often from a surprisingly wide range of social and cultural backgrounds: by no means invariably educated or of clerical background), who took Augustine at his word.

It is necessary to linger upon Augustine so as to conjure up the distinctive profile of his attitude to the cult of the martyrs. It is, indeed, so distinctive that it should come as no surprise to learn that, in the centuries immediately following his death, Augustine had considerably less influence on the religious behaviour of Latin Christians than many modern estimates of his work would lead us to suppose. He was a striking figure, but one figure only, in a large and well-populated landscape. Without being in any way less intelligent or spiritually more obtuse than the bishop of Hippo, many Christians, in many regions, thought very differently on how they might relate to the saints.

If we turn, for instance, to the Visigothic liturgies of the late sixth and seventh centuries, we find ourselves among the nameless authors of great prayers. These men were acquainted with the works of Augustine and Caesarius. They were masters of the art of sacred rhetoric. They came from a world not so very different from the *studiolo* of Augustine.⁵² But what they offered, in the prayers preserved in the Mozarabic Sacramentary of Toledo, was nothing less than a weighty evocation of the sheer 'magic' of the feasts. Imitation of the martyrs, such as Augustine proposed, had its place in these liturgies, as was also the case, and to a greater degree, in the Roman-Frankish liturgies of the eighth and ninth centuries. But the notion of imitation was a recessive colour. It was overshadowed by the vibrant phrases that gravitated incessantly around

⁵¹ Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme. L'inhumation 'ad sanctos' dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du iiiie au viie siècle* (Paris, 1988), pp. 154–62.

⁵² M.C. Diaz y Diaz, 'Literary Aspects of the Visigothic Liturgy', in E. James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 61–76, and J.N. Hillgarth, 'Popular Religion in Visigothic Spain', in James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain*, pp. 23–5.

themes that came straight from the poems of Prudentius and from the glory days of the fourth-century cult of the 'unconquerable', inimitable martyrs.

Reading the Mozarabic Sacramentary, we are left in no doubt that we are dealing with a book of potent rituals. These rituals derived their power from an incantatory deployment of charged metaphors, associated with the miraculous circumstances of the sufferings of the great martyrs. In these prayers, the believers did not strain to join their hearts to the martyrs, as if to prototypes for their own hope of victory. Rather, they offered their souls (and, often, the souls of their dead kin) as passive objects, on which God would work the great transformation of pain into delight, of constraint into freedom, as he had done in the miraculous bodies of the martyrs:

Eternal God, by whose grace the virgin Eulalia stood protected and blushed not to confess amidst the flames, for, through your promise, you caused her to be scorched by the fire of your love. So may you protect us, through her prayers, amidst the treacherous wall of flame that is this world ...

And so may God [the bishop would proclaim], who once covered her naked body with a drift of pure white snow, make you all snow white and pure from every sin and misdemeanour.⁵³

In such prayers, one is struck by a contrast. On the one hand, the prayers evoked insistently, in language worthy of Prudentius, the unparalleled sufferings of the bodies of the martyrs. These sufferings marked out the saints as unique and utterly otherworldly beings. On the other hand, the prayers called upon the saints to answer all and every prayer for safety and for success in this life.⁵⁴ Confronted by so stark a juxtaposition between otherworldly heroes and the impenitently earthly desires of their devotees, one cannot help but being reminded of the rituals by which modern Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka bless the peasantry. The chants of blessing, the *parittâ*, consist of recitations, in Pali, of the melodramatic scenes that accompanied each stage of the renunciation of the Buddha. Yet these chants are performed so as to bestow 'long life, good health and a fair complexion'. 'The intriguing paradox', writes Professor Tambiah, 'is that the conquests of the Buddha which relate to the withdrawal from life are in the process of transference transmuted into an affirmation of life'.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Liber Sacramentorum* 11.95 and 100, ed. Férotin, pp. 47 and 49.

⁵⁴ e.g. *Liber Sacramentorum* 28.247, ed. Férotin, p. 113 – to Saint Vincent of Saragossa.

⁵⁵ S.J. Tambiah, 'The Magical Power of Words', *Man* 3 (1968), pp. 175–208, at p. 181.

Anyone who wishes to understand how and why the saints came to be enjoyed in late antiquity and in the early Middle Ages must grapple, at some time or other, with that paradox. When I wrote my own book on the *Cult of Saints*, now almost twenty years ago, I had not done that. I had entered with gusto into one aspect of the cult of the saints in late antique Italy and Gaul. My book attempted to do justice to the impressive religious, cultural and artistic energy deployed around the notion of the saints as *patroni*, as protectors and intercessors, on a frankly late Roman, aristocratic model of the exercise of spiritual power.⁵⁶ I explained *how* the saints worked, as *patroni*, in terms that were easily available to contemporaries, and that were, for that reason, easy for them to verbalize. On looking back, I realize that I did not delve as deeply as I might have done into the other side of the problem, for which late Roman contemporaries did not have a ready language. I did not address the deeper, more implicit imaginative structures that explained not only *how* the saints worked (a subject on which late Roman Christians could be trusted to wax eloquent) but *why* the saints worked and, above all, on *what objects*.

Why was it that those whose lives and deaths were associated with such prolonged suffering that they had been, as it were, drastically ‘cauterized’ from all contact with the ‘world’, re-entered the same ‘world’, after death, not only as lordly figures, but as figures deeply implicated in all that was most earthy and most irreducibly profane in the life of the world? One can understand how a Roman patron might be interested in the welfare of his clients. But overwhelming and meticulous concern for semi-feral pigs, for horse herds, for the wombs of women and for the thick, rich mud of the Nile are not interests one automatically associates with late Roman aristocrats.⁵⁷ A different model has to be invoked to explain that aspect of the relation between the saint and the world.

For the evidence appears to show that it was precisely by keeping the saints *inimitable* – and, above all, inimitable in their physical sufferings – that the Christians of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages kept the saints sacred. For, in keeping the saints sacred, they felt able to bring them back into worldly affairs, as invulnerable presences, capable of reaching into the deepest, most potentially polluted and polluting levels of daily life. To build a frail bridge of imitation between oneself and such persons was the exact opposite of what one wanted from them. It did far more than destroy the fun of the festivals. It brought the saints down to the level of their imitators, and, in so doing, it undermined the

⁵⁶ P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, esp. pp. 54–68.

⁵⁷ See P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred. Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 76–8, where I attempt to address this problem in relation to eastern hagiography.

fundamental antithesis between the sacred and the profane. For if sacred figures such as the saints were no longer seen as utterly, inimitably different from the profane, then the very life-force of the profane world, which depended on intermittent contact with the sacred, would wither away.⁵⁸

In her study of certain, extreme forms of late medieval hagiography, Brigitte Cazelles has suggested that the working of such imaginative structures – above all, the need to establish a clear antithesis between the sacred and the profane – accounted for the continued demand for lives of inimitable, heroic saints. Her insights can be fruitfully applied to the late antique and early medieval periods. But a historian of the cult of the saints in the early Middle Ages can not be content with a clear cut either/or. Imitation of the saints was often combined with a sharp sense of their uniquely sacred qualities. Much can be learned from figures who combined such a strong sense of sacrality with fervent belief that heroic sainthood could and should be replicated in their own times.

Gregory of Tours was one such person. He insisted that the faithful should imitate the martyrs. *O homo mortalis ... non agonizes*: human beings, in fact, must always struggle against the allurements of the world.⁵⁹ And they could struggle successfully. All that the Christian needed to do was to make the sign of the Cross with serious intent – *viriliter et non tepide* (the two words speak volumes on Gregory's view of life) – and to trust in Christ: 'For, as I have often said, the Lord himself struggles and triumphs in the martyrs'.⁶⁰ Christ would 'struggle and triumph' once again in those who were faithful to him.

Gregory felt that he lived in a world that dearly needed saints, to challenge the complacency of modern times. When he stated, in the *Preface* of his *History*, that he wrote 'propter eos, qui adpropinquantem finem mundi disperant', we misunderstand late Latin if we translate the phrase, as we so often do, as if it meant that Gregory wrote for those 'who are losing hope [or: who are driven to despair] as they see the end of the world coming nearer and nearer'.⁶¹ In fact, *disperare* means,

⁵⁸ On this issue, see B. Cazelles, *Le corps de sainteté d'après Jean Bouche d'Or, Jehan Paulus et quelques vies des xiii^e et xiiii^e siècles* (Geneva, 1982), esp. pp. 64 and 78. I am indebted to Professor Caroline Bynum for having urged this book upon my attention.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Liber in Gloria Martyrum* 105, ed. B. Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1:2 (Hanover, 1885): III, trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988), p. 132.

⁶⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Liber in Gloria Martyrum* 106, ed. Krusch, p. III, trans. Van Dam, p.133.

⁶¹ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* 1, praef., ed. B. Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1:1 (Hanover, 1951), p. 2, trans. L. Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours. The History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 67. A.H.B. Breukelaar, *Historiography and Episcopal Authority in Sixth-Century Gaul. The Histories of Gregory of Tours Interpreted in Historical Context*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 57 (Göttingen, 1994), esp. p. 300 and n. 23 with pp. 52–5 and 169–74, and M. Heinzlmann, *Gregor von Tours (538–594). 'Zehn Bücher der Geschichte'. Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzept im 6. Jht.* (Darmstadt, 1994), pp. 69–101, both accept the conventional translation.

rather, 'to give up all hope', 'to expect no longer'.⁶² What worried Gregory was that, apart from himself and his few pious friends – persons who took the approach of the end of the world with deadly seriousness – nobody seemed to give any thought to that distant event. Their conduct showed this only too clearly. Gregory, then, did not look out at a society shrinking beneath the chill shadow of the approach of the Apocalypse. What he saw, rather, was a Merovingian Gaul more like the world that recent scholarship has presented to us. He surveyed, with religious disquiet, a basically secure and sophisticated post-Roman society, still confidently profane in many of its reflexes, the majority of whose members were stolidly indifferent to the approach of the Last Judgement. A large part of his literary work was devoted to making the saints 'stand out'. They were the only truly active and vibrant figures in a world where nothing else moved, becalmed as it was in the windless, moral doldrums of the *saeculum*.

Not only was sanctity needed; it was possible. But this was an ancient sanctity, modelled on the martyrs and on the great ascetics. For nobody had yet told the bishop of Tours about the *Adelsheiligen*. He did not know that such creatures existed. He did not believe that aristocratic lineage, nor even that a well-established family tradition of episcopal rule, conveyed sanctity. Indeed, like any pensive observer of the Roman governing class, from Seneca to Ammianus Marcellinus, Gregory had a low view of the moral fibre of the majority of his peers. Violence, sensuality and a weakness for the bottle seemed to characterize only too many of his well-born contemporaries. Descent *de stemmate Romanorum* was no guarantee in itself that a bishop would show the high degree of physical courage, the integrity and the self-control that were necessary for a bishop's tasks.

What conveyed these qualities was grace, and a somewhat old-fashioned grace at that. For Gregory had inherited from Augustine, perhaps through Augustine's Gallic admirers, that streak in the Augustinian system that emphasized that the *saeculum* still needed heroes – persons endowed with the gift of perseverance: 'strong figures who could tame the unjust powers of the world'.⁶³

⁶² For Gregory's use of *desperare* to mean 'not expect, lose hope of', cf. *Decem Libri historiarum* 4.12, ed. Krusch, p. 142 with n. 2, citing Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letter* 2.1: *nec accipiebat instrumenta desperans*, trans. O.M. Dalton, *The Letters of Sidonius* (Oxford, 1915), 1:35: 'nor does he trouble to furnish himself with deeds, knowing it hopeless to prove a title'. See also, *Sortes Sangallenses* 33, R.8: *Habebis spem fidei, sed de desperato*, in A. Dold, *Die Orakelsprüche im St. Galler Palimpsestcodex 908*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Sitzungsberichte 225:4 (1948), p. 24, with note on p. 110: 'from someone you do not expect'.

By contrast to the insouciance castigated by Gregory, expectation of the coming end of the world was the attitude expected of religiously minded persons: e.g. the formula for a legacy to a pious foundation: Marculf, *Formulae* 2.3, ed. A. Uddholm (Uppsala, 1962) p. 178.

⁶³ S. Muhlberger, *The Fifth Century Chroniclers*, ARCA Monographs 27 (Leeds, 1990), p. 131.

This was not the fluid, bubbling grace that had encouraged so many humble groups – women as well as men, married as well as celibate, lay persons as well as clergy – to strive towards the martyrs, as in the churches of Augustine’s Africa. It was the grace required by a human ice-breaker, before whose solid prow the ice-floes of the *saeculum* broke and gave way.

But, for Gregory, such grace was still active in Gaul. It was a matter of pride to him that it had come to members of his own family. Nicetius, bishop of Lyons from 552 to 573, was the uncle of his mother. Here, plainly, was a man predestinate. He had been blessed from the womb. Nicetius was one of those who had received ‘the first and basic act of pity shown by a merciful God, who heaps the wealth of grace upon the undeserving and who sanctifies the one who is not yet born’.⁶⁴ And how did Gregory know this? Nicetius had picked up little Gregory, then aged eight, and had sat him on his knee, but not before adjusting his robe: ‘holding his fingers on the edge of his garment he covered himself with it so well that my body was never touched by his blessed limbs’.⁶⁵ Would that all clergymen had such *cautela* – so deeply internalized a sense of clerical decorum! The gesture showed the ‘wealth of grace’ that God had ‘heaped’ upon the bishop’s soul.

With Gregory we can glimpse how a religious person of the late sixth century strove to make his own the awesome qualities of the saints of old. Their sacrality and fierce deaths did not hold them at a distance from him. Gregory grew up talking about saints with his mother at the fireside.⁶⁶ His first lessons in reading and writing from the Scriptures enabled him to copy out a remedy with which to heal his father’s gout.⁶⁷ He lived among persons whom he admired especially for the reverent awe with which they would pass on stories of the saints.⁶⁸ He wrote profusely so as to do the same himself. He was an active member of what we might call a ‘hagiological subculture’.

Faced by a man such as Gregory and his many tales of the saints, we must remember what the cognitive psychologists tell us. The very act of thought contains a strong narrative element. ‘Asleep and awake it is just the same: we are telling ourselves stories all the time’.⁶⁹ There is no reason not to suppose that the stories told so often by Gregory did not

⁶⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Liber Vitae Patrum* 8 pref., ed. Krusch, p. 241; trans. E. James, *Gregory of Tours. Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1985), p. 65.

⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Liber Vitae Patrum* 8.2, ed. Krusch, p. 242, trans. James, p. 67.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum* 3, ed. Krusch, p. 300, trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours. Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool, 1988), p. 20.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum* 39, ed. Krusch, p. n322, trans. Van Dam, p. 51.

⁶⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Liber Vitae Patrum* 17 pref., ed. Krusch, trans. James, p. 114.

⁶⁹ L. Hudson, in *Times Literary Supplement* 25 January 1980, p. 85, cited by M. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka. An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi, 1983), p. 86.

become part of his own story to himself about himself. The raw dramas of the lives of the saints entered the thought flow of an entire group of men and women, such as Gregory himself, who had created for themselves a 'hagiological subculture'. Ethnographers can see this happening, over the years in a living society, as the Buddhist monks in modern Sri Lanka absorb dramatic tales of the trials of the Buddha. Even as lay persons, they had taken these archaic narratives, set in a distant time, often characterized by redundant, barely explicable violence against the self, into their own thought flow and, hence, into their own inner narrative about themselves. Of the great monk Paññānda, Michael Carrithers can write: 'having so much hagiography about him to begin with, he easily became the stuff of hagiography itself'.⁷⁰

One such person, perhaps, was the lady Blatta, who was buried in Rome in the church of Saint Anastasia in 688:

et quia martyribus Christi studiosa cohaesit
Christigeri meruit martyris esse comes

And because with zeal she clung to the martyrs of Christ, she has deserved to be the companion [perhaps through *ad sanctos* burial] of the Christ-bearing martyr herself.⁷¹

Historians should not underestimate persons like the lady Blatta, although they barely appear in the sources for the religious history of the early Middle Ages. But they were there. Sixty years old, Blatta had been loyal to priests and generous to the poor. She had instilled *puđicitia* in all her children. She was the sort of grandmother, a true *nonna*, who would have fostered many a little Gregory of Tours. Ethnographers of living Buddhist societies still find themselves challenged to understand 'the actual replication of a living tradition'.⁷² Medievalists, I think, face a similar challenge. Persons such as Gregory and the lady Blatta are so welcome to us, as they give a hint of how a section of the religious world of the early Middle Ages set about the 'replication of a living tradition' by establishing a constant, warm relation with the saints.

With a date such as 688, we have reached the end of late antiquity. But recent studies of the hagiography of the medieval west indicate that the story continues. The medieval cult of the saints owed its contours to the continued grinding together of two massive tectonic plates – the urge to imitate and the urge to admire. The monumental study of André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident*, published in 1981, dealt with

⁷⁰ Carrithers, *The Forest Monks*, p. 88.

⁷¹ E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres*, no. 208B.3 (Zurich, 1970), 1:49.

⁷² Carrithers, *The Forest Monks*, p. 74.

the change in attitudes to sanctity in the later Middle Ages, that led to the emergence, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, of 'les saints imitables' – of imitable saints, cut to a more human measure, presented as models of Christian behaviour appropriate to a more complex and urbanized society.⁷³ Within a year, however, the brilliant analysis of vernacular saints' lives in northern France, *Le corps de sainteté* by Brigitte Cazelles, drew attention to a strong current of devotion that flowed in the opposite direction. She pointed out the extent to which an 'archaic' image of sanctity continued to feed the imagination of believers on utterly *inimitable* figures, conjured up from the distant, late antique past. Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Christina and Jehan Bouche d'Or – Saint John Chrysostom as the wild hermit – are troubling *revenants*. They are avatars from a very ancient Christian east.⁷⁴ They fit awkwardly into our image of a tidy, *bourgeois* Gothic Europe, where each group can be supposed to have enjoyed its own, made-to-measure saint, and where the cunning of the medievalist can be fruitfully deployed in matching the aspirations, the social codes and the needs for empowerment of each group in medieval society to an appropriate 'role model' saint.

This juxtaposition, within the same high medieval society, of two very different images of sanctity, calls for a few, necessarily brief, concluding observations. The first is that the tenacity of 'late antique' forms of the image of the saints, revealed in studies such as those of Brigitte Cazelles, should cause us, perhaps, to redefine the boundaries of Western Europe. Throughout this period, Catholic Western Europe was flanked by Christian societies that had not lost touch with the late antique imaginative structures that had favoured, on the whole, the emergence of *inimitable* saints. No Augustine had come to spoil the fun of the festivals, and to cause the shadow of his austere insistence on the imitation of the saints to fall between the faithful and more ancient forms of the enjoyment of the saints, through heady participation in their triumph. Such post-Augustinian developments did not occur in Greece, in the Balkans, in Ethiopia and in medieval and early modern Russia. And yet western and eastern Christendom never became entirely separate worlds. Both were the heirs of late antiquity. In the year 1400, in a continuum that stretched from Novgorod to London, the Christian

⁷³ A. Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 241 (Rome, 1981), see also his most illuminating second thoughts on the subject, 'Saints admirables et saints imitables: les fonctions de l'hagiographie ont-elles changé aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge?', *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (iii^e-xiii^e siècle)*, Collection de l'École française de Rome 149 (Rome, 1991), pp. 161–72. See now P. Geary, 'Saints, Scholars and Society. The Elusive Goal', *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 141 (Binghamton, NY, 1996), pp. 1–22.

⁷⁴ Cazelles, *Le corps de sainteté*, p. 19.

imagination continued to be fed by legends whose dramatic structures, whose insistent physicality and whose notions of the sacred still carried with them the distinctive flavour of fifth-century Syria and of Coptic Egypt.⁷⁵

We should not isolate the hagiography of western Europe, by privileging only its more distinctive and original features. There is no denying that the sudden development of the notion of imitable saints in the later medieval west was a notable phenomenon. In recent years, the notion that late medieval saints were expected to function as 'role models' has stimulated a series of historiographical endeavours. Historians of literature and society have attempted to do justice to the full complexity of the relationships between saints, their patrons and their audiences in the differing regions of western Europe. But, seen from the viewing point of a wider Christian world, the notion of imitable sanctity is a theme as vivid and as colourful, but as superficial, as a growth of lichen across an ancient rock. If we listen to what Byzantinists and students of medieval and early modern Russia (and even students of medieval and modern Ethiopia) can tell us about how the saints were perceived in those Christian regions, western medievalists may find an answer, through the valid comparison of cognate imaginative structures, to many of the mysteries which still perplex them.

Last but not least, the greatest mystery of all remains: how do saints produce saints? That is, how, for many religious persons, does the inimitable come to be absorbed in such a way as to provide a glimpse of wider, heroic horizons beyond the cramped confines of their normal life? On this issue, it is a relief to learn that the saints tend to give as many different answers to that question as do professors. For they also were products of very different spiritual landscapes, formed by the differing pressures of the tectonic plates to which we have referred. To take a few examples. In the months before the death of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, in 1897, the companion of her bedside, Sister Agnès de Jésus (in fact, Thérèse's elder sister) spoke to her of certain saints who had lived extraordinary lives, such as Saint Symeon Stylites. Thérèse was unimpressed. She wished, rather, for saints who had fear of nothing in this world, such as Saint Cecilia, who had not feared even to be married.⁷⁶ The late

⁷⁵ e.g. T.J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography. Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 280–92, on the English vernacular legends of Saint Christina, and G. Lenhoff, *The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb*, UCLA Slavic Studies 19 (Columbus, OH, 1989), pp. 60–1, on the cult of Saint Christina in Novgorod, later replaced by the equally dramatic *Passion* of Boris and Gleb.

⁷⁶ Saint Thérèse de Jésus et de la Sainte Face, *Le carnet jaune* 30.6.1, *Derniers Entretiens* (Paris, 1971), p. 233; cf. 21.8.3*, p. 390, on the Virgin Mary: 'On la montre inabordable, il faudrait la montrer imitable.'

antique historian (who tends to have a soft spot for Syrian holy-men of melodramatic disposition) is chastened by such words.

Thérèse of Lisieux was an exquisite example of a very modern Catholic piety. For when we draw nearer to the culture of the later Middle Ages, we meet persons for whom the ancient, inimitable saints had lost nothing of their appeal. In his autobiography, Ignatius of Loyola describes how, when still at Manresa, in 1522, he had tested his mind. Always the fine psychologist, he observed that:

When he was thinking about things of the world, he took delight in them, but afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside he found that he was dry and discontented. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem barefoot and eating nothing but herbs and undergoing all the rigors that he saw the saints had endured [and by these saints, Ignatius meant the formidable Desert Fathers of early Byzantium, transferred to the west in all their archaic ferocity in books such as the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine] not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside, he remained content and happy.⁷⁷

Heroic saints, their unearthly image transmitted from the days of Prudentius, were still available, also, to give courage and a sense of drama to the lives of lesser figures. In 1576, a young girl from Seville, recruited as a nun by Saint Teresa of Avila, confessed to Teresa that while she was being brutally battered by her parents for refusing to marry, 'she had felt almost nothing, for she thought of what Saint Agnes had suffered, a thought which the Lord brought into her memory'.⁷⁸ Somehow, Ignatius and the unknown nun from Seville had, like Gregory of Tours a thousand years before them, absorbed the inimitable. By the manner in which they had remembered the saints, they had contributed to 'the actual replication of a living tradition'.

It is the purpose of this article to suggest to medievalists that the continuous tension, evident in medieval hagiography, between imitation of the saints and other forms of imaginative appropriation of their power, goes back directly to the late antique period. It is a tension that can be traced back to the fact that, for men such as Augustine and the poet Prudentius, differing images of the martyrs and differing attitudes to their festivals implied divergent views, also, on the relation between grace and human nature, on the possible relations between members of the Christian community and its shared heroes, and, ultimately, on the nature of the boundary between the sacred and the profane. These were weighty

⁷⁷ *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. J.C. Olin and J.F. O'Callaghan (New York, 1974), p. 24.

⁷⁸ Teresa of Avila, *Las Fundaciones* 26.8, ed. T. Alvarez, *Obras Completas* (Burgos, 1998), p. 1006.

topics. A debate upon them, begun around the year 400, was by no means concluded by the year 1500. It is this unresolved, late antique debate that goes some way to explain the remarkable diversity in function and in imaginative content that characterized the medieval cult of saints.⁷⁹

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⁷⁹ This article was delivered at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds, 12–15 July 1999.