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Negotiating 'Popular' Religion: Clerical and Lay Culture in Thirteenth-Century Exempla

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**Negotiating 'Popular' Religion: Clerical and Lay Culture in
Thirteenth-Century Exempla**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

Considering the long trajectory of the writing of church history, it is surprising that historians have turned to study popular religious history only recently. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, men like Eusebius of Caesarea and Evagrius Scholasticus began documenting the development of the Church and its councils, and later historians within the Church continued such work through the centuries. Indeed, until the twentieth century, religious history was dominated by theologians and church historians, whose affiliations are clearly evident in their work. Most focused on official church history, but when they did discuss the religion of the laity, Catholics tended to emphasize the Middle Ages as a deeply pious “Age of Faith”, while Protestants, such as G.G. Coulton, emphasized practices and beliefs they saw as superstitions in an attempt to discredit Catholicism. Either way, early interpretations were inextricably linked to the scholar’s own Christian faith.

In the twentieth century, scholars outside of the Church began to turn to religious history, both at the institutional and popular levels. Interest in popular religion coincided with the rise of sociology and anthropology as academic disciplines and as influences on history writing. One of the first scholars to tackle the issue of popular religion in the Middle Ages, French sociologist Gabriel Le Bras, set the tone for much of the scholarship on the topic when he claimed that the idea of an “Age of Faith” was a myth, and that full Christianization, as was

achieved in the early modern period, had not existed in the Middle Ages.¹ This idea has led to the characterization of medieval religion into two cultures—one elite, learned, and clerical, the other popular, illiterate, and lay—debate about which has dominated the study of popular religion for the last few decades.

Probably the first to articulate the cultural divide between elite and popular religion was David Hume, the English Enlightenment philosopher, in the 1750s in his *Natural History of Religion*. Peter Brown was the first, in 1981, to make the explicit connection between Hume's ideas and those of modern scholarship, but, nevertheless, Brown argues, modern scholars have implicitly carried on Hume's "two-tiered model."² Hume argued that monotheistic belief was only truly conceivable for the highly educated elite of the Church; all others were incapable of rational, abstract thought, and thus the "vulgar" masses tended towards polytheism.³ The two-tiered model, then, tends to see religious change only among the elite through the corrupting pressure of the vulgar masses, whose culture, then, they assume to be uniform and static.⁴ It goes without saying that this analysis sharply cleaves the population into elite and popular cultures opposed to one another, a view that has found favor in the twentieth century, particularly among those approaching the problem from a sociological or anthropological perspective.

¹ Gabriel Le Bras, *Etudes de sociologie religieuse* (Paris: Presses universitaire de France, 1955).

² Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13, 17.

³ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 13-5.

⁴ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 15.

Early modern French historian Jean Delumeau was perhaps the first to prominently reassert Le Bras' thesis of incomplete Christianization in the Middle Ages. In his 1971 study of religion from the Protestant and Counter Reformations to the Enlightenment, he claimed that a "deep-seated and persistent paganism frequently camouflaged with the most superficial veneer" of Christianity characterized even the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, despite the efforts of reformers.⁵ Another early modern historian, Keith Thomas, carried on this attitude in his 1974 book, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, when he claimed that "the hold of any kind of orthodox religion upon the mass of the population was never more than partial."⁶ Thomas' work was heavily informed by the growing influence of cultural anthropology, as was that of *Annales* historian Jacques Le Goff and his student Jean-Claude Schmitt. Both stressed a model of two opposing cultures, one elite and literate, one popular and based in folklore. In his work on the early Middle Ages, Le Goff wrote of culture blocking itself into these two levels, "a relatively hermetic stratification" that discouraged transmission between them.⁷ Schmitt carried on his mentor's view of opposing folk and literate cultures in his well-known 1979 study of a persistent popular cult surrounding a shrine to a martyred greyhound in France, which seemed to have

⁵ Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism Between Luther and Voltaire* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 225. Originally published as *Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1971).

⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (1971. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 639.

⁷ Jacques Le Goff, "Clerical Culture and Folklore Traditions in Merovingian Civilization," in *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 158.

more in common with pagan folklore than official Christianity.⁸ Schmitt's findings seemed to reinforce the conclusions of Delumeau and others that Christianity had been only a superficial veneer barely covering the paganism of popular beliefs and practices in the Middle Ages.

Beginning even in the mid-1970s, scholars began to question such an analysis of medieval religion. One of the first to temper Le Goff's strict opposition of elite and popular culture was the Italian scholar Raoul Manselli. Manselli wrote that popular and learned religion were not totally distinct, that high and low religion did interact, particularly at the parish level, and he stressed that "there is not a qualitative difference, for the historian" between the two.⁹ At the same time, however, Manselli maintained the idea that "during the High Middle Ages, one rarely witnesses a true Christianization," and that pagan survivals resisted the influence of the Church.¹⁰

By the early 1980s, the historical trend had begun to swing away from a conception of opposing cultures and an emphasis on the pagan and folkloric, and back towards a Christian Middle Ages, understood in a different way. In a 1980 survey of methodologies, Pierre Boglioni still spoke of "true pagan survivals," but emphasized a more total view of popular religion that encompassed all aspects, Christian and non-Christian, of the religious life and mindset of the people. He

⁸ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, healer of children since the thirteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Originally published as *Le saint lévrier: Guinefort, guérisseur d'enfants depuis le XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

⁹ Raoul Manselli, *La Religion populaire au Moyen Age: problèmes de méthode et d'histoire* (Montreal: Institut d'études médiévales Albert-le-Grand, 1975), 16, 18. All translations of this text are my own.

¹⁰ Manselli, *La Religion populaire*, 21, 25.

was also one of the first to insist that popular and learned religion had been “in constant dialogue” with one another, and that we cannot understand the religious culture of the Middle Ages without considering both.¹¹ A year later, Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich spoke of a dialectic between official and popular cultures in his watershed collection of essays, *Medieval Popular Culture*. In a survey of a wide variety of genres of medieval literature, he stressed the mutual influence between elite and popular culture, and speaking of superstitious practices, he wrote, “Even if this was different from official Christianity, it was by no means ‘pagan’.”¹² Thus the 1980s saw historians turning away from a two-tiered approach toward an understanding of medieval religion that saw less cultural division and tended to emphasize the Christian over the pagan.

One of the most important voices in the reaction against the earlier model was John Van Engen, in his oft-referenced article, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem.”¹³ Van Engen argued for a fundamentally Christian Middle Ages, as the title indicates, grounded in the cultural structure of Christianity and its rites and rituals. He confronted the arguments of Le Goff and Schmitt head on, declaring that “it is absurd to draw an absolute social and intellectual line between the ‘bookish’ and the ‘customary’ cultures.”¹⁴ The

¹¹ Pierre Boglioni, “Some Methodological Reflections on the Study of Medieval Popular Religion,” in *5000 Years of Popular Culture: Popular Culture Before Printing*, ed. Fred E.H. Schroeder (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980), 199.

¹² Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. Janos M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 90. Originally published as *Problemy srednevekovoi narodnoi kul'tury* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981).

¹³ John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (June 1986): 519-52.

¹⁴ Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages,” 550.

arguments of this article have been highly influential on more recent trends in writing about popular religion that have more thoroughly rejected the division of cultures.

In the last ten years, the work of a new generation of scholars has begun to question whether we can even still use popular religion as an appropriate analytical term. Recent articles by younger scholars such as Simon Yarrow, Carl Watkins, Catherine Rider, and Salvador Ryan have all argued that official and popular religion should not be considered fixed categories, that rather they changed over time and depending on the medieval author's own perspective.¹⁵ It is into this current dialogue that I offer the present work. I, too, question whether there is any meaningful division between the world-views of the clergy and laity as a whole, and I would like to focus on the manifold areas in which culture was shared that have been often-overlooked in previous scholarship.

Like other recent studies of popular religion, I have approached the issue through thirteenth-century exempla—short stories used to illustrate important points in a sermon. Many have focused on the exempla of popular thirteenth-century preachers such as Etienne de Bourbon and Jacques de Vitry, but relatively little work has been done in English on the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of

¹⁵ Simon Yarrow, "Narrative, Audience and the Negotiation of Community in Twelfth-Century English Miracle Collections;" Catherine Rider, "Elite and Popular Superstitions in the *Exempla* of Stephen of Bourbon," both in *Elite and Popular Religion: papers read at the 2004 summer meeting and the 2005 winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2006); Carl Watkins, "'Folklore' and 'Popular Religion' in Britain during the Middle Ages," *Folklore* 115 (2004): 140-50; Salvador Ryan, "'The Most Contentious of Terms': Towards a New Understanding of Late Medieval 'Popular Religion'," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003): 281-90.

Caesarius of Heisterbach.¹⁶ Caesarius was a contemporary of Jacques de Vitry and Etienne de Bourbon, and they, and many other lesser-known preachers of the thirteenth century, relied heavily on the *Dialogus Miraculorum* for their exempla. In fact, it was one of the most widely read and copied works of the thirteenth century, reaching an audience even wider than originally intended, and more than fifty manuscripts still remain.

Caesarius himself was born around 1180 and entered the Cistercian Order around 1199 after having studied at the cathedral school in Cologne throughout his adolescence.¹⁷ He came to Heisterbach Abbey, not far from Cologne and only recently settled in 1192. At Heisterbach, Caesarius first served as master of novices and then eventually as prior of the abbey, a position that allowed him to travel with his abbot on visitations quite frequently.¹⁸ From the *Dialogus*, we also see him very frequently in Cologne, a major center of trade at this time, and he seems to have known the city and its people well. The confluence of these facts have leant Caesarius' work a worldliness that one would not typically expect from a monk, and it makes his stories all the more colorful, credible, and in touch with contemporary culture, lay and clerical.

Caesarius wrote the *Dialogus Miraculorum* between 1219 and 1223 to educate novices of his Order and to preserve stories of miracles known in his

¹⁶ For some recent studies of Etienne de Bourbon and Jacques de Vitry, see Rider, "Elite and Popular Superstitions;" Monica Sandor, "The Popular Preaching of Jacques de Vitry," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1993; Marygrace Peters, "Speculum vitae et fidei: The exempla as an historical source in medieval preaching for understanding its context and audience, with emphasis on Jacques de Vitry's 'Sermones Vulgares'," PhD diss., Boston University, 1993.

¹⁷ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Caesarius of Heisterbach."

¹⁸ G.G. Coulton, introduction to *Dialogus Miraculorum* by Caesarius of Heisterbach, ed. and trans. Henry von Essen Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1929), xv.

Order.¹⁹ The text is set up as a dialogue between a monk who tells illustrative stories and a novice who asks questions and makes occasional exclamations of wonderment, within a framework of twelve books, each treating a different theme: conversion, contrition, confession, temptation, demons, singleness of heart, the Blessed Virgin, divers visions, the Eucharist, miracles, the dying, and the dead. One of the most remarkable aspects of the *Dialogus* is how diligently Caesarius cited the sources of his stories, in a way quite rare for a medieval author. The exempla of Jacques de Vitry and Etienne de Bourbon often only begin with “Audivi quod...”, but nearly every story of the *Dialogus* references from whence it came, usually with the name of the source—typically a fellow monk or abbot, occasionally Caesarius’ own personal experience—and the religious house where he resided. Thus, his stories largely came out of the contemporary culture and provide a rare glimpse into the religious culture of the early thirteenth century. His audience, as I have said, were Cistercian novices, uneducated and still, in essence, laymen, so the text should reflect that culture and thus was also well-suited to a purely lay audience. Yet, Caesarius was a highly educated monk, having spent his youth studying theology, and that influence was not lost in pandering to his audience. The stories have filtered through his own knowledge and background, and in the process of handing them back out to the culture at large, he reinforced and legitimized their content. This unique process of formation that occurred in the compilation of the *Dialogus*

¹⁹ Rosemary Drage Hale, “Caesarius of Heisterbach,” in *Medieval Germany: an Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep (New York: Garland, 2001), 83.

Miraculorum, and, indeed, all collections of medieval exempla, provides the historian with a rare glimpse at an interface between clerical and lay culture.

The *Dialogus Miraculorum* contains a wealth of knowledge on a variety of aspects of life in the thirteenth century, but I have focused specifically on certain beliefs and practices that appear to have been shared by clergy and laity alike. Chapter one sets the religious scene of the thirteenth century, focusing on the clergy and their roles in relation to the Church as an institution and lay Christians en masse. Chapter two looks at the way in which the *Dialogus Miraculorum* and other exempla portray demons and saints to see what it can tell us about the way the clergy and laity conceived of the supernatural. Chapter three analyzes certain practices inherited from the pre-Christian past and asks whether they should rightly be considered superstition or religion. After all of this, I would like to suggest a different way of conceiving of “popular” religion, one which does not create a dichotomy but which takes into account all that was shared between the clergy and laity in the creation of a uniquely medieval world-view.

I Mediating Church and Flock

On November 11, 1215, some 1,200 church officials from across Christendom gathered in Rome for what would be the largest, and arguably most-important, medieval church council ever assembled—the Fourth Lateran Council.¹ It made pronouncements on a wide variety of issues that had characterized church discourse for the past century or more: it defined transubstantiation, set a harsh tone against heresy, pushed an ambitious program of reform within the Church, and called for preparation of a new Crusade, to name only a few. The council signaled major developments, and merely reading its decrees could give one the impression that the medieval Church was very centralized and mobilized, as it came to be in later centuries, particularly after the Counter-Reformation. In reality, however, the medieval Church had a problem of authority lacking power: it could issue sweeping decrees, but disseminating them and enforcing them were difficult. The Church did seek uniformity, but that uniformity encompassed fairly general notions of the faith and basic practices, which John Van Engen has boiled down to the following:

baptism at birth and last rites at death to secure eternal salvation, rudimentary knowledge of the Apostle's Creed and Lord's Prayer, rest on Sunday and feast days (holy days) with attendance at mass, fasting at specified times, confession once a year after 1215 (usually Shrove Tuesday), communion at Easter, the payment of various fees and tithes at specified times, and alms for the needy (partly as a penitential exercise).²

¹ R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10.

² John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages," 546. To this I would add the cult of the saints, which, as Peter Brown has shown, was developed as much by the Church as by popular impetus. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*.

Responsibility for disseminating the basic faith, encouraging participation in these practices, and spreading relevant decrees of councils like the Fourth Lateran, was left to the vast majority of clergy—the priests, canons, monks—who served as mediators between the institutional Church—the upper ranks of the hierarchy that produced decrees of councils like the Fourth Lateran—and the majority of Christians. Thus the clergy had to meet the demands of both the Church and the laity, whose demands were similar to those of the Church with added social expectations. Priests may have had the most direct contact with the laity, but monks, too, were involved in lay life in as much as they accepted offerings for masses for the dead, controlled large tracts of land and local mills, and served as models of behavior for all Christians. By examining the clergy's role as mediators between the Church and the laity, we may catch a glimpse of the religious milieu in which the exempla were created and perhaps better understand the shared culture that developed from such close contact.

The Church's primary expectations for the clergy focused around their roles as ministers to the laity and as model Christians; thus, reforms, education, and oversight were necessary to keep demands met. Around the turn of the thirteenth century, the Church began in earnest to police the behavior of the clergy more closely, in both the regular and secular realms. The religious orders had long practiced centralized oversight. Cluny was the first to supervise daughter houses and call a yearly meeting of priors, but the Cistercian practice of visitation and general chapters came to be the direct model that the Fourth Lateran Council tried to apply universally. The *Carta Caritatis*, drawn up by

abbot Stephen Harding in 1119, established the customs of general chapter meetings and visitations to maintain regularity and moral standards for the order. Every year, all of the abbots of Cistercian houses would gather at Cîteaux for the General Chapter where, according to the *Carta Caritatis*, they “shall consult upon matters that appertain to the salvation of souls, and shall ordain what is to be corrected, or what carried out in the observance of the rule and the institutions of the Order.”³ In addition, at least once a year the abbot of a mother-house would travel to each daughter house to ensure that all were performing their duties sufficiently and keeping moral order. All in all, the *Carta* provided ample means by which the order could reform itself when needed, and served as a good model for reform in other spheres. The Fourth Lateran Council extended the Cistercian methods of oversight to all monasteries and nunneries in 1215. Canon twelve instituted a general chapter meeting for all abbots and priors of orders not accustomed to meet already, over which two Cistercians and two of the present abbots would preside, and at such meetings they would appoint “religious and prudent persons” to “visit every abbey in the province...correcting and reforming those things that need correction and reform.”

Before the Fourth Lateran Council, the papacy had already begun the use of visitations among secular clergy, first as a means of stopping heresy, and later as a general method of oversight and disseminating information from the higher levels of ecclesiastical hierarchy to the lower. In 1184, Pope Lucius III issued the papal bull *Ad abolendam*, which charged all bishops and archbishops to visit

³ Cistercian Curia, “Charta Caritatis,” The Order of St. Benedict, <http://www.osb.org/cist/charta.html> (accessed March 30, 2009).

parishes wherein heresy had been reported once or twice a year to investigate such claims, a process that established the foundations of the Inquisition. The act of episcopal visitation, however, also became important for maintaining order within the dioceses. It could be a way for bishops both to pass orders down to the parishes and to observe any problems or complaints, and, as R.N. Swanson has suggested, lower down in the hierarchy, rural chapters “could have operated as educational and instructional bodies, to spread ideas and check on the activities of the clergy.”⁴ Though it may be difficult to assess how diligently clerics actually performed their visitation duties, some extensive visitation records do remain; most date to the fourteenth century or later, but those of Eudes Rigaud, Archbishop of Rouen from 1248 to 1275, is one of the earliest remaining and best sources on medieval clergy at the lower levels.

Eudes kept his *Register* for nearly his entire pontificate, from 1248 to 1269, when he left on the Eighth Crusade with King Louis IX. In it, he wrote of worldly monks leaving the cloister, eating meat freely, and sleeping in feather beds; and incompetent priests playing games, becoming drunk, and being sexually incontinent. What he found seems to give the impression of a clergy who are lacking in their religious vocation, yet the evidence can be deceiving. There are many days for which Eudes simply wrote, “May 17. At Louviers, at our own expense,” for example, for which we could assume there were no problems worth noting at that place.⁵ The only things mentioned were errors and abuses, so that

⁴ Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, 49.

⁵ Eudes Rigaud, *The Register of Eudes of Rouen*, trans. Sydney M. Brown, ed. Jeremiah F. O’Sullivan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 84.

is what comes through overwhelmingly in the *Register* of Eudes, as well as other visitation records. In this case and others, the impulse behind visitation was not necessarily to highlight abuses—indeed, Eudes’ *Register* was a private document that would not have been seen publicly—but rather to correct them, to reform the clergy so that they could provide better care of souls and religious edification for their congregations. Though it would be remiss to think that all medieval clergy were so thoroughly corrupt, still, it is evident based on this text and others that there were problems that needed correcting.

All of these aforementioned efforts were targeted towards a reform effort that was very much a part of the Church ethos in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and which was at the heart of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council. Near the beginning of the list of canons, the Council began focusing on reform, beginning with Canon six, which stated that provincial synods should be held annually to correct abuses and reform morals. These abuses were much the same as the ones Eudes Rigaud would document a few decades later: sexual incontinence (Canon fourteen); drunkenness (Canon fifteen); engaging in secular pursuits, like frequenting taverns, playing games of chance, or wearing “red or green garments or curiously sewed together gloves, or beak-shaped shoes or gilded bridles, saddles, pectoral ornaments (for horses), spurs, or anything else indicative of superfluity” (Canon sixteen); or, for monks, neglecting their duties in favor of banquets, gossip, or sleep (Canon seventeen). Others were more institutional in nature, such as those against illegitimate sons of canons inheriting their fathers’ offices (Canon thirty-one), simony (Canon sixty-three),

and clerics demanding payment for services such as burial or administering the sacraments (Canons sixty-five and sixty-six).

Apart from these, maintaining a standard of clerical education was also very important, at the Fourth Lateran Council and to the reform movement in general. Canon eleven confirmed a decree from the Third Lateran Council that all cathedral churches should employ a master to teach basic Latin grammar and other knowledge to the clergy, and it extended it to all other churches with sufficient means. It is difficult to make broad generalizations about educational levels in thirteenth-century parishes, but it is likely that most priests knew at least rudimentary doctrine and some Latin before their ordinations. R.N. Swanson has even suggested that “quite possibly most of the clergy received no structured training at all...the majority may have gained the required knowledge simply through a form of apprenticeship, by working with their local priest before and after ordination, and thereby picking up what was needed.”⁶

The latter observation sheds light on an important aspect of medieval education: namely, that it did not have to come from books. In his exempla, Jacques de Vitry included a story from the Life of St. Anthony in which philosophers visited the saint in the desert and mocked him for his illiteracy. Anthony asked them whether knowledge or letters had come first, and they admitted that knowledge had because it had invented letters. “Therefore,” the saint responded, “knowledge is able to exist without letters...therefore he who has

⁶ Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, 56.

knowledge does not need letters.”⁷ In a largely illiterate culture, medieval people believed knowledge could be equally gained from divine inspiration and experiences. In the book “Of Miracles,” Caesarius of Heisterbach wrote of a simple-minded deacon and monk whom God granted the ability to preach the gospel in a dream. Once he awoke, “he expounded it so excellently and efficaciously, though entirely unprepared up to this day, that he utterly bewildered all his hearers.”⁸ Good deeds seem to have been just as important as good words for medieval priests. This comes through in the text of the Fourth Lateran Council; in describing pastoral education, both canons nine and ten used the same language that the teacher will “instruct them by word *and example*” (Emphasis mine). Providing a simple and humble example to parishioners could be just as valuable at the lowest levels of the hierarchy as traditional education. Caesarius of Heisterbach devoted an entire book of the *Dialogus Miraculorum* to “Singleness of Heart” or clerical simplicity, which nearly always connoted simple-mindedness. He told many stories of clerics who received rewards and church offices, despite their shortcomings, because of pure intentions and the right actions: a simple monk received the abbacy of St. Denis for his humility, another for carrying his required needle, and one illiterate priest convinced Pope Innocent III to restore his church to him because of his simple nature.⁹

⁷ Jacques de Vitry, *Exempla*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (1890; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 30. All quotes from this document are my own translations.

⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. and trans. Henry von Essen Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1929), 10:3.

⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 6:14, 6:15, 6:29.

Such emphasis on words and deeds gets to the heart of what both the church hierarchy and lay people expected of the parish priest. Jeffrey Denton has suggested that “the reforming hierarchy had a wide and well-defined understanding of parochial duties and thus acknowledged, at least by implication and surely often in practice, the importance of individual qualities other than those derived from formal education.”¹⁰ These individual qualities would be the good deeds by which the priests would instruct by example, as the Fourth Lateran Council dictated: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, living a chaste and simple life. Lay people had similar expectations of their priests. They expected the clergy to serve in their role as divine mediators, controlling access to the sacraments and their spiritual power, of course, but the laity and the Church also did expect preaching, to edify believers and to reinforce their “implicit faith.”¹¹

Medieval priests had help in performing their pastoral duties from the newly formed mendicant orders, and the Dominicans and Franciscans in particular. That these two groups devoted to preaching, plus the numerous other smaller mendicant orders, became so popular and proliferated so widely suggests that thirteenth-century society felt a need for more preaching and closer contact with religion. By preaching and setting a good example of the apostolic life, the friars were performing many of the same duties as were parish priests, and in

¹⁰ Jeffrey H. Denton, “The Competence of the Parish Clergy in Thirteenth-Century England,” in *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honor of R.B. Dobson: Proceedings of the 1999 Harlaxton Symposium*, eds. Caroline M. Barron and Jenny Stratford (Donington, Lincolnshire : Shaun Tyas, 2002), 278.

¹¹ According to Peter Lombard in his *Sententiae*, “There are those in the church who are less able, who cannot identify or distinguish the articles of the Creed; yet they believe what is contained in the Creed, for they believe what they do not know.” Cited in John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages,” 545.

many cases the friars probably filled in where there were inadequacies. Being well-educated and typically more aware of theological developments and council decrees, the friars spread knowledge as they traveled, reinforcing the common faith upon which regional practices were based.¹² The exemplum was the means by which they conveyed bits of theology couched in often-humorous stories tailored *ad status* to fit the audience. Though urban areas were the usual domains of the mendicants, and burghers their usual audience, they also surely encountered and preached to rural people as they traveled through the countryside to the next town.¹³

Despite these occasional stopovers in the countryside, the mendicants really were devoted to the cities; thus life for the majority of people in the early thirteenth century still revolved around the village and the parish church. As such, the laity also demanded of their priests and local monks duties more practical and social in nature. As life depended on agriculture, an important function of the parish priest was to bless the fields and perform religious rituals to rid the land of plagues of insects or vermin, if need be, often through prayers and sprinkling holy water at the four corners.¹⁴ Priests developed liturgies for rain or against bad weather, and in some extreme circumstances a priest might lead a procession of the church's relics around the community to bring the saints'

¹² Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, 58.

¹³ Miri Rubin, "Religious Culture in Town and Country: Reflections on a Great Divide," in *Church and City, 1000-1500: Essays in Honour of Christopher Brooke*, eds. David Abulafia, Michael Franklin, and Miri Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20.

¹⁴ Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 22.

intercession on its behalf.¹⁵ Parish priests also directed the yearly liturgical calendar of ceremonies and feasts, which provided opportunities for devotion, but also served as social events within the community. Within the overarching, fairly uniform calendar that celebrated Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc., there were other, smaller feast days. Some might be fairly widespread, like the Feast of All Souls and All Saints, but others might be much more local in nature, celebrating a local saint or the dedication day of the parish church.¹⁶ Festivals were important to community life in the Middle Ages; Jacques de Vitry told a charming story in one of his exempla that illustrates this point:

I have heard for a long time that in a certain village was a certain aged peasant, who from long custom had learned the festivals, and on those days which in those parts were accustomed to be celebrated, he put on his red shoes. His neighbors seeing this used to say to their household: "Today it is necessary for us to celebrate, for master Gocelinus is wearing his red shoes."¹⁷

Not every day was a festival, however, and the laity did expect primitive social welfare programs of the clergy, both priests and monks. They were expected to administer alms for the poor, care for the sick, and provide hospitality for pilgrims or those in need. Monks were also charged with the care of souls, and received alms for saying masses for the dead to ensure less time spent in Purgatory.

Clergy did not always meet the expectations that the laity had for them, and it was from this attitude of disappointment that lay anti-clerical sentiment

¹⁵ Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 73.

¹⁶ Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, 93-6.

¹⁷ Jacques de Vitry, 183.

arose. As they left no records in their own voices, it can be difficult to ascertain how the laity truly felt about priests and monks. We do have, however, a variety of sources that attest to some anti-clerical feeling and behavior, the exempla included. There seems to have been a superstition that it was unlucky to meet a priest, and it shows up in the texts of preachers like Berthold von Regensburg and Jacques de Vitry. In Jacques' story, people in France during a plague believed the way to avert it would be to throw their priest into a ditch.¹⁸ Though he did not elaborate on it, it seems the reason behind this, and other practices like it, was that the priest was not meeting lay expectations—in this case, he likely had not prayed hard enough or performed enough liturgies or supplication to the saints to have prevented the plague. In another of Jacques' exempla, a man refused to receive the sacrament from an unworthy priest, probably one whom he deemed not providing a good example through his behavior.¹⁹ Considering how important the role of the church and priest was to daily life in medieval Europe, it is not likely that the laity would have disparaged the clergy en masse.

Expressions of anti-clericalism of this sort are best understood as disappointment that the clergy had not fulfilled their expectations within the community, and thus they were part of the general ethos of religious reform that the Church also expressed, through councils like the Fourth Lateran, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

¹⁸ Jacques de Vitry, 268.

¹⁹ Jacques de Vitry, 155. Jacques derided the man for his "excessive simplicity" and went on to illustrate why this was foolish: the power of the sacraments derived *ex opere operato*, not *ex opere operantis*, thus they retained their force regardless of the person administering them.

Rather than distant elites operating in a culture all their own, the lower clergy were mediators between the decrees of the Church hierarchy and the lived religion of the laity. Though they were responsible for answering to the Church and relating its demands, the lower clergy operated more closely with lay communities than with church councils. They imparted their knowledge through preaching and through their actions, they shared the same world-view as their parishioners, and they directed and participated in the local program of religious life in all its guises.

II Humanizing the Supernatural

In the book “Of Confession” in the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Caesarius of Heisterbach told the story of John, a *scholasticus* of Prüm, “a very learned man, but of a light and wanton character.” He made plans with a woman to come to him on a certain night, but instead he lay with a demon in her form. In the morning, when John told the woman to go, the demon confessed its true identity, to which John replied by “scoffing at the devil” and Caesarius wrote that he was “no whit disturbed.”¹ Though John’s response could hardly be considered typical, the story itself, and the matter-of-fact way in which Caesarius narrated it, illustrates how ordinary medieval people considered encounters with the supernatural to be. It need not manifest itself in such explicit physical form, however; people often made connections between ambiguous events and the agency of the supernatural. As R.W. Southern once wrote, pervading the Middle Ages was a “sense of a supernatural power constantly operating in the world...part of the everyday furniture of life.”² This conception comes alive in high medieval sermon stories and exempla full of demons and devils, saints and miracles, all of which are constantly involved in the lives of clergy and lay alike. Because their creation involved a dialogue whereby the clergy appropriated the needs of the people while at the same time reinforcing and legitimizing those

¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 3:10. As a note on terminology, technically the devil should refer to Satan and demons to his minions, but the literature rarely maintains this distinction. I will be using “demon” and “devil” fairly interchangeably, as my sources do.

² R.W. Southern, “The Church of the Dark Ages,” in *The Layman in Christian History*, ed. Stephen Charles Neill and Hans-Ruedi Weber (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 90.

beliefs by passing them back down, the exempla illustrate the shared world-view of clergy and lay in their conceptions of the supernatural.

Medieval communities developed very close relationships to saints, mutually beneficial to both parties. Monks constantly performed liturgies involving the abbey's relics, and members of the local community would give donations to the monastery and venerate the saints themselves through private prayer. In return, the community expected the saints to protect them in every possible way: from physical attackers, such as neighboring knights; from the temptations and abuses of the devil; and from the elements. Caesarius of Heisterbach told the story of a woman of Cologne who had been employed making beer for the Church of the Holy Apostles. When a great fire was consuming the city, the woman shut herself up in her house, "placed all her hope in the Holy Apostles, and then went into the church and prayed as follows: 'O Holy Apostles, if ever I have served you worthily and faithfully, guard now my house and your vessels that are therein.'"³ For her service, the Apostles responded to her cries as they were obligated, saving her house from the fire that had destroyed everything around it. Through this symbiotic relationship, all those who did homage to the saints—nearly everyone in medieval society—expected to be able to call on them at any time.

Demons were equally ubiquitous, waiting for any opportunity to tempt or possess the faithful. Beginning in the twelfth century, the devil and his minions became a more "colorful, immediate, and present figure in art, literature,

³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:62.

sermons, and popular consciousness,” partly due to monks rediscovering the *Lives* of the Desert Fathers and working them into their exempla, as well as preachers disseminating the stories among the laity in sermons.⁴ Thomas of Chantimpré, a Dominican preacher and protégé of Jacques de Vitry, told the tale of a group of men drinking in a tavern, expressing skepticism of the afterlife. Just as one of them spoke, a large stranger came over and joined their group. When one of the men stated, “If any man would buy [my soul], he might have it right good cheap,” the stranger offered to buy it and they made the transaction. Little did he know, however, that the buyer was a devil in disguise, and at the end of the night he snatched up the man, “bearing him indubitably to hell.”⁵ In a similar story, a demon possessed a nun because she ate a piece of lettuce, on which he happened to be sitting, without crossing herself. When the priest tried to exorcise the demon, the latter defended himself, saying that it was certainly not his fault that the nun had not crossed herself.⁶ Such seemingly light-hearted examples served as a stern warning for both clergy and lay, who inevitably believed that the devil would always be lurking, waiting for any opportunity to invade their lives.

Underlying these beliefs was a conception of the supernatural in concrete, physical terms. Saints and demons could appear in earthly forms that were most often human, but could also be animals of various sorts. The devil was well-

⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 161.

⁵ G.G. Coulton, ed. and trans., *Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), I.77.

⁶ Jacques de Vitry, 130.

known to take on the forms of serpents, cats, pigs, and toads, to name a few. A monk who received visions of demons reported to have seen mangy cats gathering around a group of lazy monks. They did not go near the good monks, Caesarius wrote, for they were surely demons in disguise.⁷ Such phenomena indicated sin, and indeed both the clergy and laity thought of sin and good works in curiously tangible ways. A recurring motif common to all of the works I studied was the sack of unsung Psalms. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was a common abuse for monks to omit words or syllables from the Psalms that they were required to recite in regular liturgies day to day. Certain monks or holy men claimed to have seen demons in the choir, gathering these forgotten bits into sacks which, according to a story from Etienne de Bourbon, later weighed down the lazy clerics in purgatory.⁸ The same could be thought true of good works. In an event Caesarius of Heisterbach considered “worthy to be told,” a citizen of Cologne reasoned,

Sin is a weighty matter and anchor stones are very heavy. I will therefore buy such stones for the future work on the church of the holy apostles, so that when, in the day of judgment my good and evil works shall be placed in the balance, the apostles who will be the judges, will put these stones into the scale with my good works, and they will quickly prove the greater weight.⁹

I would hardly suggest such an idea was common; however, it was born out of the same world-view that believed in the shape-shifting of supernatural beings and in the physical burden of sin.

⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:6.

⁸ Etienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes Historiques, Légendes et Apologues*, ed. A. Lecoy de La Marche (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1877), 212, 404; Coulton, I.87; Jacques de Vitry, 19; Caesarius of Heisterbach, 4:9.

⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:63.

The preceding accounts represent the majority of stories in the exempla—those of saints performing miracles and demons tormenting the pious—and yet, there remain plenty of tales of saints being jealous and vindictive, and demons acting as helpful members of society and occasionally even expressing piety and repentance. How do we reconcile such apparent contradictions? How did medieval people—clergy and lay alike—conceive of good and evil? What role did the supernatural play in their lives and mindsets? I would like to suggest that the answers to these questions illustrate a common conception of the supernatural and a shared need to humanize and personalize that transcends divisions between clergy and lay.

Medieval exempla are full of stories involving demons. Caesarius of Heisterbach devoted a whole book of his *Dialogus Miraculorum* to demons, while the rest of his work, too, is littered with exempla featuring demons. As one might expect, many of these focus on the evil and trickery for which the devil is known, yet, perhaps surprisingly, they also betray a fascination with demons on the part of both clergy and lay, as well as a conception of demons that humanizes them to the point that they are believed to follow the same rules and logic as man.

At the outset of his book on demons, Caesarius stated that his purpose was to show “that there are demons, that there are many, and that they are wicked,”¹⁰ and he demonstrated this through countless examples of malicious acts. The influence of the *Lives* of the Desert Fathers on monks and preachers is evident in the many examples of the devil’s psychological temptation. Jacques de Vitry told

¹⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:1.

the story of a man who confessed a terrible sin to a demon in the guise of a priest, who convinced him never to confess it again, so that when he died, having never truly confessed, the demon took his soul.¹¹ The clergy could also be fooled.

Caesarius of Heisterbach wrote of a “very religious” priest who unwittingly faced temptation from a demon appearing as an angel of light. Even after the demon’s first prophecy that he would die within the year proved false, the priest, who had become a monk, still believed and obeyed the demon’s efforts to tempt him to laziness.¹² Clearly, people believed the devil intended to harm one’s soul, but there was also a common belief that he could inflict physical harm as well.

Merely coming into contact with the devil could leave lasting effects.

When a wine-seller refused to lie with a demon disguised as a woman, the demon carried him through the air and left him in a field, after which he never mentally recovered from the terror.¹³ Caesarius told a similar story involving a lay brother whom a demon deposited in a field, but dropped so hard that he vomited blood and spent a year trembling in fear.¹⁴ Gazing upon the devil could make one go mad or become seriously ill, and the embrace of the devil was known to cause instant death.¹⁵ The belief that the devil could torment through physical means went against the traditional view of theologians that demons possessed only spiritual bodies, yet sermon literature is full of examples, like these, that the devil

¹¹ Lucky for him, God judged this to be too tricky and restored his soul so that he could confess. Jacques de Vitry, 303.

¹² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 3:14.

¹³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 3:11.

¹⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:27.

¹⁵ See Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:28-33.

could physically interact with people.¹⁶ This suggests a common conception of the devil that went beyond psychological torments to include physical abuse as well, among both lay people and learned clergy who were not theologians.

Despite the manifest dangers involving demons, medieval people remained fascinated by them. Caesarius told the story of a lay brother at Hemmenrode named Henry, one of whose “gifts” from God was the ability to see demons. When he confessed these visions to the abbot Herman, the abbot, “being kindled by his example into a desire to see demons himself,” prayed to God and also received such visions. Herman reported having seen demons often in the choir and presbytery, disturbing the singing of the psalms without the other monks realizing it, and other similar sights. None of these visions seems to have disturbed him, however, according to Caesarius’ narrative.¹⁷ If the frequency of stories involving demons in the exempla is any indication, demons engendered much curiosity among preachers and their audiences, to the point where some were willing to seek out necromancers to raise demons.

The practice of necromancy has a long history in ancient cultures. In ancient Greece and Rome, necromancy was the raising of dead spirits (*nekroi*) for the purpose of divination (*mantia*), and magicians and sorcerers were widely believed to practice it. These men operated in secret, outside of the official religious culture, and accusations of necromancy could lead to execution if the authorities found one guilty. Some of Jesus’ enemies accused him of being a magician, and may have thought he used the resurrected spirit of John the

¹⁶ For an overview of major theological conceptions of the devil, see Russell, *Lucifer*, 159-207.

¹⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:5.

Baptist to work his miracles.¹⁸ So-called “rivals of Jesus” Simon Magus and Apollonius of Tyana also practiced necromancy, and the latter barely escaped with his life after the Roman authorities officially charged him. In the Middle Ages, Christianity did not accommodate a belief in resurrection before the Last Judgment, so medieval men adapted the term necromancy to mean the raising of demons. Necromancy became quite popular in the later Middle Ages and manuals for it began appearing. Because it required literacy and religious knowledge, practitioners were overwhelmingly clerics. While some priests certainly did practice necromancy, it was just as possible for a member of a lower order to do so as well.¹⁹ Lectors could possess the level of literacy necessary to read the manuals, and the training of exorcists in particular was well suited for manipulating demons. Even monks, many of whom were priests before their conversion, could practice necromancy.²⁰ Though it reached the height of its popularity in the later Middle Ages, if the *Dialogus Miraculorum* is any indication, necromancy was popular and common enough in the thirteenth century for Caesarius and other writers to refer to it repeatedly.

Much of Caesarius’ writing on necromancy involved one practitioner in particular, a clerk named Philip “most famous for his skill.”²¹ Caesarius gave this

¹⁸ Carl H. Kraeling, “Was Jesus Accused of Necromancy?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 2 (June 1940): 155-6.

¹⁹ In the medieval Catholic Church, there were seven levels of Holy Orders, four minor and three major. The minor orders ascended through porters, lectors, exorcists, and acolytes, then the major orders through subdeacons, deacons, and priests. Lector was the lowest level that required limited literacy.

²⁰ For a good overview of late medieval necromancy, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 151-75.

²¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:2.

Philip a privileged position, having devoted the opening chapters of his book “Of Demons” to three long tales of Philip’s abilities. It is quite possible Philip may have been a real clerk: Caesarius stated that he himself had seen Philip, implied that he was well-known, and specifically cited his sources by name and house at which they resided. In the first story, a knight who doubted the existence of demons asked Philip to show him some, despite Philip’s attempts to discourage him. Thus Philip placed the knight within a circle drawn at a crossroads and warned him not to step outside of the circle or give in to any of the devil’s commands. Then the necromancer summoned the devil who carried on a conversation with the knight, answering questions, defending his reputation, and proving himself by the knowledge of all of the knight’s sins. The knight did well refusing the devil’s requests, but when the latter reached out his hand to him, the knight called back Philip to end the encounter.²² The knight survived with only a lingering pale complexion, but a priest who tried the same was not so lucky. In his next story, Caesarius told of a “foolish” priest who also desired to see demons and who experienced the same ritual. The priest, however, left the circle and the devil harmed him so badly before Philip could return that he died soon after.²³ In the last of the Philip anecdotes, one of Caesarius’ fellow monks asked the necromancer to tell him “some of the more remarkable things that he had seen in the practice of his art,” and the latter responded with an account very similar to the situation in the previous two stories, involving scholars in Toledo.²⁴ In all,

²² Caesarius of Heisterbach 5:2.

²³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:3.

²⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:4.

Caesarius portrayed laymen and priests as more foolish than the monk, who merely asks to hear stories, yet all three displayed the same curiosity with the occult practice of necromancy and fascination with demonic experiences.

In other stories of necromancy, people appealed to practicing clerks not merely to see demons, but to gain information. Etienne de Bourbon told a story of a student who turned to a necromancer to find out who had stolen his books; unfortunately for him, the demons tricked him into believing that it was a friend who had done it.²⁵ In another such story, a demon carried a necromancer to the gates of hell to inquire about the soul of his client's father, who revealed that if his sons would restore property he stole from the church, it would greatly help his soul in purgatory.²⁶ This anecdote in particular illustrates arguably the most important function of demons in thirteenth century society: as sources of information.

More frequently, people appealed to demoniacs rather than necromancers for supernatural insight. Demonic possession had been a staple of medieval clerical literature from the early Desert Fathers through centuries of saints' lives, in which the demoniacs appeared as the terrifying objects of the starring saints' exorcism abilities. This portrayal was no doubt influenced by the prototypical case, the Gerasene demoniac of Mark 5, whom the author depicted as a violent, raving beast who cannot be controlled by chains and who harms himself both

²⁵ Etienne de Bourbon, 360.

²⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 1:34.

physically and mentally.²⁷ Thirteenth-century exempla, however, featured demoniacs more prominently and sympathetically than earlier texts, whom Barbara Newman has described as “more lucid and articulate, inspiring responses more of curiosity and respect than of pity or horror.”²⁸ That these texts were closer to the popular consciousness and featured more contemporarily circulating stories than formulaic *vitae* suggests a common conception of demoniacs as links to supernatural authority. One might appeal to a demoniac for news from the afterlife: while passing through Cologne, an abbot and two brothers visited a demoniac woman from whom they inquired about the conditions of some recently-deceased souls, and they received such detailed answers that the abbot felt compelled to believe her.²⁹ Knowing who was in purgatory was a very valuable gift, for it allowed the abbot to pray for souls much more efficiently. Demoniacs could also determine the legitimacy of relics. In one such case, a clerk held a bag containing thorns from Christ’s crown over the head of a possessed girl who immediately cried out, thus proving that the relics were true.³⁰

Just as often in the exempla, people solicited demons for more personal information. As a demon knew any sin that had not been faithfully confessed and would not hesitate to reveal one’s indiscretions publicly, many exempla told of

²⁷ Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003): 36-7.

²⁸ Barbara Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century,” *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (July 1998): 733.

²⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:29.

³⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:14.

people who sought demoniacs for revelations of marital infidelity. Both Jacques de Vitry and Caesarius narrated similar stories of a man, suspicious that his wife had lain with a priest (or soldier or servant, depending on the version), who approached a demoniac for clarity, though in every case he was foiled by the timely confession of the adulterer.³¹ In another account, Jacques de Vitry wrote of a demon named Guinehochet, famous in France for revealing occult knowledge through people he had possessed. To test him, a man asked the demon how many children he had. Thinking the demoniac to be false because he told him he had only one son, the man inadvertently uncovered his wife's adultery with the priest.³² In all of these stories, the demoniacs appear as common elements of the medieval social landscape, the objects of intense curiosity who provided information unable to be found elsewhere.

In some interesting cases, demons appear to be obedient to a sense of justice. When asked questions about their identity and purpose, they were compelled to answer truthfully. When making deals with men, they kept to their word. A servant jokingly called upon the devil to guard a vineyard for him, and when a demon instantly arrived, he promised him a box of grapes for his service. The next morning the servant returned to find the vineyard safe and the box of grapes gone.³³ In another amusing story, Caesarius wrote of the interaction between a knight and a demon that had possessed a young girl. The knight

³¹ Caesarius actually told this story twice with different characters in back to back chapters, Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:2, 5:3. Jacques told it only once, Jacques de Vitry, 261.

³² Jacques de Vitry, 233.

³³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:43.

tempted the demon to leave the girl by inviting the demon to accompany him to tournaments where he could find better people to possess, and the demon agreed to stay in his pocket only until the knight told him to leave. After the knight had had his fill of the tournaments, he decided to take up the cross and begged the demon to leave; the demon tried to convince him otherwise, but left, concluding, “I cannot remain with you without your consent, for so I promised.”³⁴ In one of the anecdotes involving Philip the necromancer, demons displayed a similar respect for fairness. After one of the students who had asked to see demons was lured out of the circle and snatched away, Philip appealed to the chief demon to return the boy or else the other scholars would kill the necromancer. “Moved with compassion,” the devil decided to hold a “council of the fiends” where the demons disputed until one judged that the demon had been “too importunate” and had to return the student.³⁵ In all of these stories, demons appear humanized: they reason with men, they use human methods of law and justice, fruit is a welcome reward, and in no case do the humans involved suffer any harm from seeing or interacting with them. This conception alone departs far from the theological conception that demons always intend to do evil, and yet some exempla suggest that some demons may even strive for good.

More than just keeping their word, demons at times faithfully served humans with no thought of destroying their souls. When a knight was severely ill, a demon in the form of a man came to him and offered his services, carrying the man’s spirit to Rome to seek a divorce, to Jerusalem to see the holy places, to

³⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:11.

³⁵ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:4.

Lombardy to warn a neighbor whom robbers were about to kill, and finally back home where his health was restored.³⁶ Caesarius gave no explanation as to why he did this; he merely accepted it as so. In another instance, a rich man held a banquet for the poor to which a demoniac attended; when the others scolded the demon for not allowing the man to eat, the demon replied, “I do not want him to sin by eating what comes from robbery,” and revealed that the meat came from the fifth generation of a cow that had been stolen.³⁷ The best example of what Caesarius called “devilish kindness” is that of another knight who hired as a servant a demon in disguise, who “began his service so diligently and respectfully, so faithfully and willingly.” The demon saved both the life of the knight, by helping him ford a river, and the life of his wife, for whom he quickly retrieved a cure from Arabia. The knight eventually learned his true identity and dismissed him, but as a parting request the demon asked the knight to buy a bell for the parish church, that “by it the faithful may be invited to the divine office each Sunday.” When asked why he had done this, the demon simply said, “It is my greatest consolation to be with the sons of men.”³⁸

How do we reconcile such differing accounts of demons? The demons of these latter accounts are not the horrendously deformed creatures that can harm by a mere glance; they are helpful sources of information and, at times, loyal servants. Theologians such as Thomas Aquinas did not allow that demons could do good, as any seeming good only masked true evil intention. Jeffrey Burton

³⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:37.

³⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:38.

³⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:36.

Russell has said that this conception of the demon as abstract and absolute evil “nearly ceases...[to] respond to human perceptions;”³⁹ thus it would have been difficult for anyone, clergy or lay, to understand in any practical way, which suggests why exempla writers depicted demons with such a wide variety of characteristics. In the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, when the novice asked Caesarius the narrator why demons seem not equally malicious, the monk suggested that some angels had not expressed such intense pride against God and, though they fell with Lucifer, they are less evil and do less harm.⁴⁰ Such conceptions of demons responded to a desire to humanize the supernatural and to make them easier to understand on a personal level. And just as the demon in the last story spoke of “consolation,” such an idea reflected a similar desire to believe anyone capable of repentance, even a demon without chance for redemption. No wonder people were fascinated with demons: they existed everywhere at all times; they might be the toad you found in the kitchen, the raving-mad girl whom people said was possessed, or even your own servant. This tendency to humanize and to understand the supernatural personally also occurred with respect to the devil’s fiercest enemy and antithesis: the saint and the Virgin Mary in particular.

Saints and demons share a close relationship of antipathy in the exempla: demons particularly liked to tempt those devoted to the saints, and calling upon the saints was the best remedy for vexing demons. A knight strongly devoted to St. Thomas lodged a devil in the form of a pilgrim invoking the saint’s name, but the devil, seeking to destroy the man’s devotion, stole his fine fur cloak. Rather

³⁹ Russell, *Lucifer*, 207.

⁴⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:35.

than curse the saint for allowing this to happen, the knight remained devoted and went on pilgrimage to the church of the apostle. There he spotted the demon in his cloak and, because of the man's devotion, St. Thomas compelled the devil to return the cloak and carry him safely home.⁴¹ Though personal devotions to saints remained popular, the later Middle Ages saw the proliferation of an increasingly popular cult of the Virgin. In many ways, Mary was the ultimate saint and intercessor because of her close relationship to Christ; therefore, she was particularly powerful against demons. In one case, the Virgin responded to the cries of a monk and pious matron whom the devil had tempted to elope, and ordered the offending demons to return all to order; members of the community claimed to have heard the departing demons utter, "Let us go, for long enough have we deceived these people and caused ill to be thought of religious persons."⁴² In another case, the devil was unable to corrupt a knight, though he tried for twelve years, because the man regularly saluted the Virgin.⁴³ When faced with a threatening demon, a simple Hail Mary was enough to drive it away.⁴⁴

This relationship between saints and demons was an aspect of the relationship between saints and the community; in return for devotion, communities expected protection from enemies both human and supernatural, and vice versa. To secure this divine protection, communities needed saints'

⁴¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:59.

⁴² Jacques de Vitry, 282.

⁴³ Etienne de Bourbon, 129.

⁴⁴ See Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:44; 7:25-7.

relics which would ensure the saint's presence at that site. Sometimes, communities would go to great lengths to obtain the relics of a saint they thought to be particularly efficacious. In the High Middle Ages, the theft of relics became increasingly prevalent. Communities thought that if the saint wished to stay, he would not allow others to steal his relics; thus, being able to take the relics to a new location without incident meant that the saint had chosen to leave.⁴⁵ In an even more extreme case, people were willing to murder a saint to be able to retain his relics. When St. Romuald had decided to abandon Umbria and move to a new place, the people of that community determined to murder him, for "if they could not keep him while he was alive, they would receive his lifeless body as the patron of their land."⁴⁶ Once a community had secured the relics, however, problems could arise if either party failed to fulfill its duty, and punishment would be necessary. From this issue developed two interesting phenomena: the humiliation and coercion of the saints and divine chastisement.

When a saint failed to protect the community or an individual from attack, both the clergy and the laity had methods for persuading the saint to right the wrong that, though different in form, expressed the same understanding of divine responsibility.⁴⁷ For monks that method was humiliation. As Patrick Geary has identified, as part of the liturgy monks would pray to God for help and place the monastery's relics on the ground before the altar; they could remain in that

⁴⁵ See Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁴⁶ Peter Damien, *Vita s. Romualdi*, 13, quoted in Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, 41.

⁴⁷ Patrick Geary, "Humiliation of Saints," in *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 114.

desecrated state for the length of the liturgy or until the community perceived that the saint had answered their prayers.⁴⁸ In addition to this debased treatment, humiliation further punished the saints by prohibiting the community from visiting the relics. A practice similar in intention occasionally occurred among laymen. In response to an attack from which the saint had not protected them, laymen might gather in the church and physically abuse the altar and the relics.⁴⁹ In each case, the wronged used methods of punishment appropriate to their culture: symbolic abuse for the monks, physical abuse for the lay people.⁵⁰ As Geary has concluded:

The ways in which these two sets of rites, monastic and popular, were used in specific historical circumstances...demonstrate the *fundamental unity of religious perception and experience* which, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, cut across categories of lay or clerical, illiterate or literate, popular or elite.⁵¹

I would suggest that this statement is true for the thirteenth century as well.

The practice of coercion was similarly envisioned as a means of influencing the saints. Coercion involved verbal cries and threats to the saint to aid the supplicant, and occasionally even physical punishment.⁵² This sort of entreaty appears in the exempla. After the son of a woman very devoted to the Virgin was hanged, the woman prayed to a statue of the Virgin to return her son. When the Virgin seemingly ignored her cries, the woman exclaimed, "Is this then the price

⁴⁸ Geary, "Humiliation," 98.

⁴⁹ Geary, "Humiliation," 112.

⁵⁰ Geary, "Humiliation," 113.

⁵¹ Emphasis mine. Geary, "Humiliation," 97.

⁵² Geary, "Coercion of Saints in Medieval Religious Practice," *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 120.

of service to thee, that thou succourest me not in my need?” and threatened to take away the Virgin’s son, the image of the Christ child, if her own son did not return. But as she reached up to grab the child, her own son, raised from the dead, restrained her.⁵³ Even Christ could experience coercion; facing temptation, a lay brother of Hemmenrode called out, “Indeed, Lord, if thou dost not deliver me from this temptation, I will complain of thee to thy mother,” and Christ apparently responded to his supplication.⁵⁴ People not only practiced coercion, they believed it worked, and the repetition of these stories in the exempla seems to give clerical approval to such practices.

Saints could be just as vindictive as men, inflicting punishment for those who had wronged them just as men might threaten and attack the saints. In a study of French hagiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Pierre André Sigal has identified divine chastisement as the response to two main types of transgressions: violence, such as pillaging or armed attacks, against those the saint protects; and offenses against the saint himself through violation of the sacred, by mishandling relics, laboring on holy days, or disrespecting the saint’s image.⁵⁵ It is the latter type that shows up frequently in the exempla. Though both clergy and laymen could be the recipients of divine wrath, there is a clear trend in the exempla in the types of offenses that provoked it. Monks and nuns were punished for failing to fulfill their holy orders, by ignoring their duties or

⁵³ Coulton, I.90.

⁵⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 6:30.

⁵⁵ Pierre André Sigal, “Un aspect du culte des saints: le châtement divin aux XIe et XIIe siècles d’après la littérature hagiographique du Midi de la France,” in *La religion populaire en Languedoc du XIIIe siècle à la moitié du XIVe siècle*, ed. Edouard Privat (Toulouse : Centre d’Etudes Historiques de Fanjeaux, 1976), 41-6.

breaking a vow, while laymen offended the saints by actual actions or speech against them.

When the clergy incurred the ire of the saints, it was not usually for an explicit act, but for an implicit affront to the relationship forged between religious and the divine when he or she had taken vows. A certain monk was accustomed to sleep during church, by which he was ignoring his most important duty, to perform the liturgy. Once while sleeping when he should have been chanting, the crucifix came down and struck him so forcefully on the cheek that he died within three days.⁵⁶ Saints would also not tolerate unchaste intentions. A monk carrying the relics of S.S. John and Paul suffered “rowellings” from the saints when he failed to quench his “fleshly desires.”⁵⁷ In another case, “inflamed with love for a clerk,” a nun had agreed to meet him after compline,⁵⁸ but she found a crucifix blocking every exit of the church. Coming to her senses, she turned to ask pardon of a statue of the Virgin, but the image turned away from her. When she tried to get closer “the image smote her on the jaw with her hand...so violent was the blow that she fell to the ground and lay there till the morning.”⁵⁹

Lay people did not have any special connection to the divine, so their offenses had to be more explicit. It was a common practice for a woman to choose an apostle by lot to which she would devote special prayers; occasionally,

⁵⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 4:38.

⁵⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:67

⁵⁸ The Divine Office was divided into eight liturgical hours that required different prayers to be chanted approximately every three hours. Compline was the last hour of the day before the night's rest.

⁵⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 7:33.

if she was not happy with her choice, she might put him back and try again. But not every rejection went unpunished. One woman chose St. Jude by lot, but, because she wanted a more popular apostle, she put him back and chose again. St. Jude would not suffer this sort of treatment, however, and Caesarius wrote:

In the night he appeared to her in a dream and upbraided her severely, complaining that she had despised him, and had thrown him unworthily behind the altar. Nor did he leave her, until blows had been added to his words. For a whole year she lay paralyzed in her bed.⁶⁰

By disregarding St. Jude for another saint, the woman had broken the mutual vow of devotion and protection that was the bond between humans and saints, and she had rejected the divine will that had chosen the saint for her. Blasphemy among laymen appears several times in the exempla. In one case, a woman called a poorly-sculpted statue of the Virgin “old rubbish,” and for that the Virgin caused the woman’s son to take away all of her property, leaving her a poor beggar.⁶¹ In two similar stories found in both Caesarius of Heisterbach and Etienne de Bourbon, men got away with blaspheming Christ, but once they began to speak against the Virgin, they both died suddenly; indeed, in Caesarius’ version, a voice from the sky was heard to have said, “Insults against myself I have put up with, but I can by no means tolerate affronts to my mother.”⁶²

Just as the methods of humiliation showed different trends among clerics on the one hand and lay people on the other, so, too, divine chastisement divided along similar lines. Monks and nuns exercised control over and received

⁶⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:61.

⁶¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 7:44.

⁶² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 7:43; Etienne de Bourbon, 133.

punishment from the saints based on their religious responsibilities, while lay people, more accustomed to physical abuse as appropriate punishment for wrongdoing, both attacked their saints with blows and accepted acts of abuse as reasons for divine chastisement. Yet both groups shared that “fundamental unity of religious perception and experience” that understood saints to be temperamental and vindictive, as well as merciful and protective, and that sought to humanize the divine, imbue the supernatural with human emotions, and understand it on a personal level. This is exactly the same conception that we saw with demons. Just as popular conceptions of demons arose out of a personal need that the abstract ideas of theology could not meet, so, too, the cult of the saints and all of its nuances grew out of a similar desire to personalize divine workings and make them respond to practical needs. I am not suggesting here the “two-tiered model,” whereby the “vulgar” masses corrupted elite religion by imposing its superstitious beliefs, that Peter Brown so reviled in *The Cult of the Saints*;⁶³ on the contrary, I believe this personalized religion was the heart of medieval Christianity, shared by clergy and lay people of all levels of education, and just as important as the theology of Anselm and Aquinas. Not surprisingly, these shared perceptions of the supernatural carried over into shared religious practices. As Peter Brown has eloquently put it:

It is remarkable that men who were acutely aware of elaborating *dogmas*, such as the nature of the Trinity, whose contents were difficult of access to the “unlettered,” felt themselves so little isolated for so much of the time from these same “unlettered” when it came to the shared religious *practices* of their community and to the assumptions about the relation of man to supernatural beings which these practices condensed. In the area

⁶³ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 13-7.

of life covered by religious practice...differences of class and education play no significant role.⁶⁴

It is to these shared religious practices that we now turn.

⁶⁴ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 19.

III The Magic of Medieval Religion

As Caesarius of Heisterbach wrote in the final book of the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, after his death a wicked knight named Henry Nodus began haunting the house of his daughter. Many tried to drive his ghost away, but sword blows and even the sign of the cross did not work. Desperate, his friends turned to the bishop, who “advised them to pour water on a nail of crucifixion and to sprinkle the house and his daughter and the man himself, if he was present.” The ritual worked, and the ghost never appeared again.¹ Caesarius made no comment on this practice, but we can assume from the facts that the practice originated with a bishop and that Caesarius thought it worthy of retelling that he approved of such a measure. Many modern Christians would be inclined to label this practice superstition, and to disregard it as an inappropriate religious action, but what would medieval Christians have thought of it? I would argue that practices like this, and like the use of omens, divination, and amulets, were truly religious practices, and that their use and the assumptions inherent in the fact of that use illustrate further points at which clerical and lay culture intersected in the Middle Ages.

Despite occasional cries against them, omens and divination remained popular means of connecting with the will of the supernatural throughout the medieval period. Both were means of predicting future events that relied on contact with the supernatural, but omens were spontaneous revelations, while

¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 12:15.

divination required active practice to make such contact. Like the practice of necromancy, omens and divination date back to ancient times and continued through to the Middle Ages, the difference being the source of the supernatural power behind them. Whereas in the first century C.E. lightning storms and comets led Tacitus to believe the gods were warning men about the evils of Nero's reign, around the year 1000 Raoul Glaber would interpret the same sorts of signs as the coming of the Millennium.² Such natural omens persisted from antiquity, while in the Middle Ages, supernatural visions also provided insight into the future. The belief in omens and the practice of divination were not confined to any one group of people, but were shared among the clergy and the laity, among the educated and the illiterate, and illustrate another way in which those two groups had similar ways of conceiving of the supernatural.

Omens could be visible to many and mark grand events, like Raoul Glaber's meteors and lightning storms, but they could also be smaller and more personal, indicating the fate of only a single person. Not surprisingly, people often interpreted volcanic eruptions, like meteors, storms, earthquakes, and other natural occurrences, as important signs from God. Because they seemed to be openings into the bowels of the earth, medieval people saw volcanoes as inextricably associated with hell. In the final book of the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Caesarius of Heisterbach said of volcanoes:

They are said to be the jaws of hell, because none of the elect, but the wicked only are sent into them, as we read in the dialogue of Theodoric, king of the Goths. Hell is supposed to be in the heart of the earth, so that the wicked may not see the light of heaven.³

² Stephen Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 376-377.

³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 12:14.

Caesarius must have heard many stories of people hearing voices near volcanoes that predicted the deaths of various sinners, and he wrote of several such stories in his *Dialogue*. In one, men on pilgrimage sailing past Mount Stromboli heard a voice from the volcano say, “Welcome, welcome, our friend the steward of Kolmere; it is cold, get ready a blazing fire for him.” On their return, they inquired about this man and discovered he had died at the exact date and time that they had heard this announcement.⁴ It is clear that these tales were getting around and the belief that volcanoes served as an important link with the afterlife and could even proclaim an impending death was widespread.

There seems to have been a similarly popular belief in omens by means of animals, and birds in particular. Certain animals were closely associated with the devil, and could either portend bad luck or actually be a demon in disguise. The black cat is a classic example of this, but toads, serpents, pigs, and various birds were also commonly used as signs. From ancient times, birds had been used as omens and for divination, often serving as death auguries, and this belief carried on into the Middle Ages.⁵ Caesarius wrote of an old knight-turned-novice he had known who had forsaken his conversion and died without repentance:

At his death a fearful storm of wind raged round the house where he lay, and a vast number of crows hovered over the roof; and these portents caused so much panic that none was left to tend the dying man save only one old woman.⁶

⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 12:7.

⁵ Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 383-384.

⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 1:15.

The sign of the crows was interpreted by the novice in the dialogue, and thus by Caesarius himself, as clear indication that demons were present. Herein lay an inherent problem in using animals, and birds, as omens: their connection to the devil made them untrustworthy. As we saw in the previous chapter, demons could sometimes tell the truth: in the previous story, demons, in the form of crows, were accurately signifying the death of a sinner. Yet, the devil could always be a trickster, and could send such a false sign to make someone believe they would die sooner or later than they really would. The call of a cuckoo was one means of foretelling one's death, as the number of clucks was said to indicate how many years one had left to live. Caesarius wrote of a lay brother who heard a cuckoo cluck twenty-two times and believed that meant he had twenty-two years left to live. He then decided that he need no longer live in penitence, but rather would return to the world and then become penitent again nearer to his death. According to Caesarius, the devil was no doubt behind this, as the man died two years later. Caesarius came down harshly on omens in this case, saying that to God "all auguries are hateful," despite having previously written of his own belief in the portent of the crows.⁷ Similar stories of cuckoos appear in other collections of exempla: in one, a sick woman refused to believe she would die and refused to receive extreme unction from a priest because a cuckoo had indicated she had twelve years to live. She, too, was portrayed as deluded for choosing this omen over religious precaution.⁸

⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 5:17.

⁸ Coulton, I.36.

Not all omens were associated with the devil, however, and some were believed to come through divine visions. In a story from the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais, a contemporary of Caesarius of Heisterbach, a child who offered a bit of bread to an image of the Christ child received an omen that he would die in three days. His mother overheard this, and related it to a canon who confirmed the prophecy. The child did indeed die in three days.⁹ The difference between this story and the previous two involving cuckoos is obvious: the source of the omen, Christ, is much more legitimate than a bird, and the omen has been authenticated by a cleric. In this case, that God is behind it is without doubt.

Again, however, the devil was constantly lying in wait to confound people, and thus divine visions could also be tricks of the devil. A certain priest received a vision of an angel of light, which told him that he would die within the year. He began to give away his property and prepare his soul for death, and the rumor spread throughout the parish that the priest had had this vision. Yet, “when the year was over, and the priest still alive, it was made plain that the devil had been a false prophet,” Caesarius wrote.¹⁰ Clearly, had the omen come true, its agency would not have been questioned. The beliefs medieval people had of the ubiquity of demons and the trickery of the devil provided the explanation in cases such as this or that of the cuckoos as to why some omens came true and others did not.

The mechanism of the omen stayed the same from ancient times, though the meaning and power behind it had changed, and the same can be said for divination. Divination was widely practiced in antiquity, commonly through

⁹ Coulton, I.25.

¹⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 3:14.

oracles, the interpretation of dreams, and the interpretations of patterns related to animals, as we have already seen.¹¹ Christian divination often involved dreams and visions as well. Visionary literature was very popular in the high Middle Ages, and women like Elizabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen claimed extraordinary divine knowledge through their visions. The casting of lots was another popular form of divination in the Middle Ages inherited from the ancient world. This could take many forms. As we saw in the last chapter, Caesarius wrote of the practice of choosing saints by lots:

There is a widespread custom in our province for matrons to choose for themselves a special apostle by lot as follows. The names of the twelve apostles are written one by one on twelve separate candles, which are then blessed by the priest and placed together on the altar. A woman then goes up and draws a name by taking a candle, and then she pays more honor and worship to him than the rest.¹²

From this account it appears that this popular practice was condoned by the clergy, who had to bless the candles, likely to imbue them with spiritual significance. Caesarius did mention that there are some who objected to such a practice on the grounds that people should pay devotion to all of the apostles, but he himself does not seem to have condemned it.

Another common method of divination in the Middle Ages was the *sortes sanctorum*, whereby a sign would be sought by opening the scriptures at random and reading the first verse that one's eyes saw. A similar practice had occurred in Ancient Rome: the *sortes Virgilianae*, using Virgil's *Aeneid*. Here again the mechanism persisted while the power behind it had shifted. Some, like the

¹¹ Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 386.

¹² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:56.

Venerable Bede, condemned the practice, but its popularity among clergy remained strong well into the early modern period.¹³ Guibert of Nogent, abbot of the Benedictine monastery Nogent-sous-Coucy in the early twelfth century, mentioned this method of divination multiple times in his memoirs. Guibert was a well-educated monk and theologian, having studied under Anselm of Bec, and his memoirs and other writings are well-respected for their critical tone and historicity, as I will discuss in more detail later. In telling of his election and consecration as abbot of Nogent, he wrote, “One monk with a good knowledge of Scripture and curious, I suppose, about my future, purposely opened the Gospels on the altar, meaning to take the first verse to meet the eye as an omen concerning me.”¹⁴ That monk then instructed the deacon who was to carry the book before Guibert in procession to open it to that page and see where Guibert’s glance would fall, and it did indeed fall on the same verse. From his memoirs, it seems to have been common at this time to take divination from Scripture at the consecration of a new episcopal office. The practice was used at the consecration of several new bishops of Laon that Guibert mentioned. In the case of one in particular:

When the dean was brought to be consecrated and they took divination about him, they came on a blank page, as if to say, ‘I will prophesy nothing about him, since his acts will be almost nothing.’ A few months later he died.¹⁵

¹³ Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 388-389.

¹⁴ Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society in Medieval France*, ed. John F. Benton (1970; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 130.

¹⁵ Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society*, 198.

The *sortes sanctorum* was not confined to this small locality; it occurred across western Europe as a common practice at the consecration of new bishops.

George Henderson has studied the practice in England in the twelfth century through a manuscript list of English bishops and the divined biblical phrases from their consecrations.¹⁶ It also appears in the *Dialogus Miraculorum*.

Caesarius wrote of a man he knew when they were novices together, who had trouble persevering in the rule of the Order:

While he was thus wavering, one day I was sitting by his side, and trying to think how I might comfort him, when he snatched up the psalter, opened it and said: "Let us see what my brethren will say of me if I go back." The first verse that his eyes fell upon was this: *They who sat in the gate spake against me, and the drunkards made songs upon me.* And at once he cried out: "A true prophecy!"¹⁷

Despite occasional condemnation, the *sortes sanctorum* was a widely practiced form of clerical divination, used by novices all the way up to the best-educated abbots and bishops. Like the lay practice of choosing apostles by lots, the *sortes sanctorum* assumed that God could be called on to pass judgment on behalf of the diviners. The same belief was at work with the practice of the ordeal, which was a common practice that combined divination with the justice system.

The ordeal seems to have first developed in about the fifth century C.E. as a Frankish custom, consisting only of the trial by hot water.¹⁸ Beginning with the

¹⁶ George Henderson, "Sortes Biblicae in twelfth-century England : the list of Episcopal Prognostics in Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.7.5," in *England in the Twelfth Century: Proceedings of the 1988 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Daniel Williams (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1990), 113-135.

¹⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 4:49.

¹⁸ In this type of ordeal, the accused had to grab an object, such as a ring, from a cauldron of hot water. Robert Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 4.

reign of Charlemagne, the ordeal began to flourish, as it was used more often and a variety of trials were developed.¹⁹ By the twelfth century, many in the church had begun to question the ordeal, seeing it as “tempting God”, and they felt that clergy should not be involved in secular justice.²⁰ This change in attitude was reflected in Canon eighteen of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which forbid clerics from being involved in sentences of execution and from blessing any ordeal. By removing the priestly blessing, the ordeal lost its guaranteed link to divine justice and authority. This change reflects political developments as much as anything, as attitudes towards secular government changed and “men were forced to prefer the probability arrived at by human agencies to the certainties of divine judgment.”²¹ Despite this ruling, there is evidence that the ordeal persisted for some time and that many even at the highest levels of the Church still believed in its efficacy.²²

Even after the proclamations of the Fourth Lateran Council, exempla collections still contained stories of ordeals in various guises. In “Of Miracles,” Caesarius wrote of instances where men were tested by the ordeal of hot iron. In one, a fisherman was brought to trial for fornication with a certain woman. Confession cleansed him, and he passed the ordeal, but he later felt the same urges again, and by a miracle, merely touching the water burned him as an iron

¹⁹ Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water*, 9.

²⁰ Peter Brown, “Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change,” *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975), 136.

²¹ R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 97.

²² Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water*, 53.

would.²³ In another instance, after a man had his house burned down twice, several men accused cleared themselves by the ordeal of hot iron. Later, the man who was guilty returned to his unknowing victim, picked up the iron that had been used, and was instantly burned, revealing his crime to all.²⁴ It is difficult based on these stories to say definitively that ordeals were still performed, as these stories were likely fabricated or embellished and impossible to date. What is important, however, is that at the time of his writing this, after the Fourth Lateran Council, the ordeal and the assumptions behind it were still part of the world-view of Caesarius and his contemporaries. In a world that still received omens from visions and natural cues, and used Scriptural divination to gain insight into the future, that God could be called upon to similarly to provide insight in judicial matters just made sense.

The persistence of an ordeal mindset is evident in places in the exempla where the same assumptions seem to exist without the official court procedure. Jacques de Vitry included in his exempla a story of a priest who refused to bury a dead usurer who had not repented. The man's friends continued to insist upon his burial, so the priest, "after having performed a prayer," said to them, "Let us place his corpse upon an ass, and let us see the will of God and where he might dispose of it." The ass carried the body outside of the town and straight to the place where robbers were hanged and disposed of.²⁵ Thereby God pronounced a judgment upon the dead man as he would in an ordeal against a living man

²³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:35.

²⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:36.

²⁵ Jacques de Vitry, 177.

accused. In a story from Caesarius, the priest involved set himself to an ordeal-like test to prove his innocence. A harlot had slandered him and attempted to get him to sin with her, so the priest set fire to a bed, climbed in, and invited the harlot to join him. He was not harmed in any way by the flames, but the assumption is that she would have been consumed, had she not broken down and confessed.²⁶ In the case of Jacques' story, the prayer was critical to the legitimacy of the pronouncement. The action of the ass carrying a body to a certain place was not unusual; it required the opening appeal to God to give it significance, just as the priest's blessing at the beginning of an ordeal was crucial. Caesarius' story, on the other hand, was the kind of event contrary to nature, the "controlled miracle", that was expected in an ordeal.²⁷ The fact that the man was a consecrated priest seems to have been enough to invoke God's action to perform the miracle.

The practices of divination, the ordeal, and interpreting omens were means of harnessing supernatural power that the laity and clergy shared. Another was the use of religious amulets—objects associated with divine power used for their curative and protective qualities. The use of amulets, too, dated back to antiquity, where people might use gems or inscribed tablets for protection, healing, love spells, etc.²⁸ As with omens and divination, this practice extended into the Middle Ages, having been transformed by a different power

²⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:34.

²⁷ Brown, "Society and the Supernatural," 135.

²⁸ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 19-20.

source and belief system behind it. Medieval religious amulets could, most obviously, be relics, or objects associated with a saint that could range from actual parts of the saint's body, to more mundane items only loosely related to the life of the saint, like a cup or a shroud. Relics served as a material link between the physical and supernatural realms, providing the conduit through which people could pray for the saint's intercession on their behalves. When used in an amuletic fashion, relics most often provided protection. Related to relics was the Host of the Eucharist. Unconsecrated, the Host was just a wafer, but consecrated it became the flesh of Christ, and this fact was firmly decided in the first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council. As we have seen, the practice of receiving the Eucharist in communion became very important in the thirteenth century after the Fourth Lateran Council made yearly confession and communion a requirement. Thus the Host, too, was used in a similar way as relics were for protection, but some also used it for decidedly non-religious purposes. Healing was another important amuletic function, and most often garments imbued with religious significance performed this role in the exempla. All of these objects were used by both clergy and laity to focus divine aid on human problems, but not all of these practices were condoned.

The practice of using holy garments to heal the sick seems not to have been condemned, and such stories in the *Dialogus Miraculorum* seem to have been well-attested. One even came from the life of Caesarius himself. He had been extremely ill as a child, and his mother was told to wrap him in the shroud in which a pagan servant girl had just been baptized, still dripping wet with the baptismal water. She did this, and instantly he became well. Caesarius explained

this miracle, saying, “for although baptism is medicine for the soul, yet many have found its virtue a cure for their bodies.”²⁹ Thus the garment, imbued with holiness from the water, provided a conduit by which divine power could effect a physical cure. Garments could become imbued with religious significance for other reasons as well. As Caesarius heard directly from Oliver, a scholastic in Cologne, when he was preaching a crusade in Flanders, Oliver advised a pregnant woman, whose husband had taken up the cross, to cover herself in her husband’s cloak bearing the cross while giving birth and she would “feel its power.” She did this, and bore the child with almost no pain.³⁰ In a more fantastic instance, Caesarius heard from a Cistercian abbot that the garments of a certain monk, perhaps still alive at the time, healed any who wore them. Unable to explain this miracle, the abbot simply attributed it to the monk’s piety and renunciation of worldly things.³¹ No doubt Biblical stories of people being healed by touching Christ’s garments informed such later practices, and the belief that holiness could pass through physical contact was widespread throughout the Middle Ages. Contact relics, sometimes several steps removed from the original source of holiness, were available to those incapable of possessing relics themselves.

More often, people turned to religious amulets for protection, and relics were perfectly suited for this. Unlike miraculously imbued garments, relics were everywhere. As we saw in the last chapter, every church could be relied upon to possess a cache of relics, however large or small, through which the community

²⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:44.

³⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:22.

³¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 10:6.

was connected to the saints. Just as their setting in the church was expected to protect the community from harm, so too could a relic held in a private sphere protect its possessor. St. John the Baptist was particularly important to medieval Christians as the “forerunner of Christ”, and, unlike Christ, who left no physical remains, John’s relics did still exist on earth. In a likely apocryphal story, Caesarius wrote of a merchant who unscrupulously obtained the arm of St. John the Baptist, brought it home, and encased it in a pillar in his house. Later, the city caught fire, but the merchant did not worry, saying, “I have no fears for my house, for I have left a good guardian in it.” As he expected, the pillar containing the arm remained untouched, but not surprisingly, his secret was found out and the relic removed to a proper place in the church.³² Objects with relic-like power need not be actual remains of a saint, but could have looser associations. In another case, two merchants purchased a bearskin carpet for the canon of the church of St. Andrew in Cologne to place before the saint’s altar, as that canon himself told Caesarius. Upon returning, their ship got caught in a tempest, until the merchants remembered the bearskin and “with the utmost confidence held it up against the increasing storms and raging wind.” The apostle’s intercession worked, the sea calmed, and the men returned to Cologne to tell their tale.³³ In both stories, Caesarius mentioned that the characters involved *expected* the miracle to occur: the former merchant was not worried, and the latter held the bearskin with the “utmost confidence”. Like the expectations that people held of saints in communities, their relics could be expected to conduct divine power

³² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:53.

³³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:57.

under any circumstances, even on behalf of a crafty merchant, making the relics powerful amulets.

But what if the relic was a fake? Surely there could not be two crowns of thorns, as there seemed to be in Paris in the late thirteenth century after Louis IX brought a second one back from Constantinople. This issue disturbed some in the high Middle Ages. Guibert of Nogent was very critical of those who would exploit false relics for gain, and even wrote a treatise *On the Relics of the Saints*. Guibert was not against the cult of relics as a whole: he wrote very favorably of many miracles that occurred when the relics of Notre Dame de Laon were carried about the countryside for fundraising after the great fire.³⁴ He was, however, an advocate for clerical oversight and railed against the veneration of relics of popular saints whose holiness was unknown or doubtful.³⁵ Guibert was not the only medieval cleric concerned about this issue. Canon sixty-two of the Fourth Lateran Council declared that no one was to venerate any new relics without approval from the pope, but it is doubtful many followed this stricture. The cult of the saints and their relics had always been a local, popularly led movement, and the best the church hierarchy could hope to do was to guide it and participate in it at that local level.

So what did one do with a false relic? If it failed to produce miracles, it could be denounced and discarded. But what about a relic later found to be false that *had* produced miracles? Caesarius wrote of such an occasion in the book “Of

³⁴ See Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society*, 192-7.

³⁵ See Guibert of Nogent, “On the Relics of the Saints,” in *Medieval Hagiography: an Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland Press, 1998), 399-422.

Divers Visions.” A devout knight purchased a bridle from a deceitful priest who claimed it had belonged to Thomas Becket and had worked many miracles. Despite its falsity—how this was known Caesarius did not explain—the bridle *did* work miracles, and the knight built a church in honor of the saint to house the bridle. Caesarius explained it thusly: “God to whom nothing is impossible, willing to reward the faith of the knight, deigned to perform many miracles in honor of his martyr by means of this bridle.”³⁶ Then he summarily moved on to the next tale. Just as a seemingly mundane object like a monk’s garment could act as a conduit for divine healing, so too could an object without true holy significance perform the same mediating role. Even Guibert of Nogent, however grudgingly, had to admit that false relics could work miracles of God if those venerating them were of pious intentions and unaware of their falsity. The way in which the object was used, and the power to which it was trying to connect, were more important than the object itself.

The same issue of the practice versus the amuletic object itself appears again in regards to the Host as amulet, which is, in some ways, the opposite of the problem with false relics. From the exempla tradition we see that attempting to use the Host as a protective amulet was a common practice at this time. Caesarius wrote of two instances where lay women saved their communion wafers to sprinkle over their crops as protection against pestilence and famine, to bad results. In one case, for doing so a devil possessed the woman, whom Caesarius claimed to have seen himself.³⁷ The other woman did not face the

³⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 8:70.

³⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 9:9.

same torment, possibly because she had not yet gone through with the ritual, for she found that the Host that she had placed in her bread box had turned to congealed blood.³⁸ Another popular legend, told first by Caesarius and then by Etienne de Bourbon, claimed that a beekeeper had placed a Host in his hive to protect the bees from dying or to attract new bees, depending on the version. In both versions, the bees then recognized their Lord and built a little altar of honeycomb on which to place the body of Christ. From there the stories differ: in the first, the local congregation discovered the miracle and led the little altar and Host in procession back to the church; in the second, when the man discovered the bees, they swarmed and stung him badly “as if they had wanted to vindicate the insult to the Savior,” and then the same scene of the congregation and the procession occurred.³⁹ In the case of the Host as amulet, the object itself was without question very holy and powerful, but it was the practice that was condemned. The physical act of breaking up the consecrated Host, and thus the body of Christ, seems to have been particularly offensive. Through the voice of the novice, Caesarius wrote of the possessed woman who scattered the Host over her vegetables: “This woman was more cruel than Pilate’s servants, who spared the Lord when dead, that a bone of Him might not be broken.”⁴⁰ Medieval people considered even mere images of the saints to contain the actual essence of the holy person; this is why someone could suffer punishment for maiming or even

³⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 9:25.

³⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 9:8; Etienne de Bourbon, 317. Etienne’s story was later, and surely informed by the one from Caesarius.

⁴⁰ Caesarius of Heisterbach, 9:9.

speaking harshly of the image, like the woman in the previous chapter who called an image of the Virgin “old rubbish.” Within such a mindset, crumbling up the body of the Lord would be considered a particularly heinous offense.

Perhaps the Host as protective amulet also faced condemnation because some used it for decidedly non-religious purposes, such as love magic. Jacques de Vitry wrote of a woman who kept the Host from communion for the purpose of a love spell, but the wafer transformed into literal flesh in her mouth and thus sealed it so that she could not speak.⁴¹ Caesarius wrote of a similar story involving a priest trying to tempt a woman to love him. After Mass, he left the Host in his mouth, thinking that “if he were to kiss her that her will would be bent to his by the power of the sacrament.” Yet God prevented this by making the priest grow in size so that he could not leave the church. Terrified, he removed the Host and buried it in a corner of the church, and went to confess his sin. He and his confessor then returned to find that the Host had miraculously turned into a tiny man hanging on a cross, fully flesh and blood.⁴²

The Host as love amulet brings up issues of religion versus magic and superstition that have been debated by scholars for decades. Early historians of popular religion, such as G.G. Coulton, tended to refer to practices such as these as “superstitions” of the laity that, while interesting, were something separate from learned religion. Later historians, informed by cultural anthropology, focused heavily on these folkloric practices and saw them primarily as pagan

⁴¹ Jacques de Vitry, 270.

⁴² Caesarius of Heisterbach, 9:6.

survivals of a superficially Christianized peasant majority.⁴³ Others, however, questioned this interpretation and its historical source. Keith Thomas identified the root of this religion-versus-magic divide in the sixteenth century, when both Protestant and Catholic reformers sought to distinguish their religion from what they saw as the superstitious, magical, *pagan* elements of medieval Christianity.⁴⁴ Thus, these were early modern categories and distinctions that did not exist in the minds of medieval men. I would argue, as Richard Kieckhefer has, that we must understand these practices in their own context, as people at the time would have.⁴⁵ All of the practices discussed in this chapter—omens, divination, amulets—originated in the ancient world, among pagans, and in many cases they were considered magic. The basic mechanism carried over into the Middle Ages, but, at least by the thirteenth century, the source of their efficacy had completely changed. It is clear, even in cases that the clergy condemned like the use of the Host for love magic, that the practitioners believed God was responsible for the effect produced. Spreading a communion wafer over one's crops and saying a prayer, though it may at first glance appear similar to, say, scattering herbs and reciting a charm against dwarves, was a completely different practice because of the presumed power behind it. Here Roger Chartier's conception of cultural use can apply equally to practices as to objects. In discussing labeling cultural objects as "popular" or not, he has said, "Cultural

⁴³ See particularly Jacques Le Goff, "Clerical Culture and Folklore;" and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound*.

⁴⁴ Keith Thomas, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic II," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 1 (1975): 91-109; see also Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

⁴⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 813-36.

consumption, whether popular or not, is at the same time a form of production, which creates ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of those who produce.”⁴⁶ The basic mechanisms of the *sortes* or natural omens may have originated in a pagan context, the use of amulets in a magical context, but their use in each situation determined their identification as magic or religion. In the context of medieval Christianity, these practices called upon the power of God and had a religious meaning. Early modern Christians, and later scholars, may have seen these practices as magical superstition, but in their proper context these practices were essential to what medieval Christianity was: organic, eclectic, vital, and wholly entwined in the way in which both clergy and lay conceived of a world charged with supernatural power always at work, coursing through the veins of everyday life.

⁴⁶ Roger Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France,” in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 234.

Conclusion

The supernatural was a common element in the lives of all medieval people and permeated the way in which they viewed their world. There was no distinction here between the clergy and the laity. As we have seen, the vast majority of those within the Church lived and operated in close proximity to the lay people whom they served; though they had a responsibility to the Church hierarchy, the laity had a more immediate claim on their attention and services. Even monks were a part of this: they were typically born and raised as laymen—some not taking vows until quite late in life—and even once monks, they lived among lay brothers, welcomed pilgrims passing through, and interacted with the laity through their involvement in the local economy. The influence of lay culture on monks was such that even the work of a highly educated prior like Caesarius of Heisterbach could express beliefs and practices that some might associate with illiterate, folkloric lay culture. Caesarius' learning is clearly evident in the way he introduced each topic in the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, quoting Scripture and the Church Fathers, but once he began telling stories, theological assumptions tended to make way for lively stories of demons holding court and dedicating church bells, saints being bitterly vindictive for the slightest wrong, and people of all sorts turning to age-old practices involving divination and protective amulets. An earlier generation of scholars may have viewed such things as indicative of a Christian religion corrupted by the vulgar influence of pre-Christian tradition, but I do not think the two sides of Caesarius' work must be mutually exclusive. Medieval Christianity was a wholly different phenomenon than post-Reformation

modern Christianity. Upon a foundation of basic beliefs were built a great variety of practices, widespread and local, in which both the clergy and laity participated, that were neither dictated nor explicitly condemned by the Church. Belief in more “magical” elements was completely rational.¹

What we refer to as “popular” religion, then, must be redefined. It can no longer be equated with illiterate, folkloric, lay culture at odds with learned, elite, clerical culture, as it shared much in common with that clerical culture. I would suggest that “popular” religion encompassed medieval people as a whole—it was the dominant, lived religious culture in which the majority of medieval people participated. The aspects of popular religious culture that I have described here are necessarily only a small fraction of that culture. Further scholarship could return to sources that have previously been read for other purposes—chronicles, memoirs, parish records, to name a few—to look for evidence of religious culture. Even the *Dialogus Miraculorum* could yield much further research; one aspect of it ripe for inquiry is the frequent appearance of religious women, both nuns and pious laywomen, which could say much about the burgeoning women’s devotional movement of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Attention should also be paid to the development of popular religion and how beliefs and practices changed over the centuries and across Europe. Popular religious history is still a relatively young area of research, and there is still much for us to discover about the lived religion of the Middle Ages.

¹ See Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 813-36.

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