

PILGRIMAGE
AN IMAGE OF
MEDIAEVAL RELIGION

Jonathan Sumption

FABER & FABER
3 Queen Square
London

Cologne and Aachen have not received the attention they deserve. There are a number of reasons for this, amongst them the extreme sparseness of the evidence before the fifteenth century. But I cannot deny that self-indulgence has been an important factor. I love France. German history bores me. There is, moreover, a homogeneity about the French cultural world which makes it possible to speak of it as a whole. Germany and central Europe are in some respects exceptional and ought to be considered separately. This is already a long book. I had no desire to make it longer.

I owe a very considerable debt to the President and fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford, for the leisure and agreeable surroundings which I have enjoyed there both as an undergraduate and as a fellow. I have benefited enormously from conversations with my old tutor, Karl Leyser, more, perhaps, than he realizes. Dr. Hugh Sinclair and Dr. David Robson have helped me out with some medical matters in chapter five. The staff of at least a dozen libraries in this country and in France and Italy have been unfailingly helpful, none more so than the staff of the Bodleian Library, who staggered daily to seat U.219 bowed down beneath the weight of ancient folios. My greatest debt is to my wife, and the fact that this is a common experience among authors will not prevent me from saying so.

J. P. C. S.
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INTRODUCTION

The world which the mediaeval pilgrim left behind him was a small and exclusive community. The geographic and social facts of life made it oppressive and isolated and, except in the vicinity of major towns and truck roads, the chief qualities of human life were its monotonous regularity and the rule of overpowering conventions. Existence, for the great majority, meant rural existence. Towns were few and small, and separated themselves from the country by moats of legal privilege. Villages asserted their independence and marked out their territory with rows of stakes and crosses. Even where migration occurred, it was not allowed to disturb the placid conventions of rural life. English villages of the thirteenth century were forbidden to receive strangers, and were held collectively responsible for crimes committed in their midst. Townsmen were enjoined to watch for strangers and lock their gates at sunset.

Nowhere was the closeness of these communities more apparent than in their religious life. 'What is a parish?', asked the thirteenth-century canonist Henry of Susa; 'it is a place with well-defined frontiers whose inhabitants belong to a single church.' The parish-ioner 'belonged' in a very real sense to his church, and lived his whole life under its shadow. There, and there alone, he was baptized and married, attended Sunday Mass, paid his tithes and offerings, and there he was buried when he died. The statutes of the church constantly reminded him of the fact. No one may receive the sacraments in any church but his own. 'On no account admit to confession any person from another parish.' 'No stranger is to be allowed burial or marriage in the parish church.' A thirteenth-century archbishop of Bordeaux excommunicated 'all strangers who have abandoned their own parish churches which they ought to be attending, . . . for the parish priest should be able to see the face of every member of his flock.' Pierre de Collemieu, archbishop of Rouen, required parish priests to keep a list of their parishioners, and to eject any strangers whom they found in their churches on Sundays except for noblemen and beggars. It was not unknown for those who died outside their own parishes to be exhumed and brought back to their own churchyards.

The Lateran council of 1215 reinforced this dependence on the parish by making every layman confess his sins at least once a year to his parish priest, and to no one else. Only bona fide travellers and those in danger of death were permitted to confess to a strange priest, while those clergy who had no parishes were forbidden to hear confessions at all. The right of the mendicant orders to hear them was hotly resisted by the secular clergy as an intrusion upon their prerogatives, and was only tardily recognized by the papacy. Confession, the most personal act of piety which the ordinary man performed, was far from being the anonymous ceremony found in the modern Roman Catholic Church. It is true that the actual words spoken were inaudible, but the sacrament itself was held in public, openly, and not in some private place, especially in the case of women, as the synod of Nîmes ordained in 1284. Moreover the parish priest was expected to probe for further, undeclared, sins, and to inflict a lengthy cross-examination on the penitent. Several handbooks for priests were available in which useful and pertinent questions were set out for this purpose.

Dignity and privacy were not concepts dear to the hearts of mediaeval men, who conducted their communal lives on the unspoken assumption that the sins of one were the business of all. This was particularly true of breaches of sexual morality. In a small village near Bonneval in the Loire valley, the repentance of a prostitute at the end of the twelfth century was an event of public importance. Most of the inhabitants gathered in the street to debate whether she should go immediately to the nearest priest in Bonneval, or await his arrival for Mass on the following day. They decided to wait. In the morning they accompanied the sinner in a body to the church and, all speaking at once, recited her history to the priest. After a short homily, the priest confessed her in the presence of the villagers and sentenced her to an annual pilgrimage to Chartres. Then he absolved her amid scenes of emotion and jubilation. In the records of episcopal visitations it is clear that the majority of witnesses regarded eavesdropping and peeping through windows as a duty. When bishop Trehant of Hereford visited his diocese in 1397, most of the laymen who appeared before him were accused by their neighbours of adultery, bigamy, quarrelling with their wives, denying conjugal rights to their husbands, and other matters which would now be regarded as private. A similar picture emerges from the records of a provincial society in France. When a Poitevin peasant-woman, Clémentine Gaboreau, failed to appear in church one Sunday in 1387, her fellow parishioners recalled that she had often been seen entering and leaving the house of one Guillaume Achale and immediately suspected the worst. It was common knowledge

in the village of Ansois (Poitou) that the wife of Pierre Vigoureux was the mistress of the parish priest. Jean Bourdeau, carpenter of Coulay (Poitou) was completely unaware that his wife was unfaithful to him, until several peeping-Toms told him so, whereupon he killed her with a sickle. The fifteenth-century author of a manual for parish priests no doubt had such incidents in mind when he warned his readers against 'all that standeth or hearkeneth by nights under walls, doors, or windows, for to spy touching evil.'

The popularity of the mendicant friars and of local holy hermits, was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that they offered an escape from the stifling framework of parish life. Pilgrimage offered another escape. A surprisingly large number of pilgrims seem to have left their homes solely in order to deny their parish priest his monopoly over their spiritual welfare. Contemporary churchmen frequently accused them of seeking to confess to a strange priest or to avoid the moral censure which they deserved. In one extreme case a lady of London, on learning that she was dying, had herself carried in a litter to Canterbury in order to avoid the payment of a five shilling burial fee to her parish priest. At the end of the fifteenth century a writer castigating the excessive devotion of the populace to pilgrimages reflected that their principal motives were curiosity to see new places and experience new things, impatience of the servant with his master, of children with their parents, or wives with their husbands.

The twelfth-century chronicler Orderic Vitalis describes the dreadful fate of a priest who went with his mistress on a pilgrimage to St-Gilles, in order to avoid the opprobrium of his family and friends. But many of the penitential pilgrims who filled the great shrines no doubt honestly felt that they would never live down their obsessions of guilt so long as they remained at home. St. Hugh of Lincoln once met a man in Rochester who admitted that he had led an evil life in his youth, 'until, unable to endure my shame and hating the scene of my destruction, I secretly left my mother's house and the city where I had been born, . . . and wandered I knew not whither.' Paul Walther, a German Franciscan who visited the Holy Land in 1481, confessed before his departure that he had not lived up to the requirements of the Franciscan rule 'and therefore I have resolved to go away to a place where the German language is unknown, and there I shall exorcize my sins from my wretched body.'

The Reality of Evil

The peculiar intensity of mediaeval piety had as many causes as it had symptoms. But pre-eminent among them was a view of the

natural world as a chaos in which the perpetual intervention of God was the only guiding law. God appeared to control the entire natural world from moment to moment. He was the direct and immediate cause of everything that happened, from the most trivial to the most vital incidents of human life. Indeed it was not until the eighteenth century that men were prepared to concede to nature any power of her own, or to attribute the workings of the natural world to anything other than divine intervention. In these circumstances, men were inclined to feel that their lives were directed by irresistible forces. Since they could not control them, the only remedies available were supplication, and the performance of pious acts considered likely to propitiate them.

The reactions of men when faced with what they conceived to be overpowering supernatural forces, changed remarkably little in a thousand years of Christian history. At the end of the sixth century Gregory of Tours collected eight books of the miracles of the saints, every page of which demonstrates that the most normal incidents of daily life were interpreted as signs of divine favour or disfavour, provoking displays of general jubilation or incalculable terror. Simple men were terrified of the dark, sometimes to the point of insanity. Thunder storms brought panic to whole communities and drove them to take refuge round the altars of the saints. A flash of lightning created havoc in a small village, 'the people all fearing that the punishment of God was about to descend on them wherever they might try to escape.' Terrible cries were heard during an eclipse of the moon. Since all such phenomena sprang not from natural causes but from the direct action of God, it followed that the will of God could be discerned in them if only men knew how. To the people of Paris, a red sky at night three times in succession was a certain presage of war. A partial eclipse of the sun foretold disaster in the Auvergne. The heavens themselves blazed forth the death of princes.

These attitudes are not peculiar to the sixth century. They are found throughout the mediaeval period, and indeed afterwards. Unreasonable fear of the dark was one of the popular superstitions condemned by the eleventh-century canonist Burchard of Worms; 'many men dare not leave their houses before dawn, saying that... evil spirits have more power to harm them before cock-crow than afterwards.' Guibert of Nogent used to keep the lamp as close to his bed as possible in order to ward off demons. Shortly after the death of Robert the Pious, king of France, in 1031, it was recorded that the event had been presaged by three years of epidemics, famines, and 'prodigies'. In the fourteenth century it was still generally accepted that natural calamities were the just punishments inflicted

by God on sinners. This was, for example, the moral drawn from the hurricane which struck southern England in January 1362, uprooting the fruit trees and destroying the harvest. In *Piers Plowman* Reason preached before the King and

*... proved that this pestilence were for pure sin,
And the south west wind on Saturday at even
Was perillous for pure pride and for no point else.*

The same notion that a conflict of irresistible forces governed individual lives gave a desperate, almost frenzied quality to the religious life of the later middle ages. Jean de Meung, one of the authors of the *Roman de la Rose* attributed this belief to most of his contemporaries, though he does not seem to have subscribed to it himself. Because of it, he observed, men attached excessive importance to trivial events. Of this attitude was born the conviction that they had been set upon by demons. Sick men were driven to panic, sometimes to hysteria. Sorcery, necromancy, conjuring of spirits, visions of Heaven and Hell, were all, in the poet's view, products of the same aberration.

Ordinary men could not regard evil as an abstract force; to them it was real, visible, and tangible, capable of inflicting actual physical damage. A crude pantheistic view of nature suggested to them that the physical world harboured malignant powers hostile to men. A gust of wind might be the breath of Satan. Gregory of Tours once met a woman of the Limousin who believed that her child had been struck blind because she failed to make the sign of the cross when the wind blew up. Even at the end of the fifteenth century a gust of wind which blew open the doors of an abbey near Dunkirk was enough to strike panic in the hearts of the inmates. The friars of one Dominican convent of northern Germany habitually went about in pairs for fear of the Devil, who had broken all the windows of their church. According to St. Bruno, the founder of the Carthusian order, devils, the incarnation of all evil, moved in the air and in the dust that floated in every stream of light; 'a breath of wind, a turbulence in the air, the gust that blows men to the ground and harms their crops, these are the whistlings of the Devil.' The whole atmosphere, thought Ivo of Chartres, was filled with the spirit of evil, ubiquitous, all-knowing, powerful, spying out the inner thoughts and weaknesses of men. Anything which inspired fear might be evil, and thus the daily accidents of life suddenly took on a sinister import.

In some of the oldest writings of the Church the Devil takes the form of wild animals. He appears to St. Martin, for example, as a bull. According to Sulpicius Severus, St. Martin 'could see the

Devil with his own eyes however cleverly he might disguise himself'. Peter the Venerable, the scholarly twelfth-century abbot of Cluny, collected a large number of stories illustrating the various forms in which the Devil assailed sinners - a spider, a vulture in the sky, a bear seen in the forest near Cluny, a black pig found in the chapter house at Norwich, and a thousand other frightening creatures. Savage dogs occupied a sinister place in the mediaeval imagination. Walter, a monk of Durham in the twelfth century, was attacked by the Devil in the form of a huge black hound, while Guibert of Nogent's mother believed that lesser devils appeared as packs of small dogs to terrify children.

The Devil's most sinister form was that of a deformed, distorted human being, the horrifying figure so familiar from the sculptures of the Romanesque churches of France, or from Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century. This vision of the Devil makes its first appearance in the writings of the desert monks of the third and fourth centuries and particularly in one of the most influential saints' lives ever written, the *Life of St. Anthony* by Athanasius. During his twenty years in the desert, St. Anthony was said to have suffered temptations which are clearly modelled on those of Christ. He was perpetually conscious that 'the air around him was full of evil spirits'. The Devil frightened him at night, aroused carnal desires in him, tempted him to return to the comforts of civilization, and even struck him blows. The Devil commonly appeared to St. Anthony as a 'little black boy, his appearance matching his mind, with flashing eyes and fiery breath, and horns on his head, half-man, half-ass'. This is probably why the Devil is so often described by mediaeval writers as a negro or 'Ethiopian'. It is also the origin of the idea that the Devil was a being, almost human, possessed of human cunning and human malice. In his biography of St. Benedict, Gregory the Great describes the temptations of his hero in terms borrowed from the *Life of St. Anthony* while the same conventions are observed more than five centuries later by Peter the Venerable. When the Devil visited the sick-bed of a monk of Cluny who had experienced fleeting doubts about the doctrine of the real presence, he was 'like a small black Ethiopian, horribly deformed, with horns coming out of his ears and fire from his mouth as if he was about to eat the very flesh of the sick monk'.

It was very widely believed that dreams were a direct revelation of the supernatural world. A deepening sense of guilt about real or imaginary sins frequently resulted in nightmares in which all the sinister fantasies found in the writings of Peter the Venerable seemed to become reality. In the 1170s the daughter of a knight called Sewal had a recurrent nightmare in which she was attacked by devils in the

form of vicious black dogs; she was convinced that her dream had actually happened, and was taken by her parents to St.-Léonard de Noblat, near Limoges, and then to Canterbury in the hope of a cure. A boy aged fifteen from the Cluniac priory of Pontefract dreamed that demons were trying to strangle him, and he too was taken to Canterbury. Nor did such nightmares afflict only the sensitive and the simple. Stephen of Hayland, a knight and a man of some substance, suffered from the same nocturnal terrors for thirty years before a visit to Canterbury brought him peace of mind. In a window of the south-west transept of the cathedral, he is shown lying awake at night with a devil at the foot of his bed and another at the head.

In popular thinking, the Devil's organization and methods were a reflection of God's. He too had his twelve apostles of evil, his rites, and his Church. Just as God lived in the righteous, so the Devil 'possessed' the sinful. Sin physically delivered the sinner into the Devil's hands. 'In sign', explains a fifteenth-century preacher, 'that of them that are like hogs in gluttony, the fiends have power to dwell in them and to drench them in the sea of Hell.' 'Possession' of this sort was physical as well as spiritual. Hysteria, however caused, was a symptom of possession, and doubtless it was often in practice caused by intense guilt. Romanus, a monk of St.-Evyroul in the eleventh century, was an incorrigible kleptomaniac who frequently had to be rebuked by the abbot for petty thefts in the monastery.

'One night as he lay in bed, a demon set upon him and horribly tormented him. Hearing his hideous shrieks the monks rushed to his aid and by shaking him and sprinkling him with holy water, they finally succeeded in freeing him from the devil who possessed him. When he came to himself he recognized that the devil had gained this power over him through the thefts that he had committed.'

The idea of devils 'possessing' the sexually unchaste is particularly common in monastic writing, and the sculpted figure of 'Luxuria', abetted by a demon is found in many monastic churches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the nave of the abbey of Vézelay there is a terrifying capital showing Woman the seductress leading a young man to despair and ultimately to suicide, while a similar capital in Autun cathedral shows a young man tempted by a naked woman and thereupon being grasped from behind by a devil.

The Approach of Death

The sense of constant menace which these malignant forces aroused was heightened by a preoccupation with death verging on the

All very psychological

obsessional. The brevity of human life and the imminence of death were commonplaces of mediaeval preaching for, as Chaucer's parson observed, the majority of conversions to the pious life were probably due to the fear of damnation: 'the . . . cause that oghte moeve a man to contrition is drede of the daye of dome and of the horrible peynes of hell.'

The celebrated thirteenth-century preacher Jacques de Vitry one day encountered a man who asserted that a single word had turned him to God. He had asked himself whether the souls of the damned could be freed from torment after a thousand years. He answered in his mind: 'no.' If after a hundred thousand years: 'no.' If after a thousand thousand: 'no.' And pondering these things he saw how transitory life was, and thus a single word, 'no', converted him to God. The sermons of mediaeval preachers are full of such 'conversions'. A loose-living student of Bologna was reformed when a Dominican told him how hard would be the beds in Hell. Caesarius of Heisterbach knew of several who were converted by hearing great preachers. Another was reformed by the sight of a funeral service, while sudden illness and imminent death were responsible for countless conversions. 'Indeed', Caesarius concluded, 'the occasions of conversion are innumerable.' But not all such conversions are edifying tales in sermons. Many people undoubtedly experienced genuine transformations during which they regarded themselves as beginning a new life, as entering an elite order for whose members the chances of salvation were infinitely greater. In the early Church, Christians were frequently not baptized until they had resolved to live the most perfect possible life. St. Augustine was not baptized until the age of thirty-three, and he spoke of it then as his 'conversion'. Bede and Gregory the Great both used the word 'conversion' to mean entry into the monastic life. Indeed the 'conversion' of saints was the classic stock-in-trade of mediaeval hagiographers from the time of St. Athanasius onwards. The same pattern – worldliness, conversion, sanctity – is repeated in biographies of St. Martin, St. Benedict, St. Dunstan, Odo of Cluny, Bernard of Clairvaux and countless others who attracted the admiration of their contemporaries.

From the notion of the converted elite was born the belief that the overwhelming majority of men were damned. This tradition was strong in the early Church and, indeed, it was natural in a minority religion suffering abuse and persecution. But it survived to become a corner-stone of the moral teaching of the mediaeval Church, a recurring feature of the sermons of revivalist preachers and the visions of mystics. St. Bernard had little doubt that there were 'few, very few who will be saved', while Berthold of Regensburg, the

great German preacher of the thirteenth century, assured his audiences that less than one in a thousand of them would ascend to Paradise. 'If we believed', wrote the fifteenth-century Dominican John Herolt, 'that one man only out of the entire human race, was doomed to perdition, would not every man be afraid lest he himself should be that one? . . . How much more then does he have cause to fear, when God himself has said that "many are called but few are chosen."'

In 1091 a parish priest of Normandy reported an extraordinary vision to the bishop of Lisieux. As he was returning from his rounds one winter's night he seemed to hear the tramp of a great army in the distance. At first he assumed that it was the army of the notorious Robert de Bellême, engaged in some private war. But then a great ghostly defile appeared in the moonlight and marched past him, well-known murderers, noble ladies on horse-back, thieves, prelates, judges, and knights. All were being escorted to Hell by squads of negroid demons. Amongst them were men of great repute in their lifetimes, some of whom had seemed to be holy men. Hugh, bishop of Lisieux was amongst them, as were the abbots of St.-Evroul and St.-Wandrille and many others whose names I forget, for man's eye is frequently deceived but God sees them to the very marrow.

It is difficult to decide how far this uninviting philosophy commanded general acceptance, for the denunciations of preachers are not always a true reflection of mediaeval religious life. As the preachers themselves readily admitted, their words often fell on deaf ears, and there is no doubt that the later mediaeval period, for which surviving sermon material is richest, was also a period of notable popular worldliness. The prior of Holy Trinity, London reported in 1200 that 'many believe neither in good nor in bad angels, nor in life or death or any other spiritual things which they cannot see with their own eyes.' There were scoffers, complained Vincent of Beauvais, who openly laughed at graphic representations of Hell. Berthold of Regensburg devoted a whole sermon to the refutation of those sceptics who argued that the soul must become insensitive to the pains of Hell if they are indeed of infinite duration. Belief in a merciful God was even, occasionally, regarded as evidence of heresy. An Albigensian who appeared before the Inquisition of Languedoc declared that if he could lay his hands on that God who saved but one out of a thousand of the creatures he created, he would tear him to pieces and spit in his face. Most people, however, were not inclined to criticize official doctrines, and they continued to provide audiences for mendicant preachers. Margery Kempe, the visionary of King's Lynn at the beginning of the fifteenth century, had originally refused to believe that most men were damned and when

Our Lord showed her any that should be damned she had great pain; she would not hear of it... and put it out of her mind as much as she might.' But the Lord was displeased at this aberration and punished her until she came to accept the orthodox doctrine.

Mediaeval men were familiar with a number of detailed descriptions of Hell. The picture of Hell was repeatedly presented to them by imaginative preachers like master Richard Alkerton, who declared in 1406, in a sermon delivered in London, that the damned would be

'boiled in fire and brimstone without end. Venomous worms... shall gnaw all their members unceasingly, and the worm of conscience shall gnaw the soul... Now ye shall have everlasting bitterness... This fire that tormenteth you shall never be quenched, and they that tormenteth you shall never be weary neither die.'

The scenes carved on the west fronts at Conques or Bourges find their counterpart in the hand-books of preachers. The *Prike of Conscience*, one of the most popular of these manuals, draws a picture of Hell with intense dramatic power: the hideous din, the shrieks of the tortured, the ramping of devils, the dying and dysching of their glowing hammers, and the closely packed mass of humanity swaying this way and that in the infernal oven, each fighting and scratching at his neighbour's face like a grinning madman, or ripping off his own flesh with indescribable passion. A good many of these descriptions originated in visions, or in the accounts of those who claimed to have descended bodily into Hell. In the time of Bede, a Northumbrian who claimed to have returned to life described it as an ever-deepening pit where sinners suffered extremes of cold and heat, their cries drowned by the harsh laughter of demons. 'Do you know who all these souls are?' asked his guide: 'they are the souls who failed to confess and atone for their sins until they were dying.' Amongst seventh-century writers it seems to have been agreed that the torments of Hell consisted of alternating extremes of heat and cold. The hermit Guthlac saw it as 'sulphurous eddies of flames mixed with freezing hail', a mental image which remained common throughout the middle ages. Even Shakespeare's Claudio feared

*To bathe in fiery floods or to reside
In thrilling region of thick ribbed ice
(Measure for Measure III. i)*

Educated men may not always have believed these tales of bodily descents into Hell, though Bede and Gregory the Great certainly

did. But the descriptions of Hell which were based on them reflected notions held more or less consistently by every generation. Guibert of Nogent's mother, after the death of her husband, 'saw by a wonderful dispensation of God in frequent visions the clearest possible images of the pains he was enduring in Purgatory.' A servant of Ludwig, landgrave of Thuringia, claimed that he had been permitted a glimpse into Hell, where he had been able to watch the torments of his former master. Such accounts were received everywhere with considerable interest. When, for example, a monk of Eynsham experienced an unusually vivid dream of Purgatory in 1196, the bishop of Lincoln instructed a detailed record to be made of it for the edification of his dioceses.

Profound pessimism was one of the principal characteristics of mediaeval religion. At a popular level it bred a fatalism in which the resort to rituals with the object of expiating sin, becomes somewhat easier to understand. The salvation of an individual man was nothing less than a miracle, to be sought of God through the intercession of the saints. In a powerful sermon on damnation, Berthold of Regensburg asserted that the salvation of a sinner was 'one of the greatest miracles that ever God does. That is why we sing in the Mass "*Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis*", God is wonderful in his saints.' The relics of the saints, repeated a theologian of the twelfth century, were the means whereby the faithful might resist the power of evil in the world. They gave health to the bodies of men and absolution to their souls: 'the body of Elijah give life to the dead and remove death's sting from the living.'