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HISTORY AND THE
SUPERNATURAL IN
MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

C. S. WATKINS

effectively inculcated in lay flocks. Preaching and catechesis were probably too infrequent to allow effective diffusion of official norms. Perhaps most significantly in this respect, the mendicants, the shock troops of thirteenth-century re-evangelisation, were even at the end of the twelfth century still but a gleam in the eye of radicals within the hierarchy. And they had no straightforward twelfth-century precursors who could take up the banner of teaching where the local priests still fell short.¹⁴⁷

The 'local' might thus be far more powerful than the 'universal' in the emerging parishes of the central middle ages. This might not be a problem for practically minded churchmen accustomed to the idea that official and unofficial were woven into the fabric of local religion. But it might prove less tolerable for those who held uncompromisingly to the authoritative teachings of the universal church. Thus the differences in attitudes of the worldly Gerald and cloistered Ailred to unofficial local practices might be understood at least partly in terms of their own cultural formation and their consequent expectations of what Christian fidelity might mean. But beneath the accepting pragmatism of the secular and the stern discipline of the monk there might also be something more at work. Where Archdeacon Gerald was obliged to work with the things of an imperfect world, Abbot Ailred was perhaps more inclined to see and reject its manifold imperfections. Where the secular church embraced the broken-ness and sprinkled holy water on the worldly needs and hopes of the ordinary faithful, the monastic order turned away and accepted the sufferings of this life in the hope of better things to come. These two different orientations indicate a further and greater tension, internalised within medieval Christianity: between the needs of the body and the needs of the soul, between pieties which were wonder-seeking and those which were soul-saving. Getting at these tensions is no easy task because sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, they were at work in every believer. They help to explain why those who chose to hold on to the world were drawn emotionally to those who rejected it. And they also help to make sense of why sociological models of belief fail. These forces did not divide the church. Rather they split each individual within it as members of the Christian community struggled in this world and readied themselves for the next.

¹⁴⁷ See C. H. Lawrence, 'The English Parish and its Clergy in the Thirteenth Century', in P. Lindehan and J. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 648–70. For a more optimistic view of the thirteenth-century clergy see also J. H. Denton, 'The Competence of the Parish Clergy in Thirteenth-Century England', in C. M. Barron and J. Stratford (eds.), *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R. B. Dobson: Proceedings of the 1999 Hadlaxton Symposium* (Domingon, 2002), pp. 273–85.

Chapter 3 PRAYERS, SPELLS AND SAINTS

As we have seen, the conversions witnessed not only a transformation of religious belief but also a 'socialisation' of the new religion as it became enmeshed in political and social practices. Wondrous, miracle-working Christianity waxed large in a system of belief which was, in many ways, profoundly worldly in its orientation. But the price of this Christianisation strategy was to reinforce the ancient tension comprehended within the faith between the needs of the body in this world and the needs of the soul in the next. In consequence, churchmen of a reformist temper worried through the early middle ages that beliefs and practices had been instrumentalised, turned into practical weapons against danger and misfortune. Alcuin gave voice to such fears, claiming that too many of the faithful would rather have holy things dangling round their necks as miraculous tokens against misfortune than carry them in their hearts in hope of salvation.¹ Alcuin's alarm echoes through the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hugh of Lincoln renewed the case against over-attachment to wondrous things when he attacked the veneration of a eucharistic wafer which had miraculously turned into flesh. He marvelled 'why should we gape at a sensuous image of this divine gift when every day we behold by faith this heavenly sacrifice whole and entire?'² Gerald of Wales made the same essential point. He dramatised the true value of the sacraments by telling how an attempt to exorcise a demon using eucharistic wafers failed because the wafers were 'food for the soul not for the body' (and, as the unresponsive demon helpfully explained, 'my power is over the body, not over the soul').³

¹ On worries about the over-dependence of missionaries on the wonder-working powers of Christian gestures, utterances and objects and the need to secure conversions by preaching the message of the gospels see Wood, *Missionary Life*, p. 268. See also for discussion of Alcuin's comment Blair, *Church*, pp. 175–6.

² *AE*, II, pp. 92–5. ³ *GW*, *IK*, 94–5.

Similarly, he recounted how a devil might even be able to swallow the host, taking it into its aerial body, even though it could have no salvific effect.⁴ These observations all indicate the possibilities for clashes between two different discourses about the sacred which Christianity traditionally tried to hold together. We are not dealing here with a localised historical phenomenon but with wonder-seeking and soul-saving threads woven through the fabric of ancient and medieval Christianity. Indeed, anthropological studies of modern Catholicism illuminate how different discourses have continued to exist within shared cultic frameworks. John Eade, in exploring devotion at Lourdes, showed how the Hospitallers who kept the shrine tended to focus on the 'church's sacraments and the redemptive sacrifice of Christ' while pilgrims tended to privilege a transactional ethic in which bodily privations were exchanged for miraculous aid.⁵ Eade showed that both groups shared a deep interest in the miracle discourse of the grotto but they engaged with it in different ways and drew different things from it.

Peaceful co-existence of variety was the rule in this case and in most medieval cults, but latent difference nonetheless created pre-conditions for tension if needy pilgrims and shrine guardians championed different valuations of the sacred. This was less likely to happen at established shrines because here varied meanings could privately be imputed to rituals whose public forms tended to be agreed, shared and hallowed by long use. Crises were more likely where new cults were emerging because different valuations could generate disputes over the authenticity of the saint. The risk of tensions of this kind was heightened in the twelfth century because the church was taking a closer interest in testing claims about sanctity and regulating the business of saint-making. The danger here was that, where spontaneous devotion might be fuelled by stories of wonder-working and supernatural signs, the church might measure the prospective saint by its standards of holiness and virtue and draw very different conclusions, anathematizing the wonder-working which a local community enthusiastically embraced.

We can see this sort of tension at work in William of Newburgh's account of two 'false cults' which grew up around executed criminals. Local clergymen and townsfolk at Northampton and Stamford claimed that men locally put to death were working miracles. Unsurprisingly, the ecclesiastical authorities took strong exception to the claims and battled to suppress them. But propelling this social drama were different appreciations of the divine and incompatible 'tests' for sanctity which

flowed from them.⁶ The members of the church hierarchy who moved in to quash the cults and those local clergy and laity who promoted them emphasised different elements of the same language of the sacred. Hostile churchmen steeped in hagiographical traditions argued that only from the deepest Christian virtue might spring the grace of true miracles. Signs wrought without any indication of virtue might (as William of Newburgh darkly hinted) easily be the work of evil angels.⁷ The local laity and clergy, on the other hand, prized the miraculous in a world shot through with uncertainty and misfortune. And so they argued the other way: from news of amazing signs and striking miracles they deduced that a guiltless and virtuous man had met a martyr's death on the gallows.

So Hugh of Lincoln, Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh continued to reflect Aleuin's worries about an instrumental piety which saw the value of holy things in narrow and worldly terms. William of Newburgh's account of the drama around the corpses of dead criminals offers one insight into why many churchmen thought it dangerous for people to want holy things round their necks rather than in their hearts. Such alarm, though very old, may well have become more intense during the twelfth century. It is important to note that Christian wonder-working remained a constant: it was still at the heart of lived religion. While the new monasticism celebrated the ideal of lived suffering in the world, spiritual heroism remained unrealistic for most peasants and knights and, for that matter, most monks. They continued to seek from the church explanation and alleviation of misfortune through ritualised application of the sacred to social needs. But two important things were changing in the central middle ages. First, many churchmen towards the end of the twelfth century were beginning to take a closer interest in regulating the religious lives of the ordinary faithful and hence were scrutinizing wonder-working Christianity in its varied local guises. Secondly, many of these pastorally engaged churchmen, shaped by thinking from the cloister and the schools, were coming to attach greater significance to the intentions lying behind religious actions. Thus Bishop Hugh, Archdeacon Gerald and perhaps also the Augustinian canon, William of Newburgh, thought it important to define ritualised wonder-seeking more carefully in the context of the seeker's faith. Their concerns highlight why practical theologies might be needed which established the possibility of wondrous

⁴ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, II, pp. 228–31.

⁵ J. Eade, 'Order and Power at Lourdes: Lay Helpers and the Organization of a Pilgrimage Shrine', in J. Eade and M. Saltnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London, 1991), pp. 51–76.

⁶ Other versions of these stories appear in R.H., IV, pp. 5–6; R.D., II, pp. 143–4; Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, I, pp. 532–4; Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, in Matthew Paris, *Conita Matina From the Creation to 1239*, ed. H. R. Luard, 7 vols. (R.S., 1872–3), I, p. 244. There is a useful discussion of the cult in Webb, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 159–62.

⁷ W.N., I, p. 311.

help but guarded against magical and instrumental readings of sacred gestures, utterances and relics.

USING THE SACRED IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY: GESTURES, UTTERANCES, OBJECTS, SUBSTANCES

Before turning to these practical theologies and the means by which latent tensions were negotiated in medieval Christianity, we need to explore the repertoire of religious gestures, utterances, objects and substances held to possess apotropaic attributes. Here it is possible to trace an array of shared practices through a range of texts and genres across the span of our long twelfth century. At the heart of many of the practices stood the parish priest, a key mediator of supernatural power in the local community. He was obliged to communicate grace by uttering blessings. For instance, Gilbert of Limerick instructed him to bestow benedictions on a great variety of occasions: at weddings on bridegrooms and brides, upon the bread or water used in the judicial ordeal, on veils of widows, first fruits offered in church, candles offered on Candlemas day, ashes at the start of Lent, palms on Palm Sunday and those about to go on pilgrimage. Priests might sanctify things with holy water and here again Gilbert had specific duties in mind, enjoining, for example that the priest sprinkle holy water in new homes.⁸ The other side of the benedictional coin was liturgical cursing. Where blessings might be sought by the laity, anathemas and excommunications might be feared. Gilbert seems to have envisaged the use of these means to protect the church, secure moral observance and in more general defence of social order. Thus the priest was to excommunicate those who fell into crime and to deny communion to the unregenerate sinner.⁹

How such rituals might have been understood by parishioners is near impossible to tell. We know that, by the later middle ages, candles blessed on Candlemas day and palms from Palm Sunday were thought to retain virtues and were used in homes during moments of crisis ranging from thunderstorms to the solemnities of the deadbed.¹⁰ Likewise, we can discern something of the effect of the General Sentence, the 'greater excommunication' pronounced four times yearly against those who offended against holy church, from the many wills of those late-repenting sinners who made urgent amendment for tithes forgot and other misdemeanours.¹¹ The power of these holy things and ritual words may

already have been apparent to the twelfth-century laity but our exiguous sources do not afford us many glimpses of their reactions. Only exceptionally, and indirectly, do we detect glimmers of the parochial response. For example the local significance of benedictions is hinted at by a chance reference in the cartulary of Eye Priory. This noted that in 1205 monks and local priests were engaged in a battle at Dunwich over who should have the right to bless ships in the harbour. This service was seemingly sought after enough to be worth churchmen fighting over it.¹²

We can also try to summon the dry bones of Gilbert's prescriptions to life through narratives in chronicles and miracle collections which represent apotropaic measures in action. Colourful tales of cosmic and social drama, ranging from demonic apparitions to choking fits, often depict priests and laymen and women reaching for holy things or uttering holy words to stave off calamity. Stylised as these portrayals are, they still offer clues about the ritual reflexes of the faithful in moments of need. Often the apotropaic countermeasure is incidental to the story's central point, lending to an otherwise wondrous tale a patina of more immediately believable detail. Symeon of Durham, having recounted a visionary's journeys through the otherworld, explained how flocks of demons in the guise of crows congregated around him when he returned to the body but noted merely in passing how these were put to flight by aspersions of holy water.¹³ Orderic Vitalis similarly told of a woman of Brittany who, troubled by an *incubus* in the guise of her husband, sought the help of her priest. He duly 'touched the woman, calling on the lord's name, sprinkled her with holy water, and taught her what to say if the tempter returned'.¹⁴ When the devil came back the woman knew what to do and 'sprinkled holy water, and the demon instantly vanished'.¹⁵

Roger of Howden offered a story in a similar vein, recounting how a woman had become pregnant outside marriage.¹⁶ Caught in a storm as she fled her village, the woman begged God for shelter and then, her prayers being unanswered, called on the devil instead who duly proffered food and fire and found a sheltered spot where she could give birth to her baby. Two passers-by, hearing of this, enjoined the woman to have faith and hurried to fetch the priest. He swiftly attended and, on finding the devil cradling the child, sprinkled him with holy water in the name of the Trinity, an act which put him to flight.¹⁷ More prosaic things than demons might also be tackled with the aspergillum. We see a priest in

⁸ *Gille of Limerick*, ed. Fleming, pp. 156-7. ⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* For the later middle ages see Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 14-37. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 356-7.

¹² *Eye Priory Cartulary*, ed. V. Brown, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, 1992-4), I, p. 69.

¹³ Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque procursu istius hoc est Dunelmensis ecclesie*, ed. and trans. D. Rollason (Oxford, 2000), pp. 212-15.

¹⁴ OV, vi, pp. 185-6. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 186. ¹⁶ RH, II, p. 302. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the vision of Thurkill enthusiastically pouring holy water down the insensible visionary's throat in a bid to shake him from his catatonia. Ultimately it did, a choking Thurkill returning from the otherworld to give an account of what he had seen.

Beyond holy water, many other liturgical gestures, utterances, objects and substances were thought to be valuable in apotropaic strategies. The sign of the cross was constantly invoked as a means to drive away evil and might have broader therapeutic effects. Reginald of Durham even claiming that a cross cut into the skin could banish a headache.¹⁸ Similarly, the chrisin was thought potent. St John of York was said to have brought a dead youth back to life by touching him with it.¹⁹ More spectacularly, John of Worcester told a story, which he said was circulating widely in 1138, about the abbot of Prüm who was said to have foiled an evil spirit which had been stealing wine from the abbey cellars. He sealed the bung-holes of the barrels with chrisin oil: the following morning the demon was found immovably glued to a cask.²⁰ The idea that the chrisin might be a powerful help was also reflected in the efforts of the laity to appropriate it for their own purposes. Numerous sets of synodal statutes from the early thirteenth century prohibited the acquisition of baptismal bandages by laymen and women eager to obtain the traces of oil which these pieces of cloth preserved.²¹

The reading aloud of religious texts or even their physical presence was also thought to guard against misfortune. John of Salisbury described in his *Polycraticus* how the gospel of St John was used to cure illnesses.²² He also observed that carrying a text of the Apostle's Creed was thought efficacious in cases of possession and that 'to carry on one's person passages of the gospels, to listen to or to repeat them, has been found effective in many instances' stressing that 'such and similar practices are not merely permissible, they are highly useful'.²³ Reginald of Durham mentioned an architect who kept about his person a silken bag containing the gospels and a monk who carried a copy of St Cuthbert's life with a fragment of his shroud folded within.²⁴ Where the gospel itself was put to protective uses, it was most commonly deployed to drive away demons. The Lanercost Chronicle described how a scholar (of Oxford) possessed by a devil and was treated by one of his peers who suggested 'let one of us begin the holy gospel according to St John, and I hope to relieve the sick man'.²⁵ Gerald of Wales also described how a soothsayer who had the gift of seeing demons could drive them away with the

of St John. When the man placed the book on his lap, 'they all vanish immediately, flying away like so many birds' (though tellingly they returned in droves if a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* was opened).²⁶ Holy words might even be inscribed on talismans as a protection. The *Itinerarium Regis Ricardi* recorded how a soldier at a siege in 1190 was struck by an arrow which pierced his armour. The bolt was stopped by an amulet – a sort of medieval precursor of the bullet-stopping cigarette case – on which the name of God was inscribed.²⁷

Consistent with that pattern of locally varied cultic Christianity sketched in chapter 2, there is also reason to think that there was regional variation in such practical apotropaic uses of the holy. Gerald of Wales remarked how, in Wales and Ireland, bells, croziers and other liturgical paraphernalia were held by the 'common people' and the clergy alike to be charged with supernatural power.²⁸ Oaths were sworn on these items in the same way that they were sworn on relics in England in the hope of underwriting earthly agreements with saintly authority. None of this had any surprises to spring on Gerald, but he was still somewhat troubled by the widespread conviction that oaths sworn on bells and croziers were more powerfully binding than those sworn on the gospels. As in his description of the rites at St Eluned's shrine, he felt the need to justify beliefs which he seems to have been reluctant to condemn, arguing that the perceived powers of bells and croziers must be grounded in the divine scheme. Their effectiveness arose, he argued, 'from some hidden (*occultas*) power with which they are implanted by God, and from the vengeance of the particular saint in whose sight they are particularly pleasing'.²⁹

Gerald was clearly a little nervous about his audience's likely reactions to these devotional practices, and appears, in his careful interpretation of them, to be anticipating criticism that the symbolic and apotropaic hierarchy of the Welsh was disordered. As we have seen, 'local' Christians could differ and here is another illustration of how tensions could develop as a result of such difference. But Gerald also (less convincingly) suggests in his explanation of the wonder-working power of bells and croziers a second area of possible tension in thought about the apotropaic uses of holy things. His language is telling. In speaking of powers as *implanted* or *ingrafted* (*institus*) in bells and croziers he created a world in which the sacred was crystallised in special and powerful things. This raises questions about how faith co-operated with this

¹⁸ Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godefridi*, p. 377.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 259; *ibid.* IV, ii, pp. 102–3.

²⁰ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.

²² Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godefridi*, pp. 93–8, 111.

²³ *Lanercost Chronicle*, pp. 44–5.

²⁴ *IK*, p. 38.

²⁵ *Itinerarium Regis Ricardi*, in *Chronicles and Memorials of the Reign of Richard I*, ed. W. Stubbs (RS, 1864–5), pp. 99–100.

²⁶ *IK*, p. 203.

²⁷ *GW*, *IK*, p. 27; cf. *GW*, *TH*, p. 179.

intrinsic efficacy to bring about wondrous aid. Was faith needed at all? Was it enough to be baptised? Or was special fidelity required of the enactor of the ritual or prospective beneficiary? Gerald does not say. But it was an issue which seems to have exercised many of his peers who wanted to work out the relationship between faith and ritual act in apotropaic strategies and to understand their place in God's providential scheme more clearly.

SPELLS OR PRAYERS?

Widespread attachment to holy words and things as sources of remedy in this world demonstrates the penetration of Christianity into culture. But, as I have suggested, there might be a problem resulting from the terms on which that Christian invasion took place. Holy gestures, utterances, actions and things were made available directly to the laity or were mediated through their priests, but the theological bases on which they brought wondrous help to those in need were still not clearly established. In the twelfth century the church, as it intellectualised its traditions and practices, struggled to define the relationship between faith and action in the context of these apotropaic rituals. John of Salisbury offered the outline of an explanation when he contended that such measures 'work for the good of those who love God'.³⁰ Exorcisms, he thus explained, were established 'to diminish the power of demons and break the tie of intimacy which they have with man' and yet they 'can accomplish nothing in virtue of their own power unless they gain their potency from the direction given by God'.³¹ John's account, crafted in a rather different language from that of Gerald, located apotropaic practices more firmly in the context of the user's faith, and this essential idea was formulated more closely in the thirteenth-century theology of sacramentals. But long after this development, as Bob Scribner noted of sixteenth-century religion, there remained scope for magical and mechanistic readings of holy things and words.³² In the central middle ages we can find many texts in which the relationships between inner dispositions and outward actions had to be negotiated in the absence of clear theological guidance. We can see this if we return for a moment to Roger of Howden's story of the child born out of wedlock. Roger makes careful connections between the efficacy of apotropaic acts and the proper inner feelings of those engaged in them. The pregnant woman was told by the

passers-by to 'have faith' in Christ and the Virgin Mary while they fetched help; the priest himself was 'armed with the Catholic faith'. His sprinkling of holy water and uttering of the Trinitarian formula become outward signs of this inner conviction. And the importance of that inner faith in driving the devil away is itself dramatised by the fate of the bastard child, snatched by the fleeing devil as he lies outside the protective shell constructed by faithful membership of the church. The blunt morals here – about children born outside marriage, the fate of the unbaptised, the peril of invoking the devil – were all clear enough, but were underscored by subtler thinking in which the chronicler stressed the link between faith and action. This calls for further attention.

Why should Roger have been so careful to link the two? Another of his stories offers us clues. In this tale, Roger recounts how the saintly Eustace, abbot of Flay, had pronounced a blessing on a spring near the River Wye during a preaching tour of England.³³ The spring soon earned a reputation for its curative powers, healing the deaf, dumb, blind and infirm. It also helped a woman vexed by demons whom Eustace instructed to go to the spring. On drinking the waters, she vomited up two big black toads which turned into dogs and then into asses. Understandably discomposed by this experience, the woman fell into hysteria and chased after the demons. She came back to her senses only after 'a certain man, who had been appointed to take charge of the spring, sprinkled some of the holy water from the said spring between the woman and the monsters'.³⁴ In this tale, Roger was keen to point to God as the author of the miracle, but his writing suggested that the relationship between divine intention and its terrestrial well-springs was an oblique one. He observed how, on being released, the woman praised God 'who had given such power to men (*qui talem potestatem dedit hominibus*)'.³⁵ There is nothing here about the faith of the woman nor about that of the shrine-keeper as he splashes around the holy water. The impression is of apotropaic properties residing in things in the world, of powers *devolved* through them by God to man. In Roger's tale, the creator was the ultimate author of the woman's rescue, but, working through his creation, he seems far away from the place and moment of the cure.

The emphasis placed by churchmen on right ritual and outward observance might itself risk fostering a sense that proper manipulation of apotropaic measures was sufficient to ensure their efficacy. The carefully milled didactic tale of the holy man Ketell illustrates how this might happen. Ketell, who had acquired the grace of seeing demons, explained

³⁰ JS, Pol., I, p. 143.

³¹ Ibid.

³² R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 5–8, 39–41.

³³ RH, IV, p. 123.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

that men could drive them away by uttering the holy name. Thus although petty demons were accustomed to make horses stumble (rejoicing if the rider cursed), 'if the man was only a little disturbed and uttered the name of the Saviour, the devils took flight in sorrow and confusion'.³⁶ In alehouses meanwhile, demons might sit on the shoulders of drinkers but would flee their perches when prayers were said (resuming them when the drinker returned to his beer).³⁷ Here the faith of the user seems to have had little to do with the power of the words. And Ketell himself was known to frustrate demons simply by uttering holy names: his great gift was the ability to see devils rather than any special power over them. The holy weapons he used were in themselves entirely conventional. Thus observing demons entering his master's house one day, he cried out, 'in the name of Christ I forbid you from entering this door and from dawdling in this village, call back your companions and be gone immediately'.³⁸ Sure enough, the demons were 'unable to endure the adjuration of that holy name', fled the building and lamented that 'their machinations were perceived by this man'.³⁹

We see again the intrinsic value of gesture and utterance in another scene from Ketell's life. William of Newburgh described how one night Ketell forgot, before going to sleep, to take his customary precautions against demons. In consequence, they bound his hands and tongue to prevent him from making the sign of the cross or uttering the holy name.⁴⁰ Divine intervention saved Ketell in *extremis*, and a dazzling youth (an angel?) appeared with battleaxe in hand to chase the demons away. But he then warned the holy man to be less negligent in future.⁴¹ So the messages of the story seem to be all about reforming outward behaviour: not swearing, avoiding drink, making sure you say your prayers before going to bed. And this illuminates again the potential tension. In teaching so fervently that a virtuous life should be lived within a shape of strictly observed practices, stories such as this risked encouraging believers to over-privilege action and under-privilege right interior disposition.

This gave rise to attempts to re-balance thinking about apotropaic measures. Chroniclers, compilers of miracle collections and (rather later) *exempla*-authors can all be seen trying to do this. Their efforts mattered for two reasons. First, they needed to counter-act that instrumental piety which Alcuin had worried so much about. But secondly they also needed to explain those occasions when apotropaic measures did not work. A

solution to both problems was to tell stories in which such failures were resolved within a providential scheme which revealed something of God's larger purposes. There was also an intimate tie between these twin imperatives in explaining more fully the means of Christian wonder-working because mechanistic understandings of apotropaic measures might more easily provoke frustration, scepticism and mockery than those anchored in a fuller awareness of divine providence.

William of Malmesbury developed this case albeit in its starkest possible formulation. His now famous tale of the witch of Berkeley offered a dramatised penitential theology and illuminated the theory of apotropaic practices. William described how this woman had given over her life to the practice of *maleficium*. But, on receiving a supernatural insight that her end was unexpectedly near, she was seized by a desperate desire to save herself. Hoping that she might escape the fires of hell, she looked to the merits of her children who had both entered the church: 'despairing of myself, I rested my expectations on you; I advance you as my defenders against demons, my safeguard against my very fierce foes'.⁴² But we swiftly learn that such 'substitution' had its limits. The late-repenting witch came to realise that merits acquired by others would be of no help to one so badly stained by sin. Appreciating that her soul was lost, the witch turned, curiously, to the fate of her body. Here she envisaged that the fullness of waiting punishment might be avoided if only her corpse could be kept from the hooks and flames. So she instructed her son and daughter to sew her dead body up in a stag skin, place it in a stone coffin, fasten the lid with lead and iron, and bind the whole with three enormous chains. Then she ordered 'let there be fifty psalms sung for me by night, and as many masses by day, which may relieve the ferocious attacks of my adversaries'.⁴³ Physical impediments and an invisible wall of prayer would thus keep the demons at bay. But, as in the case of her soul, 'vain were pious tears, vows, or entreaties; so great was the woman's guilt, so great the devil's violence' that all of the counter-measures were profitless.⁴⁴ Over three nights, the devil, oblivious to the chanting priests, burst open the doors of the church, severed the chains, shattered the coffin and swept the witch away on his coal black horse, her prematurely resurrected body leaving

³⁶ W/N, I, p. 153. See also above pp. 59–60.

³⁷ W/N, I, p. 152. ³⁸ Ibid. ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 152–3. On use of the sign of cross to dispel demons see J. C. Schmitt, *La Raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990), pp. 321–2.

⁴¹ W/N, I, p. 153.

⁴² WM, GR, I, pp. 376–7.

⁴³ The use of a stag skin probably possessed no special magical connotations as sewing bodies into animal hides seems not to have been an unusual burial practice. Compare, for example, the detailed account of the death of Earl Geoffrey and the treatment of his corpse in *Walden Book*, p. 37; also William Marshal's experience of the burial of the young King Henry discussed in D. Crouch, *William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire, 1147–1219* (London, 1990), p. 49.

⁴⁴ WM, GR, I, pp. 378–9.

screams hanging in the night air. Here William was reminding his audience not only that the good works of monks were insufficient to save another's soul (true repentance animated by something more than fear was needed) but also that gestures, utterances and objects did not work in any predictable way by intrinsic power. And here it matters that a witch whose life was given over to the arts of magic was the protagonist because, contrary to her view, the worldly value of holy things could not be measured in 'magical' terms but must be understood in the context of faith and God's judgement.

This idea, that apotropaic measures, though valuable, might be of uncertain efficacy, was picked up by Thomas of Monmouth as he recorded the miracles of William of Norwich. But here the trope was developed in a different way, to make a point about the superior powers of the saint.⁴⁵ We hear how a pious young woman of Dunwich was visited repeatedly by a spirit in the guise of a knight. He pledged his love and presented her with many gifts but she refused to submit to his advances.⁴⁶ The spirit then upped the tempo of his amorous attacks, returning night and day with further blandishments, eventually leading the girl to tell her parents about her ordeal. They decided that the visitor must be a demon, set watches over their daughter, consulted priests and had masses celebrated, prayers said and alms distributed. Her room was also sprinkled with holy water and a cross was set up before the bed.⁴⁷ Not only did these elaborate measures fail to solve the problem, the intensity of the demon's assaults grew. And so, with the girl close to despair, a ghostly man claiming to be Herbert Losinga, first bishop of Norwich, appeared to her in a vision and explained that she had struggled with an evil enemy and had defeated him nobly.⁴⁸ He said that she could now be freed by travelling to Norwich with her parents and offering three wax tapers at the tomb of St William. When the girl awoke, she and her parents followed these instructions and, having done as she was bidden, and having told her story to the monks at the tomb, she found herself liberated from the devil's attacks.⁴⁹

This story, in its complex account of divine aid denied, runs against the grain of this particular miracle collection taken as a whole. In order to bolster St William's reputation, the idea that a search for wonder might fail, even in dire need and pursued in perfect faith, was rhetorically useful. In an oblique way, it supplied a valuable justification for petitions which the saint himself might have ignored (but without advertising any such instances). It also showed more generally how wonders were enfolded in the larger scheme of God's mysterious purposes and how suffering on

earth was balanced by rewards in heaven: if aid was refused, this was for a reason, in this case that the steadfast virgin would win the 'crown of chastity' in the life to come. And, of course, it also demonstrated the special standing of William, through whose agency the girl's release from her torments was finally effected.

More generally, in negotiating the needs of body and soul, in comprehending the wonder-seeking and soul-saving imperatives at work in the religion of the ordinary faithful, the saints played an important role. William of Newburgh offers a story which illustrates this from the vantage point of the chronicler. Again we are shown how apotropaic measures were seen to fail. Again, we see how a body was tormented for the good of a soul. This time the story concerns a nameless vassal of the bishop of Le Mans who, while travelling to the shrine of St James at Compostela, was accosted by a monstrous demon.⁵⁰ The pilgrim tried to protect himself by conventional means. He made the sign of the cross (putting on 'the armour of Christ') but the demon ignored this and warned him 'you will in no way be able, by this means, to protect yourself from becoming mine; but if you will fall down and worship me, I will make you rich and very famous'.⁵¹ When these threats and temptations failed, the devil made good his promise of violence and cast a black cloak over the man's head – burning his hair, blackening his skin – and then seized him by the arm. At this moment, the pilgrim begged for the help of St James. He duly appeared in dazzling raiment and put the demon to flight.

As we have seen before, the failure of gestures and utterances presumes no necessary lack of faith in the user. Rather the idea of earthly trial and suffering as the prelude to otherworldly reward was here recreated in miniature: a pale ghost of Job tested by the Lord or the holy man tempted in the wilderness. Thus the devil could terrorise with dark threats, tempt with honeyed promises and even blast with fire. But his power was over the body, not the soul. And yet William did not offer up simple suffering piety as the response for the afflicted. Instead he traced a middle way for the pious laity, making plain that faith might be tested but also holding out hope that divine intervention in this world might put bounds on suffering. In finding this middle way, the saints might be especially valuable because, as they emerged from these stories told by both Thomas and William, we can see that they were at once intelligible and yet supernatural, able to minister help in this world while also interceding for the soul in the next.

⁴⁵ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁵⁰ WN, II, p. 434.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 434–5.

If we turn to the range of rituals used to invoke the help of the saints, we can discern a similar desire among many teaching churchmen to make these less mechanical and to situate them in a context of deeper faithfulness. Here, however, we are dealing with a religious phenomenon which was still more complicated and multi-layered than that of apotropaic measures we have just met.⁵² We know from a host of miracle collections and a profusion of modern studies based on them that the saints were at the heart of medieval religious culture from conversion to Reformation and offered a vital means by which the needs of body and soul could be met.⁵³ This imaginative power derived from the special characteristics of the saints as mediators of grace. The saints helped to close the gap between man and a distant, unknowable God; a saint's power could almost be touched and could certainly be felt. It congealed thickly and invisibly around shrines; the grace holy bones exuded, Gregory of Tours contended, saturated things they came into contact with in such a way that cloths left hanging in a reliquary overnight would be heavier when they were removed.⁵⁴ The devotional practices used to establish relationships with the holy dead were often similar in form to those that we have previously encountered, but the sources of that aid might be easier for the faithful to grasp.⁵⁵ The saints represented the supernatural in tangible form, crystallised into incorrupt flesh and bones, present on earth in jewel-encrusted reliquaries which symbolised the simultaneous presence of the occupant in heaven. And the saints also left behind on earth, as a by-product of their holiness, residues of that supernatural power. Bartholomew of Farne, who had driven goat-riding demons from the Farne Islands during his life, thus allegedly instructed that his bones be buried there so that he could continue to keep them at bay after his death.⁵⁶

The human personality of the saint also ensured that relationships between saint and pilgrim could be understood and described in human

terms. The church could use the language of service, affection and love to describe the interaction which took place at the shrine. Wonder-seeking piety could be rescued from magical and mechanistic misreading, and something equally intelligible, but less at odds with official teaching, could be substituted. Thus, as Sharon Farmer has observed, the monastic communities, peasants and townsmen who engaged with St Martin at Tours 'interacted with the shrine just as they did with living persons'.⁵⁷ Similarly, when Bishop Aelfwald of Sherborne went to the shrine of St Cuthbert, he was depicted by William of Malmesbury lifting the lid of the reliquary and talking to the saint 'as to a friend'.⁵⁸ William himself, in writing his *Gesta Pontificum*, also confessed to having no reason for writing at such length about St Aldhelm, the saint of Malmesbury, beyond his 'special affection' for the saint and the 'promise' he had made to Aldhelm at the shrine.⁵⁹ Thus an encounter with the sacred was imagined as a humanised relationship with the holy.

The power of this idea can be seen in those moments when saints aroused pique in their devotees when they failed to return the devotion lavished on them. Even (or perhaps especially) monastic communities were capable of this sort of emotional reaction against their inattentive patrons. We learn from William of Malmesbury for example that, when the reliquary of St Letard was carried aloft in procession in an attempt to end a drought, the saint initially failed to intervene and had to be upbraided by the abbot for his tardiness.⁶⁰ Only after the abbot's cross words did rain start to fall. Such feelings were sufficiently widespread among monastic communities to have generated a special ritual to express and contain them. Patrick Geary has identified several cases of 'humiliation of saints' designed to shake the holy dead from non-interventionist torpors and Robert Bartlett identified the use of such a rite by monks of Burton against a slumbering St Modwenna.⁶¹

So saints offered an appealing way in which the divine could be made intelligible in the world and its workings expressed and managed in a language familiar to all of the faithful. The cults were still, of course, open to varied readings within this framework. At one end of the range, the saint was a pattern for virtuous Christian life, a hero to be emulated, a patron to be embraced through affective piety. At the other, his or her wonder-working might be conceived in terms of more mercenary human interactions. Offerings could be understood as gift exchanges. Transactional ethics and calculations connotative of mercantilist dealing

⁵² On this point see also Yarrow, *Saints*, p. 8.

⁵³ The cult of saints has generated an impressive literature. For general discussion see Ward, *Miracles*; Vauchez, *Sainthood*; Sumpston, *Pilgrimage*. On the role saints came to play in early medieval society see Brown, *Cult of Saints*. For the cult of saints in England see Finnucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*; Webb, *Pilgrimages*; Sumpston, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 10–88; H. Mayr-Harting, 'The Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: the Miracles of St Frideswide', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. L. Moore (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davies* (London, 1983), pp. 193–206. On shrines see B. Nilsson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998), esp. pp. 92–121.

⁵⁴ See Sumpston, *Pilgrimage*, p. 24. On the desire to be close to or in contact with relics see Finnucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ See Brown, *Cult of Saints*, esp. pp. 86–127.

⁵⁶ *Vita Bartholomaei Farnensis*, in Symeon of Durham, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, pp. 295–325 at pp. 314–19.

⁵⁷ S. Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 1–2.

⁵⁸ W.M., *GP*, p. 180. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 330. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶¹ See Geary, *Living with the Dead*, pp. 97–123.

might triumph over a language of love. Cults had to hold within themselves varied spiritualities but they could usually do this because they were bound up by enough that was shared, shared ritual observances in particular, to ensure that differences could co-exist.

A survey of the strategies by which saintly aid was solicited underscores this sense that, within a currency of widely agreed devotional practices, there was flexibility. Pilgrims could seek the wondrous aid of the saint through a wide range of devotions. Prayer and meditation before the shrine, perennation in front, or even on top, of it and kissing or touching the relics were commonplace of rituals described in the *miracula*.⁶² Similarly, applications or ingestions of substances in which relics had been infused constantly recur, offering opportunities for remedy without the need to travel to the shrine. St Thomas Becket worked many of his miracles through the 'water of St Thomas', in which the blood of the saint spilled on the altar steps was diluted or relics of the saint had been immersed.⁶³ Similarly holy oil and even dust from tombs were said to have worked wondrous cures.⁶⁴ Alternative strategies involved making offerings to the saint in the hope that compounded devotion and gifts would yield a return. Alms might be offered at the shrine, including money, precious objects or candles. Sometimes pieces of wax were presented to the saint in thanks for miracles performed and were fashioned into a representative shape, often the shape of a healed limb.⁶⁵ On occasions such offerings were made before the miracle was worked and the vowed piece of wax was used to effect a cure, as was the case at the shrine of William of Norwich where two women independently vowed wax to the saint before using it as a compress on painful breasts.⁶⁶

In other instances, people made promises to the saint in return for his help. Sailors called on St William of Norwich and, for the price of their devotion, begged him to calm the waves.⁶⁷ Pennies might be 'vowed' to a saint by bending or marking them. Edward I made such a practice an annual event, having pennies bent to secure the health of his hawks and horses.⁶⁸ Sometimes the devotee might use the penny to make the sign of the cross over the person or animal to be cured.⁶⁹ Finally, relics, in the form of bones or clothing or other objects associated with the saints, might be acquired by a devotee. Thus in miracles associated with St Edmund, we find an unnamed Norman crossing a dangerous ford in safety because he was protected by a relic of the saint which he carried about with him.⁷⁰

In this rich repertoire of ritual forms, one practice in particular suggests multivalence. We find in many miracle collections accounts of sick men and women being 'measured', a length of thread being stretched across the length and breadth of their bodies and then wound into trindles which were turned into candles and sent off to the shrine.⁷¹ The practice was accepted without any hint of disapproval by monastic authors, but one can see immediately that this ritual was complex and that there was scope for subtly different understandings of its efficacy. The 'measuring' suggests extra dimensions to the conventional ritual of offering candles, as here devotion to the saint seems to be co-operating with a form of sympathetic magic. Illness or other misfortune might be 'transferred' to the trindle during the measuring and might, albeit under the superintending gaze of a saint, then be consumed in fire as the candle burned.⁷²

The cults of saints were also flexible and open in a further sense. They were shaped heavily by the social needs of the pilgrims who came to the shrines. These contours of the cults emerge from the miracle collections which reveal how both individual and communal necessities were thought capable of being met through ritualised invocations. Saintly bones might be carried over drought-racked earth, placed close to the heat of a fire, even borne into battle, so that these things might catch the

⁶² See William of Malmebury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 130; also the cases of paralytics perennating at the tomb of St Cuthbert in Reginald of Durham, *Liabellus Cuthberti*, pp. 379, 441–2.

⁶³ On the cures effected by St Thomas Becket through the 'water of St Thomas' see *Becket Materials*, II, pp. xxvii–xxxii. On the earliest of these *ibid.*, pp. 42–3; and an example of a youth driven mad after being struck by lightning but cured by water in which Becket's clothing had been dipped, *ibid.*, I, pp. 404–6.

⁶⁴ Oil from the tomb of St John of York cured a woman of dropsy according to the *Vita S. Williani*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, II, pp. 282–3, 284. Holy oil from the tomb of Norwich healed a man who had swallowed vapors by causing him to vomit them up in Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 189–90.

⁶⁵ For example alms were offered at the shrine of St Wulfstan according to William of Malmebury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 119. Offerings of candles were commonplace, as described by Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 157–9; Reginald of Durham, *Liabellus Cuthberti*, pp. 376, 418–19. A little less common was the practice of representative shapes of wax being offered to the saint. Some fishermen of Dunwich caught in a storm and saved after invoking St Edmund offered a wax anchor at his tomb according to *Sancti Abbatu Opus de Miraculis Sancti Edmundi*, in *Memories of St Edmund's Abbey*, ed. T. Arnold, 3 vols., I, p. 367. See also Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, p. 223.

⁶⁶ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 253–4, 266–7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152; for a similar case *ibid.*, pp. 276–8. ⁶⁸ Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ See for example Reginald of Durham, *Liabellus Cuthberti*, p. 231. Detailed accounts of the practice can be found in the miracles of St Godric and St Cuthbert, *ibid.*; Reginald of Durham, *Liabellus Cuthberti*, p. 410. The majority of miracles allegedly worked by Simon de Montfort also involved this simple ritual. See William of Rashanger, *The Chronicle of William of Rashanger of the Barons' War and the Miracles of Simon de Montfort*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, Camden [original series] (1840), pp. 70–109. The practice is also described in the *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 53.

⁷⁰ *Hennamini archidiaconi Liber de Miraculis Sancti Edmundi*, in *Memories of St Edmund's Abbey*, I, p. 74.

⁷¹ See for example: 'Miracles of St Cuthbert', p. 17; William of Malmebury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 125–6, 138, 179; Reginald of Durham, *Liabellus Cuthberti*, pp. 411, 434–5, 455.

⁷² Merrifield, *Archaeology*, pp. 90–1.

saint's attention and the power flowing through relics might work more powerfully on the object of the devotees' fears. When drought plagued Bury St Edmunds, the bones of St Edmund were borne in procession to end it. Similarly the body of St John of York was thought efficacious in bringing rain to parched lands in the diocese.⁷³ St Modwenna's relics were paraded to quell fires and were also removed from their plinth and placed on the ground to still a violent gale. And, perhaps most famously, William the Conqueror ordered the bones of St Valéry to be brought out in order to raise favourable winds for his invasion fleet in 1066.⁷⁴

'Weather processions', as Bob Scribner labelled them, were a commonplace of miracle collections and surface also in some 'house' histories. But similar solemn ceremonial might be orchestrated in other times of need as well. For example, when plague broke out in Worcester the relics of St Oswald were paraded through the streets in an effort to end it.⁷⁵ Smaller-scale rituals were used in moments of more personal disaster. A woman of Durham saved her house from burning down by tying a hempen rope around it and calling on the power of St Cuthbert.⁷⁶ Livestock might be saved from disease by similar means. The miracles of St Wulfstan record how an ox was healed of a tumour after its owner measured the beast for a candle and dispatched it to the shrine of the saint.⁷⁷ St William of Norwich cured pigs and also healed some of the priory's own oxen of a cattle plague (again after they were measured for candles).⁷⁸ A man from Powick, Worcestershire was able to cure his horse 'through the merits of the saint' by vowing a penny to Wulfstan and making the sign of the cross over the animal's head.⁷⁹

Ritual strategies might be deployed against human as well as natural foes. Saints were invoked to defend monasteries and surrounding

⁷³ *Hermannus archidiaconi Liber de Miraculis Sancti Edmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, I, pp. 90–1. On droughts so-ended in Yorkshire see *Vita Sancti Iohannis Episcopi Eboracensis Auctore Folcardo*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, I, pp. 269–71.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of St Modwenna*, p. 211; WP, p. 111.

⁷⁵ *Miracula Sancti Oswaldi Archiepiscopi et Confessoris Auctore Eadmero*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, II, p. 57.

⁷⁶ 'Miracles of St Cuthbert', pp. 18–19. In other towns phials of Becket's relic water hurled into a fire or relics brandished on a pole were similarly effective according to *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, I, p. 477, II, pp. 186–7.

⁷⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 151.

⁷⁸ Thomas of Monmouth, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 152–3; for the case of the oxen, *ibid.*, pp. 153–4.

⁷⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 152–3. Many other similar examples survive in the collections of miracles ascribed to other saints. See the cure of a sheep by Godric in Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, pp. 460–1; cattle plagues cured by St John of York according to *Vita Sancti Iohannis Episcopi Eboracensis Auctore Folcardo*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, I, p. 325; the cure of a poor woman saved from murder by the intervention of St Thomas Becket described in *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, I, pp. 391–2, 393; and a similar miracle worked by Becket for a man in the Limousin, *ibid.*, p. 536.

communities from predatory nobles or to insulate them from broader political instability in times of war. Durham, so often on the wrong end of military incursions ranging from Norman pacification missions to Scottish raids throws up many examples of this in its hagiographical productions. We hear of marauding Scots swallowed by the earth and pitched straight into the fires of hell by the intervention of Cuthbert and, rather more benignly, of Norman punitive columns befuddled by wondrous fogs in which they became hopelessly lost before reaching the city.⁸⁰

These examples are but a few from the masses that could be piled up but they are sufficient to indicate something significant. It is a curious paradox that a twelfth-century religious culture which celebrated new heights of suffering in its ascetic ideals was still so thoroughly anchored in 'this-worldly' concerns. Wondrous interventions were regularly sought through the blessings of priests in the parishes and the miraculous interventions of saints from their shrines. And this was true across medieval society. It was not simply rustic parishioners who seized on the wonder-working power of the sacred. Peasants, priests and monks, artisans and merchants, knights and kings, all sought wondrous help in moments of social and cosmic drama. The many faces of the saints ensured that these diverse clienteles could be served. Within the communion as a whole there was a particular saint for every ill and to whom every believer might relate. Specific saints were able to develop specific local or regional appeals while others might acquire miracle-working specialisms in healing blindness, breaking fevers or raising the dead. Small local cults might possess a powerful resonance for a community, acquiring a patronal status, while others, like those of Becket and Cuthbert, had transcendent appeal. Cults might come to possess very distinctive characters and their pilgrims might have a particular social, geographical or even political profile. And within each cult there was further scope for diversity. Individual understandings could be inscribed on shared devotional practices, as deeply personal bonds became contexts for ritualised exchange of offerings and prayers in return for gracious aid.

This essential diversity of the saints in their varied competences and appeals persisted through and beyond the central middle ages but the

⁸⁰ The theme of vengeance characterises many collections of miracles, especially, in the judgement of Benedicta Ward, in earlier *miracula* where the saintly patronus was more frequently depicted intervening to protect his or her community. See Ward, *Miracles*, pp. 60–5, 67–87, 93–4. During the central and later middle ages healing certainly became the dominant feature of *miracula*. See Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, p. 55; P. Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural: a Medieval Change', *Daedalus*, 104 (1975), 133–51; and for a rather different perspective Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, pp. 34–102.

intimacy of that connection between pilgrim and saint was to some extent broken down during the course of the twelfth century. As the church took a keener interest in regulating the religious lives of the ordinary laity, it began to insinuate itself more fully into that saint-pilgrim relationship. On the grand scale we can see this in the regulation of cult itself by the creation of more elaborate processes for saint-making and the careful testing of new claims about sanctity. But the shift is detectable in efforts to supervise more tightly the devotions which bound the pilgrim to the saint. Thus many bishops began to attach indulgences to pilgrimages made to shrines, weighing out the spiritual value of an otherwise incommensurable act. Similarly, the growing importance of the sacraments in the practical teaching of the church, and especially the increased significance attached by many churchmen to confession, was making its presence felt as a *sine qua non* if saintly aid was to be forthcoming.⁸¹ Here we can see some churchmen wanting to guarantee that devotions took place in a spirit of genuine faithfulness by ensuring that the soul was cleansed from the stain of sin through the sacrament of penance. And so, rather like William of Malmesbury, Thomas of Monmouth and William of Newburgh, the writers of many miracle collections now used this idea to explain why some appeals to saints failed.⁸² As a prelude to petitioning a saint and becoming the happy beneficiary of miracles, the need for the soul to be cleansed through contrition, confession and penance came increasingly to be stressed.⁸³ According to the *Vita Remigii*, St Thomas Becket visited a blind woman and, gallantly deferring to St Remigius, told her to go to Remigius's shrine at Lincoln if she wished her sight to be restored. But then the author added an extra qualification, noting that anyone who went to the shrine 'cleansed by confession and penance' would 'whatever his illness, recover the joy of health'.⁸⁴ Similarly, though sickness might not itself be brought about by sin, insincere cleansing of sins might lead to only temporary respite. William of Canterbury described such a case involving a man who, cured of a skin disease by St Thomas Becket, returned afterwards to his sinful life and so was afflicted

afresh.⁸⁵ For ordinary laymen and women, the faith needed to secure aid was ceasing to be such an intimate thing enclosed within a relationship between petitioner and saint. Wider obligations were breaking in. Connections forged through prayer and gift-giving were still essential but so too was a life structured by the experience of the sacraments. And donation and supplication was itself defined more closely and was to be informed by penitence as well as outward observances.

CONCLUSION

Wonder-seeking, whether through apotropaic measures or invocation of the saints, was at the heart of medieval Christianity. Such strategies may have had their origins in the liturgy and in affective devotion to the saints but, as we have seen, they were capable of being invested with subtly different meanings by those who turned to them. In chapter I, we saw that many churchmen, rather than situating the demonic and angelic in a providential framework favoured by theologians, located these beings in more fragmented cosmological orders. And we saw also reflected in their writing the image of ordinary believers who also imagined the invisible world in a similar fragmented way. In moving in this chapter from the realm of thoughts to that of deeds, we can detect related differences. Some of our authors were unwilling, or unable, to trace the power of holy gestures, utterances and objects back to their first causes in the divine scheme. And some believers, seen again in reflection, appear possessed by similar unwillingness or inability. As a result, apotropaic measures (and even some rituals for invoking the saints) might be conceived as something nearer to 'spells' than 'prayers', efficacy lying more in the correct execution of ritual than the faithfulness of its enactor. The danger here for the church was that wonder-seeking piety, conceived in these terms and driven by social need, might ultimately be shallowly rooted. And, although such shallow piety might no longer eventuate in pagan revivals, it might lead the seeker to scepticism, despair or magical alternative remedies. Thus we see chroniclers and hagiographers engaging with stories about frustrated wonder-seeking in order to situate particular failures in God's providential scheme. And we also see in these stories, directly or indirectly, pastorally engaged churchmen who were trying to build up a more complex economy of the sacred. This connected the search for wonder to a deeper faithfulness and, ultimately, tried to encourage the faithful to live their lives in a way which subordinated

⁸¹ On the developing theology of the sacraments in the twelfth century see M. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1993), II, pp. 316–698. And for a case study of the implications of such rethinking see Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, pp. 79–80, 87–9.

⁸² Sin, though tied in specific cases to illness, was not generally used as an explanation for sickness in the *miracula* though it might be presented as a bar to saintly intercession. See Finnemore, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 72–3; and also Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 78–80 who takes a contrary view.

⁸³ For an early instance of this tendency to stress confession, associated with the canons of Leon, whose school championed its pastoral importance at an especially early date, see Yarow, *Saints*, p. 90; also his discussion of the cult of St William of Norwich, pp. 153–9.

⁸⁴ Gerald of Wales, *Vita Remigii*, in *Ginaldi Cantuariensis Opera*, VII, p. 28. The translation is from Bartlett, 'Hagiography of Angevin England', p. 41.

⁸⁵ Becket *Miracula*, I, pp. 431–2.

the needs of the body in this world to those of the soul in the next.⁸⁶ This was a message with general currency. Just as all social groups, from peasants to knights, from priests to monks, made their way to the shrines in need of the wondrous, so all could benefit from approaching the holy in a deeper spirit of faithfulness and penitence.

⁸⁶ The stories told by William of Newburgh, Thomas of Momnouth and Adam of Eynsham drew on elements of the common hagiographical *topos* of the holy man tested by demons. See for example the story of Guthlac in *OV*, II, pp. 322–8, and that of a pious hermit in *Map*, p. 146.

Chapter 4

SPECIAL POWERS AND MAGICAL ARTS

We saw in chapter 2 that ‘paganism’ was dead as a social reality and vanishing even as a fear haunting clerical imaginations. But new kinds of alarm agitated many churchmen who wrote historical narratives in the long twelfth century. As pagans disappeared, magicians and necromancers loomed large, perhaps larger than ever, in clerical condemnations. Why might this be? The social realities of magic in the middle ages are notoriously difficult to penetrate but there are reasons external to the practice of the art which magnified official apprehensions. In twelfth-century representations of magic three fears converged. First, magic was frequently thought to involve the dangerous instrumentalisation of Christian rituals, gestures, utterances and substances in the service of worldly ambitions. Necromancers were believed, for example, to use crucifix, holy water, signing with the cross and scriptural texts to help them command devils.¹ Such manipulation stretched to an extreme the idea, already encountered in chapter 3, that holy things worked by intrinsic power, but here this was turned to purposes wholly antithetical to the demands of faith.

Secondly, fear of magic was also stimulated by new intellectual developments. Bodies of knowledge dealing the ‘properties of things’ and astrology might hold a dangerous fascination for those susceptible to their promise of advantage. These arts had the capacity to distract, entangle in vain speculation or divert from religious obligations. They might also lure their practitioners into seeking things they ought not to seek by encouraging them to divine the future, win the affections of a lover through the use of potions or acquire earthly riches through the practice of alchemy. Here the spread of new and mysterious texts from the east, dealing with astrology, mathematics, geometry and the like

¹ On the absorption of Christian words, objects and gestures into ‘magical’ strategies see Murray, *Missionaries and Magic*, pp. 96–7.