PART I
APPROACHES
Learning and Imagination†

It is only too easy to present the study of history in a modern university system as if it were a discipline for the mind alone, and so to ignore the slow and erratic processes which go to the enrichment of the imagination. Yet it is precisely this imaginative curiosity about the past that is a unique feature of western civilization. Since the eighteenth century, we westerners have taken pleasure, and even thought to derive wisdom, from a persistent attempt to project ourselves into the thoughts and feelings of men and women whose claim to our respect was precisely that they were sensed to be profoundly different from ourselves. This unique respect for the otherness of the past and of other societies did not begin in archives; nor was it placed in the centre of European culture by antiquarians. It began among dreamers and men of well-stocked imagination. The taproots of the western historical tradition go deep into the rich and far from antiseptic soil of the Romantic movement. By the standards of a well-run History Department, the Grand Old Men of the historical tribe were wild and woolly. Giam-

†An Inaugural Lecture delivered at Royal Holloway College on 26 May 1977. I have appended references only to citations and to some principal authors: the themes I touch on are dealt with more fully both in the articles collected here and in my Haskell Lectures at the University of Chicago, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: SCM Press, 1981).
battista Vico, author of the *Scienza Nuova*, abandoned law in his youth to write poetry—and emerged a better historian for it. 'For at this age,' he wrote, 'the mind should be given free rein to keep the fiery spirit of youth from being numbed and dried up, lest from too great severity of judgement, proper to maturity but too early acquired, they should later scarcely dare to attempt anything.'

In the middle of an exacting history course, it takes a high degree of moral courage to resist one's own conscience: to take time off; to let the imagination run; to give serious attention to reading books that widen our sympathies, that train us to imagine with greater precision what it is like to be human in situations very different from our own.

It is essential to take that risk. For a history course to be content to turn out well-trained minds when it could also encourage widened hearts and deeper sympathies would be a mutilation of the intellectual inheritance of our own discipline. It would lead to the inhibition, in our own culture, of an element of imaginative curiosity about others whose removal may be more deleterious than we would like to think to the subtle and ever-precarious ecology on which a liberal western tradition of respect for others is based.

In warm and lucid pages, my teacher, Arnaldo Momigliano, a man who can both represent and embrace in his own writings the full richness of the western tradition of historical learning, has warned us ever more frequently that the grip of the study of history on the face of a great culture can be a mere finger-hold. Greeks, Romans and Jews slid with disquieting ease from the frustrations of the study of the past to take their rest in the eternal verities of science and religion. They readily preferred what was, or could claim to be, a 'discipline for the mind', abstract, rigorous and certain, to a study of ambiguous status that involved the clash of critical opinion on issues that intimately affected their estimate of

their fellows, that exposed them to the strains of travel and political experience, and that might even commit the articulate and intelligent man to the tiresome labour of learning foreign languages.2

*Pro nobis fabula narratur.* If the capacity for imaginative curiosity is part of our handhold on the culture of our age, then it becomes all the more urgent to insist that we train this imagination; that we ask ourselves whether the imaginative models that we bring to the study of history are sufficiently precise and differentiated, whether they embrace enough of what we sense to be what it is to be human, to enable us to understand and to communicate to others the sheer challenge of the past.

As an historian of Late Antiquity, I have been brought up against this issue in an abrupt form. I have been forced to understand nothing less than the dynamics of a religious revolution. Faced by such a challenge, the historian has to take time off for a moment: he has to allow his imagination to be chastened and refined. He has to examine the imaginative models, handed down to him from within his own tradition of learning, that affect his views on a subject as profound as the nature and workings of the religious sentiment in society.

What I had wished to understand is an aspect of the religious revolution of Late Antiquity that has left a permanent mark on the life, even on the landscape, of western Europe—the rise of the cult of saints and of their relics. What I found was that interpretation of this phenomenon is a cross-roads at which the conflicting imaginative models that we bring to the understanding of Late Antiquity as a whole can be seen to converge.

Let me begin by sketching out the phenomenon, as it appears in its most concrete form: the genius of Late Antique men lay in their ability to map out, to localize and to render magnificently palpable by every device of art, ceremonial,

religious practice and literature those few, clearly-delineated points at which the visible and the invisible worlds met on earth.

As Professor Hussey wrote of a Byzantine entering a church: 'as he entered the narthex or stood in the nave, the participant in the services did not simply learn something about the great truths of Christian teaching, but he could realise that he himself was actually present in both seen and unseen worlds.'

The peculiar feature of the rise of Christianity was that these points of joining coincided to an ever-increasing degree with human beings. A Late Antique landscape was dotted with human figures, each of whom was held to be a point where heaven and earth were joined. They were the living dead: ascetic holy men, whose life-style involved them in prolonged and clearly visible rituals of self-mortification and 'death' to society. Then there were the dead who lay in their tombs. Because they had made themselves 'dead' to the world when alive, all that was most alive in this world—healing, vision and justice—could be seen to spring from the dust of their bodies, to show how fully they now lived in the other world.

By the sixth century, a network of shrines containing complete tombs or fragments of dead bodies covered the Mediterranean. These would often be called, quite simply, τὸνός; 'The Place'. In 600 A.D., an enterprising gang of burglars could move from the 'place' of St Colluthos near Antinoe, in Egypt, walk a few miles upstream to the 'place' of St Victor Stratelates, cross over the Nile to the 'place' of St Timothy, and head downstream again to the 'place' of St Claudius, reaping, in a good night's work, a heavy swag of silver ornaments and ex voto offerings.

At such a 'place', the iron laws of the grave were suspended. In a relic, the anonymity of human remains could be

thought to be still heavy with the fullness of a beloved person. As Gregory of Nyssa said: 'Those who behold them embrace, as it were, the living body in full flower, they bring eye, mouth, ear, all the senses into play, and there, shedding tears of reverence and passion, they address the martyr their prayers of intercession as though he were present.'

Such places, therefore, were created to pinpoint relations with invisible human beings. The sensibilities of Late Antique men came increasingly to be moulded by a need to achieve closeness to a specific category of fellow-humans—the saints. Hence the highly concrete manner in which the striving for closeness was mapped out on the ground in terms of physical distance. The pilgrim covers long and arduous distances to his shrine. But the pilgrim is only a special case. Every believer has to put himself out to make a visit; and in Late Antiquity this visit would usually have taken him away from the classical centre of his city to its peripheral cemetery areas. This is what the senator Pinianus did in early fifth-century Rome, when his wife was facing a miscarriage: he ran out to the graveyard shrine of St Lawrence, and spent the night stretched in prayer before the tomb—ad Dominum Laurentium, 'at the Lord Lawrence's'.

The best occasion is when the invisible person visits you: hence the high drama, in all Late Antique and early medieval literature, that surrounds the discovery, the translation and the arrival of relics. The dialectic of closeness is highlighted in the festivals of the saints: crowds 'swarm like bees' around the tomb; and the saint himself makes his presence felt all the more strongly by a ceremonial closely modelled on the adventus, the 'arrival in state', of a Late Roman emperor.

After death, to lie close to the grave of the saint is a privilege reserved for the few. The western practice of depositio ad sanctos provided each community with a clear map of the ranking-order of its departed members, in the patchwork of mosaic plaques that clustered around the holy grave: 'Pro-

4. Gregory of Nyssa, Encomium on Saint Theodore, P.G. XLVI, 740B.
bilianus . . . for Hilaritas, a woman whose chastity and good nature was known to all the neighbours. . . . She remained chaste for eight years in my absence, and for this reason she lies in this holy place.\(^5\)

I have spent some time sketching the immediate visible effects of the Late Antique cult of saints. The rise to power in Western Europe of the Catholic Church was intimately connected with this localization of the holy. It was by orchestrating and controlling the religious life of the great urban shrines of the western Mediterranean, from Rome to Mérida, and from Tours to Carthage and Tebessa, that the bishops of the early medieval West gained their unique position in society. The development itself is so clear a feature of the ecclesiastical history of the Middle Ages that the revolution on which it is based has very largely been taken for granted. I would suggest that this is so because our curiosity for the subject has been blocked by an imaginative model that is not sufficiently sensitive to help us enter into the thought-processes and the needs that went into the rapid creation and expansion of the cult of saints in the Late Antique period.

The religious history of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages still owes more than we realize to attitudes summed up so persuasively in the 1750s by David Hume in his essay, *The Natural History of Religion*. For Hume faced squarely the problems of the origins of religious sentiment and presented these origins in terms of the way that men habitually think about their environment. Men, he insisted, were not natural monotheists who, through sin, had lost the original simplicity of vision of Adam and the Jewish patriarchs. Theism remains an ideal, but it is a precarious ideal. The reason for this lies no longer in human sinfulness, but rather in the intellectual, and, by implication, the cultural and social preconditions for attaining a theistic view of the world. Theism depended on achieving a coherent and rational view of the universe from which the enlightened mind might then deduce

the existence of a Supreme Being. Hence the extreme rarity of monotheism in human history. For ‘the vulgar, that is all mankind, a few excepted,’ have always lived in an intellectual and cultural milieu that tended to fragment those experiences of order on which a coherent view of the universe might be based. The average man was unable to abstract general principles from his immediate environment; and, in any case, in most ages this limitation was compounded by the fears and anxieties of day-to-day existence.

The history of mankind, therefore, is not a simple history of decline from an original theism: it is marked by a constant tension between theistic and polytheistic ways of thinking. ‘It is remarkable that the principles of religion have had a flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism and to sink again from theism to idolatry.’ Hume’s short essay owes its cogency to the concrete manner in which he enabled his Christian readers to enter with some degree of understanding into the minds of men for whom polytheism had been the norm. In so doing he provided historians with an imaginative model whose influence has remained all the more pervasive for having entered so imperceptibly into the tradition of historical learning.

For Hume’s characteristically sad and measured assessment of the concrete circumstances of human thinking provided him with a model of the social and cultural preconditions for the evolution of religious thought. The idea of a ‘flux and reflux in the human mind’ could be given a historical dimension. The respective rise and fall of theism and idolatry could be assessed in terms of the relative balance of the rational and the irrational elements in a society. That balance could be given a clear social locus by assessing the distribution and relative influence of ‘the vulgar’ in relation to the potentially enlightened few; and change could be ac-

counted for by assessing shifts in the balance between the two and in the degree of anxiety and disruption, hence the increase of fears that bring about that ‘reflux in the human mind’, which Hume associated with the polytheistic manner of conceiving the world.

This is hardly a model calculated to see the best in the springing up around the Late Antique Mediterranean world of impenitently concretized local of the holy, drawing great crowds, in the wake of the spread of Christianity, the theistic system par excellence.

Yet, if anything, it was the religious revival of the nineteenth century that hardened the outlines of Hume’s model, and that has made it an integral part of our interpretation of early medieval Christianity. Milman’s History of Latin Christianity shows how this could happen. He could present the spread of the cult of saints in Dark Age Europe in a manner touched with Romantic enthusiasm. But Hume’s model was part of Milman’s mental furniture. For he identified the theism of the enlightened few with the elevated message of the leaders of the Christian Church; and the barbarian settlers of Europe, though their mental processes might be deemed by Milman, the post-Romantic, as ‘poetic’ (not, as Gibbon had said more bluntly, ‘fierce and illiterate’), nevertheless retained to the full the qualities of Hume’s ‘vulgar’. They represented modes of thinking that fell far below those of the more enlightened leaders of the Catholic Church. Thus the balance between the few and the masses remains at the centre of Milman’s picture. As Duncan Forbes has seen so clearly in his Liberal Anglican Idea of History: ‘The relation, then, between Christianity and the course of history is one of condescension.’ ‘Now had commenced’, Milman wrote, ‘what may be called, neither unreasonably nor unwarrantably, the mythic age of Christianity. As Christianity worked downwards into the lower classes of society, as it received the crude and igno-

rant barbarians within its pale, the general effect could not but be, that the age would drag down the religion to its level, rather than the religion elevate the age to its own lofty standard. 8

Paradoxically, the renewed loyalty of sensitive and learned minds to the religious traditions of the past, in Anglicanism and Catholicism alike, heightened the lack of sympathy for the thought-processes of the average man. Many thinkers, though prepared as Hume had never been to accept the dogmas handed down to them from the past, had entered sufficiently deeply into the world of early medieval Catholicism to know that, by their standards, the river of Christian doctrine has flowed along strange and muddy banks: 'The religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it will ever be the tinctured with fanaticism and superstition, while men are what they are. A people's religion is ever a corrupt religion.' 9 Not Hume this time . . . but John Henry, Cardinal Newman.

It is by these stages that Hume's model came insensibly to permeate the great tradition of liberal Anglican and Catholic scholarship that has fostered so much of the learning on which the ecclesiastical history of the Late Antique and medieval world is based.

The most enduring feature in that tradition is Hume's 'two-tier' model for the development of religious sentiments in any society. In this model, the views of the potentially enlightened few are subjected to continuous upward pressure from the habitual thought-processes of the 'vulgar'. Pessimistic though he was about the few—far more pessimistic than those robust and upright Victorians we have just described—Hume had few doubts about who constituted the 'vulgar': they included, for instance, all women: 'What age or period of life is most addicted to superstition? The weakest and the most timid. What sex? The same answer must be

given. *The leaders of every kind of superstition*, says Strabo, *are the women. These excite men to devotion and supplications, and the observance of religious days.*

Applied to the study of the religious history of Late Antiquity, the ‘two-tier’ model encourages the historian to assume that any change in the piety of Late Antique men must have been the result of the intrusion into the élites of the Christian Church of modes of thought current among the masses; and that these changes coincided with massive external events, such as fear and anxiety caused by the barbarian invasions or disorientation caused by mass-conversions to Christianity. Such religious phenomena are deemed to belong to the category of ‘popular religion’. The category of ‘popular religion’ is, by definition, timeless and faceless, because it exhibits modes of thinking that are unintelligible except in terms of failure to be something else—failure through the pressures of anxiety, failure through the absence of the cultural and social preconditions of rational thought, failure through that hard fate that has condemned half of the population of any age, through the accident of gender, to being members of ‘that timorous and pious sex’.

Hence the relief with which the historian turns from his own learned tradition to other strands in the culture of his own age. The prevalent model of a split between the rational few and the irrational many cannot long survive a reading of Evans-Pritchard’s patient laying-bare of the intricate inner logic of a seemingly fearsome and irrational system of beliefs, in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. A respect for the checks and balances with which small communities can be acutely observed to live, twenty-four hours of the day, with the facts of the blood feud or the localized presence of the supernatural in their midst, demonstrated by Max Gluckman’s *Custom and Conflict in Modern Africa* and in Ernest Gellner’s penetrating *Saints of the Atlas*, goes no small way to answer a tradition of explanation that gives pride of place to physical insecurity and to unmodified fear of invisibility.

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ble forces in its rhetoric of explanation, when presenting the religious changes of the early medieval world. The rigorous artistry with which Mary Douglas, in her *Purity and Danger* and her *Natural Symbols*, has proposed a method of seizing, in all beliefs and rituals, a code by which a society can present itself and thus tacitly delimit and define what it is to hope to be human within it, overcomes brilliantly that cramping dualism inherent in so much ecclesiastical history, between high thoughts and low practices, elevating doctrines and sad social realities. Those books, to which I wish to pay a debt of personal gratitude—for they have been part of my attempt to take time off to feed the imagination—are now as much part of the English tradition of culture as are Hume, Milman and Newman. To read and to encourage others to read them is nothing as pretentious or as transient as striking up an alliance with another discipline. They are simply part of a common attempt, as cultivated western men, to give back to the alien, whether this is in the present, outside Europe, or in a European past remote from our present, some of the full stature of its humanity.

Let us return then to the cult of the saints. It seems to me that the growth of the cult of the saints in Late Antiquity has little to do with an upsurge of ‘popular religion’ in the manner in which such an upsurge has been presented. But it has a lot to do with a theme that preoccupied late Roman men increasingly: it was about people, and about the types of relationships that can be established between people. The relic is a person in a place; and, in that place, all that Late Antique men could value in unalloyed relations of friendship, protection and mercy in their society can come to be played out with liberating precision.

Late Antique men had inherited a continuum of Mediterranean sensibility that longed for invisible and ideal companions. As Bishop Synesius of Cyrene wrote of his guardian angel: ‘and give me a companion, O King, a partner, a sacred messenger of sacred power, a messenger of prayer illumined by the divine light, a friend, a dispenser of noble gifts, a
guard of my soul, a guard of my life, a guard over prayers, a guard over deeds.'

Yet by the late fourth century, the guardian angel tends to recede into the background: his position as an invisible friend and protector is taken over by the human figure of the saint. In a late third-century catacomb fresco, the lady Vibia is shown being led through the gate of Paradise by her Good Angel; in 396, the lady Veneranda is shown, flanked by another, elegant Late Roman woman—the martyr saint Petronilla, daughter of St Peter: a suitable protectress for Veneranda, a good ‘daughter of the Roman church’. 

Because either relationship would fall equally into the suspect category of ‘popular beliefs’, the decisive nuance separating the two scenes is blurred. We are dealing with a comparatively recent determination to find the well-known face of a fellow human being where previous generations had wished to seek, in the guardian angel, the shimmering presence of a bodiless power, whose function identified it with the vast and tranquil hierarchy of the universe.

The idea of replication has been invoked fruitfully to explain this aspect of the cult of the saints. For it has shifted attention from the questions we had been accustomed to ask of the cult—was it superstitious, did it represent a survival of paganism?—to the more hard-headed and useful questions that Late Antique men would ask: what types of relationship have I entered into? How can we both act in it? What can I expect from it? Yet the idea of replication should not be used to trivialize the phenomenon. We are not dealing with a mirror in Heaven that reflects, in rosy tints, the hard facts of patronage and prepotenza on the late Roman earth.

The language of patronage was chosen because it was the idiom with which to conduct an obscure but urgent debate on the nature of power in Late Antique society and the relation of power to mercy and justice.

Late Roman and early medieval men appear to be drawing a network of invisible fellow human beings ever closer around themselves. They work out a series of intense relationships with these, that are modelled with zest on what they consider to be good relationships in their ordinary life.

The poems of Paulinus of Nola enable us to see a late Roman aristocrat for whom the cult of saints had tapped a new well-spring of artfulness. Here is a poet for whom all that love and warmth of which classical Mediterranean men were so capable shifts from one beloved figure to another—from his elder friend and teacher, Ausonius, to a new, invisible, friend, St Felix at Nola:

\[ \text{videbo corde, mente complектar pia} \]
\[ \text{ubique praesentem mihi.}^{13} \]

To speak of a man such as Paulinus as if he had merely replaced the worship of the old gods by the worship of St Felix is to use too inert a model for the change. Men of the late Roman aristocracy, such as Paulinus or Paulinus’ friend Sulpicius Severus—who would dream of his recently-dead hero, Martin, ‘dressed in a white toga, his face alight, with glowing eyes and shimmering hair . . . He smiled at me, and handed me the little book that I had just written . . .’ (none other than the classic of western historiography, the *Vita Martini*)\(^{14}\)—obliterated their past because they could add something new: the warm blood of late Roman senatorial amicitia and the intensities of late Roman relationships with beloved teachers could flow freely into a newly-forged style of relationships with the other world.

*Amicitia*, for a late Roman man, also meant protection and power. The saint was the *patronus*, the protector, with whom it was desirable to enter into a client relationship. Early medieval relics are often called, quite simply, *patrocinia*: portable tokens of the patronage of the saints. There was no need to teach late Roman men, and there is no need to teach

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the late Roman social historians of today, about the hard facts of the systems of patronage and dependence that hardened throughout the early medieval West.

Yet, once again, we should not underestimate the speed and the certainty of touch with which Christians of the late fourth century created a system of idealized relationships of dependence with invisible human beings.

And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.\textsuperscript{15}

The shape that late Roman men decided, in no uncertain terms, to give to their saints was that of the \textit{patronus}.

The idea that the just man could intercede for the sins of his fellows was part of a long continuum of Jewish, Christian, even pagan, belief. But the belief had remained faceless: only a century of late imperial art could enable the late-fourth-century painter of the \textit{Coemeterium Maius} to convey so vividly what it was like to kneel for protection on either side of the still, upright figure of the martyr—the \textit{patronus} and \textit{dominus}.\textsuperscript{16}

For the arrival of a relic and its installation in a church was the arrival of a \textit{sublimis potestas}, a person wielding absolute power in the community. But the relic was a very particular sort of person. He or she was a martyr: that is, a fellow-human who had suffered death from an unjust power. As Victricius of Rouen was careful to stress in his great panegyric, \textit{In Praise of the Saints}, behind the altar on which the relic case now glittered, surrounded by the pomp of an Imperial arrival, there still lurked the dark memory of an unjust execution: the 'clean' power of the martyr was shadowed by the memory of an act of 'dirty' power.

The debate on the nature of power and its exercise in the

\textsuperscript{15} W. Shakespeare, \textit{Midsummer's Night Dream}, act V, scene 1, line 14.