6 Coercion of Saints
in Medieval Religious Practice

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In an imaginative study, Pierre-André Sigal has examined the litera-
ture of divine chastisement as it appears in eleventh- and twelfth-
century hagiography.[1] Saints manifested their power not only
through beneficial miracles like working cures and finding lost objects
but also by punishing and afflicting people who had offended them.
In the collections of miracles Sigal examined, saints were credited
with having punished pillagers of monastic property, thieves who
stole church treasures, and attackers of pilgrims traveling to or from
saints' shrines. In addition, a more varied group of persons and
animals who had penetrated the sacred presence of the saints' relics
without proper preparation or respect found themselves the victims
of divine wrath: even an inadvertent glance at relics accidentally
uncovered in the course of church construction and renovation could
result in serious physical punishment. Sigal goes beyond a mere
description and classification of these punishments and examines the
psychological mechanisms by which certain misfortunes that befell
people were assigned to miraculous interventions of either divine or
saintly origin. In the majority of attacks on the saint's church or
pilgrims, the interpretation that established the causal connection
was the product of the victim, not of the one punished, or else of
other, third-party observers. In a minority of cases, the victims made
the connection, either because they recognized their guilt after the
visitation of divine wrath or because they gradually came to a con-
sciousness of their guilt, usually through dreams in which the saint

1. Pierre-André Sigal, "Un aspect du culte des saints: Le châtiment divin."

appeared and beat them for their crimes. In any case, the perception of divine punishment rested on a shared understanding of sanctity and the nature of saints: saints were capricious, powerful, severe, jealous of their rights, and quick to reward or punish those who either trespassed or denied them.

This chapter examines the obverse of this relationship so well described by Sigal: if saints were quite capable of demanding their due and ready to strike whose who offended them, they also owed certain reciprocal obligations to their devotees, and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries neither clergy nor people hesitated to pressure, threaten and even physically abuse saints who shirked their duty.

Modern sensibilities would lead us to suppose that coercion and physical abuse of saints would have been considered improper by both religious and lay societies and that some clear limitation would have existed, if not always in practice, then at least in law. But when we look for parameters it becomes clear that this issue, like almost every other aspect of the cult of saints and their relics, was virtually ignored by canonists and theologians.[2] Devotion to saints was so universally accepted, and the cult of relics so natural a part of human life, that regulation and limitation of these phenomena was not even considered, except on an ad hoc basis when a case of abuse or fraud was so evident and so harmful to the community of the faithful that it could not be ignored. Thus the levels of force and intensity by which the faithful, lay and religious, sought to gain the favor of the saints developed naturally and increased in intensity with the urgency of the problems brought to the saints' attention.

2. On the slow formation of a canon law of relics, see Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *Les reliques des saints*. A few theologians did attack aspects of the cult of relics, but they were quite exceptional; see Klaus Guth, *Guibert von Nogent und die hochmittelalter-liche Kritik an der Reliquienverehrung* (Ottobeuren, 1970). Guibert of Nogent concentrated on attacking claims to physical relics of Christ, and his objections must be seen in the context of his eucharistic theology, which must in turn be seen in the Anselmian tradition; see Jaroslav Pelikan, "A First-Generation Anselmian, Guibert of Nogent," in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. F. Forrester Church and Timothy George (Leiden, 1979), 71–82; R. I. Moore, "Guibert of Nogent and His World," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis*, ed. Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (London, 1985), 107–117; and Gary Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period: A Study of the Salvivic Function of the Sacrament according to the Theologians, c. 1080–1220* (Oxford, 1984), 81–82. Neither Moore nor Macy seems aware of Guth's work.

Normally, saints were honored primarily in their bodies or relics, which, in a very real, concrete sense, *were* the saints, continuing to live among their people.[3] Pilgrims from all states and stations of life sought the same sorts of aid in the same ways: the most frequent requests were for physical cures, help in finding lost property, and protection from human or natural threats. Like people of many cultures and religions encountering the holy, they prepared themselves by fasting and the ordeal of a journey, they entered the church and approached as near as possible to the saint's shrine, they attempted to touch it to insure physical contact with the sacred, and they often passed the night sleeping or keeping watch near the shrine, calling upon the name of the saint.[4]

The clergy who staffed the churches usually did little to regulate the exact nature of these phases other than to keep the pilgrims from interfering with their own official celebration of the liturgy in the monastic hours. Efforts to go beyond this minimal control and to regulate the times of contact and the sorts of popular prayers and supplications generally met with little success. At Conques, for example, pilgrims were already, in the tenth century, accustomed to passing the night in the church of Saint Foy, singing all manner of rustic songs and carrying on what the monks considered frivolous conversations. But when the community tried to exclude pilgrims from the church at night, the doors were miraculously opened and the pilgrims were found the next morning carrying on their popular invocations as usual. The monks took this miracle as a sign that God willed that the peasants be allowed unlimited access to Saint Foy and ceased closing the church doors at night.[5]

A similar tolerance was shown toward the sorts of somewhat extraordinary prayers people used to convince the saints to help them. At Chaise Dieu, for example, an old, blind beggar stood before the tomb of Saint Robert for three days, crying out incessantly the name of the saint. The man's wife finally tried to silence him by advising that a more spiritual and interior sort of invocation would be more effective: "Do you think that you will not be heard by the saint unless by

3. On saints as living members of the community, see Geary, *Furta Sacra,* chap. 6, 108–128.
4. See Jacques Paul's study, "Miracles et mentalité religieuse populaire à Marseille au début du XIVe siècle," in *La religion populaire en Languedoc,* 61–90.
5. A. Bouillet, ed., *Liber miraculorum Sancte Fidis* 2.12, (Paris, 1897), 120–122.

exaggerated entreaties? Wait rather in silence and pour out your prayers in the private recesses of your heart." The man reacted to this advice with scorn, telling her to be quiet and asking, "Do you think the saint has such delicate ears that they will be injured by loud cries?" Saint Robert apparently supported the beggar's more external, physical form of invocation because he then cured him of his blindness. The monastic writer who recorded the miracle likewise thought that the man had shown greater devotion, and he compared him to the blind man who cried out to the Lord even when the disciples attempted to silence him.[6]

Thus pilgrims enjoyed great latitude in their devotion to saints, and when ordinary means failed, extreme—*improbis* in the words of the woman—measures were not only permissible but encouraged. Moreover, such means were practiced not only by the uneducated populace but by the monks themselves. To return to Conques for an example, a local lord dared to pasture his favorite horse with impunity on monastic property. Because the man could not be convinced to stop his horse from destroying the crops, the monks, in the words of Bernard of Chartres, "stirred up Saint Foy by means of excessive cries [*improbis clamoribus*], and they long exhorted her with prayers that she would turn away this plague from them." When finally the horse literally ate himself to death, rupturing his sides and falling dead in the monks' field, they interpreted his fate as Saint Foy's answer to their prayers.[7]

Improbi clamores were not necessarily limited to long and loud appeals for saintly protection. The cry could also contain a threat that if the saint should not fulfill his or her obligations, he or she would cease to be honored and might even be physically abused. Cistercian saints, in a tradition that probably dated to the earliest days of the order, when monasteries were not supposed to be pilgrimage sites, were frequently said to have been ordered by the abbots to stop working miracles.[8] After the death of Stephen of Grammont, to cite but one example, miracles worked at his tomb resulted in a pilgrimage that threatened the peace and isolation of the community. The prior approached his tomb and solemnly commanded him to cease his

6. *Miracula S. Roberti auctore Bertrando, AASS,* April 3, 330.
7. Bouillet, app., 229–230.
8. G. G. Coulton gives examples of this topos in his *Five Centuries of Religion* 3 (Cambridge, 1936), 98–99.

miracles, or else, he was told, his body would be disinterred and cast into the nearby river.[9] And threats did not always stop at words. Frequently in times of crisis, appeals to saintly protection were dramatized by the suspension of a cult, and the church was closed to the faithful wishing to pray or make offerings to the saints. Still more serious were the monastic rite of humiliating saints and the parallel lay practice of coercion, both described in Chapter 5.

These increasingly severe types of coercion—loud, constant entreaties; threats; abandonment; physical mistreatment; and finally, corporal punishment—appear at first to contradict the picture of the sacred, jealous, wrathful power Sigal's study presented. If saints were quick to punish even those who accidently touched them or acted irreverently in their presence, how could they tolerate such abuse? In fact, the punishment of saints by people is a reasonable extension of the punishment of people by saints and illuminates the matrix of reciprocal rights and responsibilities binding saints and men together.

Saints were vital, powerful members of society and commanded reverence, honor, respect, and devotion. They were entitled to deference, service, and an enthusiastic cult. When people purposefully or accidently failed to give them their due, either directly by acting improperly in their relics' presence or indirectly by infringing on their *honores* (their property, religious community, or devotees), they could retaliate with violence. They in turn owed, to their faithful, services that varied with the nature of the particular community. They were obliged to defend their monastic and lay families in their lives and in their property. Normally they were expected to work the miracles that formed the basis for their cult appeal and hence the usefulness of the church in lay society. In certain communities, however, such as Cistercian houses, they were instead obligated to avoid those sorts of saintly miracles that would disturb the isolation of the monks. When saints failed to fulfill their part of the bargain, they could expect to be threatened and abused until they relented, as Martin was pressured by the canons when he failed to protect Saint-Martin of Tours from Fulk Nerra, as recounted in the last chapter.

While the threats and punishments may have been extreme, they were never irreverent. Quite the opposite. Cistercian saints being threatened with exhumation and banishment were reverently ad-

9. Ibid., 99; *Vita S. Stephani Grandimontensis, PL* 204.1030.

dressed even while their options were clearly spelled out to them. Not only did humiliation of relics require an elaborate liturgy, but the actual placing of the relics on the ground had to be done by the highest ranking members of the community. Even the peasant beatings of saints were prepared for in accordance with the tradition for encountering the sacred under more normal circumstances: the peasants fasted, journeyed, and lay before the saint in respectful preparation for his chastisement.

The choice of punishments, too, was not capricious; those chosen were the same ones inflicted on people by saints. The most frequent divine punishment of disrespectful or evil nobles was casting them down from their horses, the traditional punishment for pride.[10] Humiliation of saints was exactly the same punishment: the saint was taken down from his lofty place of honor and placed on the ground. Sigal notes that saints often appeared to men in their dreams and beat them with staffs; the peasants of Saint-Calais and elsewhere simply did the same thing to the saint. Not surprisingly, in fact, the punishment of the saint could lead to the punishment of a man by the punished saint. About 1036, Henry I alienated a property of the monastery of Saint-Médard of Soissons and gave it to Duke Gozelon of Lorraine. The monks, who claimed the property by a donation from Charles the Bald or Charles the Great, were unable to recover it by appeals, either to the king or the duke. In desperation they humiliated the bodies of their principal saints. A year passed during which time the relics remained dishonored and services were suspended, but the duke remained obstinate. Finally, while attending services during Holy Week at the monastery of saints Marie and Servat at Troyes, the duke fell asleep and dreamed that he saw the patrons of Saint-Médard, Pope Gregory the Great, Sebastian, Médard, and Gildard, discussing what should be done to someone who had agreed to hold property of the Church unjustly. At the order of Gregory, Sebastian took a staff and began to beat the duke on the head. He awoke to find blood pouring from his mouth and ears and, mending his ways, returned the land to the monastery.[11] In this example, quite similar to those examined by Sigal, we see the gradual recognition of guilt, experienced as punishment by the offended saint, and resulting from punishment of the saint.

10. See Lester K. Little, "Pride Goes before Avarice.
11. Léopold Delisle, *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 455–456.

Chastisement of saints resembled that of people not only in the varieties of punishment but also in the effects on society at large. The full significance of divine or saintly chastisement made its greatest impression, we have seen, not on the individual being punished but rather on the rest of society, which, by the violent and unusual occurrence, came to see the connection between the initial offense and the event being interpreted as supernatural punishment. Likewise, the larger community was involved in the coercion of saints and came to understand the significance both of the punishment and of the events that led up to it. *Improbi clamores,* threats, isolation, humiliation, and beatings are all highly visible actions that dramatized the gravity of the situation causing them. These solemn, public actions are thus directed not only to the saints themselves but to society. Most events that led to coercion of saints were social disturbances—too many pilgrims to a remote monastery, disrespect of monastic rights by local landholders, abuse of a monastery's peasants. Relief could come only from social change. Thus the physical mistreatment, threatened or actual, of the most important person in the mediated relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds dramatized what had been done to this person and simultaneously helped polarize public opinion against the individual or group causing the disturbance. Humiliation almost invariably resulted in third-party arbitration to pressure the offending noble into agreement with the religious. The punishment of Saint-Calais succeeded in raising the consciousness of the monks to the plight of peasants on their distant property, and obviously, closing the church doors and suspending the cult of saints created disorder throughout the society that looked to that cult to secure divine favor and prosperity. Thus coercion of saints, like coercion of people, clarified the implicit assumptions of medieval society about the proper relationship between saints and men while it also served as a mechanism by which not only saints but sinners could be controlled.

This brief examination of the ways society viewed relationships between saints and men and their possible means of interaction must raise certain fundamental questions about the nature of medieval religion. Should coercion of men by saints and vice versa be seen as religion at all, or is it, rather, a form of magic that existed without serious opposition alongside genuinely religious aspects of Christianity through the twelfth century, was gradually condemned begin-

ning in the thirteenth century, and then was slowly eliminated in the course of the later Middle Ages and Reformation? The exchange between the anthropologist Hildred Geertz and Keith Thomas, author of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,[12] which appeared in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, clarified the terms and boundaries of the debate on the nature of medieval Christianity.[13] As Thomas argued in his book and then pointed out again in his response to Geertz's critique of it, the various definitions of magic and religion with which historians, theologians, and until recently, anthropologists have attempted to assess systems and practices are themselves products of the early modern period. Reformers of the sixteenth century, trying to eliminate those remaining elements of medieval religion which they opposed, first formulated such distinctions as "religion is intercessionary, magic is coercive"[14] and *religion* is a term that covers the kinds of beliefs and practices that are comprehensive, organized, and concerned with providing general symbols of life, whereas *magic* is a label for those beliefs and practices that are specific, incoherent, and primarily oriented toward providing practical solutions to immediate problems but not referable to any coherent scheme of ideas.[15] Thus whatever the justification for using such labels, they are hopelessly culture bound and can be applied to other cultures and periods only with great risk to an integral understanding. Even Thomas's own chapter title, "The Magic of the Medieval Church,"[16] indicates how poorly such categories serve to illuminate the realities of the prereformation period. Certain essential characteristics of medieval religion—the sacraments, the cult practices associated with the saints— would be viewed by subsequent reformers as "magical" and, in their fragmented survivals in postreformation Europe, certainly did present a picture of incoherent, specific means of coercing supernatural powers to achieve particular ends.

Yet in the context of medieval society, these phenomena appear quite different. Punishing saints through their corporeal remains may be directed at particular ends, but it is an integral part of a broad,

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12. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971).
13. Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975): 71–89, with a response by Keith Thomas, 91–109.
14. Ibid., 96.
15. Ibid., 72.
16. Thomas, 25–50.

cohesive view of the vertical and horizontal relationships in a society that includes both the living and the dead. The relationships of obligations and rights binding these groups, although not articulated and defined by law or creed, appear, nonetheless, to have been quite widely accepted, to judge by actions such as coercion and chastisement of men and saints. That these structures did not conform to postreformation and counterreformation views of Christianity is immaterial. Medieval religion was neither magic nor religion in the modern sense of these terms. More all-encompassing than modern, compartmentalized religion and less rationalized, codified, and articulated, medieval religion was an expression of a perception of the world, at times through joyous liturgical dance, at times through desperate physical abuse.