

THE OBJECT OF DEVOTION:
FUNDAMENTALIST PERSPECTIVES ON
THE MEDIEVAL PAST

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Those of us who teach and study medieval literature know exactly what it is that is the object of our devotion: it is the past, which is at once an object of desire and an object of scrutiny, the thing that we try to approach objectively and cleanly and the thing that is muddied and complicated by our relationship to it. Our efforts to write about the past are colored by our own experience, no matter how hard we work to push that experience to the margins of consciousness. As medievalists such as Nicholas Watson, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Catherine Brown have shown in elaborate and persuasive detail, the scholar's encounter with the past is never wholly innocent, nor should we expect that it could ever be so. All we can do is to try to take account of our own position, our own perspective, and bear it in mind as we take stock of the past. This effort is different from, but arguably builds upon, Caroline Bynum's powerful argument for the need to carry out an "analogical" study of the past: she suggests that only through a process of analogy, in which we seek to understand medieval categories and relations in their own terms, and then compare modern categories and relations in their own terms, can we come to some kind of fruitful understanding of the past.¹ What I am not so much suggesting as illustrating in the following pages is the need for a personal inventory of terms and categories, of an exploration of why we see the world—including the object of our research,

which is also the object of our devotion—in the way we do. This is not to suggest that my personal inventory is in itself particularly interesting or important: the effort to make such an inventory, however, I would suggest, *is* important and worth carrying out, not just for one's own sake but for the sake of the work.

In light of this sense of the past and our relationship to it, I take up the editors' invitation to consider how issues of belief have informed my own scholarship. This is an invitation I thought about for a long time before accepting: like recounting your own dreams, recounting your own intellectual formation is the ultimate exercise in narcissism. In time, however, I came to think that it might be useful for younger scholars, in particular, to see some of the ways in which an awareness of what I will call "habitual knowledge" informs not only the ways we live our lives, but also the way in which we see and know, and consequently the work we do. In using the phrase "habitual knowledge," I am drawing on Bourdieu's definition of *habitus*: a set of dispositions that generate practices, perceptions, and behaviors within a group, in contrast with other forms of knowing that we might consider to be more analytical, more objective, more a part of an academic discourse that strives to work outside of unconscious presuppositions. In his *Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu particularly notes the ways in which religious communities participate in the construction and expression of *habitus*, and points out the role of children as members of the community who are especially strongly formed within the parameters of the community's *habitus*.² It is this kind of "habitual knowledge" that I retrace here in order to contextualize the ways in which it has shaped my research over the last two decades and, more broadly, the way I see the medieval past. It is my hope that this account might serve as a kind of test case to help others excavate parallel trajectories in their own intellectual histories.

From the age of seven to fourteen, I was brought up as Jehovah's Witness, in a community that explicitly defines itself as not part of this world, and as having a special mission: to bear witness to the Truth (that is, to their own understanding of scripture as a whole and, in particular, of revelation) regardless of the consequences.³ For Jehovah's Witnesses, enduring persecution (one of the first four-syllable words I learned) is a necessary, even desirable, part of life. The social boundaries and habitual practices of this community—membership and disfellowship (shunning), weekly meetings of the congregation and public ministry to the world, annual circuit and district conventions—give shape to life, all the more powerfully because members of the community do not associate with those outside, except as necessary for school or work. The habitual knowledge formed within a community of this sort includes a strong sense of the way in which time passes

in cycles: the weekly cycle of meetings (Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday), the weekly witnessing door-to-door in order to spread the Truth, the annual assemblies, and—most importantly—the great clock of apocalypse. During my childhood, we expected the end of days to come sometime soon after 1975.

I was never baptized as a Jehovah's Witness, not because I didn't wish to be, but because my mother left the community before I was of an age to be baptized. (There is no set age, but children are not usually baptized before their mid- to late teens.) If she had stayed in the community, I probably would have been baptized, but when she left, I did not express any wish to remain in the community myself. I was, as they say, lukewarm. I was not lukewarm about religion, however, because I had a passionate desire to believe; it was therefore with great joy that I embraced Islam as an adult. For a long time, I believed that there was a complete disjunction between the extreme Protestant millenarianism of my childhood and the moderate Islam of my adulthood: it is clear to me now, however, that the iconoclasm I was brought up with has left me with an inability to see images as anything other than idols, and that the fundamentalist reading of scripture I internalized at a young age has left me with a constant sense of wonder at the figurative, even allegorical, possibilities of the word. Perhaps most powerfully, the certainty I felt as a child that the world would come to an end any day now has left me with a sharp but uneasy sense of recognition, even familiarity, when I read apocalyptic literature of the middle ages. That sense of recognition is both enabling and a handicap, a penetrating knowledge that feels like revelation, but is just as likely to be illusion.

Love for Leviticus

Then they filled it with four rows of stones. A row of ruby, topaz and emerald was in the first row. And the second row was turquoise, sapphire and jasper. And the third row was lesh'em stone, agate and amethyst. And the fourth row was chrysolite and onyx and jade. They were set with settings of gold in their fillings. And the stones were according to the names of the sons of Israel. (Exodus 39: 10-14, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*)

The Kingdom Hall, in every community of Jehovah's Witnesses, is a functional space. That is not to say it is not a symbolic space: in the Kingdom Hall I attended as a child, a large room filled with about two hundred fixed chairs was fronted by a slightly elevated stage, with a central podium with microphone and, off to the side, a small round dining table with two chairs and two microphones on the table. The overseer or one of the elders would

stand at the podium to lead Bible study (on Friday nights) or to lecture (on Sundays); other brothers in the congregation might come to the podium, when invited by the elders, to offer prayer on behalf of the community or to make an announcement. Friday night meetings included an interlude in which sisters would sit at the side table in staged reenactments of witnessing in the community; sisters did not stand at the podium, in keeping with Paul's injunction against women preaching.

The back of the Hall included a desk where publications were sold, at a modest cost: different copies of the Bible (in the Revised Standard), copies of *Watchtower* and *Awake*, the Truth book (*The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life*, long the main book publication offered by Witnesses in their ministry), and a rainbow of other books, including *Make Sure of All Things: Hold Fast to What Is Fine*, *God's Kingdom of 1000 Years Has Approached*, *Holy Spirit: The Force Behind the Coming New Order*, and, proliferating annually, the *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*. An additional room at the back was for the use of sisters with small (or noisy) children, with a loudspeaker to deliver audio from the main hall and several shelves of books. The space of the Kingdom Hall was therefore a symbolic space even though it was austere, regulated in ways to assure its functionality, its practicality, and the gendered division of roles within the congregation. The stage reinforced the division of roles not only according to gender but also according to seniority in the hierarchy of the congregation: to speak from the podium was to be recognized as having a certain status within the community, either as an elder or, if still a young man or a new member of the congregation, someone who might in time become an elder.

The most striking aspect of the symbolic space of the Kingdom Hall was also a marker of time: the inscription mounted on the wall above the stage, made up of a verse or two from the Bible. This verse would be changed annually, and it was with eagerness that the larger gathering of the assembly made up of all the congregations in the circuit would look forward to the announcement of the new verse for the year and to the book to be featured in the practice of witnessing in the coming year. The verse was constant, in that the pride of place in the Kingdom Hall was maintained by a few lines carefully chosen from scripture; it was mutable, in that the verse changed every year, marking the countdown of the last days. Time was marked on a large scale, in the counting of ages as recounted in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, marked also in the seven heads of the beast, culminating in the coming of Antichrist; it was also marked on smaller scales, in the annual tick-tock of the changing verse and new featured book, and in the weekly cycle of meetings. The structure of these meetings was consistent: two hours on Sunday morning, with the first hour a lecture by an elder of the congregation or the

overseer, and the second devoted to questions and answers drawn from the current issues of the *Watchtower*; one hour on Tuesday evening, with questions and answers drawn from the current book under study; two hours on Friday night, with the first hour focused on questions and answers from a more challenging book under study and the second hour devoted to practice ministry (as preaching at the podium for brothers and as door-to-door ministry at the table for sisters). Saturdays were for door-to-door witnessing, but pioneers—those who dedicated themselves full-time to ministry—went door-to-door throughout the week. Together, the cycles of the week and the year make up a complete *habitus*, a communal practice that governs the life of the community and of the individuals within it. They create a set of norms and behaviors, hierarchies and categories, generating habitual behaviors and habitual knowledge—that is, ways of knowing that emerge from the practice of the *habitus*.

As a child, I loved to read, but it is not allowed to read worldly materials during meetings at the Kingdom Hall. You can read the text under study at the time, with its questions printed at the bottom of the page and highlighted text providing the answers, or the Bible. I read the Bible. I memorized the titles of the books of the Bible in order, finding that this was an accomplishment that would impress adults almost as much as memorizing Bible verses and demonstrating the ability to cross-reference across scripture. (This is an ability that served me well in graduate school, I have to admit.) During the hours spent sitting in my seat at the Kingdom Hall, more than anything else, I read Leviticus. It was my favorite book of the Bible: full of lists, full of inexhaustible, meticulous, demanding detail. Medievalists, if they think about Leviticus at all, are likely to think about it within the parameters of Mary Douglas's seminal work on *Purity and Danger*.¹ But I read about the cereal offerings of flour, with oil and frankincense (Lev. 2); about how, if you cannot afford the cost of two doves for the blood offering, you can substitute a tenth of an e'phah of flour, with no oil or frankincense (5:11); about the thanksgiving offering of unfermented cakes moistened with oil, unfermented wafers smeared with oil, and ring-shaped cakes of fine flour moistened with oil (7: 12); the rites of purification, for polluted bodies and for diseased bodies, and so on. Above all, I read and reread the final chapters of Exodus that come right before Leviticus: the account of the tabernacle, the tent, the ark, the veil, the table, the lamp, and the altar. The profusion of color and substance was overwhelming: the linen and the goat's hair and the ram skins dyed red; the blue and the reddish purple and scarlet; the hangings of the tent and the veil; the fifty loops of the curtain and the fifty hooks of gold; the acacia wood overlaid with silver and gold, adorned with cherubs; the standing lamp with six branches, three on each side, with cups

made like flowers of almond; the blue and purple and scarlet of the high priest's garments, with its golden ephod set with topaz and emerald, sapphire and diamond. What guilty pleasures! Repeating the numbing details of these lists, it was possible to be upright and obedient, and still secretly imagine what the meaning could be hidden behind the details: what was meant by the scarlet and the purple, by the sapphires of the second row of the breastplate? The knowledge was hidden, but it was certainly there, hidden just below the surface of the page.

The other guilty reading pleasure available to me was the maps at the back of the Bible, mainly conventional maps of the "Holy Land," but also one wonderful schematic of the "Ground Plan of the Tabernacle." I pored endlessly over that map, imagining the outer courtyard, the holy sanctuary within, and the Holy of Holies. The altar was outside, but the ark with its tablets was deep within the sacred space, hidden behind the veil. The sacred space mapped out on the page was the inverted image of the space of the Kingdom Hall: a nested series of enclosures, bearing inside it the most powerful of secrets, the inscribed word of God. The promise of that page was something I came to recognize in the joy of the allegorical: the relationship of form to meaning, the exploding outward and upward of layers of figurative meaning surmounting—sometimes superseding—the literal level. When I came to study the Middle Ages, it is no wonder that I was drawn, like a magnet, to allegory—the pleasures of the figurative word so long held off by fundamentalist modes of reading.

When I came to write about allegory, in a dissertation that ultimately emerged as a monograph titled *Seeing Through the Veil*, it seemed absolutely essential to me to couch the operation of figurative language in terms that were based on spatial relations: interiority, nested structures like Russian dolls or Chinese boxes, symmetry, "horizontal" and "vertical allegory." The book argued that allegorical writing, from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, gradually moved away from a relatively unproblematic way of expressing knowledge in terms of seeing to a more complex, doubtful depiction of the relationship between sight and knowledge. It is clear to me now, with hindsight, that the approach to allegory taken in that book was not only a reaction against the fundamentalist modes of reading that were part of my early formation, but also an affirmation of the habitual knowledge that I had developed concerning sacrality and meaning during those long hours spent pondering the interior spaces and outward orientation of the temple. To know—to see—hidden knowledge was to penetrate the interior space. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a crucial focus of *Seeing Through the Veil* was the twelfth-century notion of the *integumentum* or *involucrum*, the metaphorical garment that represents the way that meaning can be concealed beneath

the veil of language.

One further aspect of *Seeing Through the Veil* shows the effects of the emergence of my fascination with allegory in reaction against a fundamentalist milieu: that is, the relentless exclusion of devotional or theological texts from the book. My explicit rationale for excluding these texts was that, while vision ceased to be used as a privileged mediator of knowledge in late medieval allegory, it continued to be used in devotional writing, but not in what could strictly be defined as an allegorical mode (Akbari, *Seeing* 236, 242-43). I now see that argument as specious and have come to be very interested in the ways in which vision serves to describe spiritual modes of knowing—often through the privation of that knowledge, as in Marguerite Porete's writings, or in the *Cloud of Unknowing*. It seems extraordinary to me that, in a study that positioned the *Roman de la Rose* as the wellspring of much of the later allegorical tradition, I was able to exclude Marguerite's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. This work is an elaborate allegory that draws explicitly on the *Rose* not only for many of its personified abstractions, but also in the theory of allegory articulated in it; because it is a devotional text, however, I thoughtlessly put it to one side. Looking back at Marguerite now, however, I can see how dramatically an engagement with devotional texts might have expanded the scope of *Seeing Through the Veil*, particularly in its account of the limitations of vision when the human being comes face to face with the divine.

In Dante's *Paradiso*, a text I did write about, this encounter of the human and divine is highly mediated, both through elaborate poetic figures and through symbolic structures; in Marguerite's *Mirror*, by contrast, the human is annihilated—beautifully, pleasurably, and inexorably annihilated—by the divine. Amour, the personification of Love, orders the “hearers of this book” to “listen and understand well,” declaring that “the Annihilated Soul has no power of will at all, nor can she have such power at all, nor can she even wish to have such power, and in this the divine will is perfectly fulfilled” [“Or oyez et entendez bien, auditeurs de ce livre, le vray entendement de ce que ce livre dit en tant de lieux, que l'Âme Adnientic n'a point de voullenté, ne point n'en peut avoir, ne point n'en peut vouloir avoir, et en ce est la voullenté divine parfaitement acomplie” (48)].⁵ The annihilation of the will also entails the annihilation of the power of knowledge:

The Free Soul knows all and also knows nothing...she knows by the power of faith that which she needs to know for her spiritual health; and she knows nothing of that which God has in her of him for her, which he gives to no one except to her. Therefore, in this interpretation, this Soul knows everything and also knows nothing. She desires all, says Love, and also desires nothing; for this Soul, says Love, desires so perfectly only the will of God, that she neither knows, nor is able, nor desires in her will anything but the will of God, because Love has cast her into

such a strong prison.

l'Ame Enfranchie scet tout et si ne scet neant...elle scet par la vertu de foy ce qui luy convient savoir pour son salut; et ne scet neant de ce que Dieu a en elle de luy pour elle [Lat. "in se, de se, pro se"], qui ne donnera a nulluy fors que a elle. Donc par cestuy entendement scet ceste Ame tout et si ne scet neant. Elle veult tout, dit Amour, et si ne veult neant; car ceste Ame, dit Amour, veult si parfaitement la voullenté de Dieu, qu'elle ne scet, ne ne peut, ne ne veult en son vouloir que la voullenté de Dieu, tant l'a Amour mise en forte prison. (64-66)

This prison, a clear allusion to the prison in which Bel Accueil (Fair Welcome) is imprisoned in the closing lines of Guillaume de Lorris's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*, is here transformed into a joyful enclosure, where the Soul is the utterly helpless prisoner of Love.

When I excluded devotional texts from *Seeing Through the Veil*, I told myself that such texts would have not only a limited engagement with complex theories of allegory, but would also have an impoverished model of visual theory—perhaps a simple form of the platonic extramission theory, with the visual ray emerging from the eye of the viewer to encounter the object of vision. Unsurprisingly, a closer look at Marguerite's *Mirror* reveals something more interesting: not a detailed recapitulation of technical optical theories, to be sure, but a negation of the power of vision in the encounter with the divine. Just as the will, the capacity to desire, and the ability to know are all erased in the annihilating love of God, so too is the power of vision: speaking of the thief crucified with Jesus, Marguerite writes,

Paradise is nothing else than to see God alone; and in this way the thief was in paradise, just as soon as his soul had departed from his body.... And it is true, that he was in paradise that same day: because he saw God [as Christ], he was in and totally possessed paradise. For paradise is nothing else, than to see God.

aultre chose n'est paradis, que Dieu tant seulement veoir; et pource fut le larron en paradis, tantost que l'ame fut partie de son corps....Et est vray, qu'il fut en paradis le propre jour: pource que il vit Dieu, il fut et eut paradis, car aultre chose n'est paradis, que Dieu veoir. (268)

Yet even this vision of God proves to be an experience of annihilation, for in paradise, the thief experiences, "without any medium, the life of glory, and is in paradise without being" ["sans moyen, de vie de gloire, et est en paradis, sans estre" (270)].

Immediately following this description of the visual experience of paradise, Marguerite enjoins her reader to interpret these words allegorically, using language drawn explicitly from the *Roman de la Rose*:

Gloss these words, if you want to understand them, or else you will understand them wrongly, for they have no appearance of paradox (lit. "contrariness") to the one who understands the innermost part of the gloss; it appears to be not at all the truth, yet it is truth, and nothing else.

Glosez ces motz, se vous les voulez entendre, ou vous les mal entendrez, car ilz ont aucune semblance de contrarieté, qui n'entend le noyau de la glose [Lat. "nucleum glossae"], mais semblance n'est mie verité, mais verité est, et nulle autre chose. (270)

This dense passage draws both on the theory of allegory as truthful lie articulated in the opening lines of the *Rose* in the portion written by Guillaume de Lorris, and on the theory of allegory as the merging of contraries ("contreres choses") put forth by Jean de Meun in his monumental continuation of the *Rose*.⁷ Yet because Marguerite's *Mirror* is also a deeply pious work, devoted to the willing annihilation of the soul within the all-consuming love of God, written by a Beguine mystic who would ultimately be burned for her resolutely held beliefs, I did not even consider including it in my study of optics and allegory: at the time I wrote *Seeing Through the Veil*, devotional literature was for me a blind spot.

From Holy Image to Holy Dust

It is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life, while the brain is impressible, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct; and the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason. (Darwin 101, in a discussion of Hindu categories of clean and unclean foods)

When my mother and I became Jehovah's Witnesses, it was necessary to clean the house. I mean this not in the literal sense, but in Mary Douglas's sense: to clean the house was to remove the idols, to expel the sources of spiritual uncleanness. This meant removing not only religious images (such as crucifixes, saint's images, pietas) as such, but also things more loosely idolatrous, such as American flags and Christmas decorations. Flags were thought to be an expression of nationalism, a sentiment forbidden to the Witness who is in this world but not of it, and were therefore seen as idols, wrongful objects of devotion. The celebration of Christmas, like Easter, is understood by Jehovah's Witnesses as a holdover of pagan rituals, the winter Saturnalia and the springtime fertility festival. (Halloween was even more energetically rejected as a misguided celebration of demonic influences.) Birthdays, anniversaries, and all celebrations were erased from the annual calendar of the observant Witness: the only holiday to be observed

was Passover, reckoned according to the Jewish calendar—observed in a peculiarly solemn and silent special meeting at the Kingdom Hall. Following a brief address by the overseer, a plate of matzoh and a cup of wine were passed from hand to hand throughout the entire congregation. No one ever partook, though I heard that one person did partake in a congregation in Pompton Lakes, a few towns away. Participation in that one, singular ritual of the Witnesses was restricted to those of the “Little Flock,” those of the 144,000 who would have a special status as leaders of the Great Flock in the new kingdom following the last days. How did you know if you were a member of the 144,000? You simply knew, and your knowledge would be confirmed (if it was confirmed) by the elders in a process of discernment.

Clearly, this was a religion that held the individual worshipper at arm’s length: it was possible to be a loyal servant of Jehovah, a witness to the Truth, but not (except for a very rare few) to be a participant. The exclusion of images served to underline the remoteness of God from the individual, the impossibility of making contact in some way, even through the mediation of an image. As a seven-year-old child, of course, I could have had very little sense of the reasons for this rejection of images. What I did understand was that a sacrifice was required: I still recall very vividly placing a tiny white plastic image of the Virgin Mary in the trashcan in the garage. I threw it away, as I had been told to do, but I did so very gently and closed the lid quietly. Having become habituated to the rejection of idols from an early age, I have always found it very easy to understand the iconoclastic energy of early modern Protestantism: white-washing the painted walls, smashing the figures of the saints, all seem to me appropriate and natural reactions against the seductive lure of the image. The rejection of images in Islam always made perfect sense to me for the same reason: having loved an image and then willingly sacrificed it seems to have made it impossible for me to ever see an image as anything but beautiful surface.

This complex and deeply felt attitude toward images became more complicated as I came into closer contact with Shi’a Islam, in which devotion to the family of the Prophet and the Prophet Muhammad himself is sometimes expressed in affective terms, and even in the form of painted or engraved images (though never, to my knowledge, three-dimensional images). In spite of the very negative views of Shi’a Islam held by some of my religious study companions, I was not disposed to be too negative or judgmental about such practices because my husband and his family were Shi’a, and I thought it wrong to separate myself from their religious orientation. This view was strengthened by the fact that my mother-in-law was the most devout person I knew, and yet she also kept a drawing of the Prophet’s companion and relative, Ali, above her bed. I could not myself be drawn to venerate im-

ages, but it was clear to me that there was a place for such observance. I was drawn up short, however, by other aspects of Shi'a observance that seemed to me even more emphatically to embrace a material, even incarnationist, view of the divine: the most powerful of these was the practice of putting a few grains of dust brought from Mecca in a small glass of rosewater to be shared among members of the family at a time of religious celebration. As I partook, part of my mind rejected the practice as a manifestation of magical thinking, even an echo of pagan practices with an overtone of the celebration of the Mass; part of my mind, however, saw the practice as a source of union and a memorial of the pilgrimage, and as something that it was not my place to criticize.

It must be clear from the remarks above that I have not fully taken stock of the ways in which this experience of idolatry and iconoclasm, image veneration and drinking holy dust, has affected my personal inventory of categories and terms. What is nonetheless clear to me, however, are the ways in which that experience has shaped my effort, over the past two decades, to write about European Christian views of Islam. As I discuss in the introduction to *Idols in the East*, the first glimmerings of that book appeared in 1990, when as a student in a course on medieval French saints' lives I noticed that Muslims were described as polytheistic worshippers of idols named Muhammad, Apollo, and Tervagant. At the time, I was deep in my own personal study of Islam, and so it immediately struck me as paradoxical, even bizarre, that the very feature most central to Islamic theology—the oneness of God—was inverted in the Christian view. Idolatry, too, was clearly an inversion of the actual Muslim practice of rejecting images in worship. This observation became the basis for a seminar paper on the French *Play of Saint Nicholas* by Jean Bodel and eventually grew into an article on the centrality of images in Christian views of Islam.

By the time I came to write the book, however, it had become clear to me that more was at stake than the simple view of Muslims as idolaters. Idolatry was not just a way for medieval Europeans to denigrate Muslims by identifying them as worshippers of graven images: it was a way for them to insinuate that Islam was a religious law entirely consumed with the beautiful surface rather than the referent beyond, and that the Muslim (like the Jew) understood scripture only according to the literal level instead of seeking out the deeper meaning according to the spirit. As the author of *The Book of John Mandeville* puts it, the Muslims “know much of Holy Scripture. But they understand it only according to the letter, just as the Jews do, for they do not understand the letter at all spiritually, but only bodily. And for this reason St. Paul says, ‘The letter kills, but the spirit gives life’” [“scievent moult de Seint Escripture. Mes ne la entendent fors qe selonc la

lettre. Et auxi ne font les Juys, qar ils n'entendent mie la lettre espiritalment, mes corporelment, et pur ceo dit seint Paul: 'Littera enim occidit, spiritus autem vivicat'" (277-78)]. In some texts, this love of the beautiful surface is manifested in a vision of the luxurious Islamic paradise, as in Mandeville's description of "a place of delights, where a man will find all manner of fruit in every season, and rivers flowing with milk and with honey...[and houses] made of precious stones and of gold and silver...and every man will have twenty-four wives, all virgins, and he will have intercourse every day with them, and nonetheless he will always find them still virgins" ["un lieu de delices ou home trovera toutes manerres des fruitz en toutes saisons, et riveres corantz de lait et de vin... {et maisons} faites des pieres precieuses et d'or et d'argent, et...chescun avera IIII^{xx} X femmes toutes pucelles, et avera touz les jours affaire a elle, et toutdis les trovera pucelles" (272-73)].¹⁸ In other texts, such as Jean Bodel's *Play of Saint Nicholas*, the beautiful surface appears in the form of the golden statue of Tervagant worshipped by the misguided pagans; either way, the spiritual transgression is the visible manifestation of a faith that is tied to the letter—as Mandeville puts it, the Muslims understand not figuratively but "corporelment," according to the flesh. The realization that spatial logic was central to European Christian views of Islamic theology and religious practice proved to be crucial to my effort, in *Idols in the East*, to make sense of the interrelation of Orientalism and anti-Islamic sentiment. One mode of exclusion was based on ethnic or racial alterity; the other, on religious difference. The two could be shown to be complexly intertwined, however, once space was foregrounded in the analysis: orientation, whether expressed in the geographical logic of the map or in the devotional logic of the image, is the invariable key to the European Christian view of the "Saracen."

Awaiting Apocalypse

He that bears witness to these things says, "Yes; I am coming quickly." Amen! Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22: 20, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*)

Jehovah's Witnesses mark up their books. I learned to highlight text as a Witness, preparing for Tuesday and Friday night Bible study by marking the right answers in the text to the questions at the bottom of the page in the current issue of the *Watchtower* or that year's book for study. But for all the highlighting of magazines and books, the one thing that was never marked up was the Bible. That remained singularly clean. Looking back recently at my childhood Bible, however, I noticed one peculiar thing. Other than my

name in the front cover, and the Tetragrammaton doodled repeatedly across the closed pages in colored ink, the only thing written in the book was the year, one year after another: 1974, 1975, 1976. The peculiar thing is that I had written the date for the last of these three years in parts, the first three numbers written completely, and the last digit filled in only gradually, over the course of the year. It took me a few minutes to remember why: it was because time might come to an end at any time, because the apocalypse was coming soon.

While Jehovah's Witnesses have always preserved a millenarian faith in the last days and final judgment, the expected date has varied. Perhaps the most important of these projected dates was October 1914, which moved from being seen as the time of the apocalypse itself, to being seen as the beginning of the last days, to being seen as a date more loosely associated with the apocalypse. When we first became Witnesses, in 1972, the end was expected soon after 1975. After that year came and went, the revised view was that the generation of those who were of the age of reason (never clearly defined) in 1914 would not have died out before the last days were completed. My mother used this as a means of reassuring my grandmother (who would have been nine years old in 1914), though my grandmother did not seem to find this "good news" very reassuring. The expectation that the end time was at hand was, in retrospect, somewhat unnerving. I can remember always being conscious of where I was, and where my family members were, at any given time, hoping that we would find a way to get together before the apocalypse got too vigorously underway. At the same time, I was certain that a loving God would be protective of his flock and had no doubt that Satan would be bound and chained for the promised thousand years and a blissful paradise would be once again present on earth. Children's books for Witnesses, such as the paradise book (*From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained*) were filled with illustrations of children of various nationalities, dressed in modern clothing, playing with lions and tigers. These pictures were the counterpart of the stylized drawings of Adam and Eve in Eden earlier in the book, reaffirming for us childish readers the fact that a return to the Edenic state of union with nature was close at hand.

The understanding I had developed in childhood of a continuity between the earthly paradise of Eden and the earthly paradise that would be enjoyed after the apocalypse (when Satan was bound and peace reigned on earth) proved useful to me later on when I struggled to understand the tension, in medieval texts both Christian and Islamic, between a literal understanding of the heavenly paradise and a figurative one. This tension became a central focus of *Idols in the East*, in which I argued that Christian views of Islam as a religion of the alluring surface owed much not just to views of Muslims

as idolaters, but to views of the Islamic paradise as a place of sensuous pleasures of the body. The literal reading of scripture, which for medieval Christians marked the fundamental similarity of the Jew and the Muslim, resulted in a false understanding of the heavenly paradise described in the Qur'an and in accounts of the Prophet's *mi'raj* (or night-journey through the heavens) as a place literally flowing with rivers of milk and wine, with delicious foods, beautiful jewels, and voluptuous bodies. While it was relatively straightforward to demonstrate the basis of medieval Christian conceptions of the Islamic paradise, I found myself on more treacherous ground in trying to understand what an accurate understanding of the Muslim view would entail: a closer look at Muslim exegesis of the relevant parts of the Qur'an makes it clear that the description of a luxurious paradise is not simply to be understood as figurative or allegorical. What might it mean to have a paradise that is neither purely of the spirit nor purely of the body, neither to be understood according to the spirit or according to the word? The fundamentalist modes of reading I had internalized as a child did not help me to resolve this dilemma, nor did the allegorical modes I had learned as an adult. A reader accustomed to interpreting the Song of Songs, for example, as an allegorical account of the encounter of the soul with Christ might readily interpret the account of paradise in Surah 56 as a similar expression of the union of the individual soul with the divine. As Walid Saleh puts it, however, in his eloquent survey of philologically informed attempts to interpret these verses, "Qur'anic paradise was a paradise of bodily as well as sensual engagement." The thirteenth-century exegete al-Baydawi struggled to determine whether the attendant females in paradise would be glorified incarnations of the wives that the believers had married on earth, or new virgins supplied expressly for the afterlife; he did not imagine that paradise might be a place of disembodied bliss.

While my sense of the imminence of apocalypse had been acute during our time as Witnesses, I had not thought much about Islamic apocalypticism until after the bombing of the World Trade Center, when everyone suddenly became aware that growing numbers of people were willing to both die and kill in the expectation that they could hasten the approach of the end.⁹ The event itself, coupled with the resurgence of other forms of fundamentalism in North America, had the effect on me of shaking loose some of the passionate zeal of the convert. My faith and love remained intact, but I suddenly remembered the terrible danger of being bound by the beliefs of a religious community. Though I held tightly to my faith, I fled from the fundamentalism that could too easily be a part of it, having suddenly realized how closely it had been bound up in my life, both in childhood and—at least potentially—in adulthood. But I did not forget what it

was like to believe blindly.

For my next major research project, I intend to write about apocalypse and revolution in historical writing of the Middle Ages, beginning with the accounts of crusade and imminent last days in the *Liber Floridus* of Lambert of St. Omer and moving through a series of historical chronicles influenced by the apocalypticism of Joachim da Fiore. Because this project is still in a very early stage, it is too early to know what shape it will take; it is not too early to observe, however, that my experience of reading apocalyptic literature feels very natural. Accounts of history that move from the origins of man, through the histories of empires and nations, passing through the present moment to the imagined climax of the advent of Antichrist and ultimate victory of Christ triumphant, make perfect sense to me. Nothing is more transparent, to my eye, than the diagrams appearing in apocalyptic texts that make starkly visible the inevitability of what Milton aptly calls “the world’s great period” (*Paradise Lost* 12.467). I do not feel in command of the personal inventory of categories and terms that will necessarily inflect my future study of pre-modern apocalyptic historiography. But I do, at least, have some sense of the alluring and—yes—dangerous sense of familiarity I will certainly feel as I read the writings of those who believed, as surely as I did, that the end of days was coming soon.

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NOTES

1. On Watson, Dinshaw, and Bynum, see my *Seeing Through the Veil*, 242-43.

2. “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them” (Bourdieu 53). On *habitus* more broadly, see Bourdieu, 52-65.

3. The account here reflects my own experience only. For a well-informed account of congregational practices in England by a non-Witness, see Holden. An exceptionally detailed account of the history of the movement, its theology, and its organization can be found in M. James Penton, who frankly acknowledges his own perspective on the subject as a former Witness. Less useful is the polemical work of Heather and Gary Botting.

4. In addition to Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35-40, see also Mary Douglas, “The Forbidden in Leviticus.”

5. All translations from the Old French are mine.

6. See Jonathan Juilfs's essay in this volume (especially note 52), drawing on D. W. Robertson Jr.'s study, on the implications of Marguerite's use here of the "nut (*noyaux*)"-shell metaphor, a variant of the *grain-paille* (Lat. *nucleus-cortex*) typology for allegorical reading.
7. On these passages in Guillaume and Jean, see my *Seeing Through the Veil*, 48-9, 100-5.
8. For discussion of this passage, see my *Idols in the East*, 259-62.
9. On modern apocalypticism in the Islamic world, see Filii.

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