

HOLY MAN AND HOLY RELIC
IN THE FOURTH CENTURY: HEALER OR EXORCIST?

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Pagan religion in the Roman Empire performed the vital function of allowing its adherents access to other-worldly patronage, not only for other-worldly benefits, but also (and more importantly) for this-worldly gain.¹ On this patronage depended matters as weighty as the *Fortuna* of the Empire itself,² and as inconsequential as the recovery of a few stolen coins.³ In contrast, primitive Christianity actively discouraged its adherents from seeking this-worldly gain from its sources of other-worldly patronage.⁴ Indeed, the very fact that pagan cults did encourage this-worldly gain was often seen by early Christians as proof of demonic corruption in these cults,⁵ while conversely, pagan polemicists such as Celsus and Porphyry explicitly criticized Christianity precisely for its failure to provide other-worldly patronage for this-worldly benefits concerning health, wealth, safety, and progeny.⁶ Only in the marginal Apologetic literature—material intended, I believe, deliberately to conceal the disjunctions between primitive Christianity and the Roman world⁷—do Christians claim such patronage. By the fifth century, however, this “failure” of Christianity had clearly been supplied;⁸ Christians now expected, like their pagan neighbors, the accessibility of their sources of other-worldly patronage for this-worldly gain. When and why did this change in access to Christian other-worldly patronage take place?

I shall argue here that the attribution of expectations of this-worldly gain to Christianity before the reign of Theodosius I (378–395) is anachronistic. I shall further argue that such an attribution limits our understanding of the significance of this emperor’s reign, of the context of his anti-pagan legislation of 391 and 392, and of the centrality of the cult of saints in the subsequent success of Christianity. If my reading of the evidence is correct, we must redate the emergence of a key element of Late Antique and Early Medieval Christianity by at least half a century.

These questions of precisely when and why this change in attitude took place have not yet been satisfactorily answered. One argument places the change in the late second century, with the rise of Apologetic Christianity. The Jesuit historian Hugo Rahner reads the Apologetic material with just such a literal interpretation;⁹ nor does the Bollandist hagiographer Hippolyte Delehaye make any distinction among the benefits sought by Christians, as evidenced by Origen in the mid-third century, Hilarius of Poitiers in the mid-fourth, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus in the mid-fifth.¹⁰ Another argument places the change in the late third

century, on the heels of a surge in Christian numbers. Nicole Herrmann-Mascard dates the appearance of “superstition”¹¹ in the cult of relics from the second half of the third century, when “les masses” began to “se convertir au Christianisme.”¹² Yet another argument places the change in the early fourth century, following Constantine’s conversion. A.H.M. Jones claims for Constantine’s reign the “triumph of Christianity,”¹³ while Peter Brown’s deservedly well-known article on “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” implies a uniformity of expectation of this-worldly gain sought through the other-worldly brokerage of holy men from the early fourth century on.¹⁴ All of these arguments, I believe, need to be reexamined in the light of a new interpretation of the evidence that I shall put forth.

Several of the secondary works I have mentioned refer to Athanasius’s *Life of Anthony*¹⁵ (written ca. 360) to support their claims for pre-Theodosian expectations of this-worldly gain from holy men. In chapter 57, for example, the cure of a certain official named Fronto is described. Fronto has a terrible affliction (δεινὸν πάθος): he bites his tongue and is in danger of putting out his own eyes. He makes his way to Anthony to ask that he pray for him. Anthony does so, and tells Fronto to go home; when he arrives he will be cured (τεθεραπεύθεις). Fronto has faith and goes away; as soon as he arrives in Egypt, his affliction leaves him and he becomes well (ὑγιής).

Similarly, in chapter 61, an official named Archelaos comes to Anthony to ask him to pray for a Laodicean virgin named Polycratia. She is suffering terribly (ἔπασκε δεινῶς) with pains in her stomach, and her whole body is weakened (ἀσθενής). Anthony prays for Polycratia; she at the same moment, despite the intervening distance, becomes well (ὑγιή), and her weakness (ἀσθενεία) leaves her.

The situation in these two examples seems to be clear: someone is ill; Anthony prays for them; a miraculous healing takes place. Moreover, the lack of an explicit mention of anything demonic contrasts strongly with other cures performed by Anthony. In chapter 63, for example, Anthony meets a youth who is possessed (ἔχων δαίμονα). Anthony rebukes the demon; the demon leaves the youth, who thus becomes well (ὑγιής). Likewise, in chapter 64, Anthony meets another possessed man (ἔχων δαίμονα πρὸς αὐτόν); the demon is very terrible (οὗτος δεινός). Anthony again rebukes the demon; it leaves the man, who thus becomes well (ὑγιής).

The contrast, however, between these pairs of examples is not so great as it at first seems. The vocabulary is in fact ambiguous.¹⁶ Πάθος, literally “suffering,” is used equally of both physical and spiritual suffering. Ἀσθενεία, literally “weakness,” likewise can refer either to physi-

cal or to spiritual weakness. In all four examples, the victim, after Anthony's intervention, becomes ὑγιής; this too refers either to physical or to spiritual soundness. How, then, does one choose between the two possibilities?

One passage that can be brought to bear on the difficulty is Mark 1:32–34.¹⁷ In this passage, a crowd of people bring “all those who are ill and possessed” (πάντας κακῶς ἔχοντας και δαιμονιζομένους) to Jesus for healing. Jesus “healed many ill with various diseases and cast out many demons.” (ἔθεράπευσεν πολλούς κακῶς ἔχοντας ποικίλαις νόσοις και δαιμόνια πολλὰ ἐξέβαλεν). Here again we seem to have two separate actions, healing of the ill and exorcism of the possessed. But, interestingly, in the parallel passage in Matthew (Mt 8:16), no mention is made of the ill being brought to Jesus; there are only the possessed (δαιμονιζομένους πολλούς), whom Jesus both heals (ἔθεράπευσεν) and exorcizes (πνεύματα ἐξέβαλεν). Conversely, in the parallel passage in Luke (Lk 4:40–41), no possessed are said to be brought to Jesus, only the ill (ἀσθενούντας ποικίλαις νόσοις), whom again Jesus both heals (ἔθεράπευεν) and exorcizes (ἐξήρχετο δαιμόνια).

If one assumes that healing and exorcism are two distinct actions to early Christians, then these passages pose a significant dilemma; two of the three passages must be judged corrupt, in a rather blatant way. The more plausible resolution for this dilemma is to assert that physical illness and demonic possession are not in fact distinguishable—at least to first-century Christians. No semantic difference is thus intended between the phrases, “heal a sickness” (πάθος/ἀσθενεία θεραπεύο), and “exorcize a demon” (δαίμον/πνεύμα ἐκβαλλο). They are interchangeable, and indeed often paired together, as in the three parallel passages just cited.

One must ask, however, whether these phrases continue to be interchangeable in the fourth century. Hilarius of Poitiers, in his *Liber Contra Constantium Imperatorem* (§8),¹⁸ describes the workings of relics: “At times by these [relics] demons roar (*dum daemones mugiunt*), at times afflictions are driven out (*dum aegritudines depelluntur*), bodies are lifted without fetters, and the clothing of women suspended by the foot do not fall into their faces, spirits (*spiritus*) are burned without fire, the afflicted (*vexatos*) make themselves known (*confiteri*) without questioning. . . .” The Latin *aegritudo* is ambiguous,¹⁹ exactly like the Greek πάθος and ἀσθενεία; but the elaboration of detail in the description of the actual happenings in the presence of relics makes it plain that *aegritudo* is intended to refer to spiritual, not physical, illness. In particular, the inability of the *vexatos* to keep quiet makes no sense if they

are sick but not possessed.

Moreover, Hilarius makes no mention of the physically ill in another, similar, description of the power of relics. In his *De Trinitate* (XI.3), he argues that Christ is still present in the world: "This the tombs of the Apostles and Martyrs tell through miracles (*per virtutum operationes*), this the power of his name proves, this the spirit of evil (*immundi spiritus*) confesses, this the roaring (*mugitus*) of rebuked demons (*punitorum daemonum*) resounds."²⁰ Here again demons are unable to keep silent when in the presence of relics, whose power (*virtus*) is greater than theirs. Conversely, the absence among the *operationes virtutum* of cures of the merely physically ill is telling.

Hilarius, then, even in the fourth century, continues to use the ambiguous New Testament vocabulary of illness in the same way as the Gospel writers: namely, to equate physical illness with spiritual affliction, that is, possession;²¹ so it is plausible to assert that Athanasius, in the chapters of the *Life of Anthony* referred to earlier, also uses the same vocabulary in the same way. Indeed, one can confirm that assertion with this passage. In a fragment of his work *On Amulets* (*Περὶ ἄπτων*), Athanasius writes, "If anyone falls into illness (*ἀνωμαλία*) difficult to cure, let him say the psalm, 'I said, "Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul (*ἴασαι τὴν ψυχὴν μου*), because I have sinned against you."²² One is not to make use of amulets (*περίαιπτα*), but only of prayer and the sign of the cross, "which sign not only do illnesses (*νοσήματα*) flee, but even the whole host of demons (*πᾶν τὸ στίφος τῶν δαιμόνων*) fear and marvel at." 'Ανωμαλία again is like πάθος, ἀσθενεία, and *aegritudo*; it can mean a difficulty or irregularity of either bodily or spiritual health.²³ So too νοσήμα, which was noted earlier. As Athanasius uses them here, however, these words can only mean spiritual illness. Athanasius is explicit; physical illness is merely symptomatic of a spiritual separation from the divine occasioned by sin. It is the soul (*ψυχὴ*) that needs healing, not the body.

This lack of distinction between illness and possession is continuous in Christian sources from the first century through most of the fourth century. The curative acts described in both Latin and Greek Christian sources refer not to this-worldly solutions for physical symptoms, but rather to other-worldly solutions for the problem of spiritual separation from the divine. No distinction is made between this spiritual dilemma and the physical manifestations of illness which are more obvious. Possession and illness are one and the same; the unique cause is sin, the occasion of demonic possession, of separation from the divine; the unique cure is the renewed presence of the divine, through prayer and acts of faith or through more tangible avenues to sources of other-worldly pa-

tronage, namely relics and holy men.

All this stands in sharp contrast to the sudden irruption into the sources of cures of explicitly this-worldly ailments, which begins only in the 370s. Having reviewed all the evidence for the third and fourth centuries, I am convinced that Basil the Great (bp. 370–79) is the first to claim these cures. In his *Oration on Saint Mamas*, delivered in his own basilica in Caesarea, Basil says, “Everyone will remember him, who, gathered in this place, has had him as a helper in prayer; for whom, when they called out his name, he was present at their labor; whom he brought back from a journey; whom he lifted up from illness (*ἄρρωστία*); whose children already dead he restored to life; for whom he postponed the appointed end of life. . . . For this is the ground for praise (*ἐγκώμια*) of the martyr, the wealth (*πλοῦτος*) of spiritual graces (*χαρισμάτων*).”²⁴ This statement is fundamentally different from what has gone before. Even Basil’s word for “illness” does not have the ambiguity between spiritual and physical, characteristic of words used earlier; *ἄρρωστία* refers only to physical illness.²⁵ Nor, in the context in which it is found, can it plausibly be read in an other-worldly interpretation, as the other benefits listed are even more clearly physical and this-worldly.

With this panegyric, Basil has changed the terms of the relationship between individual Christians and the sources of other-worldly patronage. No longer are these sources available only for other-worldly benefits; from now on they are also accessible for purely this-worldly gain.

Throughout the 380s and 390s, the change introduced by Basil becomes apparent in the writings of Greek bishops connected to Theodosius’s court in Constantinople. Of these the most important are Gregory of Nyssa, a brother of Basil, bishop of Nyssa from 371 to 380, and of Caesarea from 380 to 394;²⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, a close friend and correspondent of Basil, bishop of Nazianzus from 374 to 383, and briefly of Constantinople in 381;²⁷ and Nectarius, bishop of Constantinople from 381 to 397.²⁸ At the same time, no trace of Basil’s change can be found in the writings of someone like Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem from ca. 350 to 387, who was neither a correspondent of Basil nor well-connected in the Imperial court;²⁹ nor indeed of Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus from 367 to 402, who, despite being a correspondent of Basil, was, like Cyril, poorly connected in the Imperial court.³⁰

This change is transmitted into the Latin West through the work of Ambrose of Milan, bishop from 374 to 397. Ambrose first makes use of this idea in 386, in the midst of one of his personal controversies with Valentinian II, who was at this time residing in Milan.³¹ Ambrose de

scribes in a letter (Epistle 22) to his sister the discovery and translation of the relics of Gervasius and Protasius. "I found the fitting signs, and on bringing in some on whom hands were to be laid, the holy martyrs became so conspicuous that, while I was still silent, one was seized and thrown prostrate at the holy burial place. We found two men of marvelous stature. . . . On the following day we moved them to the basilica. . .

³²

Those on whom "hands were to be laid" are possessed, as their reaction in the presence of the relics shows. As in the writings of Hilarius and Athanasius, the demon cannot remain hidden from such sources of other-worldly power. The expectations here both of Ambrose and of the possessed whom he uses are of the traditional, pre-Theodosian kind. Ambrose's letter describes a large number of miracles of this sort (*multos purgatos*), both before and after the translation. But Ambrose also tentatively experiments here with the new kind of this-worldly expectation. During the translation of the relics to Ambrose's newly built basilica, a blind butcher named Severus touches the cloth which covers the relics, and "his sight (*lumen*) is restored (*redditum sit*) to him."³³

After this date, the writings of Ambrose increasingly show Basil's idea of this-worldly benefit.³⁴ The spread of this idea in the Latin West is at first limited to men from within Ambrose's circle, the most important of whom was Augustine of Hippo (bp. 395–430), who collected, published, and preached about stories (*libelli*) of relic-related miracles of precisely the this-worldly sort in question here.³⁵

The writings of these Greek and Latin bishops demonstrate the role which Basil's idea played in Theodosius's agenda of suppressing the still-vital pagan cults. Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and the imperial support he gave to it, had necessitated certain changes in the relations of Christian communities to the world and to God. These changes, indicated in Eusebius of Caesarea's contemporary works, were largely brought about through a centralizing and literal interpretation of the marginal Apologetic works of the second and third centuries; this enabled Constantinian Christianity to support in a new and direct way the *Fortuna* of the Empire. But these changes did not affect the expectations of this-worldly gain sought within Christianity by individuals and communities. As I hope I have shown, this change in expectations resulted from the work of Theodosius and his bishops, who deliberately aimed at Christianizing the core of supporters of the old religion. Theodosius's adoption of Basil's idea allowed Christianity to offer both to non-Christians and to marginal Christians a competing source of other-worldly patronage, finally accessible, like the gods of Roman religion, for this-worldly gain in the traditional areas of health, wealth, safety,

and progeny.

The dramatic decline in non-Christian inscriptions after 378 noted by Johannes Geffcken indicates that Theodosius was relatively successful in this aspect of his imperial agenda.³⁶ It was this success, I believe, that enabled the emperor to promulgate the anti-pagan legislation of 391 and 392. For this legislation to be effective, the vitality and unique utility of Roman religion—namely, its access to other-worldly patronage for this-worldly gain—had finally to be countered, which is precisely what the officially-promoted reversal of the traditional Christian attitude towards the seeking of health, wealth, safety, and progeny from heavenly patrons had done. It is thus to the reign of Theodosius the First that one should date the “triumph of Christianity” and the origin of the medieval—and modern—cult of the saints.

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¹ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978) 8–12, 63; W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965) 105ff.

² The “pax deorum,” the proper relationship between the community of Roman citizens and the traditional Roman gods. See R.A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner’s, 1974) 78ff.

³ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996) 36.

⁴ As I have argued in “Christian Apologetic and Martyrial Intercession in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History” (unpublished; presented at Zephrus Marginalia Conference, SUNY-Stony Brook, April 1997). For an opposing view, see R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100–400* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984).

⁵ E.g., Tertullian, *De Spectabilis* ch.5, ed. Migne, *PL* 1:710–11; Clement of Alexandria, *Cohortatio ad Gentes* ch.3, ed. Migne, *PG* 8:123–34.

⁶ See the rather inadequate responses to these charges made by Origen, *Contra Celsum* I.11 (*PG* 11:676–77) and Arnobius, *Disputatio adversus Gentes* II.8 (*PL* 5:822–23).

⁷ This reading of the Apologetic literature is rather uncommon, but there is not space here sufficiently to justify my interpretation. See O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s, 1956) 4–5; see also below, n. 9.

⁸ See Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Historia Religiosa* (*PG* 82:1279–1497), and Constantius of Lyon, *Life of Germanus of Auxerre* (*Sources Chrétiennes* 112; trans. and ed. T. Head and T.F.X. Noble in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995]), where such this-worldly expectations remain overshadowed by the exorcism motif.

⁹ Hugo Rahner, *Kirche und Staat im Frühen Christentum: Dokumente aus acht Jahrhunderten und ihre Deutung* (Munich: Kösel, 1961); trans. L.D. Davis, *Church and State in Early Christianity* (San Francisco:

Ignatius, 1992) 9–13. This literal interpretation is still the most common reading of the Apologetic literature; see M. Sordi, *I Cristiani e l'impero romano*, trans. A. Bedini, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1986) 4–6; MacMullen 4ff, 22ff; R.M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World* (New York: Harper, 1970) 51.

¹⁰ H. Delehaye, *Les Origines du culte des martyrs*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* ser. 20 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1933) 100ff.

¹¹ N. Herrmann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d'un droit* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1975) 24.

¹² Herrmann-Mascard, *Reliques* 28.

¹³ A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (1948; New York: Collier, 1967) 201ff.

¹⁴ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101. Rpt. in Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 103–52.

¹⁵ *PG* 26:835–977; see ch.57, 26:925–26; ch.61, 26:931–32; ch.63–64, 26:933–34.

¹⁶ Cf. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (1843; Oxford: Clarendon, 1940); Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961).

¹⁷ For what follows, see K. Aland, M. Black, B.M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren, eds., *The New Testament, in Greek and English* (New York: American Bible Society, 1966).

¹⁸ *PL* 10:584–85; trans. mine.

¹⁹ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (1879; Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

²⁰ *PL* 10:401; trans. mine.

²¹ Examples of this same lack of distinction for Christian writers of the second and third centuries could easily be multiplied. See, e.g., Tertullian,

De Spectabilis XXIX (PL 1:734–35); *Ad Scapulam* IV (PL 1:781–82); Cyprian, *De Lapsis* 33.35 (PL 4:491–93); Origen, *Contra Celsum* I.46, I.67, II.49 (PG 11:743–46, 785–86, 871–74). Moreover, these same writers often insist on the avoidance of praying for physical healing. See, e.g., Commodianus, *Instructiones adversus gentes* 79 (PL 5:262); Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* I.9 (PG 8:339–56); Cyprian, *De oratione dominica* 18–19 (PL 4:531–33); Origen, *De oratione* VIII.1, XVI.2, XVII.1–2 (PG 11:441–42, 467–70, 469–74).

²² PG 26:1319–20; trans. mine.

²³ Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*; Lampe, *Patristic*.

²⁴ PG 31:589–600; trans. mine. Delehaye, *Origines* 111, notes that this is the first *extant* invocation of a martyr in a panegyric, but he argues that such invocations were made in prior panegyrics now lost and in other media.

²⁵ Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*; Lampe, *Patristic*.

²⁶ Cf., e.g., *Oratio de S. Theodoro* (PG 46:735–48); *Laudationes in XL Martyres* (PG 46:749–86).

²⁷ Cf., e.g., *Oratio XXIV, in S. Cyprianum* (PG 35:1167–94).

²⁸ *Sermo in S. Theodoro* (PG 39:1822ff).

²⁹ Cf., e.g., *Homilia in paralyticum* (PG 33:1132ff).

³⁰ Cf. the dubiously attributed *Orationes* (PG 43:427–506).

³¹ For this controversy, see esp. Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and State in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 209ff. It is not yet clear how Ambrose learns of this idea and decides to use it at this date, before Theodosius comes to Milan, where he resides 388 to 391.

³² PL 16:1019–26.

³³ Augustine describes this event no fewer than four times: *Confessiones* IX.7; *De Civitate Dei* XXII.8.2; *Sermo de Diversis* CCLXXVI.5; *Sermo in natali martyrum Gervasii et Protasii*.

³⁴ See esp. *Exhortatio Virginitatis* (PL 16:335–64), the dedication sermon for the translation into a Florentine church of the relics of another pair of discovered martyrs, Vitalis and Agricola.

³⁵ See, e.g., Augustine's *Sermones in sanctis* (PL 38:1279ff).

³⁶ J. Geffcken, *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums* (1920; Darmstadt, 1972); trans. S. MacCormack, *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1978).