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Luigi Canetti

Marks of Glory. Material and Immaterial Traces of Sanctity  
between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

The cult of saints embodies an essential aspect of late antique and early medieval Christianity, providing an indissoluble link between material traces (relics, ex votos, images) and immaterial traces (dreams, visions and prophecies) of the presence of the divine in the world. These traces are profoundly influenced by an anthropomorphic framework: it is precisely Christian anthropology, based on the human-divine principle of Christology, which guarantees the coexistence of the material and immaterial dimensions, the perceptible appearance and the invisibility of the ultimate meaning of a ritual praxis<sup>1</sup>. While the distinctive tendency of the Christian pilgrimage is, in the words of Alphonse Dupront, «anthropomorphiser le cosmique», when commenting on the anti-pagan polemic that permeates the works of authors and councils in Late Antiquity, Peter Brown concludes that «what is at stake is nothing less than a conflict of views on the relation between man and nature»<sup>2</sup>.

The existence of a cult of saints in Christianity is neither inevitable nor necessary and many ancient and modern Christianities have done without it: radical Arians, the Nestorians of Persia, Manicheans and Protestants to name but a few<sup>3</sup>. What is more, it is not easy to reconcile the Trinitarian monotheism of orthodoxy with the idea of the intercession of saints. It is certainly no coincidence that the cult of saints has provided a stage for theological and historiographical conflict for many centuries, as well as serving as a useful testing ground for the theoretical foundations of religious facts and their historical, sociological, psychological and anthropological aspects.

It is no longer accepted that the cult of saints is merely a form of disguised polytheism, the continuation of pagan popular religion, assuming that this ever existed (something which Arnaldo

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the studies of Carolyn Walker Bynum opened an original path: see in particular C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 1981, 2015<sup>2</sup>), p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview see the broad summary due to R. Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton U.P., 2013).

Momigliano rightfully doubted). In the same way, the idea that the cult of saints was only an instrument of propaganda, a tool for strengthening the power of bishops, is no longer given credence. From the beginning, devotion to saints transcended social class and was shared at all intellectual levels, as it met complex needs for mediation between the human and divine worlds (protection, healing, salvation, exemplarity and so on). Furthermore, as Marc Van Uytfanghe argued, such a complex phenomenon cannot be explained simply as a development within Christianity: we need to distinguish between the different stages of its evolution, in which interaction with biblical, post-biblical and political-social factors played a decisive role<sup>4</sup>. Although these are all contingent factors, they have nevertheless dominated the tone of Christian sanctity throughout its two-thousand year history. While the 2nd and 3rd centuries featured doctrinal and ritual aspects related to the internal dynamics of Christian communities, the 4th and 5th centuries also offered political and institutional elements, the result of interaction with society as a whole. We can therefore think of the development of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity as a river with various tributaries and an accumulation of debris; its waters may change in terms of course and nature, but it continues to draw on the same source. After all, many important institutes and phenomena in the history of Christianity had an extremely tenuous biblical basis: just think of celibacy, the papacy, monasticism and purgatory among others. All of these were given ex post facto justification, but can only be explained with contingent factors of a historical nature. It is also true that the biblical interpretation of history contributed to the justification and absorption of these phenomena at a doctrinal and normative level.

When referring to the cult of saints, we should leave behind the old Enlightenment-influenced historiographical dichotomy between the instrumental aspect of religion and the genuine element of beliefs and behaviour. We should avoid perceiving the internal history of sanctity as the history of models of perfection and instead open ourselves up to the history of its signs and codes and its expressive, rhetorical and iconic features. Sanctity invests bodies, things and societies. The texts and monuments that express its full richness are a product of the cultures and individuals who represented themselves by projecting social relations onto a divine plane constructed using the components of their imaginary.

<sup>4</sup> M. Van Uytfanghe, *L'origine, l'essor et les fonctions du culte des saints. Quelques repères pour un débat rouvert*, *Cassiodorus. Rivista di studi sulla tarda antichità*, 2 (1996), 143-96.

Sanctity is one of the most important forms of power in the late antique and early medieval world. However, its power is not only a useful instrument for legitimising political and ecclesiastical authority: its attractiveness, which is already in itself a form of power, affects experiences and languages like prophecy and asceticism, which are closely related to the mental and physiological dynamics of cultures, with control of the mind and body and with them control of nature and cosmic forces<sup>5</sup>. The political function of sanctity is therefore more than just a propaganda tool of political authority (an aspect which we tend to overstate after the totalitarian experiences of the 20th century). Instead, if anything, it is the ideal image of power in all its visible manifestations and dimensions. From the 8th century onwards, also in the Latin West and not only in Byzantium, there was an increase in the importance of devotional images, which became increasingly widespread in sacred places and played key roles in dreams and visions<sup>6</sup>. Authority always derives from the reputation of power and its self-representational image is closely linked to the power of the images and the imaginary produced in its epiphanic places. This all helps to understand the importance of the rituals and emblems of power: sceptres, thrones, crowns, ceremonial dress, standards and military *insignia*. We can add to that the icons, mosaics, reliquaries and the whole ornamental apparatus that qualifies or, perhaps more accurately, glorifies the places (courts, churches and shrines) where power took shape in an explosion of light, colour, sound and scent that provided a bewildering contrast to the dullness, grimness and violence of the outside world<sup>7</sup>. This referred by analogy to the perfection of the cosmos before the fall and the paradisiacal plenitude of resurrected bodies, of which the relics of saints offered a token and foretaste, glorified by the splendour of their reliquaries.

This is the glory of God and his saints, a God of power and victory, never represented before the year 1000 as a dead man on the Cross, but always in the guise of the Pantocrator triumphant over death. However, this is also a God providing nourishment and comfort, a peacemaker, because his law – reflected in the saints and monarchs as exemplars – is the incarnation of the right order of creation in opposition to the diabolical excess of sin. In this way, saints and their relics are given the exorcistic role of expelling demons, the diabolical spirits that infest the bodies and minds of the possessed as well as animals and public areas: the ground is cleared before a church is consecrated, with the purging of

<sup>5</sup> See P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> C. Angelidi - G. T. Calofonos, *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond* (Farnham; Ashgate, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> The book of B. V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon. Space, Ritual, and Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State U.P, 2010), opened an original perspective on these issues.

demonic presences if there are remains of a pagan temple. The glory of God is recognised and celebrated in liturgy through the solemnity of the rituals, the pomp of the precious materials and the perceptible beauty of the decoration, offering a foretaste of the final defeat of the devil and his accomplices. In particular, *ornamenta ecclesiae* are not redundant secondary decoration, but that which is most fitting and appropriate for the eminence and honour of the supreme referent (*decet*, in Latin, from whence *decus* and *decor* as beauty which is both honorific and aesthetic). From Late Antiquity onwards, decorative features in sacred places do not abandon the figurative aspect but tend to foreground the ‘vertical’ aspect of the symbol or material sign over the ‘horizontal’ principle of imitating external form. Reliquaries and holy icons, perceptible windows on the invisible world, are the maximum embodiment of this semiotic and exegetic principle, which is typical of all medieval artistic production, albeit with different nuances in the East and West<sup>8</sup>.

I do not wish to underestimate the active administrative component of power, but it is worth focusing on this celebrative and ostensive, ornamental and ‘cosmic’ aspect of sanctity in the late antique and early medieval world. André Vauchez stressed the prevalence of ‘admirable saints’ over ‘imitable saints’ in the first millennium<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, from the 6th-7th century onwards even the living saint or holy man increasingly becomes a kind of emblem, an icon-relic of the invisible; he thus embodies the paradox whereby more and more magical value is assumed by the prophetic word – the word of wisdom but especially the word of salvation, of which the saint is both a witness and spokesman in his role as a spiritual father. In this way, it becomes above all the word of health and thaumaturgical power. However, caution is required: it is precisely the heroic aspect of overcoming the limits of human nature through asceticism that justifies the attribution of thaumaturgical powers to saints in this life, enhanced after death in the *virtus* of their relics<sup>10</sup>. While, as Guy Stroumsa observed, stoic and Platonic sages strive to adapt and conform to the natural limits, Christian saints aim to overcome these

<sup>8</sup> Here I summarize the themes at the heart of my book *Impronte di gloria. Effigie e ornamento nell'Europa cristiana* (Roma: Carocci, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> A. Vauchez, *Saints admirables et saints imitables : les fonctions de l'hagiographie ont-elles changé aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge?* in *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (III<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. Actes du colloque de Rome (27-29 octobre 1988) (Rome : École française de Rome, Rome 1991), pp. 161-72.

<sup>10</sup> R. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2019), now constitutes the starting point for any study on the issue.

limits, as their role model Christ offers the tools to defeat death<sup>11</sup>. The late antique history of Christian sanctity therefore generated a basic tension which went on to affect the entire history of Christianity in different ways. From its beginnings, it was interwoven with a dynamic of secularisation, which tended to belittle the salvific potential of signs of the sacred (places of worship, relics, images and sacraments). At the same time though, it was also inclined towards the ideal establishment of a cosmos, a beautiful and orderly world (whose order makes it beautiful) that contemplates and reflects its own balance and expresses the ideal order that governs its destinies in the cyclical nature of its liturgy, an aspect closely linked to the cult of saints and the spatial-temporal articulation of the sacred in the framework of a political theology. This is the distinctive feature of late antique Christianity. Nevertheless, we should not think of a long period of stasis. Instead, we could say that the ‘cosmic’ tension and corresponding exaltation of that which shines and honours (*agalma*) as a visible sign of the invisible world permitted endless experimentation during those centuries with tangible ways of relating to the invisible universe, bringing into play all of the instruments and opportunities that the society, culture and language of the time – in essence history – offered men at all social levels. Therefore, the ‘contemplation of order’, to use Germana Gandino’s agreeable definition<sup>12</sup>, was not only created using the decisive instruments of normative development and social and ecclesiastical regulation in compliance with the ideological paradigms of royalty and the priesthood. Instead, this ideal order was achieved and expressed above all through the ritual and liturgical orchestration surrounding the cult of saints: an ensemble of gestures, practices and beliefs which clarified an extremely complex set of meanings that cannot be reduced to the religious dimension in the modern sense of the term, which distinguishes between the spheres and languages of the political, the economic, the aesthetic and the legal. Seeking signs of order through tangible manifestations of sanctity meant not only celebrating the lost ideal harmony, both present and future (the consensual and legitimizing function of hagiography), but also verifying or condemning the effective distancing of man from the ideal models and indicating the paths along which they could be reached (the exemplary and prophetic role of sainthood). For intellectuals, reading the world in hagiographical terms meant constantly finding potential divine meaning in the seemingly most meaningless and tragic gestures and events: disease, death, war,

<sup>11</sup> G. Stroumsa, *La Fin du sacrifice. Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), pp. 46-47.

<sup>12</sup> G. Gandino, *Contemplare l'ordine. Intellettuali e potenti nell'alto Medioevo* (Napoli: Liguori, 2004).

invasion and natural disasters and calamities<sup>13</sup>. It made little difference whether they wrote about saints or political and military history; anything could be a sign to be deciphered in the light of the great scriptural code, the main repository of meanings available to Christian intellectuals, in addition to what was offered by classical culture and, from the 5th-6th century onwards, the oral and folkloric cultures of the peoples who made up the diverse mosaic of early medieval Europe.

According to Dan Sperber's epidemiological paradigm, it is possible to account for major cultural change or 'macro-phenomena, such as epidemics, as the cumulative effect of microprocesses that bring about individual events, such as catching a disease. In this, epidemiological models contrast starkly with 'holistic' explanations, in which macro-phenomena are explained in terms of other macro-phenomena – for instance, religion in terms of economic structure (or conversely)<sup>14</sup>. When dealing with the transmission of complex cultural phenomena over an extremely wide geographical area and time span, we therefore need to imagine sequences of transformations triggered by the social propagation of ideas, without reinforcing the dichotomy between the cultured and the popular or falling into the oversimplification of mere hypotheses of diffusion and derivation. Indeed, describing isomorphic cultural phenomena in terms of diffusion and derivation fails to explain phenomena of cultural assimilation because, as Carlo Ginzburg noted, 'diffusion is a fact, not an explanation'<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, Christianisation was not merely a process that appropriated previous beliefs and cannot be reduced to a question of their functional reuse, the idea underlying Jacques Le Goff's well-defined concepts of the 'obliteration' and 'adulteration' of folkloric culture<sup>16</sup>. In fact, it was in some way already present in nuce in the patristic and then the historiographical paradigm of the targeted recycling

<sup>13</sup> On the main forms of theological rationalization and ritual management of evil and suffering, see my *La danza dei posseduti. Mappe concettuali e strategie di ricerca*, in *Il Diavolo nel Medioevo. XLIX Convegno storico internazionale del Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo – Accademia Tudertina (Todi, 14-17 ottobre 2012)* (Spoleto: Fondazione CISAM, 2013), pp. 553-604.

<sup>14</sup> D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> C. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, Engl. transl. by R. Rosenthal (Chicago & London: Chicago U. P., 1991), p. 217; original italian edition: *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), p. 198: «la diffusione è un dato di fatto, non una spiegazione».

<sup>16</sup> On this subject, see now my paper *Cristianizzazione e culture fra Tarda Antichità e Alto Medioevo*, in *Quaderni di storia religiosa medievale*, 1 (2019), 237-65.

of classical culture<sup>17</sup>. We should perhaps accept that in many cases the previous belief can be seen to have appropriated the Christian tradition in order to survive, accepting to be transformed into something previously unimaginable. This is not only a question of role reversal: we are actually dealing with the existence of a previous chain of beliefs within certain cultural models, leading to significant (but not infinite) fluidity in the symbolic and ritual possibilities. Just like the cult or ritual, the previous belief is not by definition ‘pagan’. Indeed, it may even date back to the final Palaeolithic phase, when the first core of a poetic and sapiential language indigenous to European culture was formed according to Mario Alinei’s ‘Palaeolithic Continuity Paradigm for the Origins of Indo-European Languages’<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, the Christian saint is not the plunderer of pagan divinities, as late antique hagiography would have us believe and as many of us tend to think, but is in a certain sense their prey, the unpredestined victim who does not, however, die. The saint is not even a simple hybrid or a mere successor to pagan gods, as Paul Saintyves postulated, followed by those who advocated the theory of *Germanisierung des Christentums*. If anything, the saint is a paradox, or perhaps an oxymoron, just like the women who perform funeral laments or popular healers in the South of Italy: without being aware of it, and in a radically different historical situation, these figures embody the words and gestures of a distant sapiential tradition – which Giorgio Raimondo Cardona called ‘ethnoscience’<sup>19</sup> – and at the same time reproducing pedagogical and devotional models introduced over the centuries through Catholic preaching. Therefore, the saint ‘does not confront his enemy, but embodies him’<sup>20</sup>. He is not a disguised or falsified pagan god, but constitutes a complex stage with the convergence and divergence of different branches of tradition equipped with their own chronologies and sociologies, which cannot be reduced to the linear sequence between classical culture and medieval Latin civilisation. It is high time we cast aside causal and linear explanatory models like imitation and filiation because they are unable to explain such complex cultural phenomena as religious ritual and the cult of saints<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> J. Le Goff, *Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la tradition mérovingienne*, in *Annales E.S.C.*, 22 (1967), 780-91 (pp. 786-7); reprint in J. Le Goff, *Un autre Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 217-28 (223-4).

<sup>18</sup> The epistemological ‘manifesto’ and many essential contributions can be found on the web page <http://www.continuitas.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> G. R. Cardona, *La foresta di piume. Manuale di etnoscienza* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> F. Benozzo, *Breviario di etnofilologia* (Lecce-Rovato: Pensa Multimedia, 2012), p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> It is in this perspective that in recent years I have re-examined the classic issues of votive offerings and therapeutic incubation in late antique and early medieval Christianity; see for examples my studies *Immagine e sacrificio. Un’antropologia storica della statuaria votiva tra Antichità e Medioevo*, in L. Canetti (ed.), *Statue. Rituali, scienza e magia dalla Tarda Antichità al Rinascimento = Micrologus Library*, 81 (Firenze: SISMEL-Ed. del Galluzzo, 2017), pp. 365-401;



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R. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2019)

*Abstract.* The cult of the saints summarizes in itself and strengthens to the maximum degree an essential aspect of late-antique and early-medieval Christianity, providing an indissoluble link between the material traces (bodies and relics) and the immaterial traces (dreams and visions) of the presence of the divine in the world. This paper, recalling the main lines of the historiography of the last decades and suggesting new interpretative paradigms, will focus on the coexistence of the material and immaterial dimensions in devotional practices, which culminated in the cult of holy images and in the continuity of the divinatory and therapeutic value to dreams and visions sent by God and the saints.

*Riassunto.* Il culto dei santi riassume in sé e potenzia al massimo grado un aspetto essenziale del cristianesimo tardoantico e altomedievale, poiché in esso si legano indissolubilmente le tracce materiali (corpi e reliquie) e le tracce immateriali (sogni e visioni) della presenza del divino nel mondo. Questo articolo, richiamando le principali linee storiografiche degli ultimi decenni e suggerendo nuovi paradigmi interpretativi, si concentra sulla coesistenza della dimensione materiale e immateriale nelle pratiche devozionali, che sarebbe culminata nel culto delle immagini e nella continuità del valore divinatore e terapeutico dei sogni e delle visioni inviate da Dio e dai santi.

*Key words:* glory, image, materiality, relics, santità, traces

*Parole chiave:* gloria, immagine, materialità, reliquie, santità, tracce