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The Body in Medieval Spirituality:
A Rationale for Pilgrimage and the Veneration of
Relics

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Abstract

Christian pilgrimage was one of the most striking phenomena characterising medieval societies. A physical encounter with the relics of saints often constituted the spiritual summit of the pilgrim's journey. In order to understand the importance of physicality and the rationale behind the veneration of relics, it is necessary to consider the philosophical recategorisation of the human body and the Christological reflections of Christian writers during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This article presents some exemplificative texts, which show the emergence of a Christian philosophy within which the human body assumed a new dignity and new powers. When juxtaposed to these metaphysical and theological discourses, the acts of veneration towards the bodies and relics of saints become intelligible, suggesting that this aspect of medieval spirituality should be seen not merely as a fideistic and irrational phenomenon but rather as the manifestation of an internally coherent cosmology.

Pilgrimage, undertaken by millions of Christians every year, remains to this day a vibrant spiritual tradition. During the Middle Ages, however, pilgrimage was a phenomenon that defined and symbolised entire societies. Pilgrims from every social group travelled across long distances, spending much (in some cases all) of their worldly wealth, enduring all sorts of hardships, and risking their lives in order to reach sanctuaries, shrines, and other holy places.¹ Pilgrimage was a spectacularly widespread feature of medieval Christendom, a society both shaped and shaken by religious movements which attempted to reorient the Church towards its transcendent mission and the faithful towards the practice of penitential acts (Magli 1967). To be sure, voyages motivated by religious piety and by the popularity of sacred sites are not uncommon in other historical periods, cultures, and faiths (e.g. Al-Houdalieh 2010; Bianchi 2004; Bowring 2016 [esp. chapter 12]; Carmichael et al. 1994; Ceruti 2007; Dillon 1997; Eeckhout 2013; Hubert 1994).² Furthermore, non-religious factors need to be considered to explain the diffusion of shrines and the striking number of pilgrims characterising the medieval period, especially from the 11th century onwards. Therefore, the study of political, psychological, and in general non-religious themes related to pilgrimage has assumed an increasing importance.³ Yet scholars have also observed that medieval pilgrimage is a phenomenon of such magnitude that the sum of all the non-religious factors favouring the emergence of local cults and shrines would still fail to give us a complete picture of it. According to Patrick J. Geary (1990: 22), “the political, economic, and social functions of relics in post-Carolingian Europe are conceivable only if seen in relation to their fundamental religious functions.”⁴ Observing the peculiarity of Christian pilgrimage in the Middle Ages vis-à-vis pilgrimage in other religious and historical contexts, some historians, such as Diana Webb and Brett E. Whalen, have suggested that penance was a key concept in the medieval mindset, being thus among the religious beliefs that motivated pilgrims (Webb, 2001: 15–16; 2002: 51–52; Whalen, 2011: 70–73). Penance (intended as a purposeful and intelligible endeavour)⁵ is indeed one

¹ Even land routes within Christian Europe and roads that we are inclined to imagine as not particularly dangerous were actually hazardous: Saracens sometimes attacked 10th century pilgrims traveling to Rome while crossing the Alps. (Flodoard, 1905: 921, 923; see also Fedden 1961). On the dangers faced by travelers during the Middle Ages and the fears associated with them, see Prieto 2012.

² For an anthropological introduction, see Coleman and Elsner 1995.

³ A seminal work on the political significance of the cult of saints in Medieval Italy is Webb 1996. On the propaganda surrounding the emergence of some medieval pilgrimage sites, see for instance Dal Santo 2012; Edwards 2008.

⁴ Such affirmation sounds all the more sobering as it comes from a scholar who devoted so much of his research to non-religious factors influencing the veneration of saints and relics.

⁵ Within Catholic theology, penance was and remains a purposeful and intelligible act, because it is linked to the sacrament of Confession and to the doctrine of Purgatory (Aquinas, *Summa*, Supplement, Appendix II, art. 1; Waterworth, 1848: 110).

of the great theological ideas that we need to consider in order to understand late ancient and medieval pilgrimage in Europe and across the Mediterranean.⁶

Even when penance is taken into account, however, another question remains to be addressed: why did pilgrims so often have as their objective a close encounter with the mortal remains of a saint? That decomposing bodies, hair, severed fingers, and dust from sarcophagi spiritually attracted medieval Christians constitutes an interesting problem.⁷ In order to answer such a question, I propose here to reflect upon the ways in which specifically Christian metaphysical and theological ideas contributed first, in Late Antiquity, to assign a central role in Christian cosmology to the human body and to the relics of martyrs, and then, more strikingly during the Middle Ages, to inspire so many faithful to leave everything behind and embark in dangerous journeys. In particular, I shall propose and discuss an interpretative framework that takes into consideration the theological rationale justifying the veneration of relics and the very possibility of pilgrimage as a way to encounter God, receive help, give thanks, and do penance. My hypothesis is that the veneration of relics is neither a fideistic and intrinsically unintelligible deed nor the remnant of pre-Christian practices but rather the consequence of a coherent philosophy of the body based on a Christian metaphysical system. Focusing on some exemplificative Christian writings dealing with the body, martyrdom, and the veneration of sacred mortal remains, this article aims to show how one particular aspect of Christian philosophy and theology, namely the unique metaphysical position of the human body, was an integral part of the composite system of beliefs that encouraged pilgrimage not only as an instrument of penance but frequently also as a means to take advantage of the spiritual power available thanks to holy men and women (either living or long-deceased). This cosmology—which remains part of the tradition of many Christian denominations today—is an essential constituent of the sophisticated and multi-layered rationale behind one of the most important phenomena characterising medieval societies.

INCARNATION AND FINAL RESURRECTION

In her book *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, Diana Webb (2002: 2) writes:

⁶ For an historical introduction to penance in the Middle Ages, see Meens 2014. Throughout the whole book, the relevance of penance, the diversity of penitential practices, and the active participation of the laity emerge quite clearly, but a particularly interesting section, depicting the situation in Charlemagne's empire between the eight and the ninth century, is on 113–23.

⁷ Unfortunately, both history books and popular culture sometimes quickly dismiss the veneration of relics as “superstitious.” For example, Boccardi (2008: 54) has used the term “superstitious” to describe the reaction of medieval people to the arrival of relics in his book on the history of Pistoia, and in one of his public history columns in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones (2013) has recently labelled the exposition of relics in Catholic churches as “dark and primitive.” For a more accurate definition of what is (and what is not) superstitious, see Feser, 2015: 192–201.

Initially, at least, Christianity challenged the apparently innate human inclination to believe that certain places are holier than others, either in their nature or because they have been specially sanctified by mythic events or by ritual. [...] Christians increasingly conformed to patterns of belief and behaviour exemplified by their pagan ancestors.

Other scholars support this view, underlying the continuity between pre-Christian pious practices and the early Christian world (Elsner and Rutherford, 2010: esp. 1–9). Indeed, it seems undeniable that “[t]he salient point about pilgrimage is that it need not always be a journey undertaken exclusively or even principally for religious reasons” (Horden and Purcell, 2000: 445). Yet even though pagan (and Jewish) beliefs and rites may have influenced early Christians, and even though non-religious motives were common among both pre-Christian and Christian pilgrims, when we look specifically at the philosophical substrata and religious doctrines justifying (if not always motivating) pilgrimage, the importance of Christian metaphysical and theological notions of the human body to illuminate Christian journeys and veneration toward the saints’ tombs and relics is hard to overestimate. Perhaps a key distinction needed to colour our understanding of philosophical and theological justifications for pilgrimage among early Christian authors is the one between pilgrimages to holy sites and pilgrimages to living saints or to the remains of martyrs. Interestingly, Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony (2005: 8), whose research has vividly portrayed the debate on pilgrimage taking place within the early Church, notes that “pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its vicinity evoked much harsher criticism than did visits to the shrines of martyrs or to holy men.” Pierre Maraval (2002: 74) has also argued that early Christian texts expressing scepticism towards the veneration of relics are significantly more rare than those criticising the visit to holy places. I suggest here that reverence and physical journeys towards relics and saints were less theologically controversial than reverence and pilgrimages towards holy sites because of the new place assigned to the human body within Christian cosmology.

A fundamental principle underpinning medieval spirituality—and one that can help us to decipher the rationale behind the veneration of relics—is the dignity of the human body. In the mindset of Christian pilgrims in both Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, a crucial consequence of this principle was the body’s capacity to channel spiritual energy (e.g., performing miracles) even after death, once the soul had departed. Both the principle and its consequence were peculiar. This article is not the place for an in-depth discussion of all the opinions held by Greco-Roman philosophers about the body, and the influence of Greek philosophy on the development of Christian metaphysics and theology is undeniable (Hunt 2012). Nevertheless, it does not seem far-fetched to say that the Christian view on the subject was, if not an absolute novelty (as it partly derived from the Old Testament’s body-soul monism), a radical position in the cultural landscape of Late Antiquity. Platonism had conceived of the human body (and both the pleasures and discomforts associated with it)

as a distraction (if not as a prison) for the soul.⁸ According to T. M. Robinson (2000: 42–43), in some of Plato’s dialogues, the body is similar “to a counterperson,” a fact that generates a state of “warfare between body and soul” that is “literally to the death.”⁹ Gnosticism later embraced this vision. Instead (as we shall presently see), Christian writers such as St. Athanasius and St. Augustine—while always acknowledging the danger constituted by the temptations of physical desires—soon started to recategorize mankind, developing in the process a conception of the human body that was the logical conclusion to be drawn once Genesis 1:27 was juxtaposed to (and heightened by) the Incarnation of Christ and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body on Judgement Day (Kelly 1994).

St. Paul, in his epistles, was perhaps the first Christian author to define the human body both as a new temple (1 Corinthians 6:19) and as an instrument of salvation through suffering (2 Timothy 2:3), therefore shaping an alternative, non-pagan “pattern of belief” that justified reverence towards the bodies of holy men and women. Contextualising Paul’s discussion with the Corinthians, Theo K. Heckel (1993) has shown how the apostle defined the transcendent meaning of the human body and rejected Platonic dualism (see also Becker 1993; Robinson 1977). Here revelation (in particular, Genesis) played a key role, drawing the boundaries for contingent debates: “God created body and soul. On this basis, Paul checks any attempt to assign the soul alone to the divine realm, with the body—as a prison—holding the soul back from God” (Heckel, 2000: 123–24). The result was turning upside down pre-Christian practices related to death. As rightly noted by Peter Brown (1981: 5):

Pagan parallels and antecedents can only take us so far in understanding the Christian cult of saints, very largely because the pagan found himself in a world where his familiar map of the relations between the human and the divine, the dead and the living, had been subtly redrawn.

There is no incompatibility—not even “initially”—between Christianity and pilgrimage, because Christian pilgrimages tended to show reverence towards relics or living saints rather than merely towards holy sites. As Brown (1981: 6) aptly states:

⁸ Plato does not describe his psycho-physical dualism in the same way in all of his writings; moreover, early Christian writers as well as medieval philosophers had a complicated (in some cases conflicted) relation with Greco-Roman philosophical traditions—not just with Platonism, but also, for instance, with Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Pythagoreanism. Nonetheless, the consequences of the philosophical place and spiritual meaning assigned to the human body were for Christians extraordinarily important, as they would directly affect not only ascetic praxis, but also Christological doctrines. These themes are best treated in Ware 1997; see also Hunt, 2012: 11–46.

⁹ Robinson’s entire essay is worth reading for an introduction to the complexities (and contradictions) of Plato’s dualism.

To explain the Christian cult of the martyrs as a continuation of the pagan cult of heroes helps as little as to reconstruct the form and function of a late-antique Christian basilica from the few columns and capitals taken from classical buildings that are occasionally incorporated in its arcades.

The fundamental question about the nature of Christ and the emergence of Christological doctrines contributed to give an extraordinary significance to the human body. One of the most famous writers to explore the meaning of God's Incarnation and to pave the way for a new understanding of the human body was St. Athanasius (c. 296–c. 373). In his work *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the archbishop of Alexandria explains:

And if, as they say, it were unsuitable for the Word to reveal Himself through bodily acts, it would be equally so for Him to do so through the works of the universe. His being in creation does not mean that He shares its nature; on the contrary, all created things partake of His power. Similarly, though He used the body as His instrument, He shared nothing of its defect, but rather sanctified it by His indwelling (Athanasius, n.d.: 43).

Writing in the context of fierce debates between Jews, Gentiles and Christians, Athanasius was here defending the reasonableness of the way in which the Word, the divine Logos, had decided to reveal itself.¹⁰ Athanasius's text exemplifies how God's Incarnation brought Christian philosophical assessments of the human body beyond the already significant implications of Genesis. Assuming a more profound theological relevance, the human body now became something that the Word had not merely created but also shared and "sanctified." This cosmological view of the body would be expressed in different ways during the course of the Middle Ages, but it was present since the very beginnings of Christianity, simply because Christianity itself could not exist without it. A proof of this fact is one of the most ancient hagiographic documents written within the early Church, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.¹¹ This letter recounting the capture, trial and execution of a bishop in the context of the persecution of early Christians in Smyrna was probably written in the 150s, and one of its aims was surely to establish the ideal conduct of a Christian martyr, which would reflect that of Christ himself. Sara Parvis (2006) has reconstructed the debate about the authenticity and the date of this account, concluding that, notwithstanding some historical inaccuracies, the text is authentic and was indeed written by mid-second-century Christians. Towards the end of the letter, the author regretfully communicates that, after the brutal killing of Polycarp, his body was burnt on the suggestion of some Jews who had supposedly been inspired by the devil:

¹⁰ One of the best introductions to Athanasius's thought and writings is Meijering 1974. Meijering carefully describes the importance of reason in the saint's works (see esp. 119–22).

¹¹ Two recent studies of this text are Dehandschutter 2005 and Holmes 2005.

But the jealous and envious Evil One, the adversary of the family of the righteous, having seen the greatness of his martyrdom and his blameless life from the beginning, and how he was crowned with the crown of immortality and had won a reward which none could gainsay, managed that not even his poor body should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this and to touch his holy flesh (Schaff, 2014: 17:1).

This desire to touch Polycarp's "holy flesh" is linked to the idea that the human body is intrinsically different from any other matter, being potentially able to be an instrument of redeeming power. So, even the few relics that remained after the fire consumed Polycarp's corpse were lovingly preserved: "And so we afterwards took up his bones which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place; where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together..." (Schaff, 2014: 18:2–3). The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is an extraordinary text that deserves study for a great variety of reasons. What it exemplifies in particular with regard to the Christian view on relics is that the cosmological and theological (re)categorisation of the human body had practical implications on the treatment, preservation and veneration of the saints' mortal remains at a very early stage in the history of the Church.

Later influential writings echoes this view of the body, such as Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, where the bishop of Alexandria describes the hermit's struggle against the devil. Anthony's body is here the protagonist in the victory against temptations.

All this was a source of shame to his foe. For he, deeming himself like God, was now mocked by a young man; and he who boasted himself against flesh and blood was being put to flight by a man in the flesh. For the Lord was working with Antony—the Lord who for our sake took flesh and gave the body victory over the devil ... (Athanasius, 2003: 5).

The centrality of the body in this account is striking.¹² Similarly, the martyrs had participated in God's sanctifying act by willingly transforming their bodies into an instrument through which Christ's passion could be repeated—or, to use St. Paul's expression, "completed" (Colossians 1:24). Therefore, in his *Discourse on the Blessed Babylas*, St. John Chrysostom (c. 349–407) can write:

But God, who is philanthropic and provides us with countless opportunities to be saved, in addition to other ways also prepared for us this way which is a powerful inducement to virtue, by leaving the relics of the saints in our midst for the time being (Chrysostom, 1985: 112).

¹² The monk's body seems the protagonist of the account also in other passages (e.g. Athanasius, 2003: 14).

With these premises in mind, we can start to see the theological underpinnings favouring the emergence of devotional acts around tombs, bones, hair and other remains. John continues describing in these terms the experience lived by Christians when visiting the relics of saints:

If anyone approaches such a tomb, one immediately receives a distinct impression of this energy. For the sight of the coffin enters one's soul and acts on it and affects it in such a way that it feels as if it sees the one who lies there joining in prayer and drawing nigh. Afterwards, one who has had this experience returns from there filled with great zeal and is a changed person [...] This vision of the dead enters the souls of the living [...] And why speak of the location of a grave? Many times, in fact, the sight of a garment alone and the recollection of a word of the dead move the soul and restore the failing memory. For this reason God has left us the relics of the saints (Chrysostom, 1985: 112).

The affirmation of the reunification of the body with the soul at the final resurrection further enhanced this recategorisation of the human body. For instance, St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), in his *Moralia on Job*, reflects on this doctrine in this way:

But see, I hear of the resurrection, but it is the effect of the resurrection that I am searching out. For I believe that I shall rise again, but I wish that I might hear what kind of person; since it is a thing I ought to know, whether I shall rise again perhaps in some other subtle or ethereal body, or in that body wherein I shall die. But if I shall rise again in an ethereal body, it will no longer be myself, who rise again. For how can that be a true resurrection, if there may not be true flesh? So that plain reason suggests, that if it shall not be true flesh, assuredly it will not be a true resurrection; for neither can it be rightly termed a resurrection, when it is not what fell that rises again (Gregory the Great, 1844: Vol. 2, XIV, 71).

As “plain reason” was used by pope Gregory to conclude that the bodies of the dead would rise again, it seemed reasonable to him (and to the Christian faithful) that the bodies of martyrs and saints would perform miracles, precisely because such remains had not been forever separated from these holy persons. This is not to say that devotional practices based on Christology, rational theology, and metaphysics developed following exactly the same pattern throughout Christendom. In fact, Gregory was dumbfounded when thinking that Eastern Christians were nonchalantly dismembering, dividing, and transferring holy bodies (Bartlett, 2013: 44–45). But, supported by revelation, Christian writers progressively elaborated a sophisticated and cohesive understanding of the human body, which would eventually offer (both in the East and in the West) a rationale for the preservation, transfer, and

veneration of relics, and the whereabouts and shrines of these relics soon became centres of pilgrimage.¹³

FROM SACREDNESS TO POWER: THE HUMAN BODY

These Christological and philosophical discussions matter because the dignity and the spiritual role of the human body within Christian cosmology, coupled with the difficult historical conditions in which many of the first Christian communities lived, offered a system of beliefs that supported “behaviours”—such as the veneration of local martyrs and ultimately the exposition of their relics—which would lead to the practice of pilgrimage without necessarily recurring to what Webb labels “mythic events” or “ritual.” This statement is not to deny that many centres of pilgrimage during the Middle Ages owed their fame to the stories that had supposedly taken place there (Haren and Camm 1988), and to be sure, Jerusalem maintained an enormous spiritual significance for Christian pilgrims due to the events narrated in both the Old Testament and the Gospels.¹⁴ Yet Georgia Frank has underlined the early and consistent link within Christian spirituality between sensory experiences, the human body, and the divine. In particular, Frank has shown that, from the fourth century to the Islamic conquests, pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem were attracted by the holy people (monastics, hermits, and living saints) whom they encountered along the way at least as much as by holy places (Frank, 2000: 6–16; see also Hunt 1982; Ousterhout 1990). Similarly, many (or even most) medieval pilgrimages centred on physical objects (the body of a saint or his/her relics), not sites or places, so much so that, if the sacred object was removed (e.g., through a *furtum sacrum*) and transferred to a new locality, the old centre of pilgrimage often lost any spiritual significance (Geary 1990; Webb, 2002: 14–15). I would thus suggest that the Christian conception of the body is a key component of the philosophical and theological rationale behind, for instance, the exposition and veneration of the remains of St. Gervasius and St. Protasius in St. Ambrose’s basilica in Milan, or of St. Catherine’s head in Siena. The significance given to the body as an instrument of sanctifying suffering by both God’s Incarnation and so many early Christians’ martyrdom; the idea that holy men (like the Desert Fathers) can accumulate spiritual power and contribute to (as well as take advantage of) the saints’ treasury of merits (Burton-Christie 1992); and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, justified the conviction that lifeless bodies and relics still retained an enormous power, as through them their deceased “owners” could continue to perform miracles.

¹³ The role played by revelation (and, as we have seen, in particular by the Incarnation) in the definition and recategorisation of the body could be likened to its role in the definition of God’s philosophical characteristics. Etienne Gilson famously described this latter role (1936: 42–52).

¹⁴ On medieval pilgrimages to Jerusalem, see Chareyron 2005.

This conception of the martyred body and its spiritual power fit in particularly well with the Christocentric reflections on time elaborated by St. Augustine (354–430), one of the most influential non-canonical writers in the history of Christianity. To be sure, among early Christian authors, Augustine is one of the most cautious towards physical cults and sensory experiences of the divine.¹⁵ While a “deliberate freedom from geographical connotations” (Bitton-Ashkelony, 2005: 117) characterise his writings that appears to suggest a negative attitude towards pilgrimage to holy places, Augustine encouraged the veneration of martyrs and relics. More significantly, according to Augustine’s understanding of time, the Incarnation (and the passion) of Christ was the central, *kairic* event in the history of the world.¹⁶ As explained by Andrew Redden (2013: 136) (in a study that, not surprisingly, deals with a 16th century martyrdom), because Augustine considers the Incarnation as “[...] the ‘moment’ in history in which the eternal and the immutable became a part of *chronos* or teleological time, all other events whether preceding or following will be directly related to it.” This temporal landscape, proposed especially in Book XI of the *Confessions* as a response to the Manicheans on the problem of evil, would have an enormous influence in the development of medieval philosophy. In relation to pilgrimage, we could say that the suffering of a Christian martyr can be intended within Augustinian philosophy as a *kairic* moment, which repeats *the kairic* moment par excellence: Christ’s suffering on the cross. Hence, since time is intrinsically linked to space and physicality, a journey towards the mortal remains of a saint should be truly (not just symbolically) understood as a journey towards Mount Calvary. Augustine himself, in one of his discourses, seems to draw this conclusion as he explains to the faithful what the martyrs did with their bodies using a metaphor that stresses contemporaneity with Christ’s lifetime: “And like the One gave his life for us so the martyrs have followed his example [...] They laid their bodies down on the ground, almost as mantles, while the colt that carried the Lord was led to Jerusalem” (Augustine 1863 [author’s translation from the original Latin]).

As for the possibility that the body—which is in a sense the physical root of concupiscence—could be used as a sacred means to obtain salvation, this idea was not a difficulty once the body itself had been identified as an essential component of any person. In the context of a diatribe with those Gentile “philosophers” who were using Plato’s dualism to discredit Christianity, Augustine claims in *The City of God* that such Platonic dualism did not exist at all and that Plato himself had celebrated the immortality of the body in the *Timaeus*:

¹⁵ On Augustine’s attitude towards pilgrimage, the best account is Bitton-Ashkelony, 2005: 106–39.

¹⁶ The Greek word *kairos* indicates an understanding of history that revolves around a central, pivotal event (or a series of events). It is, in a sense, a radical alternative to *chronos*, which is a linear and sequential description of time.

[...] it is not the body as such, but the corruptible body, that is a burden to the soul [...] Plato teaches quite plainly that the gods who were made by the supreme God have immortal bodies; and he represents God himself, their creator, as promising them, as a great boon, that they will remain forever with their bodies and will never be parted from them by any death (Augustine, 2003: XIII, 16).

While it is beyond the objectives of this article to investigate the accuracy of Augustine's reconstruction of Plato's opinion on the body, this passage (and actually chapters 16 and 17 of Book XIII in their entirety) illuminates how important it was for the bishop of Hippo to defend the dignity of the body and to provide a philosophical account of the person in its completeness. This metaphysical position, together with the cosmological conceptualisation of *kairos*/time, has to be considered to understand how Augustinian thought accommodated cults of saints and the veneration of their mortal remains. Revelation played a part not only in the development of a Christocentric/*kairic* description of time but also in strengthening reason with hope, which as a category contemporary historians rarely touch but as a key component of the Christian faith certainly concurs to explain human action in a Christian society. Augustine (2003: I, 12) boldly announced this hope when he wrote, "Christians have the promise that their bodies and all their limbs will be restored and renewed, in an instant, not only from the earth, but also from the remotest hiding-places in the other elements into which their dead bodies passed in disintegration."

In his *Historia Regnum Francorum*, Gregory of Tours (539–594) recounts an episode that perfectly illustrates the popular reception of these cosmological and theological views. When St. Martin of Tours died, "a great dispute arose" between the people of Poitiers and the people of Tours:

For the people of Poitiers said: "As a monk, he is ours; as an abbot, he belonged to us; we demand that he be given to us. Let it be enough for you that when he was a bishop on earth you enjoyed his conversation, ate with him, were strengthened by his blessings and cheered by his miracles. Let all that be enough for you. Let us be permitted to carry away his dead body." To this the people of Tours replied: "If you say that the working of his miracles is enough for us, let us tell you that while he was placed among you he worked more miracles than he did here. For, to pass over most of them, he raised two dead men for you, and one for us; and as he used often to say himself, there was more virtue in him before he was bishop than after. And so it is necessary that he complete for us *after death* what he did not finish in his lifetime" (Gregory of Tours, 1916: I, 48, emphasis added).

This passage opens a window on the medieval mindset and on the way in which popular culture assimilated and expressed a sophisticated theological discourse about the body, for while it is true that Gregory is not always a reliable source, it is also certain that a cult of St. Martin did emerge immediately after his death and soon became one of the most popular in

medieval Europe, bringing a great number of pilgrims to Tours every year (Maurey 2014). The Christian conceptualisation of the human body supported the conviction that St. Martin could continue to use his mortal remains even “after death” in order to perform miracles, channelling the enormous spiritual power accumulated during his holy life, but also taking advantage of his newly acquired closeness—or better, immediateness—to God.¹⁷ Writing about two centuries after Gregory of Tours, Einhard (c. 775–840) further developed the idea that the relics of saints were still powerful, arguing that they could even express their will (Einhard, 1998: 90–91).

Documents produced during the Middle Ages to describe the spiritual map of Christendom seem to confirm that the cosmological importance of the human body for Christians has to be considered in order to nuance explanations of medieval pilgrimage which tend to overemphasise non-religious (e.g. socioeconomic, political) and non-Christians factors. One such document is the *Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, written in the 12th century and detailing the routes going from France to the shrine of St. James (Davies and Davies, 1982: 84–87). Pilgrims travelling across long distances would almost never follow the shortest available route to Santiago, choosing instead to stop by many less famous sanctuaries and churches that preserved relics of local martyrs and saints. In the following paragraph recommending to the pilgrim several of these spiritually significant landmarks, there is one term, “body,” that recurs quite evidently:

Then, on the same route, one should visit the bodies of the blessed martyrs Tiberius, Modestus and Florentius who, in the time of Diocletian, racked with various tortures for the faith of Christ, suffered martyrdom. [...] Then, the Burgundians and Teutons who go to Santiago by the route of Le Puy should visit the most holy body of Saint Faith, virgin and martyr, whose most holy soul, after her body was decapitated by the executioner on the mountain at the city of Agen, choirs of angels bore off to heaven in the likeness of a dove, and they adorned her with the laurel of immortality [...] Then one should visit the venerable head of the blessed John the Baptist which was brought by the hands of some religious men from the region of Jerusalem to a place called Angély in the land of Poitou, where an immense basilica of admirable workmanship was constructed under his patronage, in which the same most sacred head is venerated by a choir of a hundred monks day and night and is distinguished by innumerable miracles (Shaver-Crandell, Gerson, and Stones, 1995: 78, 81).

Here we find clearly expressed an interest in physical (not mythological or merely spatial) realities. This passage does not impart to the pilgrim the

¹⁷ Webb (2002: 64) has brilliantly summarised this close relationship between Church militant (the faithful on Earth) and Church triumphant (the saints in Heaven): “The saints belonged to the Christian community, which embraced the living and the dead, and they operated within it as channels of God’s ever-present power.”

cosmological notions supporting such interest; rather, revealingly, it takes them for granted.

The faithful reaching a shrine could see bones, touch tombstones, and in some cases even take the dust surrounding relics. The apogee of most pilgrimages was in sum a sort of celebration of the body. Writing about medieval Italy, Ida Magli (1967: 126) claims:

The saints are first of all something sacred, that is to say “powerful”; what is important is the power that is revealed to them and in them, transforming them into carriers of power. The empiric character of the power dominates the cult of the saints; whoever is powerful is saint [...] But the saint is also a corpse; so both the dead and their potency are holy.¹⁸

Hence, we could say that the physical world, which during the Middle Ages became progressively de-animated (Dales 1980), found a harmonious counterpoint in the sacredness of the human body, created in the image of God, sanctified by Incarnation, and finally, at times, transformed by the life of a holy man or woman into an instrument through which a transcendent power reveals itself. The ultimate (only apparently paradoxical) consequence was the celebration and display of physicality for the sake of transcendence. Medieval pilgrims to some extent were not exorcising death because of a terrifying and mysterious world but rather staring, unafraid, at the weakness and humiliation of the human body, powerful even while lifeless, severed, repulsive (Bynum 1995).¹⁹ Medieval pilgrimage is first and foremost a religious phenomenon, underpinned by a theological centrepiece of early Christian thought: the sacredness of the body. For a medieval peasant, Athanasius and John Chrysostom may have been unknown and strange names, and yet the parading of relics across the town to end plagues, stop riots, or simply celebrate a saint’s day was an at least intelligible event, because the remains of martyrs and confessors were understood to have a peculiar place in a shared Christian cosmology. Within this cosmology, the preservation, transfer, fractioning, and veneration of the saints’ bodies was due also to their partly innate and partly acquired (through martyrdom or a holy life) place in the spiritual and metaphysical landscape. The ability to perform miracles was not interrupted but rather increased by death.

Another fact suggesting that the Christian understanding of the human body and the consequent celebration of physicality were the philosophical substrata of so many cults and pilgrimages is the fact that the arrival of the

¹⁸ My translation from the original Italian text: “I santi sono anzitutto qualcosa di sacro, cioè di ‘potente’; l’importante è la potenza che si rivela loro e in loro, e li fa diventare quindi portatori di potenza. Il carattere empirico della potenza predomina nel culto dei santi: è santo chiunque possiede potenza [...] Ma il santo è anche un cadavere; sono santi i morti ed è santa la potenzialità dei morti.”

¹⁹ Bynum shows how the Christian understanding of death stressed continuity, assigning a pivotal, positive role to the human body, which would partake of the resurrection and therefore could not be likened to a prison.

fragment of a relic was enough immediately to spark a new veneration and transform a town into an international centre of pilgrimage. This transformation is precisely what happened in the Tuscan city of Pistoia in 1144, when the local bishop was able to obtain a piece of St. James's skull from the sanctuary in Compostela (Boccardi, 2008: 53–55; see also Dolcini and Sisi 1994; Ferrali 1979. Once again, the intrinsic dignity of the human body had been heightened by St. James's martyrdom, which now enabled him to perform miracles even through a small fragment of his mortal remains.²⁰ It was this specifically Christian cosmological and theological system of beliefs that motivated people of different countries and social groups to start suddenly to visit places like Pistoia. But the theme of movement and voyage itself has deep biblical roots and is connected to medieval pilgrimage through an intermediate, logical step: the visit to living holy men. This specific form of pilgrimage had arguably started with the Desert Fathers, but its true models were the scriptural episodes of crippled and sick people approaching Christ. In his *Dialogues* (1911), the aforementioned Gregory the Great condensed in just one page many of the cosmological and theological themes discussed so far: Incarnation, physicality, transcendent power, and intercession through saints. In Book III, chapter 3, Gregory tells the story of pope Agapitus and of what happened when “a dumb and lame man was brought unto him for help.” The movement here is not autonomous, as the faithful approaches the holy man in the same way in which the crippled man approaches Jesus in the Gospel, carried by his friends. Yet both the journey towards the Lord and the journey towards the living holy man mirror the act of pilgrimage towards physical realities that can channel spiritual energies, or more precisely transcendent power. Gregory (1911: III, 3) continues the story by writing a passage that is worth quoting at length:

The holy man carefully demanded of his kinsfolk, that brought him thither and stood there weeping, whether they did believe that it was in his *power* to cure him: who answered, that they did firmly hope that he might help him in the virtue of God by the authority of St. Peter: upon which words forthwith the venerable man fell to his prayers, and beginning solemn mass, he offered sacrifice in the sight of almighty God: which being ended, he came from the altar, took the lame man by the hand, and straightways, in the presence and sight of all the people, he restored him to the use of his legs: and after he had put our Lord's *body* into his mouth, that tongue, which long time before had not spoken, was loosed. At which miracle all began to wonder and to weep for joy: and forthwith both fear and reverence possessed their minds, beholding what Agapitus could do in the *power* of our Lord, by the help of St. Peter (emphasis added).

²⁰ This kind of episode can be found in many medieval accounts. In the ninth century, Einhard witnessed a similar enthusiasm for the arrival of the relics of St. Marcellinus in Aachen (Einhard, 1998: 87).

The question posed by Agapitus about the faith of his interlocutors is probably a rhetorical device used by Gregory to stress the scriptural analogy. More importantly, the theme of power appears inextricably linked to materiality and space, not only because the sick man “was brought” to the holy man but also because two physical contacts cure him: first, the pope’s touch that heals the legs and then the touch of the Word, Christ himself, through the Eucharist that heals the tongue. This episode clearly spells out two typically Christian and medieval messages: that there cannot be salvation without a movement that is as much physical as spiritual, and that holy men are powerful—or, as Magli put it, “carriers of power.” These beliefs, which had reached philosophical maturity by the time of Gregory the Great, were and remain fully intelligible and philosophically coherent.

CONCLUSION

A complete and nuanced picture of Christian spiritual traditions surrounding the dead bodies of holy men and women can only emerge from the integration of historical descriptions with theological, philosophical, and literary sources. The beliefs and actions described above are neither fideistic nor unexplainable but rather based on an intelligible and eminently Christian metaphysical account of the human body. Inspired by revelation, this account sparked Christological discussions, guided the Desert Fathers’ attempt “to integrate the materiality of the human body within the totality of Christian experience” (Hunt, 2012: 11; see also Miller 1994), and was progressively developed into a consistent stream of philosophical thought and theological doctrine connecting early Christians, medieval pilgrims, and many modern Christians.²¹ The difficulty in acknowledging the historical importance of this stream’s metaphysical and cosmological tenets is not just the result of a cultural abyss separating late ancient and medieval Christendom from modern, secular terminologies and academic categories. The 16th century reformers who broke away from Rome sparked a philosophical and theological fragmentation that created a fracture within Christianity itself:

To a degree these sensory definitions of the sacred were rejected during the Reformation as part of a reaction against the material culture of holiness with which late medieval Catholicism and its rituals were imbued. The priest no longer made Christ metaphysically present through transubstantiation, and the cult of saints was rejected by the Reformers (Hamilton and Spicer, 2005: 8).

²¹ One only needs to read the beginning of pope John XXIII’s opening statement at the last ecumenical council of the Catholic Church to see how the bodies of saints still hold a unique place in the spiritual landscape of the Catholic faith: “Mother Church rejoices that, by the singular gift of Divine Providence, the longed-for day has finally dawned when—under the auspices of the virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is commemorated on this feast—the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is being solemnly opened here beside St. Peter’s tomb” (John XIII, 1962: 786–96).

This endogenous fracture deepened temporal distance and amplified the effects of secularism.²² As a consequence, the traditional understanding of human physicality and of its spiritual power has become, if not increasingly opaque and mysterious, surely more challenging to consider when historians try to read the motives of apparently bizarre and irrational acts of people living in medieval Europe. The temptation to reduce early and medieval Christian expressions of spirituality to social phenomena resulting from a mix of propaganda, local politics, and fear is in sum part of a broader problem.²³ This article's objective has been to propose some interdisciplinary reflections, in the hope that scholars may more exhaustively enlighten in the future how Christian theology and the place assumed by the human body in Christian spirituality justified visits to living saints, tombs, and relics.

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²² One of these effects, which is surely linked to the difficulties encountered by secular writers when dealing with devotional acts, has been well summarized by Feser (2007: 78–79): "As with the modern approach toward personal identity, the modern view of human action is part of a general trend in modern thought toward a 'disenchantment' of the human world, a progressive abandonment of the notion that human beings have by their very nature a dignity that raises them above the rest of the material and animal realms."

²³ For a serious discussion of this problem in the social sciences, see Stark and Finke, 2000: esp. 1–21, 42–56.

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