

Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700–1200)

Professor Julia M.H. Smith

summarises the arguments she presented in her 2010 Raleigh Lecture.

IN THE LATER Middle Ages, Boccaccio and Chaucer parodied the cult of relics in medieval Christianity. At the Reformation, Calvin poured venomous ridicule on these ‘superstitious’ practices. Many contemporary Catholic churches in the western world have quietly tidied away their collections of medieval and early modern reliquaries, embarrassed by the detritus of their pre-Enlightenment past. The invitation to deliver the 2010 Raleigh Lecture as part of the Medieval Week gave me the opportunity to re-think two questions: What were relics? And why and how did they make sense to the men and women of the Middle Ages? Underlying them is a fundamental issue central to several world religions, how belief relates to materiality.

A new perspective

Hitherto, scholars have generally approached relics from one of two perspectives. They have either had recourse to the comments of medieval men whose familiarity with many centuries of theological, legal and literary traditions enabled them to critique, praise, elucidate and, above all, define and circumscribe what relics were from the perspective of the ecclesiastical establishment. Alternatively, they have taken their cue from the glittering reliquaries which abound in museums, and have used these masterpieces to appreciate their aesthetic qualities and infer the cultural values of their contents. The silver gilt and jewelled head of St Eustace, originally from Basel but now in the British Museum, is a case in point. It speaks to us of the goldsmith’s craft around 1200, and of medieval traditions of commemorating ancient saintly persons in monumental form.

My approach differed. Drawing on a huge corpus of medieval evidence for the contents dozens of reliquaries, such as St Eustace’s head, I adopted an ‘object-based’ approach. I placed relics’ material nature – stones, lumps of dried soil, sticks, scraps of fabric, splinters of wood, locks of hair, teeth, pieces of bone and the like, all of which derived from pilgrimages to saints’ shrines or to the Holy Land – at the centre of my enquiry. And I drew on recent cross-cultural work by anthropologists and scholars of religion to make sense of these tiny commonplace items. By resisting the post-Enlightenment impulse to separate belief from practice, I presented them as markers of deep-seated cultural reflexes whose

effectiveness has been obscured by exclusive focus on learned discourse or by excessive reliance on reductive functionalism.

Essential qualities

In brief, I argued that all relics shared three essential qualities. They were fragments of a larger whole, detached portions that combined tangibility with incompleteness. Moreover, their partial nature robbed them of self-evident identity, leaving them implicitly important yet indeterminate and unspecific. Most importantly of all, they were all highly portable, easy to transport over long distances in pockets and saddle-bags. As portable objects, they circulated within medieval society in the same ways as other movable possessions did, by gift, inheritance, theft, sale, and donation, flowing through established networks of communication and transmission. I then posited that in their very tangibility and tiny size, these objects mediated so successfully between the mundane and the sacred because they bridged the chasms of time and place which separated Christians from the world of Bible stories, martyrdoms and the long-dead founding fathers and mothers of their own communities.

Frame of reference

An obscure 12th-century incident illustrates my argument. It concerned a Christian woman desperate to help her Jewish neighbour, whose son was very ill. The Christian woman produced a pebble and promised that if it was steeped in water, the resulting drink would cure the child. But the mother refused. Because the stone came from the Holy Sepulchre, the site of Christ’s burial and resurrection, its Christian owner was sure of its redemptive, healing qualities. But from the Jewish perspective, anything from any grave was polluted by contact with a corpse, and this stone most of all epitomised everything that separated Jews from Christians. Rabbis used this tale of exemplary maternal piety to try to dissuade later generations of Jews from compromising their own identity in the towns of medieval Germany where Jews

and Christians lived, worked and raised their children side by side. I used it in my lecture for two reasons. First, it enabled me to dismiss the widespread assumption that ‘relics’ are simply the bones of saints. Secondly, it gave me the opportunity to demonstrate how much significance a little stone can have – but also to emphasise that



Figure 1. Reliquary head of St Eustace. Photo: courtesy British Museum.

it only 'works' within an implicitly agreed frame of cultural values and religious reference.

Exhibition

My remarks had a much more general purpose than merely offering a new perspective on a familiar medieval theme. As the exhibition which opens in the British Museum on 23 June 2011 with the title 'Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe' will amply demonstrate, relics continue to fascinate in this secular, post-modern age. Along with over one hundred other exhibits from museums around the world, the reliquary head of St Eustace will be on display. The fragments of bone, wood and fabric that it once contained do survive (but are now back in Basel): they

invite reflection upon the paradox of materiality and belief, and give pause for thought about the distinction between the sacred and the secular. As visitors return from the exhibition galleries into the Museum's halls filled with treasures from so many other cultures, times, and places, they will surely be prompted to think about what medieval Christianity did, or did not, have in common with other cultures, and why its heritage still matters in the 21st century. My Raleigh Lecture was intended as a contribution to that enterprise.

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