

## Lay Piety

A couple of decades ago the author of this text accompanied a group of non-German students to a baroque church in southern Germany. When seeing some relics exhibited there, one of the students, a young American woman, asked in astonishment: “Why do they keep these old bones here?” If she had lived as a devout Christian in the Middle Ages she would probably not have come forward with such a question. Journeying to a place where parts of the body of an allegedly holy person could be venerated\* was a strong desire for a faithful Christian. The inscription at the tomb of St Martin of Tours (5th century) suggests that for a devout believer a tomb or reliquary\* does not simply contain dead bones: “Here lies Bishop Martin whose soul is in the hand of God, but who is completely present here ...” [from The ORB: On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies].

The veneration\* of relics was one of the various forms of the so-called lay piety which manifested itself – and still does – in phenomena such as pilgrimages, processions, cults around saints, images, devotional songs, religious stage plays, field chapels and wayside crosses. In the late 1950s about 4,000 of such crosses from various centuries were counted in the district of Trier, to give just one example of the number of such objects.

These forms of piety had come into existence without the support of the official church and might be explained by the harsh medieval living conditions. Moreover, it was the general belief that human beings were essentially evil and could expect nothing but eternal damnation as punishment for a life of sin. Redemption\* through forgiveness of sins might be achieved by an appeal to Christ. Such an appeal, so the belief, was best made at places where Jesus (or his disciples) had lived. But there were only a few of such places and they were in distant countries. The demand for holy places and objects gradually caused a multiplication of saints and pilgrimage sites. This was achieved by canonizing a great number of Christians. To canonize is to officially declare a dead person to be a saint. Such a person had to be generally believed to have lived as an outstandingly virtuous Christian and perhaps died as a martyr for his belief. A saint was expected to speak in support of a person’s prayer for help, as it is suggested in the phrase ‘*ora pro nobis*’, (‘*pray for us*’).

The popularity of saints was maintained to a large extent by miracles they were believed to perform.

Apart from local places of veneration\*, a lot of people, especially those seeking help for various illnesses, undertook long and arduous\* journeys to popular holy sites such as Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Canterbury, Cologne\* and also Trier. Often pilgrims returned claiming to be partly or completely cured or at least relieved from their illnesses.

Pilgrimages were undertaken also as a sign of gratitude for help, for penance\* for sins, in the hope of obtaining indulgence\* and, of course, as an expression of veneration for a particular saint.

The crusades and the expansion of trade opened a large market in the sale and trade of relics, often with strange results. So it might have been confusing for example for a pilgrim to come across different skulls of Christ in different pilgrimage churches, but perhaps the pilgrim was satisfied with the explanation that one skull was Christ's when He was a boy and the other one when He was a man.

The following example of a medieval sermon story (13th c.) provides some insight into people's dealing with relics: A certain knight sought to obtain some relics of St Thomas of Canterbury. He was offered a bridle (part of a horse's harness) by a cunning priest who assured him that St Thomas had used it for a long time and that it had proved its power. The knight paid the sum the priest had demanded. God, the story continues, wishing to reward the knight's faith, decided to perform many miracles through the bridle. The knight then founded a church and placed the bridle as a relic in it.



Image 1: Menhir stone near Ferschweiler, Eifel area; c. 3.5m high. [Photo E. Plüer]

The official church sometimes felt unease at aspects of the cult of relics and was concerned about their authenticity. Still, vagrants (persons without a settled home or regular work) succeeded time and again in selling things such as straw from Jesus' manger\* in Bethlehem to simple-minded peasants as a kind of substitute relic for domestic use.

Many cults and rites practised by medieval Christians seem to be bordering on superstition and magic.

Expectant women relied on amulets and spells\*, peasants used similar practises to protect their livestock and rites\* were performed to ensure a good harvest. As mentioned earlier, the realities of medieval life were harsh and people – in trying to protect themselves – were not really concerned if they made use of traditions that were rooted in pre-Christian times.

The Celtic menhir\* cult stone seen in the picture, allegedly reshaped by St Willibrord (Anglo-Saxon missionary, d. 739), hints at the blending of heathen and Christian elements.

In the later Middle Ages the practise of lay preaching emerged. The example of the so-called 'Drummer of Niklashausen' (1476) reflected the conflicts of those times. Hans Behem (also Beheim or Böhm), a shepherd and street musician from the small town of Niklashausen in southern Germany, claimed to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary.

His lay sermons quickly attracted huge crowds. According to a report by an informer to the Bishop of Würzburg he had said among others that the Emperor was a rogue and that you could forget about the Pope. The fish in the water, he had continued, and the game



Image 2: Hans Behem preaching in front of pilgrims with candles (Illustration from the Echter Chronicle, first half of 16th c.) [image in public domain]

in the fields should belong to everyone. The clergy should not own more than they needed for a daily meal, but, he had added, they would be killed anyway very soon. If all the lords, ecclesiastical and worldly, did not own more than the common man, then all the people would have enough to get along.

Perhaps fearing an armed uprising the Bishop had Behem arrested and burned as a heretic.

The Protestant Reformation put an end to many forms of lay piety in Protestant areas, in particular the cult of saints and relics. The idea of saintly intercession\* was rejected by reformers such as Martin Luther on the ground that people would rely on works rather than on faith.

In recent years there has been a growing popularity for (Catholic) Christians to go on pilgrimages, in particular to Santiago de Compostela, though many of these modern pilgrims seem to be motivated by views on religion that have considerably changed since the Middle Ages.

Jürgen Plüer

## Glossar: Lay Piety

<i>Cologne</i>		Köln
<i>arduous</i>	needing much effort, difficult	mühsam
<i>heretic</i>	sb who holds an opinion that is contrary to the accepted belief of the church	Ketzer
<i>indulgence</i>	here: granting of freedom from punishment for sin after being forgiven	Abläss
<i>lay</i>	not belonging to the clergy	hier: Volks-
<i>manger</i>	long, open box for horses and cattle to feed from	Krippe
<i>penance</i>	a ritual act to gain forgiveness of one's sins	Buße
<i>redemption</i>	an act to free or save sb from sin	Erlösung
<i>reliquary</i>	a container for keeping or exhibiting relics	Reliquiar
<i>rite</i>	a religious ceremony	Ritus
<i>spell</i>	words which are thought to have magical power	Zauber
<i>superstition</i>	the belief that certain events cannot be explained by reason or that they bring good or bad luck	Aberglaube
<i>venerate</i>	expressing deep feeling of respect	verehren
<i>veneration</i>		Verehrung