

The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997

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As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of my article, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,”¹ arrives and passes, I find myself increasingly in agreement with the great Origen of Alexandria. The Patriarchs, he insisted, never celebrated anniversaries. Wise men that they were, they realized that a birthday only served to bring to mind a regrettable accident: a disembodied soul, suspended above matter by rapt contemplation of eternal truth, had allowed its attention to stray, it had wobbled, it had crashed into the cramped particularity of an individual body. Articles are like that. They arrive on the pages of the *Journal of Roman Studies* as the result of just such a fall into particularity. Highly particular enthusiasms, intensely specific preoccupations, elicited by specific evidence and by cultural and scholarly traditions caught at an irremediably precise moment of time, make every scholarly contribution—even articles that appear in the Olympian, still air of the *Journal of Roman Studies*—gloriously “dated” the very moment they appear. They bear the indelible stamp of a given time and place. They are as clearly defined by their blindsides—by the many might-have-beens that came to be blocked to view as they took on their own, distinctive shape—as they are by their contents.

But Origen—for all his sympathy for the Patriarchs, as they contemplated, from the viewing-point of eternity, the tiny, crabbed thing that they had become in taking on a specific body—was a warm soul. Twenty five years, in his opinion, could not be better spent than in pushing

1. Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101, reprinted, with additional notes, in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 103–52. I cite from that reprinting.

resolutely against the limitations incurred by that first, fierce act of embodiment. Even in more torpid fields than ours, a quarter of a century is a long period of time. In the study of late antiquity it has taken us into a new age; and not least because of the efforts of those gathered on this occasion, whose work and friendship have constantly brought to my attention perspectives on late antiquity of which I could not have dreamed in 1970.

So if, in this paper, I concentrate on the precise circumstances in which I wrote "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," in around 1969 to 1970, I do not do this out of egotism. Still less do I wish to disown or to dismiss an article on which, I know, many have drawn creatively, following, reapplying and modifying its suggestions in ways that continue to surprise, delight and reassure me. But it is important to stake out, as accurately as possible and without the blurring induced by hindsight, exactly how far I myself intended to reach, and, indeed, how far I was capable of reaching, given both my own preoccupations and the limits of the scholarship that was available to me at that time. For only when that baseline is clearly delineated can we gauge the exact distance between ourselves, in 1997, and an article that was conceived and written, effectively, at the very end of the 1960s. It is enough to listen to the papers that have been presented in these few days to realize that this distance is enough to take one's breath away.

Let me be content to evoke the enthusiasms and the preoccupations which drew me to the subject of the holy man in the first place and which account for the distinctive shape of the article itself, as it finally emerged in print at the end of 1971. There is much of this that I do not need to repeat here. Professor Tomas Hägg of the University of Bergen has recently devoted an issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* to a retrospective appraisal of *The World of Late Antiquity*, a work of synthesis that was commissioned at much the same time as I was working on the holy man. That book was written, if I remember correctly, immediately after I had handed in the manuscript of my article, in summer 1971. My own account of the writing of *The World of Late Antiquity*, in *Symbolae Osloenses*, covers the long-term evolution of my work, much of which went back to my first contact with late antiquity, when studying Saint Augustine and his North African background, as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student at Oxford in the late 1950s.²

2. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971; repr. New York: Norton, 1989, with bibliographic additions). See Peter Brown, et al., "The World of Late Antiquity Revisited," ed. Tomas Hägg, *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997): 5–90.

What strikes me forcibly, on looking back on what must have been two periods of preparation and writing that were almost adjacent in time, if not parallel, was the relative ease with which much of my former work flowed into the outlines of my account of late antiquity in *The World of Late Antiquity*. By contrast, the writing of the article on the holy man was a far rougher ride. As I now turn to my notebooks and to those sticky, proto-modern xeroxes—precious hagiographic texts from the *Patrologia Graeca*, coaxed for the very first time out of the sanctuary of the Bodleian Library by slow, ceremonious, and still slightly shame-faced application to the newly installed photocopying service of the Library, and read, in large part, on trains to and from Paddington, so that my marginal annotations become jagged at regular intervals, as the train rattled over the points at Didcot and Reading—I have relived the sensation of being in a boat, unexpectedly rocked and slapped by choppy waves, raised by a sudden squall of new enthusiasms. Most of these enthusiasms dated from no earlier than 1966, when I completed the manuscript of my biography of Saint Augustine. Let me itemize three of the most important of these.

First: since 1966, I had turned away from the Latin West to discover, in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, an East Roman society whose vigor, complexity and distinctive profile increasingly impressed me and excited me as every year seemed to reveal a fresh and unexpected aspect of it.³ It was East Roman society, as we had begun to take the measure of it in the 1960s, that led me to the holy man, and not the holy man to East Roman society. The holy man himself, I would insist, was simply,

one of many surprising devices with which a vigorous and sophisticated society (as the East Roman Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries appears to have been) set about the delicate business of living.⁴

The “average late Roman,” and especially “the astute and self-confident farmers of late Roman Syria and Egypt,” and not the holy

3. See Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 137–59, for a sketch of the strengths of the eastern empire. In 1971, my views on the religion and society of the eastern empire had been deeply influenced by three major works: Norman Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: Athlone Press, 1960), esp. “The Thought World of East Rome,” 1–23; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: A Social and Administrative Survey* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), which I reviewed in “The Later Roman Empire,” *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 20 (1967): 327–43, in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber, 1972), 46–73; G. Dagron, “L’empire romain d’Orient et les traditions politiques de l’Hellénisme,” *Travaux et mémoires* 3 (1968): 1–242.

4. Brown, “Holy Man,” 109.

men, were the heroes of that article. Sturdy figures, set fair and square against a Near Eastern landscape, their unproblematic averageness and stolid male identity (neither of these qualities, I must add, to my shame in the light of modern methods, were subjected by me to scrutiny according to either race, class or gender), they were the creators and clients of the holy men. The holy man served their particular needs. His figure was charged with their distinctive hopes and fears. It was their expectations of leadership that edged his unlikely figure towards the same functional niche, in rural society, as that occupied by the rural patron. Altogether, one of the principal purposes of the article was to take a notoriously flamboyant figure, the holy man—and especially the holy man of Syria, who had previously been presented to us as the incarnation of all that was unbearably high-strung, if not downright repulsive and primitive, in the religious world of Byzantium—and to see him through the clear eyes of those who first found him useful as well as remarkable.

This was a view from the bottom up, based on a series of studies of East Roman village life, that had recently and in every aspect challenged the long-established, melancholy impression of uniform oppression and *misère* as the lot of the late Roman peasantry, in East and West alike. In 1953, the archaeological survey of Georges Tchalenko in the *Massif Calcaire* of northern Syria, between Antioch and Aleppo, revealed that the landscape against which Symeon Stylites had been active, and on which he left his name to this day—the Jebel Sem'an—was characterized by the very reverse of a depressed and servile peasantry.⁵ Rather, it showed

the emergence of a new, more egalitarian society, whose solid and unpretentious farmhouses survive to this day.⁶

But northern Syria was not the only place where it was possible for scholars to sense an East Roman countryside stirring with hitherto unexpected life. In 1962, the publication of the Abinnaeus Archive revealed the manner in which villages in the Fayum, in Egypt, drew Flavius Abinnaeus, a military man, as patron, into their vigorous quarrels.⁷ In 1964, Horst Braunert's *Die Binnenwanderung* took the

5. G. Tchalenko, *Les villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord*, 3 vols. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1953); see now G. Tate, *Les campagnes de la Syrie du Nord du iie au viie siècle* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1992).

6. Brown, "Holy Man," 115.

7. *The Abinnaeus Archive: Papers of a Roman Officer in the Reign of Constantius II*, ed. H. I. Bell, V. Martin, E. G. Turner, D. Van Berchem (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

villages of Roman and late Roman Egypt out of the permafrost in which a previous tradition of scholarship had been content to leave them. What Braunert showed was a world “unfrozen”—a world characterized by lively movement from village to village and by decisive shifts in the relationship between villages and cities.⁸ In 1964, Roger Rémondon⁹ and, a little later, Wolfgang Liebeschuetz (whose study of late Roman Antioch did not appear until 1972, but whose manuscript I read, at this time, with mounting excitement) reassessed the nature of rural patronage in Egypt and Syria.¹⁰ They recovered the distinctive profile of the relations between peasants and patrons in the East Roman countryside, in contrast to the less fortunate West, where patronage and the subjugation of a free peasantry went hand in hand.¹¹ It was a less brutally oppressive, more bilateral relationship than we had thought. Like the spiritual dominance of the holy man, here was a distinctively late Roman institution (an institution frequently manipulated by relative newcomers—military men and courtiers—to the detriment of the traditional aristocracies of the classical cities) that could be said to have grown from the ground up. It was

a significant feature of that seismic shift that enabled new classes in the empire to make their creativity felt by throwing up new forms of social relations and by moulding to their own advantage the old features of public life.¹²

The discovery of the social phenomenon of rural patronage, that seemed to link the very top to the very bottom of East Roman society, lent weight to a novel sense, in the cultural and religious history of the East Roman Empire, of the interpenetration of worlds that had hitherto been thought of as entirely separate, if not hostile to each other. The essays in Paul Peeters' *Le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine* had already pointed to *la Syrie bilingue*, to the cultural and religious “bilingualism” of Christian Syria and to its crucial role in creating a bridge between the Syriac culture of the eastern provinces and the “high”

8. Horst Braunert, *Die Binnenwanderung*, Bonner Historische Forschungen, Bd. 26 (Bonn: L. Röhrscheid, 1964).

9. R. Rémondon, *La crise de l'empire romain*, La Nouvelle Cléo, vol. 11 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 303–4.

10. W. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 192–208.

11. L. Harmand, *Libanius: Discours sur les patronages* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955); see now M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1992), 89–183.

12. Brown, “Holy Man,” 120.

Greek culture of Constantinople.¹³ Settled in the “North Syria corridor,”¹⁴ within sight of the roads that led from Antioch through Edessa to the Euphrates, “my” holy men were only the most picturesque figures, among a jostling crowd of upwardly mobile court eunuchs, Imperial butlers, top bureaucrats, poets and circus entertainers all bound for Constantinople, who could be observed to take advantage of that wide and ever-open bridge. A cultural bridge, largely created by the rise of Christianity, seemed to join Coptic, Syriac and Greek in a new, post-classical religious *koiné*. Along with its uncowed and ingenious peasantry, the cultural homogeneity of East Roman Christianity was considered, by those who had come to know East Rome in the 1960s, to be the secret of the unique resilience of the early Byzantine Empire.

It was, altogether, a moment of the breaking of a dam in the study of the cultural, social and religious history of East Rome. But it was also a time, for me, to return to my roots. I have observed that academic breakthroughs, though often acclaimed as moments of breathtaking novelty, are usually most effective when they link up with aspects of traditional academic practice, frequently “implanted” at an early stage in the routine teaching of undergraduates. Ancient sediments come into their own again, in an unexpected manner, so as to provide a secure foothold for new ventures. After decades spent studying the high thoughts of pre-medieval persons, I now found myself settling back, with a comfortable feeling, to studying the informal institutional experiments of enterprising peasants in small, face-to-face communities. I had allowed myself to become, once again, a little of an Oxford medievalist. At Oxford we had been trained, in late adolescence, to identify intellectual adulthood with the ability to trace, with disabused eye, the workings of local systems of law and administration, as these related to central authority in the “much governed England” of the middle ages. It was a training that valued, above all, canniness, if little else, in the approach to the past. Thus, when faced by a figure as startling as Symeon Stylites, I knew, from my reading of Helen Cam’s *Hundred Rolls*, how not to be overimpressed. Peasants’ petitions in Egyptian papyri, the shape and distribution of farmhouses in northern Syria, the astute pursuit of mutual advantage associated with the workings of rural patronage, helped me, as it were, to “stop down” my lens, so as to take

13. P. Peeters, *Le tréfonds oriental de l’hagiographie byzantine*, *Subsidia hagiographica*, no. 26 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1950).

14. S. A. M. Adshead and K. Adshead, “Topography and Sanctity in the North Syrian Corridor,” *Oriens Christianus* 75 (1991): 113–22.

a sharply defined photograph of a man such as Symeon, despite the “glare” of his preternatural ascetic behavior and the supernatural claims that this behavior implied. As with my first encounter with the day-to-day cunning of a medieval Hundred Court, so with my new encounter with the holy men of Syria, I would keep my cool: I knew that they were not figures out of a Gothic novel; they did not belong to a

romantic and misty period of “strong passions, enormous crimes, profound superstitions.”¹⁵

In some way or other, they belonged to a work-a-day world. It was my business, as a historian, to show how they fitted into such a world.

Second: in the late 1960s, I had returned to such themes from a significantly different direction. For, in late December 1967, I had had a long tea with Mary Douglas, at the Commonwealth Club in London. The occasion of this tea, my first contact with Mary Douglas, had been the preparation of a paper on sorcery in the later Roman empire, that was to be delivered in a meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists on the theme of *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, held to honor E. Evans-Pritchard.¹⁶ I had already become acquainted with Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, to which I had been introduced, significantly, by a fellow-medievalist—by Paul Hyams, a great connoisseur of medieval English law. In 1969, as I read the draft of the manuscript of her *Natural Symbols*, I realized—more sharply than I had done when preparing my article on sorcery—that I had entered an intellectual world that represented a total break with any past approach that I had known to the problem of the relations between religion and society.¹⁷ I also realized that this intellectual world—a world upheld by Mary Douglas, in conversation quite as much as in print, with an unremitting, scintillating consequentiality—offered the possibility of redeploying, according to entirely new interpretive categories, the mass of highly particularized, concrete evidence that had come to pour in

15. Helen Cam, *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls*, The Antiquarys’ Books (London: Methuen, 1930), 240.

16. Peter Brown, “Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages,” in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, Association of Social Anthropologists Monographs, no. 9 (London: Tavistock Press, 1970), 17–45, in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, 119–46.

17. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), and *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Cresset, 1970; repr. with new introduction, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996).

upon me, with unrelenting, minutely vivid serendipity, the moment I turned from the pages of Saint Augustine to the social and religious world of the late classical and early Byzantine East.

I was faced with nothing less than the equivalent of the discovery of a universal law of gravity. With controlled intellectual fury (whose moral and religious dimension I only later came to appreciate) Mary Douglas had intervened, in her *Natural Symbols*, in the vigorous debate associated with the reforms of Catholic practice in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Her defence of the ritualistic habits of those she called “the Bog Irish” against the reforming zeal of a high-minded, modernizing clergy had the effect of flattening the comfortable hierarchies of religious experience around which previous accounts of ancient and medieval religion had been organized. There was no such thing as a “higher,” more “spiritual” religion independent of the precise social circumstances that produced such a form of religious experience: it had no inherent superiority, in and of itself, over against more “ritualistic” forms of observance. Both forms of religion reflected, each in a different way, highly particular forms of social interaction. As a result, the “elevated,” “spiritual,” “personal” aspects of ancient and medieval religion, on which most scholars had lingered with ill-disguised preference, were no longer kept on a high shelf, far removed from the “superstitious” and “ritualistic” beliefs of those deemed to be “the ignorant masses.” For Mary Douglas, what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. In her view, the seemingly “highest” aspects of a religious system must take their place, on a strictly equal footing, with magic, sorcery, exorcism, belief in demons—indeed, with all the elements in the troubled, alien air that “my” holy men breathed with such evident gusto.

A world previously divided according to modern prejudices came together. Topics relegated to chapters with uninviting titles, such as *Die niedere Glaube* (“Lower Forms of Belief”),¹⁸ were as significant as were theology and the “higher” forms of religion. For both revealed, in different ways, aspects of the social system in which both were firmly embedded. Cultural and religious judgments as to their relative worth were deemed irrelevant. No matter how inviting, how strange or how

18. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, repr. 1996, 37–53; see Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion: II. Die hellenistische und römische Zeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1974), 520–43. For my further critique of such views, that implied a “two-tiered model” of late antique religion, see *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12–22.

repugnant to us each variety of religious experience might appear, each constellation of belief implied a moral cosmology which, if correctly characterized, could be treated as a faithful pointer to an equally clearly delineated variety of social experience.

No one had told me this before. One reads books that truly influence one for their tone quite as much as for their content. It was the unflinching universality and the diagnostic zest of *Natural Symbols* that spoke to me in the ensuing years. It had the effect of totally reordering my view of late Roman society, at exactly the same time as I had come to take the measure of the breakdown of so many previous images of that society. The two experiences converged. The later Roman empire that I had grown up to know, in the 1950s and 1960s, had been characterized by massive, conflictual blocks—town and countryside, upper class and peasantry, Hellenized and non-Hellenized, orthodoxy and heresies—that expressed the alienation of entire local populations. The vast shadow of Mikhail Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* still fell across the entire late Roman period, as did a vigorous tradition of Marxist scholarship, that was by no means limited to the wooden certitudes of Soviet publications. In particular, British late Roman history, and my own early endeavors within it, would have been inconceivable without the wide horizons and the acute sense of conflict maintained by Marxist scholars, such as E. A. Thompson and Geoffrey de Sainte Croix.¹⁹ When working on North Africa, I had already begun to soften these stark contrasts, in constant dialogue with the work of William Frend.²⁰ I had come to a considerably less conflictual view of the

19. See esp. E. A. Thompson, "Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain," *Past and Present* 2 (1952): 11–21, and "The Settlement of the Barbarians in Southern Gaul," *Journal of Roman Studies* 45 (1956): 65–75, and, later, G. E.-M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981); note p. 447, where my article is described as "marred by blindness to the realities of the class struggle in the Late Roman Empire"—a fair judgment, from the Marxist standpoint which de Ste. Croix always represented with vigor. It was a vigor that did nothing to inhibit the kindness and generosity which, almost alone among the ancient historians of Oxford, de Ste Croix showed to me as a young scholar, and not least by the gift of an offprint of his article, "Suffragium: From Vote to Patronage," *British Journal of Sociology* 5 (1954): 33–48, which prompted my later interest in the role of the saints as *patroni*.

20. W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); P. Brown, "Religious Dissent in the Later Roman Empire: The Case of North Africa," *History* 46 (1961): 83–101, in *Religion and Society*, 237–59, and "Christianity and Local Culture in Late Roman Africa," *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 85–95, in *Religion and Society*, 279–300.

principal social developments of the period. The more I studied the eastern Empire, the more it seemed to me that this was not a society that could be characterized by unbridgeable contrasts and unremitting conflicts. But I was uncertain as to what to put in their place.

The view of society propounded by the social anthropologists, and especially by Mary Douglas, amounted to a total change of scene. The heavy, conflictual structures of the later Roman empire gave way to something more like a view of a swarm of fireflies on a dark summer's night: all over the eastern Empire, vivid detonations of religious experience pinpointed (with the uncanny silence of fireflies) those precise points of social uncertainty, of expectations of fluidity, that interplay of open and closed boundaries which Mary Douglas had taught me to look for as the defining traits of a given "style" of society.

And, of course, in following those vivid flashes, one's reading could take one anywhere. It was a time to revel in new-won erudition. After many years devoted to scanning the pages of a single, towering Latin author—the works of Saint Augustine—it was time to confront the less articulate, but superabundant, riches of the religious history of the Greek East. Every detail counted. The description of a miracle in the *Life* of a Byzantine saint; the exact size and placing of farmhouses on a Syrian hillside in an archaeological report; a theological formula in a treatise or a magical spell on a fragment of papyrus; a startling gesture of authority on a late Roman mosaic; above all, the many "gossiping stones" of the Greek world—the epigraphy of Asia Minor and Syria that the work of Louis Robert and others had brought, for the first time, to my attention: every fragment of evidence of the religious and social *mores* of the eastern parts of the Empire in the Roman period came to be endowed for me, in those years, with a high charge of microcosmic, diagnostic sensitivity. They fed into an ambitious venture in interpretation, carried out in the conviction that there was, indeed, a "concordance between symbolic and social experience."²¹ Those seemingly disjointed fragments, culled from the journals and collections of papyrology, archaeology and epigraphy that I would check out, volume after volume, from the superb resources of the Ashmolean Library, carrying them home with the sense of discovering an entirely new world in its most concrete and humble details, spoke as revealingly to me of that "concordance between symbolic and social experience" as did any of the more conventional, literary sources to which I had been accustomed. It was precisely in such

21. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, repr. 1996, xxxv.

neglected corners of the late Roman world—in the hagiography, the epigraphy, the archaeology and papyrology of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, where, in any case, startling changes in the interpretation of east Roman society had begun to occur—that it was possible to build up, by new methods and from a new standpoint, a fresh and comprehensive picture of an entire society, clearly revealed in its concordant modes of social and religious experience. In sum, Mary Douglas had suggested that

We should be able to say which kinds of universe are likely to be constructed when social relations take this or that form.²²

Looking back, I do not know whether this was an altogether safe suggestion to make to a young man faced by nothing less than the need to understand the role of a vivid religious figure—the holy man—in a highly distinctive, late antique society. Articles get written, in part, because of mirages. And the mirage that flickers between the lines of my article on the holy man as behind much else that I wrote in the next decade (not least, my book *The Making of Late Antiquity*) was about as grandiose as you could get.²³

As an anthropologist, Mary Douglas had been content to juxtapose differing societies or differing groups within a society, highlighting the vaguely uncanny, unconscious consonance between the social practices and the religious world of each. But the historian might treat periods as Mary Douglas treated tribes. It was a prospect too delightful to resist. Would it not be exciting to treat the whole period from the age of the Antonines to the Iconoclast controversy as a succession of clearly delineated “tribes”? One could juxtapose the distinctive religious and social “style” of each period—each one, that is, as if it were a distinctive “tribe”; and then one could “run” those still shots, the distinctive social and religious “styles” of each period, in such a manner as to present a film of the entire social and religious history of the later Roman empire. In this film, the communal equilibrium of the classical Roman empire could be seen to give way to the *temps houlant* of the third and fourth centuries, where the *locus* of spiritual power was as fluid and open to abrasive competition as was the society in which claims to such power were made, with increasing vehemence; and, a little later, the dramatic rise of the holy man, in the fifth century, would be seen to flatten out

22. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, repr. 1996, viii–ix.

23. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

imperceptibly, in the new-found stability of the age of Justinian and the western early middle ages.²⁴ It was particularly exciting to be able to present this entire “film” strictly in terms of something as majestically neutral and universal as the shifting relation of “group” and “grid,” the ever-fluctuating balance of fluidity and rigidity, of personal enterprise and hierarchy in a Mediterranean society, as it passed, within the timespan of half a millennium, from its classical to its medieval form. The fall of the Roman empire in the West, the end of paganism and the rise of Christianity could be presented, in such an account, without once having recourse to the narrative slogans of an earlier age. It would be a history of late antiquity, that is, without a “decline and fall,” without a “crisis of nerve” and without a “rise of the irrational.” In such a late antiquity, for instance, the period of the third and early fourth centuries, austere characterized by E. R. Dodds as an “Age of Anxiety,” could come into its own, as a crucial moment in Roman history, by being more correctly diagnosed, both socially and religiously, as an “Age of Ambition.”²⁵

Some things are too good to be true. Fortunately for one’s own reputation and for the health of the field, mirages tend to disperse. I would be the first to admit that, in my article, the figure of the holy man was made to bear far too heavy an interpretative weight. I no longer think that the Christian holy man, significant though he was, can be treated as the uniquely privileged, microcosmic essence of a macrocosmic change. Nor can the macrocosmic change itself—the rise of Christianity in a re-structured Roman world—be presented with so crisp a sense of unidirectional change as I implied in my article. Periods are not tribes. They can be juxtaposed and compared with considerable intellectual profit, along lines first laid down by Mary Douglas in her *Natural Symbols*. But they do not flick briskly from one age to another, like the frames of a motion picture. In a vast geographical area, distinguished by the greatest variety of inherited religious traditions, changes happen slowly and in a most untidy manner.

To take one small example, where my “microcosmic” approach certainly caused me to overreach myself. My classicist friend, Robin Lane Fox, can rest assured that the oracles did not fall silent, in late antiquity, with the rise of a distinctive new “style” of relations to the supernatural associated with the Christian holy man.²⁶ On such an issue,

24. Brown, “Sorcery,” in *Religion and Society*, 135–42.

25. Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, 27–53.

26. R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: A. Knopf, 1987), 677.

the spiritual landscape of the Mediterranean was more old-fashioned, less “style conscious” than I had thought was the case in 1971. The holy man, as I have returned to him in a forthcoming article in volume 14 of the new *Cambridge Ancient History* and in my book, *Authority and the Sacred*, has lost much of his instant, diagnostic glamor. He was no harbinger of a new religious order, implicitly consonant with a new style of social relations. What little “style” he imparted to those around him was more like that of a trusted neighborhood sewing woman, letting in a little here, letting out a little there, in well-worn, serviceable clothes, inherited from a distant past.²⁷ He was not, alas, a Christian Dior, creating the New Look for a new age of Roman society.

As for the holy man himself, this brings me to my final, third point. The manner in which I approached his strictly religious activities—as healer, exorcist, spiritual counsellor and intercessor before God—bears the unmistakable mark of a precise moment in my own life and in aspects of the culture around me. At the risk of appearing unduly autobiographical, this more personal aspect of the writing of the article needs to be stressed. For, as I read it again, there is a raw charge and the sense of an urgent, partly intuitive eclecticism that is particularly apparent in the latter half of the article, where I deal with the manner in which the holy man operated within the religious system of east Roman Christianity.

In order to understand the intellectual and cultural conditions of Britain in the late 1960s, we must remember one thing. In the modern academic world, the term “interdisciplinary” tends to be taken for granted. Along with “Theory,” “interdisciplinary” has become a phrase calculated to bring a benevolent smile to the lips of deans and funding bodies. It has also, alas, become an exclusionary banner, waved with vigor in internecine skirmishes within academe itself. For good or ill, it has become part of our university culture. In the Oxford of the 1960s, it played no part whatsoever in the normal functioning of the university. It was something that you did for yourself, if you had the intellectual ambitions and cultural ambitions to do so, and friends and acquaintances prepared to indulge and encourage your extracurricular aspirations. To apply the words of my master, Arnaldo Momigliano, describing, with

27. Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter 3, “Arbiters of the Holy: The Christian Holy Men in Late Antiquity,” at 57–78, and “Arbiters of Ambiguity: A Role of the Late Antique Holy Man,” *Cassiodorus: Rivista di studi sulla tarda antichità* 2 (1996): 123–42.

his exquisite sense of the nuances of English, the writing of biography, “interdisciplinary” study was what “gentlemen” did. “But were they gentlemen?”²⁸ The scholars of Oxford were far from certain that they were.

As a result, the acquisition of a full modern culture—and not least a culture that addressed the all-important borderline of psychology and social studies, to which historians of religion had begun to turn²⁹—usually occurred to one side of, if not in self-conscious defiance of, the dominant culture of the university. This was a closed academic culture, perpetually reinforced by the most subtly conservatizing of all practices—by the intensive teaching of a fixed curriculum to intelligent late adolescents, lured into compliance by the promise of instant adulthood to be had on strict but unproblematic terms. One “disciplined” the mind; one did not widen it.

I remember how, as early as 1958, I sat in the bar of *The Turf* inn, from late morning into the early afternoon, reading about the blood-feud in Max Gluckman’s *Custom and Conflict in Modern Africa*.³⁰ This was an utterly appropriate, because studiously marginal, place in which to absorb such work. *The Turf* was a pub; it was not really “Oxford.” The train that took me to Paddington was similarly charged with a sense of access to a culture excluded by the University. For it was in a metropolitan culture (somewhere in Bloomsbury, perhaps, or among the B-Group Freudians of Highgate, or at the Tavistock Clinic), and not among the dull dons back home, that the fullness of the secrets of human behavior were best known and were discussed with most fervid intellectual energy.

That metropolitan world was close to me in 1970. I was married to a former psychiatric social worker, trained at the Tavistock Clinic, anxious to teach psychoanalytic perspectives on social work, and, eventually, to practice as an analyst, despite the lack of interest in such concerns in the Oxford of that time. Intense debates on psychiatric practice, and

28. Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1.

29. Notably, for the ancient world, E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), see Peter Brown, “Aspects of the Religious Crisis of the Third Century A.D.,” *English Historical Review* 83 (1968): 542–58, in *Religion and Society*, 74–93, esp. 75–80.

30. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955). I was not, of course, alone in such reading: see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, “The Blood Feud of the Franks,” *The Long Haired Kings* (London: Methuen, 1962), 121–47, at 123 n. 1.

especially on what constituted a psychiatric “cure,” were constantly present to me at that time. They were no academic matter. They were tinged with seriousness, even with bitterness. They touched on the very status of the psychoanalytic profession itself, on its qualifications and on the role to be allotted to a woman of non-medical background. Such things hurt at one remove. Furthermore, from 1968 to 1974, I myself was involved in a Kleinian analysis—hence the xeroxes with the jagged writing on their margins and the traces of stains of teacups and custard cream biscuits from a cafe in Maida Vale.

I was particularly concerned, in those tense years, that my explanation of the effectiveness of the holy man should be both sociologically and psychologically convincing. With that in mind, I attempted to elaborate, from scattered hints—for the field of psychology was notably lacking in figures of the synthetic brilliance of an Evans-Pritchard and a Mary Douglas—a homespun theory of psychological needs. I wished to explain why the figure of the holy man was “charged” with specific expectations, why his authority came to be held as “objective,” why his interventions were tinged with a distinctive “crackle” of power, and why his very person was held to resolve the acute ambivalence of mercy and anger associated with the Christian God. All of these questions assumed models of psychological interaction, indeed, the existence of strong psychological forces, that had been excluded in the more consequential, but more closed, syntheses of the social anthropologists. Yet what struck me at the time was the manner in which Kleinian psychoanalytic theory persistently converged on the small-group analysis practiced by anthropologists. It seemed to explain the dimension of strong affect that characterized the society which had invested the holy man with such dramatic qualities. For, unlike the more inward-looking Freudianism, for which I could find little use, Kleinian theory had the advantage that it stressed, above all, the dynamics of personal interaction. It was concerned with “object-relations.” It examined the manner in which an unconscious charge of idealization, projection, ambivalence peopled the world around the individual, and so the world of any small society, with figures endowed with heavy overtones of power, goodness or evil.³¹

In this way, Kleinian psychological models—with their emphasis on the power ascribed, through projection, to idealized figures—colluded

31. Hence my debt to social psychology and to the journal *Human Relations*, especially to studies that dealt with situations involving healing and authority in micro-societies, such as hospitals: e.g., Isobel Menzies, “A Case Study of the Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety: A Report on a Study of the Nursing System of a General Hospital,” *Human Relations* 13 (1960): 95–121.

with the daring, “microcosmic” suggestions of Mary Douglas, to place an unusually heavy emphasis on the person of the holy man. Here was a figure who could be singled out as a privileged symptom of the distinctive religious and social “style” of an entire society and, at the same time, who was “charged,” in a dramatic, partly unconscious manner, with the hopes and fears of those around him. This left me with a problem to which I have frequently returned. In my article on “The Saint as Exemplar,” that was written in Berkeley in 1983, and published in the first volume of *Representations*, I made plain that

the greatest single feature of my portrayal of the holy man in need of revision would be his “splendid isolation.”³²

I have made several attempts to overcome that “splendid isolation.”³³ It might be helpful, on this occasion, to look at the reasons why I had tended to isolate the holy man in the way that I did in the article of 1971. Put very briefly: to be effective, I believed that the holy man had to be starkly different from everyone else. The sociological and the psychological models that I used converged to wish upon him a greater degree of separateness from his fellows than he may, in fact, have possessed. To work as a patron and mediator, the holy man had to present himself as a total “stranger.” But he had to remain totally “other” in psychological terms also, so as to receive the heavy charge of idealization that enabled him to act effectively as an “objective” spiritual counsellor—the heir of the ancient oracles—and as the source of cures whose principal therapeutic drama appeared to me, at the time, to have consisted in intense focussing upon a single, “objective” healing agent.

Altogether “my” holy man lived a lonely and abrupt existence. His asceticism had less to do with a notion of the relation of body and spirit within himself as it did to separating himself out, through a melodramatically afflicted body, from his fellows: such asceticism was “a long drawn out, solemn ritual of dissociation—a becoming the total stranger.”³⁴ His activities assumed an ability to be charged with associations of power “from above.” Hence my magnificent obsession, at that time, with the visual rhetoric of power on every level of Roman society—not only in the imperial court, but in the theater, in the streets of the cities,

32. Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 1.2 (1983): 1–25 at 11.

33. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 57–78, “Arbiters of Ambiguity,” 123–42, and “The Holy Man,” *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14 (to appear).

34. Brown, “Holy Man,” 131.

even in figures and formulae carved on the stone lintels of humble farmhouses. The iconography of the hand of God in Jewish and Christian art, as studied by André Grabar, and the restless, excited world of acclamations, brought together in the *Eis Theos* of Erik Peterson, formed the background to the day-to-day work of the holy man as he made the hand of God palpable on earth.³⁵ Power was as power did. Hence the many active gestures of the holy man (recorded by his biographers) made sense as part of a constantly enacted, public ritual of power that separated him yet further from his fellows. I was not surprised by this. It struck me as yet another example of those many “mini-investiture-scenes,” by which power was achieved and acclaimed by others in what appeared to be a singularly fluid and abrasive age. As for his clients, they seemed to me to have colluded in creating a gulf between themselves and the holy man. They endowed his stable person with qualities that were the opposite to their own more fragile and discontinuous piety. He stood alone on their behalf before a very distant and threatening God. For the average east Roman, Christians were members of what struck me as an unusually fluid and complex society, by ancient standards, shot through with high expectations and faced by hard choices. They could even be thought, by me, to be capable of indulging in that most rare of all psycho-social luxuries, a “crisis of freedom.”³⁶ They needed the holy man to help them to negotiate such a crisis.

My skepticism as to these assertions focusses less on the phenomena that they describe as on what these descriptions excluded. In condemning my holy man to “splendid isolation,” I think that I unduly flattened him. It would take an entire paper to spell out how I might nowadays restore him to his three dimensions. Let me end by making four suggestions, drawn from the article itself, which I would now make to the young man who wrote it.

35. André Grabar, “Recherches sur les sources juives de l’art paléochrétien (III),” *Cahiers archéologiques* 14 (1964): 49–57; Erik Peterson, *Eis Theos: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, *Forschungen zur Religion*, Bd. 41 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1926). For a debate on the manner in which art historians such as Grabar approached representations of power in late antiquity, see T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 16–19. Despite my criticisms of the approach adopted by Mathews, in *Art Bulletin* 77 (1995): 499–502, it is a debate that should continue. On the highly distinctive intellectual background of Erik Peterson, see Barbara Nichtweiss, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1992), 273–91.

36. Brown, “Holy Man,” 148.

In the first place, I had unwittingly colluded with the hagiographic texts themselves, that presented the holy man in dramatic, epic terms. Like the heroes of epic, as characterized by Mikhail Bakhtin, the holy man was condemned, in such texts, to “utter externality.”³⁷ I compounded that externality yet further by insisting on looking at the holy man always from the outside, through the eyes of others—almost as a Rohrschah test of their own projections—rather than as he (or she—for we can now speak in less exclusively male terms of the holiness of both men and women) might have seen himself. At that time, the early Christian quest for sanctity did not interest me in the least. I wanted to know what the saints did for society, not what they did to themselves.

I hope that I have gone some way to make good that blind spot, through my *Body and Society*, in which I have lingered at length and with respect on those images of the person that were present in the imaginations of men and women alike, as they embarked on the difficult business of actually becoming holy in the hard school of the desert.³⁸ But that was not how I thought in the late 1960s. To go to the desert was simply for me, at that time, to translocate: it was to step into a special niche, as an outsider, crisply defined by contrast to other niches in a society that struck me as uniquely sensitive to the social resonance of ecological boundaries. It was not to transform oneself, still less to transform the desert itself, according to a haunting collective representation of a new Adam at peace in a Paradise Regained. I had to wait until 1983, for Bernard Flusin to add that further dimension to my notion of the holy man as “stranger,” in his exquisite study of Cyril of Scythopolis and the monks of sixth-century Palestine, *Miracle et histoire dans l'oeuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis*.³⁹ But even Saint Patrick could have told me something of what it was like to *become* Symeon Stylites rather than what it was like to have been declared, by others, to *be* Symeon Stylites; for Patrick's *Confessio* gives us a precious glimpse, from the inside, of the first stages in the life of a holy man:

But after I reached Ireland, well, I pastured the sheep every day and used to pray many times a day: more and more did my love of God and my fear of Him increase, and my faith grew and my spirit stirred, and as a result I

37. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, transl. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 133.

38. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213–40.

39. B. Flusin, *Miracle et histoire dans l'oeuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1983), 125–26.

would say up to a hundred prayers in one day, and almost as many at night; I would even stay in the forests and on the mountain and would wake to pray before dawn in all weathers, snow, frost or rain: and I felt no harm and there was no listlessness in me—as I now realize, it was because the Spirit was fervent within me.⁴⁰

Second: if the holy man was defined, less by his “translocation” than by the “transformation” of his person, through a Spirit-filled ascetic discipline and through the imaginative alchemy associated with the return of Adam, in the desert, to his Paradise Regained, then, of course, the issue of his male gender becomes that much more interesting. If I spoke of holy *men* in my article, it was not solely because the Oxford of 1971 still lived, insouciantly, in the Jurassic age of gender studies—as was certainly the case. Holy males were the persons that I met in my sources; and I met them because, as holy men, they fulfilled a particular, highly public, even confrontational role, that women, whatever their reputation for sanctity, were rarely expected to occupy.

But the exclusion of women from that particular, highly public and conflictual role is only half an answer. For maybe holy men were not “men.” I would now wish to ask what light is cast on notions of male gender itself, in the early Byzantine world, by the conviction that a man such as Symeon, as an “angelic” man, was not even a male? By living a life that mirrored the angels, the *demuta’ de-mala’ke’* of Syrian piety, he had transcended the categories of gender as normally defined. I would suggest the working of an imaginative alchemy similar to that which thought of the desert monk as the wild man turned into the image of Adam. Symeon, the angelic man, was seen as a male turned so completely from the procreation that defined male gender in the normal world as to become, as an angel, an unfailing source of hyper-procreativity in the world around him. I would apply to Symeon the words used by Katherine Ringrose in her subtle analysis of the image of the eunuch in east Roman society:

If one looks past the polarity of language and male-oriented definitions of gender . . . it becomes apparent that they acquired the main attributes of a distinctive, socially constructed gender.⁴¹

40. Patricius, *Confessio* 16, transl. A. B. E. Hood, *St. Patrick: His Writings* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978), 44.

41. Katherine Ringrose, “Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium,” *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. G. Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 85–109, at 109.

This “socially constructed gender,” of course, was the powerful and all-productive “non-gender” of the mighty angels—beings thought of as capable of touching, without being soiled by such contact, all that was most concrete, most physical, most carnal in this world: the wombs of women, the growth of seeds, the multiplication of livestock, the life-giving, muddy flood of the Nile.⁴²

Third: from the point of view of east Roman society, I now consider that I underestimated the role of the Christian church itself and of pious Christian notables, whether clergymen or lay men and women, as a separate stratum of the village world around the holy man. In the late 1960s, the discovery of the villages of Syria and Egypt had been a heady enough breakthrough for one decade. We should remember that this discovery coincided with a spate of studies of the “little community,” associated with the work of Robert Redfield. “Portraits of human wholes” were the delight of our time. It was good to retire to one’s bath with a short study of a village—Turkish, Palestinian, Egyptian, Andalusian or Central American—to read how yet another “little community” had moved, in our own times, and the more hesitantly the better, towards modernity, providing the observer with a challenging view of the subtle admixture of “folkways and stateways” that seemed to characterize village society throughout the world. Such studies of modern villages gave pause for thought to late Roman historians, who had, until recently, considered the villages of Egypt, North Africa and Syria to be utterly closed worlds, untouched by—even hostile to—the concerns of the “great tradition.”⁴³

The social stratification of these “human wholes” was as ill-defined as was the social stratification of the newly discovered late Roman villages of northern Syria. In my article, “the village,” *tout court*, met the holy man as a faceless entity. There are few village elders and no village churches in my account. Yet it seems to me now that such a view looks straight through one of the most decisive achievements of fourth- and fifth-century Egypt and Syria, which was the expansion of the Christian church itself, as a sharply defined institution, with a rapidly expanding *Nomenklatura* of authoritative clergymen. If we read the recent book of Roger Bagnall on late Roman Egypt, we see that the villages passed through a “rudderless” phase in the early fourth century, as the villages

42. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 78, and more fully in “Arbiters of Ambiguity,” 140–42.

43. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 96–148.

of Syria may have done at a later time. But, by the beginning of the fifth century, in one village alone, twelve priests and five deacons come out of the woodwork to impose a settlement on the distribution of water.⁴⁴ The lines of command had begun to be drawn with a firm hand. We should not underestimate the remarkable—because far from foregone—achievement of Athanasius as patriarch of Alexandria, in harnessing to his authority the religious ferment of his age.⁴⁵ New local elites had been created by a new sense of the religious community. They were grouped around the Christian church of each village. The message of Annick Martin's detailed study of Athanasius' relations with the local churches of Egypt is reinforced by David Brakke's *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*. The authorized image of the holy man that circulated in Egypt was patiently created by Athanasius himself and was addressed precisely to those new local groups:

his principal constituency remained the people of the parish churches and their priests and bishops.⁴⁶

As for the Syria of the age of Symeon Stylites, the egalitarian impression of the farmhouses of the *Massif Calcaire* that so struck Tchalenko must now be set beside the slightly later evidence for lavish silver-work and inscriptions on mosaics of the churches of Syria and Jordan. Such evidence speaks of the growing wealth and permanence of little clerical and lay oligarchies, firmly established, by the late fifth century, in the villages and small towns of the region.⁴⁷ It was these local notables, and not always the "average" late Roman, who consulted and supported holy men. Like the gods of an earlier time, their words were for the rich.⁴⁸

Fourth, and last, what I have learned in the last decades is the quiet power of what one might call the "collective representations" that the

44. Roger Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 137–38.

45. Annick Martin, *Athanasie d'Alexandrie et l'Église de l'Égypte au ive siècle*, Collection de l'École française de Rome, no. 216 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1996).

46. David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 271.

47. C. Mango, "Aspects of Syrian Piety," in *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth Century Byzantium* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 99–105; P.-L. Gatier, "Villages en Proche-Orient proto-byzantin (4e–7e siècle): Étude régionale," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 2, eds. G. R. D. King and Averil Cameron (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), 17–48.

48. David Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 49.

Christian holy man shared with the average believer. Such considerations have levelled up the ground between his own position, as an elevated “stranger,” and the spiritual powers and expectations of pious Christians “in the world.” Late Roman Christians now seem to me to have held a more optimistic, less melodramatic view of their day-to-day relations with God than I had once thought. One did not have to sit on a sixty-foot column for one’s prayers to be considered acceptable and useful to one’s neighbors.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the notion of “collective representations” lends a viscosity, a sense of weight from the past to the holy man’s experiences and ministrations. It is hard to reconcile my growing sense, over these decades, of the mute continuities between pre-Christian and Christian practice,⁵⁰ with the image, which I then communicated, of the holy man as the exponent of a totally self-created and dramatically stylized “new” way of life. Let me be content with one example. Looking back on my marginal notes to the xerox of Hilgenfeld’s translation of the Syriac *Life* of Symeon Stylites, I notice that I expressed a certain puzzlement at the absence of highly personalized drama in so many of his miracles. They seemed to come, quite literally, from off the column itself, and not—as my model for his efficacy would have led me to expect—from his ever-active hand and authoritative voice.

When I first gave “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man” as a public lecture in America, at Princeton, in 1972, Carl Schorske approached me afterwards, and suggested, jokingly, that perhaps Freud had something to say on the meaning of such a column. At that time, my reading of current social anthropology made me unduly prim about such questions. It seemed to me sufficient to say that symbols were social creations. They had the short life span of the social interactions that gave them meaning. Their immediate function was what one needed to know. This immediate function stood between the observer and the discreet weight of the past, just as it excluded from consideration the presence of seemingly timeless, unconscious imaginative associations. I welcomed such a brisk view as a merciful respite from the pressure of too heavy and too easily misunderstood a past, frequently invoked with more learning

49. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 60–62.

50. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 3–4, and *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 95–102. For the notion of a distinctive, regional “spiritual landscape” (in this case, that of Saivite South India, inherited and adapted by both Muslims and Christians) I owe much to Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 130.

than good sense. I did not wish to get mired in the monotonous and undifferentiated continuities assumed, without reflection, to exist across the centuries, by writers of monographs in the *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*. It was not until 1990 that David Frankfurter was able to reassert the significance of Symeon's relation to his column, in terms of enduring imaginative patterns particular to the religious landscape of Syria. He did so in such a way as to make it possible to think again about the continuities between pagan and Christian practice without sounding like a romantic or a pedant.⁵¹ And it was not until 1992 that Robert Doran's preface to his *Lives of Symeon* captured the sense of quiet, cosmic order that radiated from the column itself, reinforcing ancient imaginative boundaries in the villages of Syria and the mountains of Lebanon.⁵²

To sum up: at the beginning of my article, I had attempted to explain the holy men of late antiquity by means of studiously matter-of-fact situations. By the end of the article, the holy men had become, once again, somewhat larger than life. For their social role, as I then saw it, forced them into drama, and excluded consideration of those more serene, less highly personalized imaginative structures that I have come to appreciate more in the Christian imagination of their time. I suspect that there was always room for both. Let me end by taking two examples from different areas of the Islamic world, observed by modern ethnographers.

Drama and "focussing" have their place in the activities of a holy man, and particularly in the occasional resolution of conflict. In Michael Gilsean's recent masterpiece of anthropological narrative, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches*, we meet a figure not at all unlike one of "my" holy men, as I relished them in 1971. Sheik Ahmad al-Ba'arini was a notorious outlaw and exemplar of *marajul*, of manly honor. To seek settlement from him

transformed the occasion from a routine haggle. . . . That there were other universes and other practices was "forgotten" in the glamour of his being. . . . A cultural paradigm had taken shape before my eyes.⁵³

But, when we come to a Muslim shrine in India, *pir* Baba, sucking his cigarette in a cluttered, ill-lit room in the *dargah* of Patteshah, is a very

51. David Frankfurter, "Stylites as *Phallobates*: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990): 168-98.

52. Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, Cistercian Studies, no. 112 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Press, 1992), 43-45.

53. Michael Gilsean, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 201.

different figure. Here is someone who is beloved and effective precisely because he is so low-keyed. Sudhir Kakar was struck by

his curious mixture of humility and an evident pride that he stood out among the common herd . . . his self-image as a healer was of being a conduit to Allah. . . . He saw himself merely as go-between and neither accepted praise for his successes nor blamed himself for his failures. . . . “I only knock at Allah’s door on your behalf,” he would say. “Whether he lets you in or not is a matter between you and him.”⁵⁴

I am glad that I have come to know *pir* Baba. Unlike the charismatic ruffian, Sheik Ahmad al-Ba’arini, who is so clearly gendered, in the religious and imaginative system of late antiquity *pir* Baba could have been a woman. Low-profile, sincerely humble, but wise, and with an open face towards God, *pir* Baba could be Monegundis, dispensing remedies in her little cell in the courtyard of the shrine of Saint Martin at Tours.⁵⁵

And the cure which *pir* Baba offered was not so much a drama of focussing and authority. His quieter traditional knowledge gave to his clients “the restoration of a sense of *centrality* in time and space.” Such gentle, knowing practices reminded Kakar of an adage of Novalis: “Every sickness is a musical problem, and every cure is a musical solution.”⁵⁶

Altogether, our study of holiness and its function in late antiquity must learn to trawl with a wider net than I had once thought was necessary. For Christian sanctity, our net must include women as well as men, the churches of the villages as well as their bleak antithesis in desert and hillside, prickly local clergymen and notables as well as the humbler rank and file of villagers, gentle figures closer to *pir* Baba than to the formidable Ahmad al-Ba’arini. Then we will be able to find a way out of the “splendid isolation” of the holy man, who, as a result of a convergence of traditions current in the 1960s and early 1970s—in social history, social anthropology and psychology—has been left to roar on his pillar since 1971.

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54. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 18 and 33.

55. Gregory of Tours, *Vita Patrum* 19.

56. Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, 34 and 38.