

POPULAR PIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES: WHAT IS POPULAR? *

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From the outset of this paper it should be clear that I do not underwrite the term "Popular piety" as it stands. If, from time to time, I do use it, this is, first of all, because it is in my title; secondly, and more important, because, as I hope will become evident as I go along, I am not using it in its accepted sense, as something over and against a higher or "learned" piety, as happens in the dichotomy so favoured by many scholars: "Foi savante -- Foi populaire" and "Official piety -- Popular Piety."¹

To take the terms "Learned faith" and "Popular faith" first. Since the faith in question here is, I presume, that gift of God by which one is impelled by God himself to give one's wholehearted assent to him, then one either has this faith or has not. There is no in-between. And if one has it, there are no grades of possession. From this point of view the faith of the mediæval peasant, the faith of the ignorant or unlettered, the faith of believers at large, is exactly the faith of the learned, the intellectual, the theologian. All believe in the same God who gives them their belief and the certainty of their belief.

At another level, however, there may be differences. Although the one object of faith for the learned and unlearned is God, the learned, by meditating for example on this object of belief, may be in a position to express better than the unlearned just what that object is perceived to be. But for our purposes, this is beside the point, since it does not at all mean that the

learned believe more in God or with a greater certainty than do the unlearned. A greater intelligence, in other words, does not make for greater belief, since it is not one's intellect on its own that provides and certifies an access to the object of belief, but the object itself, God. One may see with the greatest intellectual clarity that one should believe in God, but it is God who gives the belief, not one's own powers of intellect.

To speak, then, of a "Learned faith" of the Middle Ages (or, for that matter, of any age) over and against a "Popular faith," as though it were a higher, purer form of faith, is hardly correct. The curious thing, on the contrary, is that instead of there being a "learned" faith and a "popular" faith, all faith, if any such terms are to be applied to it, is "popular" *de facto*. The object of faith, God, is as inexpressible as he is beyond our grasping him at all without his help, and therefore cannot be encompassed by human words, formulae, representations, or thought, whether learned or unlearned. Any attempt to do so at any level of learning never gets beyond the human level, and therefore, with respect to the reality in question, God never gets beyond the "popular" level. If we are to accept, for example, that Aquinas, whose faith surely would have to be classed as "savante," really said towards the end of his life that in contrast to the reality which he had just seen in a vision, all that he had written about God was so much "chaff," then this is just what he meant.²

Granted then that a "learned" faith in the basic meaning of faith is at least a contradiction in terms, it seems to follow that what the various experts who write on mediaeval faith, piety, and devotion must mean by the dichotomy "Learned faith -- Popular faith," is not that some in the Middle Ages believed in a more learned way than others, but that their expression of the object of faith that the lettered and unlettered had in common was more learned than that of the unlettered.

But this is no great help, either. For "learned" or "unlearned" expressions of belief are very fallible expressions at the best, and, as gauges of belief itself, are less than indicative. Leaving aside the obvious fact that only God, the only giver, can judge the degree with which the gift of faith is returned to him (from which point of view all are equal), the chances are that a "learned" expression of, shall we say, a theologian, may have little or nothing to do with the quality of his or her belief. The whole thing may be an intellectual game, where the bumbling or seemingly semi-superstitious expression of a so-called "illiterate" may in fact be an honest product of a faith that is attempting to express itself at his or her own level.

All of which brings me, as it should, to "Piety," since, generally speaking in a religious context, piety is the expression of gratitude in one way or another for a faith that is held by the believer as a gift from the one in whom one believes. Expressions of piety may be institutional, ecclesial, civic, Eastern, Western, Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, official, personal; but one thing seems certain: there is no real room for two "tiers" of mediaeval or other piety, one "learned," the other "popular." All again are expressions of one, single object of belief, and all the expressions, in relation to the incomprehensibility of the object, are in the long run "popular." All are equally inadequate expressions of gratitude on the part of believers for the mysterious gift of faith, on to which they hold with the help of the giver.

Expressions of piety may, of course, be classed, as I have done above, by degree of external or societal sophistication, in the sense that a "public" or "civic" expression of piety, such as that recently chronicled for renaissance Florence,³ usually has more trappings than the unsung funeral of a pauper, or a Book of Hours is more impressive than a grubby prayer-leaflet of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, or one church is more glittering than another. But these degrees of sophistication are in fact as informative about the piety that lies behind them as the learning of a theologian is about his hold on faith. The possession of a Book of Hours in the Middle Ages does not prove anything about the piety of the owner unless one can show that the owner actually used it to pray. A civic procession, for all its solemnity and attendant panoply, may not on its own tell us much more about the belief of the participants than the rambunctious goings-on today at football matches between Celtic and Rangers, the rival "Catholic" and "Protestant" soccer clubs in Glasgow, tell us about the "faith" or "piety" of the supporters of either side.

The real problem for me with the term "Popular piety" is that if one retains it, then I honestly do not know what it is in contrast to. To me, piety is, of its very nature, "popular," no matter where it is found. Piety, after all, if one is to use the term with any sensitivity to its basic meaning, is simply a grateful and respectful acknowledgement of one's relationship, generally of dependence, sometimes of admiration, to someone or something above one, whether mother, father, older brother or sister, church, country, minister, teacher, leader, God. In the case of God, which is what we are concerned with here, those who engage in acts of piety are, without distinction, simply returning thanks, each in his or her own way, to God, the Being-beyond-them, for the gift of their belief in him and for his revelation to their belief of himself and of himself-among-men in his Son. And this piety, at its most

general level, takes the form of obedience to his commandments, and, at its more specific Christian level, takes on as well the singular form of Thanksgiving proposed by his Son: the Eucharist.

I say "singular," because of all the forms of piety imaginable, this is quite outrageous: "Eat my body. Drink my blood." Yet this invitation is, in more ways than one, the blueprint of Christian piety, and the response to it in terms of piety, is at its most striking, perhaps, in the Middle Ages. For the Eucharist is an acknowledgement, a divine acknowledgement at that, that human beings as human beings do not exist in or by spirit alone; and that belief, an act of the spirit, has need of a bodily expression as well. The Eucharist is an invitation to something that is precisely on the level, the bodily level, of man: food and drink. If ever there was an exploitation of the "popular," this is it; and in the grossest form imaginable, as some opponents of Christianity in the Middle Ages were often quick to point out.⁴ For Christ's invitation to thanksgiving was not simply to eat bread and wine, but bread and wine that somehow were his own body and blood. No delicate, refined symbolism here. The wonder of it all is that this as an expression of belief and piety hardly bothers the historian of mediaeval "piety" and mediaeval "devotion," where far less exotic and more humanly intelligible and palatable forms do bother him. To put it another way: if this is the central act of Christian piety, then all else is child's play.

The Eucharist is, needless to say, the central act of Christian piety, and is *the* act of popular piety, by any meaning of "popular" that one chooses. And it is, because of its origin, automatically the yardstick of any and every Christian manifestation of piety, just as it is, in mediaeval doctrine, the hub around which the other sacraments revolve. Logically speaking, then, all other expressions of mediaeval piety should be classified or described in terms of or in relation to this fundamental act of piety. This is not all that difficult, I suggest, if one remembers that the repetition of this central act of Christian piety or thanksgiving usually is termed in the Middle Ages, as in other times, "The Liturgy." Hence when one speaks of "The Liturgy," one generally means the Eucharist, and other forms of Liturgy or worship which are not on the same level as the Eucharist are usually qualified as the "Liturgy of Baptism," "Liturgy of Confirmation," "Liturgy of the Hours," etc.

Looking, then, at mediaeval manifestations of piety in terms of their proximity to or remoteness from the act of piety that is "The Liturgy," the following categories suggest themselves. Expressions which, like the sacraments, are intimately connected with the Eucharist and, consequently, with the

person of Christ himself, are clearly *liturgical*, without qualification. Those, on the other hand, which, like Preaching and the Divine Office, have a close but not necessarily an intimate connection with the Eucharist, may be called *semi-liturgical*. Then those which, though they may seem only remotely connected with the Eucharist, nevertheless are related to it, just as the cult of the saints is, may be termed *para-liturgical*. Those, further, which are not at all connected with the Eucharist, yet are not at variance with the meaning of piety as embodied in the Eucharist, may be dubbed, but without any negative connotation, *non-liturgical*. Those, finally, which are aberrant or misguided expressions that prove on examination to run counter in spirit to all that the Eucharist as an act of thanksgiving implies, may be classed, in all charity, as *a-liturgical*.

All of this categorization may seem cumbersome, but at least it has the merit of classifying acts of piety not in extrinsic or accidental terms such as "official" or "institutional" or "learned" or "popular," but in terms of their object, God, and specifically in terms of their relationship to that act of piety which his Son, Christ, gave for the participation of all who believed in his Father: the Eucharist. It has the merit, too, as the categories "official" and "popular" do not, of allowing for the fact that those who engage in acts of piety have a remarkable range of acts at their disposal, and are not at all tied, as if by some sort of class-distinction, to one or other given category. An "official" act of piety, for example, may just as easily be a para-liturgical act, such as honouring a saint, as a straight liturgical act such as the Mass. A civic, a parish, or indeed a purely personal expression may take the form of anything within reason, from the solemnly liturgical -- a Mass in a square, in church grounds, in the fields -- to the non-liturgical: visiting a holy well or keeping the grass down in a cemetery.

Of course, a very pertinent question at this point may well be, "If the Eucharist is the act of Christian piety, why then all these other expressions in the Middle Ages, some of which are at quite a remove from the Eucharist and all that it implies?" If, as I suggested earlier, the Eucharist is an adroit as well as a rather shocking concession to the fact that human beings are human beings and therefore need to have some way of expressing their thanks in a human manner for the gift of faith, then an answer is not hard to come by. All forms of piety, with the Eucharist setting the headline in the Christian context, are attempts by believers to engage the whole person and not just the mind and heart in thanks for belief and for all that goes with it.

All, no matter what form they may take, even a mistaken one, ultimately are attempts to compensate for the inescapable fact that belief, for all its richness and God-given certainty, is a stark, intellectual, demanding thing that, humanly speaking, goes more than a little against the grain and needs some external form of expression and support, whether it be the symbolism of the Eucharist or a religious token on one's person. What is more, belief in a Christian (and here I am speaking of Christian belief, though this applies to most beliefs) is an act of faith by which fallible, gullible, fleshly human beings are put in touch with and give consent to a Being that is beyond their ken, in every sense: a Being whom they cannot touch, see, hear, catch a whiff of; a Being with whom they cannot walk, talk, carouse, as they are accustomed to do with their fellows. And in their own way, whether collectively or personally, they compensate at the human level for this lack, just as Christ did for them in the Eucharist.

What is true generally is particularly true of the Middle Ages. With the aid of faith -- faith indeed "seeking intelligence" -- mediaeval Christians attempted as best they could to search out and greet the God in whom they believed in the things and people they had some human experience of: in bread and wine, first and foremost, and in the various sacraments, since Christ himself had designated these specifically as symbols in which they could encounter God and through which they could return thanks to him for their gift of belief; in various objects and matter connected with the Eucharist, such as water, candles, oil; in things or persons linked in one way or another with the human Christ whose death and resurrection they remembered in the Eucharist -- in rush crosses and wayside crucifixes, in shrines and memorials of Christ's mother and Joseph and the apostles, in the cultivation of the relics of saints and others in whom they thought they had caught sight of God at work in their midst, and hence had something physical to hold on to as an intermediary on their own level, whether dead or alive did not matter, with the God they had never met in person.

The mediaeval enthusiasm for eucharistic processions and pageants, and various other semi-liturgical, para-liturgical and non-liturgical forms of devotion to the Eucharist, may have their explanation in this attempt at "compensation." Everyone was familiar with the Eucharist, but for all that it was a supreme acknowledgement on God's part of the need of man for something tangible through which to express gratitude for faith and divine benevolence. The very setting of the Eucharist in church or oratory, and the ritual surrounding it, created a distance between believers in general and the object

of their faith. The communal act of piety was in fact too communal to be wholly and satisfyingly personal. But out in the streets in a eucharistic procession, the Son of God in the eucharistic bread or "host" was now in the open and moving about, however symbolically, as he had once moved among the people of Judaea. The mediaeval believer, so much an onlooker in church, could now walk behind, before, beside, perhaps even shoulder, Christ the Son of God in the bread he had designated as his Body, could strew flowers, dance and make music, in a friendly, companionable, and very personal act of thanksgiving.

The root of all these mediaeval expressions of para-liturgical, semi-liturgical and other modes of piety is, it seems to me, a desire to engage the whole person physically and hence as completely as possible in acts of thanksgiving (whether straightforwardly or out of fear or apprehension or sheer self-interest matters little). In the long run it was simply an extension to anything and everything within reason (and sometimes not) of the model of piety Christ himself had set up in the Eucharist. Anything and everything could be an expression of piety, provided it had some connection, real or perceived, with God and with his Son in the Eucharist. And it could be something loaded with symbolism in its own right, as were the painted candles which new mothers such as Béatrice de Planissoles of *Montaillou* fame, presented at the altar in their parish church, or it could be as simple and uncomplicated an expression as that of the citizen of London 1392 who in his will left seventeen shillings to his parish church "in memory of the ten commandments and the seven deadly sins."⁵

Of course, para-liturgical and non-liturgical forms of piety such as these are the most intriguing of all, though the a-liturgical are not without interest too. All these forms of piety, even if from time to time they become institutionalized, are basically a product of spontaneity rather than of obedience to some ecclesiastical directive or other. A not unreasonable name for most of them would be "spontaneous piety," provided one remembers that the spontaneity springs from faith, and from faith attempting to engage the whole person. Certainly "spontaneous" would avoid the somewhat condescending if not pejorative connotation of "popular."

All the same, call them what you will, these forms of piety may not be looked upon as though in opposition to, or by definition inferior to, purely liturgical forms such as the Eucharist and the sacraments. Rather, like the Eucharist itself, they are simply extensions of faith to things to which, at a human level, a person of faith may relate easily -- often, indeed, with more

ease than he or she can relate to the model itself of expressions of piety, the Eucharist, since that, for all its sensitive appreciation of the needs of believers at a human level, in itself requires a further act of belief. Like the Eucharist, these various forms of piety in the Middle Ages are there because the person of faith is not disembodied. He or she in fact is more alive than most. To him or her the God of faith enlivens everything, and though never met in person can be encountered and revered, however much at a distance, wherever faith prompts him to be discerned.

Hence the difficulty of putting an intellectual framework on the spontaneous piety of the Middle Ages, of fathoming its patterns, of fitting it into various anthropological schemes, of putting it on the lower of a double tier of "learned" and "popular," "official" and "non-official," and the like. The "fides quaerens intellectum" of Anselm is as valid of the spontaneous forms of piety or religion in the Middle Ages as it is of the expressions of faith, of the forms of piety, that are deemed "learned." All these expressions in the long run are but feeble attempts to capture in human terms at varying levels a common belief in God and his relationship to man and creation, whether these expressions are those of Anselm above in his *Proslogion* or those of a troubadour strumming the praises of Mary.

This is not to suggest that one cannot profitably plot, quantify, or study mediaeval or other expressions of piety, liturgical or not, wherever one finds them. But to judge the various expressions in relation to one another *tout court* -- "popular," for example, in terms of "learned" -- is hardly just. The only judgement of their quality, I am convinced, should be in terms not of one another but in terms of their motivating force, belief, and its object, God. They stand or fall, the "learned" with the "popular," by the fidelity with which they express this belief in human terms. From this point of view, the so-called "learned" expression of the Middle Ages may be, at its own level, wider of the mark than the so-called "popular" at its level. Those who postulate a "learned" faith and a "learned" piety run the risk of seeing "popular" expressions of religious belief as deviations from some sort of "learned" norm rather than as understandable and mostly respectable attempts of the human spirit when imbued with faith to give a concrete expression to that faith.

To be quite fair to these mediaeval expressions, one should first ascertain just how this or that "popular" act of piety, no matter how gross or ridiculous or smacking of superstition, could possibly be an expression of some real belief which in itself is unexceptional. Only when the solid belief that lies behind or has sparked a given expression has been established, will

it be possible to speak in any reasonable way of "deviation," and even then only in terms of what is deemed by the scholar to have been held as a belief in the case in question, not in terms of or with a sole reliance upon that which someone else -- the "learned," perhaps -- held or practised in respect of the same belief.

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NOTES

¹ A paper read at the opening of a Colloquium on Devotion and Popular Piety in the Middle Ages (Fifth International Collòquium on Mediaeval Civilization), Scarborough College, University of Toronto, 27-29 January 1982. It was occasioned by a reading of some recent books and articles on popular piety and popular religion in the Middle Ages, notably: *Les Religions Populaires. Colloque international, 1970*, ed. B. Lacroix and P. Boglioni (Québec 1972); "Une enquête sur les 'spiritualités populaires'," *Revue d'histoire de la Spiritualité* (formerly *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique*) 49 (1973) 493-504; *Foi populaire. Foi savante*, ed. J.-M. R. Tillard et al. (Paris 1976), being the proceedings of a colloquium at Ottawa in 1974; R. Manselli, *La religione popolare nel Medioevo (Sec. VI-XII)* (Turin 1974), on which see R.C. Trexler in *Speculum* 52 (1977) 1019-22; N.Z. Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness*, ed. C. Trinkaus and H. Oberman (Leiden 1974), pp. 307-36; E. Delaruelle, *La Piété populaire au Moyen Age* (Turin 1975), being his collected essays, with postscripts by P. Wolff, R. Manselli and A. Vauchez; A. Vauchez, *La Spiritualité du Moyen Age occidental (VIIIe - XIIe siècles)* (Paris 1975); *La Religion populaire en Languedoc (XIIIe - début XIVe siècle)*, being vol. XI of the *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* series; J.C. Schmitt, "La 'Religion populaire' et culture folklorique," *Annales E.S.C.* 31 (1976) 941-53, being a critique of Delaruelle above; J. Le Goff, *Pour un autre moyen âge: Temps, travail et culture en Occident* (Paris 1977), especially part three; *Congrès national des sociétés savantes, Besançon 1974: La Piété populaire au moyen âge*, 2 vols. (Paris 1977), especially the review articles by

M. Mollat and A. Vauchez, I. pp. 7-25 and 27-42; P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago 1981)

² See J.A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino* (New York 1974) 321.

³ R.C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York 1981).

⁴ See, for example, the comment of the legist Vacarius circa 1170 from England, replying to a jibe of his dissident friend in Italy, Ugo Speroni, at the "Catholic practice" of receiving Christ "wholly in the stomach," in I. da Milano, *L'eresia de U. Speroni nella configurazione del maestro Vacario* (Vatican City 1945) 527-28.

⁵ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, The Promised Land of Error*, translated by B. Bray (New York 1978) 165, 306; will of Roger Sheriff, clerk 1392, in R.R. Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting* (London 1889) ii. 296-97.