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Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change

TO ADD TO A COLLECTION of studies on the social and intellectual evolution of the first millennium B.C. a paper whose center of gravity lies to the modern side of the first millennium A.D. seems to call for some justification. The prophetic message of Zoroaster, the philosophical and religious currents of the Hellenistic age, the rise and establishment of the Christian church—such themes might have seemed more apposite, either because they were contemporary with the changes discussed in the other papers in this volume, or because, though later in time, they could be seen as the direct sequels of such changes.

The logic of our common discussions seemed to call for a different treatment. These hinged on the problem of change: how can we meaningfully analyze and describe profound changes in the social and moral environment of long-dead societies? Once the problem of change emerged as our common concern, it became less incumbent to contribute to *Dædalus* yet another reliable account of yet one more turning point in the formation of European culture. The opportunity suddenly presented itself to acknowledge with gratitude debts incurred some time ago to a great tradition of scholarship and to branch out to learn yet more new things from that great tradition. For, in this generation, the study of the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. has been the forcing ground for some of the best evocations of the processes of social and intellectual change available to the student of any pre-industrial society. To read Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*, Richard Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages*, M. D. Chenu's *La théologie au XII^{ème} siècle*, and Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual* is to pluck with both hands a wealth of material, brilliantly marshaled, on the kinds of intimate, irreversible, and delicately interrelated changes of which any pre-industrial society may be capable.¹

The small emergent world of Northwestern Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, on which this study must concentrate, often strikes the student of the classical ancient world—and especially the student of classical Greece and ancient Israel—as strangely germane to his own concerns. Here also we find a stocktaking and revaluation of traditional religion by a newly formed intellectual elite, associated above all with the Schools of Paris and with such great names as Peter Abelard (ca. 1079-1142).² We find a sharpening and a redistribution of roles in society, dramatically pinpointed in the sudden emergence of a new relationship between clergy and laity in the time of the Investiture Contest (a contest connected with the name of one great pope—Gregory VII [1073-1085]—but in reality a process as widespread and ineluctable as a change in the tide of Western society).³ In the course of the eleventh century the feudal knightly class emerges as a distinct group,⁴ while, in the twelfth century, the facts of urban life and of a new-style mercantile

professionalism had come to stay, and were slowly but surely incorporated in the medieval image of society.⁵ We find novel departures in forms of law and organization: the emergence of written codes after centuries of customary, oral law, the reception of Roman law at the Schools of Bologna, and the codification of the canon law and theology of the Christian church (in the *Decretum* of Gratian, ca. 1140, and the *Sentences* of Peter the Lombard, ca. 1150).⁶ We have a singularly consequential attempt to found a new religious order on the basis of a written rationalized legislation, in the case of the Cistercians (first founded in 1098).⁷ Innumerable novel ventures in administration and constant experimentation in new forms of social organization cover the face of Europe of the twelfth century.⁸ Finally, and most revealing of all for our purposes, we find a probing of modes of self-expression which vary from a revival of the tradition of religious autobiography associated with St. Augustine to the totally novel departure of courtly love poetry (Bernard de Ventadour was writing around 1145).⁹

Like the foundations of a great cathedral, these achievements are largely invisible to us because they are so continuous with all subsequent masonry. Compared with so solid and intimate a link between ourselves and our own twelfth-century past, the revolutions of the first millennium B.C. have the exhilarating but remote air of a mountain range seen on the edge of a far distant horizon.

However, our discussions made plain that we were not gathered to study Progress or to hail Achievement. This being so, the claims of the period covered by the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. are both more modest and more cogent: we happen to know more about them. The state of culture and society that preceded the various revolutions of the first millennium B.C. is shadowy in the extreme compared with what we can know of the mentality and circumstances of the men of the period from A.D. 800 to 1000. It is, therefore, possible not merely to juxtapose two static studies—a painfully reconstructed 'Before' and an exuberant 'After'—but to know this 'Before,' the state of Europe in the Dark Ages, with sufficient certainty to hope to touch, or to point the way for others to touch, those levers that made possible the emergence of the one state from the other. For a scholar possessed with insatiable curiosity, not only for what changes have happened in the distant past but how change happens at all, the opportunity to study the eleventh and twelfth centuries after Christ is too good to be missed.

Let us first describe the kinds of changes which, for the non-medievalist at least, may be the most significant. They cluster around a redrawing of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. We begin in A.D. 1000, "in a world where hitherto the sacred and profane had been almost inextricably mixed."¹⁰ One cannot resist the impression that a release of energy and creativity analogous to a process of nuclear fission stemmed from the disengagement of the two spheres of the sacred and the profane in the succeeding two centuries. Take the best known example: the new demarcation of the roles of the clergy and of the laity associated with the Investiture Contest acted to the eventual benefit of both parties. The clergy, theoretically placed superior to the laity, were made in reality more self-contained. A vast rise in their cultural standards and interests was made possible by the acute sense of being able to "go it alone" as a professional group with their own high professional standards. In the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages, by contrast, a gifted man might have found himself either encapsulated in a monastery to one side

of the human group, tied as a monk to the life of an honorary angel, or, if he were to take his place within the group, immobilized by a network of obligations ranging over the whole sphere of the sacred and the profane. The biographies of great bishops in tenth-century Germany, for instance, reveal men who, though impressive as pillars of the community, were forced to be jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none.

The situation of the twelfth century, by contrast, is a world where gifted men could find leisure, incentive, and personal resources to tackle more strictly delimited tasks. The laity also, though technically made inferior to the clergy, came to enjoy the freedom that came from a vast unpretentiousness. Political power was increasingly wielded without religious trappings. Government was what government did: rulers, who could no longer claim to stand for an undifferentiated, archetypal image of power, settled down to exercise what real power they actually possessed in a more rational, a more literate, and a more effective manner.¹¹ The age that began with the penance of the Emperor Henry IV before Gregory VII at Canossa in 1077 ends in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries with a brittle but unanswerable assertion of purely secular values surrounding a newly formed mystique of chivalry and a code of courtly love. Throughout society, the disengagement of the sacred from the profane opened up a whole middle distance of conflicting opportunities for the deployment of human talent compared with which the society of the early Middle Ages appears as singularly monochromatic.

These are the changes that characterize the eleventh and twelfth centuries. We will not touch on all of them. Instead, we must now take a narrow doorway into this great hall and first examine one well-documented paradigm case of the disengagement of the sacred from the profane as it took place in this period—the case of the ordeal.¹² In so doing, we will attempt to seize the wider implications marshaled behind the phenomenon that we are examining. For if ever there was an area where the sacred penetrated into the chinks of the profane and vice versa, it was in the ordeal. In and around A.D. 1050, for instance, in the Baptistry of Canterbury Cathedral, it was possible, in the same great pool of water, both to be baptized as a Christian by the priest and, as a fully grown litigant, to undergo the ordeal of immersion in water to discover the truth about issues in a purely secular law suit: “And it could be converted from its sacramental to its judicial function with the minimum of disturbance.” “In all this confusion,” writes Professor Southern with an eye to the twelfth-century future, “there is something barbaric.”¹³ The withering of the ordeal in the course of the twelfth century has, therefore, been consistently viewed in terms of the clearing up of a “barbaric confusion.”

Let us look at the process of the withering of the ordeal. Ordeals had depended on an easy passage between the sacred and the profane. A case begun among laymen in a trial in a lawcourt might find itself transferred to the solemn *mise en scène* of a great church. The upshot of dramatic and often desperately cruel actions—the effect of a hot iron on the hand that could hold it for nine paces, of boiling water on the arm that had snatched an object from a cauldron, of whether a man sank (if innocent) or floated (if guilty) in a pool of water, the result of a duel—if all these were surrounded by solemn prayers of blessing by the priest, they would be held as the final decision of God on the rights and wrongs of the case. The ordeal was a “controlled miracle” brought to bear on the day-to-day needs of the

community:¹⁴ small issues such as debts, money, and the ownership of cattle jostled side by side with accusations of witchcraft, poisoning, murder, and assault in the register of ordeals performed in the late twelfth century in the Hungarian town of Varad, and a similar situation prevailed over much of Northern and Western Europe.¹⁵

This is the profile of the ordeal as it was attacked in the course of the twelfth century. By 1215, the Lateran Council forbade clerics to pronounce the liturgical blessing on which the whole structure of the ordeal was held to depend. The clerical critics of the late twelfth century had created a picture of the ordeal and of its untenability of which modern scholars are still the direct heirs.¹⁶ To invoke a controlled miracle by the ordeal in the course of a secular law suit was to “tempt God.” This was not only because the issues decided by the ordeal were often trivial and almost invariably worldly: to “tempt God” was also to abandon prematurely the processes of human proof and reason and to seek a certainty to which mere human beings were not entitled in such basically trivial affairs. The presence of the ordeal in the life of their age was explained away in terms that continue to be reiterated up to the present day. The ordeal, they said, was an ancient custom, vulgar, lower class, tolerated in earlier times merely as a concession by the church to the hard hearts of the Germanic barbarians.¹⁷ The withering of the ordeal, therefore, is hailed as one feature of the emergence of Western civilization from the “tunnel” of the Germanic Dark Ages and of the progress of rationality. “The essential steps had been taken in making human justice and government an affair subject to human rules and dependent on the efficacy of human agents.”¹⁸ A different description of the nature of the ceremonies and strategies of the ordeal, therefore, will help us to look also for different causes for its abandonment, and so to emerge with some tentative new conclusions as to the preconditions for a disengagement of the sacred from the profane in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and, perhaps, in analogous situations in other societies.

First, a remark about the evidence, and about our means of reconstructing the mentalities and social situations behind the evidence. We may know what everybody wants and has always wanted—the crowning mercy of truth in human affairs. The solemn blessings with which the ordeal begins make impressive reading:

O God, lover and author of peace: Thou who lookest on the earth and causeth it to tremble, look down we pray Thee on the faith and prayers of Thy supplicants, who have brought the causes of their complaint to Thy judgment. Send forth Thy blessing on this iron glowing with the fire to dissolve their contentions . . . that by its agency, justice should shine abroad and evil-dealing be conquered.¹⁹

When the wicked sons of Fulk de Morrillon took the oath on holy relics before trial by battle, they began to stumble over one another and to walk round in circles—now *that* was a good ordeal!²⁰ Sherlock Holmes also solved insoluble mysteries. Yet a detective novel would be a fragile basis from which to reconstruct the mentality and strategies of a modern crime squad. Unlike the detective novels, unlike the activities of Sherlock Holmes, of course, the ordeal happened. It was a dramatic and often a desperately cruel moment. An unsuccessful protagonist in an ordeal by boiling water could not see his way to the cauldron and, when he plunged in his arm, felt the pain as if his very heart was burning.²¹ Bracton comments grimly that

a man's front teeth are a valuable asset to him, "they greatly help in winning trials by battle."²² There were moments of heady triumph.²³

There were also moments of wild hope. A knight surrounded by suspicions of adultery had rushed "prematurely" to the ordeal by hot iron and was well and truly burned.²⁴ As Marcel Proust said: "Quand on se voit au bord de l'abîme et qu'il semble que Dieu nous ait abandonné, on n'hésite plus à attendre de lui un miracle." The register of Varad in Hungary records two hundred and seventeen cases between 1208 and 1235 with a lapidary faith in the literal truth of the ceremony: "portato ferro combusti sunt et suspensi; portato ferro pro terra ista justificatus est."²⁵

The diversity and complexity of the evidence for the ordeal do not permit any simple explanation, much less any explaining away. Yet it is, I think, legitimate to look more closely into the ceremony itself in order to decide, not what men hoped for from ordeals but, more modestly, what had continued to satisfy them about ordeals—what needs led them to maintain the ceremony as a satisfactory solution to some difficulties, and then to abandon it in the course of the twelfth century for other means of proof.

We must begin with a clear idea of who is being satisfied. Up to the twelfth century these are small face-to-face groups. We are in a Europe of low overall population where human beings were still cramped into long-inhabited settlements. These settlements could be populous enough in themselves, but they were isolated from the others by stretches of woods and poor communications.²⁶ The extended kin group is the primary unit of society, a fact studiously maintained and defined by the blood feud. Safety and protection still rested on coagulations of kinsmen and dependents in small, intense groups.²⁷ The coercive power of the state up to A.D. 1100 is weak. Literacy is severely limited. The greatest explicit ideal of the early Middle Ages is a minimal one of peace and, above all, concord: this amounted to the maintenance of a minimal consensus in a face-to-face society built up of evenly balanced family groupings. In such a society the ordeal takes on its meaning as an instrument of consensus and as a theatrical device by which to contain disruptive conflict.

The ordeal was mercifully slow. It allowed room for maneuver and for the evolution of a situation. To call it a controlled miracle and to dismiss it as tempting God, as late-twelfth-century thinkers came to do, was to import into the ceremony a singularly brisk expectation of the miracle. God might be believed to speak in an ordeal, but the human group took an unconscionably long time letting Him get a word in edgewise. For God is revealing "truth," not any specific fact. He was judging the status of a person or of a group, whether they and their claims were "pure" and "just."²⁸ He was not deciding whether a piece of land really belonged to a certain claimant. What was at stake was the status in the community of the groups that had been brought into conflict. Exoneration in the ordeal was not just the revelation of the true facts, it was victory:

Having come together in that place and duly celebrated all the rituals in the manner of the church, by the merits of St. Peter that the justice of the cause of St. Martin should be shown forth, the man of this church was untouched, without a spot of red from the iron.²⁹

Yet, with the ordeal, it was a victory carefully contained. For the spilling out of conflict was the curse of every early medieval society. To take one example only:

In March, 1134, after the assassination of the sub-Dean of Orleans, all the relatives of the dead man assembled to receive the homage, not only of one of the murderers, of his accomplices and of his vassals, but also of the "best of his kin"—in all two hundred and forty persons. In every way a man's action was propagated throughout the circle of his kinsfolk in successive waves.³⁰

The ordeal placed a contraceptive barrier between what was a dramatic and violent action and its "successive waves." In the *Chanson de Roland*, when the traitor Ganelon is defeated in trial by battle, he is killed and the thirty kinsmen who mobilized behind him are hanged in the Accursed Wood. That, for the writer of the poem at least, was the last of it. A real life vendetta, if unresolved through trial by battle, could drag on for years.³¹ Because of this, the battle of Fontenay, fought in 841, had to be declared a *iudicium Dei* retrospectively. For this battle had been so messy an affair, and the consequences of the half-resolved confrontation involved in it were so laden with rancor and the possibility of vendetta for the Frankish nobility, that the bishops declared God had spoken, and that was to be the end to it.³²

The very course of the ritual of the ordeal helped to contain conflict and to bring about a resolution. The ceremony applied a discreet massage to the ruffled feelings of the group. The most marked feature of the ordeal is the slow and solemn processes by which human conflict is taken out of its immediate context. The representative of the conflict—the man who undertakes the ordeal, who can be accuser or accused—is publicly shorn of all contact with the normal world.³³ Shaved, dressed in a shirt, for three days his diet and his whole rhythm of life is that of a priest not of a layman. He is solemnly blessed, stripped of talismans and amulets (the normal adjuncts of purely human conflict); he is liberally doused with holy water and transformed by long prayers of benediction into a prototype of the ancient righteous man delivered in times of tribulation.³⁴ He is no longer part of a human lawsuit. He is the spearhead of justice, but it is a spearhead carefully detached by long rituals from its haft, from the pressures of the groups ranged behind a disputed issue. The ordeal is entered into under conditions where the human group has usually reached deadlock. An ordeal is a tacit "de-fusing" of the issue. It is not a judgment *by* God; it is a remitting of a case *ad iudicium Dei* 'to the judgment of God.' This is an action tantamount to removing the keystone of the arch on which, hitherto, all pressures had converged. Once removed, a decision can be reached quickly and without loss of face by either side. For by being brought to the judgment of God, the case already stepped outside the pressures of human interest, and so its resolution can be devoid of much of the odium of human responsibility.

Seen from the outside, the ordeal was a *spectaculum* to which everyone flocked.³⁵ Quite apart from explicit beliefs on the nature and source of the final verdict, the ritual itself was reassuring and peace-creating. It also had the role of a demonstrative ceremony in a largely non-literate society. The ordeal was only one of a series of crucial legal transactions whose validity was derived exclusively, in the early Middle Ages, from a declaratory ritual.³⁶ It was, like similar rituals, a fixative. It attempted by dramatic and memorable gestures—such as scars, stand-up fights, floating in water—to make a lasting impression on the public memory of a small community, where the public memory was known to be notoriously given to manipulation and to acts of selective oblivion.³⁷ *Verba volant, ordalia manent* could be the motto of part of the function of this great ceremony.

The verdict of the ordeal, therefore, should not be seen in isolation. It is better seen as the final precipitation of a long-drawn-out attempt to maximize certainty. In this, the ordeal was merely a particular case of a general rule: "A decent [law] suit ended in an agreement, brought about after long discussions, in which many people had taken part. With their lack of clear lines and sharp legal distinctions and the absence of hard-cut issues, they remind us of the *palavers*, the favorite technique of settling legal disputes among the natives of Africa."³⁸ Hence the flexibility surrounding the actual role of the participants of an ordeal. Like a suit of plate armor, the ordeal may seem from the outside a single impregnable whole; but each piece of the suit is so jointed as to allow an exceptional degree of free movement. Participants had time to climb down: one hundred and twenty did so at Varad.³⁹ Others "chickened out" at different stages along the long ritual. Three days, for instance, had to elapse between the moment of holding the hot iron and the opening of a sealed bandage surrounding the hand. This was too much for twelve subjects of the ordeal in Varad: *sentiens se combustum confugit ad ecclesiam*.⁴⁰ Fiction could toy delightfully with the paradoxes involved in this freedom of maneuver. In Gottfried of Strassburg's romance, *Tristan*, the queen escapes unscathed from holding the hot iron, for she had framed a specious oath. The maneuvering of the parties behind the form of the oath is laid bare in the account: "Thus a wrangle from side to side as to what her oath should be. One man wished her ill, another well, as people do in such matters." The queen got her oath, and "she was saved by her guile, and by the doctored oath that went flying up to God. . . . Thus it was made manifest and confirmed to all the world that Christ in his great virtue is pliant as a wind-blown sleeve. He falls into place and clings, whichever way you try him on, closely and smoothly. . . ." ⁴¹ Gottfried's blasé comment, though coming at a slightly later period, has its parallels in the real life of the eleventh century. It is a tiny outcrop of the vast bedrock of cunning with which medieval men actually faced and manipulated the supernatural in their affairs.⁴²

There was a built-in flexibility in the ordeal that enabled the group, which had the main interest in reaching certainty, to maintain a degree of initiative quite contrary to the explicit ideology of the ordeal. For an ambiguity lies at the heart of every ceremony of ordeal. The hand that has held the hot iron, the hand that had been plunged into boiling water are solemnly sealed and reopened again before witnesses three days later. If the wound heals "normally," then the case is adjudged decided: God has spoken in the most elemental way, by an assertion of the integrity of a man's rights symbolized by the surviving integrity of his physical body in contact with extreme heat. But, after three days, the normal healing of such a burn is still ambiguous.⁴³ The phenomenon on which the group concentrated is, in fact, still as open-ended as a Rorschach test. Yet, paradoxically, it is around precisely this ambiguous experience that unanimity is crystallized.

The efficacy of the ordeal, therefore, remains a function of the strength of feeling in the group.⁴⁴ A heretic in Soissons "floated like a stick" when put in the blessed pool of water. The blessed water had well and truly rejected him. "At this sight the whole church was filled with unbounded joy. Their notoriety had brought together such an assembly of both sexes that no one present could remember seeing one like it before."⁴⁵ It is in this excited way that the group of interested parties could stand behind the ordeal. In a case involving their Norman king, in the very early twelfth

century, a group of down-at-the-heels Saxon landowners in Kent had the ordeal of the hot iron inflicted on them in a matter of theft, "so that it was a piteous thing to see it done." The tender-hearted local group insisted, however, that they had emerged from this in better condition than before. The comment of the king, William Rufus (1087-1100), is a tribute to this strange process of decision-making: "What is that? Is God a just judge? Damn whoever thinks it! He will answer for this by my good judgement and not by God's—which can be folded this way and that as anyone wants it."⁴⁶

Certain general conclusions might follow from this examination of the ordeal. What we have found in the ordeal is not a body of men acting on specific beliefs about the supernatural; we have found instead specific beliefs held in such a way as to enable a body of men to act. The type of community that was prevalent in pre-twelfth-century Europe found in this particular form of the mingling of sacred and profane an elegant and appropriate solution to some of its problems. When the type of community survives intact, the ordeal or avatars of the ordeal survive with it. The growth of rationalism and clerical condemnation of the ordeal are largely irrelevant to this process. In the thirteenth century, for instance, in Navarre the ordeal of the boiling cauldron continued unchanged but under lay supervision.⁴⁷ In Varad, ordeals continue long after 1215.⁴⁸ In the factious Italian towns, though these were forcing grounds of rationalism and of written law, avatars of the ordeal survived as a remedy for the ills of an evenly balanced and fissile community.⁴⁹ So we are dealing not with a strange custom inherited from a more "barbaric" past or practiced among the more "barbaric" members of the European world. We are dealing with a total situation to which this and analogous solutions were applied. The role of the supernatural in society—the intermingling of the sacred and the profane that so strikes scholars of the pre-twelfth-century world—is part of a style of life.

Let us examine the role of the supernatural in other areas of life in terms of this style. The need for consensus and the pressure brought by consensus in relatively small groups are the leitmotifs of much early medieval religion. We see this in the cult of the relics.⁵⁰ For to vest what was intrinsically ambiguous with final authority was part of a whole style of decision-making in the early centuries of the Middle Ages. Nothing could be more nondescript than a relic. It was a nameless bone, carrying with it cold undertones of death and the earth. Yet it is precisely such bones that are the focus of early medieval devotion, especially as this devotion affected the public life of men. As with the ordeal, their very ambiguity was the secret of their power. They could be saturated with the values projected onto them by the group. Even in the reception of a relic the human group holds the initiative. For among the many newly discovered or newly arrived pieces of dust only the group can make up its mind which is the holy dust.⁵¹ The rest would follow. It would be a churlish poor man indeed who resisted the healing powers of a relic whose authenticity had been decided by the fasting of the whole cathedral chapter and bishop of his town for three days on end.

Once vested in this way, the supernatural becomes the depository of the objectified values of the group. The miracles of the saints are, in slower rhythm, as much the hard judgment of the community that recorded and remembered them as was any ordeal. The group explained notable misfortunes in terms of the vengeance of the saints, and the threads linking any misfortune with the judgment of the saint

passed through the moral accountancy of the community. Hence the notoriously matter-of-fact nature of so many of the miracles associated with local cult sites in the early medieval period. The miracles of Sainte Foye, to take one example only, from the early eleventh century in Southern France, are like a stalagmite, formed from the deposit of innumerable little drops of the gossip and value judgments of a region.⁵²

The sacred, therefore, was intimately connected with the life of the group on every level. At the same time, however, it was operative because it was thought of as radically different from the human world into which it penetrated. It was all that the human community was not. The ritual of an ordeal made it a place where "there is sanctity, chastity, truth, and victory, upright behavior, humility, goodness, leniency, the fullness of the law, and of the truth and obedience of God".⁵³ very much, that is, a place not fraught with the ambiguity of a mere human law court. A king, at certain moments of his career, takes on a stance that defines him as not the normal layman. The ideal of this society for centuries is the monk who is not technically human; he lives the life of angels.⁵⁴ The tremendous sense of the intimacy and adjacency of the holy is one of the main characteristics of the early medieval period. Priests serving at the altar must, if they spit, spit to one side or behind them; for at the altar the angels are standing.⁵⁵ This non-human in the midst of a society is available to all, for all purposes. Though the non-human is sharply and dramatically defined against the human, its application is deeply unspecialized. It penetrates the human community in any variety of circumstances.

We are dealing with the holy as an enabling device carefully (if unconsciously) ground into a tool to resolve otherwise unbearable human conflicts. Hence attitudes to the holy in person-to-person relations are strictly analogous to the ordeal. Early medieval society coped with the problem of the sinner in its midst according to exactly the same rhythms as we have observed elsewhere.⁵⁶ Penance had to maintain a strong declaratory element. A man made his peace with the community quite as much as with God, and the idea of the holy enabled him to do so without losing face. The penitent could step out of the human community by becoming a monk—that is, by becoming an honorary non-human, living the angelic life. If he did not step out forever, as a monk, he could at least mark himself off, either by penitential exile or by ceremonies as elaborate, as prolonged, and as histrionic as was any ordeal.⁵⁷ The penance of a mighty man in tenth-century England was a sight to be seen:

... and let the powerful man try earnestly to shed tears from his eyes and bewail his sins; and let a man then feed those three days as many of God's poor as he possibly can.⁵⁸

The holy, being invisible, was sensed to be kinder than man. Reparation could be made to the saint for any insult. This was far from the case with visible human beings. Having struck Bernier with a chess board, Raoul de Cambrai offered to make amends to him by going fourteen leagues on his knees with Bernier's saddle on his head. Bernier would not accept even so crushing a self-abasement, hence a deadly vendetta.⁵⁹ The saints, unlike Bernier, did not have this reputation of refusing reparation. Injustice to a fellow human being could be made good without losing face through offering dramatic reparation to the angry saint rather than to the victim. On a capital at St. Benoît-sur-Loire, a knight lies full length at the feet of St. Benedict; the man whom he had unjustly bound is standing with arms upraised

behind him, his chains having fallen from him. But it is not at the feet of his wronged captive that the knight has chosen to fall to ask forgiveness.⁶⁰

If we are to enter into the type of change that was finally precipitated with great rapidity in the twelfth century, though it had been prepared in the eleventh century and in areas of religious devotion, for instance, had harbingers as far back as the tenth, we should look along the demarcation line between the sacred and the profane, defined in terms of the objectified non-human against the subjective human. This somehow changed subtly in these centuries of transition. For the situation we have seen in the early centuries of the Middle Ages is one where the sacred and the profane can be intermingled because the borderline between the objective and the subjective in human experience is deliberately blurred at every turn. To take up these examples in the cult of the saints, the squat gold and bejewelled figure of Sainte Foye has all the impregnable majesty of an objective force, acting in its own initiative, in the midst of a community riven by subjective human doubt and discord. The statue, which can still be visited in Conques, was called the *Maiestas* of the saint.⁶¹ Throughout Europe similar relics had similar impregnable qualities:

The deficiencies in human resources were supplied by the power of the saints. They were great power houses in the fight against evil; they filled the gaps left in the structure of human justice.⁶²

It was a strangely subjective objectivity. For relics were chosen because they were the remains of people. The supernatural world was built up of a model of intense person-to-person relationships. Like any weak lord, the relic could be rebuked by its vassals if it failed to give protection. When St. Benedict allowed his shrine to be robbed, the custodian at St. Benoît-sur-Loire beat the shrine with a stick, shouting "You sleepy head! If you don't care enough to protect your own bracelets, I won't care if people come in and steal the trousers off you next time."⁶³ Like any rival lord, the relic could be insulted by its opponents. Heaven revenged the knight who, when confronted with the image of Sainte Foye on a plot of land placed there to defend her rights, threatened to kick her—but threatened he had.⁶⁴ The objectivity of the supernatural was skin deep. It was not impersonal. It was the projection of the needs of a group, and was thus sucked into the subjective values of the group. The vengeance of the saints was the visceral reaction of a small community, a reaction placed beyond the frailty and discontinuity of human subjectivity by being identified with the saint; it was, in that sense, subjectivity objectified beyond recall.

What happened in Northern Europe as a precondition of the shift to a different relationship between the subjective and the objective can be quickly told.

Two great changes stand out in modifying the situation we have described. The first is the more obscure. The group itself changes consistency. It would be wrong to think of pre-eleventh-century Northern Europe as uniformly underpopulated. The reverse may be true: patches of uncomfortably dense population were hemmed in by intractable wasteland. Quite apart from purely physical overcrowding due to the limited space available for farming, the "technology of human relations" placed a premium on the ability to mobilize and to retain the consensus of as large a body of kinsmen, of allies, and of dependents as possible. The twelfth century saw the relaxing of this claustrophobic inward pressure. Population that had built up in long-cultivated areas became more free to spill out into reclaimed land. The compact

human groups in towns and villages were dissolved by a leavening of horizontal mobility; the immediate family no longer needed to blend for safety into the wider mass of the kin.⁶⁵ Such changes were slow and far from uniform, but in large parts of Northern Europe they subtly removed the social pressure for envisaging the role of the supernatural in the human group in the terms we have described. The growing impersonality of a larger, more fluid group made less necessary the theatricality of an ordeal or of a public renunciation; it dissolved the sharp memories of local breaches of the accepted code of conduct on which the previous genre of miracles of the saints had depended. Men who needed to care just that little bit less about their neighbors no longer had to go through the more difficult maneuvers of their life in a limelight of supernatural rituals.

Second—and blatantly—a ceremony such as the ordeal was a theatrical bid for consensus in a society still so balanced as to make any other form of human agreement on insoluble issues seem to involve all participants in a loss of face. The lay state of the twelfth century was fast moving away from such a consensual image of its role. The ruler was no longer a peacemaker in this old-fashioned manner; he was the imposer of law and order. Wherever faced by superior coercive power, elaborate devices for maximizing the consent of all interested parties around difficult or explosive issues just withered away. In late-twelfth-century England, for instance, law may not have been notably more rational than was the ordeal; but it was trenchant and it was authoritative. The gallows could speak for itself, without mystification.⁶⁶

The shift from consensus to authority is one of the most subtle shifts of all in the twelfth century. It is, perhaps, the greatest single precondition for the growth of rationality. In the late twelfth century, for instance, ecclesiastical bodies throughout Europe decided that they could be expected to obey leaders elected by a simple majority of their members.⁶⁷ They acted in the faith that a decision reached in this highly artificial manner could yet carry an authority such as was inconceivable in earlier ages. Previously, nothing but a divinely inspired miracle of unanimity could cover up the all-too-naked scrimmage of interests in any hotly contested election to a bishopric or to a monastery.⁶⁸

In a sense, the exercise of reason, as fostered by the intellectuals and the reformers of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, was the most blatant exercise of authority of all. For appeal to reason in clerical controversy invariably implied, at that time, that men could be expected to obey rapid and trenchant decisions—the outcome of syllogism, the production of an authoritative written text. Previously their consent had had to be wooed and qualified by the slow, discreet molding force of appeals to ancient custom. The intuition of Professor Vernant has laid bare the substratum of an agreement to abide by the rules of the city, which lies behind the faith of the early Greek philosophers that men could be expected to abide by the laws of rational discourse.⁶⁹ In the twelfth century, by contrast, in a society where coercive force had come to bear with greater hope of immediate success than in previous centuries, the shrill note of claims for the authority of reason is no discreet substratum: it sticks out like a crag in every controversy.

The concomitant of these changes in the structure and expectations of twelfth-century society was a dramatic shift in the borderline between the subjective and the objective. Briefly, the supernatural, which had tended to be treated as the main source of the objectified values of the group, came to be regarded as the preserve

par excellence of the exact opposite; it became the preserve of intensely personal feeling. At the same time purely human actions—reasoning, law, the exploitation of nature—take on an opacity, an impersonal objectivity, and a value of their own which had been lacking in previous centuries. The capacity to juxtapose intensely subjective feeling with a growing respect for the impersonal nature of much of the world and of human relations marks the emotional and intellectual climate of many of the thinkers of the twelfth century. For example, the same age which has been acclaimed for the suddenness of its discovery of the individual also salvaged whole systems of written law from the quicksands of a legal system, which, by contrast to the general maxims of Roman jurisprudence, was a cat's cradle of human relationships. The same age saw the emergence of significantly new attitudes to the universe. Though very different from any modern view, it was "modern" in being no longer shot through with human reference. Previously, a thunderstorm had shown either the anger of God or the envy of demons, both directed at human beings. Twelfth-century cosmological speculations gave back to the universe a certain opacity to human states of guilt, of anger, and of exultation; its greatest and most profound achievements were those that rendered to the cosmos a life of its own. For the speculations of the twelfth-century Platonists on issues such as the Soul of the World, reinforced at a slightly later period by the translation of Arabic scientific treatises, pointed the way to a natural world which no longer was a mirror-image of the tensions of the human community.⁷⁰

Modification of the role of the supernatural itself might be suggested as the leit-motiv of the new sensibility that developed in the course of the twelfth century. As long as the supernatural was strenuously defined as that which was totally discontinuous with the human group, the individual could not but regard it as either irrelevant to most occasions of his normal existence or as positively crushing. Hence the paradox of the development of Christian society in the West in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

From one point of view here we have a society that came to accept a far more clearly defined hierarchy, explicitly designated in terms of the varying degrees of contact with the supernatural. The priest was superior to the layman because he handled the holy and the layman did not. Yet, in order for this claim to be made with conviction, the holy itself came to be far more strictly delimited. The cliff face of an ill-defined notion of the holy is cut down to size, in order to become the mounting block from which the clerical elite (in theory at least) climbed into the saddle of Western society. A whole century of sacramental theology and of constant speculation on the nature of the Eucharist lies behind this development.⁷¹ The majesty of the sacraments is heightened; but it is a majesty delimited and focused by closer definition of the nature of sacrament. The same Lateran Council of 1215 that forbade clerical participation in the ordeal sanctioned the doctrine of transubstantiation. The two decrees sum up a shift in mentality. Laymen were no longer allowed to expect that the untold majesty of God might any day shine out for their benefit in a lawsuit; but if they went to Church, the transmutation of bread and wine into Christ's body was certain to happen. As Braque has said: "We lower our aims—and call it progress." For an out-and-out rationalist would find it hard to square accounts of a century acclaimed for its advances in "rationality" with the miracle literature that sprouted around the doctrine of transubstantiation.⁷²

While it may be easier to follow the way in which the public definition of the relation of the sacred to the profane changed, it is difficult to resist the impression that this modification had an important equivalent in changing views of the individual's own capacity for experience. The early medieval definition of the supernatural had hinged on a need to maintain as strict a disjuncture as possible between the *I* and the *not-I*. The sort of ritual behavior that we have examined throughout this study reflects the extreme difficulty that early medieval men experienced in changing their minds and communicating this fact to their fellows. In every aspect of life, from litigation to penance, the consequences of disruption in the community and of humiliation and of loss of face for the individual were almost too crushing to admit any but the most melodramatic changes of tack. Reparations for wrongs done had to be decently screened behind a supernatural décor.

A character molded and strengthened by less dramatic but more frequent doses of regret is very much a discovery of the confessional literature of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁷³ The period dominated by a penitential theory labeled *Contritionism* is a period of experiment on the topic of how much an individual can make good by himself, without constantly looking over his shoulder at a group to placate, whether in a face-to-face ritual of penance or by similar melodramatic acts of reparation to the invisible majesty of the local saint. The development of confessional literature is one of the spearheads of self-awareness in the twelfth century. The intimate shame of self-revelation came to be considered expiation enough. The role of shame was all the more relevant to an age whose sense of professional achievement had created a particularly brittle façade of self-regard in knights and clerics alike.⁷⁴ One need only think of the lurking horror of hidden illness in so many Romances of the late twelfth century in order to appreciate this.⁷⁵ The man who confessed more often to more father-confessors experienced more shame in so doing, and was therefore more certain of expiation.⁷⁶ Now it was possible to canalize these bitter feelings of shame into an intimate, non-communal relationship to a father-confessor. In the course of his lifetime a man could live through stages of conflicting emotion without being subject to so drastic a pressure as to opt heavily for the one or the other. A flood of tears in a knight became an incongruity that could be tolerated; it need no longer be a breach with his past behavior so sharp and so humiliating as to be acted out only in the decent shelter of a monastery, or in regions far removed from the group that knew him.

Regret for sin, of course, was what concerned clerics; but love concerned knights. And love was an equally incongruous mixture of states.⁷⁷ For love made brave men tremble; love made them weep like women or like monks. Love led the lover to actions and to states of feeling that bore no obvious relation to his immediate duties to his fellow men. Love took him into a strange country, where relief of obligation and the gaining of a sense of happiness had nothing whatever to do with scrupulous attention to the reciprocities of the life of the group:

Ses peccat pris penedensa,
 E ses tort fait quir perdo,
 E trais de rien gen do
 E ai d'ira benvolensa,
 E gaug entier de plorar,

E d'amor doussa sabor,
E sui arditz per paor

(Piere Vidal, XXVIII)

Twelfth-century poets, as we know, explored the permissible incongruities of love with all the glee of children who have discovered a new toy. Yet sober father-confessors were not above toying with the paradoxes of regret in the same almost euphoric way: Could a man make his act of contrition into the ear of his horse?⁷⁸

Last of all, we come to the hallmark of a sensibility of transcendence as it affected medieval culture. The supernatural itself comes to be defined gradually and tentatively, but with a growing conviction all the more strong for being largely unwitting, as an upward extension of the individual. The supernatural becomes an awareness of the individual's own potentiality, salvaged by being raised above the ambiguities and illusions of the natural world. Angels wither away in the mind and in the art of the twelfth century⁷⁹—ancient symbols of the non-human, they are rapidly replaced by symbols of the idealized human. They are replaced by the figure of the Virgin. In the growth of the legends of the Virgin, for instance, we have entered a world where the individual seeks from the supernatural invisible companionship with all that is most tender, most pure, most unambivalently good in his own imagination. The Virgin, for instance, has no relics. There is nothing as ambivalent about her as dead flesh and bone; what she leaves to men are pure, celestial tokens—drops of her milk, her shawl, memories of her presence. She is owned by no locality. Compared with the Virgin of twelfth-century devotion, a saint like Sainte Foye, with her glittering image placed menacingly on the borders of a disputed plot of land⁸⁰ or carried “at the charge” in order to quell a brawl in the cloister at the monastery at Conques, could not be said to represent so tender a portion of the soul.⁸¹

Sainte Foye, whose miracles were first written by an outsider from Chartres, then by a local, a monk of Conques, in 1020, has the interest of being a transitional figure. Like Mary, she is a beautiful virgin.⁸² The many miracles of deliverance from prison—reminders of the truly Gothick horror of a feudal dungeon—are not so dramatic as those of previous centuries. Chains do not slip from the prisoners “like broken glass.” She is, rather, a figure of inspiration. She prompts the knight, in dreams, to make use of his purely human ingenuity and luck.⁸³ She enters into the high adventures of the local aristocracy without melodrama, as a source of good dreams, brainwaves, and a point of reference in moments of good fortune. Yet Sainte Foye remained a concentrate of those unmodified feelings of anger and of vengeance that go with a community's sense of justice. She still had more to do in life than be perfect. She was the heavy voice of the group.⁸⁴

The Virgin, in a rising flood of miracles associated with her from the first decade of the twelfth century, was on the other side of a watershed.⁸⁵ She had come to stand for the inner resources of the individual. Occasionally these inner resources are explicitly pitted against the group. Whole cycles of miracles dwell lovingly on the hiatus between outer appearances and inner dispositions. Society might bury a fornicating monk in unhallowed ground; but a lily growing from the mouth of the corpse showed that, on his way to his *inamorata*, the monk had always said his *Ave Maria*.⁸⁶ The miracles of the Virgin are miracles of divine justice suspended and of unmodified human rigor exposed as mistaken. They introduce an air of ambiguity

into human affairs, such as the hard certainties of the group had not previously been able to permit. Miracles of justice give way to miracles of inspiration, of individual guidance, visions of sweetness, and snatches of heavenly music: "Let others think what they like," wrote William of Malmesbury, "I would prefer a single vision of her to all the world, or to any miracle whatever."⁸⁷

The supernatural has become what Renan said it was: "The way in which the ideal makes its appearance in human affairs." The definition comes with all the certainty of a post-twelfth-century European. It has been the purpose of this paper to show how this sharpening and delimitation of the role of the supernatural took place, and how many of the well-tried devices of living in small groups had to be weakened, overruled, or neglected before so finely whittled a concept could emerge. Increased impersonality and a tendency to delimit what is above man to a fragile extension of his own good intentions are not necessarily the recipe for human happiness. Not everybody wished to move so fast into the modern age. A twelfth-century knight, crippled by a stroke, first thought that it was just his bad luck—not a reassuring thought for one facing the numb horror of partial paralysis. Then he dreamt that he was slapped in the face by the Virgin and reminded that he had poached on the fishing rights of the local monastery. The knight was able to make reparation in the ancient manner, having experienced the Virgin in the ancient manner.⁸⁸ Here we have a man who drew back, in dreams at least, from a world where both suffering and guilt—two main themes of human history—threatened to break the mercifully precise bounds of a face-to-face world. Perhaps the later history of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation (as seen by some scholars) might provide a sober epilogue entitled "Risks of Transcendence"; but then, it is in the form set by the twelfth century, if in a very different idiom, that we still run these particular risks.*

* While my first debt is to *Dædalus*, in offering to me the unparalleled opportunity of learning from a wider range of scholars of wider views than I had thought possible, I owe no small protection from my own capacity for error to my friends in Oxford—to Dr. Paul Hyams, to Patrick Wormald, to Benedicta Ward, and to the careful criticism of Dr. Sabine MacCormack. In these footnotes, I have on every occasion cited only those works to which I was directly indebted.

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