

## THE MAGIC OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Surely, if a man will but take a view of all Popery, he shall easily see that a great part of it is mere magic.

William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine* (1591)  
(in *Workes* [Cambridge, 1616-18], i, p. 40)

Nearly every primitive religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power. This does not prevent it from functioning as a system of explanation, a source of moral injunctions, a symbol of social order, or a route to immortality; but it does mean that it also offers the prospect of a supernatural means of control over man's earthly environment. The history of early Christianity offers no exception to this rule. Conversions to the new religion, whether in the time of the primitive Church or under the auspices of the missionaries of more recent times, have frequently been assisted by the belief of converts that they are acquiring not just a means of other-worldly salvation, but a new and more powerful magic. Just as the Hebrew priests of the Old Testament endeavoured to confound the devotees of Baal by challenging them publicly to perform supernatural acts, so the Apostles of the early Church attracted followers by working miracles and performing supernatural cures. Both the New Testament and the literature of the patristic period testify to the

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.** A fundamental source for this aspect of the medieval Church is A. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1909), which is based on early medieval liturgical books. But it does not have much material relating to the later Middle Ages or to England. In addition to the *York Manual* and *Sarum Manual* I have drawn upon the liturgical texts contained in W. Maskell, *Momumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1882). The thirteenth-century *Rationale* of G. Durandus is an invaluable guide to the Church's ritual (French translation by Ch. Barthelémy [Paris, 1854]), and so are many of the articles in *D.T.C.* The most comprehensive survey of the superstitions surrounding the sacraments is still Thiers, *Superstitions*. C. G. Loomis, *White Magic. An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian legend* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948) provides a useful analysis of the miraculous content of the Saints' *Lives*, and there is a suggestive, though crude, account of Church magic in V. Rydberg, *The Magic of the Middle Ages*, trans. A. H. Edgren (New York, 1879), chap. 2. See also P. Delaunay, *La Médecine et l'Eglise* (Paris, 1948).

importance of these activities in the work of conversion; and the ability to perform miracles soon became an indispensable test of sanctity. The claim to supernatural power was an essential element in the Anglo-Saxon Church's fight against paganism, and missionaries did not fail to stress the superiority of Christian prayers to heathen charms.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval Church thus found itself saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *Lives* of the Saints had assumed a stereotyped pattern. They related the miraculous achievements of holy men, and stressed how they could prophesy the future, control the weather, provide protection against fire and flood, magically transport heavy objects, and bring relief to the sick. Many of these stories were retold in *The Golden Legend*, a popular compilation by a thirteenth-century Archbishop of Genoa, which was to be translated by Caxton in 1483 and reissued in England at least seven times before the Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

On the eve of the Reformation the Church did not as an institution claim the power to work miracles. But it reaped prestige from the doings of those of its members to whom God was deemed to have extended miraculous gifts. It stressed that the saints were only intercessors whose entreaties might go unheeded, but it readily countenanced the innumerable prayers offered to them on more optimistic assumptions. The shrines of the saints at Glastonbury, Lindisfarne, Walsingham, Canterbury, Westminster, St Albans and similar holy places had become objects of pilgrimage to which the sick and infirm made long and weary journeys in the confident expectation of obtaining a supernatural cure. Over five hundred miracles were associated with Becket and his shrine; and at the Holy Rood of Bromholm in Norfolk thirty-nine persons were said to have been raised from the dead and twelve cured of blindness. Holy relics became wonder-working fetishes, believed to have the power to cure illness and to protect against danger; around 1426 the Bishop of Durham's accounts contain a payment for signing sixteen cattle with St Wilfrid's signet to ward off the murrain.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., B. Colgrave, 'Bede's miracle stories', *Bede, his Life, Times and Writings*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford, 1935), and the passages in Bede cited by J. D. Y. Peel, 'Syncretism and religious change', *Comparative Studies in Soc. and Hist.*, x (1967-8), p. 134, n. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *S.T.C.* lists eight editions between 1483 and 1527. There is a modern reprint edited by F. S. Ellis (Temple Classics, 1900) and a discussion in H. C. White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison, Wisc., 1963), chap. 2. For early instances of ecclesiastical healing see W. Bonser, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England* (1963), pp. 118-19, and Loomis, *White Magic*, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> P. A. Brown, *The Development of the Legend of Thomas Becket* (Philadelphia, 1930), p. 258; W. Sparrow Simpson, 'On the pilgrimage to Bromholm in Norfolk', *Journ. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.*, xxx (1874); Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, pp. 37-8. Examples of resort to miraculous shrines can be found in J. C. Wall, *Shrines of British Saints* (1905), pp. 129, 213.

Images were similarly credited with miraculous efficacy. The representation of St Christopher, which so frequently adorned the walls of English village churches, was said to offer a day's preservation from illness or death to all those who looked upon it. St Wilgerfort, better known as St Uncumber, whose statue stood in St Paul's, could eliminate the husbands of those discontented wives who chose to offer her a peck of oats. The large mounted wooden figure of Derfel Gadarn at Llandderfel, near Bala, protected men and cattle, rescued souls from Purgatory, and inflicted disease upon his enemies: Henry VIII's visitors found five or six hundred worshippers at the shrine on the day they went there to pull it down.<sup>1</sup> Saints indeed were believed to have the power to bestow diseases as well as to relieve them. 'We worship saints for fear,' wrote William Tyndale in the early sixteenth century, 'lest they should be displeased and angry with us, and plague us or hurt us; as who is not afraid of St Laurence? Who dare deny St Anthony a fleece of wool for fear of his terrible fire, or lest he send the pox among our sheep?'<sup>2</sup>

The worship of saints was an integral part of the fabric of medieval society and was sustained by important social considerations. Individual churches had their own patron saints, and strong territorial associations could give hagiolatry an almost totemic character: 'Of all Our Ladies,' says a character in one of Thomas More's writings, 'I love best Our Lady of Walsingham', ' "and I", saith the other, "Our Lady of Ipswich." ' <sup>3</sup> Pilgrims brought money into the community and the inhabitants grew dependent upon them: in Elizabethan times, for example, it was pointed out that St Wistan's church in Leicestershire had previously been maintained by the proceeds of the annual pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> Every medieval trade had the patronage of its own especial saint, who was corporately worshipped, and whose holy day had strong occupational affiliations:

'Our painters had Luke, our weavers had Steven, our millers had Arnold, our tailors had Goodman, our sowters [cobblers] had Crispin, our potters had S. Gore with a devil on his shoulder and a pot in his hand. Was there a better horseleech . . . than S. Loy? Or a better sowgelder than S. Anthony? Or a better toothdrawer than S. Apolline?'

<sup>1</sup> One hundred and eighty-six examples of the painting of St Christopher are cited by M. D. Anderson, *Looking for History in British Churches* (1951), pp. 144-5. For St Uncumber, T. More, *The Dialogue concerning Tyndale*, ed. W. E. Campbell (1931), pp. 166-7, and for Derfel Gadarn, G. Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff, 1962), pp. 495, 502.

<sup>2</sup> W. Tyndale, *Expositions and Notes*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, P.S., 1849), p. 165. Cf. D. Erasmus, *Pilgrimages to St Mary of Walsingham & St Thomas of Canterbury* (1849), ed. J. G. Nichols, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> More, *Dialogue concerning Tyndale*, p. 62. On saints and their localities see the statistical summary in F. Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications* (1899), iii, and F. Bond, *Dedications and Patron Saints of English Churches* (1914).

<sup>4</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (1957), p. 79.

Reginald Scot could thus mock these occupational saints in the years after the Reformation, but his words reveal the depth of the social roots of this form of popular devotion. The patronage of the saints gave a sense of identity and of corporate existence to small and otherwise undifferentiated institutions. Hence their enduring popularity as names for colleges and schools even in a Protestant era.

Local loyalties could thus sustain an individual's allegiance to a particular saint. But the worship of saints in general depended upon the belief that the holy men and women of the past had not merely exemplified an ideal code of moral conduct, but could still employ supernatural power to relieve the adversities of their followers upon earth. Diseases, like occupations and localities, were assigned to the special care of an appropriate saint, for in the popular mind the saints were usually regarded as specialists rather than as general practitioners. 'S. John and S. Valentine excelled at the falling evil,' recalled Scot,

'S. Roch was good at the plague, S. Petronill at the ague. As for S. Margaret she passed Lucina for a midwife, . . . in which respect S. Marpurgie is joined with her in commission. For madmen and such as are possessed with devils, S. Romane was excellent, and friar Ruffine was also prettily skilful in that art. For botches and biles, Cosmus and Damian; S. Clare for the eyes. S. Apolline for teeth, S. Job for the pox. And for sore breasts S. Agatha.'<sup>1</sup>

The saints were always on call to deal with a variety of daily eventualities. Pregnant women could use holy relics – girdles, skirts and coats – kept for the purpose by many religious houses, and they were urged by midwives to call upon St Margaret or the Virgin Mary to reduce the pangs of labour, or to invoke St Felicitas if they wished to ensure that the new child would be a boy. Henry VII's queen paid 6s. 8d. to a monk for a girdle of Our Lady for use in childbirth.<sup>2</sup> The variety of other secular contexts in which saints could also be invoked is indicated by John Aubrey's nostalgic description of the part they had once played in the daily lives of the Wiltshire country folk:

'At St Oswaldsdown and Fordedown, &c thereabout, the shepherds prayed at night and at morning to St Oswald (that was martyred there) to preserve their sheep safe in the fold . . . When they went to bed they did rake up their

<sup>1</sup> Scot, *Discoverie: A Discourse of Divels*, chap. xxiv. For typical lists of saints and their appropriate specialisms see T. J. Pettigrew, *On Superstitions connected with the History and Practice of Medicine* (1844), pp. 37–8; Brand, *Antiquities*, i, pp. 363–4; W. G. Black, *Folk-Medicine* (1883), pp. 90–4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Whole Works of . . . Jeremy Taylor*, ed. R. Heber & revd. by C. P. Eden (1847–54), vi, p. 257; C. F. Bühler, 'Prayers and charms in certain Middle English scrolls', *Speculum*, xxxix (1964), p. 274, n. 31. Cf. *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, ed. C. Nevins (Cambridge, P.S., 1852), p. 141; Frere & Kennedy, *Articles and Injunctions*, ii, p. 58, n. 2; C. S. L. Linnell, *Norfolk Church Dedications* (York, 1962), pp. 11–12n.

fire and make a cross in the ashes and pray to God and St Osyth to deliver them from fire and from water and from all misadventure . . . When the bread was put into the oven, they prayed to God and to St Stephen, to send them a just batch and an even.<sup>1</sup>

The impetus behind the worship of saints seems to have slackened considerably during the fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> But until the Reformation miracles at holy shrines continued to be reported. In 1538 a Sussex parson was still advising his parishioners to cure their sick animals by making offerings to St Loy and St Anthony.<sup>3</sup>

The powers popularly attributed to the saints were, however, only one particular instance of the general power which the medieval Church, in its role as dispenser of divine grace, claimed to be able to exercise. By the early Middle Ages the ecclesiastical authorities had developed a comprehensive range of formulae designed to draw down God's practical blessing upon secular activities. The basic ritual was the benediction of salt and water for the health of the body and the expulsion of evil spirits. But the liturgical books of the time also contained rituals devised to bless houses, cattle, crops, ships, tools, armour, wells and kilns. There were formulae for blessing men who were preparing to set off on a journey, to fight a duel, to engage in battle or to move into a new house. There were procedures for blessing the sick and for dealing with sterile animals, for driving away thunder and for making the marriage bed fruitful. Such rituals usually involved the presence of a priest and the employment of holy water and the sign of the cross. Basic to the whole procedure was the idea of exorcism, the formal conjuring of the devil out of some material object by the pronouncement of prayers and the invocation of God's name.<sup>4</sup> Holy water, thus exorcised, could be used to drive away evil spirits and pestilential vapours. It was a remedy against disease and sterility, and an instrument for blessing houses and food; though whether it worked automatically, or only if the officiating priest was of sufficient personal holiness, was a matter of theological dispute.

Theologians did not claim that these procedures made the practical precautions of daily life superfluous, but they did undoubtedly regard them as possessing a power which was more than merely spiritual or symbolic. The formula for consecrating the holy bread, given away to the laity on Sundays in lieu of the eucharist, called on God to bless the bread, 'so that all who consume

<sup>1</sup> Aubrey, *Gentilisme*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> See R. M. Clay, *The Mediaeval Hospitals of England* (1909), p. 9, and G. H. Gerould, *Saints' Legends* (Boston, 1916), p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> *L.P.*, xiii (1), no. 1199.

<sup>4</sup> For these rituals see the *Bibliographical Note* above. A large collection was translated and published as *The Doctrine of the Masse Booke* by N. Dorcastor in 1554.

it shall receive health of body as well as of soul'.<sup>1</sup> It was regarded as a medicine for the sick and a preservative against the plague.

As for holy water, there were some theologians who thought it superstitious to drink it as a remedy for sickness or to scatter it on the fields for fertility; but the orthodox view, firmly based upon the words of the benediction, was that there was nothing improper about such actions, provided they were performed out of genuine Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Periodically, therefore, the holy water carrier went round the parish so that the pious could sprinkle their homes, their fields and their domestic animals. As late as 1543, when a storm burst over Canterbury, the inhabitants ran to church for holy water to sprinkle in their houses, so as to drive away the evil spirits in the air, and to protect their property against lightning. At about the same date the vicar of Bethersden, Kent, could advise a sick parishioner to drink holy water as a help to her recovery.<sup>3</sup> In the seventeenth century Jeremy Taylor lamented of the Irish that 'although not so much as a chicken is nowadays cured of the pip by holy water, yet upon all occasions they use it, and the common people throw it upon children's cradles, and sick cows' horns, and upon them that are blasted, and if they recover by any means, it is imputed to the holy water'.<sup>4</sup> The Devil, it was agreed, was allergic to holy water, and wherever his influence was suspected it was an appropriate remedy. In the reign of Elizabeth I, Widow Wiseman, later a Catholic martyr, threw holy water at her persecutor, Topcliffe, whose horse thereupon flung him to the ground. Topcliffe raged against her, 'calling her an old witch, who by her charms had made his horse to lay him on the ground, but [relates the Catholic source for this episode] she with good reason laughed to see that holy water had given him so fine a fall'.<sup>5</sup> Here, as Protestant commentators were to urge, the distinction between magic and religion was an impossibly fine one.

The same was true of the numerous ecclesiastical talismans and amulets whose use the Church encouraged. As one Protestant versifier wrote:

'About these Catholics' necks and hands are always hanging charms,  
That serve against all miseries and all unhappy harms'.<sup>6</sup>

Theologians held that there was no superstition about wearing a piece of paper or medal inscribed with verses from the gospels or with the sign of the cross, provided no non-Christian symbols were also employed.<sup>7</sup> The most common

<sup>1</sup> *Sarum Manual*, p. 4; Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, i, p. cccxviii, n. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *L.P.*, xviii (2), pp. 296, 300.

<sup>4</sup> *The Whole Works . . . of Jeremy Taylor*, vi, p. 268.

<sup>5</sup> *The Chronicle of the English Augustinian Canonesses Regular of the Lateran, at St Monica's in Louvain*, ed. A. Hamilton (1904), i, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> T. Naogeorgus, *The Popish Kingdome*, trans. B. Googe, ed. R. C. Hope (1880), f. 57<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.2.96.4; Scot, *Discoverie*, XII.ix; J. L. André, 'Talismans', *The Reliquary*, n.s., vii (1893).

of these amulets was the agnus dei, a small wax cake, originally made out of paschal candles and blessed by the Pope, bearing the image of the lamb and flag. This was intended to serve as a defence against the assaults of the Devil and as a preservative against thunder, lightning, fire, drowning, death in child-bed and similar dangers. After the Reformation Bishop Hall commented on the survival of the associated belief in the protective power of St John's Gospel, 'printed in a small roundel and sold to the credulous ignorants with this fond warrant, that whosoever carries it about with him shall be free from the dangers of the day's mishaps'.<sup>1</sup> In the seventeenth century rosaries were similarly blessed as a protection against fire, tempest, fever and evil spirits.<sup>2</sup>

The same preservative power was attributed to holy relics: in 1591, for example, John Allyn, an Oxford recusant, was said to possess a quantity of Christ's blood, which he sold at twenty pounds a drop: those who had it about them would be free from bodily harm.<sup>3</sup> The sign of the cross was also employed to ward off evil spirits and other dangers. In North Wales it was reported in 1589 that people still crossed themselves when they shut their windows, when they left their cattle, and when they went out of their houses in the morning. If any misfortune befell them or their animals their common saying was 'You have not crossed yourself well today', or 'You have not made the sign of the rood upon the cattle', on the assumption that this omission had been the cause of their mishap.<sup>4</sup>

Ecclesiastical preservatives of this kind were intended to give protection in a wide variety of contexts. The consecration of church bells made them efficacious against evil spirits and hence enabled them to dispel the thunder and lightning for which demons were believed to be responsible. When a tempest broke out the bells would be rung in an effort to check the storm: this happened at Sandwich, for example, in 'the great thundering' of 1502, and again in 1514.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, one could invoke St Barbara against thunder, or tie a charm to the building one wished to protect – though an agnus dei failed to save St Albans Abbey from being struck by lightning in the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> As a protection

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of . . . Joseph Hall*, ed. P. Wynter (Oxford, 1863), vii, p. 329. On the agnus dei see *D.T.C.*, i, cols. 605–13.

<sup>2</sup> *H.M.C.*, Rutland, i, p. 526.

<sup>3</sup> *C.S.P.D.*, 1591–4, p. 29. The Venetian practice of flocking to the altars of St Charles Borromeo to seek preservation against sudden death is described in *H.M.C.*, x, appx. i, p. 553.

<sup>4</sup> *P.R.O.*, SP 12/224/145<sup>v</sup> (also printed in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* [3rd ser.], i [1855], p. 236).

<sup>5</sup> D. Gardiner, *Historic Haven. The Story of Sandwich* (Derby, 1954), p. 166. Other examples in Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 158; Aubrey, *Miscellanies*, p. 141; J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts* (1913), pp. 212–13; B. Weldon, *Chronological Notes concerning the . . . English Congregation of the Order of St Benedict* (1881), p. 185. The formula for consecrating bells is in *Sarum Manual*, pp. 175–7.

<sup>6</sup> T. Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum monasterii Sancti Albani*, ed. H. T. Riley (Rolls Series, 1867–9), i, p. 313.

against fire there were 'St Agatha's letters', an inscription placed on tiles, bells or amulets. Fasting on St Mark's day was another means of gaining protection; or one could appeal to St Clement or to the Irish saint Columbkille.<sup>1</sup> In 1180 the holy shrine of St Werberga was carried round Chester and miraculously preserved the city from destruction by fire.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there were exorcisms to make the fields fertile; holy candles to protect farm animals; and formal curses to drive away caterpillars and rats and to kill weeds. At the dissolution of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds there were discovered 'relics for rain, and certain other superstitious usages for avoiding of weeds growing in corn'.<sup>3</sup>

The medieval Church thus acted as a repository of supernatural power which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems. It was inevitable that the priests, set apart from the rest of the community by their celibacy and ritual consecration, should have derived an extra *cachet* from their position as mediators between man and God. It was also inevitable that around the Church, the clergy and their holy apparatus there clustered a horde of popular superstitions, which endowed religious objects with a magical power to which theologians themselves had never laid claim. A scapular, or friar's coat, for example, was a coveted object to be worn as a preservative against pestilence or the ague, and even to be buried in as a short cut to salvation: Bishop Hugh Latimer confessed that he used to think that if he became a friar it would be impossible for him to be damned.<sup>4</sup> The church and churchyard also enjoyed a special power in popular estimation, primarily because of the ritual consecration of the site with salt and water. The key of the church door was said to be an efficacious remedy against a mad dog;<sup>5</sup> the soil from the churchyard was credited with special magical power; and any crime committed on holy ground became an altogether more heinous affair, simply because of the place where it had occurred. This was recognised by a statute of the reign of Edward VI imposing special penalties for such offences; if the consecrated area were

<sup>1</sup> *Homilies*, p. 62, n. 20; V. Alford, 'The Cat Saint', *Folk-Lore*, lii (1941); P. B. G. Binnall in *ibid.*, liii (1943), p. 77; W. Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, P.S., 1850), p. 61; G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1961), p. 147; C. Singer, 'Early English magic and medicine', *Procs. Brit. Acad.*, ix (1919-20), p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> Wall, *Shrines of British Saints*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> B. Willis, *An History of the Mitred Parliamentary Abbies and Conventual Cathedral Churches* (1718), i, appx., p. 58; G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), pp. 313-14; Scot, *Discoverie*, XII.xxi (holy candles); B. L. Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif* (Cambridge, 1919), p. 94; G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village* (Cambridge, 1925), p. 268; *id.*, 'The excommunication of caterpillars', *Historical Teachers Miscellany*, iii (1925), p. 268; G. R. Elton, *Star Chamber Stories* (1958), p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Foxe, vii, p. 489; *Homilies*, p. 59. For the origin of the notion, H. C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences* (1896), iii, pp. 263, 496-500, and H. Thurston, 'Scapulars', *The Month*, cxlix-cl (1927).

<sup>5</sup> Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, p. 499.



polluted by some crime of violence a special act of reconciliation was necessary before it could be used again for religious purposes.<sup>1</sup> Even the coins in the offertory were accredited with magical value; there were numerous popular superstitions about the magical value of communion silver as a cure for illness or a lucky charm against danger.

But it was above all in connection with the sacraments of the Church that such beliefs arose. The Mass, in particular, was associated with magical power and for this, it must be said, the teaching of the Church was at least indirectly responsible. During the long history of the Christian Church the sacrament of the altar had undergone a process of theological re-interpretation. By the later Middle Ages the general effect had been to shift the emphasis away from the communion of the faithful, and to place it upon the formal consecration of the elements by the priest. The ceremony thus acquired in the popular mind a mechanical efficacy in which the operative factor was not the participation of the congregation, who had become virtual spectators, but the special power of the priest. Hence the doctrine that the laity could benefit from being present at the celebration even though they could not understand the proceedings. If too ignorant to follow a private mass book, they were encouraged to recite whatever prayers they knew; so that during the Mass the priest and people in fact pursued different modes of devotion. The ritual was said, in a notorious phrase, to work 'like a charm upon an adder'.<sup>2</sup> In the actual miracle of transubstantiation the 'instrumental cause' was the formula of consecration. Theologians refined this doctrine considerably, but their subtleties were too complicated to be understood by ordinary men.<sup>3</sup> What stood out was the magical notion that the mere pronouncement of words in a ritual manner could effect a change in the character of material objects.

The reservation of the sacrament at the altar as an object of devotion had become customary in England by the thirteenth century and the element of mystery attaching to it was enhanced by the construction in the later Middle Ages of enclosed sanctuaries to protect the elements from the gaze of the public. Literalism generated anecdotes of how the Host had turned into flesh and blood, even into a child.<sup>4</sup> The notion spread that temporal benefits might be expected from its mere contemplation, and the belief was enhanced by the readiness of the Church to multiply the secular occasions for which masses

<sup>1</sup> A. Watkin, *Dean Cosyn and Wells Cathedral Miscellanea* (Somerset Rec. Soc., 1941), p. 158; 5 & 6 Edward VI cap. 4 (1551-2).

<sup>2</sup> For this expression, G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Studies*, 14 (2nd edn., 1921), pp. 24-5. For this controversial subject I have drawn on both C. W. Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers* (1958), and F. Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation* (1960).

<sup>3</sup> C. W. Dugmore, in *Journ. of Theol. Studs.*, n.s., xiv (1963), p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> C. N. L. Brooke, 'Religious sentiment and church design in the later Middle Ages', *Bull. of the John Rylands Lib.*, 1 (1967). For a good example of popular literalism see E. Peacock, 'Extracts from Lincoln episcopal visitations', *Archaeologia*, xlviii (1885), pp. 251-3.

might be performed as a means of propitiation. There were masses for the sick and for women in labour, masses for good weather and for safe journeys, masses against the plague and other epidemics. The *Sarum Missal* of 1532 contained a special mass for the avoidance of sudden death.<sup>1</sup> In 1516 the Priory of Holy Cross at Colchester received a grant of land, in return for the celebration of a solemn mass 'for the further prosperity of the town'.<sup>2</sup> It was common to attach special value to the performance of a certain number of masses in succession – five, seven, nine or thirty (a trental). The ceremony could even be perverted into a maleficent act by causing masses for the dead to be celebrated for persons still alive, in order to hasten their demise. The fifteenth-century treatise *Dives and Pauper* inveighed against those

'that for hate or wrath that they bear against any man or woman take away the clothes of the altar, and clothe the altar with doleful clothing, or beset the altar or the cross about with thorns, and withdraw light out of the church, or . . . do sing mass of requiem for them that be alive, in hope that they should fare the worse and the sooner die.'<sup>3</sup>

The clear implication was that the clergy themselves were sometimes involved in these perversions.

A plethora of sub-superstitions thus accumulated around the sacrament of the altar. The clergy's anxiety that none of the consecrated elements should be wasted or accidentally dropped on the floor encouraged the idea that the Host was an object of supernatural potency. The officiating priest was required to swallow the remaining contents of the chalice, flies and all if need be, and to ensure that not a crumb of the consecrated wafer was left behind.<sup>4</sup> The communicant who did not swallow the bread, but carried it away from the church in his mouth, was widely believed to be in possession of an impressive source of magical power. He could use it to cure the blind or the feverish; he could carry it around with him as a general protection against ill fortune, or he could beat it up into a powder and sprinkle it over his garden as a charm against caterpillars. Medieval stories relate how the Host was profanely employed to put out fires, to cure swine fever, to fertilise the fields and to encourage bees to

<sup>1</sup> G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion* (Cambridge, 1923-50), i, pp. 117-18. For lists of such purposes, Delaunay, *La Médecine et l'Eglise*, pp. 10-11; Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, i, pp. lxxx-lxxxi; Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers*, pp. 64-5. The fullest account (for Germany) is A. Franz, *Die Messe im deutschen Mittelalter* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1902).

<sup>2</sup> *Essex Review*, xlvii (1937), pp. 85-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Dives and Pauper* (1536), f. 51. Cf. Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 75; Thiers, *Superstitions*, iii, 5, chaps. vii-viii, xi; G. R. Owst, 'Sortilegium in English homiletic literature of the fourteenth century', in *Studies presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. J. C. Davies (1957), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> A doctrine well illustrated by the nauseous anecdote in Weldon, *Chronological notes*, pp. 234-5.

make honey. The thief could also convert it into a love-charm or use it for some maleficent purpose. Some believed that a criminal who swallowed the Host would be immune from discovery; others held that by simultaneously communicating with a woman one could gain her affections.<sup>1</sup> In the sixteenth century John Bale complained that the Mass had become a remedy for the diseases of man and beast. It was employed by 'witches . . . sorcerers, charmers, enchanters, dreamers, soothsayers, necromancers, conjurers, cross-diggers, devil-raisers, miracle-doers, dog-leeches and bawds'. The first Edwardian Prayer Book accordingly insisted that the bread should be placed by the officiating minister direct in the communicant's mouth, because in past times people had often carried the sacrament away and 'kept it with them and diversly abused it, to superstition and wickedness'.<sup>2</sup>

It was because of this magical power thought to reside in consecrated objects that ecclesiastical authorities had long found it necessary to take elaborate precautions against theft. The Lateran Council of 1215 had ruled that the eucharist and the holy oil should be kept under lock and key, and the later medieval English Church showed a keen interest in enforcing this stipulation. As late as 1557, for example, Cardinal Pole, in his Injunctions for Cambridge University, insisted that the font should be locked up, so as to prevent the theft of holy water.<sup>3</sup> Thefts of the Host are known to have occurred periodically – three were reported in London in 1532 – and communion bread continued to be employed illegitimately for magical purposes in the post-Reformation era: James Device, one of the Lancashire witches of 1612, was told by his grandmother, Old Demdike, to present himself for communion and bring home the bread.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these superstitions, however, did not require anything so dramatic as the theft of the Host from the altar. Mere attendance at Mass might secure temporal benefits. In his *Instructions for Parish Priests* John Myrc, the fourteenth-century Austin Canon of Lilleshall, claimed the authority of St Augustine for the view that anyone who saw a priest bearing the Host would not lack meat or drink for the rest of that day, nor be in any danger of sudden death or blindness.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, i, cap. 7; Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, 3, chap. xi; P. Browe, *Die eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters* (Breslau, 1938); *Mirk's Festial*, ed. T. Erbe (E.E.T.S.), i (1905), pp. 173–4; *The Works of John Jewel*, ed. J. Ayre (Cambridge, P.S., 1845–50), i, p. 6; Scot, *Discoverie*, XII.ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Select Works of John Bale*, ed. H. Christmas (Cambridge, P.S., 1849), p. 236; *The Two Liturgies . . . in the reign of King Edward VI*, ed. J. Ketley (Cambridge, P.S., 1844), p. 99. For a case in point, A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the diocese of York, 1509–1558* (1959), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Powicke & Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, *passim*; Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 470; Frere & Kennedy, *Articles and Injunctions*, ii, p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 150; Potts, sig. H3.

<sup>5</sup> J. Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. E. Peacock (E.E.T.S., 1868), p. 10. Cf. W. Harrington, *In this Boke are Conteyned the Comendacions of Matrymony* (1528), sig. Eiii<sup>v</sup>.

'Thousands,' wrote William Tyndale in the early sixteenth century, believed that, if they crossed themselves when the priest was reading St John's Gospel, no mischance would happen to them that day.<sup>1</sup> The Mass could also be a means of prognosticating the future or of gaining success in some projected venture. The clergy disseminated stories of the miraculous benefits which had been known to spring from communicating, and of the disastrous consequences which participation in the ceremony might have for the unworthy communicant.<sup>2</sup> In the Communion Service in the Prayer Book of 1549 the curate was required to warn the congregation that anyone who received unworthily did so to his own damnation, both spiritual and temporal, for in this way 'we kindle God's wrath over us; we provoke him to plague us with divers diseases and sundry kinds of death'. In the seventeenth century the Catholic Church was noted by an intelligent observer to teach that the Mass might still be efficacious for 'safe-journeying by sea or land, on horseback or on foot; for women that are barren, big, or bringing forth; for fevers and toothaches; for hogs and hens; for recovery of lost goods and the like'.<sup>3</sup>

Like the Mass, the other Christian sacraments all generated a corpus of parasitic beliefs, which attributed to each ceremony a material significance which the leaders of the Church had never claimed. By the eve of the Reformation most of these rituals had become crucial 'rites of passage', designed to ease an individual's transition from one social state to another, to emphasise his new status and to secure divine blessing for it. Baptism, which signified the entry of the new-born child into membership of the Church, was necessary to turn the infant into a full human being, and by the thirteenth century was expected to take place within the first week of birth. The Church taught that the ceremony was absolutely necessary for salvation and that children who died unbaptised were usually consigned to limbo, where they would be perpetually denied sight of the vision of God and even, according to some theologians, subjected to the torments of the damned.<sup>4</sup> At the baptismal ceremony the child was, therefore, exorcised (with the obvious implication that it had previously been possessed by the Devil), anointed with chrism (consecrated oil and balsam) and signed

<sup>1</sup> Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Thiers, *Superstitions*, iii, v, chap. xii; Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, p. 79; J. A. Herbert, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, iii (1910), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> H. More, *A Modest Enquiry into the Mystery of Iniquity* (1664), p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> A. van Gennep has a brief discussion of baptism in his pioneering work, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee (1960), pp. 93-6. For medieval teaching on the subject, G. G. Coulton, *Infant Perdition in the Middle Ages* (*Medieval Studies*, 16, 1922) and G. W. Bromiley, *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers* (1953), pp. 48-52. The meaning of the rites of passage is further discussed by M. Gluckman in *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, ed. Gluckman (Manchester, 1962) and R. Horton, 'Ritual man in Africa', *Africa*, xxxiv (1964).

with the cross in holy water. Around its head was bound a white cloth (chrisom), in which it would be buried if it should die in infancy.

The social significance of the baptismal ceremony as the formal reception of the child into the community is obvious enough, and it is not surprising that greater meaning should have been attached to the ceremony than the Church allowed. Even in the early twentieth century it was believed in some rural communities that children 'came on better' after being christened. In the later Middle Ages it was common to regard baptism as an essential rite if the child were physically to survive at all, and there were stories about blind children whose sight had been restored by baptism. Sundry superstitions related to the day on which the ceremony should take place, the sort of water which should be used, and the qualifications of the godparents. There were also attempts to apply the rite in inappropriate contexts, for example, by baptising the caul in which the infant was born, or by exorcising the mother when she was in labour.<sup>1</sup> Particularly common was the idea that animals might benefit from the ceremony. It is possible that some of the numerous cases recorded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of attempts to baptise dogs, cats, sheep and horses<sup>2</sup> may not have arisen from drunkenness or Puritan mockery of Anglican ceremonies, but have reflected the old superstition that the ritual had about it a physical efficacy which could be directed to any living creature.

Very similar ideas surrounded the ceremony of confirmation. This rite had originally been combined with that of baptism as one integrated ceremony of Christian initiation. But by the early Middle Ages the two rituals had drawn apart, though confirmation was still expected to take place when the child was very young. Various maximum ages, ranging from one year to seven, were prescribed by English bishops in the thirteenth century; and, although a minimum age of seven came to be thought appropriate, the custom was slow to establish itself: Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII, was baptised and confirmed at the age of three days. Only in the mid-sixteenth century did the Council of Trent require the child to be approaching years of discretion and capable of rehearsing the elements of his belief.<sup>3</sup> At the con-

<sup>1</sup> On these notions, Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, i, *passim*; Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, ii, pp. 374-5; F. A. Gasquet, *Parish Life in Mediaeval England* (1906), pp. 189-90; Delaunay, *La Médecine et l'Église*, p. 10; W. M. Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (1956), pp. 59-60; W. Henderson, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties* (new edn., 1879), p. 15; *County Folk-Lore*, v, ed. Mrs Gutch & M. Peacock (Folk-Lore Soc., 1908), pp. 228-9; R. Farnworth, *The Heart Opened by Christ* (1654), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., V.C.H., Oxon. ii, p. 42; *Sussex Archaeol. Collns.*, xlix (1906), pp. 53-4; C.S.P.D., 1611-18, p. 540; 1631-3, p. 256; *Southwell Act Books*, xxii, p. 213; H.M.C., Hatfield, x, p. 450; Lilly, *Autobiography*, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Powicke & Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, pp. 32, 71, 298, 369, 441, 591, 703, 989; J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation* (Alcuin Club, 1965), pp. 122-3; W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 199; Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, i, pp. cclx-cclxiii, 42, n. 9; Tyndale, *Answer to More's Dialogue*, p. 72; Harrington, *In this Booke are Conteyned the Comendacions of Matrymony*, sig. Eii.

firmation ceremony the bishop would lay his hands on the child and tie around its forehead a linen band which he was required to wear for three days afterwards. This was believed to strengthen him against the assaults of the fiend, and the notion became current that it was extremely bad luck to untie the band under any circumstances. Here too physical effects were vulgarly attributed to the ceremony: a belief which survived until the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the case of the old Norfolk woman who claimed to have been 'bishopped' seven times, because she found it helped her rheumatism.<sup>1</sup>

Another ecclesiastical ritual with a strong social significance was the churching, or purification, of women after childbirth, representing as it did society's recognition of the woman's new role as mother, and her resumption of sexual relations with her husband after a period of ritual seclusion and avoidance. Extreme Protestant reformers were later to regard it as one of the most obnoxious Popish survivals in the Anglican Church, but medieval churchmen had also devoted a good deal of energy to refuting such popular superstitions as the belief that it was improper for the mother to emerge from her house, or to look at the sky or the earth before she had been purified. The Church chose to treat the ceremony as one of thanksgiving for a safe deliverance, and was reluctant to countenance any prescribed interval after birth before it could take place. Nor did it accept that the woman should stay indoors until she had been churched. Like the *Sarum Manual*, *Dives and Pauper* stressed that unpurified women might enter church whenever they wished, and that 'they that call them heathen women for the time that they lie in be fools and sin . . . full grievously'. But for people at large churching was indubitably a ritual of purification closely linked to its Jewish predecessor.<sup>2</sup>

Radical Protestants were later to blame the ceremony itself, which 'breedeth and nourisheth many superstitious opinions in the simple people's hearts; as that the woman which hath born a child is unclean and unholy'.<sup>3</sup> But a fairer view would have been to regard the ritual as the result of such opinions, rather than the cause. Virginity, or at least abstinence from sexual intercourse, was still a generally accepted condition of holiness; and there were many medieval precedents for the attitude of the Laudian Vicar of Great Totham, Essex, who refused communion to menstruating women and those who had had sexual

<sup>1</sup> R. Forby, *The Vocabulary of East Anglia* (1830), ii, pp. 406-7. Cf. Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, 2, chap. iii; W. Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, P.S., 1848), p. 225; *County Folk-Lore*, v, ed. Gutch & Peacock, p. 108; *Folk-Lore Journ.*, ii (1884), p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> *Dives and Pauper* (1536), f. 229; *Sarum Manual*, p. 44; Harrington, *In this Booke are Conteyned the Cōmendacions of Matrymony*, sig. Div; T. Comber, *The Occasional Offices . . . Explained* (1679), pp. 506, 507, 510.

<sup>3</sup> J. Canne, *A Necessitie of Separation* (1634), ed. C. Stovel (Hanserd Knollys Soc., 1849), p. 109n.

intercourse on the previous night.<sup>1</sup> Such prejudices may have been reinforced by the all-male character of the Church and its insistence on celibacy, but they are too universal in primitive societies to be regarded as the mere creation of medieval religion. The ceremony of the churching of women took on a semi-magical significance in popular estimation; hence the belief, which the Church vainly attempted to scotch, that a woman who died in child-bed before being churchied should be refused Christian burial.<sup>2</sup> The idea of purification survived the Reformation; even at the end of the seventeenth century it was reported from parts of Wales that 'the ordinary women are hardly brought to look upon churching otherwise than as a charm to prevent witchcraft, and think that grass will hardly ever grow where they tread before they are churchied'.<sup>3</sup>

It is hardly necessary to detail the allied superstitions which attached themselves to the ceremony of marriage. Most of them taught that the fate of the alliance could be adversely affected by the breach of a large number of ritual requirements relating to the time and place of the ceremony, the dress of the bride, and so forth. Typical was the notion that the wedding ring would constitute an effective recipe against unkindness and discord, so long as the bride continued to wear it.<sup>4</sup> Such notions provide a further demonstration of how every sacrament of the Church tended to generate its attendant sub-superstitions which endowed the spiritual formulae of the theologians with a crudely material efficacy.

This tendency was perhaps less apparent in the various rituals accompanying the burial of the dead, such as the convention that the corpse should face East or that the funeral should be accompanied by doles to the poor. Important though such observances were in popular estimation, they related primarily to the spiritual welfare of the soul of the deceased, and were seldom credited with any direct impact upon the welfare of the living, save in so far as a ghost who could not rest quietly might return to trouble the dead man's survivors.<sup>5</sup> Funeral customs are worth studying for the manner in which they helped to ease the social adjustments necessary to accommodate the fact of death, but by their very nature they do not testify in the same way as the other rites of passage to the extent of popular belief in the material effects of ecclesiastical ritual.

Before a man died, however, he was extended the last of the seven sacraments,

<sup>1</sup> J. White, *The First Century of Scandalous, Malignant Priests* (1643), p. 50. The Catholic Church regarded abstinence as desirable but not essential; Thiers, *Superstitions*, iv, pp. 563-4.

<sup>2</sup> J. Toussaert, *Le Sentiment Religieux en Flandre à la Fin du Moyen-Âge* (Paris, 1963), p. 101. Cf. *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, ed. G. E. Corrie (Cambridge, P.S., 1845), p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 145. Cf. the nineteenth-century survivals recorded in J. E. Vaux, *Church Folk-Lore* (2nd edn., 1902), pp. 112-13; *County Folk-Lore*, v, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> W. Taswell, *The Church of England not Superstitious* (1714), p. 36; Thiers, *Superstitions*, iv, 10.

<sup>5</sup> See below, pp. 587-600.

extreme unction, whereby the recipient was anointed with holy oil and tendered the viaticum. In the eyes of everyone this was a dreadful ritual, and from Anglo-Saxon times there had been a deep conviction that to receive the viaticum was a virtual death sentence which would make subsequent recovery impossible. The medieval Church found it necessary to denounce the superstition that recipients of extreme unction who subsequently got better should refrain from eating meat, going barefoot, or having intercourse with their wives.<sup>1</sup> It may have been in an attempt to counter this fear that the leaders of the Church chose to stress the possibility that extreme unction might positively assist the patient's recovery, provided he had sufficient faith. The Council of Trent emphasised that the ceremony could boost the recipient's will to live, and Bishop Bonner wrote in 1555 that:

'Although in our wicked time small is the number of them that do escape death, having received this sacrament . . . yet that is not to be ascribed unto the lack or fault of this sacrament, but rather unto the want and lack of steadfast and constant faith, which ought to be in those that shall have this sacrament ministered unto them; by which strong faith the power of almighty God in the primitive church did work mightily and effectually in sick persons anointed.'<sup>2</sup>

This was to link unction to the Church's other rites of blessing and anointing the sick to which it was closely related, and in which the intention had been curative rather than merely symbolic.<sup>3</sup> As such it represents a final manifestation of the physical significance which the sacraments of the Church were so widely believed to possess.

Next to the sacraments as a means of access to divine assistance came the prayers of the faithful. Such prayer took many forms, but the kind most directly related to temporal problems was that of intercession, whereby God was called upon to provide both guidance along the path to salvation, and help with more material difficulties. In times of disaster it was appropriate for the clergy and people to invoke supernatural assistance. Private men made their solitary appeals to God, while communities offered a corporate supplication, most characteristically in large processions arranged by the Church. Such processions were common in medieval England as a response to plague, bad harvests and

<sup>1</sup> *Sarum Manual*, p. 113; Powicke & Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, pp. 305-6, 596, 707, 996; Thiers, *Superstitions*, iv, 8, chap. 7.

<sup>2</sup> E. Bonner, *A Profitable and Necessary Doctryne, with Certayne Homelies Adioyned Therunto* (1555), sig. Ddiii; Council of Trent, Session xiv, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of extreme unction*, chap. ii.

<sup>3</sup> R. M. Woolley, *Exorcism and the Healing of the Sick* (1932); B. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. F. Courtney (Freiburg, 1964), pp. 233-57. A 'blessing for sore eyes' is reproduced on pp. 6-7 of the appendix to W. Beckett, *A Free and Impartial Enquiry into . . . Touching for the Cure of the King's Evil* (1722).



foul weather; and it was confidently believed that they could induce God to show his mercy by diverting the course of nature in response to the community's repentance. In 1289 the Bishop of Chichester ruled that it was the duty of every priest to order processions and prayers when he saw a storm was imminent, without waiting for orders from above.<sup>1</sup>

This belief that earthly events could be influenced by supernatural intervention was not in itself a magical one. For the essential difference between the prayers of a churchman and the spells of a magician was that only the latter claimed to work automatically; a prayer had no certainty of success and would not be granted if God chose not to concede it. A spell, on the other hand, need never go wrong, unless some detail of ritual observance had been omitted or a rival magician had been practising stronger counter-magic. A prayer, in other words, was a form of supplication: a spell was a mechanical means of manipulation. Magic postulated occult forces of nature which the magician learned to control, whereas religion assumed the direction of the world by a conscious agent who could only be deflected from his purpose by prayer and supplication. This distinction was popular with nineteenth-century anthropologists, but has been rejected by their modern successors, on the ground that it fails to consider the role which the appeal to spirits can play in a magician's ritual and which magic has occupied in some forms of primitive religion.<sup>2</sup> But it is useful in so far as it emphasises the non-coercive character of Christian prayers. The Church's teaching was usually unambiguous on this point: prayers might bring practical results, but they could not be guaranteed to do so.

In practice, however, this distinction was repeatedly blurred in the popular mind. The Church itself recommended the use of prayers when healing the sick or gathering medicinal herbs. Confessors required penitents to repeat a stated number of Paternosters, Aves and Creeds, thereby fostering the notion that the recitation of prayers in a foreign tongue had a mechanical efficacy. The chantries of the later Middle Ages were built upon the belief that the regular offering of prayers would have a beneficial effect upon the founder's soul: they presupposed the quantitative value of masses, and gave, as their most recent historian puts it, 'almost a magical value to mere repetition of formulae'.<sup>3</sup> Salvation itself could be attained, it seemed, by mechanical means, and the more numerous the prayers the more likely their success. It therefore became worthwhile to secure other people to offer up prayers on one's own behalf. In the reign of Henry VIII the Marchioness of Exeter paid twenty shillings to Elizabeth Barton, the Nun of Kent, to pray that she would not lose her next child in childbirth, and that her

<sup>1</sup> Powicke & Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, p. 1086, and index under 'processions'.

<sup>2</sup> For the distinction see, e.g., J. G. Frazer, *The Magic Art* (3rd edn., 1911), i, chap. 4; and for criticism, G. & M. Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (Cambridge, 1945), p. 72, and below, pp. 267-72, 638-40.

<sup>3</sup> K. L. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 308, 312.

husband would come home safely from the wars.<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas More told of a friar in Coventry who declared that anyone who said his rosary once a day would be saved. The Enchiridion of Salisbury Cathedral contained a formula with the rubric: 'Whosoever sayeth this prayer following in the worship of God and St Rock shall not die of the pestilence by the grace of God.' The Catholics, said Jeremy Taylor, taught 'that prayers themselves *ex opere operato* . . . do prevail', and 'like the words of a charmer they prevail even when they are not understood'.<sup>2</sup>

The medieval Church thus did a great deal to weaken the fundamental distinction between a prayer and a charm, and to encourage the idea that there was virtue in the mere repetition of holy words. It was the legacy of Catholic teaching, thought two Elizabethan pamphleteers, that 'the ignorant sort, beholding a man affected but only with melancholy, are so strongly conceited that it is no physical means, but only the good words and prayers of learned men that must restore them again to their perfect health'.<sup>3</sup> Because medieval theologians encouraged the use of prayers as an accompaniment to the gathering of herbs, the notion survived that these plants were useless unless plucked in a highly ritual manner. The distinguishing feature of the village wizards of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was their assumption that the ritual and unaccompanied pronouncement of special prayers could secure the patient's recovery.<sup>4</sup> This had not been the teaching of the medieval Church, for prayers, though necessary, were not intended to be effective without medical treatment. But the clergy had claimed that the recitation of prayers could afford protection against vermin or fiends;<sup>5</sup> and without the Church's encouragement of the formal repetition of set forms of prayer the magical faith in the healing power of Aves and Paternosters could never have arisen. The rural magicians of Tudor England did not invent their own charms: they inherited them from the medieval Church, and their formulae and rituals were largely derivative products of centuries of Catholic teaching. For, in addition to the prayers officially countenanced, there was a large undergrowth of semi-Christian charms which drew heavily on ecclesiastical formulae. The following extract from the commonplace-book of Robert Reynys, a fifteenth-century church reeve at Acle, Norfolk, is typical:

'Pope Innocent hath granted to any man that beareth the length of the three nails of Our Lord Jesus Christ upon him and worship them daily with five

<sup>1</sup> *L.P.*, vi, p. 589; A. D. Cheney, 'The Holy Maid of Kent', *T.R.H.S.*, n.s. xviii (1904), p. 117, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> H. M. Smith, *Pre-Reformation England* (1938), pp. 161-2; *Private Prayers put forth by Authority during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. W. K. Clay (Cambridge, P.S., 1851), p. 392 n. 1; *Whole Works of . . . Jeremy Taylor*, vi, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> J. Deacon & J. Walker, *A Summarie Answer to . . . Master Darel his Bookes* (1601), pp. 211-12.

<sup>4</sup> See below, pp. 178-83, 267.

<sup>5</sup> Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, pp. 93-4.

Paternosters and five Aves and a psalter, he shall have seven gifts granted to him. The first, he shall not be slain with sword nor knife. The second, he shall not die no sudden death. The third, his enemies shall not overcome him. The fourth, he shall have sufficient good and honest living. The fifth, that poisons nor fever nor false witness shall grieve him. The sixth, he shall not die without the sacraments of the Church. The seventh, he shall be defended from all wicked spirits, from pestilence and all evil things.<sup>1</sup>

Charms of this kind were to be a common feature of popular magic in the century after the Reformation; and so were the old Catholic prayers ritually recited: the repetition for fifteen days, for example, of the prayers known as St Bridget's Oes (because they all began with the invocation 'O') was thought to be a means of divining the date of one's own death.<sup>2</sup> Prayers could also be used for maleficent purposes, for example, by being recited backwards.<sup>3</sup> *Dives and Pauper* asserts that 'it hath oft been known that witches, with saying of their Paternoster and dropping of the holy candle in a man's steps that they hated, hath done his feet rotten of'. This was apparently no exaggeration: in 1543 Joanna Meriwether of Canterbury, 'for the displeasure that she bore towards a young maid named Elizabeth Celsay and her mother, made a fire upon the dung of the said Elizabeth; and took a holy candle and dropt upon the said dung. And she told the neighbours that the said enchantment would make the cule [buttocks] of the said maid to divide into two parts'.<sup>4</sup>

Another way of coercing God into granting the suppliant's requests was to increase the incentive by making a vow of some reciprocal service, conditional upon the success of the prayer. God and man would thus be united by a bond of mutual self-interest. A sailor in peril of shipwreck might vow candles to a shrine or assert his readiness to undertake an arduous pilgrimage should he escape his present danger.<sup>5</sup> In the seventeenth century women could still emulate the example of Hannah by solemnly vowing to dedicate their children to a religious career if only their barrenness could be terminated.<sup>6</sup> The ritual condition of fasting was also thought efficacious. By the fifteenth century the belief had arisen that one could avoid sudden death by fasting all the year round on the day of the week on

<sup>1</sup> C. L. S. Linnell, 'The commonplace book of Robert Reynys', *Norfolk Archaeology*, xxxii (1958-61), p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Deacon & Walker, *A Summarie Answer*, p. 211. The same prayers could also be used to deliver one's ancestors from Purgatory, H. C. White, *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion* (Madison, Wisc., 1951), pp. 216-17 (their text is in Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, iii, pp. 275-82).

<sup>3</sup> Thomson, *Later Lollards*, p. 83. A Cambridgeshire woman was slanderously accused of doing this in 1619; Ely D.R., B 2/37, f. 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, f. 53; Ewen, ii, p. 447.

<sup>5</sup> *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. N. Bailey & ed. E. Johnson (1878), i, pp. 278-9; L.P., i, no. 1786. For a similar attitude in a modern South Italian village, E. C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), pp. 131-2.

<sup>6</sup> Aubrey, *Gentilisme*, p. 97.

which the Feast of the Annunciation happened to occur. Conversely, there were the 'black-fasts', designed to secure the death of an enemy.<sup>1</sup>

A further example of the supernatural power thought to be at the disposal of the medieval Church is provided by the religious sanctions employed in the administration of justice. The standard method of inducing a witness to give honest testimony was to require him to swear a solemn oath as to the truth of his evidence. The assumption behind this procedure was that perjury would call forth the vengeance of God, certainly in the next world and quite possibly in this one. Hence the slowness of the lay authorities to treat perjury as a civil offence. The force of such an oath might be further enhanced by requiring that it be taken on some sacred object – a Bible, or a relic. The holy taper of Cardigan Priory, for example, was 'used of men to swear by in difficult and hard matters', and it proved a useful source of revenue to the monks. A note on the eleventh-century *Red Book of Derby* asserts that 'it was commonly believed that who should swear untruly upon this book should run mad'. The sixteenth-century Irish made similar use of St Patrick's staff, believing that to perjure oneself on this holy object would provoke an even worse punishment than if the oath had been sworn on the gospels. In the same way Anglo-Saxon charters had been kept on an altar or copied into a gospel or holy book in order to stiffen the sanction against any party who subsequently broke faith.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of such deterrents is another matter: the historians of early medieval law declare that 'our ancestors perjured themselves with impunity', and the frequency of perjury in the courts had become a matter of general complaint by the later Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> But the reality of the divine sanction never ceased to be upheld by the Church.

An alternative device for supporting testimony and making agreements binding was the unofficial use of the Mass as a form of poison ordeal. The suspected party would be required to communicate, on the assumption that he would be damned if guilty or dishonest. His willingness to undergo the test would thus constitute proof of his innocence. In the Tudor period men sometimes took

<sup>1</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, ff. 60<sup>v</sup>–61<sup>v</sup>; below, p. 512.

<sup>2</sup> *Three Chapters of Letters relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, ed. T. Wright (Camden Soc., 1843), p. 186; *York Manual*, p. xx; E. Campion, *Two booke of the histories of Ireland*, ed. A. F. Vossen (Assen, 1963), p. [22]; P. Chaplais, 'The origin and authenticity of the royal Anglo-Saxon diploma', *Journ. of the Soc. of Archivists*, iii (1965), p. 53. Cf. *Whole Works of . . . Jeremy Taylor*, vi, p. 175. On oaths in general see J. E. Tyler, *Oaths, their Origins, Nature and History* (1834); H. C. Lea, *Superstition and Force* (3rd edn., Philadelphia, 1878), pp. 323–7; *Dives and Pauper*, ff. 93<sup>v</sup>–94; Aubrey, *Gentilisme*, p. 128; C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (1964), chap. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Sir F. Pollock & F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1952), ii, p. 543; D. Wilkins, *Concilia* (1737), iii, p. 534; *Sermons by Hugh Latimer*, ed. G. E. Corrie (Cambridge, P.S., 1844), p. 301.

communion as a means of clearing themselves of some notorious slander.<sup>1</sup> The same principle gave rise to the convention, which Archbishop Laud attempted to make obligatory, that newly married persons should take the sacrament together immediately after the marriage service as a means of confirming their promises. In modern times the Christian sacraments have been similarly employed as a poison ordeal by newly converted African peoples.<sup>2</sup> In the Middle Ages holy relics were also used for this purpose. Bishop Latimer commented on how people flocked to see Christ's Blood at Hailes Abbey, Gloucestershire, believing 'that the sight of it with their bodily eye doth certify them and putteth them out of doubt that they be in clean life, and in state of salvation without spot of sin'.<sup>3</sup> The same idea underlay the numerous 'stones of chastity' and similar objects.

There were also supernatural remedies to check theft, especially the theft of holy objects. The lives of the saints abounded in stories of the miraculous retribution which had overtaken those who tried to raid ecclesiastical treasure-houses or to penetrate some holy shrine. The thief was unable to get out once he had got in, or the stolen object had stuck to his hands. The man who stole pyxes from a London church in 1467 was unable to see the Host until he had confessed and been absolved.<sup>4</sup> There were also sundry popular methods of thief-detection in which Christian prayers or holy books played a key role; a Suffolk witch advised her clients in 1499 to give their horses holy bread and water to prevent them being stolen.<sup>5</sup>

The medieval Church thus appeared as a vast reservoir of magical power, capable of being deployed for a variety of secular purposes. Indeed it is difficult to think of any human aspiration for which it could not cater. Almost any object associated with ecclesiastical ritual could assume a special aura in the eyes of the people. Any prayer or piece of the Scriptures might have a mystical power waiting to be tapped. The Bible could be an instrument of divination, which opened at random would reveal one's fate. The gospels could be read aloud to women in child-bed to guarantee them a safe delivery. A Bible could be laid on a restless child's head so as to send it to sleep. *Dives and Pauper* declared that

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Jewel*, i, p. 6; C. Chardon, *Histoire des Sacrements* (Paris, 1745), ii, p. 239; Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, pp. 320-4; Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, i, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> *C.S.P.D.*, 1640, p. 279; Aubrey, *Gentilisme*, p. 130; Cf. M. G. Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting* (Manchester, 1965), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, ed. Corrie, p. 364.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 156. Cf. Loomis, *White Magic*, pp. 55, 85, 97-8, 194; L. F. Salzman, 'Some Sussex miracles', *Sussex Notes and Queries*, i (1926-7), p. 215.

<sup>5</sup> C. Jenkins, 'Cardinal Morton's register', *Tudor Studies*, ed. R. W. Seton-Watson (1924), p. 72. Other ecclesiastical remedies for lost goods occur in Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, pp. 147-8; Scot, *Discoverie*, XII. ix, xvii; Deacon & Walker, *A Summarie Answer*, p. 210. Cf. below, p. 214.

it was not wrong to try to charm snakes or birds by reciting holy words, provided the operation was done with reverence.<sup>1</sup>

The widely dispersed nature of such notions is eloquent testimony to the power with which many Englishmen credited the apparatus of the Church. Comparable assumptions are to be found among many newly converted African peoples today. Many of the Ceŵa of Zambia and Malawi believe that Christians use the Bible as a powerful means of divination, and assume that conversion is a likely prelude to worldly success; indeed the prophets of the native Pentecostal Churches have tended to usurp the role of the traditional diviners. The Makah Indians of North America similarly regarded Christianity as a new means of divination and healing. In Sekhukuniland the Pedi were attracted to the new religion by the hope of gaining additional protection against sickness; and for the Bantu the healing message of Christianity was the central pivot of evangelisation.<sup>2</sup> In medieval England the same connection between religion and material prosperity was given vivid expression in 1465, when a man who had been excommunicated at the suit of another party retorted defiantly that the excommunication could not have been valid, for his wheat crop had been no smaller than that of his neighbours, which it would have been if God had upheld the decree.<sup>3</sup>

It would, of course, be a gross travesty to suggest that the medieval Church deliberately held out to the laity an organised system of magic designed to bring supernatural remedies to bear upon earthly problems. The Church was other-worldly in its main preoccupations. Most of the magical claims made for religion were parasitic to its teaching, and were more or less vigorously refuted by ecclesiastical leaders. Indeed our very knowledge of many of these superstitions is due to the medieval theologians and Church Councils who denounced them. It would be wrong to infer the attitude of medieval Church leaders from the indictments of the Protestant reformers. Medieval ecclesiastics usually stressed the primarily intercessory nature of the Church's rites. The recitation of

<sup>1</sup> Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, pp. 61-2; B. Holyday, *Motives to a Good Life* (Oxford, 1657), p. 129; *Dives and Pauper*, f. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting*, p. 90; J. R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia* (1967), pp. 41, 221 ff.; P. Tyler, 'The pattern of Christian belief in Sekhukuniland', *Church Qtrly. Rev.*, clxvii (1966), pp. 335-6; B. G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (2nd edn., 1961), pp. 220, 254-5; B. A. Pauw, *Religion in a Tswana Chieftdom* (1960), chaps. 2 & 6; E. Colson, *The Makah Indians* (Manchester, 1953), p. 277. Cf. M. J. Field, *Search for Security* (1960), pp. 51-2; M. Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (1959), p. 184; R. W. Lieban, *Cebuano Sorcery* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1967), pp. 32-3; J. D. Y. Peel, 'Understanding alien belief-systems', *Brit. Journ. Sociology*, xx (1969), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, 1883, xxiv (*Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the constitution and working of the Ecclesiastical Courts*, i), p. 162. For similar beliefs in modern Ireland, K. H. Connell, *Irish Peasant Society* (Oxford, 1968), p. 155.

prayers, the worship of saints, the use of holy water and the sign of the cross were all propitiatory, not constraining. As the perpetual extension of Christ's incarnation, the Church claimed to be the mediator between Man and God, and the dispenser of God's grace through prescribed channels (the *opus operatum*). The sacraments worked automatically (*ex opere operato*), regardless of the moral worth of the officiating priest, and thus gave medieval Christianity an apparently magical character.<sup>1</sup> But most other ecclesiastical operations could only be accomplished by a good priest and a pious laity (*ex opere operantis*). They were dependent upon the spiritual condition of those participating: the agnus dei, for example, might fail to protect its wearer if he was weak in faith.

It was only at a popular level that such agencies were credited with an inexorable and compelling power. Many later medieval theologians were strongly 'rationalist' in temperament, and preferred to stress the importance of human self-help. They had inherited rites from a more primitive era and they viewed them cautiously. They regarded the sacraments as symbolic representations rather than as instruments of physical efficacy. As an institution, the Church was zealous to check the 'excesses' of devotion, to vet closely any claims to new miracles, to restrain popular 'superstition'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the late medieval Catholic laity were not all ignorant peasants; they included educated urban dwellers who were intellectually more sophisticated than many of the clergy. The vernacular literature of the fifteenth century testifies to their realistic social outlook.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, there were several circumstances which helped to consolidate the notion that the Church was a magical agency, no less than a devotional one. The first was the legacy of the original conversion. It was not just that the leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church had laid so much stress upon the miracle-working power of their saints, and had disseminated anecdotes illustrating their superiority to any magic the pagans had to offer; though this in itself made difficult the later efforts to purge religious teaching of any 'grossness'. The real difficulty stemmed from the notorious readiness of the early Christian leaders to assimilate elements of the old paganism into their own religious practice, rather than pose too direct a conflict of loyalties in the minds of the new converts. The ancient worship of wells, trees and stones was not so much abolished as modified, by turning pagan sites into Christian ones and associating them with a saint rather than a heathen divinity. The pagan festivals were similarly incorporated into the Church year. New Year's Day became the feast of Circumcision; May

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pauw, *Religion in a Tswana Chieftdom*, pp. 147-8, 195.

<sup>2</sup> Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen*, ii, pp. 120-3; Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, pp. 83-5; E. Delcambre, *Le Concept de la Sorcellerie dans le Duché de Lorraine* (Nancy, 1948-51), iii, pp. 132-3; A. B. Ferguson, 'Reginald Pecock and the Renaissance sense of History', *Studies in the Renaissance*, xiii (1966), p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance* (Durham, N.C., 1965), chaps. 1-5.

Day was SS. Philip and James; Midsummer Eve the Nativity of St John the Baptist. Fertility rites were converted into Christian processions and the Yule Log was introduced into celebrations of the birth of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This well-known process of assimilation was not achieved without some cost, for it meant that many of the purposes served by the older paganism were now looked for from nominally Christian institutions. The hundreds of magical springs which dotted the country became 'holy wells', associated with a saint, but they were still employed for magical healing and for divining the future. Their water was sometimes even believed to be peculiarly suitable for use in baptism.<sup>2</sup> Observance of the festivals of the Christian year was thought to encourage fertility and the welfare of the crops. An eclectic range of ritual activities was conducted under the auspices of the Church: 'leading of the plough about the fire' on Plough Monday, 'for good beginning of the year, that they should fare the better all the year following';<sup>3</sup> the annual fires kindled on the hillsides on May Day, St John Baptist Eve and other occasions;<sup>4</sup> the flowers draped by the villagers around the holy wells; the offerings of oats, cheese and other commodities at the shrines of saints.<sup>5</sup> Some were customary calendar rituals whose pagan origins had long been forgotten, whereas others retained a frankly magical purpose. Material prosperity was assumed to be integrally connected with their observance; and their annual recurrence gave men confidence in face of their daily problems. The consolations afforded by such practices were too considerable for the Church to ignore; if the people were going to resort to magic anyway it was far better that it should be a magic over which the Church maintained some control.

The Church's magical claims were also reinforced by its own propaganda. Although theologians drew a firm line between religion and superstition their concept of 'superstition' always had a certain elasticity about it. It was 'superstitious' to use consecrated objects for purposes other than those for which they were intended. It was 'superstitious' to attempt to achieve effects, other than those which might have natural causes, by any operation which had not been authorised by the Church. But in these, as in other definitions, the last word always lay

<sup>1</sup> On this large subject see especially E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, i (Oxford, 1903), chap. 6, and C. R. Baskerville, 'Dramatic aspects of medieval folk festivals in England', *Studies in Philology*, xvii (1920).

<sup>2</sup> Brand, *Antiquities*, ii, pp. 374-5; and for some examples, *ibid.*, pp. 369, 385; R. C. Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (1893); Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, p. 34; V.C.H., Oxon., ii, p. 17. A case of ecclesiastical action against excessive well-worship is in *Diocese of Hereford. Extracts from the Cathedral Registers, A.D. 1275-1535*, trans. E. N. Dew (Hereford, 1932), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, f. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Mirk's Festial*, p. 182; Sir J. G. Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful* (1913), i, pp. 196-7; below, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Frere & Kennedy, *Articles and Injunctions*, ii, p. 57; Bodl., Oxford Dioc. Papers c. 22 (Depositions, 1590-3), f. 76.



with the Church. In general, the ceremonies of which it disapproved were 'superstitious'; those which it accepted were not. As the Council of Malines ruled in 1607: 'It is superstitious to expect any effect from anything, when such an effect cannot be produced by natural causes, by divine institution, or by the ordination or approval of the Church.'<sup>1</sup> There was, therefore, no superstition in believing that the elements could change their nature after the formula of consecration had been pronounced over them: this was not magic, but an operation worked by God and the Church; whereas magic involved the aid of the Devil. The authors of a fifteenth-century treatise against witchcraft stressed that only natural operations could achieve natural effects; but they exempted from this rule such approved practices as carrying around the Host in an attempt to allay a thunderstorm.<sup>2</sup> As Catholic theologians never ceased to emphasise, it was the presence or absence of the Church's authority which determined the propriety of any action. The difference between churchmen and magicians lay less in the effects they claimed to achieve than in their social position, and in the authority on which their respective claims rested. As the Elizabethan Reginald Scot wrote sardonically of the Pope: 'He canonizeth the rich for saints and banneth the poor for witches.'<sup>3</sup>

Theologians further enhanced popular belief in the existence of the Church's magical powers by stressing the mystical powers available to the faithful as a means of preservation against the assault of evil spirits. They did not deny that devils could do material damage by bringing thunderstorms or by tormenting men and animals with occult diseases. But they drew attention to the counter-magic at the Church's disposal. If a cow was bewitched it should have holy water poured down its throat. If a man thought he saw a devil he should make the sign of the cross. If evil spirits brought storms then consecrated bells could be rung to repel them. And if the Devil took possession of a human being the Church could ritually exorcise him.<sup>4</sup> So long as certain physical misfortunes were explained in spiritual terms they could be countered with spiritual weapons; and here the Church claimed a monopoly.

The leaders of the Church thus abandoned the struggle against superstition whenever it seemed in their interest to do so. Throughout the Middle Ages their attitude to the credulities of their simpler followers was fundamentally ambivalent. They disliked them as gross and superstitious, but they had no wish to discourage attitudes which might foster popular devotion. If a belief in the magical efficacy of the Host served to enhance respect for the clergy and to make the laity more regular church-goers, then why should it not be tacitly tolerated?

<sup>1</sup> Thiers, *Superstitions*, ii, p. 8. Cf. *Malleus*, II.2.7; R. Whytforde, *A Werke for Householdors* (n.d., copy in Bodl., Ashm. 1215), sig. Cii<sup>v</sup>. On the relativity of the notion, cf. H. Thurston, *Superstition* (1933), pp. 15-19.

<sup>2</sup> *Malleus*, II.2.7.

<sup>3</sup> Scot, *Discoverie: A Discourse of Divels*, chap. xxiv.

<sup>4</sup> See below, pp. 478, 493.

Such practices as the worship of relics, the recitation of prayers, or the wearing of talismans and amulets, could all be taken to excess, but what did it matter so long as their effect was to bind the people closer to the true Church and the true God? It was the intention of the worshipper, not the means employed, which counted. Chaucer's Parson commented that 'charms for wounds or malady of men or of beasts, if they take any effect, it may be peradventure that God suffereth it, for folk should give the more faith and reverence to his name'. Provided such techniques reflected a genuine trust in God and his saints, no serious harm could come from them.

So at least most churchmen reasoned.<sup>1</sup> In doing so they made the medieval Church into a more flexible institution than they perhaps intended. For they were condoning a situation in which a belief in the potency of Church magic was often fundamental to popular devotion. Medieval theologians and modern historians alike have tended to regard such an attitude as merely parasitic to the main corpus of medieval Catholicism, an accretion which could have been shorn off without affecting the essential core of belief. So, from the point of view of the theologians, it was. But it is doubtful whether this austere distinction between true religion and parasitic superstition could have been upheld at a popular level. The magical aspects of the Church's function were often inseparable from the devotional ones. Many of the parochial clergy themselves drew no distinction: the suggestion made to a child at Rye in 1538 that he should drink three times from the chalice to cure his whooping cough did not emanate from some ignorant parishioner; it was made by the curate himself.<sup>2</sup> The line between magic and religion is one which it is impossible to draw in many primitive societies; it is equally difficult to recognise in medieval England.

<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, *Parson's Tale*, 1.606; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.2.96.4; Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, pp. 141, 148; Lea, *Materials*, p. 135; Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, pp. 78-83.

<sup>2</sup> *L.P.*, xiii (1), p. 430. For the same formula, Scot, *Discoverie*, XII.xvii, and for the role of the clergy in popular magic, below, p. 274.