

The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons *c.*597–*c.*700

Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife

Marilyn Dunn

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For MB

List of Abbreviations

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ASSAH</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>British Archaeological Reports</i>
<i>CBA</i>	<i>Council for British Archaeology</i>
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>
<i>HE</i>	B. Colgrave and R. Mynors (eds and trans.), <i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>
<i>Jesuit Relations</i>	R. G. Thwaites (ed.), <i>Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents</i>
<i>NPNF</i> 1st ser.	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> First Series
<i>NPNF</i> 2nd ser.	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> Second Series
<i>PL</i>	J-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia Cursus Completus Series Latina</i>
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>

Approaches to the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons

The difficulties of studying the religions of the Anglo-Saxons in the conversion period are well known. Historians have agonized over the basic and ‘fearsome question of how religious activity is to be identified in the surviving record.’¹ Such are the problems associated with both the quantity and the quality of the written and material record that, despite the existence of several studies of Anglo-Saxon paganism, one commentator has been driven to conclude that

... the essential *known* is the historical and that the historical, in terms of Anglo-Saxon religion, means Christian culture.²

A judgement of this nature implies that any view of the process of Christianization itself is always going to be written predominantly from the Christian side: and indeed several existing works on the topic have been written largely – though not always entirely – from this perspective.³ But should we necessarily be content with such a restrictive approach? While the problems confronting the historian are extensive, we might look at the issue from another angle, attempt ‘to make contact with otherness in other cultures’, and establish a more anthropological approach to the history of the Anglo-Saxon ‘conversion period.’⁴ What sort of religion was Anglo-Saxon paganism? What type of belief-system is Christianity? If we can achieve some understanding of the differences and also of the similarities which existed between them, a fresh understanding of the nature and extent of Christianization might be possible. The following study sets out to examine paganism, Christianity and the encounter between them in Anglo-Saxon England in the period c.597 to c.700 by analysing them as different types of religion.

The study of religions *as* religions is hardly new. One of the best-known influences on the creation of a typology or typologies of religion is Max Weber (1864–1920), some of whose work explored religious rejections of the world and their different ‘directions.’⁵ Weber suggested that, because of their overriding goal of salvation, ‘world rejecting’ religions (which are also ‘rationalized’ religions, providing answers to profound questions of meaning) exist in a state of tension with the political, economic, familial, sexual, aesthetic, scientific and intellectual aspects of society. Religions of this type produce a highly negative valuation of human civilization along with the goals of detachment from society and the

attainment of another sphere of reality, which generally takes the form of an afterlife. Christianity and Islam provide, along with Indian Buddhism, classic examples of ‘world rejecting’ religion. Both Christ’s injunction to ‘take no thought for the morrow’ but to seek the kingdom of Heaven, and the Buddha’s image of the world as a burning house from which humankind needs to escape, are characteristic of the teachings of such faiths. Religions which we might describe by contrast as ‘world accepting’ are concerned with the here and now – matters of health, prosperity and security in this world, the welfare of the family, avoidance of drought or flood, and the safe gathering-in of the harvest. Anglo-Saxon paganism is one of the many religions falling into this category.

A closely related typology of religion was produced in the 1930s by Gustav Mensching, who contrasted ‘folk religions,’ which follow the latter pattern, with the ‘world religions’ of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. In his definition of ‘folk religion,’ there is also a concentration on survival and prosperity in this world, while the welfare of the sib, tribe or people is the ethical standard against which actions are measured.⁶ And whether we think in terms of ‘world accepting’ or ‘folk’ religions, it follows from their focus on outcomes in this world that this category of religion, into which Anglo-Saxon paganism also falls, is not concerned with the idea of another sphere of reality – unlike the ‘world rejecting’ belief systems. The former do not focus on attaining salvation through reaching a different world or state.

Since the nineteenth century, ethnographers and anthropologists have not only studied various religions *in situ*, but have also been able to see the progress of Christianization for themselves in various locales and societies where ‘world accepting’ or ‘folk’ religions were formerly the norm. One of the most useful studies of this kind is *Rank and Religion in Tikopia* by the anthropologist Raymond Firth, who charted the progress of Christianization between the late 1920s and the early 1950s in a tiny Polynesian outlier in what was then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.⁷ Firth described the gradual progress of Christianity, tracing the encounter of the local religion, which had as its primary objective the preservation of the health and welfare of the Tikopia themselves, with Christianity, a belief system predicated on salvation and focused on the life to come. Another important approach is provided by the Africanist Robin Horton, who has reflected on the encounter between traditional religions and the ‘world religions’ of Islam and Christianity in western Africa.⁸ Horton to some extent worked within a framework that distinguished ‘this-worldly’ from ‘other-worldly’ religions, although he also belonged to an Intellectualist tradition that saw religions as providing answers to the question of how the cosmos works. He highlighted the existence of belief in a supreme being or creator god amongst some African peoples, and suggested that this may have enabled an understanding or acceptance of both Christianity and Islam; his emphasis on

the importance of a supreme being proved controversial, although in fact this is a useful and relevant point when examining responses to the Christian idea of the Trinity.⁹ Horton also drew attention to the pivotal position of rulers and religious leaders, whom he conceived of as occupying a crucial position between the macrocosm of the great world religions and the microcosm of local religions, cults and traditions. This is a valuable framework in which to examine the decisions made by individual Anglo-Saxon rulers when faced with the prospect of accepting baptism.

As Robert Bellah has remarked, we could attempt to account for the presence and absence of 'world rejection' as a dominant theme in religion without ever raising the issue of what he calls religious evolution. He himself argues that religions *did* evolve, and proposes a sequence of types of religion – 'primitive', 'archaic', 'historic', 'early modern' and 'modern'.¹⁰ All of these classifications are based, as Bellah admits, on a general theory of social evolution – in other words a partly functionalist approach, which sees religion as an expression of society – and they also seem to involve the idea of progress towards a greater 'rationalization' in the Weberian sense. At the same time, he appears still to be operating partly within the explanatory framework which distinguishes between 'world accepting' and 'world rejecting' religions, interpreting both 'primitive' and 'archaic' belief systems as falling into the former category and the 'historic' and other groupings (which include Buddhism, Christianity and Islam) as representing a major advance in what an earlier commentator called 'the differentiation between experience of the self and of the world which acts upon it'.¹¹ The concepts of 'world accepting' or 'folk' and 'world rejecting' religions can be helpful when considering the processes of conversion and Christianization, and both descriptions will appear from time to time in this study. However, categorizations of this type can also suggest meta-narratives of 'progress' from localized polytheisms to 'world' or 'universal' religions, and thus have potential limitations when it comes to helping us make contact with the 'otherness' in other cultures.

More fruitful in assisting us towards what anthropologists would think of as an emic approach to the religious cultures of the Anglo-Saxons in the period of Christianization is the emerging field of cognitive anthropology. Through reference both to the ethnographic record and also to advances in cognitive science, this discipline seeks to establish the common mental structures of human cognition and to explain culture in terms of cognitive causes, and even of the evolution of cognition.¹² In one of the best-known works on this subject, *Religion Explained*, Pascal Boyer has set out to elucidate what he calls the human instincts creating gods, spirits and ancestors.¹³ He is particularly interested in the human capacity for generating inferences and suggests that the 'social mind' consists of a collection of specialized inference systems for sex, parenting, social exchange, trust, friendship and coalition building. The evolution of these systems has also

facilitated the development of inferences about supernatural beings, leading people everywhere in the world to entertain concepts of supernatural beings with special qualities and powers – in other words, gods.¹⁴

Cognitive anthropology has not only attempted to explain certain universals, such as gods; it has also produced specific explanatory theories of how religious actors conserve, recall and transmit information on which it is possible to construct a typology of religions.¹⁵ The most-discussed ideas in this field are those of Harvey Whitehouse, who has recently suggested that religious data can be described in terms of two very different sets of dynamics, which he characterizes as ‘imagistic’ and ‘doctrinal’ *modes of religiosity*.¹⁶ He describes these as tendencies towards particular patterns of codification, transmission, cognitive processing and political association. The imagistic mode consists of the tendency for religious revelations to be transmitted ‘through sporadic collective action, evoking multivocal imagery, encoded in memory as distinct episodes and producing highly cohesive and particularistic social ties’.¹⁷ The imagistic mode is non-verbal, iconic and based on affective rather than semantic memory: its most important rituals are performed infrequently. By contrast, the doctrinal mode of religion encompasses the tendency for revelations to be codified as a body of verbalized doctrine, transmitted through routinized forms of worship. It is committed to memory as ‘general knowledge’ and produces large communities of anonymous believers. As Whitehouse himself points out, the first mode is commonly found in small-scale or regionally fragmented ritual traditions and cults; the latter in many regional or ‘world’ religions.

Whitehouse’s theories, set out across a number of volumes and papers, have been much discussed, criticized and refined further both by himself and by other scholars including cognitive anthropologists, anthropologists, ethnographers and archaeologists.¹⁸ Historians of religion have also commented on them. Anne L. Clark, the author of an authoritative study of the twelfth-century visionary Elizabeth of Schönau, suggests that Whitehouse underrates the role of imagistic, visionary experience in monastic communities as well as amongst illiterate laypeople in the late middle ages.¹⁹ She argues that the repetitive verbalized ritual of monastic life could trigger off ecstatic, visionary and emotional experiences, while representational images, intended to ‘teach’ doctrine to the laity, might also be the medium of direct personal communication with supernatural power. She sees this neither as independent co-existence of the two modes nor as fusion of the two, nor even as evidence that the unlearned resorted to imagistic practices out of tedium. Clark also argues that gender is very important in the structuring of medieval religious identity, a suggestion explored in this book in the context of the initial reception of Christianity.

Theodore Vial has examined the applicability of modes theory to the history of the Reformation period.²⁰ On the basis of Whitehouse’s own comments,

Vial suggests that the Reformation may in part be the historical source of his understanding of the doctrinal mode of religiosity – and can also be used to test the applicability of his theory as a whole. He proposes both that the term doctrinal – while defined neutrally by Whitehouse – actually carries with it a lot of baggage, some of it suggesting Calvinist dogma, and that medieval popular religion may actually fit the doctrinal mode very easily. He is also uneasy about the term ‘imagistic’. Yet while one of Vial’s main concerns is Whitehouse’s theory of the interaction between the two modes, in a slightly later piece he has suggested that the establishment of possible patterns of interaction, as well as the trajectories of these patterns, will be of great use to historians.²¹

Since these comments were made, additional and perhaps more productive ways of looking at the relationship between the two modes have been proposed. Todd Tremlin suggests that patterns of historical transformation in religious systems are influenced not only by modes dynamics but also by the tendency of cognitively optimal concepts or positions to emerge, in which both kinds of thinking, and the patterns they generate, are present simultaneously. Jasper Sørensen has contrasted assessments of ritual acts that appear to involve magical efficacy with those which focus on exegetical meaning. While his analysis would seem to suggest that rituals understood as magically effective represent the cognitively optimal position, he also indicates the way in which these rituals or their outcome can lead to exegetical explanation culminating in the formulation of doctrine. Jason Slone posits interaction between the intuitions of the imagistic mode on one hand, and the explicit reasoning of abstract doctrinal theology on the other. And Ikka Pyysiäinen has suggested that in a conversion situation the attractor position lies between imagistic and doctrinal modes.²²

The concept of interaction between imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity provides an extremely useful heuristic device for the study of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons. Anglo-Saxon paganism not only falls into the categories of ‘world accepting’ or ‘folk’ religion but can also be studied as an example of the imagistic mode, an approach that has the potential to bring new dimensions to our understanding of how it functioned. This book places Anglo-Saxon paganism within the frame of the imagistic mode, and also examines aspects of the interaction between doctrinal and imagistic elements within Christianity itself. It suggests that while Christianity is quintessentially doctrinal, over the centuries preceding its arrival among the Anglo-Saxons it had developed or absorbed an imagistic element, in the shape of the cult of saints and relics. The incorporation of such cognitively optimal features into Christianity would create a useful point of contact with new converts from an imagistic religion and provide one of the most powerful tools the Anglo-Saxon Church had at its disposal in its efforts to bring about the acceptance of the new religion by the people. Part of the book is also devoted to an exploration of the way in which the Christianization of the

Anglo-Saxons itself brought about further interaction with, and absorption of, imagistic practices and concepts into a doctrinal religion – particularly where the Church's view of death and the afterlife was concerned.

This book argues that intuitions and doctrines about the dead are of central importance to our understanding of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. Cognitive anthropology emphasizes the importance of death in all religions: to quote Pascal Boyer, 'the souls of the dead, or their "shadows" or "presence", are the most widespread kind of supernatural agent the world over'.²³ One of the greatest gulfs between official Christian doctrine on one hand and pagan and popular belief on the other lies in their contrasting concepts of the soul and the afterlife. Christianity teaches that the individual possesses a single soul, which leaves the body at the moment of death. In many cultures, however, the body is believed to house two or more spirits or souls, while death is frequently seen as a liminal process in which one of the souls can only arrive safely in the afterlife after the performance of the correct rituals or the decay of the flesh – or both.²⁴ If neither takes place, the soul may linger in the world of the living and can even re-enter and re-animate the body, causing it to leave the grave and terrorize the living as a malevolent and murderous vampire.²⁵ The gulf between pagan and Christian belief in these areas could have proved a major threat to the effective establishment of Christianity in seventh-century England, especially after the arrival of the Justinianic Plague, which swept the country between 664 and 687.²⁶ As the first to die in an epidemic is popularly believed in many cultures to return to carry others off, the Christian Church, which had never taken a particularly interventionist line where the performance of some traditional funerary rituals was concerned, had to cope with the possible reinforcement or revival of popular beliefs which did not accord with strict Christian doctrine. Part of the purpose of this book is to suggest that, in the wake of the arrival of the pandemic elsewhere in Europe from the 540s onwards, the Church had already begun to make some changes in its teachings relating to the world to come and that, after a major outbreak of plague in seventh-century England, it further evolved its thinking; in doing so, it generated a view of the afterlife which now contained a more liminal element that would slowly evolve over the following centuries into the area of the Christian afterlife which became known as Purgatory. The following chapter introduces some of these concepts, discussing the tensions between 'doctrinal' Christianity and popular beliefs about death and the afterlife, and examining the way in which some popular beliefs and imagistic practices relating to the dead were absorbed into Christianity from the fourth century onwards. It also looks at the arrival of the first waves of plague in Western Europe in the mid-sixth century and at popular intuitions about the causes of epidemic disease, before going on to trace the beginnings of a Christian response to this intensive encounter with death in the sixth and early seventh centuries.

Discourses of the Dead: Popular Intuitions, Christian Doctrines and Epidemic Disease

NON-CHRISTIAN MULTIPLE SOULS AND THE SINGLE CHRISTIAN SOUL

One of the most fundamental differences between Christianity and many other religions lies in the area of soul belief. Amongst the Native American peoples, in Oceanic cultures, in Archaic Greece and surviving in a number of European folk tales, we can find many variations on the same basic affirmation of soul dualism: this postulates the existence of a free soul, which represents the personality on one hand, and on the other, one or more body souls, which endow the body with life and consciousness.¹ Such beliefs are undoubtedly based on attempts to infer from observation and experience how the person is constituted, how life exists in the body, and the natures of consciousness and personality. There can be considerable variants in these beliefs, but certain fundamental patterns are discernible. Generally, the free soul is considered to be active during unconsciousness, when it leaves the body, while the body souls are active when the individual is awake; it is not entirely clear where in the body the free soul resides during wakeful consciousness.

When the free soul leaves the body temporarily during life, it is usually conceived of as doing so, as demonstrated in many European folk tales, in the shape of a bee, wasp, fly or other insect. Later this category seems to have been expanded to include small animals formerly associated exclusively with the body soul, such as the mouse (*musculus* or little mouse = muscle). The body soul or souls are often divided into several parts and usually consist of life or breath soul and ego soul. The life soul or body motor may be associated with the lungs, gall bladder, heart or kidneys (though it is not necessarily identical with the organ it controls). The Archaic Greeks had a particularly rich concept of the ego soul, incorporating the *thymos* or source of emotions housed in the chest or limbs; the more intellectual *noos* (later *nous*) located in the chest; and the furious *menos*, located in the chest or *phren* (mind) or even in the *thymos*. But by the end of the fifth century BC, the *psyche* (originally associated with the breath), closely corresponding to our idea of the free soul, absorbed the body soul concepts to

produce the idea of a single unitary soul which was incorporated by Christianity and with which we are familiar. Some traces of multiple soul belief survived: for early Christian theologians such as Origen, working partly in the intellectual tradition of Platonism, the soul was made up of a number of areas or parts – including, for example, the *nous*. However, it was still a single soul which left the body at death. Multiple soul belief also teaches that the souls leave the body on death. The body souls either disappear or turn into a sort of spook, which does not represent the personality of the dead. The free soul, on the other hand, will eventually pass into whatever afterlife is envisaged by the society in which it has previously resided while dwelling in a body.

NON-CHRISTIAN AFTERLIVES AND FUNERARY RITUAL: TRANSITION AND INCORPORATION

Another very important difference between Christianity and many other religions lies in its conception of the nature of the afterlife. Christianity teaches that moral conduct governs the fate of the soul after death. It visualizes an afterlife containing places of ultimate reward – Heaven – for the virtuous, and punishment – Hell – for the wicked. This is a very different eschatology – both in the precise and also in the more general sense of the word – from that envisaged by many ‘world accepting’ and imagistic religions. In these, the afterlife may be relatively lightly conceptualized and is often virtually an extension of the present life. For example, according to seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries, the Huron people of North America believed in a village of souls

... in no respect unlike the village of the living – they go hunting, fishing, and to the woods; axes, robes, and collars are as much esteemed [there] as among the living. In a word, everything is the same; there is only this difference, that day and night they do nothing but groan and complain.²

The Montagnais, by contrast, believed the souls of their dead lived in a large village in the direction of the setting sun, where they spent their time contentedly:

They hunt for the souls of beavers, porcupine, moose and other animals, using the soul of the snowshoes to walk on the soul of the snow, which is in yonder country: in short they make use of the souls of all things as we here use the things themselves.³

While their picture of the other world was basically a prolongation of life on earth, it was upside-down, with day and night changing places – a concept common in both North and South America and Eurasia.⁴ The idea of the dead as the opposite of the living is also found in Greek mythology.⁵

This is not to say that all non-Christian afterlife topographies are completely

undifferentiated. Later Scandinavian mythology as preserved and developed in literary sources visualized an underworld realm of the dead in which warriors were received into Valhalla.⁶ Greek and Roman mythology elaborated the ideas of Limbo, home to the souls of those who had died before their time; Hades, where the wicked are punished; and the Elysian Fields, which received the souls of heroes. The mystery or saviour cults flourishing in the later Roman Republic and Roman Empire promised afterlife happiness for the souls of their followers in intensely idyllic landscapes. But Roman epitaphs and funerary art suggest, along with funerary rites, that most people intuited the world of the dead in terms of a world not unlike the present existence. It might be found in the tomb itself, in Mother Earth, in the Blessed Isles across the ocean, or in the sky.⁷ In Irish tradition, humans might enter the world of the dead via the burial mound (especially at the festival of Samain, November 1). The legends of the Celts contain elements such as the Island of Women, or Annwyn (the Welsh 'not-world'), suggesting a similar basic conceptualization of the afterlife – although there is also evidence of belief in an afterlife which depended on rank in this world.⁸

For the soul to secure admission to the world of the dead, it is necessary for the correct funerary rites to be performed. In the *Iliad*, when the dead Patroclus appears in a dream to Achilles, he asks for his funeral rites – cremation followed by burial of his ashes – to be performed as he cannot cross the river to Hades unless this is done.⁹ In his famous study of *The Rites of Passage*, first published in 1909, the folklorist and anthropologist Arnold van Gennep observed that while we might expect funeral ritual to consist predominantly of rites of separation – and this is undoubtedly true of the earliest Christian rituals, as we will see below – in many societies worldwide, transition rites are of considerable duration and complexity, while those funerary rites which incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead are the most extensively elaborated and considered to be of the greatest importance.¹⁰ One of the most important insights of Robert Hertz's seminal essay 'A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death', published two years earlier than van Gennep's work, was his realization that in many societies the liminal period during which the soul or spirit of the dead person had not finally reached the afterlife was believed to correspond to the period it took for the flesh to decay:

... the period of waiting coincides in a great many cases with the real or presumed duration of the decomposition ...¹¹

Hertz examined the measures taken to ensure the safe and permanent transition of the soul to the afterlife, and to avoid its return to haunt or harm the living when the corpse is in the polluting and dangerous state of decay.

A first burial followed by a secondary burial, or exposure and burial, are classic

funerary rites of transition, known all over the world. The practice of secondary burial is found in many religions and societies.¹² The body is sometimes exposed in a shelter, which can take the form either of a miniature wooden house raised on piles or of a platform covered by a roof, until the flesh decays from the bones. Hertz thought that such customs amongst Malay peoples might have derived from an earlier custom of exposing the corpse, wrapped in bark, in the branches of a tree.¹³ A well-known example of this latter practice and its accompanying rituals is that of the Huron people of North America, who buried their dead only to re-bury them at more or less regular intervals.¹⁴ Seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries to Canada reported:

As to what is the state of the soul after death, they hold that it separates in such a way from the body that it does not abandon it immediately.¹⁵

An extensive account of the ceremonies has been left to us by the Jesuits: it describes an initial burial which was similar to that of the Malay peoples, but rather than being suspended in the trees, the bark-wrapped bodies were hung from four poles in a village 'cemetery'. Every twelve years or so, the bodies of those who had died since the last feast were taken from their bark coffins and any flesh remaining on them was removed from the body, before they were transported to a central place for burial in a communal pit:

The flesh of some is quite gone and there is only parchment on their bones; in other cases the bodies look as if they had been dried and smoked, and show scarcely any signs of putrefaction; and in other cases they are still swarming with worms. When the friends have gazed upon the bodies to their satisfaction, they cover them with handsome beaver robes, quite new; finally, after some time, they strip them of their flesh, taking off the skin and flesh which they then throw into the fire along with the robes and mats in which the bodies were wrapped. As regards the bodies of those recently dead, they leave these in the state in which they are and content themselves by simply covering them in new robes. Of the latter they handled only one old man, of whom I have spoken before who died this autumn . . . this swollen corpse had begun to decay during the last month on the occasion of the first heat of the spring; the worms were swarming all over it and the corruption that oozed out of it gave off an almost intolerable stench; and yet they had the courage to take away the robe in which it was enveloped, cleaned it as well as they could, taking the matter off by handfuls and put the body into a fresh mat and robe, and all this without showing any horror at the corruption.¹⁶

The anthropologist Peter Metcalf has described the double funeral rituals of the Berawan people of Borneo, which begin with the exposure of the dead person on a special seat in front of his or her house, while several days of festivities take place around it and the participants communicate with the dead person, offering food or tobacco. A first burial follows, or perhaps the storage of the body in a jar

where it decomposes and the fluids are drained off. Once flesh has separated from the bones, the latter are reburied or placed in a wooden sepulchre.¹⁷

Robert Hertz also identified cremation – for which the spirit of the dead Patroclus begs in the *Iliad* – as a funerary rite of transition:

... far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life ... The violent action of the fire spares the dead and the living the sorrows and dangers involved in the transformation of the corpse ...¹⁸

Paradoxically – or so it might appear at first – embalming or mummification are also in harmony with the beliefs behind the exposure of bodies, their deliberate excarnation or cremation, as they too achieve a state of stability for the body, and avoid the polluting and dangerous process of decay.¹⁹

From a religious point of view, the importance of funerary rites of transition and incorporation lies in the belief that until they are performed the soul is not admitted to the village, land or realm of the dead. The soul does not suddenly sever all ties with the living – as long as the temporary burial or decomposition of the body lasts, it is still associated with their world. At this stage, it is a potentially malevolent or unwelcome ghost, which might try to take the living into its shadow existence or at least pilfer subsistence from them – so food offerings are often made to the dead, even before the final ceremonies marking the soul's full incorporation into the world of the dead.²⁰

The reasons behind such practices and beliefs have been examined by cognitive anthropologists, who point out that although we know a person is dead, we cannot or do not immediately cut off all our mental interaction with them. We go on thinking about them and mentally revisiting the picture we had of them while they were alive, or pondering our former relations with them as living persons. In this sense the recently dead are very close to us and their presence can be felt very vividly, or even 'seen'. Anthropologists also note that while it is quite common for peoples they have studied to have vague notions about death or 'the dead' in general, they often cherish much more detailed representations of the recently dead, which may well revolve around the transitional period between death and some further state. Consciousness of the polluting nature of the corpse focuses attention on the period of decay as the transitional or liminal period. It is also a common feeling that the presence of the recently dead is dangerous rather than reassuring.²¹ This idea may be intensified if they have been buried – especially if they have been given shallow burial, as anyone visiting the cemetery or grave may hear the noises that accompany decomposition, prompting the idea of activity within the grave.²² In addition, certain types of person are believed to be particularly predisposed to haunt the living. The souls of those who have 'died before their time' or not been given full funerary rites – murder victims, victims of lightning strikes or suicides (who are often denied customary rituals),

for instance – are commonly considered to have the potential to return as ghosts or to re-animate the body as a dangerous revenant. This category is frequently extended to include murderers or anyone who was particularly unpleasant or difficult to deal with in life.²³

Thus in many cultures, afterlife belief is not predicated entirely on moral conduct while the individual is alive, but focuses in the first place on the presence of the souls of the recently dead, on the dangers of pollution presented by the decaying body, and on the performance of the correct rituals in order to ensure they reach that afterlife and do not linger inappropriately or even menacingly in the world of the living.

CHRISTIAN AFTERLIFE AND OFFICIAL FUNERARY RITUAL: SEPARATION

When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the
holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from
another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King
say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom
prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . .

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into
everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels . . .

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

(Matthew 25:31–34, 41, 46)

By contrast with the beliefs just described, early Christianity proposed a differentiated afterlife, depending on the life a person had led. Initially it postulated a process of judgement and admission to its afterlife after the arrival of Christ on earth for the second time. Perhaps the early lack of focus on the period before Christ's second coming was partly a consequence of the popular assumption by the first Christians that this *parousia* would happen at any moment.²⁴ It took several centuries for the realization to dawn that it was not imminent: as late as the fourth century the Pachomian monasteries of Egypt anticipated the second coming of Christ, while the Western ascetics Melania and Rufinus settled and founded religious communities on the Mount of Olives, where it was popularly believed the second coming would take place.

The gradual realization that the *parousia* was not at hand after all threw into ever-sharper relief the fact that not all Christians were equally virtuous. How were the churches to maintain morals and discipline if the ultimate judgement of the good and bad seemed to be receding into a distant future? There were points when that judgement seemed to be much nearer. During a pandemic raging between 251 and 266 CE, the North African Bishop Cyprian of Carthage not only believed that pestilence indicated that the last times were at hand, but also assured his flock that those who perished were not lost but gone before. A Christian, he affirmed, should regard Heaven as his own country where a dense crowd of his family and friends eagerly awaited his embrace. Contained in this treatise on the plague, therefore, there seems to be more than a suggestion that Heaven would swiftly open its gates to the souls of ordinary believers. However, this was a view that emerged from the horrors of the third-century pandemic. The theological view that prevailed in the longer term was that the souls of the martyrs and eventually those regarded as saints would be instantly admitted to, or have some sort of foretaste of, Heaven on their deaths, while those of the irredeemably bad would likewise have a foretaste of Hell.²⁵ For the soul of the average person, however, there was no immediate outcome simply to be confirmed at the Last Judgement. The soul of the individual whose sins had been less gross would await this event in locations identified variously as the biblical ‘bosom of Abraham’, *refrigeria* – literally, ‘places of refreshment’ – or *receptacula*, ‘receptacles’. There, according to St Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fifth century, it would experience rest or affliction, depending on the merits of its earthly life, possibly undergoing purification by fire before re-union with the resurrected body. Then, finally, it would appear before God’s judgement seat.²⁶

Thus the earliest surviving Christian funerary liturgies essentially seem to function as rituals of separation – rather than, as in other cultures, rites of transition or incorporation.²⁷ One of the earliest testimonies to Christian practice is the prayer noted down by Bishop Serapion of Thmuis in Egypt in the mid-fourth century, which refers to the core Christian doctrines of the repose of the soul, the Last Judgement, and also the resurrection of the body at the end of time:

... we beseech thee for the repose and the rest of this thy servant: give rest to his soul, his spirit in green places in chambers of rest with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all thy saints; and raise up this body in the day which thou hast ordained ...²⁸

The fourth-century text known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Basil, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo – who writes about his own mother’s funeral – all provide fleeting glimpses into the Christian rites of death and burial, with their processions, singing and chanting, and their attempts to suggest simple dignity and a restrained but supposedly joyful triumph over death.²⁹ The earliest surviving complete rite for the dying and dead from the Western Church – from

the fourth or fifth century – reveals that it involved the administration of the Eucharist to the dying person (even to penitents); prayers and psalms immediately after death; the washing of the body and its conveyance to the church accompanied by psalms and antiphons; a church service which included lessons from the Book of Job, psalms, prayers and responses; and finally inhumation, again accompanied by a psalm and an antiphon.³⁰ These rituals were intended to suggest the repose of the soul until the Last Judgement, the resurrection of the body, and an optimistic anticipation of a good outcome for the individual on the day of judgement. The exact nature of the resurrected body itself – the ‘spiritual’ and ‘incorruptible body’ promised in the New Testament³¹ – was the subject of much discussion and conjecture amongst early Christian thinkers. Would it consist of a dynamically transformed human body – the buried and decaying body being seen in terms of a seed that would grow into something new – or would it be in effect a re-assemblage of dust and particles? The latter view seemed to win the day.³² But whichever view was championed, Christian writers agreed that Christ’s own resurrection guaranteed to the ordinary believer that his or her body would be made whole or transformed by God before the Last Judgement and that it would rejoin the soul, from which it had been separated at the instant of death.

As well as campaigning against ritual lamentations which they associated with non-Christian beliefs about the impurity of the dead body and also with professional mourners, many early Christian writers sought to present the funeral as an occasion of joy and triumph over death.³³ But where joy was concerned, as one authority has observed, the Church eventually lost the battle.³⁴ Augustine himself described how he failed to overcome his own despair and sorrow during his mother’s funeral.³⁵ Despite their suggestion of hope for the individual at the Last Judgement, Christian funerary rites served to emphasize the separation of the living from the dead until the end of time. Both the Church’s doctrine and also the rituals themselves contradicted traditional assumptions about the dead and what should be done with them. The idea that the dead body was impure was rejected by the Church.³⁶ Christian funerary ceremonies laid less emphasis on rites of transition which maintained the relationship between the living and recently dead, or rites of incorporation which turned the soul of the dead person from a potentially threatening ghost into a benevolent ancestor.³⁷ Instead, both doctrine and ritual principally stressed a final leave-taking in which the soul of the dead person was secluded from the living, becoming part of anonymous and hidden groups of waiting souls, not to be released for judgement until the end of time.

POPULAR CHRISTIAN RITUALS FOR THE DEAD

In practice, many Christians supplemented the basic Christian burial rite either by constructing their own understanding of certain parts of it or by assimilating traditional customs to Christian ones, thus satisfying the intuitive need to maintain a relationship with the recently dead. Augustine refers to the offering of the Eucharist at his mother's grave, and what was originally seen as a thanksgiving came to take on the nuance of intercession for the removal of sin in the afterlife.³⁸ Relations with the dead did not stop with official Church rites of inhumation: the popular customs of graveside funeral feasts and days of commemoration continued in Christianized form. Just as their pagan contemporaries did, Christians, especially in Italy and North Africa, gathered for a meal at a *mensa*, a stone table placed over the grave, which might even have holes pierced in it for pouring libations into the tomb.³⁹

Some Roman extra-mural cemeteries were roofed over to facilitate funeral ceremonies.⁴⁰ Funeral feasts continued in this pagan tradition, much to Augustine's embarrassment, as non-Christians were able to accuse those who feasted at tombs of 'appeasing the shades of the departed with wine and food' in traditional fashion.⁴¹ But however much the Church felt unease about this ritual, the *refrigerium*, which not only seemed to imply that the soul of the departed was still close at hand but was also frequently the occasion of drunkenness, it was unable to interfere in such occasions as they were essentially family affairs. It was possibly as late as the sixth century that Mass or communion became a part of private funerary rites in some areas, while many cemeteries were under the control of a private burial society rather than the Church.⁴² Synods 'rarely' dealt with funerary customs:⁴³ the Church could only attempt to control clerical participation and behaviour at *refreria*, as demonstrated by the *Apostolic Constitutions*:

... when you are invited to their memorials, do you feast with good order and the fear of God, as disposed to intercede for those who are departed. For since you are presbyters and deacons of Christ, you ought always to be sober ...⁴⁴

As well as actual funeral feasts, commemorative meals were held at regular intervals after death. These intervals varied from region to region, but their resemblance to periods traditionally thought to reflect the decay of the body or departure of the soul, as well as the annual anniversary of the death, is suggestive; and such ceremonies provided for the basic psychological need for continued interaction with the recently dead and the intuition of their continuing presence. The timing of the commemorations was given Christian explanations – intervals of three, seven and thirty or forty days were linked to the resurrection of Christ, the creation of the world or the period of mourning for Moses – and Masses were

said at these intervals for the souls of the deceased. Such commemorative Masses must have gone some way towards satisfying the need of the living to keep up a relationship with the recently deceased – but there was no suggestion on the part of the Church before the seventh or eighth centuries that they had any function other than commemoration.⁴⁵

So worried were some churchmen at what might be regarded as the assimilation of non-Christian customs into Christian funerary practice that they attempted to regulate the related phenomenon of feasting at the tombs of the martyrs on their anniversaries. In the 380s Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo, was told by the gatekeeper when she took wine and cakes to the tombs of the martyrs that Bishop Ambrose of Milan had forbidden the continuation of this practice. Ambrose objected not only to the drunkenness prevalent at such occasions, but was also concerned by the resemblance of such feasts to pagan commemorations of the dead.⁴⁶ In North Africa in the 390s, Augustine himself complained of the scandalous conduct that took place at such religious celebrations in cemeteries – including the *Laetitia* in memory of a former bishop of Hippo – and also attempted to reform private funeral feasts or commemorations. Writing to the Metropolitan Bishop of Carthage, he expressed shock at ‘drunken revels and luxurious feasts in cemeteries’, and worried that an ‘ignorant and carnal multitude’ supposed that the offerings of food and drink customary at such occasions brought not just honour to the martyrs but solace to the dead.⁴⁷ His solution was to suggest that meals at the tombs of the departed should be turned into offerings of alms for the poor, a sentiment he would later repeat in his *City of God*.⁴⁸ Thus he attempted to re-direct commemorations of the dead into a more doctrinally acceptable form: meals for the poor – already a feature of some Christian martyr commemorations – were now to be channelled into a religious act by the living in memory of the dead.⁴⁹

How far Augustine enjoyed any success in this is an open question. While he asserted, in Book VIII of his *City of God*, that the ‘better sort’ of Christian had given up private banquets in memory of the dead, this implies that others had not. It seems very likely that though the African Church accepted Augustine’s strictures,⁵⁰ elsewhere people carried on in the same old way. Other churchmen may not have been so eager to antagonize their flocks by interfering in family funerals and commemorations, and the continuation of traditional practices can only have been encouraged by the fact that Christians were not buried in separate cemeteries from pagans, though discrete Christian sections were not uncommon.⁵¹ But as Christian cemeteries developed from pagan burial areas, the decoration and furnishing of individual tombs might contain a mixture of traditional and Christian elements: even the inscription *Dies manibus sacrum* is no longer automatically assumed by historians to be evidence of pagan burial.⁵²

As a whole, our knowledge of Christian funerary ritual reveals the way in which the Church's liturgy was supplemented unofficially by practices reflecting intuitions and feelings about the dead that could not be eradicated easily. In the fourth century, 'the family tomb was deeply rooted in the tradition of Roman society' with the result that shifts in thinking and practice about the dead, especially the recently dead, were difficult to effect – even in subsequent centuries.⁵³ Another notable feature of this was the way in which Christians were quite capable of interpreting one of the central features of the Church's own death rites, the administration of the *viaticum*, as reflecting the common conceptualization of death as a journey. Thus while the giving of Eucharist to the dying was part of the Church's ritual, and regarded by some of the Church fathers as the administration of 'medicine of immortality', the Councils of Hippo (393), Carthage (525), Auxerre (561–605) and *in Trullo* (692) all felt it necessary to forbid the placing of the host in the mouth of the corpse, as it was seen as the Christian equivalent of the coin placed under the tongue of the dead pagan as a fee to Charon in order that the soul might reach its destination after death.⁵⁴ (An alternative explanation of this ancient custom is that the coin was really a charm designed to prevent evil spirits or the soul itself from entering or re-entering the body.⁵⁵) The power of traditional concepts is evident in the way in which the idea of the soul's journey after death survived to some extent, Christianized in the idea of angels leading it safely into the bosom of Abraham.⁵⁶

DOCTRINAL VS POPULAR SOUL BELIEF IN THE WRITINGS OF ST AUGUSTINE

The tensions between popular intuitions concerning the proximity of the recently dead and the liminal nature of death on one hand, and Christian doctrine on the other, are evident not only in the way in which Christian burial was frequently supplemented by more traditional commemorations but also in the work of St Augustine of Hippo, writing in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. There, we can trace some of the oppositions which could exist between strict doctrine and the beliefs and feelings of ordinary Christians. In his role as a leading expounder of Christian doctrine, Augustine would find himself battling popular perceptions of death and the afterlife, and particularly the belief that the soul of a living person might temporarily leave the body and visit the world of the dead.

Belief in such experiences is reported in many cultures and is rooted in psychic experiences by individuals who have regained consciousness from comas or trances, and described a journey to the other world. The seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries working amongst the Huron observed that

... some ... having been left as dead, recover health, and talk at random of the other life ...⁵⁷

One of them reported some of these narratives at length, with expressions of deepest disapproval:

A young man of the highest standing among them, being ill, after much entreaty finally answered that his dream showed a bow rolled in bark; that if any one wanted to go with him as an escort, there was but one man on earth who had one of the sort. A company of resolute men put themselves on the road with him; but at the end of ten days there remained to him only six companions, the rest turning back on account of the hunger which pressed them. The six go with him many a day's journey, and in following the tracks of a little black beast, come upon the cabin of their man, who warns them not to partake of what a woman who was to be present should offer them for the first time. Having obeyed him, and having upset the dishes upon the ground, they perceived it was only venomous reptiles she had presented to them. Having refreshed themselves with the second course, it was a question of bending the rolled bow, which not one of them succeeded in doing, except the young man in whose behalf the journey had been undertaken. He received it as a gift from his host, who invited him to take a sweat with him, and, upon emerging from the sweat-box, metamorphosed one of his companions into a pine tree. From there they advanced to the village of souls, whence only three returned alive, and all frightened, to the house of their host; he encouraged them to return home with the help of a little meal, such as the souls eat, and which sustains the body wonderfully. He told them, moreover, that they were going to pass through woods where deer, bears, and moose were as common as the leaves on the trees; but that, being provided with so marvellous a bow, they had nothing to fear, that they would be very successful in the chase. Behold them returned to their village, with every one around them rejoicing, and learning their different adventures.⁵⁸

Similarly, a modern anthropologist working amongst the Native American Salteaux in the 1930s was given several accounts of soul-visits to the land of the dead. One informant told him:

I saw a man who died and lay dead for two days. He told me what had happened to him ... He thought he was going to sleep ... 'all of a sudden,' he said, 'I found myself walking on a good road. I followed this road. On it I came to a wigwam. I saw an old man ... 'I'll show you where your parents are staying,' he said. While we were walking, we came in sight of lots of wigwams. As far as I could see, there were wigwams. The old man pointed out one of them to me. 'You go there,' he said. 'That's where your mother and father live.'⁵⁹

Such accounts are based not only on the intuition of an afterlife very like the land of the living, but also on the idea that the soul is capable of leaving the body during periods of unconsciousness. In this state it can pass to the other world and then return to its host body.

Christian teaching on this subject was quite different: the soul could not leave the body temporarily, and separation of body and soul could only take place in the moment of death. But the Church faced the persistence of more traditional soul belief at a popular level. Thus in his treatise *On the Soul* (*De Anima*), the North African theologian Tertullian (d. 230) attempted to discredit the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana's story of a man named Hermotimus of Clazomenae, whose soul was in the habit of periodically leaving his body to travel abroad as he lay asleep; one day, his enemies burnt his body so that his soul would have no place to which to return and would therefore perish. Tertullian, worried by the implications of this story for Christian doctrine, in particular the concept of the resurrection of the body, argued energetically against it.⁶⁰ In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, we can see both Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo still trying to combat this type of belief when they argued that the souls of men could not – as was popularly believed – pass into animals while they lay unconscious.⁶¹ Augustine also struggled to counter the idea that the soul, like the souls of the Native Americans discussed above, was able to pass into afterlife – in this case the Christian afterlife – and then return. In 416, he attempted to bring into disrepute the popular *Visio Pauli* or *Apocalypse of Paul*, a text narrating the journeys of a soul in the other world, based on the passage in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, where Paul writes:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

How that he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.⁶²

Augustine gave short shrift to the *Visio* on a number of grounds:

... there have been some vain individuals who, with a presumption that betrays the grossest folly, have forged a Revelation of Paul, crammed with all manner of fables, which has been rejected by the orthodox Church; affirming it to be that whereof he had said he was caught up into the third heaven, and there heard unspeakable words 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter'. Nevertheless the audacity of such might be tolerable, had he said that he heard words which it is not as yet lawful for a man to utter; but when he said 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter', who are they that dare to utter them with such impudence and non-success?⁶³

But the continuing popularity of the *Visio*, which led to the production of many versions in the medieval period, must have been due not only to its depiction of

the other world, but also to popular belief in the ability of the soul to leave the body.⁶⁴ Augustine continued his campaign against such ideas into the 420s. In his *De Cura pro Mortuis Gerenda* (*On the Care to Be Had For the Dead*), composed c.421/2, he relates the story of a man from his own diocese named Curma, who had lain in a coma for several days. Curma had apparently alleged that, while he was in this state, his soul had left his body and visited the afterlife, temporarily joining his dead relations. From thence, his soul had been sent back to his body – at precisely the moment when another man also named Curma, a smith, had died. Augustine dismisses the whole story as a dream or dream-like vision, pointing out that Curma claimed to have seen not only the dead but also some of the living – including Augustine himself.⁶⁵

According to Augustine, Curma was told in his vision to have himself baptized, and he subsequently put himself forward as a candidate for baptism. Thus the story seems pitched to suggest not only popular belief in the ability of the soul to leave the body during periods of unconsciousness and in the permeability of the barrier between this life and the next, but also that Christianity was being brought face-to-face with such concepts by the recently converted. Ideas of this sort may have been even more widespread. In both his treatise *On the Care to Be Had For the Dead* and also in his *City of God* (c.415–27), we can see Augustine arguing energetically against the popular intuition that the dead were active in the world of the living. He states in the plainest possible terms the separation of the living and the dead and the impermeable nature of the divide between their respective zones:

... for the departed to be by their general nature interested in the affairs of the living is impossible.⁶⁶

His argument is that if the souls of the living do not and cannot visit the dead, then neither can the dead penetrate the world of the living or have any knowledge of it – and by implication, therefore, any influence or power over it. To prove this, he turns to the well-known biblical story of the uncharitable rich man (Dives), whose soul went to Hell, while that of Lazarus, the beggar who had lain at his gate, was taken up into the bosom of Abraham. Gazing up from his torments in Hell, Dives begged Abraham first to send Lazarus to him with water to cool his tongue and then, if he would not do this, to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers to mend their evil ways. Abraham, as Augustine trenchantly points out, did neither. There was no question of his soul being sent back to visit the living. Nor should we, he continues, think that those in the next life have any precise knowledge of what is happening on earth. Any information Abraham possessed concerning Lazarus' life on earth must have been communicated to him by Lazarus himself when he arrived in the afterlife; and similarly Dives, in Hell, can have had no precise knowledge of his brothers' current situation, but