

Spirit and Matter: The Ambivalence of Medieval Everyday Religiosity*

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Official religiosity of the Middle Ages tended to oppose soul to body and spirit to matter. To be sure, all is God's creation, and Catholicism contests the Manichaean belief in the created world as the devil's domain. This is why flesh is filled with spirit, nature bears the imprint of the divinity, and matter, rather than being an inert substance, is also spiritualized. If one were to switch from the theological and scholastic theories to the actual day-to-day religious practices and notions of rank-and-file Christian believers, however, one would observe not only matter granted life, but also – and to a greater degree – a somewhat naïve naturalism, or “materialism,” which blurred or obscured the seemingly clear-cut borderlines between the spiritual and the material. It is hard to verify where these borderlines were obliterated metaphorically and where they were ignored in earnest, but in a literary genre such as the Latin *exempla* – short moralizing stories and anecdotes incorporated in sermons – this tendency is seen fairly clearly.¹

* Translated by Elena M. Lemeneva from: A. Ya. Gurevich, “Дух и материя. Об амбивалентности повседневной средневековой религиозности,” in *idem, История – нескончаемый спор. Медиевистика и скандинавистика: статьи разных лет*, ed. L.P. Petrik (Moscow, 2005), 227-235 (originally published in *Культура и общественная мысль: Античность. Средние века. Эпоха Возрождения* (Moscow, 1988), 117-123.

¹ On *exempla* see: A. Lecoy de la Marche, *La chaire française au moyen âge, spécialement au XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1869); J.-Th. Welter, *L'exemplum dans la littérature religieuse didactique du moyen âge* (Paris, Toulouse, 1927); G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People* (2nd ed., New York, 1961); S. Battaglia, *La coscienza letteraria del Medioevo* (Napoli, 1965); Cl. Bremond, J. Le Goff, and J.-C. Schmitt, *L'exemplum. Typologie des sources du Moyen Age occidental* 40 (Turnhout, 1982); *Prêcher d'exemples*, ed. J.-C. Schmitt (Paris, 1985); C. Delcorno, “Dante e l'*exemplum* medievale,” *Lettere italiane* 1983, no. 1; *idem*, “Nuovi studi sull'*exemplum*,” *ibid.* 1984, no. 1; A. Ya. Gurevich, “*Exempla*: Литературный жанр и стиль мышления (*Exempla*: Literary genre and the way of thinking),” in *Монтаж: Литература, искусство, театр, кино* (Moscow, 1988), 149-189.

Let us examine some of these *exempla*:

Ablaze with lust, a wanton woman passing through the streets of the city in an immodest outfit burnt the city to ashes.² This is clearly a metaphor, just like the story of a knight, who, aspiring to come nearer to God, visited the place on the Mount of Olives where the Lord had set foot himself and died there on the spot. His kin invited a physician to establish the cause of death. Having learned of the deceased's love of God, the doctor concluded that his heart had broken from great joy. An autopsy confirmed the diagnosis: the heart was ruptured and displayed an inscription: "Jesus is my love."³ Consider as well an *exemplum* of a rich man whose death literally embodied the evangelical words "for where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also" (Matt. 6:21). He died overseas and had to be disemboweled in order for the body to be brought home for burial (the general rule being that one must be buried in one's home parish). An autopsy discovered that he had no heart. When his treasure chest was unlocked, however, the rich man's heart was found there.⁴ Materialization of a metaphor can also be seen in the story of a Cologne burgess who constantly prayed on the go; after death he appeared to a relative, and the feet of the apparition bore an inscription: *Ave Maria gratia plena*.⁵

How should one interpret *exempla* about lawyers who, during their lifetimes, eloquently defended those who paid the best rather than those in the right, and therefore, after their death either had no tongue at all, or it continued to move incessantly or swelled up and fell out of the mouth?⁶ Similarly, a deceased usurer's hands kept moving after death, as if counting coins, while the money of the other usurer devoured the monastic money placed in the same chest.⁷ What is the meaning of scenes where demons lurk around lazy and negligent monks collecting unpronounced syllables of the psalms and stuffing them into a sack to be produced in support of accusation at the Last Judgment?⁸ Following the same logic, a rustic mentioned by Jacques de Vitry (renowned French ecclesiastic, preacher, and author of the most popular collection of *exempla*) goes to town "to buy songs for the festi-

² *La Tabula Exemplorum Secundum Ordinem Alphabetis: Recueil d'exempla compilé en France à la fin du XIIIe siècle*, ed. J.-Th. Welter (Paris, Toulouse, 1926), no. 152.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 311.

⁴ *Anecdotes historiques, legends et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Etienne de Bourbon*, ed. A. Lecoy de la Marche (Paris, 1877), no. 413.

⁵ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis monachi ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange (Cologne, 1851), vol. 1-2, XII:50, cf. XII:47.

⁶ *Liber exemplorum ad usum praedicantium*, ed. A.G. Little (Aberdeen, 1908), no. 68; *Anecdotes historiques*, no. 439 and 440; *La Tabula Exemplorum*, no. 4; *Die Exempla des Jakob von Vitry: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Erzählliteratur des Mittelalters*, ed. C. Frenken (Munich, 1914), no. 9.

⁷ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis* II:34; XI:40.

⁸ *Exempla aus Handschriften des Mittelalters*, ed. J. Klapper (Heidelberg, 1911), no. 6; cf. M. Jennings, *Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon* (Chapel Hill, 1977).

val,” and some scoundrel, instead of cantilenas, sells him a sack of wasps which then sting all the simpletons gathered in church.⁹ It is appropriate here to recall another Cologne citizen who reasoned that good deeds should be as weighty as possible and thus purchased stones for the church, in order that his good deeds might outweigh his sins at the Last Judgment.¹⁰

Beyond doubt, in many of these instances we encounter enlivened comparison, metaphoric conscience, a play of images and similes that was so typical of the worldview expressed in the *exempla*. Quite likely, the learned preacher did not take these oddities at face value and told his stories to the flock tongue-in-cheek. But how did the audience receive them? Did they also invariably see them as a good joke and an allegory? I am not so sure of that. Was not the difference between the speaker and the listeners similar to that in an *exemplum* about a priest’s concubine who, having heard from the preacher that the concubines of the religious can be saved only by entering the fiery oven, in her simplicity did just that – and burnt to death?¹¹ As this *exemplum* says, in no way did the preacher expect his figure of speech to be interpreted literally, but the woman, concerned with the imminent threat to her soul’s salvation, did not recognize a joke.

There is an anecdote about a sinner aboard a ship who realized that the raging storm was caused by his sins and hastened to confess in order to prevent the deaths of all those on board. As he was throwing overboard the “mass of sin” (*massam iniquitatis*), the sea was calmed down; the storm ended as soon as he finished confessing. The conversation between the characters of the *Dialogus miraculorum* – the master and the novice discussing this case – makes clear that both of them (as well as the author, Caesarius of Heisterbach) take it quite seriously and feel no doubt as to the verisimilitude of such situations. The novice is perplexed by a totally different issue: is it not strange that for the sins of one person the Lord was going to punish many others as well? The master allows for that possibility.¹² That sins have a physical weight could not seem strange to people who believed in the weighing of good and evil deeds on the scales at the Last Judgment.

One is compelled to assume that the public targeted by such *exempla* was bound to perceive the truths of Christianity primarily in visible, tangible form, that the spiritual was approached through the material, and that people’s faith stood in stark contrast to the sophisticated theology of the learned. However, at least two disclaimers belong here.

Firstly, it is uncertain whether the ecclesiastics who collected and wrote down the *exempla* shared the same version of religion. In the texts examined so far

⁹ *Die Exempla des Jakob von Vitry*, no. 78.

¹⁰ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis*, VIII:63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, VI:35.

¹² *Ibid.*, III:21.

there is no distance between the simple and unrefined faith of the audience and that of the speakers. One ought take into account, however, that the preachers were to proclaim the truth to the public, not tales they did not believe themselves. There is no reason not to accept Caesarius of Heisterbach's words: "I have heard much of what I do not wish to write, for not all of it have I remembered, and it is better to omit the true than to record the false."¹³ After all, a preacher addressed his speech not only to the parishioners, but also to God, and telling lies was too dangerous for his own soul. The sophisticated faith of a learned monk or a cleric amalgamated with the faith of the "simpletons." The literature of the *exempla* was too closely related to the oral culture that dominated society, even in the thirteenth century, for not to share with folklore the criteria of truthfulness and verisimilitude.

But, of course, the same phenomenon was understood differently by a learned monk and a simple commoner. A carpenter who took part in the building of a chapel saw candles in it light up all by themselves on St. Andrew's day and the Son of God, who sat in his mother's lap, take the crown off her head and place it on his own and after the end of the liturgy replace it on the Virgin's head. At first, this "simple pious man" did not dare tell anyone about what he had seen for fear of not being believed, but when the same scene was replayed on St. Nicholas' day, he told the prior about it. The prior interpreted it as follows: by putting on his mother's crown and by placing it back on her head, the Son wished to convey the message: "Mother, just as I partake in the human substance through you, so do you partake of the divine nature through me."¹⁴ The carpenter saw it happen, but the prior was able to understand what it meant.

Secondly, in interpreting the religion of uneducated people one must be wary of missing its reverse side: their un-reflected-upon, unconditional faith, their longing for a miracle that could bring them luck, heal sickness, protect the crops and livestock, defend them from demonic attacks, and procure salvation of their souls in the afterlife. This profound belief, combined with rather lopsided and vague notions of the divinity, pervaded to a great extent with paganism and magic, prompted them to look for Christ in the host and to allow for sins' physical weight, to attempt to crucify themselves in order to come nearer to Christ or to give him his due, to sense the movement of a child in a virgin womb, to be present at the litigation for one's soul between the angels and the demons and to hear the verdict of the Judge, to approach the gates of Paradise in visions and to wander through Hell and Purgatory.¹⁵ Let us recall that in the thirteenth century – when preaching was on the

¹³ *Ibid.*, III:33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VII:46.

¹⁵ See A. Ya. Gurevich, *Проблемы средневековой народной культуры* (*Problems in medieval popular culture*) (Moscow, 1981), 301 ff.; published in English as *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988).

rise and the many collections of *exempla* were being compiled – crusades continued to go on as well as mass pilgrimages, and multitudes fell into heresy in their search for a truer way to salvation. Echoes of all these popular movements are clearly discernible in the *exempla*.

Doubts regarding certain aspects of religion that occasionally arise in some people are the doubts of people who strive to strengthen their faith, rather than the disbelief of unreligious skeptics or agnostics. Time and again one faces up to supernatural powers or lives in eager anticipation of such encounters. Does not the peculiar informality with which people treat these powers stem from this intimacy, which does not, however, eliminate their awe and fear?

No wonder, then, that statues of the Virgin and of Christ bow to the persons who did them service or displayed loyalty.¹⁶ The *exempla* about believers eating God are especially “piquant.” The monk Godescalc, reciting a prayer *Puer natus est nobis*, discovered a beautiful baby in his arms whom he kissed and placed on the altar and, when the child was transformed back into the sacrament, ate it.¹⁷ Jacques de Vitry heard of one priest who had to host a bishop and could not satisfy the bishop’s cook who demanded an endless variety of dishes. In despair the priest said: “I have nothing else but the sides of the Crucified.” Having cut off part of the body from the crucifix, he made a meal and served it to the prelate who accepted the treat.¹⁸ I must admit that I am unable to comment on this “Christian cannibalism” in which faith and the love of Christ mix with obedience to an ecclesiastical superior and some completely different ingredients. Surely, the communion here is understood as a literal rather than a symbolic consumption of the Lord’s body.

“Faith moves mountains.” This, too, should not be interpreted only figuratively, since during a debate on the defense of Christianity against the infidels one pious smith whacked a mountain with a hammer, saying: “For the sake of Lord Jesus who said so, I order you, mountain, to move into the sea,” which the mountain promptly did.¹⁹ Faith and profound devotion overcame the force of gravity; Caesarius of Heisterbach was personally acquainted with a priest who levitated “a foot high” during the mass. There is nothing wondrous about that, since piety is fiery and drives one upward. In cases when this priest was in a hurry to finish the liturgy, however, and served mass without the due diligence, this grace was taken away from him.²⁰ Caesarius also knew another priest, whose “belly burst” near the altar, as in the Book of Job (32:19). In Job, this is an image, a simile, a metaphor that compared Job’s belly to “the new wine which wanteth vent, which bursteth the new

¹⁶ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis* VIII:21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IX:2.

¹⁸ *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Th. Fr. Crane (London, 1890), no. 6.

¹⁹ *Anecdotes historiques*, no. 332.

²⁰ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis*, IX:30.

vessels,” whereas the *Dialogus miraculorum* describes, so to speak, a medical fact: according to the account he served the liturgy “with his belly burst open.”²¹

The worldview recorded in our sources materializes the metaphor. Everything is understood literally. It would be a grave mistake to interpret symbolically such cases as that of one nun who, having hidden a wooden crucifix under the mat of her bed, cried because she could not find it, and Christ said: “Do not weep, my daughter, for I am in a pouch under your mattress,” or that of another recluse who, having mislaid the crucifix in some crack, shouted: “Lord, where are you? Answer me!” and immediately found it.²² Neither of these two “sought God” in the spiritual sense; each was looking for “his own Lord,” that is, his/her own crucifix, which responded to the summons.

An *exemplum* about a Sardinian bishop was quite popular, whose sermon on the evangelical theme – “And every one that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold” – made such an impression on one Saracen that he wished to be baptized on the condition that if this promise were fulfilled after his death his sons would receive in full the hundredfold compensation for the property he was about to give away to the poor. The sons indeed came to the bishop demanding their due. The bishop took them to their father's grave, had the sarcophagus opened, and in the right hand of the corpse they found a charter which the deceased had addressed to the bishop, but not to his own children. The charter said that the converted Saracen had received a hundredfold and thanks for it.²³ A literal understanding of a Christian precept was highly characteristic of this way of thinking.

Within the space of this article I am constrained to omit consideration of the multiple *exempla* in which the word of a saint is an order obeyed by all living creatures, including bees and flies, horses, pigs, and donkeys who praise the Creator. Moreover, the Creator is obeyed even by his enemies – demons; some of them bring slacking priests back to righteousness, while others deplore the lack of piety in commoners. Some demons even sincerely and deeply suffer from the impossibility of reconciliation with the Lord.²⁴

Whichever way one chooses to study the *exempla*, one is invariably confronted with ambivalence as an integral, core feature of the conscience which produced this genre of medieval Latin literature. Rapprochement of the spiritual and unsubstantial with the bodily and the sensual, transitions from one to another and their mutual transformations, are often a literary technique, a metaphor. But were they really only metaphors? Wasn't it simultaneously a characteristic feature of

²¹ *Ibid.*, IX:32.

²² *Ibid.*, VI:31, 32.

²³ L. Hervieux, *Les fabulists latins IV: Eudes de Cheriton et ses dérivés* (Paris, 1896), 317.

²⁴ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis* V:10, 35; *La Tabula Exemplorum*, no. 275; *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories*, no. 233; *Anecdotes historiques*, no. 45; *Liber exemplorum*, no. 38.

people's mindset, dissecting and organizing their reality in this peculiar way? The world, which for them was built on the opposition of spirit and matter at the same time, forever revealed the materiality of the spiritual and the spirituality of the material. Having reached the extremes of any one of these principles, their thought discovered there the complete opposite; the substance, the bodily, allows the spirit to filter through, while the spirit at a certain point shows its tangible, substantial side.

The world was perceived by these people as some kind of *Geistmaterie*, and the human soul itself possessed bodily characteristics. These were discovered not only in the devil's frying pans and the devil's smithy where sinners' souls are forged, burned, and subjected to various other procedures. People told of cases when a soul leaving the body was visible and had a specific physical appearance – of a bird, a homunculus, or a sphere. Granting life to all things created was correlated with the embodying of all things spiritual. Thus, time and again we encounter the difficulty of applying our system of notions – a product of contemporary culture – to the worldview of the people of the Middle Ages.

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Vorwort

Der vorliegende Band von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* wird besonders dadurch bestimmt, dass wir die Möglichkeit erhalten haben, einen Beitrag zur Alltagsreligiosität in englischer Übersetzung zu publizieren, den Aron Ya. Gurevich, einer der bedeutendsten Mediävisten des 20. Jahrhunderts¹, im Jahre 1988 in russischer Sprache verfasst hatte und welcher 2005 in einem Sammelband der Arbeiten des Autors, neuerlich auf Russisch, wieder abgedruckt wurde. Der Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit der Analyse von *Exempla*, einer Quellengruppe, welcher sich Gurevich in seiner wissenschaftlichen Karriere des öfteren gewidmet hatte.

Ein zweiter Beitrag, verfasst von Yuriy Zazulyak (L'viv), setzt sich mit dem Alltag der Gerichtspraxis im spätmittelalterlichen Galizien und der dabei auftretenden Rolle von Schriftlichkeit auseinander. Gertrud Blaschitz analysiert schließlich einen im Jahre 2006 entdeckten Wandmalerei-Zyklus in einem Wohn- und Repräsentationsraum der sogenannten ‚Gozzoburg‘ in der Stadt Krems an der Donau (Niederösterreich), einem Baukörper aus der zweiten Hälfte des 13. Jahrhunderts, als dessen Bauherr der damalige Kremser Stadtrichter Gozzo gilt.

Der Band versucht somit neuerlich, die Breite, Vielfalt und Interdisziplinarität der Forschungsfelder einer Geschichte von Alltag und materieller Kultur des Mittelalters aufzuzeigen. Er soll dadurch auch wieder anregen, sich stärker mit jener wichtigen Teildisziplin der Mittelalterforschung zu beschäftigen.

Gerhard Jaritz (Herausgeber)

¹ Siehe den Nachruf durch János M. Bak, Elizabeth A.R. Brown und Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, in: *Speculum* 82 (2007) 826-828.