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The Function of Relics

by

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Editor's note: The essay "On Relics," which appeared in Studies, *was later re-written and expanded by the author, who re-titled it "The Function of Relics." Under that title, it appeared in Schuon's book* Esoterism as Principle and Way (*Perennial Books, 1981*). *The following is from the most recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.*

It is in the nature of man — since he combines the outward with the inward — to, make use of sensory supports towards the progress of his spirit or the equilibrium of his soul. These supports are either artistic, and so symbolistic and aesthetic, or theurgic; in the latter case their function is to act as the vehicle of benefic, protective, and sanctifying forces; the two types can moreover be combined. We propose to speak here of the second category, or more precisely of a particular case, that of relics, whose function indeed pertains to theurgy, at least indirectly; we say theurgy, and not magic, given that the forces that act in this case have their raison d'être and their essential source in divine Grace and not in human art.[1] In order to deal with this subject, it may suffice to reply to two objections, one regarding the authenticity of relics, and the other their efficacy.

Let us first of all recall that at the source of the cult of relics lie the bodies of the saints, then parts or segments of these bodies, then objects which have touched them, and later objects which have touched any of the above; this last category is clearly limitless, since it is possible to continue indefinitely placing fabrics on relics "of greater force", such as the Holy Tunic kept at Treves. It has to be borne in mind in any case that the cult of relics, far from being a fairly recent abuse, as most Protestants imagine, goes back to the period of the catacombs and forms an essential element in the devotional and charismatic economy of Christianity.

There are two notions at the origin of relics, the one theological and official, and the other more popular, at least *a posteriori* and *de facto*. The cult of relics, as of images, is based theologically on the respect due to the saints as glorious members of Christ, and on the idea that, in venerating the saints through their relics, one will breathe in their love of God or love God

[1] At the summit of this phenomenological category is situated the sacramental order, whose nature is nevertheless such that, from a stricter point of view, it constitutes a separate category.

through them; popularly it is based simply on the beneficent, and it may be miraculous, power that inheres in the bodies of the blessed and which cannot but impart itself to some extent — depending on the importance of the saint — to objects that have been in contact with them. We say "popularly" for simplicity's sake and although this term does no more than recognize a state of fact; the idea of a miraculous presence in relics was, in fact, taught by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem and other Church Fathers, while the thesis of the moral function of relics — also dating from the earliest days — was upheld in particular by the Scholastics.

There are three different powers to be distinguished in a relic: firstly there is the beneficent influence inhering in the object itself; secondly there is an added psychic energy coming from the devout as the result of fervent and prolonged adoration; thirdly there is the aid that may be granted by the saint, from Heaven itself, independent of the two preceding factors but occasionally combining with them. The presence of a theurgic power is more certain with corporeal remains, such as bones or blood, but it no less probable with objects formerly belonging to saintly personages; in the case of quasi-divine persons, such as Christ and the Blessed Virgin, the inherence of a theurgic power in the very least object that touched them is even absolutely clear. However, this power does not work blindly: its positive or negative manifestation — as the case may be — depends on the nature of the person who benefits by it or experiences it, and also upon all kinds of circumstances, both subjective and objective.

A very particular instance of relics is that of heavenly objects sent down to earth, such as the black stone of the Kaaba or the pillar of Saragossa; the applicability here of the term "relic" (*reliquia* = remains) may well be questioned, but all things considered it must be admitted that the term has *de facto* a very broad meaning which can apply to any sensory object with a divine, presence. Tradition relates that the pillar (*el pilar*) was carried to Saragossa by angels; the Blessed Virgin, at that time still alive on earth, accompanied them and stood upon the pillar, and then departed with the angels after giving certain commands to the Apostle Saint James.[2] The pillar, of heavenly origin, descended into earthly matter; it thus underwent in its passage a kind of "trans-substantiation" — the same observation applies to the black stone at Mecca —just as, conversely, earthly bodies raised up to Heaven, those of John and Mary for example, undergo an ascendant "trans-substantiation". We are aware, in saying this, that the starting point of modern science is to deny suprasensory cosmic dimensions outside space — although even the most ordinary magic is inexplicable except by one of these dimensions — but we cannot stop here to expound the doctrine of cosmic degrees, which we have explained on other occasions;[3] it is clearly impossible to discuss the significance of relics without presupposing an adequate knowledge of this doctrine, or at least the basic idea of the levels of universal Existence.

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[2] The pillar was touched by Mary, as was the black stone by Abraham; in this sense the term "relic" is fully justified, given the *"avataric"* quality of the holy personages.

[3] See *Form and Substance in the Religions,* chap. "The Five Divine Presences." See also *Logic and Transcendence,* chap. "The Symbolism of the Hour-glass."

The cult of relics is encountered in various forms in all religions; Buddhist stupas are no more than vast reliquaries. Even Islam, which is little inclined to this type of cult, cannot forego it completely, if only because the Prophet, and the saints after him, left behind them objects which cannot but be venerated.[4] What corresponds most directly in Islam to the cult of relics is the veneration of the Prophet's tomb at Medina and the tombs of saints, starting with those of the great Companions; most of these tombs are at the same time mosques, sometimes famed for the miracles that occur there,[5] after the fashion of the Christian churches built from the first centuries onwards over the tombs of martyrs. The same idea of combining the body of a saint with a sanctuary is found in the Christian custom of enclosing a relic within an altar; every altar is in principle a mausoleum.

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The rejoinder to the objection that relics are ineffectual has been given above; it remains to consider the objection that they are not genuine. In reply to this difficulty, it may be said in the first place that the warrant of authenticity lies in the very principle of the cult of relics, without which the cult, which is in fact universal, would not anywhere exist; the next point to be made is that the canonical, and hence traditional, nature of the cult constitutes a guarantee of the authenticity and legitimacy of relics in the eyes of anyone who knows what a religion is. In the charismatic economy of every intrinsically orthodox religion there is in fact a protective power which keeps a watchful eye on the integrity of the various elements of worship, even if they are no more than secondary, and this power results from the presence of the Holy Spirit, and is thus not unconnected with the mystery of infallibility.

These fundamental facts do not prevent our admitting that, in the Middle Ages when the need to possess relics became all but insatiable, certain somewhat unscrupulous or unbalanced persons took to falsifying them; but, aside from the fact that the victims of these frauds were private individuals and not the custodians of sanctuaries, this abuse does not logically permit doubts about the genuineness of relics canonically recognized. The question still remains, however, as to whether canonically recognized relics did not occasionally include an unauthentic one as the result of error if not fraud; despite guarantees resulting from the nature of things and

[4] Certain objects once belonging to the Prophet are conserved in Istanbul in the old palace of the sultans; in an Islamic climate they cannot occasion an organized cult, but Moslems nevertheless contemplate them with veneration perhaps murmuring meanwhile the *salatu 'ala 'n-Nabi* (blessings on the Prophet) and putting requests in prayers.

[5] This calls to mind the house of the Blessed Virgin at Ephesus, where Catholics celebrate mass while Moslems pray in the adjoining room; the various *ex-votos* show that the Virgin bestows miracles on both communities.

despite administrative safeguards,[6] mistakes are always possible in exceptional cases for almost metaphysical reasons which need not be discussed here. In this event, the grace inherent in the religion intervenes in another way: in response to the fervor with which a false relic is adored, the saint invoked will make himself present therein,[7] exactly as a saint can choose to be present in a painted or sculptured image which likewise has no link back to the personality of the saint on earth.[8]

The miraculous images of the Virgin are such, not because Mary once actually touched them, but because she was willing to bestow her grace upon them; as much could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of certain saints subsequently declassified from archeological scruples, supposing these scruples to be justified.[9] There are cases where the question of historicity is best put in parentheses, since it is not always possible — to say the least — to prove the non-historical nature of persons or events held in the night of an inaccessible past; besides, it is an unrealistic prejudice to take only written documents into account and to disdain oral traditions, even to the point of forgetting their existence or possibility. When it comes to ancient cults, historically dubious, but deep-rooted and hence efficacious, the Holy Spirit, or what Moslems would call the *barakah*, must be "given a free hand" and the temptation to dot all the i's — too often inspired by an inferiority complex — must be resisted; one must have a feeling for the concrete meaning of sacred phenomena, and trust in the paracletic and charismatic power which animates the body of religion and of which we spoke above.[10] All this is made all the more

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[6] Since the Middle Ages, "pious frauds" have obliged the Church to draw up rules to safeguard the cult of relics: their identity and integrity had to be certified by a seal-bearing official, that is, they had to be recognized by the bishop and approved by the Pope. It should also be noted that the Church in the Middle Ages had to act with equal severity against superstitious abuses and even against sacrilegious practices with magic as their end.

[7] According to an opinion that is current in the Maghrib and doubtless also in other Moslem lands, there are saints whose function it is to take responsibility for prayers made over a false tomb or an empty tomb, — or other mistakes of this kind, — which in its way explains the fact that prayers combined with a false support, but legitimate as regards its form and significance, are not invalidated by the material error.

[8] The same is true of miraculous medallions for example, which are not relics of the Blessed Virgin, but objects made at her behest and then charged with her beneficent power, likewise also for miraculous waters.

[9] A saint like Saint Philomene should have been allowed to "rest in peace", from the moment she manifested her person through the miracles of Ars; it is a tautology to add that she did this with Heaven's acquiescence, without troubling herself with the *nihil obstat* of exact science.

[10] A certain lack of the "sense of *barakah*", curiously typical of the Latin world, is shown likewise at the level of sensible forms, which should be those of sacred art; we are thinking here not only of the indescribable excesses of the baroque style, but also of the stiff and cumbersome manner in which certain holy places are fitted out, frequently dominated by a crude and obnoxious clutter of metallic assemblages which cannot but militate against the outpouring of heavenly influences. If there are two incompatibles, they are indisputably "civilization" and Paradise.

plausible by the fact that side by side with its transparencies, Heaven loves a certain indetermination or asymmetry, as many of the elements in religion bear witness, and above all the Scriptures themselves.

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Iconoclasts of all kinds need to be reminded that it is better to love God through a saint than not to love Him at all; or, again, that it is better to remember His love thanks to a saint, his relic, his image, than to disdain these supports whilst forgetting to love God; this is what was overlooked by the reformers who rejected images and relics without being able to put anything of like value in their stead — and without even suspecting there was anything there to replace — because, in rejecting these supports, they simultaneously rejected sainthood; quite different is the case of the Moslems, who accept sainthood outright and venerate the tombs of saints in consequence. Moslems are, moreover, "non-iconists" rather than "iconoclasts"— somewhat as Buddhists are "non—theists'' and not "atheists", and the primordial proof of this is that the Prophet, at the capture of Mecca, protected with his own hands an image of the Virgin and Child which was in the Kaaba; in other words, Islam does not set out heretically to attack traditional images that already existed — the crude idols of the Beduins had nothing sacred about them — but simply forbids the making of images *a priori* in order to facilitate one particular mode of awareness of the Transcendent, which, in insisting upon omnipresence and essentiality, does in fact preclude all visible supports.

What does correspond to Western iconoclasm in the context of Islam is Wahhabism which destroys mausoleums, seeing in them manifestations of idolatry,[11] but to compare it with Protestantism is however not permissible, since Wahhabism, which is extreme Hanbalism, upholds all the essential elements of dogma and practice. It is also deeply significant that Wahhabi iconoclasm stopped short before the tomb of the Prophet in Medina, which is the supreme relic in the Moslem universe, summarizing for Islam the mystery of the presence on earth of celestial humanity.

[11] Iconoclasts of every kind readily assert, sometimes not without demagogy, that if images, relics and kubbas are destroyed, the people will put God in the place of these "idols"; but they forget one thing: namely that the people will not do so. Doubtless the people can do without these supports when abstraction is at the very foundation of the religion, but not when their removal has been imposed at a later stage.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The one path leading up to the highest peak is the mysterious orthodox line of transmission established by Buddhas and Fathers, and to walk along this road is the essence of appreciating what they have done for us. When the monk fails to discipline himself along the road, he thereby departs from the dignity and respectability of monkhood, laying himself down in the slums of poverty and misery.

Dai-o Kokushi.