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# '*But this soil, I know!*': Materiality, Incarnation, and the Earthiness of Popular Belief and Practice

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## Abstract

Taking its cue from the story of a Cretan peasant who was reluctant to let go of a handful of his native soil in order to enter heaven, this article begins by exploring ideas concerning the afterlife in which this world is contrasted with the world to come. It then proceeds to discuss how Christians historically have frequently understood themselves to be in the world, but not of it; how dualistic tendencies have often pitted the soul against the body, and how such views have had an influence on how we understand the person of Christ, often preventing Christians from fully accepting the implications of the Incarnation. The article examines instances of a lingering docetic streak within Christianity, which lies uncomfortably with its central claim that God became fully human. Notwithstanding the difficulties some Christians may have with the idea of a fully human Jesus, there is also a very rich tradition within Christianity of bodily engagement with the material world, not only sacramentally, but also within many popular religious practices, including pilgrimage and relic veneration. Finally, the revival of interest in sacred natural sites, even in areas where church attendances continue to fall, is investigated.

## Keywords

Incarnation, Docetism, creation, dualism, materiality, pilgrimage

The Canadian spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser often relates the following story:

> There once lived a peasant in Crete who deeply loved his life. He enjoyed tilling the soil, feeling the warm sun on his naked back as he worked the fields, and feeling the soil under his feet. He loved the planting, the harvesting, and the very smell of nature. He loved his wife and his family and his friends, and he enjoyed being with them, eating together, drinking wine, talking, and making love. And he loved especially Crete, his tiny, beautiful country! The earth, the sky, the sea, it was his! This was his home.

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> One day he sensed that death was near. What he feared was not what lay beyond, for he knew God's goodness and had lived a good life. No, he feared leaving Crete, his wife, his children, his friends, his home, and his land. Thus, as he prepared to die, he grasped in his right hand a few grams of soil from his beloved Crete and he told his loved ones to bury him with it.
> He died, awoke, and found himself at heaven's gates, the soil still in his hand, and heaven's gate firmly barred against him. Eventually St. Peter emerged through the gates and spoke to him: 'You've lived a good life, and we've a place for you inside, but you cannot enter unless you drop that handful of soil. You cannot enter as you are now!'
> The man was reluctant to drop the soil and protested: 'Why? Why must I let go of this soil? Indeed, I cannot! What's inside of those gates, I have no knowledge of. But this soil, I know … it's my life, my work, my wife and kids, it's what I know and love, it's Crete! Why should I let it go for something I know nothing about?'
> Peter answered: 'When you get to heaven you will know why. It's too difficult to explain. I am asking you to trust, trust that God can give you something better than a few grains of soil.'
> But the man refused. In the end, silent and seemingly defeated, Peter left him, closing the large gates behind. Several minutes later, the gates opened a second time and this time, from them, emerged a young child. She did not try to coax the man into letting go of the soil in his hand. She simply took his hand and, as she did, it opened and the soil of Crete spilled to the ground. She then led him through the gates.
> A shock awaited him as he entered heaven … there, before him, lay all of Crete![1]

It's a good story, and one that I like very much. However, the question remains: what is it seeking to communicate? On the one hand, it serves as an important corrective to popular depictions of an eternity in heaven consisting, in the main, of finally having the time (and opportunity) to learn the harp, and then playing it while seated on the fluffiest of clouds; or, alternatively, taking one's place in the largest flash-mob choir ever assembled to sing in perfect harmony, in perpetuity: and, let's face it, neither prospect is likely to be the stuff of one's wildest eschatological dreams. In this story, at least, the protagonist is asked to trust that all will be well in his letting go of the handful of Cretan earth that he so tightly holds. And, in doing so, the land that he so dearly loved is restored to him, presumably in the most pristine state.[2] This, at least, presents an attractive eternity: the prospect of enjoying what one most loved on earth, but in a new, and brighter heavenly key.

[1] The story appears in Rolheiser's *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), but can also be found online at: Breaking The Eucharistic Bread | Ron Rolheiser (accessed 14 November 2021).

[2] One might see something of Matt 16:25 in this turn of events.

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Others, however, might quibble with this presentation of the rewards of the next life, and complain that heaven should be so far beyond one's human, earthly experience, that any resemblance to what we find on our blue planet could be considered nothing more than a celestial let-down, even a downright cop-out. This view might be called the 'Mel Gibson approach' – at least as interpreted by Stephen Fry in a 2018 conversation with Richard Dawkins which included some discussion on belief in an afterlife.[3] Fry recalls, sometime in the 1980s, hearing an interviewer ask Gibson: 'I believe that I've read somewhere, Mel, that you believe in life after death …', to which Gibson reportedly replied, 'Well, I know one thing for a fact, there's gotta be more to it than this'. Fry then responds to this statement some thirty odd years later: 'What? … what? Even if you were just an ordinary guy, to say, "Aw, yeah, there's America, there's Australia, there's Europe, there's the Lake District, there's the Poles, there's the deserts, there's the Tropics, there's the Bushes ['there's the Galaxy!', interjects Richard Dawkins, 'the universe …'] … but there's gotta be more than *that*, surely!"'. As portrayed by Fry, one could imagine someone of that persuasion feeling quite let down in finding *even* one's favourite earthly locations awaiting them in heaven. And yet, in the story about the peasant from Crete, one suspects that his shock was one of sheer joy and relief in seeing that which he so dearly loved awaiting him, ready for its eternal, uninhibited enjoyment.

Christianity has always struggled with the tension of Christians being in the world, and yet not of the world. For some two thousand years we've walked a very fine tightrope (and, it must be admitted, fallen off it a number of times) between endorsement of the created order ('God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good', as recorded in Gen 1:31[4]) and our part within it, and a prescribed detachment from the things of *this* world, seen as necessary if we are to fully attain blessedness in the *next*. And so often this manifested itself as a dualism between our souls and our bodies. This was, in no small way, reinforced by the verses of Scripture we became familiar with: 'For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?', as recorded in Mark 8:36.[5] The writer of the late-second / early-third-century *Epistle to Diognetus* wrestled with the position of Christians vis à vis the world around them, suggesting, in so many words, that Christians were *in* the world, although not *of* the world:

> For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by country, or by speech, or by dress … They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners … They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh. They spend their existence upon earth, but their citizenship is in

[3] CSICon 2018, Las Vegas, held on 20 October 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYPZwZud_PA. See from 14:40 onwards.

[4] Translations, unless otherwise stated, are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

[5] I have chosen the Douai-Rheims 1899 American translation here.

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> heaven … in a word, what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.[6]

And yet, despite the balancing act that the Diognetus author attempts in the above extract, later Christians were often presented with the starker choice of either embracing the world or renouncing it. We either *gave in* to the flesh, or *mortified* the flesh. Whatever the case, the struggle between the soul and the flesh was real. A sixteenth-century Irish bardic religious poem entitled *Fada atu a n-aghaidh mh'anma* ('You're a long time opposing my soul') captures this conflict well: 'my body has killed my soul and is like a tree gone wild'. Another, *Cuir srian rem corp a choimhdhe* ('Put a bridle on my body, O Lord') asks that the body be bridled for 'my steed cannot be trusted … her wicked ways are dangerous … save me from the danger of her being on top of me – woe to him on whom she lies heavy'. We find similar allusions in other bardic poems such as *Dona an t-each-sa fhuair mh'anam* (which I like to translate as 'Bad is the ginnet my soul's been landed with'), allusions to a violent drunken body assaulting the soul in its monastic cell. The soul was often depicted as the spouse of Christ violated by the unruly body, thrashing itself about, in a precarious and chaotic world.[7]

The irony of this perceived perpetual conflict between soul and body, of course, is that our very identity as human beings is wedded to our being a unity of body and soul. This is something which has more recently come to be much more keenly emphasised. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites *Gaudium et Spes* 14 when it notes that:

> Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.[8]

Not only are we a unity of body and soul, but we become part of the community of faith and are nourished in that community of faith *in*, and *with*, our bodies. And the life-giving sacraments which we receive are *grounded* in natural elements: the water and chrism of our baptism and confirmation; the bread and wine of the Eucharist; the union of human bodies that consummates a marriage. Furthermore, our annual

[6] *Epistle to Diognetus*, 5:1,5,8-10, and 6:1, in *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, ed. J. Levenson,. Revised with additional documents by W.H.C. Frend (London: SPCK, 2002), pp. 55-6.

[7] See discussion of these poems in Salvador Ryan, 'Florilegium of faith: the religious poems in the Book of the O'Conor Don', in Pádraig Ó Macháin (ed.), *The Book of the O'Conor Don: Essays on an Irish Manuscript* (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 2010), pp. 61-87.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 364 (2nd ed, 2000).

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*memento mori* is presented to us in the form of slightly wet ash imprinted on our foreheads, and, in the older wording, we are reminded that 'Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return'. The very conduits, then, that carry us along, with the hope of eternal life with Christ, are, themselves, elements of this world, experienced tangibly, and sensibly, in our material bodies which are part of the natural world. As it stands, it cannot be otherwise. Little wonder, then, that the peasant from Crete objected: 'Why must I let go of this soil? Indeed, I can't! What's inside of those gates, I have no knowledge of. *But this soil, I know* [my emphasis]…'. He was right. None of us can. We will return to this point.

Meanwhile, we should also acknowledge that this tension between flesh and spirit, between the material and the spiritual, has also had a long history in how we have understood the person of Christ. I sometimes like to provocatively propose to my students that many of us, even today, are quasi-, if not full-blown docetists in how we understand Christ. We really don't take the Incarnation seriously because that would entail thinking all sorts of things about the God-Man, whom we would very much prefer to be more God than Man, because 'Man', or more properly the human being, is so much messier. In recent years, we have come to more fully regard ourselves as *part* of creation, not *apart* from creation. We do not miraculously exist outside the eco-system in which we find ourselves. And yet, when it comes to Christ, we do not often think of him in that way. In many respects, he is presented to us as being *apart* from nature, and even when he is presented as being part of nature, we don't often like to dwell too closely on what that might mean if pushed to its logical conclusion. When you take the example of Christ's conception and birth, for instance, as recounted in Matthew and Luke's gospels, they certainly do not present the idea of *parthenogenesis* as commonplace.[9] And that's before we even get to the non-canonical literature and texts such as the Infancy Gospel of James, or Pseudo-Matthew where Mary is presented as *virgo perpetua*, *ante-partum*, *post-partum*, and even *in partu*, with no spilling of blood and no pain. The medieval image of the Christ Child being born as sunlight passes through glass conveniently by-passes the messiness of natural birth, but also reinforces the idea of Christ's origin as an emanation of light that gradually takes on the form of a baby, as recounted

[9] Mary's 'How can this be?' question to the angel in Luke 1:34 makes this very clear. In recent years, scientists have discovered instances of parthenogenesis in the natural world to be far more common than previously thought, leading some to wonder whether rare instances of parthenogenetic events in humans (ovarian teratomas and chimeras) might be interpreted as 'experiments of nature, which could eventually render our species [cap]able of parthenogenesis in the future'. See Gabriel Jose de Carlia and Tiago Campos Pereira, 'On Human Parthenogenesis', *Medical Hypotheses*, 106 (September, 2017), pp. 57-60; Carrie Arnold, 'Slideshow: Virgin Birth not so Miraculous in Animal Kingdom', *Science* (27 Dec. 2012); Helen Pilcher, 'Clone Alone: Who needs Sex?', *New Scientist* (27 Feb. 2013).

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by the midwife in both the second-century *Protoevangelium* of James and a Latin Infancy Gospel preserved in the fourteenth-century Arundel 404 manuscript in the British Library, but containing material of a much earlier date. The Arundel manuscript, taking its cue from the Infancy Gospel of James, reads as follows:

> Now I stood stupefied and marvelling, and fear gripped me; for I was looking upon the astounding clarity of the brightness that was born. But that light, little by little, withdrawing into itself, assimilated itself to the child, and in a moment the child came to be as children are normally born.[10]

This idea of Christ's birth involving an emanation of light was clearly a resilient one, and can also be found referred to by Ratramnus of Corbie (d. 868) in his work *On the Parturition of Mary*, in which he denounces those who hold to such a view in the following manner:

> There is a report … that throughout parts of Germany the ancient serpent is spreading the poison of a new perfidy and is attempting to subvert the catholic belief about the Saviour's Nativity with I know not what kind of devious fraud, insisting that Christ's birth took place not through the portal of the virginal womb as a true human birth, but unnaturally from some unknown and hidden recess as a beam of light shining firth into the air, so that he was not born but explosively discharged. For in that he did not follow the ways of the womb in being born, but came out by some other route just as if he were bursting through the wall of a house, he was not in a true sense born but was violently expelled.[11]

Not 'following the ways of the womb in being born' was, thus, considered problematic if Christ were to be regarded as fully human.

However, we are not quite finished with the fourteenth-century Arundel Infancy Gospel, for it contains an additional reference that has had a much longer influence, indeed, one that survives to our own day: 'I was greatly amazed that he was not crying, as newborn children normally do'.[12] This, indeed, was not normal. It's usually the first thing you expect, even need a newborn baby to do – to cry; and, if it doesn't, you are left wondering if something is wrong. A non-crying baby Jesus removes him further from the reality of the Incarnation, and, if we are to take the Incarnation seriously, that simply will not do. That said, how

[10] *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, ed. Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 74:1, p. 127. It also reads: 'Thus in fact was this light born as the dew which comes down from heaven to earth'. Here, however, the influence of the *Rorate Coeli desuper et nubes pluant justum* (Isaiah 45:8) from the medieval Rorate Mass is clear.

[11] Thomas N. Hall, 'Christ's Birth through Mary's Right Breast: An Echo of Carolingian Heresy in the Old English *Adrian and Ritheus*', in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. Charles D. Wright, Frederick M. Biggs and Thomas N. Hall, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 272

[12] *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, p. 127.

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many of us have joyfully, and perhaps obliviously, sung the following words at Christmastime – 'The cattle are lowing / the baby awakes / but little Lord Jesus / no crying he makes' without any qualms whatsoever about the intrinsic Christological problem?

And yet this tentative approach to Jesus's humanity, this embarrassment almost, at the full implications of his being fully part of the created order, was present in Christianity from the beginning. A docetist streak (the belief that Jesus did not possess a real human body) may even have crept into the writings of someone who regarded himself as opposing that very heresy in his own day. Clement of Alexandria's (150-215) statement, in his work the *Stromateis*, that Jesus did not need to eat, but only consumed food so that those around him would not think his body was an illusion,[13] has often been taken as evidence of this. Thomas Weinandy remarks, for instance, that 'heavily influenced by Stoic philosophy, Clement did not allow even the most ordinary of human tribulations to touch Jesus'.[14] One wonders whether such a view, and those like it, constitute a failure to fully realise the full implications of the Incarnation. To do that properly would involve being prepared to face uncomfortable images of the baby Jesus, for example: the image of him throwing up on Mary's shoulder in his earliest months; the idea of Christ experiencing the normal bodily processes of urination and defecation; of the reality of sickness in Christ's human life. Did the Christ-Child wet the bed? Did he ever have the sniffles? Was he ever feverish? Did he have bouts of diarrhoea? And then, more controversially still, did he experience the normal nocturnal emissions of teenage years? And yet, even as I write this, I wonder at my reference to the possibility of 'controversy' in relation to an aspect of Christ's human experience. Leo Steinberg regards the idea of Christ as a sexual being as crucial to the belief that he became fully human, instances of the *ostentatio genitalium* in religious art underlining the consequences of God's 'humanation', the term Steinberg prefers to use for the Incarnation.[15] For Christ to be really human was for Christ to experience many of the above features of the human condition; and, not least, his own sexuality.

Furthermore, to ask these questions is also, in short, to ask whether Christ was a part of the created world? Was he *part* of a living, breathing eco-system, rather than standing *apart* from it? Sometimes it's

[13] *Stromateis* VI.9.71.1-2.

[14] Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 24. However, Daniel Lee Worden cautions against this charge, arguing that it ignores the larger context of Clement's writings, which show themselves opposed to the very belief that he is being accused of. See Daniel Lee Worden, 'Clement of Alexandria: Incarnation and Mission of the Logos-Son' (PhD dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2016), p. 166.

[15] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and its Modern Oblivion* (Rev. edn., Chicago, 1997).

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difficult to appreciate this. Christ is often depicted as ruling over nature in the Gospels: quelling the storm; walking on the water; causing whole shoals of fish to surrender *en masse* to his followers; he is depicted as having pigs possessed and causing them to hurl themselves (with their demonic cargoes) off steep banks into the water.[16] Was Christ a part of nature or did he stand apart from nature? If we take the Incarnation seriously, we have to accept the former. But, in doing so, we have to accept the whole package. And that necessarily means reckoning with a Jesus of Nazareth who had some 100 trillion microbes, 1.5 kilos of them, including bacteria, fungi, and viruses living in and on his body; that's not even to mention some 1.5 million mites that would also have lived on him at any one point in his life.[17] That's what the Incarnation means. That's what being a part of creation means. If he's not a microbe-carrying Jesus, he's not a human Jesus. It's that simple. No wonder we've been afraid of the Incarnation for so long.

And yet, despite our being frequently reminded, in the words of St John Damascene, that prayer involves 'the raising of one's mind and heart to God', we often fail to do this without keeping one eye, or maybe one hand, grounded in the world as we find it, harnessing what is *material* to help us to journey to the *immaterial*. We return to our peasant from Crete: 'Why must I let go of this soil? Indeed, I can't! What's inside of those gates, I have no knowledge of. *But this soil, I know* …'. Indeed. I now wish to explore some of the ways in which we have done this over the centuries. Speaking of the Catholic imagination, Andrew Greeley writes:

> Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more religious sensibility, which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. The world of the Catholic is haunted by a sense that objects, events and persons of daily life are revelations of Grace.[18]

Devotion to contact relics, for instance, can be traced back to the very earliest days of the Christian Church.[19] Supporters of the use of relics in later centuries even argued for its biblical basis in Acts 19:11-12 which reads as follows: 'So remarkable were the miracles worked by God

[16] The relevant passages can be found in Mk 4:35-41; Matt 14:22-33; Lk 5:4-5; Mk 5:1-20.

[17] https://www.micropia.nl/en/discover/stories/on-and-in-you/ (accessed 14 November 2021).

[18] Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), I.

[19] For a lively introduction to this topic, see Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

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at Paul's hands that handkerchiefs or aprons which had touched him were taken to the sick, and they were cured of their illnesses, and the evil spirits came out of them'. The earliest surviving mention of relic veneration outside of the New Testament is found in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, c. AD 156, in which followers of the martyred bishop of Smyrna record how 'we took up his bones, which were more valuable to us than precious stones and finer than refined gold' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 18). Recovering the bodily remains of martyrs became highly significant.

Basil of Caesarea (330-79) would write that 'Those who touch the bones of the martyrs participate in their sanctity' (*Homily on Psalm* 115), while Gregory of Nazianzus (329-90) remarked that 'The bodies of the martyrs have the same power as their holy souls, whether one touches them or just venerates them. Just a few drops of their blood, the signs of their sufferings, can effect the same as their bodies' (*Against Julian*, 1.69).

The pilgrim, Egeria, who visited the Holy Land during the years 381–384, recounts how tangible encounters with relics could even lead to theft. When venerating the cross in the Holy Sepulchre Church, she noticed how one pilgrim 'bit off a piece of the Holy Wood and stole it away', and for this reason the deacons stood round and kept watch to make sure no one did so again.[20] In the later twelfth-century, the Carthusian, Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln, would perform a similar action when visiting the relics of Mary Magdalene at Fécamp in Normandy, biting off a piece of her bone, which he hoped to smuggle away with him. When the attendants reacted with horror, he simply replied: 'If, a little while ago, I handled the most sacred body of the Lord of all the saints with my fingers, in spite of my unworthiness, and when I partook of it, touched it with my lips and teeth, why should I not venture to treat in the same way the bones of the saints for my protection'.[21]

The significance of a tactile encounter with what is considered to be sacred is further demonstrated in Jerome's letter of condolence to Eustochium in 404, on the death of her mother, Paula. He recalled her mother's journey to Jerusalem to live as a nun, and her interaction with the physical environment once she arrived there:

> Moreover, in visiting the holy places, so great was the passion and the enthusiasm she exhibited for each, that she could never have torn herself

[20] *Egeria's Travels*, trans. John Wilkinson (London: SPCK, 1971), 37.2, pp. 136-7. For a recent edition, see *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018).

[21] 'Bishop Hugh of Avalon's Devotion to Relics (1186-1200)', in John Shinners (ed.), *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), pp. 176-7.

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> away from one had she not been eager to visit the rest. Before the Cross she threw herself down in adoration as though she beheld the Lord hanging upon it; and when she entered the tomb which was the scene of the Resurrection, she kissed the stone which the angel had rolled away from the door of the sepulchre. Indeed, so ardent was her faith that she even licked with her mouth the very spot on which the Lord's body had lain, like one athirst for the river he has longed for. What tears she shed there, what groans she uttered, and what grief she poured forth, all Jerusalem knows.[22]

The so-called Piacenza pilgrim, who visited the Holy Land in 570, spoke of how 'earth is brought to the tomb and put inside, and those who go in take some as a blessing'.[23] The practice of removing earth from a holy place is found at a great many sacred sites around the world, and is widely attested in the literature. Moreover, it is found across all social strata.[24] In 1599, for example, we find the learned Scots Jesuit, James Gordon Huntley, apostolic nuncio to Ireland, going on pilgrimage to the tomb of St Patrick in Down, from which he took away some earth from the grave that he found to have miraculous effects.[25] This is also something the present writer has encountered in Marian shrines such as Fátima in Portugal, where one can even find small bags of 'Terra Sancta' on sale in the local religious goods stalls. Meanwhile, one will also sometimes find pilgrims wiping the base of the plinth on which the statue of the Virgin rests with their handkerchiefs when the figure is removed from the shrine's Capelinha to be carried in procession. Meanwhile, in New Mexico, the shrine of Chimayó, which is known as the so-called 'Lourdes of America', situated eighty-five miles from Albuquerque in the shadow of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, attracts thousands of visitors each Good Friday to visit its miraculous crucifix, but also to take away some 'holy dirt' for which the shrine has become famous.[26] When Beverley R. Singer, a professor of anthropology at the University of New Mexico, was asked whether she considered the tradition of collecting 'holy dirt' from Chimayó to be a Catholic or a Tewa[27] ritual, she responded, 'Does it matter?

[22] *Readings in Late Antiquity: a Sourcebook*, ed. Michael Maas (2nd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2010) p. 148. For a reflection on the significance of more modern examples of tactile piety, see Salvador Ryan, 'The Quest for Tangible Religion: a View from the Pews', *The Furrow* (July/August, 2004), pp. 410-416.

[23] *Readings in Late Antiquity: a Sourcebook*, pp. 149ff.

[24] On this point see Salvador Ryan, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship between Theology and Popular Piety', *Heythrop Journal*, 53 (2012), pp. 961-971.

[25] Edmund Hogan, *Distinguished Irishmen of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Burns and Oates, 1894), pp. 326-7.

[26] See Brett Hendrickson, *The Healing Power of the Santuario de Chimayó* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

[27] A linguistic group of Pueblo Native Americans whose homelands are situated near the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

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It's in our cultural memory bag to practice these ways. We know when we need the dirt and your intuition just takes you there'.[28]

The physical landscape itself was frequently imbued with sacred significance through its association with either Christ, the saints, or martyrs, and this often manifested itself in recognisable remnants of various kinds. The Piacenza pilgrim from 570 tells us that 'You can see the place where he was crucified, and on the actual rock there is a bloodstain'.[29] In Ireland we are familiar with impressions in the landscape associated with various early Irish saints. Irish folklore that recounts stories of priests on the run during the 'Penal Days' often included references to various marks on the landscape, perpetual reminders of the ultimate sacrifice paid by priest-martyrs. One tale recounts how in Arrighmore bog, Co. Tipperary:

> there is a large rock which the priests used to stand upon and preach to the people. We can still see the mark of the priest's feet where he used to stand and the grass is now growing about it.[30]

In an account from Killenaule, Co. Tipperary, a man cut down a tree that had been associated with a priest in the Penal Times. It relates how 'he cut the tree into blocks and on each block that he cut, he found a form of a priest saying mass, and on each block the priest was at a different part of mass'.[31] Meanwhile, in Ballinlough near Kells, Co. Meath, 'soldiers were following a priest and he climbed an ash tree. The soldiers saw the track of his foot on the tree and they caught him and hung him off its branches. Afterwards some person got a bit of the tree to put in the fire and it would not burn. The tree is supposed to be there still and the track of the priest's foot is there on the tree still'.[32] The detail that the part of the ash tree that the priest climbed would not burn in the fire testifies to the sacred status it has acquired, much in the same way that it was commonly believed by older generations in Ireland that holy water could never be boiled. In this instance we have the example of a natural element imbued with additional sanctity, and then acting as if it were *apart* from nature. This is worth reflecting on.

The history of Christianity has also included many voices who have been critical of the engagement of believers with the various material expressions of their belief, and, indeed, of too close an attachment to

[28] Bernardo P. Gallegos, 'Dancing the Comanches', the Santo Nino, La Virgen (of Guadelupe) and the Genizaro Indians of New Mexico, in *Indigenous Symbols and Practices in the Catholic Church: Visual Culture, Missionization and Appropriation*, ed. Kathleen J. Martin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 205-23, at p. 222. I wish to thank Peter Marshall for having originally drawn my attention to this shrine.

[29] *Readings in Late Antiquity: a Sourcebook*, pp. 149ff.

[30] National Folklore Schools Collection (henceforth NFSC), www.duchas.ie, vol. 531, pp. 237-238.

[31] NFSC, vol. 564, p. 157.

[32] NFSC, vol. 714, p. 91.

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the earthly world around them. One such voice was that of Claudius, bishop of Turin, who around the year AD 816 had the following to say about the cult of relics and the veneration of images:

> Why do you humiliate yourselves and bow down to false images? Why do you bend your body like a captive before foolish likenesses and earthly structures? God made you upright, and although other animals face downward toward the earth, there is for you an upward posture and a countenance erect to heaven and to God. Look thither, lift your eyes thither, seek God in the heights, so that you can avoid those things that are below…[33]

What a contrasting note this sounds when compared with the following extract from Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* (84-85):

> Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.
>
> God has written a precious book, 'whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe'.[34]

Thankfully, today there is a growing appreciation of sacred sites in the natural landscape, sites that were often neglected for large parts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Ireland, pilgrimages to holy wells, of which the island has some 3000, have experienced a revival in more recent years; likewise, Mass rock sites, pilgrim paths, and fledgling Irish *caminos* associated with early Irish saints have become equally popular. This renewed popularity comes as attendance at church on Sundays is in sharp decline. There may be something in the view that disaffected former churchgoers are seeking meaning in rituals that are often presented as having their roots in a remote, even pre-Christian past; this has certainly been a feature of the explosion of interest in so-called 'Celtic Spirituality' in recent decades. For instance, one man (here designated as SO), who was interviewed by Suzanne Crawford O'Brien for an article in the journal, *Material Religion*, in 2015, had this to say about the continued adherence to rituals surrounding local wells:

[33] *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: a Reader*, ed. Brett Edward Whalen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 98. Some centuries earlier, St Augustine, in a sermon on the *Noli me tangere* incident in the Gospel states that Christ's admonition was not to be taken literally but was a directive for a proper mode of belief: 'do not touch earth and so lose heaven; do not cleave to the man and so lose belief in God'. Cited in Elina Gertsman, 'Matter Matters', in Stephanie Downes, et al. (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 35.

[34] *Laudato Si* https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed 14 November 2021).

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> SO: Oh yes, oh God, yes, they still go [to the pattern days[35]]. They don't always walk now, they go by car, but they still go. You know even people who don't go to mass still go to the wells.
> SC: Oh, that's interesting. Why do you think that that would be?
> SO: Well, of course, the wells go back 10,000 years. The mass only goes back about 2,000. It's a modern innovation, you know, God forgive me for saying it.[36]

What have come to be known as Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) worldwide currently attract a wide variety of visitors – pilgrims, religious tourists, secular tourists, ecotourists, and environmental pilgrims – and often the lines become blurred between these various categories. Nowadays they are of just as much interest to anthropologists and health geographers, who describe them as 'therapeutic landscapes', as they are to those who continue to share in the practice of ancient religious rituals. Contemporary sacred sites around the world have, thus, become complex multifunctional spaces.[37]

For believing Christians, however, the struggle continues to accept the reality of Christ's Incarnation, even as we (often, literally), vote with our feet in our religious practices and devotions. Those who visit Sacred Natural Sites in large numbers, approaching them from the perspective of Christian faith, affirm the innate goodness of the natural world, and find themselves in deep sympathy with Pope Francis's views on 'God's precious book', as expressed in *Laudato Si*'. We have cause to hope that we are slowly moving away from the dualistic tendencies of our past. I say, tendencies, because, despite the many examples we have discussed above, there have always been Christian thinkers who have made it their business to celebrate the goodness of the created order. Caroline Bynum helpfully reminds us of a vision by the mystic Mechtild of Hackeborn (d. 1289), in which she saw the vestments of a celebrating priest covered with every blade and twig, every hair and scale of the flora and fauna of the universe (and expressed surprise at this); it was only then that she also saw that 'the smallest details of the creation are reflected in the holy trinity by means of the humanity of Christ, because it is from the same earth that produced them that Christ drew his humanity'.[38] Bynum asks us to consider that

[35] These are pilgrimages to sites associated with local saints. The term derives from the Irish *pátrún* meaning 'patron'.

[36] Suzanne J. Crawford O'Brien, 'Well, Water, Rock: Holy Wells, Mass Rocks and Reconciling Identity in the Republic of Ireland', *Material Religion* 4:3 (2008), pp. 326-348, at p. 334.

[37] See, for example, Jaime Tatay, 'Sacred Trees, Mystic Caves, Holy Wells: Devotional Titles in Spanish Rural Sanctuaries', *Religions* 12: 183 (2021); Ronan Foley, 'Small Health Pilgrimages: Place and Practice at the Holy Well', *Culture and Religion: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14:1 (2013), pp. 44-62.

[38] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Zone Books, 2015), pp 259-61.

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the body of Christ, then, includes not merely his senses and suffering, flesh and blood, but the fur and feathers, sticks and stones of the earth as well. The German philosopher-theologian, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), likewise regarded Christ's humanity as a *manductio* leading all creation back to God.[39] These are surely images with which our friend from Crete could readily sympathise: '*But this soil, I know! …*'.

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[39] Ibid.

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