


Awkward Objects:
Relics, the Making of Religious Meaning,
and the Limits of Control in the Information Age

Winfried
Jan  Geisbusch
University College London

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Signature:

London, 15.09.2008

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Abstract

The thesis aims to recover relics – i.e. the bodily remains of the saints in the Roman-Catholic tradition – as a neglected object category within the study of material religion. In doing so, it seeks to widen the understanding of the materiality of religious practice, complementing more traditional approaches that have focused on religion as primarily a phenomenon of belief, ritual or written discourse.

To achieve this aim the thesis examines the continuing conditions of the production, authentication, circulation and function of relics at the intersection of institutional and private contexts. Special emphasis is laid on the modes of abduction and appropriation that mediate between these contexts, in particular their more controversial aspects involving the use of modern electronic media such as commercial websites like eBay, the Internet auction house

The first section of the thesis charts how relics are produced within the institutional setting of ecclesiastical authorities and how they derive potency, authority, in short: significance, from the inscription within these settings, localized at Rome and the Vatican as both, objective and imaginary spaces; and how, often against the resistance of Church authorities, relics are alienated from these settings through more or less legitimate channels such as street markets, the trade in antiques and especially eBay, the Internet auction site, which appears as an arena on constructing and contesting religious significance through sacred objects.

The second section then looks in more detail at the specific meanings that individual faithful invest in relics, especially when seen before a backdrop of larger controversies about popular and official piety, Catholic tradition(alism) and innovation following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a discussion that, within the social sciences, also involves debates on the understanding of religion and modernity, on memory, value and values, materiality and spirituality.

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I. Introduction: Excavating the Subject

Early on a fine Sunday afternoon in Rome I am sitting in the stylish café of the Bramante cloisters, just round the corner from Piazza Navona. Quiet during the week, except for lunchtime, it is a fairly busy place on weekends, though frequented mostly by Romans and a few ex-pats, too hidden as it is for the tourist crowds. Renaissance arcades, a few funerary monuments to sixteenth-century bishops, lintels with the coat of arms of the architect's patron, Cardinal Oliviero Carafa (d. 1511), roof gardens looking in from neighbouring buildings, bright blue skies – a scene that I have come to feel as 'typically Roman', a long history very much alive in a bustling present (the *chiostro del Bramante* also houses a modern art gallery), combined with ubiquitous ecclesiastical connections.

In front of me on my table I have a reliquary, properly speaking a *theca*, a relic locket. A bit smaller than half my palm, the usual oval shape, made of brass that has darkened over time. What time? Judging by its style, I would date it between 1800 and 1850. It is my latest acquisition, bought forty minutes earlier in Porta Portese, Rome's largest and busiest street market. It cost a bit more than I really felt comfortable with, but at the same time I knew I was getting a good deal. It would have cost twice as much if I had bought it on eBay. Just a pity that the threads that are supposed to fasten the back of the reliquary have come apart, so there is a chance that it has been opened and the relics been tampered with, or giving me the possibility to tamper with them, which I certainly will not do. Still, the wax seal that is applied over the knot of the threads is intact – a nice, clear strike, showing a bishop's coat of arms: six tassels on each side decorate the *galero*, the flat, wide-brimmed ecclesiastical hat that is part of the heraldry of Roman-Catholic prelates. The shield has the shape of a horse's face armour, often used by Italian clergy; it is underlaid by a Maltese cross, indicating that the bishop was also a Knight of Malta or had otherwise received an award within the order. The shield shows an eagle or falcon looking right. Since the threads are broken, the card-board, covered with the usual red silk, onto which the relics are fixed, sits a bit wobbly within the theca, so someone has bolstered it with some bits of paper. They look yellow, very thin and brittle – a good sign, if the paper is as old as it appears: if the theca has been interfered with it happened a long time ago, bestowing its own historical value on a case of fakery or a simple mishap. But

then, threads can also wear out naturally, scraped by the rim of the cap if the back of the relic is opened too often. At any rate, the relics look fine to me, no loose bits as far as I can see – if it is possible to say very much about them at all. There are 18 of them in the locket, no less. They are just tiny specks of matter, barely identifiable; some, I can tell, are particles of fabric, others may be stone or bone, dust or ashes, partly merging with the dots of glue that hold them in place. Of two or three I am not sure whether I actually see them at all or whether it is simply the glue that I am looking at. As a specimen of craftsmanship the theca is a bit botched. I could say *craftswomanship*, given that many convents had – and have – a line in reliquary-making – 'nuns' work', as it is sometimes called, or '*schöne Arbeiten*' in German, literally meaning 'beautiful works'. But somehow the wonkiness of the design does not quite suggest the infinitely patient, meticulous hand of a female religious. Sister at the convent of Santa Lucia in Selci showed me some of the pieces she recently created. They were just the ordinary, mass-produced thecae that one finds in the shops around the Borgo Pio and Via dei Cestari, but skilfully embellished by her, the *cedulae*, the little labels that identify the relic, laser-printed (a bit prosaic perhaps, but far more legible), carefully cut out and carefully pasted, minute ornaments of metal foil, sequins and gold wire arranged around the relic.

Still, in its own way the piece in front of me is rather a fine one. Eighteen relics, quite an exceptional number, axially arranged (if a bit askew), eight sit vertically in the centre, five on each side. The *cedulae* are handwritten, the black ink still unfaded, but the letters are scrawled. Some pieces that I have seen were miniature calligraphies, but not these ones. And as the lengths of the individual *cedulae* vary the general impression is untidy and crowded. Yet the top one reads 'Ex Spina Cor D.N.J.C.' – one of the common abbreviations in clerical Latin that any antiques dealers worth their salt, devotees and collectors alike will spot from a mile away: 'From the Thorn of the Crown of Our Lord Jesus Christ'. Quite a catch, this one – great cities have been pillaged and their people butchered for it, kings have spent the fortunes of their realms to get hold of it¹. Less dramatically, I got it

¹ In 1204, the Fourth Crusade was diverted to Constantinople and the city sacked, resulting in a veritable flood of relics into the West over the following years, among them the 'Crown of Thorns'. King Louis IX of France (r. 1226-1270) acquired the relic in 1239 for the vast sum of 177,000 livres, housing it in a purpose-built shrine at Paris, the Sainte Chapelle. Single thorns were occasionally given away as precious gifts.

in a flea market; quite a catch, indeed, even if it is just a minute speck rather than a recognizable shape. 'Ex Sepul. B.V.M.' – 'From the Tomb of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. Not bad either. Other relics are of St Joseph, St Anne, St John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Paul. The nuclear Holy Family in the palm of my hand, together with the foundational figures of the early Church. A few martyrs – St Blaise, St Emygdus. The great monastic founders St Benedict (with his disciple St Maurus), St Francis and St Dominic. Some medieval favourites – St Anthony of Padua and St Roch. Two protagonists of the Catholic Counter-Reformation – St Cajetan, founder of the Theatine clerks regular, and his follower St Andrew Avellino. And finally some St Vincent who I cannot fully identify, as there are several saints of that name and the cedula is only partly legible.

This vignette addresses a number of issues relevant to this study: Firstly, the continuing presence of relics, despite their perception as a thing of the past, and a particularly obscure and somewhat morbid aspect of the past, a thing offensive to enlightened minds. As such it asks questions about our understanding of history, memory and modernity, and how these notions are driven and contested. These questions will be addressed in greater detail in sections V.ii and then again in VI.i and VI.ii on the politics of memory, nostalgia and heritage.

Secondly, speaking of *things*, relics underscore the material aspects of religious practice, embodying the contradiction that transcendence, as the real, is bound up with the material, as the merely apparent, and all the consequences this inescapable tie implies (Miller, 2005). For what *is* a relic, materially speaking? In my theca they appear as grains of indeterminate matter. Yet at Sant'Andrea della Valle, to name just one example, one may also find an entire saintly body on display². Many other churches will display relics somewhere in between these two extremes, or they treasure non-human relics, such as the fragments of the 'True Cross' at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. As relics oscillate between presence and representation, we need ask how their 'relic potentiality' is specified, actuated and inscribed. They are substance as much (or as little) as sign. Their materiality is simultaneously dissolved and fortified, as substance becomes substrate, yet substrate is what makes the relic relevant.

² That of St Giuseppe Tomasi (1649-1713), cardinal and noted liturgist.

Thirdly, the mentioning of eBay was not merely a flippant aside, as relics, controversially, have been sold through the website for a number of years. As I will argue, this practice raises significant questions over the nature of place and emplacement, over institutional boundaries, religious agency, authenticity and authority. The implication of an arguably open, decentralized network device such as eBay also draws attention to the questions of who may or may not own a relic, how their circulation (or non-circulation, their withholding) is organized, and who may define all these criteria. Section V is largely devoted to an exploration of religious practice on the Internet and the implications of eBay in particular.

And fourthly, since relics, according to canon law, must never be traded for gain – this being one of the main issues that brought notoriety to the eBay goings-on – we may also want to explore the construction and contestation of value and values, the complex relations and translations between money and morality. Here, the mutual constructions of sacred and profane are underscored and at the same time called into question. I will take this discussion up in section VII, as I regard them to be intimately linked with the construction of value and values.

To write about relics – relics, that is, as they are produced and distributed by the Catholic Church today, as a vivid, active object in the religious imagination and practice of contemporary Catholics – is to write about a topic that may be regarded as deliberately obscure and peculiar. Obscure enough, for sure, to merit a gesture of protestation to the contrary right at the beginning. As a topic, relics are not taken for granted. Whether such an assumption is justified or not, to write about relics therefore takes on the appearance of a rescue job. In certain ways this seems fitting enough; the very term – from the Latin *relinquere*, to leave behind, or *reliquiae*, remains – suggests that we are dealing with matter that is incomplete, half destroyed, on the point of vanishing, that requires our efforts of collection and recollection if we want to make any sense of it. Relics are by their very nature suffused with a sense of the past, of nostalgia, a curious half-presence that is redolent with absence.

Anthropology, it might be said, is by no means immune to this kind of nostalgia and to the appeal of urgency that the threat of disappearance can bestow: 'Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken

shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants – these die away under our very eyes' – thus Malinowski in 1922 in the opening paragraphs of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1984 [1922]: xv). While the Trobriand Islands and popular Catholicism may be a universe apart, the quotation is resonant for my own work nonetheless. Studies of the cult of relics or medieval piety are not infrequently prefaced with similar remarks, although, in general they are more optimistic than Malinowski. After a long period of neglect and ignorance, relics have moved since the 1960s/70s 'from the periphery to the center of medieval religious and social history' (Geary, 1990 [1978]: ix), so there is certainly hope that all is not lost, indeed, that much has been preserved and rediscovered. It is certainly true that there is now a rather substantial body of literature on medieval and early-modern popular piety, on devotional practices and religious mentalities. Relics are no longer discussed solely by 'the antiquarian, the curious, or the uncritically pious' (Cunningham in Sox, 1985: xiii), but also by the historian. Yet the gaze of the historian is by definition set on the past and the resurgence of relics in historiography contrasts with more ambiguous contemporary attitudes. For the Church of the post-Conciliar period, i.e. after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), relics had become 'part of the expendable stock of Christian tradition', embarrassing to 'progressive' Catholics (Sox, 1985: 7). The pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) has arguably been in many respects one of restoration, if not rollback (Kelly, 1996; Hebblethwaite, 2000; highly critical: Küng, 2002; Cornwell, 2002), and Benedict XVI is now widely seen to be following in his footsteps (Stoekl, 2006; Comaroff, 2008). It has witnessed a renewed relevance of many traditional forms of devotion, not least through the pope's many travels to sanctuaries across the world and a rapid increase in canonizations and beatifications, juridically institutionalized through a streamlined saint-making process³. At the same time, it may still be argued that expressions of popular piety – a term as broad as it is problematic – continue to be seen by the Catholic hierarchy with considerable ambivalence, at once cherished and suspect:

³ Through the apostolic constitution *Divinus perfectionis magister*, which came into force in January 1983.

'65. While the Magisterium highlights the undeniable qualities of popular piety, it does not hesitate to point out dangers which can affect it: lack of a sufficient number of Christian elements such as the salvific significance of the Resurrection of Christ, an awareness of belonging to the Church, the person and action of the Holy Spirit; a disproportionate interest between the Saints and the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ and his mysteries; lack of direct contact with Sacred Scripture; isolation from the Church's sacramental life; a dichotomy between worship and the duties of Christian life; a utilitarian view of some forms of popular piety; the use of "signs, gestures and formulae, which sometimes become excessively important or even theatrical"; and in certain instances, the risk of "promoting sects, or even superstition, magic, fatalism, or oppression". 66. In its attempts to remedy such defects in popular piety, the contemporary Magisterium has insistently stressed the need to "evangelize" popular piety...' (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2002: 57-8)

One may, therefore, wonder how accurate the impression is of recovery from historical oblivion. Perhaps it is more, as Wilson (1983: 1) puts it, a matter of applying new methods and approaches to an established subject that 'has attracted more scholarly attention over the centuries than most'. Already in 1983, the annotated bibliography to his edited volume, *Saints and their Cults*, lists an amazing 1,262 titles on saints, hagiography, relics, sacred images, pilgrimage, female sanctity and popular religion in the Christian West. What is perhaps a more recent development, is, firstly, an acknowledgment that phenomena such as these have continued to enchant modernity, respectively that modernity is a notion in need of critical appraisal and careful application (Robbins, 2003; Cannell, 2006: 30-9; Freytag and Sawicki, 2006: 7-24; for the Italian context in particular: Chambers, 2008; Hersche, 1999); and, secondly, an interest in the material culture of these phenomena in contemporary Western Christianity (for example, Eade and Sallnow, 1991; McDannell, 1995; Orsi, 1996; Morgan, 1998).

Relics and the beliefs and practices associated with them have without doubt undergone radical changes. Yet given that we are dealing with a

phenomenon stretching over nearly 2,000 years of Christian history – to say nothing of relics in non-Christian contexts – this should hardly surprise. Relics are no longer of central importance to the establishment and exercise of temporal authority. They are mostly peripheral even for spiritual authority, too, although they can still be mobilized if required. They do no longer underwrite the treaties of sovereigns. For the most part, their economic significance as generators of income is negligible (notwithstanding some notable exceptions). They are not usually the focus of communal pride or civic identity anymore. They are not relied on to avert epidemics or assure good harvests. All in all, they may not have vanished, but their place is not nearly as central, their presence not nearly felt as much as it once used to be. Even so, we would do well to be more specific about the exact dimension of this 'once', which, if used carelessly, too easily glosses over the specificities of historical developments, positing a clear and unbridgeable divide between a homogenous past and a radically dissimilar present. Yet as Geary (1990 [1978]: 17) pointed out, the fortunes of relics and their cult waxed and waned even throughout the Middle Ages:

'When so examined, the role of relics in medieval society is clearly a changing one, and when compared with other competing means of satisfying basic social and personal needs, the place of relics in the central Middle Ages [ninth through eleventh centuries] emerges as quite different from that of previous and subsequent periods.'

At the same time, and in addition, we need to take note of continuations from the past to the present. At the most basic level, perhaps, relics have changed little. For the believer, then and now, they are a tangible point of contact between heaven and earth, a physical conduit of living, active grace that may bring about miraculous effects. As such, relics have intricately been bound up – not always in an untroubled way – with one of the longest-lived organizations, the Christian, respectively the Catholic Church, which has more or less successfully sought to control and formalize, limit or expand their creation, distribution, function and meaning, in the process securing (or at any rate encouraging) their historical continuity.

In the following sections I will try to provide a (necessarily brief) history of relics within Christian thought and practice, with an emphasis on some of their more problematic aspects, which were recognized early on and came to assume critical importance in the Reformation period. The aim of this exercise, however, is not to place relics, as I said above, firmly in the past, but show how this history still informs the present.

II. History

i. Demarcations: the logics of immanence and transcendence

As Evans-Pritchard (1962) pointed out, social sciences (or rather: social scientists) and religion do not go well together. At the same time, 'religion has always been a central field of inquiry in anthropology' (Eriksen, 2001: 29). Yet the picture remains is more ambiguous and contradictory still: as Cannell (2006) argues, one outcome of anthropology's specific intellectual development has been to give short shrift in particular to Christianity as a serious subject of study. Anthropology's 'anxiety of influence' made Christianity seem 'at once the most tediously familiar and the most threatening of the religious traditions for a social science that has developed within contexts in which the heritage of European philosophy, and therefore Christianity, tends to predominate.' As a result, it 'was the last major area of religious activity to be explored in ethnographic writing' and generally 'considered the least urgent object of study' when compared with other religious traditions (Cannell, 2006: 3, 8). Yet Christianity cannot be taken to be a monolithic block. We need to distinguish between Christian denominations and look at how their various traditions interacted or fitted in with anthropological thought. Cannell (2006) makes this point, but applies it largely to non-Western societies, discussing the formation of plural 'Christianities' through conversion and the resulting classificatory and methodological problems of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

In contrast, Tambiah (1984) discusses at length the European philosophical traditions – Judaism, Greek philosophy, and Christianity, especially Protestantism – and their profound, if not always acknowledged influence on anthropological

notions of religion, magic and science. His discussion is highly pertinent for my own study as it brings to light how certain subject matters came to be marginalized or were framed in terms that are little conducive to cautious, impartial analysis. One of his central arguments is that

'[s]eventeenth-century Protestant thought contributed to the demarcation of "magic" from "religion", magic being a class of acts ranging from sacramental ritualism to false manipulations of the supernatural and occult powers, and true religion being a "rational" belief system in a sovereign providence. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment rationalism carried this tendency further and proposed an intellectual conception of religion as an object of study.'
(Tambiah, 1984: 31)

I would argue that this double inheritance of Protestant and Enlightenment thought – rational, intellectualistic, transcendental – has marginalized not only the anthropological study of Christianity in general, but more specifically obstructed the study of the Catholic tradition and within it the study of its material, tangible contents. To be acceptable at all to the social scientist (usually as a means of social cohesion), religion had to be shorn of its 'irrational', 'folkloristic' accretions. 'Overboard went prophecies, miracles, dogma, theology, ritual, tradition, clericalism, and the supernatural', leaving a 'substitute religion ... based upon a code of conduct suitable for Victorian gentlemen' (Evans-Pritchard, 1962: 41). Tambiah (1984), but also Thomas (1991 [1971]), point out the affinity between Protestant values and theology, on the one hand, and early modern scientific activity, on the other. It was a relationship 'of complementary stimulation as well as increasing separation of domains' (Tambiah, 1984: 31). In a world of mechanistically operating natural laws, God could increasingly be envisioned as remote from his creation, absent from everyday human cares and occupations, and religion be conceived in propositional terms as primarily a matter of doctrine and belief. In the light of these developments, then, Catholic notions of divine immanence or presence must come to appear 'anti-' or 'ir-rational', while 'rationality' – the rationality inherited also by anthropology – tended to take on an anti-Catholic dye. The fact that a number of distinguished anthropologists like

Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, Victor Turner, or Mary Douglas were practising Catholics is perhaps more the exception that proves the rule rather than a counter-argument, as Evans-Pritchard himself noted (1962: 45):

'The majority of anthropologists are indifferent, if not hostile to religion ... and a minority are Christian ... of the Christians, a considerable proportion are Catholics ... it would seem to be a general tendency of our times ... that Protestantism shades into Deism and Deism into agnosticism, and that the choice is between all or nothing, a choice which allows of no compromise between a Church which has stood its ground and made no concessions, and no religion at all.'

Whether this is actually the case, whether the Church has indeed made no concessions at all, remains to be seen. In fact, I would submit that, if the central question, the point at which Protestantism, Enlightenment thought and modern rationality separated from the Catholic tradition, is the question of spirit and matter, or spirit in matter, or the spirit of matter – in short: the relationship between these two concepts –, then the debate must be regarded as still open and ongoing, not only between the social sciences and Christianity, or between Protestantism and Catholicism, but also within Catholicism. Relics, and material religion more generally, are located right at the heart of the matter (a pun not intended, but meaningful), conceptually blurring the carefully guarded boundaries between immanence and transcendence, humans and things, objects and subjects, raising issues of power and agency that I will take up again in greater depth in chapter VII.

Relations of transcendence and immanence, as Robbins (2010) points out, are at the heart of anthropological investigations of Christianity, because they are also at the heart of Christian traditions and how they define themselves and against each other. Transcendence is a fundamental category in Christian thought. From the Latin *transcendere*, literally 'to go beyond', it refers to the 'performance, respectively the experience of a reality beyond that which is to hand or objectifiable' (Rotzetter, 2008: 606; my translation). As such, it is closely related to notions of a/the divine being and an after- or other world, which can (and

historically did) imply an ontological, hierarchical dualism: the material world thus appears more or less opposed to a spiritual world into which the human being is called to enter. This is achieved through the praxis of asceticism, a form of mental and physical preparation that usually demands a disregard for material possessions and bodily comfort and a degree of withdrawal from society. However, transcendence and asceticism are not necessarily entwined. The idea of withdrawal from the world does not appear in Old Testament Judaism, where the world is primarily creation and the place of encounter with the divine. Rather, the Christian ascetic tradition appears as a legacy of Greek thought, drawing from a range of schools and thinkers, such as Stoa and cynicism, Plato and Plotinus, and gnosticism, as they were received by early Christian writers (Rotzetter, 2008: 648). While these traditions are far too complex to be discussed here in any detail, they share a dualism that posits body and soul, matter and spirit as more or less hostile opposites, calling, ultimately, for the overcoming of the former in favour of the latter.

For the anthropology of Christianity the notion of transcendence is important as it allows to approach a number of issues that have become central concerns within its discourse, such as language, change, and individualism (Robbins, 2010), some of which also relate to my own work here (notably cultural change and individual agency). Traditionally, such anthropological engagements have taken for granted the transcendental nature of Christianity: Cannell (2006: 14-18) traces a line from Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness' to later anthropological writing on Christianity. Separated from the divine that no longer resides within space and time, 'present in consciousness only, never in life' (Hegel in Cannell, 2006: 15), humanity is seen to be in need of mediation to bridge the radical divide, and notions such as salvation, mortality and person (as an interior, reflexive self) take on urgent meaning. These assumptions, Cannell (2006) writes, still come through, for example, in Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society* (1933 [1893]) as well as Leach's (1983) 'Melchisedech and the emperor'.

Yet a closer, more historically informed examination, she argues, reveals a less clear picture. As the range of early Christian sources and influences both from Greek and Judaic traditions mentioned above would suggest, Christianity has a more diverse history than is often granted, comprising a multitude of often conflicting scriptural interpretations and devotional practices. The idea of a

monolithic orthodoxy crystallized only gradually over the first three or four centuries. In fact, what has come to be called heresy or heterodoxy, as Lüdemann (1996) argued, may well precede orthodoxy rather than deviate from it; orthodoxy is a retrospective label, given to those arguments and teachings that have emerged triumphant from theological debate. The controversies over idolatry and the veneration of images – boiling down to questions of representation versus essence, respectively of didactic merit versus occasion of error, which is also pertinent for my work on relics – still occupied the Church throughout most of the eighth and until about the middle of the ninth century. In the next section I will go into some more detail about the implications of these discussions for the appreciation (or not) of relics. Here I would like to stress the alternatives to a conception of Christianity as primarily a religion of transcendence: given the centrality of the doctrine of incarnation, the idea of Jesus' double nature as simultaneously fully God and fully man, existing in historical time, highlights aspects of immanence that are also clearly present in Christianity, though not always given thorough recognition. This is also true for the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead, which has, in fact, been applied directly to the relics of the saints. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), for example, writes that their remains are worthy of veneration because their bodies, as 'temple and instrument of the Holy Spirit', will become like the body of Christ in their glorious resurrection (quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 111). The Catholic dogma of transubstantiation extends this notion of an immanent presence throughout history to the present day, teaching that bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, not in a symbolical, but in a substantial way. As with the body of Christ, so with the body of the believer: it was and, indeed, often enough still is a site of abjection, yet it is also God's creation. As such it is a site of encounter with the divine, finding expression, for example, in the bodily practices of Christian mystics (as I have already discussed earlier, in section IV.ii) or, less exalted, in the somatic practices of Christian believers of many different traditions (see, for example, the Good Friday rituals in Bicol, Philippines, described by Cannell [1999: 167-82] that involve vigils, the reciting of sacred texts and flagellation; or the mimetic bodily practices among the members of a charismatic Protestant community explored by Coleman [2000: 125-33]). In fact, while acknowledging the often predominant influence of a dualistic *praxis*, Rotzetter (2008: 361) even argues that on a

doctrinal level Christianity is strongly committed to a theology of incarnation, regarding body and soul not as opposites, but as a unit. Or, as Cannell (2006: 43) put it, '[e]ven transcendent Christianity, therefore, was never unambiguously otherworldly, and even orthodox Christianity contained within it the shadows of its own alternative ways of thinking.'

Pushing this argument further would, in my mind, suggest a closer look at those traditions that have maintained a particularly keen sense of the divine immanence in the world, notably Roman-Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church, as expressed in a number of sacramental and devotional practices and an immensely rich material culture. Through this study I hope to contribute to this debate, adding to the anthropology of Christianity in general, but also to draw out and, perhaps, develop its theoretical and methodological assumptions. If anthropology has inherited its perspectives and notions from those Christian traditions that have privileged the transcendent, we might want to ask what an anthropology would look like that takes its inspiration from a tradition of immanence, from the 'shadows of alternative ways of thinking'. This is what I am trying to do, even if in a most rudimentary way. Rather than starting with Hegel, I would want to start with Marx and a perspective that takes matter seriously, and takes it seriously not primarily as an obstacle to overcome, but as the most obvious way to experience God and world, a world in which the dialectical co-creation of people and things is taken for granted, rather than seen as an aberration.

One theme Robbins (2010) identifies as central to the anthropology of Christianity is cultural change, seen as rupture in the continuity of human history, caused by the birth of Christ, but also as the need and possibility of intervention in present time through the actions of the faithful. On an individual level this entails the transformation of the person, the act of conversion – the new believer leaves his or her old self behind and takes on a new self, which may also involve a break with the customary social environment, such as family and friends, or old habits and behaviours. On a collective level, believers are called to work for the conversion of society by spreading and living the Word and remake the world according to God's plan. Coleman (2000) explores this aspect in his study of a charismatic Pentecostal community in Sweden. He shows how the congregation is

enmeshed with globalization processes, indeed, how a 'globalizing habitus' emerges among members of the congregation:

'[T]hey would probably agree that any evangelical group worthy of the name must cultivate a desire to 'take the world for God', using the bountiful resources provided by divine favour ... Engagement with forces of globalisation becomes comprehensible within the motivational paradigms, spiritualised experiences and sacralised language of evangelicalism.' (Coleman, 2000: 235)

The theme of globalization is suggestive for my own work on a number of levels: for one, both the Catholic Church and eBay are organizations that define themselves as trans- and multinational, that deal with and participate in the flows of people, objects and ideologies that globalization entails, even if their purpose and strategies differ. Secondly, as Robbins (2010) also notes, the notion of change is approached differently within Catholicism, understood more as gradual modification rather than the kind of radical transformation that a strong commitment to transcendence usually implies. Again, this is a theme that has occupied me in the exploration of how some Catholics valorize the divine immanence in sacred objects, relics, and therefore consider the collecting or rescue of these objects as form of cultural preservation or restoration, emphasizing continuity over change (such as brought about by the Second Vatican Council).

Another theme Robbins (2010) mentions is the nature and use of language. Given the centrality of 'the Word' in particular for Protestantism – as prayer, as sermon, as the word of God contained in the Bible – this is hardly surprising. Catholicism, of course, is also founded on a notion of divinely inspired scripture; yet in contrast to Protestantism's reliance on the Bible as the sole basis of Christian teaching it maintains the idea of a 'deposit of faith' that consists of scripture and tradition. Keane (1998, 2006, 2007) has probably most thoroughly explored the relation between language and transcendence in Protestantism. As a project always beset by anxiety over the boundaries between the this- and the otherworldly, the correct ascription of properties to things, and the distinction between subjects and objects (Keane, 2006), transcendence in speech practice appears as a concern with sincerity – the attempt to unshackle meaning from the

social and material conventions embedded in language and instead allow for 'free' statements, that is to say: the unmediated expression of genuine thoughts and feelings as they come forth from an interiorized locus of truth, moved by the spirit. As such, sincere speech should, indeed must, do without the trappings of ritual and formulas, understood as constraints that deceptively seek to capture the divine and therefore come close to magic. Yet the attempt, Keane (2007: 80) argues, must always run into irresolvable contradictions:

'High ideals, doctrines, and ideologies cannot exist socially or be transmitted without some semiotic embodiment, which necessarily imposes certain conditions on them (such as iterability, contingencies of form, and the hazards inherent in the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization) that may contradict the purposes of those who create them.'

Even the spoken word is not immaterial – it requires a body to speak it, a body to hear it, and an atmosphere to transmit sound waves. Furthermore, if an utterance is to be understood (and thus become social) it has to be spoken into an already pre-existing system of linguistic conventions, that is to say: language. In more radical versions, even this requirement may be circumvented – for example through glossolalia –, but again this circumvention can only be incomplete: the unintelligibility of glossolalia may be a sign of its sincerity and therefore of its origin in divine inspiration, yet again it has to be spoken into a social community that holds (and communicates, most likely in ordinary speech) certain conventions that organize what glossolalia is an expression of. It is the revenge of the cradle Catholic Mary Douglas: 'For it is an illusion to suppose that there can be organization without symbolic expression' (Douglas, 2003 [1970]: 53). Content must have form, and this form must be ordered by convention to be social form. 'Fundamentalists, who are not magical in their attitude to the Eucharist, become magical in their attitude to the Bible' (Douglas 2003 [1972]: 21), something McDannell (1995) has pointed out in her description of the importance of the family Bible for American Protestants in the nineteenth century, objects often lavishly illustrated and produced to a very high standard. Yet doing away with the Bible in order to free the word (or the Word) from its material cage, allowing it to

be transcendent, simply produces new problems. Engelke (2007), too, illustrates this, in his work on the Friday Masowe Church, a small Protestant community in Zimbabwe. Like Keane's Calvinist missionaries on Sumba, Indonesia, the Friday Masowe apostolics stress the unmediated inspiration of their faith, even to the exclusion of the Bible, both on theological as well as historical grounds: to them, the Bible is as much a material obstacle in that it deadens living faith with textual prescription, and a reminder of colonial authority. Yet in their healing practices, the Friday Masowe have recourse to material preparations, most notably 'holy honey', and as Engelke shows, this can (and does) become a sticky subject: while the curative properties are ascribed to the blessing conferred on it by the Holy Spirit, in everyday practices its power slips easily from the spiritual to the material when a pot of holy honey is treated like a medicine, rather than as a symbol of a lived connection to God. What is more, honey, within the wider social environment of the Friday Masowe, has ambiguous symbolic associations as it is also employed by traditional, non-Christian healers, and serves as the basis of honey wine, which is used in ancestor worship:

'In the realm of healing it becomes the practical channel through which the apostolics articulate an exception to the rule that a Friday faith should be immaterial ...[T]he extent to which religious communities objectify their authority through the use of things deserves attention as much for what it tells us about the immaterial world as it does about the persistence of the material one.' (Engelke, 2007: 243)

Keane (2007) characterizes these attempts to separate the material from the immaterial, body and spirit in Latour's term of the 'process of purification', which aims to create 'entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other' (Latour, 1993: 10-11), the by-product of which is the figure of the fetish. It designates not so much that which is ambiguous, possessing attributes of both, but that which is wrongly labelled – that is to say: what is regarded (by some) as possessing attributes it does not really have (according to others), attributes tending to revolve about conceptions of agency and subjecthood, both usually denied to the material object. As such, it

says more about those who apply the term to others than about those it has been applied to: where there is a fetish, there is disagreement about ontological boundaries, which is the sort of disagreement that easily plays out through various social modalities. If fetishists are both mistaken and dangerous – mistaken since they do not realize the world for what it is and are therefore unable to act efficiently within the world; dangerous since they are likely to spread their errors, thus denying agency to others – should their practices not be opposed? Such was (and is) the argument of reformers and reformators: 'The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth', Latour (2002: 16) sums up the case for transcendence. Yet iconoclasm, as he also points out (2002: 33-4) is not without its pitfalls. In their belief that the avoidance or destruction of images, bodies, objects is of crucial importance they may hand more power to the fetishes than the fetishists do.

Matter, within Christianity, therefore has an ambiguous, uneasy place. The twin ideas of incarnation and resurrection, understood not merely spiritually, but literally, enable, indeed require its reconsideration. As 'members of Christ' and 'temple of the Holy Spirit' (I Corinthians, 3:16, 6:19) the saints partake in the divine glory; theirs is the eternity that has been promised to body and soul, insofar as the resurrected will be recreated from their remains, however small and dispersed, in a new, transfigured body. As such, their bones and ashes can be understood as already partaking in the future glorification. The great innovation of Christianity during its first three centuries was therefore the revaluation of the dead human body against the horror antiquity felt for the dead and their polluting remains, but also against Gnostic ideas of the principal corruption of the flesh and all creation.

Brown (1982: 7-8) speaks of a 'visible shift' that, by the late fourth century, occurred 'in the balance of importance accorded to the areas of the living and the areas of the dead', already presaged two centuries earlier when the Christians of Smyrna were careful not to lose the charred remains of their martyred bishop, St Polycarp (d. 156): 'We thus collected his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and better than gold, and buried them in a suitable place' (quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 149; my translation). The account is the earliest extant trace of an existing or at least developing appreciation, if perhaps not quite yet veneration of saintly remains. Yet at the same time, Christianity inherited a strong

desire for the transcendental, taking up Judaic as well as Platonic thought. It certainly shares in the 'underlying principle' that is 'found in most of the religions that dominate recorded history':

'Wisdom has been accredited to those who claim that materiality represents the merely apparent, behind which lies that which is real [...] Nevertheless, paradoxically, material culture has been of considerable consequence as the means of expressing this conviction.' (Miller, 2005: 1)

The social sciences too, in their own fashion, have long adhered to a similar view of the world, for as Latour pointed out, at least since Durkheim 'the price of entry into the sociology profession' has been 'to realize that the inner properties of objects do not count, that they are mere receptacles for human categories' (Latour, 1993: 52). As an ontological proposal, this chimes well with Reformation theology, though we would do well to widen our perspective, to understand Protestantism not only in denominational or institutional terms even if it did of course solidify in such a way since the sixteenth century. It is perhaps more useful to speak of a 'Protestant sensibility', a particular approach to the sacred that is hostile to overt ritualism and instead concerned with the interior life, with the invisible and immaterial, the hidden interaction between God and the individual soul – a characteristic Mary Douglas (2003 [1970]) identified, and criticized, in post-Conciliar Catholicism.

ii. Theology and institutional practice

Seen in this way, the Reformation, despite all its ruptures and transformations, can also be comprehended as a continuation of a tradition that, if somewhat muted, existed long before and is perhaps integral to all religious practice. From this perspective the cult of relics in its irreducible materiality and visibility always displayed certain troublesome aspects; aspects that were already remarked upon well before the sixteenth century, even though this criticism typically remained within the bounds of orthodoxy or focused on specific elements rather than the underlying principle as a whole.

'Despite the blossoming of the cult of the relics in the Middle Ages and the support given to it by the Church, ever since Christian antiquity there have been authors prepared to express their reservations, doubts and even rejection with regard to the cult.'
(Snoek 1995: 353)

Basil the Great (d. 379) saw it as tangential and superfluous to the proper centre of the faith, which had to be Christ and his sacrifice. Vigilantius of Aquitaine (fl. c. 400) dismissed the cult of relics as a cult of dust and bones, prompting a fierce response from Jerome (d. 420)⁴. At about the same time, Victricius of Rouen (d. 407) developed a genuine 'theology of relics' (Angenendt, 1997: 43), arguing that '*ubi est aliquid, ibi totum est*' – 'where there is a part, there is the whole', that is to say: the saint with his or her *virtus*⁵ is fully present in each and every particle, taking up again the Old Testament image of the dry bones that are reassembled, bit by original bit, through the will of God: 'I say it with all emphasis that in the relic there is the whole grace and the whole virtue [...] The one who heals, is alive; the one who is alive, is in his relics' (quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 155-6; my translation). Seven hundred years later the sentiment is still remarkably similar, when Thiofrid of Echternach (d. 1110) could write in the same vein: 'And whatever ... [the holy soul] miraculously does while still in flesh and bone, the same it will do even more wondrously in the dissolved dust and radiate onto everything...' (quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 132; my translation).

Just a few sentences, yet fundamental in the understanding of what relics are, do and mean, influencing doctrine and expressing the principles of popular practice as well as official doctrine up to the present: firstly, they highlight the central importance of the body as the primary relic, notwithstanding the later custom, possibly from the early fourth century, of extending the meaning of 'relic' to objects that have been in contact with the saint, either during his or her lifetime or after death. This was most commonly clothing, but could also include the saint's tomb, instruments of torture in the case of martyrs, oil from the lamps

⁴ Vigilantius' work is only known through Jerome's critical reception of it (the *Letter Contra Vigilantium*).

⁵ *Virtus* is a characteristically ambiguous term, which may denote 'virtue' in a moral or ethical sense, but is also understood, particular in late antique and medieval usage, as a kind of efficacious force inherent to relics.

burning by the tomb, or other objects. From the time of Leo I (440-461), the popes would distribute so-called *brandea*, pieces of cloth that had covered the bones or tomb of a saint. The cloth would quite literally soak up the saint's (or the relics') virtue, even to the point that it would become measurably heavier. This had the advantage of multiplying the number of relics as demand rose, while keeping the saintly remains together in one place, in conformity with the old Roman law that protected the peace of the dead and prohibited their disinterment and dismembering. Keeping body relics in one place may also have been seen as an expedient measure by the bishops of Rome to retain the city's privileged position as a cult centre, dotted with the tombs of the saints and martyrs. At the same time, however, it seems that the increase in *brandea* caused some doubt as to their value compared to body relics. Gregory I (590-604) tells how his predecessor, Leo I, convinced the doubting Greeks of the significance of contact relics by cutting a *brandeum*; blood began to flow out, forcefully demonstrating the tangible presence of the saint (Snoek, 1995: 12-14). Thus, even in contact relics the primacy of the body makes itself felt as they are virtually incorporated into the very being of the saint, transforming their nature from being *related to* into being *of* the saint.

Secondly, despite the ancient resistance (in the West) to the exhumation and dismembering of bodies, the teaching of Victricius would suggest the pragmatism of exactly such a practice. External factors accelerated this development: with the political accord of the papacy and the Carolingian rulers in the mid- eighth century and the subsequent spread of the Roman liturgy across the Alps, the popes could no longer decline requests for body relics, at least occasionally, to furnish the new churches in the expanding Frankish empire. The threat to Rome from the Lombard rulers in Italy had also convinced the popes of the expediency of such measures, moving the remains of the saints from their resting places at the outskirts to the relative safety of the city. By the late tenth century, *translatio* and *dismembratio* thus became widely accepted practice, increasing the availability of relics. A side effect of this development was the further devaluation of secondary relics, which reinforces the idea of a hierarchy between body relics and contact relics as well as the notion of virtue as something inherent, transferable or contagious, but also prone to fading.

This, in turn, also suggests a growing conflation of saint and relic. As Snoek (1995: 21-2) and Geary (1990 [1978]: 34) point out, practices such as the *humiliatio*, when communities ritually ceased to pay homage to relics in order to 'shame' a non-responsive saint into action, indicate a conception in which the relic actually *is* the saint. As such, they are credited with an inherent power or a sacred presence, rather than merely symbolic or commemorative significance. This 'materialistic' or 'pragmatic' understanding was never undisputed, however. Already Augustine of Hippo (354-430) saw miracles – as expression of *virtus* – as secondary, emphasizing instead its ethical conception, i.e. virtue, in the modern sense of the word. In the long run, the ethical component of the term clearly eclipsed the materialist component. This process already approached institutionalization during the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216) when he demanded that virtue of life must accompany any miracles as evidence of holiness, since miracles could also be worked by devils and witches (Vauchez, 2005 [1988]: 36-40). A similar 'ethicization' is noticeable in the writings of Thomas Aquinas when he argues that the remains of the saints merit veneration since their bodies, when alive, were the temple and instrument of the Holy Spirit and will be resurrected to a new and transfigured life; God therefore glorifies their relics through the working of miracles in their presence. Yet there is no inherent power in the remains of the dead.

Finally, the saint's tomb appears as the 'gravitational centre' around which devotional practices are structured: mass is celebrated over it, pilgrims flock to the tomb, and the faithful seek to be buried close to it as discussed already by Augustine of Hippo (*De cura gerenda pro mortuis* [Allies, 1914], where he appears rather indecisive as to the merits of this practice). Yet at the same time that body and tomb serve as the locus of authentication and authorization – the sacred centre in Eliade's sense – they also effect and permit the opposite, centrifugal movement, the spreading of particles, both body and contact relics, in ever smaller fragments all over the Christian world.

Official Church teaching was broad enough to accommodate scholarly, ethicized positions as well as popular practice, as long as it was not pushed to its ultimate conclusions or linked with wider political and institutional issues. Yet there are also voices that have questioned the cult of saints and relics early on in a much more fundamental way. The rather militant opinions of Claudius of Turin

(d.c. 830/40) sound, as Geary (1990 [1978]: 16) observes, surprisingly similar to those of Jean Calvin (1509-1564). Others, like Agobard of Lyons (d. 840), who would allow relics only as a concession to the popular taste of the uneducated masses. Alcuin (c. 735–804), leading scholar at the court of Charlemagne, tried to balance the position by arguing, on the one hand, that it is better 'to follow the example of the saints in your heart than to carry [their] bones in little sachets' (quoted in Snoek, 1995: 354; my translation); on the other, he seems to make a case for their intrinsic value in a passage that evokes the account of the martyrdom of St Polycarp when he praises the blood shed by St Boniface (680-754), missionary bishop in Frisia, as 'more precious than gold' (quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 158). While such voices critical of the cult of relics remained outside the ecclesiastical and theological mainstream, it is important to acknowledge their persisting presence throughout the Middle Ages. A cautionary approach to the theological significance of relics as well as to questions of authenticity is not the sole preserve of the Reformation. Guibert of Nogent (1053-c. 1124), for example, devoted a treatise, *De pignoribus sanctorum*, to the deconstruction of the alleged milk-tooth of Jesus Christ that was kept at the abbey of Saint Médard at Soissons, basing his criticism on historical as well as theological arguments (although this did not stop him from composing a highly idiosyncratic account of some relics for his own monastery that shows little evidence of critical qualities). As Schreiner (1966: 1; my translation) remarks, 'the critical capacity of medieval man has become the subject of scholarly debate', a question reminiscent perhaps of anthropological discussion regarding 'primitive mentality' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923). It is not useful to describe medieval attitudes as principally uncritical, Schreiner points out; criteria of truth and reason are simply different from our own. At the same time, 'reformers, reformators and humanists, when criticizing saints' lives and relics, take their material and formal arguments from the critical traditions of the previous centuries' (Schreiner, 1966: 34; my translation). Relics played important parts in the lives of both, intellectuals and simple folks, rulers and the ruled, even if their analytical reflections of them obviously differed. The differentiation between *linea rationis* and *intellectus rusticus* belongs, in its fully formed radicalism, to a later age: 'The religious history of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages still owes more than we realize to attitudes summed up so persuasively, in the 1750s, by David Hume, in his

essay *The Natural History of Religion*' (Brown, 1982: 13). Taking shape as a 'two-tiered model' (Brown, 1982) it divided (or was thought to divide) the religion of the enlightened few and the superstition of the vulgar masses, yet as I have argued above, following Tambiah (1984), it served as much as a rhetorical or ideological device to distance Protestant righteousness from Catholic corruption. It was in Reformation theology that the radical opposition between matter and spirit became irreconcilable and, as Protestantism took institutional and political shape, intellectually influential, even dominant. What could be termed the 'centuries of critique' – between the consolidation of the Reformation during the 1520s and 1530s and the Enlightenment heyday until around 1800 – saw the final parting of these two streams of discourse, with the side-arm of critique developing into the mainstream, while the flow of traditional religious thought and practice began to drain away.

'If one were to examine relics with a little more rigour one would, as a learned Benedictine stated, find that a great number of false relics have been presented to the pious devotion of the faithful, and that bones have been consecrated that were – far from being those of the blessed – not even those of Christians.' (Jaucourt, 1765: web page)

Thus the first but one sentence in Jaucourt's article on relics for Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. It summarizes and sets the tone of Enlightenment criticism that perceived relics primarily within a context of error, fraud and superstition. Relics, the argument goes, were theologically dubious, of secondary importance for the exercise of the genuine Christian faith, if not in fact prone to cause more harm than good as they easily led into superstitious and pagan practices, and encouraged outright swindles and profane exploitation. Most consequential perhaps was Kant's systematization of religion, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), as the 'recognition of all our duties as divine commandments' (quoted in Kohl, 2003: 78; my translation), which took Protestant thought to its radical conclusion. 'True' religion, in this sense, can never be realized through *any* form of ritual or material concretization, but only through a fully internalized moral conduct of life. What is more, this conduct finds its end in itself. To expect a reward for it – salvation, grace, blessings – is to reduce

morality to a means-end relationship. Yet God cannot be bargained with; as the perfect creator, 'God cannot receive anything from us; we can have no influence on him' (quoted in Kohl, 2003: 78; my translation). Even moral conduct can thus degenerate into *Afterdienst* (superstitious behaviour), if we falsely assume that natural actions can cause supernatural effects. Such behaviour could be labelled as magic or witchcraft. Yet in order to distinguish it more properly from the evil intention implicit in these activities, Kant preferred the term 'fetish-making' to highlight its principally erroneous, rather than malevolent nature. Drawing on nearly 200 years of thinking about 'fetishes' as expressions of primitive, non-European mentalities, Kant gave additional charge to the term by applying it, like Marx and Freud after him, to his own society. Hovering between wickedness and error – erroneous because it conflates and confuses the material and spiritual, the real and the imaginary; wicked because to follow it is to lead a life of immorality – the fetish has ever since been a central figure around which any discourse of religion and materiality inevitably seems to organize itself; notwithstanding Kant's uncompromising anticlerical stance, it would regularly crop up during my fieldwork interviews, especially with ecclesiastical informants.

In response to Protestant and Enlightenment critique, Catholicism, too, sought to establish new, firmer grounds from which to defend its tenets, practices and material culture, involving the assimilation of Protestant critique as much as its refutation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), in its final session, dealt, among other things, with the cult of saints and their relics, decreeing that

'all bishops and others who sustain the office and charge of teaching ... instruct the faithful diligently concerning the intercession and invocation of saints; the honour (paid) to relics; and the legitimate use of images [...] Also, that the holy bodies of holy martyrs, and of others now living with Christ ... are to be venerated by the faithful; through which (bodies) many benefits are bestowed by God on men [...] Moreover, in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished ... nor the celebration of the saints, and the visitation of relics be by any perverted into revellings and drunkenness ... In fine, let so great care and diligence be used herein

by bishops, as that there be nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous, seeing that holiness becometh the house of God. And that these things may be the more faithfully observed, the holy Synod ordains ... that no new miracles are to be acknowledged, or new relics recognised, unless the said bishop has taken cognizance and approved thereof... But if any doubtful, or difficult abuse has to be extirpated ... the bishop, before deciding the controversy, shall await the sentence of the metropolitan and of the bishops of the province, in a provincial Council; yet so, that nothing new, or that previously has not been usual in the Church, shall be resolved on, without having first consulted the most holy Roman Pontiff.'

(Waterworth, 1848: web page)

It is worth quoting the decree at some length, as I believe it shows clearly the new impetus that took its force from Protestant critique, yet used it for its own ends. In defending itself against Protestantism, Catholicism became both, more and less like its adversary. It greatly emphasized hierarchical control at the expense of the uncontrolled growth of popular devotions, pushing what can be described as a 'modernizing agenda': the removal of 'superstitions', which consequently involved assessments of exactly what kind of belief and practice should be deemed superstitious and what should constitute authentic faith; the elimination of quasi-commercial elements and overt exchange relations from devotional life; the curtailing of indecorous behaviour within sacred space, which, in fact, required a definition or reinscription of exactly this space and its boundaries; and the examination of legends, saints, relics and miracles in the light of historical-critical evidence. Whether Church authorities were actually able to enforce these decrees in full is a moot point. Yet the Council of Trent did provide the dogmatic and structural template for future developments along the lines of a 'modern', centralized, bureaucratic organization, for, as Smith (1993: 101; italics removed) called it, a 'locative vision of the world' that privileges the fixity of place and the establishment of hierarchy, order, and boundaries it facilitates – a privilege that is obviously at odds with the ideology of explicitly open networks, such as the Internet in general, and eBay in particular, pointing towards an area of conflict in

the circulation of relics, a theme I will develop towards the end of chapter IV and throughout chapter V.

There are a number of points here that are relevant for the further discussion and indeed for the whole project of this thesis, arguments that have implications for the study of popular piety, for the formulation of official positions relating to it, and, in fact, for the very notion of 'popular piety' as well as for notions bearing upon 'popular piety', such as 'authenticity' and 'historical critique'.

As I have already said, the Catholic reformation mirrored and to a degree absorbed ideas of the Protestant reformation, in this way structurally becoming more like its adversary even in the process of defining itself against it. Accepting the need for spiritual reform, yet at the same time insisting that internal belief requires external form, even if these forms may be or become inadequate over time, the Catholic Church arrived at something that resembles a Douglassian argument *avant la lettre*. On the one hand, one might therefore stress the underlying continuities that reach from the spiritually feverish years of the late fifteenth century throughout the Reformation period. Sacramental, institutionally mediated as well as interiorizing, spiritual forms of piety – the two poles of religious practice – can both be seen as answers, competing as well as complementing, to the one principal question, the yearning for and insecurity over salvation. On the other hand, it is perhaps at this point that we encounter the final drifting apart of popular and elite consciousness, of flock and pastor. Well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, clerics, especially in rural areas, shared a similar educational, cultural and socio-economic background with their parishioners. Few owned books, even fewer held a doctoral degree, knowledge of Latin was often deficient (Hsia, 1999: 115). '[T]he quality of rural priests and services remained very low ... An inquiry near Benevento in the early eighteenth century found that four-fifth of the local priests could not properly conduct mass' (Astarita 2005: 134). At stake was the formation of 'a better trained, morally irreproachable clergy using canonically approved liturgical texts ... to celebrate feast days approved by the official Church', a clergy 'more capable of resisting the infiltration of lay practices in sacramental life' and 'better qualified to correct lay superstitions' (Hsia 1999: 115-6) – a clergy clearly set apart from the laity in terms recognizable to us today. On a discursive level, this project of simultaneously

reclaiming and purging tradition produced textual critiques such as that of Jean Mabillon (1632-1707), a Benedictine scholar, and the group of Jesuits known as Bollandists⁶, who published hagiological works based on historical-critical standards 'by removing subsequent stylistic additions, philological impurities, and textual corruptions', providing 'commentaries to explain incoherences and contradictions in the sources' (Hsia, 1999: 131). The downside of this development, according to Douglas (2003 [1970]), is a Church that has now become overly intellectualized and that disregards the belief and practices of its own flock.

While projects like that of the Bollandists could serve to defend and legitimize the Catholic tradition, the newly established Congregation of Rites (1588) provided an institutional locus for its continuation. As the curial organization in charge of canonizations (among other things), it exercised a centralized, clearly structured authority and applied a rationalized approach to the saint-making process. The recognition of saintly qualities became, as Burke (1987: 50) writes,

'more "bureaucratic", in Max Weber's sense of the term. The distinction between sacred and profane was made sharper than it had been, while recruitment procedures for the saints were made uniform and formal. In the trials for sanctity, the supernatural was defined, graded and labelled with increasing care.'

This trend continued and was reinforced with new legislation in 1625 and 1634 by Urban VIII (1623-1644), which further clarified the procedures for beatifications and canonizations and, in the next century, by Benedict XIV (1740-1758). His extensive study, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* (*On the Beatification of Servants of God and the Canonization of Blesseds*, 1734/38), drew on canonical sources as well as current historical research, critical philology and medical sciences and achieved a synthesis of tradition and modernity that

⁶ After one of their founding figures, Fr Jean Bolland (1596-1665).

'even though it touched on a burning and controversial issue like the cult of saints, stirred the interest not only of the Protestant world, but also of the new circles of secular learning linked to the French Enlightenment, who during the very years of his pontificate were launching the project of the *Encyclopédie*.' (Gotor, 2004: 122; my translation)

This synthesis of a Catholic Enlightenment motivated by an anti-Enlightenment affect not surprisingly proved to be an uneasy one, uneasy for the Church herself, for her denominational opponents and also for historiographers of the period and the history of ideas. Within the particular field of religious practice, the 'aspiration towards the heroic ideal of holiness as a model of perfection and the social pressures for a holiness of miracle-working, shared by large sectors of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, blended in a way so as to cause trouble throughout the modern period and beyond' (Gotor, 2004: 123; my translation). Post-Tridentine Catholicism therefore appears as a complex setting for the assessment, development and curtailing of popular devotional practices – at once modernizing and conservative; holding on to their legacy against Protestant censure, while at the same time often finding them troublesome and in need of close doctrinal supervision; popular, but not to be left to the people. Certainly, these processes brought about a new balance between 'true and false miracles, moving attention towards the question of authenticity and certification and towards the definition the modern boundaries of faith and superstition, religion and medicine [or science more generally] that are still in force today' (Gotor, 2004: 123; my translation). But one may go further and argue that not just 'faith' or 'superstition', but 'religion' itself was forged as recognisable, objective and objectifiable entity during this (rather long) historical moment – an argument also made by Asad (1993) – the completion of which we possibly still have not yet witnessed. 'Once there was no "secular" ... The secular as a domain had to be instituted or *imagined*' (Milbank in Cannell 2006: 3; italics in the original); yet at the same time the secular could only be imagined against the sacred as an other that therefore assumed its own epistemological visibility.

To look at Catholic practice and doctrine from this specific vantage point has certain theoretical implications for my work: for one, it becomes necessary to

question the Durkheimian premise that '[a]ll known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things – the real or ideal things that men represent for themselves – into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words *profane* and *sacred*' (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 36; italics in the original). While such a dynamic of profane and sacred is undoubtedly operative in contemporary Catholic practice (but who exactly are the practitioners, and do they all draw the boundaries in the same way?), it cannot be regarded as an essential, quasi-natural feature of it, but must be recognized as the result of specific historical and social processes. In fact, seen from Durkheim's perspective, Catholic (and Christian) history would have to appear as one unceasing and inextricable muddle of categories – of popes and bishops as temporal rulers; of temporal rulers often exercising wide authority over the appointment of ecclesiastical offices; of salvation seemingly bought by money through indulgences or pious bequests; of people grasping the divine as much (if not foremost) in terms of good harvests, healthy livestock and physical well-being as in terms of moral perfection or mystical union; of churches serving for the celebration of mass, yet also for leisure, business, public communication, socializing⁷ and, in our own times, places of cultural edification; of pilgrimage sites beleaguered by vendors of tacky souvenirs and devotional objects (a tradition going well back to antiquity; see Künzl and Koeppl, 2002); and, as far as relics in particular are concerned, of unbridled fetishism, fraud, theft, commerce and politicking dressing up as piety (or perhaps the other way round). Typically, instances thus as these have been interpreted (and censured) as a convergence of sacred and profane, blurring the boundaries of their clear properties, a degeneration. However, it would seem more reasonable to reverse the interpretation and to see the opposite dynamic at work – the slow, still imperfect, yet widening partition of these properties, sacred and profane, their emergent crystallization as distinct properties. The sacred, to put it pointedly, is a modern formation – or, somewhat more moderate, the sacred as we know it today is a

⁷ Nowel (1986), for example, describes medieval St Paul's cathedral in London as a space of stall holders, domestic servants looking for work, legal practitioners advising clients, passers-by using the church as a convenient thoroughfare, men of leisure ambling around, town criers, citizens' assemblies and even people practising archery.

historical construct rather different from the sacred the faithful knew 500 or 1,000 years ago.

'In the life of ideas there comes a moment when they lose their immediate intelligibility and, like any empty word, fill with contradictory meanings. With religious phenomena this moment coincided with the birth of modern anthropology, which not incidentally has at its centre ambiguous terms like *mana*, *tabu* and *sacer*, at the end of the last [nineteenth] century.' (Agamben, 2002: 90; my translation, italics in the original)

It is probably material religion – the collective of sacred objects – that suffered the most severe losses, both in physical as well as in ideological terms. Relic inventories and broadsheets for pilgrims give an idea of the vast number of objects that must have been destroyed between the early sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries. But it is also the very idea of the sacred as something concrete and tangible that has become deeply questionable. Orsi, as an historian of modern and contemporary American religion, gives an illustration of this in his teaching experiences. In his class on US urban religions, he describes a 'Lourdes grotto' in the New York parish of St Lucy's, complete with 'healing well' (though fed by the municipal water system)⁸, much visited by local pilgrims. His students' reactions to this phenomenon, he says, are nearly uniformly critical and dismissive:

'[N]ot one student in all the years I have taught this course ... has ever been willing to say that the practices at St. Lucy's are of obvious importance to the people who do them and therefore worthy of our serious attention [...] St. Lucy's is too mired in matter.' (Orsi, 1997: 5-6)

⁸ These grottos, modelled more or less freely on the original at Lourdes, France, were a common feature of Catholic piety since the late nineteenth century and up to the 1950s, replicated both in- and outdoors.

How much such a conception of the sacred has slipped from our horizon is also illustrated by the fact that a large proportion of scholarly work regards it as an *historical*, not a contemporary topic, a finished chapter, not one that is still being written every day. While standard works like those by Angenendt (1997) or van Os (2001), the one a medievalist, the other an art historian, admittedly aim to provide an historical overview, the imbalance is nonetheless striking with just a few pages of general observations devoted to modern or contemporary practices, compared to lengthy, in-depth research on late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Even an author such as Kürzeder (2005), who explicitly discusses the use of sacramentals in current pastoral theology, ultimately relegates the topic to the past, entitling his (highly informative) book on baroque piety *Als die Dinge heilig waren* – 'when things *were* holy'. (For a more detailed discussion of the term 'sacramental', see section VI.i) There is today a curious disjunction observable as lived religion in Europe appears at once effervescent and marginal, with millions travelling to the pilgrimage sites of Lourdes, Fatima, San Giovanni Rotondo and a multitude of lesser shrines, while nation states remain on the whole resolutely secular, and sociological data, by and large, indicate a steady de-institutionalization of religious practice. 'We are today faced with a vast store of traces, which we neither understand nor inhabit' (Nora in Corbin 1999: xix); this remark, which Corbin applied to the lost campanological sound-scapes of early modern France, might just as well describe many religious discourses and practices, or at any rate the secular liberal's perception of them. This despite the flamboyant reanimation of canonizations, saints' cults and Marian devotions during the pontificate of John Paul II – if it was a *reanimation* and not, in fact, an altogether new phenomenon not seen before, at least not in this form; or despite the abundance of scholarly publications that have sought to reassess medieval and early modern religious life in an unbiased way, trying to eschew both apologetics and polemics. And yet, the very presence of scholarly studies may indicate our perhaps inevitable move from *milieux de mémoire* to *lieux de mémoire*, from memory to history (Nora, 1989). With narrative flair, Brown describes the world of Gregory of Tours (c. 540-594), a leading churchman of his time, as 'like a heavy, silken veil whose rustling surface betrayed the presence of Gaul's innumerable saints hidden beneath it' (1999: 132; my translation). Yet the very act of such a depiction reveals the chasm of experience between describing a world

and inhabiting it. For Gregory of Tours the saints were not hidden at all; reading his *Glory of the Martyrs*, they appear ever-present, taken for granted in their works and in their relics: 'Once as I was as usual wearing relics of this Blessed Virgin along with those of the holy apostles and of the blessed Martin that had been placed in a gold cross...', he begins a story (1988: 32). And a good thing it was that he wore those relics – coming across a burning hut that day he could successfully call upon the saints to put the fire out (or call upon the relics; the difference is not always clear to modern eyes, perhaps because it is a difference only modern eyes will look for). Yet living a religious life today, however intense and devoted, it is possible to step outside of it, to study and examine it as the objectifiable representation of something else – of society writ large, of the relations of production, or psychological structures –, an option unavailable in the sixth century (or the tenth, the thirteenth or even still the sixteenth).

'History is a study of change over time, and at a crucial level it can be argued that the function of relics has changed very little from the early Middle Ages to the present' (Geary, 1990 [1978]: 16). I would agree with this statement as well as with Geary's added caveat that relics and their veneration are still not an extrahistorical topic. Arguing against the 'triumph of semiology over corporeality', Pinney (2002b: 131-2) calls for a 'material, "figural" history' that 'respects [the object's] own alterity in the flesh of the world'. Relics, it would seem to me, invite just such a 'figuralization' with their capacity to forestall discursive closure, instead favouring sensuous experience (if not necessarily decipherability), predicated on notions such as 'essence' and 'authenticity'. In this respect, relics may prove to be rather intractable anthropological objects, but useful nonetheless in this very intractability. Their irreducible materiality resists easy attempts at transcendence or translation. Pinney's argument is timely. While historians have long since come to a sophisticated understanding of relics, theologians and social scientists alike still feel challenged, regarding them as objects that demand demystification (I am tempted to call it 'naïve' demystification). Relics, it seems, still need to be exposed as either nonessential for a mature faith, or as fraudulent, or both:

'We no longer live in early Christian times, nor in the Middle Ages, when everything had to be believed. Modern individuals usually

cannot bear any cult that rests on false, mostly forged souvenirs of the saints, surrounding themselves with the aura of authenticity.'

Thus Herrmann (2003: 9; my translation), a canon lawyer, sociologist and self-confessed critic of the Catholic Church. In some form or other, questions that have occupied late antique and medieval Christians are still of relevance today, above all the often related twin questions of authenticity and efficaciousness: is a certain relic genuine and what does 'genuine' mean? And what are relics for – are they meant to signify or are they meant to do something? And in either case, what exactly is it they are meant to signify or do? And underlying these, encompassing them, is the question of memory, of bringing the past into the present and to project it into the future, plausible only due to relics' 'material property of brute persistence over time' (Keane, 2006: 311). The answers to these questions have varied widely over the centuries, but as long as they are being asked – and they *are* being asked – they will have to be addressed, every time anew.

III. Place

i. Emplacing relics

In a somewhat speculative essay, historian Lionel Rothkrug (1979) drew what he called the Benrath line (named after a suburb of Düsseldorf, in Germany's Rhine-Ruhr area), dividing areas of strong and weak saint worship in Germany. Showing a high density of saints' shrines (as of the year 1500), the south remained Catholic after the Reformation, while the north, where shrines were much thinner on the ground, turned Protestant. Rothkrug's thesis is, of course, more complex than summarized here, yet what makes it salient for my own project is the underlying assumption that religious practice and belief are fashioned by material structures literally 'on the ground'. Between Rome and eBay as the physical and virtual sites of my fieldwork, between interviews, participant observation, archival and Internet research I aim to chart a geography of spaces, discourses and imaginations and of the movements between them.

Rome, and Italy more generally, may be seen as the primary landscape in which to locate the objects of my thesis – relics, relic practices and relic beliefs –, but also from which to dislocate them. The official ecclesiastical structures that oversee (or try to oversee) the production, authentication and distribution of relics are situated here: the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, which has the formal canonical authority over relics; the postulators general of the various religious orders as the key officials entrusted with the processes of beatification and canonization, which often (though not necessarily) involve relics; the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome, as it maintains the *lipsanoteca*, a kind of 'relic bank' from which churches may receive relics for liturgical functions and whose custodians, a community of Augustinian nuns, are also commissioned with the manufacture of reliquaries by a number of postulators. Yet as the opening vignette illustrates, Rome is also a place where relics are abducted from the formally prescribed structures of their creation, distribution, ownership and use. Where did that theca I found in Porta Portese come from? When and how did it leave its ecclesiastical setting that must have been its original habitat? The dealer I bought it from would provide only vague information about its provenance, the veracity of which I cannot ascertain (though I do have my own ideas).

Rome, Italy, Catholicism, relics, popular devotions thus merged and merge to form not only a particular landscape, but also a mindscape, located in contrast, if not antagonism, to enduring narratives of modernity, rationality and progress.

'The subterranean chapel in which the body of San Carlo Borromeo is preserved, presents as striking and as ghastly a contrast, perhaps, as any place can show [...] [I]n a gorgeous shrine of gold and silver, is seen, through alabaster, the shrivelled mummy of a man... The shrunken heap of poor earth in the midst of this great glitter is more pitiful than if it lay upon a dunghill.' (Dickens, 1973: 138)

Places such as Isernia – a hilltop shrine in the Molise region, associated with a fertility cult of uncertain antiquity – provided the Scottish diplomat and antiquarian Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803) with the material for anthropological and cultural theorizing, shot through with a good deal of anti-Catholic bias. The votive wax models of male sexual organs he found there

'were given to the British Museum as remains of an archaic ritual practice, which could only have been preserved in the culture of a Catholic country – a culture considered the heir and blood-relation of pagan idolatry. A century later, British anthropologists would call them "survivals".' (Carabelli, 1996: 7)

The depictions of Dickens, Hamilton and many others (Astarita, 2005: 220-49; give us the outsider's view (of the Protestant observer), partly bemused, partly scandalized. Yet voices from within, too, have long tended to cast Italy and Italian religious practice in terms of its stubborn constancy, even archaism. It is the land south of the Benrath line, as it were, anchored firmly in the past through the very materiality of its religion. Carlo Levi, exiled to a remote village in the Basilicata region of Southern Italy by the Fascist government of the time, has provided a picture of this supposedly timeless, unchanging world in *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, 1945):

'The seasons pass today over the toil of peasants, just as they did three thousand years before Christ; ...to this shadowy land, that knows neither sin nor redemption from sin, where evil is not moral but is only the pain residing forever in earthly things, Christ did not come. Christ stopped at Eboli.' (Levi 2000 [1947]: 12)

Much more sympathetic to the inhabitants of these premodern lands than Dickens or Hamilton, Levi's *Mezzogiorno* (literally 'Midday', as the southern regions of Italy are known) still emerges as a radical alternative to Enlightenment ideas of progress and rationality, to Protestant ethics based on virtuous industriousness, to the abstraction of the Word and trust in the thorough transcendence of the sacred. Instead, it becomes the terrain of alterity, of a contrary collective imagination – remote, unknown, exotic, archaic, savage, and pagan. Levi's narrative hovers between the realist and the magical. It is based on facts, unflinching in its description of the bleakness of peasant life and a biting in its critique of Fascist politics. At the same time, it is suffused with moments of enchantment, populated by saints and devils, witches and brigands. His description is closely echoed in de Martino's (2008 [1959]) ethnographic account of Catholicism, magic and

rationality in the southern region of Lucania, and it is still recognizable in Hauschild's (without year) revisit three decades later. Levi's indifferent and ageless nature, the 'pain residing forever in earthly things' return in de Martino's formula of the 'overwhelming force of the negative' that threatens human individuality and agency, giving rise to a ritualistic, magical worldview, 'a set of socialized, traditional techniques, intended to preserve the individual from the crises of "psychological misery" and thus indirectly ... to release realistic possibilities of action' (de Martino, 2008 [1959]: 109; my translation). To the extent that this force of the negative appears not as outcome of historical structures, but as part of the human condition, its remedies and its ideology must remain unchangeable.

Arguably, the *Mezzogiorno* as a metaphor can be found anywhere in Italy, beyond its southern regions; in many ways the country came to be perceived since at least the eighteenth century as the 'domestic' other of civilized, modern, enlightened, rational, industrial Europe – from St Charles Borromeo's shrine at Milan to the hinterland of Naples that were proverbially seen as the 'Indies over here' for the assumed primitiveness of its people (Astarita, 2005: 155-6), or 1860's Sicily as evoked by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)*, 1958). Even Rome – hardly a place cut off from history, Western civilization or the state – appeared suspended in an everlasting time warp, overfull of beggars and priests, 'the antithesis of all that a "civilized" society should have been, in the eyes of enlightened eighteenth-century opinion' (Procacci, 1991: 248). By the mid-nineteenth century, the Papal States were deemed, not altogether unreasonably, one of the most underdeveloped and backward regions in Europe, hopelessly behind the times and fighting a useless rearguard action against modernity and progress. One may even say that this imaginary Italy of premodern alterity has lasted virtually until the present. In *The Keys of St. Peter (Les Clefs de St Pierre)*, 1957), a humorous, though well-informed novel by Roger Peyrefitte, Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) is continuously shown to be modernizing ecclesiastical costume and writing speeches to trade associations of midwives or travel agents. Yet despite papal pretensions to be up to date with the modern world, Rome and the Vatican still appear steeped in sumptuous ceremonies, Byzantine protocol and atavistic customs. Modern trappings notwithstanding, even in factual accounts and historical analyses Italy remains different: 'What

leaves many Italians perplexed and sceptical when they consider the economic miracle [of the 1950s/60s] is that there has been no parallel social progress [...] Italy is still the country ... where intellectual progressiveness coexists with clericalism, alienation with superstition' (Procacci, 1991: 460-1).

Unaffected by the iconoclastic purges of the Reformation that swept large parts of Central and Northern Europe, unaffected also by the violent secularization of France in the late eighteenth century, Italy comes to appear as a site of greater historical continuity. The dissolution of monasteries and the dispersal of religious material culture during the Napoleonic invasion (1797-1813) or following national unification in 1870 remained episodic⁹. The great Roman basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura, for example, was able to retain its relic treasures simply by changing its legal status. Looking at these relics today – kept in a small room off the cloister, the shelves occupied by reliquaries stretching back 300 years and still being added to, an arm of St Anne, the mitre of St Francis de Sales, the chains of St Paul, splinters of bones and skulls – one is reminded of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century broad-sheets that were published by cathedral churches and monasteries to publicize their relic treasures to the faithful and attract pilgrims. In Rome, in Italy more generally, the saints and their remains still inhabit many churches as a matter of course

The Benrath line thus comes to serve as a hermeneutical device, running between places, real and imagined, but also between ideologies and historical periods, between 'elite culture' and 'popular practices', modernities and pre-modernities, between the modernizing Catholic Church of the Second Vatican Council and of pre-Conciliar times. In a way, it cuts through religious practice in such a way as to rend it into a practice in itself and for itself, cutting up what Heidegger called being-in-the-world: '[T]o be human is to be enmeshed in a familiar life-world ... in such a way that, under normal conditions, there is no way to draw a clear distinction between a "self" component and a "world" component' (Guignon, 2005: 80). Material religion, sacred matter, relics do not need to show up as distinct and troublesome entities unless the 'unified flow of agency'

⁹ Between 1859 and 1870, the kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont achieved the political unification of the peninsula through military campaigns and plebiscites in the various Italian states, resulting in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Not included at this time was the city of Rome and its immediate environs, which remained under papal authority, protected by French troops. In the wake of their withdrawal, Rome was occupied and made national capital in 1870, completing the unification process.

(Guignon, 2005: 81) is splintered through an epistemological or ideological rupture such as Reformation, Enlightenment, Counter-Reformation, secularization, or modernization. Only then do self and world, mind and matter, subject and object emerge in a problematic fashion. Is it too pointed a statement to say that the relic became recognisable as 'figure of alterity', of provocation only at (and through) the moment of its widespread destruction or negation, thus giving rise to the possibility of fetishism in the first place? As Hauschild (without year: 372-3; my translation) observed:

'As a humanist scholar I was all but bewitched by the idea that magic and religion are mental facts and had therefore overlooked that to South-Italians the spirits can just as well be physical facts [...] For Vito and his colleagues¹⁰ there is no clear boundary between the chemically verifiable effects of herbs and, from our point of view, the purely psychical effects of prayers and magical rituals. Technical thinking, the Enlightenment have divorced nature and spirit, and magic has remained as the product of this fission.'

Where there is no perception of consciousness as thoroughly divorced from the world, it makes no sense to speak of misperception – such as fetishism – either. It is a model that presents self and world as not yet radically split, but still enmeshed in an integrated fabric of life – a network of entities, a Heideggerian *Zeugganzes*. In such a religious practice, saints and relics may be *zuhanden* (ready-to-hand) – useful, practical –, yet at the same time always related to other contexts, entities, or tasks. 'In [Heidegger's] description of being-in-the-world, we ourselves, as agents involved in these contexts, gain our own identity, and so *become* the humans we *are*, through the medium of the world in which we find ourselves' (Guignon 2005: 85).

It is the historical shift, the traumatic rupture that brings out the possibilities (or necessities) of choice, argument, and renovation. Any border, such as the Benrath line, is simultaneously a zone of contact: what it sunders, it also brings together or forces onto each other, effecting new combinations and

¹⁰ The healers Hauschild worked with during his fieldwork.

unexpected reactions. Against the destructive, alienating effects of Enlightenment policies on popular religious practice, the (German) romantics set their enthusiasm for these same practices, rooted in an idealized notion of the Christian Middle Ages¹¹. 'The crisis of meaning caused by the Enlightenment, by scientific progress and revolution, the menace posed by the "dark side of the natural sciences" were to be given a verifiable response of faith' (Angenendt, 1997: 278; my translation). Relics could play an important role in this process, as shown by the example of writer Clemens Brentano (1778-1842) who became the interlocutor of the ecstatic seer and stigmatic Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774-1824). He published her detailed (and heavily edited) visions of the life and death of Christ and experimented with her mystical gift of discerning true relics, using her as a 'sacrometer' (Angenendt, 1997: 278). Beatified in 2004, relics of Emmerick, who once span a web of religious significance, of linkages between a spiritually beleaguered present and a still stirring past envisioned in revelations, embodied in ecstasies and saintly remains threatened by dispersal, have themselves been converted into materializations of traditionalist religious practices. They, in turn, now exercise enormous fascination on others, acting as literal gap-stops of time and mentalities, as I could once observe when a prayer card with a thread from her pillow came up for sale on eBay, sparking an out-and-out bidding war.

The borders between modernity and premodernity, between official and popular religion are being stitched together by new linkages across space and time as traditionalist Catholics or collectors of 'folk art', in Germany, in Italy, in the United Kingdom, above all in the United States move relics and are moved by relics. Technologies like eBay facilitate object flows from the treasure trove that are Italian churches and monasteries. Once requested by kings and bishops as a means to underpin power and elite cultures, given by popes to supplant pagan beliefs and enfold distant lands within the realm of the Church, relics are now sought by priests and lay people to bolster a religious culture regarded by the hierarchy as peripheral, trivial or superstitious. Twelve hundred years ago Rome furnished the churches and monasteries of the christianizing central and northern

¹¹ Incidentally a suggestive connection to Heidegger whose writings, according to Roger Scruton, 'contain the last despairing glimmer of a German romantic philosophy' (quoted in Collins, 2006: 7).

Europe; now it is furnishing the homes and imaginations of traditional(ist) American Catholics. 'Tradition', in this sense, acquires a variety of meanings: historically, it refers to what came first and is therefore original, unadulterated. But these origins are also perceived spatially – the origins are a space, the space of the Italo-Catholic landscape. Untouched by, or at least averse to modernity it is a locus of memory, a vast deposit of history – ideas, customs, practices, texts, and objects –, though less of history-as-change than of history-as-perpetuity, of that which cannot change because it can only ever be the way it always was. And because of its memory of time immemorial, it is a locus of authenticity. Yet as a locus of authenticity it is also a locus of authority, asserting the power to impose its own structures elsewhere.

ii. Sacred space and the anthropology of pilgrimage

The aim of the following chapter therefore is to develop a concept of the relic as located within a dialectic of emplacement, displacement and re-emplacement. In this I try to complement prevailing interpretations that focus on the embeddedness of the relic in a specific locale – perhaps under the lingering influence of Eliade's notion of the 'holy place' – and that regard this embeddedness as fundamental condition of a relic's operability. This is not to say that scholars have ignored the many ways in which relics have travelled, such as gift giving, theft, sale, loss and rediscovery. The traffic in relics throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period is striking and well documented. Yet movement, in these accounts, appears principally as a problem, or as a merely transitory phenomenon, something that is extraneous to the relic, accidental and even detrimental to it as it threatens to erase the relic's meaning (Geary 1990 [1978]). This is a view that I regard not so much as wrong, but as incomplete, or biased. The relic, as I will argue, is animated by and, in turn, animates the place at which it is located. Yet this place is not simply a 'place-at-which' or a 'place-to-which' (as the vast literature on pilgrimage perceives it), but also a 'place-from-which' and it is this notion that I want to explore. Followed to its logical conclusion, of course, a 'place-from-which' in certain ways ceases to be place; it dissolves and becomes distributed place. Again, this is not to substitute one model with another, but to complement a one-sided view; a 'place-from-which' only and always exists in a

dynamic and dialectical relation to a 'place-at-which' and a 'place-to-which'. To trace these connections I will chart the flow of relics from Rome, or Italy in a wider sense, to other places, most notably the United States, a flow much facilitated by modern technology as exemplified by eBay, the Internet auction site. Moving through these networks, relics cease to be objects 'at which' or 'to which' as they become detached from their place of origin, turning into objects 'from which'. Yet this movement is animated by paradox and an inherent tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces: as moving objects, relics carry with them their connection to a specific place and time, that is: an origin; yet simultaneously it is this connection that motivates the process of their extrication: a relic without an origin, a name, a history, a pedigree, that cannot be located and dated, ceases to be of significance. Conversely, it is exactly this connection to a place, a moment in time, a biography that makes a relic an object of power, and therefore desire, and hence motivates its abduction and diffusion. Emplacement provokes displacement, displacement feeds on emplacement. These somewhat philosophical reflections gain objective currency in the practices and relations of the actors involved and caught up in the relic network – those institutions and officials of the Roman-Catholic Church dealing with the cult of saints and the veneration of relics, the faithful who have a devotion to relics, collectors, dealers, occasionally forgers, religious lobby groups seeking to educate the faithful and influence their practices, and even eBay executives. Reflecting the contradictory forces of place and movement, their relations are often fraught by conflict and tension, drawing on and implicating wider concerns such as the formulation of official liturgy and pastoral care in response to 'popular' forms of piety, orthopraxis and heteropraxis, questions of religious tradition and innovation, boundaries between individual and collective ritual, or the maintenance of control and hierarchy. These issues will crop up time and again throughout this thesis.

Space and the sacred are, of course, intimately connected in Christian, or perhaps better: Catholic tradition¹². The presence of the sacred (in memory, signs or objects), emplaced in a particular locale, give significance to it. 'For religious man', Eliade writes (1959: 20),

¹² Obviously, other religious traditions have their own ideas on place and the sacred, but these do not concern me here as my study focuses on Roman-Catholicism.

'space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts are qualitatively different from others ... There is, then a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous'.

Relics are a tangible way in which the sacred can intervene in and organize space. The effect is often a material, architectural transformation – first the establishment of a tomb, then maybe a church or basilica over the tomb, which in turn attracts the faithful, desiring to be buried *ad sanctos*, near the saints, sometimes giving rise to the growth of whole necropoleis. 'Initially', Angenendt remarks (1997: 125-6; my translation),

'it was generally the case that the saints were venerated only within and by the community of their burial place ... This connection to a locality has actually always continued [...] Religious studies have acknowledged the tombs of important ancestors or founders ... as a central place of habitation and culture.'

As such, the tomb also acquires an eminently political dimension as a tool for the legitimization of power and authority (Rader, 2003), a point also made by Geary (1979).

In Christian thought¹³, Jerusalem has obviously held a prominent position as a sacred place, the stage of the salvific theatre of Christ's life, passion, death and resurrection. The fact that a place in its actual materiality – rocks, soil, plants, buildings – could acquire a sacred quality (or that sacredness could imbue its materiality, to put it somewhat differently) is attested early on by archaeological evidence. The Museo Sacro at the Vatican, for example, owns a small wooden box, dating back to sixth-/seventh-century Palestine, that contains stones and earth

¹³ The same can, of course, be said about Judaism, too. See, for example, Douglas (2000), Rabinowitz (2001), or Smith (1993). 'In recent years the recovery of the structure of sacred space has, especially within Judaism, become more than a merely academic enterprise. The repossession of the land of Israel in 1947 and the repossession of the site of the Temple in Jerusalem in 1967 have reawakened in an acute way the archaic language of sacred space and have reacquainted the modern Jew with a variety of myths and symbols...' (Smith, 1993: 105).

from the Holy Land; paintings on the inner side of the lid refer to the various places the particles were taken from. Herrmann, though disapprovingly, cites a wealth of references to sacred topographies in the Holy Land:

'Due to the craving for relics of the Lord it could not take long before the faithful simply took the basic matter that was the most easily available and, when compared to individual relics, ... in seemingly inexhaustible supply. Many pilgrims generously helped themselves to earth that Jesus was said to have touched.' (Herrmann, 2003: 38; my translation)

Other spots, among many others, included the olive tree to which Christ was bound while waiting for the high priest, shown to fifteenth-century pilgrims; the soil that God used to form Adam, found near Damascus; or the tombs of the Virgin Mary and of figures from the Old Testament (Herrmann, 2003: 38, 90-1). Travel accounts and pilgrim guides of Jerusalem and Palestine are extant from at least the fourth century, such as those composed by the 'Bordeaux pilgrim', travelling in 333, by Etheria/Egeria, possibly a Spanish nun, writing in the late fourth century, and the 'Piacenza pilgrim', around the year 570. These travellers visited, and interacted, with the places of their pilgrimage. The 'Piacenza pilgrim', for example, inscribed the names of his parents into the couch on which Christ was believed to have sat during the wedding at Cana, while Etheria had the relevant passages from the Scriptures read while visiting the according places of the Old and New Testament. For these pilgrims, place, the very soil, seems to have assumed the quality of a substrate of the historical event, making it possible to follow, quite literally, in the footsteps of Christ and his prophets and disciples.

While Jerusalem is, of course, fundamental for the history of Christianity, for contemporary Catholics Rome is perhaps even more enmeshed with topographies of the sacred. Unlike Jerusalem, where Catholicism competes with other Christian denominations and Christianity competes with Judaism and Islam, Rome is exclusively and inseparably entangled with Catholicism, as the very designations 'Roman-Catholic' or 'Church of Rome' indicate. Yet just as with Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Rome's sacredness, and thus its centrality and authority, is to a large extent defined topographically:

'From the 15th century onwards, church historians note an intensification of the Vatican's desire to shape the topography and built space of Rome as a means of fusing Imperial myth with papal power ... By the Renaissance, this centrality is actively worked into urban space.' (McNeill, 2003: 543)

The notion of spatial sacredness has been maintained over the centuries and even became enshrined in law: in the Lateran Treaty of 1929, which established the Vatican as a sovereign state after the Papal States had ceased to exist in 1870, Rome is expressly accorded a 'sacred character' and described as 'centre of the Catholic world and place of pilgrimage' (section 3, article 1; Aloha Net: website).

This ideology finds literal expression in the localization of St Peter's tomb. It assumes tangible, synchronic form through the cathedral built over it as the concrete materialization of the scriptural word of St Peter being the rock on which the Church is founded¹⁴, and genealogical, diachronic form through the idea of the apostolic succession, the idea of the transmission of the episcopal ministry from the apostles (of whom St Peter was the most eminent) through a continuous line of bishops. '[C]onsecrated to Christ through the glorious blood of the Apostles Peter and Paul', Rome 'has been made by the Most High head of the Christian religion and the seat of His vicar. This *civitatis* [sic; should read: *civitas*] *sacerdotalis et regia* (royal and priestly city) is *caput mundi*' (Stinger in McNeill, 2003: 544; italics in the original). As supreme witnesses of their beliefs (from the Greek *martyrein*: to bear witness), martyrs accorded particular prestige to the local churches that their example had shown to be unwavering in the true faith. It is around their tombs that saints' cults initially sprang up, as was also the case with St Peter, who died around 64 in the persecution of Nero.

Yet the example of the martyrs can also illustrate the social production and reproduction of sacred space and its significance for religious practice, a case in point being the so-called 'catacomb saints'. Largely forgotten by the fifteenth century, the Roman catacombs were sensationally rediscovered in 1578 when a

¹⁴ 'Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Mt 16:18f) – a pun on the Aramaic name Cephas, given to Peter by Jesus. Rendered πέτρα (*petra*) in Greek, which translates as 'rock'. The Latin quote reads as follows: 'Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam.' The passage was first used by pope Damasus I (366-384) in support of Rome's claim to jurisdiction over the general Church, an important step towards the emergence of a 'universal primacy'.

vineyard near Via Salaria collapsed and uncovered an entrance to what was then called the Priscilla catacombs (today, more correctly named as 'catacombe Anonimo di Via Anapo'). The moment of this chance discovery was providential: following the trauma of the Reformation, the cult of saints had gone through a crisis of credibility and legitimization, with a gap of 65 years, from 1523 to 1588, during which no new saints were canonized (Burke, 1987). These developments show space as dynamic and subject to modifications in both a literally and imaginary register. The Reformation had displaced Rome as the centre of Christendom and marginalized it, cast as a new Babylon, even seat of the antichrist. Yet still before, the sacred landscape of Christian Rome had undergone shifts: since the fourth century the catacombs, outside the city walls, had been a major place of worship and pilgrimage. Fearing raids by Langobard invaders, many of their relics were transferred to churches within the city during the seventh and eighth centuries – a significant change as it breached, and then transformed, ancient custom prohibiting burial within the city space and the opening of the tomb. The crusades, beginning in the late eleventh century, helped to change forms of devotion, favouring relics connected to the Holy Land and the Passion of Christ; as a result the catacombs fell into oblivion – cultic practice had shifted spatially, from the outskirts to the city centre, and in imagination, from early-Christian martyrs to relics of Christ and, later still, saints of the flourishing mendicant orders. The newfound catacombs of the late sixteenth century again modified these territories. Overflowing with the remains of supposed martyrs, they appeared to reprove Protestant critique, demonstrating evidently the unbroken religious tradition of the Church of Rome and revealing it, again, as the central locus of true holiness – a hierophany, in Eliade's terms, the sudden manifestation of the sacred in the world that gives structure and orientation to otherwise disordered space:

'The rediscovery of these early-Christian martyrs had far-reaching reverberations. Cathedrals, monasteries and collegiate churches either revived their own traditions of early-Christian martyrs, or they acquired corpora of the newly found martyrs from Roman catacombs. In this way, they aspired to turn themselves into a second Rome.' (Polonyi, 1995: 10; my translation)

From Rome, these catacomb saints were transferred throughout the Catholic world, mostly to Southern Germany, Switzerland and Austria, but occasionally as far as North America and India. The most intense period of transfers were the 150 years between 1580 and 1730, though they ceased completely only in the late nineteenth century, with occasional exceptions still occurring in the twentieth century¹⁵. These movements thus also (re-)connected Rome with the local churches in areas that had either remained Catholic or were being reclaimed for the old faith at this time, again establishing and reinforcing a pattern of concentric authority, with Rome at its hub and apex, an *axis mundi* (Eliade). Such thinking may on first sight appear archaic, yet as the troubled archaeology of regions such as Palestine shows, myths of origin, religious sentiment and their material embodiment can still form explosive mixtures (see, among many others, Rabinowitz, 2001).

The idea of a holy place, of course, has been heavily influenced by the writings of Eliade (1958, 1959, 1963). Among the central themes of Eliade's work are the basic opposition between the sacred and the profane and the notion of sacred space. In fact, the latter can be seen as a necessary corollary of this division. For it is only in the sacred that reality, being and value are found and which therefore orders and patterns human existence. The sacred quite literally intervenes in space and reveals itself – a hierophany – as an 'irruption' in the otherwise homogeneous, undifferentiated and therefore chaotic space of the profane: 'There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.' And it is this 'break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation [...] The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world' (Eliade, 1959: 20-1).

Eliade has been criticized for his sweeping generalizations, leading Allen to remark that while he 'may have been the most popular and influential contemporary historian of religion ... many, if not most, specialists in anthropology, sociology, and even history of religion have either ignored or

¹⁵ For example, the relics of a catacomb saint, St Benedict (not to be confused with the abbot and founding figure of the Benedictine order) can be found under an altar at the Roman church of Sant'Agostino, deposited there as late as 1930.

quickly dismissed' his work (Allen, 1988: 545). Yet even in critical distance Eliade's work remains a nearly unavoidable point of reference. The idea of the holy place still is at the heart of the study of pilgrimage, notwithstanding the theoretical development it has undergone over the past 25 years; it is, as Eade and Sallnow state, its 'very *raison d'être*' (1991: 6; italics in the original). Historians, too, have shared this emphasis on the sacred centre as is evident in Brown's seminal study on the cult of saints in late antiquity:

'Hic locus est: "Here is the place," or simply hic, is a refrain that runs through the inscriptions on the early martyrs' shrines of North Africa. The holy was available in one place, and in each such place it was accessible to one group in a manner in which it could not be accessible to anyone situated elsewhere.' (Brown, 1982: 86; italics in the original)

In his study, Brown was inspired by Mary Douglas' (2003 [1970]) notions of grid and group, seeing saints' shrines from a structuralist perspective as forming an integrative network in an otherwise often instable and fragmented society. The pre-eminence of sacred space is also apparent in Geary's (1990 [1978]) work *Furta Sacra* on relic theft in the period roughly from 800 to 1100. While theft obviously implies movement, this movement is not intrinsic to the nature of the relic, but, on the contrary, can endanger its very existence:

'As a physical object, divorced from a specific milieu, a relic is entirely without significance. Unlike other objects, the bare relic – a bone or a bit of dust – carries no fixed code or sign of its meaning as it moves from one community to another or from one period to a subsequent one.' (Geary, 1990 [1978]: 5)

To function as a relic, to have cultural and religious meaning at all the relic has to re-emerge from a state of liminality, into which, as an unavoidable side-effect, the act of theft has thrown it. This happens through the re-embedding in the new locale, the new community that will now look after the relic and normally resist attempts at further movement by other interested parties.

Yet such a view makes a number of implicit assumptions that need not apply in general: for one, this approach considers the relic primarily as a public object – it is venerated in public, on display to crowds of people, and a significant object for a community looking after it. While a relic is all these things, too, what this approach neglects is the individual sphere, respectively the interaction between public and individual sphere. It reflects the common problem of the historian that surviving sources tend to privilege public, institutional and elite interests over those of ordinary individuals. In an article published after *Furta Sacra*, Geary (1979) acknowledges that the local reality may well have been messier. Secondly, and this is a more fundamental challenge, if an object, a relic, is the destination of pilgrimage, that is to say: attracting people from afar, then its significance obviously transcends the local milieu. Its significance is dispersed, distributed. We need therefore ask not only how people travel towards a place and towards an object – the question of pilgrimage – but also how places and their objects travel to people. This does not at all mean that we have to dispense with the notion of the sacred place; on the contrary, it requires us to see it as an element – constitutive, though incomplete on its own – in a dialectic of movement. There would be no movement without a place, but by the same logic there would be no place without movement. Pilgrims travel to a place because it holds significance, holiness. But for the same reason the faithful have moved and continue to move places, or at any rate their material substrates, whatever form they may take: soil, souvenirs, filial buildings and institutions.

In their edited volume *Contesting the Sacred*, Eade and Sallnow (1991) have begun to shift the theoretical in this direction. Aiming to 'deconstruct the centre', they discussed alternative modalities of centrality: person-centred sacredness, in which a living saint becomes the focal point of interaction with the divine; and 'textual pilgrimage', which privileges the reception of sacred scriptures and employs place only as a kind of material illustration of these writings. Moreover, they point out that place – unlike its conception by Eliade as 'a primordial experience ... a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world' (1959: 20-1) – is, in fact, a thoroughly social construct. It is

'the meanings and ideas which officials, pilgrims, and locals invest in the shrine – meanings and ideas which are determined by their political and religious, national and regional, ethnic and class background – which help to give the shrine its religious capital.'
(Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 15)

The twin arguments that sacredness can assume non-spatial forms and that the religious meaning of a pilgrimage site is multivalent and even conflictual supersedes the two earlier main paradigms: the structuralist approach, which stressed the unifying social function of pilgrimage for tribal, regional, or national identity (best known perhaps: Wolf, 1958); and, highly influential, Victor and Edith Turner's *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), respectively Victor Turner's earlier works in which he developed the concepts of *communitas* and *liminality* (1974a, 1974b), emphasizing the anti-structural character of pilgrimage. Turner's work has remained resonant, despite or perhaps even due to the theoretical and empirical critique it was subjected to. A follow-up volume by Eade and Coleman (2004) shifted the focus even further. Starting their discussion with *Image and Pilgrimage*, they noted that at the heart of this text there are a number of photographs, emphasizing either 'objects ... or ... people in largely static poses: kneeling in worship, sitting by statues, observing a benediction' (Eade and Coleman, 2004: 1). What these pictures conceal or only hint at, they argue, is movement. 'The act of representation' – photographic, ethnographical – 'encourages concentration on images and issues that lend themselves most easily to the gaze of the analyst: in other words, relatively fixed rather than fluid physical and social processes' (2004: 2). In contrast, Eade and Coleman's volume aims to align the anthropological study of pilgrimage with more recent theoretical developments: the shift away from the study of small-scale, fixed and bounded socio-cultural units, the querying of the ethnographic present, and the recognition of mobility as 'endemic to many current processes of culture formation' (2004: 4-5).

However, what all these studies have in common, despite their often opposing theoretical approaches, is the conception of movement as the motion of human beings towards a place, or of a place as attractor and stage of human movement. Yet truly to 'deconstruct the centre' it is necessary, I would argue, to

pay attention to a different dimension of movement, that of the centre itself – what Orsi (1991), in a study of the shrine of St Jude in Chicago, called 'the center out there, in here, and everywhere else'. In this article, 'pilgrimage' is shown to be despatialized as space becomes time and going becomes writing through religious radio broadcasts, devotional practices at home synchronized with liturgical functions at the shrine, and correspondence by letter with devotional magazines. I find this approach useful as it offers a more thorough deconstruction of space and movement in religious practice. It highlights the power of mass media in transforming the meanings of space and movement – 'in the 1930s ... the various national popular media created the possibility for the "sharing of common experience"' (Orsi, 1991: 224) – a possibility greatly enhanced, I would argue, by the development of the Internet since the time of Orsi's article. My study focuses on exactly this capacity of the Internet in the shaping of religious practice and experience and its role in transcending narrow notions of space and movement. Taking literal the idea that the centre can be 'out there, in here, and everywhere else' I ask how people interact with the centre and how the centre is being transformed when it is no longer (or no longer solely) the pilgrim who travels, but the centre itself, or at least particles of its material substrate. Within the context of this particular study, I ask about the material objects that draw people to a sacred place and, even more, about the objects – relics – they take with them or, indeed, acquire from such a place without visiting it at all.

The tradition of such practices is ancient: mass-produced *ampullae* filled with water were given to pilgrims at the shrine of St Menas, near Alexandria in Egypt, between the fourth and seventh centuries. Similar phials are known to have come from the holy sites in Palestine, dating to around 600 (see Künzl and Koeppel, 2002). At Canterbury, water mixed with the blood of its martyred archbishop, St Thomas Beckett (1118-1170), was poured into *ampullae* and given to pilgrims (Sumption, 2002: 81-4). We can also safely assume that the faithful created their own devotional objects by simply taking away fragments of the shrine or its surroundings, such as earth or stone chippings, or by 'soaking up' its emanations with brandea, as depicted, for example, on a fifteenth-century altarpiece from Bavaria (see Os 2001: 28). 'Such fragments might be added to relic collections, used as portable talismans, or steeped in water to produce home remedies' (Webb, 2000: 85). More recently, McDannell (1995) discusses the

Marian shrine of Lourdes as an example of such a process: already in the 1870s, less than 20 years after the apparitions that put the site on the devotional map, American Catholics imported water from its miraculous well, and pious associations began spreading the cult through the creation of replica grottos:

'Through using Lourdes water, Catholics could experience the power of the French shrine at a distance. The water served as a link between the miraculous events which happened to Bernadette¹⁶, the Virgin and her son in heaven, and the needs of people living throughout the world [...] The divine was not anchored to one place. The construction of the shrines and the distribution of miraculous water made a physical statement that the divine, and Catholicism in general transcended national boundaries.' (McDannell, 1995: 155, 161)

Religious goods shops and mail order businesses can also play a role in this context (McDannell, 1995: chapter 8, on Christian retailing), supplying material objects – medals, rosaries, prayer books, devotional literature etc – that may function to transcend spatial boundaries and tie the devotee into a wider network of beliefs and practices. The fact that such customs have received relatively scant scholarly attention is not really surprising, as they pose obvious methodological problems. Once a fragment of material religion, especially when self-made, has been taken away from the place of its origin and entered into the private sphere of the individual it becomes hard to track and, not anchored within an institutional context, has a much higher likelihood to get lost. The practices of 'common folk' thus tend to leave fewer traces, are less often preserved in written sources, frequently overlooked by contemporaries who take them for granted, regard them as rather unimportance or even with suspicion, placing them into the categories of 'superstition' or 'popular piety' exactly because they eschew institutional supervision.

As the designation of a locus of origin – be it within registers of the imaginary or the real – serves to anchor, legitimize and authorize the relic, give it

¹⁶ Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879), the teenage seer who received a series of visions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858. Canonized in 1933.

significance and organize the trajectories of its movements, it is necessary to historicize and spatialize relic practices. Structured through spatial and temporal categories, relic practices can be seen to develop through hierarchical social relations, engendering sets of divisions: centre and periphery, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, orthopraxis and heteropraxis, old and new, authentic and fake, generative and derivative, body relic and contact relic, metonymy and metaphor, origin and destination, production and distribution, locus and movement, possession and loss, keeping and giving, tradition and innovation. Such binaries do not necessarily possess an objective reality, although they certainly serve as common representations of perception and thinking: clerical informants will ask whether the use the faithful make of relics is within the bounds of orthodoxy or not. Collectors will want to know if relic genuine or fake? Sellers may point out that this or that relic comes directly from Rome. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that these binaries stand in a relation of tension and reciprocity that can make the whole ground shift: movement may lead to re-implacement, or loss; yet loss, in turn, may act as a stimulus and justification for reconstruction. The nostalgia of traditionalist Catholics is not so much, or not only and simply, the effect of a Church that has 'betrayed' and 'forgotten' its traditions. One may just as well turn the argument around and ask whether the 'betrayal' of tradition, whether the modernist innovations of the Second Vatican Council, whether liturgical and theological reform are not in fact necessary and desired to legitimize nostalgia and traditionalism, at least to the extent that these sentiments must always refer to a past that never was. Equally complex is the relationship of authenticity and falsehood: 'Is it real?', must be the most spontaneous and most frequent question I have been asked whenever a conversation touched upon relics, yet the answer, 'What do you mean by real?', is hardly ever satisfying. As authenticity and falsehood are intricately layered and entangled, the answer as much as the question can only depend on the hermeneutic interests of the parties involved – interests that need to be revealed and explored in order to reveal the implicit powers of jurisdiction and interpretation.

The centre thus not only needs to be deconstructed, but also to be reconstructed. Despite its focus on time rather than space, even in Orsi's (1991) article the notion of a centre looms large. People may not travel to it in person, but it is the centre of their devotion, the focal point that orders, structures and

validates their actual practice. The centre may be simultaneously out there and in here, but it is still central, that is to say: a place of privilege. Keeping this in mind is important so as to remain attentive to power differentials, to maintain a sense for structure as well as for agency. In a critical appraisal of Eliade and his notion of sacred space, Smith develops the useful notion of a 'locative' worldview, an ideology with a 'vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing "place"' (Smith, 1993: xii, 100-3, 130-42). While he applied this model to late antique, Near Eastern societies, I find suggestive his statement that such a worldview is typical of 'urban, agricultural, literate, hierarchical, bureaucratized, imperialist, slave cultures', its 'most persuasive witnesses' being the production of 'priestly and scribal elites' (Smith, 1993: xii) – a characterization that in many aspects, I would argue, also fits the Roman-Catholic Church (on its important role in the development of legal and bureaucratic institutions in the West, for example, see Weber, 2005 [1922] *passim*; Jedin, 1985: vol. 3.2, chapters 34, 38, 40; Miller, 1983). Curiously enough (or perhaps not so curiously after all), it is during the period of final decline of the papacy's temporal powers, from the Napoleonic wars until the unification of Italy, that is to say: the period from about 1800 to 1870, that Rome achieves its undisputed centrality for the Catholic faith, its ideological apotheosis, in the form of ultramontanism, which placed Rome, pope and curia at the heart of the Catholic Church, a state of affairs made law with the coming into force of the Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC), the Code of Canon Law, in 1918.

'The CIC is zenith and conclusion of a development beginning in the 19th century that aimed to turn the Church, through strict and uniform discipline and close ties to the Apostolic See (among other measures), into a fitting tool for the Christian diffusion of the world.'
(Jedin, 1985: vol. 7, 154-5; my translation)

It is this development that has bestowed the enduring prestige, the animating *genius loci*, which, for example, drew about 25 million pilgrims to Rome during the Jubilee Year of 2000 or the 2 million or so arriving for the funeral of John Paul II. Place, sacredness and authority are tightly enmeshed in such an institution, a connection also made by Lévi-Strauss:

'A native thinker makes the penetrating comment ... "All sacred things must have their place." It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them.'
(quoted in Smith, 1993: 137)

The argument is highly interesting for a number of reasons: not only does it take up again the embedded nature of the sacred – Brown's (1982) '*hic locus est*' –, Lévi-Strauss' subtle reversal of the 'native thinker's' comment also suggests a dialectic process: things are sanctified by their place as much as place is sanctified by things. Also implied is the possibility – and danger – of movement and displacement. Again, Lévi-Strauss appears to see this possibility in dynamic terms: removal threatens both, place and things, in their identity and existence, recalling Geary's (1990 [1978]) argument of the relic as a 'blank' object the significance of which depends entirely on local context. Yet the question is, of course, whether we can take this argument at face value, or whether we should not see it as underpinned by exactly the locative ideology that Smith (1993) described. Emplacement, the assignation of a proper place and the fixing of things in it is not a disinterested process. How such emplacement is maintained, negotiated and subverted will be a central theme when discussing the traffic of relics on eBay. Finally, we must also inquire into the material substance of these things and the implications of this substance for a concern with boundaries, limits, borders, control and authority: relics are, after all, human remains, dead bodies – in most cultures among the most polluting and transgressive substances thinkable. It would seem reasonable to assume that such a substance creates problems for any institution founded on order and control, both in a theoretical and a practical sense. In the realm of theory we know that the Church had to accomplish a complex revaluation of death and the body through a theology of incarnation and resurrection, overcoming the antique horror of the defiling power of the dead. Yet even today, that revulsion is not always dead: I remember an interview with an eminent postulator general, an official with half a century of experience in his position, who expressed intense disgust at the idea of distributing body relics,

saying he was very happy that the saints of his order were all safely in their tombs, inaccessible, and that he would not dream of disturbing their tranquillity to 'chop them up'. Which, in turn, hints at the practical problem posed by dead bodies – their very divisibility; as the saint is fully present in every particle of his or her body, relics lend themselves to fragmentation and thus diffusion.

iii. Difference and movement

What the anthropology of pilgrimage has achieved, then, is the deconstruction of essentialist notions of sacred space and a theoretical broadening that takes into account not only the actual place of pilgrimage, but also the notion of movement in a wider context. Where for Eliade 'the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space' was still 'a primordial experience' and 'not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of primary religious experience' preceding all reflection on the world (Eliade, 1959: 20-1), such power, such significance is no longer seen as intrinsic to space, but as a discursive and dialectical effect of human interaction (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 15-16). Social relations shape space as much as space shapes social relations (see, for example, Jessop [2005] for a Gramscian analysis of spatiality). Place thus remains a crucial element: it is that which animates the relic and is, in turn, animated by the relic. At the same time, however, we are looking at processes that dissolve the hold of place over relics and propel them into motion. The place, the centre is there as I will illustrate in the next section on Rome as a 'relic-scape'; it is there as a material environment – with its churches and chapels, shrines and tombs, institutions and offices – as well as an imaginary one – the location of salvific action, the stage of religious desires and hopes, the locus of memory and history. Yet it is because of this animating agency that is also constitutes a corollary to its opposite, a 'trans-place', an arena of movement based on difference, difference between what is variously perceived by interested actors as sacred and profane, central and peripheral, eternal and everyday. Pilgrimage offers the opportunity to experience the sacred through a 'therapy of distance' (Brown, 1982: 87), yet travel to the sacred centre is only one way to overcome distance. Another possibility is to dwell permanently within the precinct of the sacred, a case McKevitt (1991) described for San Giovanni Rotondo, the shrine-town of Padre Pio (1887-1968, canonized 2002), where

outside devotees have settled around his monastery (and are clearly, and often critically, perceived as outsiders and fanatics by the locals). Finally, and this is the case that I am exploring, one may attempt to transfer the sacred into the individual sphere, dislodging fragments of its material substrate – soil, images, souvenirs, relics – from the centre in order to recreate it within one's own daily life.

To some extent, this is, of course, nothing new; as mentioned above, phials of holy water from the shrine of St Menas have already been brought back by pilgrims from their travels 1,500 years ago. Yet this '*longue durée*' should not tempt us to see this practice as timeless, ahistorical, as there are also substantial dissimilarities. For one, the institutional framework has, of course, shifted. Despite a Catholic ideology that tends to see the Church as eternal, the Catholic Church of the fifth century is not that of the fourteenth or eighteenth or twenty-first century.

Secondly, the technologies of experiencing the sacred have changed radically: from far-distance travel taking months and involving serious risks to health and safety to the ease of modern transportation; from the relative inaccessibility of media representing the sacred (manuscripts, paintings, sculpture) to the 'age of mechanical reproduction' and the Internet. For the purpose of my study perhaps the most crucial difference, however, is the possibility to disentangle spaces and bodies: in twelfth century England, to get hold of some of the diluted blood of St Thomas Beckett the devotee would have had to travel to Canterbury him- or herself, or charge someone else to do so (not an uncommon practice). To bring such a relic home required that the devotee first came to the relic. In contrast, a technology such as the Internet, while not dissolving the importance of space, connects spaces and bodies in a much more fluent and promiscuous way. Like the 'wormholes' in science fiction novels, it allows for the immediate connection of objects and individuals in distanced spaces: opening the appropriate site of Wikipedia, I find an illustrated article on St Charles Houben (St Charles of Mount Argus, 1821-1893), showing a period picture of him in the Passionist habit of his order as well as a picture of a contemporary memorial at his birthplace. At the same time, I have a theca with a bone splinter of St Charles next to me, acquired through eBay a few years ago. St Charles was born in Belgium, yet he is buried at Mount Argus monastery in Dublin, where he spent the second half of his life. The theca was prepared (according to the accompanying

documentation) in Rome, the seller from whom I bought it is based in the United States. I possibly paid for it via PayPal, an eBay subsidiary since 2002 and its Internet money transmitter of choice, whose European transactions are managed from regional headquarters in Luxembourg. I am writing this in London, never having been made to leave my desk while drawing together this network of distant places and agents. It is the relic that has travelled to me, rather than the other way round. It has been drawn from a universe of sacred objects that maintain a notional (and crucial) link to a specific space and time (as the relic's authentic¹⁷ reads: '*Datum Romae, ad Ss. Ioannis et Pauli, die 12 mensis Januarii 2004*': 'Given at Rome, at Ss John and Paul, on 12 January 2004'¹⁸), while virtually floating unanchored in an undefined space: the sacred centre is anywhere, waiting to be (re-)actualized in a concrete place through an assemblage, if often a conflicted one, of human agency and technical processes.

As Smith argued, the notion of the centre is 'not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustrative; it is a dubious notion that will have to be established anew on the basis of detailed comparative endeavours' (quoted in Gill, 1998: 304). There certainly is continuity with traditional practices, such as enduring importance of place as an authorizing locus – the idea of the 'centre' warranting the object's potency. It creates and signals difference to the homogenous space of the everyday, the profane, and it is this difference, in significance, in authority that enables and prompts movement – such as that of St Charles' relic – and thus makes the transfers and abductions of sacred objects meaningful: place is dynamic, it moves the human agents who operate within it and is in turn moved by them in a competition between centrifugal and centripetal forces. The relic practices that I am exploring are located within this framework of place, difference and movement. Movement, as well as the resistance to it, the contested ideas of emplacement, displacement and re-emplacement, have been a, if not *the* central concern for many informants throughout my research, most notably when acted out through eBay. That the auction website, or the Internet more generally, should come to embody these anxieties is perhaps not surprising

¹⁷ It is a compulsory requirement that every relic issued by a competent official body must be accompanied by a document testifying to the relic's origin and authenticity; this document is referred to as the authentic.

¹⁸ The monastery of Ss John and Paul is the mother house of the Passionist order and seat of its postulator general, Fr. Giovanni Zubiani CSSR, who also signed the document.

as it calls into question bounded and static notions of space (and thus of authority): 'Cyberspace is an incredibly complex dynamic field of play in which personal interests, personal whim, and pure coincidence greatly influence the way relationships are made, the way one travels (surfs), works, and learns' (Gill, 1998: 311). As such, I do not see it so much as the antithesis to place, but as an integral counterpart, a complement. It visibly brings to life the social dynamic inherent in the notion of place and is thus integral rather than antithetical to place because movement is always a move away from as much as a move towards, simultaneously an undoing and a redoing. The relic that is transferred from a place is set in motion not for the sake of movement, but with the intention of having it emplaced again somewhere else. What is more, the ambition, the interest to set it in motion is triggered in the first place by a relic's emplacement in a specific locale, that is to say: by its having been differentiated, in a rather traditional Eliadean sense, from the homogeneity of space – it has been made specific, particular, and sacred by its localization at a precise moment in history and in a concrete place: the person of the saint, his or her story, his or her deeds and charismata, the sites of these occurrences, the site of his or her grave or chief place of veneration. In the following chapter it is my aim to describe this localization in more specific detail.

IV. ROME

i. Notes on methodology

Local fieldwork for this thesis was conducted during two six-month periods in Rome between 2005 and 2006. Throughout this time, as well as before and continuing after my return, I also undertook online research, mostly on eBay, but also looking at other sources, such as the personal websites or the websites of Church authorities, individual religious communities and ministries, and religious goods shops.

During the first weeks in Rome I sought to gain a general overview of the sacred landscape, walking the historic centre and visiting as many of its churches as I could, of which about 40 figure in my notes (out of around 400 the whole city

is said to boast). The idea was to arrive at an indication of the presence (or absence) of relics in Rome's sacred space, to gauge their accessibility and significance to public veneration, and thus to identify possible sites of further research through contacts with local clergy and worshippers. Apart from churches, I also sought out other sites of access to relics, in particular commercial channels such as antiques shops and flea markets. Official, institutional contacts within the Church administration – the postulators of various orders and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints – complemented my research in Rome.

It quickly became apparent that while many, if not most, churches in the historic centre displayed relics in some form, these displays were by no means always, or even often, the centre of devotional practices, judged by the occurrence of material traces such as lit candles, flowers or votive offerings. In many cases, relics were simply part of the church furniture, with reliquaries placed on or buried inside altars (visible through an *oculus*), and often rather inconspicuous. Others were much more eye-catching, such as the complete bodies of saints on display in a number of churches, for example Saint Giuseppe Tomasi (1649-1713, canonized in 1986) at Sant' Andrea della Valle, Blessed Anna Maria Taigi (1769-1837, beatified in 1920) at San Crisogono, or Saint Francesca Romana (1384-1440, canonized in 1608) at Santa Maria Nova. In other churches, such as Santa Maria di Loreto, just off Trajan's Forum, or at Sant' Ignazio, relics were sometimes gathered in large and ornate carved altar pieces that could hold dozens of reliquaries in various shapes and sizes, from sizeable box reliquaries to tiny thecae. Even so, very few of these places showed signs of veneration that were clearly centred on displayed relics or a saint's tomb.

By contrast, such signs – usually in the form of *ex votos* – were frequently and prominently focused on images of the Virgin Mary, both inside churches and, occasionally, outside, surrounding small street shrines, the so-called *madonelle*. Other saints, most notably Anthony of Padua (c. 1195-1231, canonized in 1232), patron of lovers and finder of lost things, and Rita of Cascia (1381-1457, canonized in 1900) and Jude Thaddeus, both traditionally called upon in desperate situations, were also repeatedly the centre of veneration, with votive offerings and messages left at their altars or statues. However, not in a single case were these devotions related to relics of the saint in question. Whether these statues in some way reference the main sanctuaries of the saint in question is hard to tell. The

tomb of St Anthony in the cathedral at Padua is a major attraction for Catholic worshippers, who have virtually covered it with messages and votive offerings. At the same time, the sanctuary of St Rita at Cascia, Umbria, about 150 km northeast of Rome, while attracting significant numbers of pilgrims, is nowhere near on par with that of St Anthony, and the veneration of St Jude is virtually independent of his relics, but rather the result of intense missionary work by the Dominicans and Claretians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of the few instances I came across where relics did play a role in public veneration in Rome was mentioned to me by the abbot of the monastery-basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura, Dom Edmund Power. He explained that once a year the community held a *fiesta* on the patron saint's feast day, 29 June, including a procession during which the alleged chains of St Paul are carried about and used to bless the participants, usually a crowd of some thousand people. However, when I visited San Paolo 'out of season' I found the chains, together with a great number of other relics, housed in a small side chapel off the church's cloister where they receive hardly any attention at all, an impression confirmed by Dom Edmund. This is not to say that relic-centred devotions do not exist in Rome or Italy more generally, or are insignificant: the cult of St Januarius (San Gennaro) (died c. 304) at Naples would be another example, apart from St Anthony mentioned above and perhaps even more so, as it is deeply woven into public life, to the extent that through his relics the saint is seen to foretell the city's fortunes¹⁹.

Even so, signs of devotional practices attaching to saints' relics – in marked contrast to those centred on images – were relatively rare in Rome. It would have been possible at this point to shift or broaden the focus somewhat to include sacramentals in a wider sense, the paraphernalia of Catholic devotionism such as images, prayer cards, statues, books, or rosaries that might be termed fourth class relics (see section IV.iv for more details on the classifications of relics). While undoubtedly part of the religious practices of many Catholics (McDannell, 1995; Morgan, 1998; Orsi, 1996, 2005), they represent a related, yet different class of objects compared to relics, the central

¹⁹ Three times a year, but most importantly on the saint's main feast day of 19 September, the relics of his alleged blood are put on public display at the cathedral of Naples in front of enormous crowds, an event important enough to be covered by the national media. Usually in a solid state, the blood is expected to liquefy at this time; a failure for this to happen is taken as a sign of the saint's displeasure, portending disaster for the city such as earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, reflecting Naples' location on a geological hotspot.

difference being the fact that relics are perceived, or can be perceived, as assuming a different ontological status as objects of essence rather than of representation, or at least inviting such a blurring of boundaries. As a result, they are hedged in by pro- and prescriptions in a way that other sacramentals are not and which profoundly influences their authentication and distribution and establishes a clear hierarchy among such objects.

These practical considerations shaped the design of further research. As it was difficult to identify potential informants or entry points for participant observation within a local neighbourhood, a greater reliance on institutional contacts, commercial channels and online investigations seemed more promising. Theoretical reflections also underpinned this decision: firstly, starting my study with the relic trade on eBay immediately raised questions over networks and their negotiations rather than over practices embedded within locally bounded units. Secondly, and even more fundamentally, taking a material culture perspective suggested an object-centred approach. Yet to explore the role of a saint or relic within a local community would likely have inverted this perspective – the object seen through the prism of a community and its structures of kinship, class, work, gender, age and other such categories that render a community specific to its place and time. Such studies, of course, are viable, worthwhile and often rich in detail and tell us a lot about people and their practices²⁰. But what do *objects* want? Gosden (2005), taking his cue from Mitchell (1996), posed this question as a way to foreground the agency of objects as a theoretical concern, against the common assumption that casts objects as the passive screen of human action and meaning-making. Objects, of course, do not want anything in a sense that would impute intentionality; they are indifferent. Yet this very indifference, it seems to me, is exactly what makes them powerful as fetishes, that is to say: as entities that, while not caring about human desires and actions, are able to structure these desires and actions to a greater or lesser extent, and partly independently of human agency – in its muteness and lack of empathy the object provokes response. The notion of the fetish, of course, is complex and often controversial. In a series of seminal articles – significantly entitled 'The *problem* of the fetish' (emphasis added) –

²⁰ See, for example, Herzfeld (2009) on the Roman quarter of Monti; McKeivitt (1991) on Padre Pio's shrine-town of San Giovanni Rotondo; Mitchell (1998) on the feast of St Paul at the Maltese capital of Valletta; or Christian (1989 [1972]) on religion and society in rural northern Spain.

Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988) traced its origins to the intercultural encounters between European (Portuguese) merchant adventurers and West African societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pitching 'radically heterogeneous social systems' against each other, the fetish appears as a figure, a material object that is capable to embody 'simultaneously and sequentially ... religious, commercial, aesthetic and sexual values' (Pietz, 1985: 7), revealing their contingent nature. It is characterized by its 'irreducible materiality' – that is to say, its literal rather than figurative or representational presence – and its 'ordering power', fixing (or fixating) a specific originating event in time and place (Pietz, 1985: 7). I will return to the fetish and its role in religious practice again in chapter VII.

At this point it must suffice to point out that, seen as such a kind of entity, the relic no longer belongs purely to a specific local setting but should rather be studied through the permutations of a network, allowing me to trace the constitution of value and values in contested spaces – which raises the issue of the field and its demarcations. To work primarily within the classical ethnographic locale – the socially and, by implication, spatially bounded unit – would have posed different questions and yielded different data. It also seems to me that attempting something like an anthropology, if not 'of Catholicism' (quite some undertaking), but at least 'about Catholicism' should invite work not so much through the local perspective – perhaps the anthropological default position – but from a bird's eye perspective, given that the Catholic Church understands itself explicitly as universalistic and centralistic. This does not mean that local specificities can or should be erased in support of an idealized institutional self-image or subjected to some kind of evolutionary narrative that would cast the local as a primitive other that is yet to develop into its higher, official form. But it does mean that any kind of formation – social, material, ideological – calling itself 'Catholic' can only do so in relation to the demands and protocols of a watchful central authority that has rarely hesitated to exercise its power on the local level as far as it could. The relic/fetish activates and actualizes such issues of meaning and authority across spatial and institutional boundaries; its 'distributedness' therefore should be matched by a methodologically approach that is equally distributed across the networks formed by places, institutions, technologies and individuals, and that foregrounds the object.

One way of tracing such networks was by doing online research, which in my case focused strongly on the eBay auction website. For years, eBay has been served as a platform for the circulation of religious objects (among myriad other objects, obviously), with thousands of listings at any given time advertising devotionalia of various traditions. Of these, relics (or objects described as such; the strict sense of the term does not necessarily cover all of them) routinely account for between 200 and 400 listings on eBay's US site. Further listings, though much fewer in numbers, I often found on the Italian and German sites. Over time it also became noticeable that a number of non-US sellers, especially among the Italians, increasingly listed their objects on the US site.

Doing online research, or even an online ethnography, poses its own methodological and theoretical challenges. Most basically, as Hine (2000: chapter 2) points out, the Internet can be understood as either (or both) a culture in itself or as a cultural artefact, suggesting a sort of conceptual two-way traffic between the offline circumstances of its use and the online social space that emerges through its use. In my own research this weave of meaning often surfaced as a tension between or suspicion of users' actions and their interpretations: buyers would point out the mercenary, venal aspects of a website that was not simply commercial, but, in fact, because of the auction mechanism, pitted them against each other, a practice all the more problematic as it blurred boundaries between sacred and profane. There was also suspicion of the traders' authority and integrity: did they sell the 'real thing'? Would they knowingly offer fakes? Did they appreciate the religious or symbolic value of their merchandise or were they just in it for the money? eBay appears here as a space marked by competition, self-interest and secularism, even sacrilege. At the same time, many buyers, while expressing these concerns, would still use eBay because it enhanced their agency as religious subjects: it offered a way to circumvent the general hesitancy of the Church to make relics accessible, and it allowed trawling the offers of dozens of traders across geographical boundaries, in this way transcending both institutional and spatial limitations. At the same time, therefore, that eBay abetted the dispersal of a particular heritage – 'Catholicism for sale' – it helped to reassemble it. It is at this point that we can see how the conceptual spaces of 'culture' and 'cultural artefact' are being stitched together again: Internet technology is being used within and in turn affects a traditionalist Catholic milieu, concerned with issues of

heritage, memory, orthodoxy and the disturbing transformations between symbolical and commercial value.

Taking on the role of both buyer and seller on eBay allowed for participant observation as I set up regular contacts with a handful of traders, but I would also receive feedback from potential or actual buyers. To encourage such responses and give them a more systematic and coherent form I included a brief description of my research and a questionnaire in my listings, which drew in a number of replies. In some cases this developed into an ongoing e-mail exchange, most notably with two relic ministries that I describe in greater detail in sections V.iv and VI.v Observing the relic trade on eBay also included an exploration of the listings in terms of the objects on offer, narrative strategies of their descriptions, and prices, but also the formation of networks between repeat sellers and buyers (traceable through eBay's feedback and evaluation function), the attempts at intervention by critics of the relic trade (messages displayed on sellers' listings and their response), and the self-presentation of sellers on their 'about me' pages (another inbuilt eBay function). These traces would frequently lead to further online sources, for example the websites of relic ministries, which often described in great detail the groups' activities and explicitly outlined their religious positions, or to online merchants of religious goods more broadly. Again, these often contained implicit or explicit statements on devotional practices and beliefs.

Religious practices thus appear as and through networks rather than as spatially circumscribed, even though space does remain an important factor. Yet it is for me, theoretically as well as methodologically, only the starting point from which to branch out. It is the arena in which and through which certain objects are imbued with potency and significance.

'The tendency to treat the field site as a place which one goes to and dwells within reinforces the idea of culture as something which exists in and is bounded by physical space. This tendency is exacerbated by the historical roots of anthropology in the study of relatively isolated communities, and by the continuing practice of concentrating on a particular region.' (Hine, 2000: 58)

Rome, and Italy more generally, were a necessary spatial site of research to start from, as it was here that I could meet some of the actors who occupy central points of the networks I tried to chart: the churches that possess (and lose) relics; the Church officials who create and authenticate, distribute or withhold them; or the dealers, some of whom would also reappear on eBay. But the ethnographic object proper of this study is the dispersed object in motion, as it simultaneously activates and is activated by a religious imaginary within a specific historical and institutional context, that of post-Conciliar Catholic devotionism. It is therefore more about 'following connections' than about a 'period of inhabitation' (Hine, 2000: 60).

ii. Material forms of devotion in local practice

Before I do so, however, and explore the Roman 'relic-scape', I feel that it is necessary briefly to shift the perspective of my study from the viewpoint of the centre to local practices, so as to avoid reproducing the self-image of the Catholic hierarchy or the Vatican curia. For while the Catholic Church obviously *is* a centralized and hierarchical institution, it also exists always in and through the local and its specificities, refracted by diverse cultures and histories. I will trace such local European Catholic practices of devotion and the making of saints through three related themes of embodiment (with a particular accent on food and eating), emplacement, and ritual. Obviously, given the vast field and the equally substantial literature on these themes this can be no more than a sketch.

a) Embodiment

In *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve*, Pina-Cabral (1986) explores the worldview of the peasants of the Alto Minho region in northern Portugal. Faced with the contradiction inherent in Christian thought between immanence and transcendence – the problem of living and expressing the privileged state of immateriality or spirituality through the physical body – Minhotos have recourse to certain kinds of intermediate figures, the 'non-eaters', as Pina-Cabral terms

them, and the incorrupt corpse²¹. As they refuse food either completely or, sometimes, live off the sacramental host as their only form of nourishment (a phenomenon known as *inedia*), the significance of the non-eaters, according to Pina-Cabral, lies in their liminal status between life and death: '[T]hey do not participate in those bodily functions that characterize humans in this fallen world. Thus, while being alive, their bodies in effect behave as if they were dead' (1996: 234). In this way, they come to reconcile, or attempt to do so, the dichotomy between the notions of the spiritual and the physical: physical existence with its bodily demands and temptations is equated with corruption and, ultimately, spiritual death. On the other hand, salvation, and thus spiritual, eternal life, is attained through the contempt of the body and renunciation of its needs – the fundamental principle of (Christian) asceticism. Given their liminal status that manages to intertwine physical existence with spiritual life, they are seen to be capable of interceding with the divine for the ordinary believer.

The significance of food – both its consumption and the abstention from it – for the shaping of Christian (female) piety is extensively discussed by Bynum (1987, 1996), who explores practices of feasting, fasting and Eucharistic devotion in the Middle Ages and up to the early modern period. As she argues, food is intimately connected to images of the body and its symbolic manipulation. Yet against a dualist understanding of asceticism as merely the rejection of physicality, Bynum develops a more complex picture. She highlights how the polysemous value of food is predicated on the basic formulation of 'food equals body' (1987: 251), drawing together an intricate web of symbolic associations. In the Eucharist as the central ritual of the Christian faith, God becomes 'food-that-is-body': 'In becoming flesh, God takes on humanity, and that humanity saves, not by being but by being broken' (1987: 251). In Christ, physicality thus becomes not the opposite, but the means of spirituality. In its nourishing form, Christ's body assumes female connotations that play on the traditional gender roles of women as mothers, feeding the infant with their own substance, the milk of their breast, and housewives, preparing food in the kitchen – two models that can both draw on scripture and hagiography in the figures of St Martha, the patron of housekeepers,

²¹ It should be noted here, however, that both figures are by no means specific to the Alto Minho, but instead are common topoi in Catholic (Christian) popular belief and hagiography quite generally.

and, above all, the Virgin Mary as she feeds the child Christ. In turn, (female) mystics elaborated on these conceptions through bodily mortifications and manipulations, clearly understanding their body as a locus of sacrality. By denying themselves the common pleasures of eating, mystics could fuse their suffering with that of Christ Crucified – a suffering, however, that was not only (or even primarily) seen as suppression, the destruction of the body to release, protect or purge the spirit, but as a genuinely generative process. As Christ took on suffering in his physical body, this body became redemptive and nourishing, thus taking on the symbolic value of food – a concept drastically expressed in a vision of St Colette of Corbie (1381-1447) to whom Christ appeared in the form of a plate filled with cut meat (Bynum, 1996: 148).

In a way similar to the non-eaters, the incorrupt body, that is to say: a corpse that for some reason or other remains intact after death²², also assumes a liminal, mediating position in the economy of immanence and transcendence. In the case discussed by Pina-Cabral (1986), such bodies are usually encountered in the course of reburial, which customarily takes place after about three to five years when the body can be expected to have been reduced to mere bones, marking the complete separation of the dead from the community of the living. The interpretation of an incorrupt body varies, depending on what is known about the moral characteristics of the deceased, as both great sinfulness and sanctity may place the person outside the natural order of things: too many unexpiated sins, understood as a kind of debt, may tie the individual to the world and thus prevent his or her separation from the living, signified by the continual existence of the body (which the dead should not normally have). Inversely, incorruptibility can also signify purity of life and thus mark the body of a saint. Since physical corruption is the consequence of man's fallen status due to original sin, the triumph over sin by the saint preserves his or her body from decay, a notion anticipated by the belief in the bodily assumption into heaven of the Virgin Mary (a notion current in Christian thought since the sixth century and dogmatically formulated by Pius XII in 1950). Such an incorrupt body may become the focus of popular veneration, a kind of local counterpoint to the official system of relic

²² 'Incorrupt', while routinely used, is a somewhat euphemistic term. Hagiographies often stress the 'life-like' appearance of the saint, discovered intact weeks, months or even years after death; however, the bodies one finds on display are often better described as mummified, i.e. discoloured and desiccated.

circulation that places the Church hierarchy and its institutions at the centre. Local priests, Pina-Cabral (1986: 231) writes, are often 'loath to accept incorruptibility as a necessary sign of sanctity' and quickly try to rebury the body, though public pressure can prevent this, in which case the body may be put on permanent display as the centre of local shrine. Woodward makes the same point (1993: 101; my translation) when saying that 'even today the faithful are captivated by this tradition [of incorruptibility], although the officials of the Congregation [for the Causes of Saints] are not.' Yet he also states that the discovery of an incorrupt body can kindle interest in the cause of a candidate for sainthood, thus potentially feeding back into official procedures.

b) Emplacement and ritual

Where Pina-Cabral looks at the role of the physical body in local saint-making processes, Christian (1989 [1972]) explores the role of landscape as it becomes entwined with local religious practices. In a Durkheimian vein (though without explicit reference), he relates the social units of his field – the villages of the Nansa valley in northern Spain – to 'territories of grace', the area over which a particular shrine, respectively the image of the saint inhabiting it, exercises its influence:

'For the human community that lives in its territory of grace the shrine image comes to symbolize the landscape and activities on which the identity is based. The shrines are seen by the people in the territory of grace as assuring the successful prosecution of the vital activities of the group.' (Christian, 1989 [1972]: 44).

While shrine images are the at centre of local communal practices – annual *fiestas*, processions and rounds of pilgrimage – that engender particular group identities, these activities are overlaid or complemented by what Christian calls 'generalized devotions' (1989 [1972]: 46). They are religious practices that are not attached to a specific place in the geography of the valley, but to a translocal cult, typically fostered since the Middle Ages by similarly translocal institutions, such as the mendicant orders or the Vatican. The difference between the two concepts,

Christian (1989 [1972]: 46-7) argues, is crucial: where the 'shrine image seems to engage the social self of its devotees', the generalized devotions encourage a 'personal interest in redemption and salvation.' The shrine images are not interchangeable, they exist only within, and perhaps through, their specific locale, through their anchored materiality in space, whereas the generalized devotions do not. The two modes of devotion exist side by side, although Christian notes the progressing decline of localized devotions, the result of modernization processes: as local identities become subsumed into larger units owing to improved transportation and the mass media, the fortunes of local shrines have tended to wane, superseded by sanctuaries with a regional appeal. There is also the impact of a younger generation of priests, trained in post-Conciliar theology, who often radically downplay the importance of shrine images (1989 [1972]: 182-7).

Relics play no role in Christian's account, yet he does explore how people form intimate relationships with saints, the Virgin Mary or Christ through ritual practices. Central among these are more or less formalized 'devotions' (plural), here understood as an act of worship, such as the saying of a prayer or a novena, which also reflect 'devotion' (singular), understood as a general attitude of reverence accorded to a divine figure (1989 [1972]: 47). Christian further distinguishes between the intentions behind acts of devotion, which may be of a generalized affective nature or be performed in a more instrumental way, as fulfilment of pledges made, as penance and asking of forgiveness, or for the attainment of a specific objective, such as healing and protection. In all these invocations, the saints come to stand in as powerful, benevolent protectors, yet also as human figures, approachable like a friend or parent, inviting not just reverence, but a more intimate relationship. At the same time, these devotional practices reflect (and probably reproduce) social structures, notably gender roles: women are more likely to choose a personal patron saint and maintain an active devotional life, revolving as much around private acts of communication with the divine as around family activities (for example the domestic rosary in the evening, or arranging for mass to be said in church during a household crisis). A similar example is provided by Mitchell (1998), who also links the production of specific identities to religious practice and bodily engagements. In his case, the *festa* of St Paul in Valletta, Malta, a specific male identity is reproduced through participation in carrying a statue of the saint in procession. By integrating routine

expressions of masculinity, a *habitus* in Bourdieu's (1990) sense, with the extraordinary event of ritual performance, ritual comes to be seen as a social as well as bodily practice. In fact, carrying the heavy statue results in the appearance of a characteristic callus on the shoulder of the carrier, thus literally inscribing social position, gender and religious practice on the body.

c) Local practices and the limitations of a concept

Sources such as these provide an ethnographic bottom-up perspective, emphasizing local practice as well as alternative modes of interaction with the sacred – embodied, though not necessarily centred on relics or the body of a saint, but engaging other material instantiations such as landscape, images or the bodies of ordinary believers. Or, where the body of a saint is involved, as in the case of the incorrupt corpse or the non-eater, they show how concepts of sanctity are produced on a local level, potentially (though not necessarily) in contradiction to official definitions.

However, to reconnect this section back to the focus of my study, I would argue that it is potentially misleading to see these practices only as *alternative* materializations of the sacred, for such a characterization runs the risk of setting up a too easy a dichotomy, long since criticized in historiography as a reification of modernist reformers (e.g. Brown, 1982, among others). For want of a better expression, the term 'popular piety' is still widely used (but see Primiano, 1995), yet popular and elite practices, while increasingly drifting apart since the early modern period and the Enlightenment, continue to share substantial common ground, allowing not only for conflict (which is also clearly manifest in the sources), but also for co-optation and exchange. I would hesitate to isolate the veneration accorded to a shrine image or to the incorrupt body of a holy woman from official norms, just as official norms will always be realized within a specific local context²³.

²³ As an aside: In this respect I find Christian's account somewhat contradictory. He makes a very pointed distinction between valley shrines and generalized devotions: 'The phenomena stand in sharp contrast ... [The chapels] do not budge. They are the cultural contribution of the valley to the repertoire of devotion [...] they have a function that is primeval. They are virtually totem objects, embodying in some way the essence of the humanity of their devotees' (1989 [1972]: 99f). This, I think, is overstated – most of them are consecrated to some appellation of the Virgin Mary, whose cult is deeply intertwined

This holds true for devotional and liturgical traditions generally and it also holds true for the veneration of saints and their relics more particularly. In fact, while the official process of canonization is ultimately finalized and authorized by the Vatican – all roads do indeed lead to Rome –, the first step must be taken at the local level. Official procedure explicitly recognizes this: it is mandatory that the call for a canonization should come from the faithful and grow organically over time out of the local community as it responds to the *fama sanctitatis*, the reputation for saintliness, of the individual that has lived and died (and is often buried) within this community. The making of a saint thus remains, at least initially, a grass-roots affair, which develops into a negotiation between local and translocal norms as the process is recognized by and passes through the official procedures. The cases of Alexandrina da Costa (de Balazar) (1904-1955) and Therese Neumann (1898-1962), also mentioned briefly by Pina-Cabral as a non-eater (1986: 233), illustrate this interplay that combines (or seeks to combine, and in the end sublate) elements of 'popular' and 'official', 'periphery' and 'centre', 'tradition' and 'innovation', or 'Rome' and 'local Catholicism'. Da Costa, apart from her inedia, was also noted for her ecstatic re-enactments of the Passion of Christ, this despite the fact that she had been paralysed since the age of 14, when she had jumped out of a window trying to escape an attempted rape. Much the same can be said about Therese Neumann, of Konnersreuth in Bavaria, Germany, whose stigmata and dramatic ecstasies have been documented in a series of rather gruesome pictures. It would therefore seem more correct to regard the practice of fasting, on which Pina-Cabral focuses, as only one component in a range of somatic expressions of a particular 'popular' piety that exists either below the radar of the Church hierarchy or in a, sometimes tense, dialectic with it, revolving around culturally and historically specific ('heterodox') notions of holiness, space, body and materiality. Bynum also lifts the topic of fasting from the local and

with wider Church politics and general liturgical and devotional changes; to see the shrines as somehow autochthonous seems therefore questionable to me. Also, many of them may well have been built or endowed by elite patrons or been dependent on monasteries, to regard them as just a manifestation of 'popular' religiosity would thus be a simplification. Secondly, Christian also states that 'the two systems have been adulterated by each other' (1989 [1972]: 101), an observation that is hard to reconcile with the first statement, especially as it becomes clear that the chapels do indeed 'budge', with many having lost their following and significance over the past 40 or 50 years. Ultimately, therefore, I do not find the distinction between generalized and localized devotions very clear – historically, the two categories seem too fuzzy to me, even if they work as categories of how people organized their religious practice at the time of Christian's fieldwork.

popular level, framing it as a phenomenon found widely across medieval and early modern Europe and reflected upon in theological writing, both by hagiographers and sometimes, when literate, by the fasting women themselves (1987: chapters 4 and 5). Pina-Cabral (1986) himself actually interprets much of the veneration accorded to non-eaters and incorrupt bodies through a prism of 'high' theology and anthropological theories on myth and liminality. We learn little what these saintly figures actually do for and mean to the Alto Minho peasants, although it can be surmised that they act as intercessors in life crises such as illnesses, while there are also references to the reproduction of gender roles (for example in the stronger valorization of sexual purity in women than in men). Such concerns may indeed be more important at the local level than to the Church hierarchy, which will either downplay such cults or, if taking an interest in them, will usually seek to reinterpret them. The case of Alexandrina da Costa provides an example for this: as a non-eater, she became the focus of localized veneration, expressing popular ideas about the appearance of holiness in an idiom of bodily mortification and extravagant somatic phenomena resonant among her community. Her own writings and sayings revolve strongly about notions of suffering and atonement, showing her as an example of the 'vicarious penitent' or 'victim soul', a fairly common type of female sanctity in Romanic cultures. This type is still accepted to some extent, though it is often at odds with official post-Conciliar conceptions of sainthood that favour figures who can invite emulation in the ordinariness, rather than the hard-to-imitate extraordinariness, of their lives (Woodward, 1993: 133, 204-7, 211-21). Yet at the same time, da Costa's piety also reflects aspects of the theology of her time as disseminated by missionaries (Woodward, 1993: 212, 216), so it cannot be seen as merely an expression of local notions of holiness. What is more, despite their traditional(ist) or 'popular' appearance, causes such as da Costa's continue to feed into the official saint-making process, for the simple reason that there is a demand for their model of holiness. Da Costa's cause, for example, was introduced quite soon after her death, in 1967, successfully leading to her beatification in 2004. Rather than positing a dichotomy between local and generalized devotions or practices, it would therefore seem more accurate to speak of a negotiated exchange. At this point, relics proper as well as 'fourth-class relics', also make a reappearance, distributing the saint (or saint-to-be) between the local and the global, be it through objects

offered on eBay, made available by devotees who maintain websites dedicated to the individual, or circulated by official sources (see, for example, the numerous websites dedicated to da Costa; or the website of the diocese of Ratisbon, Germany, where the faithful can order devotional literature, holy cards and candles with the image of Therese Neumann).

After this excursion, I will in the following section explore Rome as a 'relic-scape', that is to say: as an assemblage of sacred space and religious material culture.

iii. Rome as a 'relic-scape'

For nearly 2,000 years Rome has been a centre of Christianity, respectively of Catholicism. It was among the most important early Christian communities, its bishop gaining political and theological pre-eminence within the Church from the fourth century onwards. Yet Rome is embedded within a wider geography of the sacred. Even among Catholic countries Italy is notable for the density of its population of saints. Virtually every town has its own local saint – an early Christian martyr, a revered medieval bishop, a holy friar or miracle-working nun – their collectivity forming a spatio-temporal grid, with Rome, as the temporal and spiritual seat of the papacy, at its centre. With this position come the attendant material and administrative structures: literally hundreds of chapels, churches, oratories and monasteries; the offices of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints; the headquarters of most of the religious orders; archives and museums; a substantial population of clergy and religious. The sheer wealth of these institutions across Italy is overwhelming, with around 400 churches in Rome alone and an estimated 100,000 edifices all over the country that are in some way dedicated to the Catholic cult, containing perhaps 75% of Italy's total cultural heritage (Hersche, 1999: 226). Such an assemblage of Catholic heritage would appear to underpin Rothkrug's (1979) thesis on the durability of religious beliefs and practices as being conditioned by material structures. It is these structures within which relics exist, within which they are created, circulated and preserved, but also neglected, forgotten and abducted. Pilgrims have flocked here for fifteen centuries; over time vast amounts of capital have been spent by the Church, the nobility as well as middling families to establish, transform, reconstruct, enlarge,

and embellish Rome's sacred topography. In the *centro storico*, Rome's historical centre, it is virtually impossible to walk for five minutes without coming across a religious building. They have formed a cityscape that is possibly unique in the world, built over centuries like a coral reef. Relics have colonized this space like a form of microorganism, the objectified traces of religious practice and, quite literally, of its human practitioners. And, like microorganisms, some have thrived, forming part of living routines and traditions, while others have withered, vanished or become fossilized, as I will show in the following sections of this chapter.

Moving between individual churches, official agencies of the Vatican bureaucracy, and commercial channels I will try to stitch together some of the constituent elements of a devotional network, the further unfolding of which through eBay and the Internet I will then trace in chapter V.

a) Santa Maria Maddalena (La Maddalena)

Few people, neither clergy nor the faithful, still care much about the hundreds of nameless and fragmented relics that adorn the Cappella delle Reliquie at the church of Santa Maria Maddalena, usually just referred to as *La Maddalena*, in the heart of tourist Rome, just a few steps from the Pantheon. It is part of the headquarters of the Camillian Fathers, a sixteenth-century order devoted to the care of the sick, and by no means one of the must-see places, though still worth a visit, a rococo riot of angels and volutes (and as such a rare example of this style in Rome). The Cappella delle Reliquie is to the left of the main altar, a bit hidden and out of sight, quite small, not much more than an extension to the passageway that leads into the Camillians' motherhouse. Not until my third or fourth visit did I notice that the walls of the chapel are literally set with relics – on the side walls two large calendar reliquaries, two massive wooden frames in which tiny fragments are arranged in columns, day by day, according to the respective saint's feast. They are identified by date and name, yet in the gloom of the chapel the minuscule script is illegible, rendering them effectively anonymous. More relics are arrayed around the altar retable, this time identifiable pieces of bone. It is quite an extraordinary feature, yet even so I doubt that many casual visitors will spot it. The chapel is dimly lit and architecturally modest compared to the rest of the

church. A guidebook available from a little stall at the church dryly states that the chapel 'oggi non presente interesse artistico' ('today does not show anything of artistic interest') and mentions the relics' presence in half a sentence, but does not give any further information.

Yet while these relics may be examples of how material religion can 'fossilize', at the same church we also find relics alive and thriving. The Camillians have been rather successful over the past fifteen years to get members of their congregation through the saint-making process, with beatifications of Camillian Fathers or Sisters in 1994, 1997, 2001, and 2005. Their pictures have been placed on some of the side altars and third-class relics²⁴ of some of the recent blessed are often available at the church. Together with edifying pamphlets and brochures informing on the Camillians' history and global activities, I often found prayer cards with contact relics of Bl Luigi Tezza (1841-1923) and Bl Giuseppina Vannini (1859-1911), as well as little metal plates, just small enough for a wallet, with the embossed picture and a third-class relic of Bl Enrico Rebuschini (1860-1938). These are the kind of relic that can be reproduced ad infinitum, destined for wide and fast circulation among an extensive, unrestricted audience. Print runs of these cards can easily reach hundreds, if not thousands of copies, and in cases such as that of Padre Pio, as the postulator of his order told me, tens of thousands. They help to spread the fama sanctitatis of the blessed and, hopefully, stimulate devotion, inspire prayers for intercession that may result in the miracles required for canonization, and more generally make the individual, the congregation and its works more widely known, influence opinions and attitudes, perhaps even prompt donations or vocations.

Prayer cards, without relics, are also available of the founder saint, Camillo de Lellis (1550-1614), whose magnificent tomb is in the church and relics of whom are kept in the mother house next door, and of Nicola d'Onofrio (1943-1964), a recent and still pending cause. St Camillus – as a historical figure, inscribed into the organization he founded, officially commemorated in the Roman calendar, his iconography spread internationally throughout the order – is largely independent of such networks of communication and intercession,

²⁴ A 'third-class'-relic is usually cloth that has been touched to the remains of a saint, like the brandea mentioned in chapter II. The classification of relics as first-, second- and third-class is described in greater detail in section IV.iv.

respectively their material substrate, relics. To keep his charisma alive it is sufficient to provide pictures of him and his remains, rather than to give away the actual relics. *Santini*, little picture cards with holy images, are freely available, showing him assisting the sick or depicting 'il reliquiario con il cuore di S. Camillo', a sumptuous construction with two angels holding up a capsule with the heart under a gilded dome, housed in a silk-lined box. In contrast, Nicola d'Onofrio, currently listed as a 'servant of God', the first stage of the way to canonization, is still very much enmeshed in these networks: a biographical pamphlet (Ruffini, without year) sums up his exemplary life, gives excerpts from his writings, develops his particular charisma and quotes from the concluding session of the diocesan inquest into his life, which took place in June 2004, opening the way to the next steps in the beatification process. Should it proceed with positive results, it is likely enough that in a few years time prayer cards with contact relics will be available in the same way as those of Bl Luigi Tezza or Bl Giuseppina Vannini are now.

b) San Rocco

The church of San Rocco is located at the Foro Augusto Imperatore, just off Via del Corso, one of Rome's principal shopping streets and a buzzing promenade for locals and tourists alike. The edifice is inconspicuous – run-of-the-mill baroque, originally dating back to around 1500, with nineteenth-century additions. None of the top architects has worked on it, in fact the original architect is unknown, nor does it house any world-class art works. A curiosity is perhaps the chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, built to resemble the grotto at the French pilgrim site. One altar has been specially privileged, granting release from purgatory to one soul for each requiem mass said here. What makes San Rocco interesting is the fact that most of the side altars are furnished with reliquaries, either in twos or fours. They are of the typical eighteenth-century style silversmithing that is still very popular as contemporary specimens at the religious outfitters in Via dei Cestari show. The reliquaries atop the altars are just a part of the church's relic collection; a large cabinet in the sacristy holds further examples. San Rocco is not exceptional in this respect – it is the common furnishings of any religious establishment that has been going for a century or two (or longer).

Similar (and larger collections) can be found elsewhere, for example at Il Gesù and at San Crisogono, the former being the mother church of the Jesuit order, the other part of the headquarters of the Trinitarians. San Crisogono has a veritable treasure chamber that houses a substantial number of reliquaries, some of them quite large and elaborate. Religious institutions such as these quite naturally come to serve as gathering points for this kind of object: a pastor with the right connections, pious donations, inheritances from religious confraternities now perhaps defunct, but once attached to that particular church (San Rocco still is the home of a confraternity devoted to the saint that dates back to 1499), furnishings taken over from affiliated establishments that were closed down or merged, a cult to a particular saint once (or perhaps still) venerated at the church – these are different ways how religious institutions accumulate, over time, smaller or larger collections of religious objects, depending on their prominence and wealth, or that of their parishioners, and become depositories of material religion.

c) St Peter's and San Giovanni in Laterano

Yet both the humble and unremarkable as well as the grand and exceptional are enmeshed in this same topography of the sacred, San Rocco, which hardly figures in any tourist guide, as much as St Peter's: *Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum* ('Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven'). The words are found on the frieze just below the dome of St Peter's, spelling out in letters two metres high Rome's claim to authority, soaring over the alleged tomb of the apostle in an awe-inspiring materialization of the Biblical quote, forming an assemblage that comprises (debatable) scriptural exegesis, stone and gold, centuries of devotional practice, as well as the putative remains of Jesus' chief disciple, or at least some of them.

Belief in the apostle's burial on the Vatican hill has a long tradition, and excavations between 1940 and 1957 did reveal mausolea dating back to about 160 CE, one of which may have been a cult centre for a person named Peter, depending on the interpretation of a Greek inscription found on it (ΠΙΕΤΡ[ΟΣ] ΕΝΙ, which can be read as 'Peter is within'). Pius XII was convinced enough to announce the discovery of St Peter's tomb in 1950. Somewhat farcically, bones

found at the place were put into 'safe-keeping' by Monsignor Kaas, a confidant of the pope, and promptly forgotten. Accidentally rediscovered, anthropological analysis eventually identified them as the remains of a man of around 60 to 70 years of age – consistent with the apostle's age at his death –, which Paul VI (1963-1978) in 1968 declared to be the authentic remains of the saint. Neither the claim for the tomb, nor for the bones has been unequivocally accepted, and it is obviously impossible to determine with final certainty the relics' identity and movements over two millennia. For as it happens, relics of St Peter are not that difficult to come by, and they have been venerated in other places in Rome as well. *Non est in toto sanctior orbe locus* ('no holier place in all the world') – thus the words found over the altar of the Capella Sancta Sanctorum ('Holy of Holies'), once the private chapel of the popes and repository of the Church's most important relics. Among others, the purported head of St Peter was once kept here, though it is now to be found (together with the head of St Paul) at the nearby basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, the mother church of all Roman-Catholic churches in the world – raising the obvious question of exactly where this head came from, and when it was detached from its owner.

However, to the believer (and the scholar, although in a different way) these statements, places, buildings and objects form a network of mutual references that constitutes a well-structured space of authority and holiness – they refer to each other and have to be seen in relation to each other as well as to their outside, spaces less sacred and less authoritative. They are centre to the periphery, place of origin, and thus privileged over the places of destination. It is through relation to St Peter's, the Sancta Sanctorum and San Giovanni in Laterano that other – smaller, lesser – relics gain their significance. Among my own collection are two thecae, possibly one half of an original set of four, with purported apostle relics. If one is to believe the cedula, one of them contains a minute fragment of St Peter's remains (together with relics of St Paul, St Andrew and St James Major). The actual substance of the relic is not clearly identifiable; it could be a speck of bone, wood or stone. The seal bears a cardinal's coat of arms, though unfortunately I have been unable to identify it, which would have helped to pinpoint the origin and age of the reliquary. Judging by its style, I would assume that it was manufactured at some time in the second half of the nineteenth century, or perhaps slightly earlier. Unlikely as it seems, the relic's provenance need not be

altogether spurious; the *baldacchino* over the altar of San Giovanni in Laterano that holds the heads of Saints Peter and Paul was renovated in 1851 and it is conceivable that whatever fragments were found to have come off the main relic could have been broken up further and distributed.

d) The Vatican lipsanoteca at Santa Lucia in Selci

Another possibility is that my relic did not come directly from San Giovanni in Laterano, but from the so-called lipsanoteca, the official relic depository of the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome, yet another joint in the local and translocal relic network.

Housed until the 1920s in the Palazzo del Vicariato next to San Giovanni in Laterano, it has since been at Santa Lucia in Selci, a convent of Augustinian nuns in Via Selci 82. Despite the location between the Colosseum and the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, just a few steps off the busy thoroughfare of Via Cavour, the little side streets of the Esquiline hill are mostly overlooked by tourists. It is a residential neighbourhood, with a few ground floor workshops, still a typical sight in Italian towns, mostly car repairs, and, hidden very discreetly, Rome's oldest gay bar. With its ancient walls and small windows, the convent has a medieval rather than baroque feel and appears a bit forbidding. Santa Lucia itself is a small and little-known church, not even shown in my street map, dating back to at least the seventh century CE and occupied by the Augustinians since 1568. To enter it, one climbs a small flight of steps leading into a cool and shady atrium. On the left-hand side is the entrance to the actual church. On the right are a door, a bell and a barred window where callers report to the Sister porter before being buzzed into a parlour, a spacious, if rather gloomy, room, divided by a grille. Here the nuns receive their visitors.

Santa Lucia's lipsanoteca is the official 'relic bank' from which religious institutions worldwide are supplied with relics, typically for liturgical functions. As such, it was an obvious place of interest for me, yet as I was to find out actually getting there and speaking to the Sisters was anything but easy. It took several weeks of negotiations via letters and e-mails with the Vicariate until I was finally given permission to arrange a meeting with Sr C, who is in charge of the relic collection. While the lipsanoteca itself is not accessible as it is situated

within the nuns' enclosure, Sister – who, like many of the nuns at Santa Lucia, is a Philippina and speaks English – appeared quite happy to talk to me, if a bit bemused by my research project and by the bureaucratic stir my request had caused. As I learned, the nuns have relics of over 2,000 saints and blessed in their care, reaching back to early Christian times. (Although, Sister explained, relics belonging to saints dating back to the first five centuries are no longer supplied, as the Church now feels that their authentication cannot meet modern standards of historical credibility – in itself an interesting development, which perhaps can be seen as a redefinition of authority and authenticity in response to changing historical and devotional circumstances.)

The Sisters also prepare relics for new saints and blessed on order of various postulators. It is a labour-intensive and time-consuming business, but a source of income for the convent, even though unit prices are very low, up to €3 per finished theca and just a few cents for each prayer card: 'Laborare e mangiare', as Sr E put it, one of Sr C's co-religious. Listening to Sr C was a lesson in sacred, and not so sacred, economy that entwined devotional labour with practical realities: on the one hand, she and her co-Sisters are clearly dedicated to their work. I was shown a box full of thecae prepared for the impending beatification of Paul Josef Nardini (1821-1862; beatified in October 2006), with relatively simple, yet pretty decorations of gold wire. Another one, of St Cathérine Labouré (1806-1876; canonized in 1947), Sister had embellished for herself in quite a sumptuous way with gold wire and little flower ornaments. The preparation of thecae is clearly not just a way of earning a bit of money for the convent; it is also a labour of love in which devotion to the saintly persons whose remains the nuns handle mingles with pride in their handiwork and creativity. In Sr C's eyes there are certainly fine differences, as she (very humbly) belittled the thecae produced by one of the postulators I had spoken to and whose craftsmanship she found wanting. Sr C has been doing this kind of work for about 15 years, so it takes her no longer than two or three hours to prepare a theca, but it is an occupation that demands concentration and attention to detail as well as good eyesight and nimble fingers since dimensions are minute (the diameter of a typical theca is just about two centimetres). The same applies to the preparation of relics for prayer cards: normally contact relics consisting of cloth, the fabric is cut into scraps of barely a centimetre side length. A hole is punched into the card, a little piece of transparent

protective film is put over it on the back of the card, the relic placed upon the film and then a paper seal is affixed on top of it, holding the relic in place and confirming its authenticity. Luckily, paper seals are nowadays often self-adhesive, but on older cards the relic particle is sometimes stitched on with yarn and the seal, cut out by hand, normally had to be glued to it – a process that must have been much more time-consuming and messy. The thecae used by the Sisters are mass-produced, with Santa Lucia being supplied by D. Colombo & Figli S.p.a. of Noviglio (Milan), a leading Italian manufacturer of medals, key chains and similar metal objects, including reliquaries. In fact, religious objects account for about 80% of the company's business. Such thecae can be found in the religious goods shops around the Vatican at retail prices of €3 to €6. While small ad-hoc requests for relics can be dealt with by the postulators themselves, orders of larger batches, e.g. for an upcoming beatification or canonization, will usually be handed over to certain convents like that of Santa Lucia. In such a case, the postulator will provide the Sisters with the raw materials – the prayer cards, sometimes also the thecae (otherwise ordered by the Sisters and billed to the postulator), and, of course, the saintly remains. Sister showed me a piece of bone of Blessed Nardini, from which the nuns had chipped off the small slivers that had gone into the thecae.

I was told that until 2003 relics were available from the lipsanoteca with relative ease, as is also recounted by Cornwell who describes how he obtained a relic on an ad-hoc visit to Santa Lucia:

'This religious house is the center for the official repository of relics for the Catholic Church, and it is the only place in the world where Catholics may acquire relics that carry an official Vatican stamp of authenticity. Here in 1988 I ordered my relic of Saint Thérèse, patron saint of priests, one of the great exemplars of holiness for the late nineteenth century. It cost 3,000 lira, for the reliquary rather than the relic itself, the sale of which is banned as "simony"^[25].' (Cornwell, 2002: 225)

²⁵ The term simony denotes the sale or purchase of spiritual things, respectively in a wider sense any exchange of spiritualia for temporal gain and is most commonly applied to the

However, in response to an incident with a German relic collector, dealer and writer of popular history books, regulations have been severely tightened and relics are now practically unattainable for lay people. It so happened that the writer, having acquired after much pleading with Sr C a relic of the 'Column of the Flagellation', publicized his story in a book on the relics of the Lord's Passion (Hesemann, 2002), causing the lipsanoteca to be flooded with similar requests. To make matters worse, the donation Sister had received for the relic (properly speaking for the theca, as pointed out in the quotation above) was represented in a way that could be construed as a form of payment, giving the impression that the lipsanoteca's relics were, in fact, for sale. The episode caused considerable dismay in the Vicariate, the Sisters were sternly reprimanded and Sr C received a dressing-down from her mother superior. Since then, any requests for relics have to be made through the Vicariate and must be accompanied by a letter of reference from the applicant's local ordinary. By no means are the Sisters to give away any relics on their own accord. The effect was, as one informant stated, that

[i]n this way it has practically become impossible for a common layperson to get into the possession of a relic authenticated by Rome, as already the bishops are little disposed to lose time with writing out references; furthermore, Monsignor Frisina [the competent official at the Vicariate, director of the Liturgical Office], for his part, tends to leave unanswered all cases in which the relics are not expressly destined for public veneration.' (Guido, pers. comm., 2007; my translation).

e) The Capuchin *curia generalizia*

The Sisters of Santa Lucia, apart from safekeeping the Vatican's lipsanoteca, prepare relics en bloc for upcoming beatifications or canonizations, usually on commission of some religious order or other. It was therefore an obvious step to try and gain some insight into the activities of a postulator general, the official charged by his order with the administration of pending causes. In this capacity, it

purchase of religious offices, such as that of a bishop. It derives from the name of Simon Magus, who, according to Acts 8: 18-24, offered to buy St Peter's charismatic powers.

is the postulator general who signs the authenticating documents that have to accompany a relic, it is he (or an authorized assistant) who arranges for the preparation of relics with a community such as Santa Lucia, and who often deals with requests for particular relics of saints from his order.

On a cold, but sunny day shortly before Christmas 2005 I thus visited the *curia generalizia*, or general headquarters, of the Capuchin friars. A relatively modern redbrick building in Via Piemonte, it was here that I was received by the order's postulator general, Fr Florio Tessari, and Fr Gandolf Wild, archivist and second vice-secretary, who kindly acted as an interpreter. Perhaps the most interesting part of the interview was the inspection of Fr Florio's office and the Capuchins' relic chapel. In the office, large metal filing cabinets contained hundreds of relics, mostly second- and third-class, of dozens of Capuchin saints and blessed in alphabetical order, kept in small folded papers. On Fr Florio's desk sat a stack of authentics, the documents that have to accompany any relic meant for public veneration. Usually pre-printed and in Latin, the competent official simply has to fill in information on the actual substance of the relic and a description of the theca, then sign and stamp the document with his seal of office. The entries are formulaic and standardized – such as 'from the bone' (*ex ossibus*), 'from the clothing' (*ex indumentis*) or 'from the ashes' (*ex cineribus*), with the theca usually being 'of metal' and 'a round shape' (*ex metallo, figurae rotundae*), 'glass-covered' (*crystallo occlusa*), 'bound by red-coloured thread' (*filo serico rubri coloris ligata*) and 'sealed with the seal of our office' (*sigillo muneris nostri obsignata*). Also on the desk a box full of exactly such thecae, which can be bought *en gros* from manufacturers of religious goods, though they are also available to tourists from the shops near the Vatican where they sell for €3 or €4 apiece. And sheets of pre-printed cedulae, ready to be cut off and glued underneath it inside the theca. The service performed by the Sisters of Santa Lucia is here repeated on a small scale, as Fr Florio only deals with ad-hoc queries – a specific relic requested by a Capuchin community, say, or some bishop with a devotion to a particular saint – rather than large-scale preparation of relics for an upcoming beatification of which the Sisters take care.

The order's relic chapel, which I was shown afterwards, functions in a similar way. Established by one of Fr Florio's predecessors in the 1950s, it is a small room of maybe three by four metres. The walls are wood-panelled, a

window overlooking the inner courtyard, though the blinds that day were shut leaving the room in dim light. One wall is taken up with an altar on which sit statues of the Virgin Mary and various Capuchin saints, the ceiling is covered by a fresco. Into the wall panels are cut dozens of little niches, each illuminated with a little electrical candle and containing a small wooden box reliquary, each bearing a label identifying its content as the relic of this or that Capuchin saint. In between the niches, dozens, possibly hundreds of thecae are set into the wall, holding further relics of holy Capuchins. The chapel is in active use and mass is celebrated regularly here. Yet its main function is as the order's official relic collection and, occasionally, a stockpile for relic requests. There is, for example, a quite substantial store of *ex indumentis* relics of Padre Pio. The atmosphere of the chapel, at least for me, was rather magical, even a bit uncanny. Somewhat irreverently I thought of the traders on eBay to whom this chapel would appear like a treasure cave – hundreds of relics, many of them rare, many of them first class, highly marketable, easily worth a five-digit figure. For the Capuchins, the chapel's significance is, of course, not of a monetary nature (although for medieval monasteries precious reliquaries were one possible way to store wealth; wealth that could be rendered liquid in times of hardship). It is a place that gathers in a tangible way the order's history, achievement and piety. Begun as a reform branch of the Franciscans in the 1520s, the Capuchins, after some initial difficulties, rapidly spread over Italy, Europe and its colonies, becoming a vanguard institution of the Catholic Reformation. Active as missionaries and popular preachers, they reached their peak around 1760 with 34,000 members in 1,700 communities. The history of the order's saints goes back to St Felix of Cantalice (1513-1587), buried in the nearby church of the *Immacolata Concezione*, the first Capuchin to be canonized (in 1712, although already Sixtus V [1585-1590] had intended to declare him a saint, indicating a strong reputation for holiness among his contemporaries). The relic chapel at the curia generalizia gathered and continues to gather this history of Capuchin holiness from the times of St Felix up to the present with relics of Padre Pio, who has become one of, if not *the* most popular saint in Italy today. And it is likely to grow further, with dozens of Capuchin causes currently pending²⁶.

²⁶ The order's website at www.ofmcap.org lists about 50 causes in progress, the site of the

f) Street markets and antiques dealers

Religious orders, such as the Camillian Fathers or the Capuchins, or the *lipsanotheca* represent, from the Church's point of view, the legitimate distribution channels of relics – either of contact relics through the medium of prayer cards, or of body relics to those entitled to their possession or with the right connections. In contrast, the commercial sector – street markets, antiques shops – offers unregulated access, often to the dismay of ecclesiastic authorities, but also, as we will see, with clerical collusion.

Porta Portese is one of Rome's oldest street markets, certainly the largest with up to 1,500 stalls, and a genuine Roman institution. Always busy, on fine days the streets are positively jam-packed with shoppers and flaneurs. It is located in Trastevere, traditionally a somewhat scruffy working-class district, which in more recent years has been undergoing a process of gentrification. Stretching out from the eponymous Piazza Porta Portese, it grew out of a thriving black market after the Second World War and is held every Sunday between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. Its counter-cultural roots are still reflected in its relatively open and unsupervised structures that today allow a substantial number of immigrants, not always with visa and work permit, to earn a (modest) living as traders. The market offers virtually everything – from clothing to second hand records, from mattresses to pets, from cheap Chinese electronics to antiques. And as unlikely the setting seems, even relics can be found here. For those in the know (or those who simply stumble across her stock), Signora A is the purveyor of choice. She is a genuine *Romana di Roma*, born and bred in the city (a circumstance that tended to made communication somewhat difficult, given my own rather basic grasp of Italian and her habitual use of dialect), living in Casilino, one of the modern suburbs that are usually shunned by tourists. In her late sixties when I first met her, Signora A is a rather formidable lady and certainly qualifies as *furba*, shrewd, as Italians would say. She has had a stall in Porta Portese for 35 years, selling mostly vintage costume jewellery and small *objéts*, but with a nice little sideline in relics.

Tellingly enough, her stall was located immediately in front of the house where I stayed during my first few weeks in Rome, although initially I walked

Italian province of the order at www.fraticappuccini.it lists over 100.

past it without noticing my good luck. I was just about to go back in when I cast a glance at her stall – and froze. At the time I had been in Rome for just over a week, and relics – at least for sale or otherwise accessible to private interests – had proved more elusive than expected. Yet here they were, a jumbled collection of various sizes and styles, surrounded by necklaces and rings, little trinkets of silverware, brooches, medals and the like; I still remember the tight feeling in the stomach, the typical sensation of the collector when suddenly spotting the hunted object. Yet that day I contained my covetousness and simply spent a few minutes at the stall, eventually buying the first of a number of pieces I acquired from Signora A over the coming months: a possible bone splinter of St Emygdus, said to have been born in Trier, Germany, and later bishop of Ancona, on the Italian Adriatic, martyred in 304, in a theca of probably late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century origin, decorated with *papier roulé* and silver wire, authenticated by a well-preserved wax seal on the back, clearly showing the coat of arms of a bishop; a pretty minor saint, yet whose reputation as a patron against earthquakes has helped to spread his cult as far as Los Angeles and San Francisco. It was a difficult choice – Signora A obviously knew the going rate of such objects and at €70 I could afford only one, so I had to leave behind other desirable pieces, like a relic of Camillo de Lellis (which I bought much later), a Caterina de'Ricci (1522-1590) (also bought eventually), or a splinter from the skull of St John the Baptist (*ex cranio*, according to the cedula), a gem that, unfortunately, escaped me. Over the weeks that followed I became a regular presence at Signora A's stall. While it was difficult enough to explain to her in my rudimentary Italian what I was doing, my regular custom certainly did a lot to alleviate her suspicions, and I felt that after some time she began to indulge my curiosity, to the point that eventually she even invited me to her flat to conduct business and answer my questions without the distraction of other customers. As she told me, the relics came mostly from a church in the Abruzzi region, sold to her by the local parson to raise money for the parish. She added that this was happening with the consent of the relevant Vatican authorities, a statement I did not question, although it seemed highly improbable to me. Presumably, it was meant to assuage any scruples Signora A might have suspected me of, or as a disclaimer covering her against any allegations of wrongdoing. When I followed this up with an official at the Vicariate, I was told, not surprisingly, that the claim to ecclesiastical authorization

was certainly untrue since relics may never, under any circumstances whatsoever, be sold.

Signora A has a few regular customers, among them a number of 'preti americani', American priests, presumably employed in the Vatican bureaucracy or attached to the Pontifical North American College, which chimes with what I had been told in the meantime by a few antiques dealers with shops in the city centre. Occasionally, someone would buy a piece because it held a special meaning to him or her ('for example, someone will find a St Anthony of Padua and buy it because he's a devotee'), but this is rather the exception. The impression is that most customers are moved more by historical or antiquarian motives, or by a sense of religious concern that is, however, not necessarily bound up with a devotion to a specific saint. Perhaps this concern is best described as a kind of loyalty towards a traditional form of piety, or a nostalgia for these now marginalized traditions, or, an expression I have repeatedly encountered when speaking to devout lay Catholics, a desire to 'rescue' relics from oblivion, maltreatment and desecration. I will more fully explore these motivations and the various meanings relics hold in chapters V and VI.

To what extent Signora A gave me a true account, or in which parts she was knowingly dishonest, what details she may simply have held back, or what parts I missed due to language problems is a matter of informed speculation. For sure, the claim to official permission is untrue, though I cannot say who made it up – Signora A or her supplier – or for whose benefit it was made up. Asked whether she herself felt any unease about the sale of these sacred objects or about ecclesiastical sanctions, she dismissed the question with flippant gesture, which I take to suggest that she is quite aware of the theologically dubious aspects of the trade, but robustly indifferent to them, an attitude that need not surprise. While 'Italy is Catholicism, and vice versa', this taken-for-grantedness (and inescapability) of the Church has also produced a stout anticlericalism (Jones, 2003: 166), giving birth to such beautifully evocative terms as *mangiaprete* (literally a 'devourer of priests') for the more radical opponents of ecclesiastical power, or *strozzapreti* ('priest choker'), the name of a pasta dish. What is clear, is that Signora A is not prepared to let a few clerical suits get in her way of earning a living. Another debatable point of Signora A's account is the source of the relics, which remains rather vague – a church in the Abruzzi –, yet silence on this point

is not surprising. Throughout my research, supply chains were the most guarded and secretive issue. No dealer will be keen to lay open his or her sources and thus foolishly invite competition or expose themselves and their sources to ecclesiastical or legal sanctions. A number of relics I bought from Signora A point further east, beyond the Abruzzi, to the region of the Marche, the area around Ancona; it is the cult centre of the already mentioned St Emygdius, but also of other saints whose relics I acquired, like Bentivoglio de Bonis (1188-1232), a Franciscan friar; or the semi-legendary Judas Cyriacus (second century?), believed to have been an early bishop of Ancona, very obscure figures both who are unlikely to enjoy veneration further afar. Asked about my guess, Signora A, however, denied that the relics came from this area. Again, exactly how honest or how economic with the truth she was is difficult to tell – maybe the Abruzzesi priest, if he exists, is himself merely a middleman. Ancona, as I found out much later, for some reason appears to be a hub of the trade in sacred antiques, and a number of dealers located there or nearby have an active presence on eBay, offering objects of often very high quality (or at least made to look like first-rate objects – as I will explore a bit more below, the forgery of antique religious objects seems to have developed into a kind of cottage industry).

Signora A is, of course, not the only dealer of relics in Rome, although perhaps one of the best connected. Just a stone's throw from the church of San Rocco, mentioned above, the Foro Augusto Imperatore is the site of a bi-weekly street market more narrowly dedicated to antiques and collectibles than Porta Portese, offering objects such as postcards, stamps and coins, china and glass, jewellery, and militaria. It is here that I came across P, a trader in his mid-/late fifties who turned out to be an eBay dealer I had bought from before. P does hold down a full-time job with the Roman tourist board, yet, as he stated, his earnings of €1,600 a month were simply no longer enough to get by in Rome since the introduction of the common currency had led to a massive increase of living costs, especially of rents – a tale I heard more than once. Making some extra money through the sale of coins, old bank notes, postcards and relics was a valuable sideline for P. Reticent with information on his supply channels, as every dealer, P would merely state that his family owned a country house to which an oratory was attached, the initial source of his relics. Again, the truth content of this information is hard to gauge. Other, and more verifiable, sources for P's activities

are antiques shops and flea markets, although he pointed out that the relic business was a difficult one and that supplies were often tricky to secure. He knew Signora A and her stall in Porta Portese, having recently bought relics from her for €2,000, which supports my impression that she is possibly one of the best-connected figures in the business. It would also indicate that there is a fair amount of intermediate trade going on through networks of dealers known to each other, who are at the same time partners and competitors. P, for example, while buying from Signora A, clearly had a somewhat dim view of her, saying, 'she's too expensive' and 'wants to be too clever'. Given the prices she charged, margins were too small for him, so he would think twice whether to buy from her again. Such statements possibly need to be taken with a pinch of salt – unlike Signora A, P, as I knew, traded his goods not just through the local channels of street markets, but also through eBay, thus reaching a far wider audience and speeding up his turnover. While most of P's listings on eBay would receive bids within a week or a fortnight, quite a few of Signora A's stock I still found at her stall after a month or two. Like Signora A, P also named clergy as another source, although again without caring to go into details. He would simply state that he is rather well known in the right Roman circles, so priests would contact him if they wanted to sell something. While an antiques dealer with a shop near Piazza della Rotonda questioned this piece of information ('Maybe he said that to make you buy his relics'), the statement does not seem altogether implausible to me: for one, clergy are in a privileged position to get hold of relics; even without illicitly plundering their parish church they are more likely to receive relics through official channels or networks of friends and colleagues as personal gifts, and while canonical law may strictly forbid the sale of relics, such activities are effectively impossible to control. Secondly, the trade in sacred objects is a rather closely knit affair with just a few specialists and a number of shops clustering together in defined areas, most notably Via dei Cestari near the Pantheon and the Borgo Pio near the Vatican. It would not take long for a solvent buyer or a well-stocked seller to become a familiar figure and establish the necessary contacts.

In two antiques shops I was also told that their relics came from private individuals who were not clergy, presumably selling off inherited pieces. According to the dealer near Piazza della Rotonda there were usually a handful of relics available to her, which she would then sell on commission. The general

tenor of all dealers was that relics are a somewhat arduous business due to supply problems, more difficult today than it used to be: 'They have become collectable beyond Catholic circles', one dealer stated, explaining their scarcity. Most also agreed that clergy are not only a source of relics (whatever the truth of this statement), but also a main customer group. Some dealers mentioned especially priests from South America, motivated by a general lack of relics in their home countries, others, like Signora A, spoke of North American clergy. These structures appear to apply not just to Italy. The importance of clerical custom was also noted by a German dealer with whom I spoke in Cologne: again, she stressed the difficulty to secure supplies, saying she was still selling the very last pieces acquired a decade ago from a French specialist upon the liquidation of his business. Only very occasionally would she find new objects at junk sales or flea markets. Going prices under these circumstance, she said, varied enormously, from the extremely cheap when 'people don't know their stuff' to the very pricey when they do, in which case re-sale is often no longer profitable. Again, the circle of customers in the Cologne shop appeared quite confined – often local clergy, sometimes figures of the local hierarchy (such as Cologne's archbishop, Cardinal Meisner), or else 'persons of sophistication, with a special interest'. Equally limited is the circle of dealers; my informant could recall only two other antiquaries with a significant business in relics, one near Lake Constance in southern Germany, the other in the Netherlands.

With the mentioning of Cardinal Meisner, we come full circle: in late 2004 and early 2005 an antiques dealer from Belgium with a well established eBay presence offered a large number of relics, 'from the collection of a deceased Cardinal to be sold for charity'. While, unsurprisingly, my enquiry as to the cardinal's identity went unanswered, it can be surmised that the relics came from the estate of Gustaaf Cardinal Joos (1923-2004), Titular Bishop of Ypres, the only cardinal from the French/Benelux region to die around this time. Given their position of authority, high-ranking prelates with a personal interest or a particular devotional outlook (Cardinal Joos was a known traditionalist), will find it easy enough to accumulate substantial collections of sacred objects such as relics – collections that after their death may then be dispersed again and find their way into the hands of family, dealers, collectors and the faithful.

iv. Alienable possessions

The relics of Cardinal Joos (if it was indeed his collection) and their subsequent fate highlight another aspect of the processes of emplacement, displacement and re-emplacement I have discussed earlier. What the ethnographic vignettes show, I think, is a negotiation over who can and who cannot (or should not) have relics, what kind of relics, and how these relics are to be interchanged (if at all). Fr Florio would decline all requests for body relics coming from private individuals and at most concede to the distribution of contact relics on prayer cards, and even on this practice he seemed to have a somewhat dim view, regarding it as a bit of a nuisance that, unfortunately, could not be avoided; the Sisters at Santa Lucia are now strictly bound to give relics only to petitioners vetted by the Vicariate and equipped with the obligatory references. At the same time, as Fr Florio explained to me, prayer cards with contact relics, such as those of Padre Pio, have a print-run that amounts to tens of thousands, which, of course, implies a wide and easy circulation, in stark contrast to the fixity and inaccessibility, for example, of the body relics in his care, establishing a hierarchy between types of relics as well as between the recipients of relics.

Weiner (1992) theorized such mediations of difference and hierarchy through the carefully controlled possession of sacred objects in terms of 'keeping-while-giving', i.e. the giving away of certain types of objects and the ability to hold on to other, inalienable possessions in order to legitimize status and power and to transcend (or obscure) historical change: 'The authenticity lodged in these possessions,' she writes, 'denies intergenerational difference, whereas their ownership continually justifies difference in the presence' (Weiner, 1992: 48). Yet such efforts are agonistic and cannot always be maintained: 'The strategies and negotiations surrounding inalienable possessions acknowledge the complementarity, the domination, and the subversive tactics that, taken together, show the extent or limitations in transforming difference into rank and hierarchy' (Weiner, 1992: 10-11).

Seen within this framework, the formerly charitable approach of the Sisters of Santa Lucia, giving a relic to any caller, could be maintained only as long as outside demand for relics was modest. The occasional pious visitor, such as Cornwell, mentioned earlier, could be given a relic as he or she would venerate

and prize it, feeling honoured and indebted. It was the publicity generated by the German collector/writer, the growing notoriety of eBay as a market for relics and the obvious intrusion of an element of commerce that necessitated a more stringent control as both, publicity and commerce, threatened to destabilize the 'difference in the presence', moving the relic from the centre as the inalienable corollary of value or significance, and thus of authority, into a relation of adequation – making it seem to be priceable and thus exchangeable and movable (a move from prize to price as well as a spatial move, a loosening of its ties to a specific locus of authority, such as the lipsanoteca). A strict regime of prudent keeping and little giving was therefore enforced, or perhaps better: reinforced. Already an account of the late nineteenth century (*Cenni Storici sulla Lipsanoteca (Brief History of the Lipsanoteca)*, Minocchio [1894]) shows similar directives issued by the cardinal-vicar of Rome in 1881²⁷. It gives the impression of a similarly careful relic management more than a hundred years ago, as, according to the decree, notable relics²⁸ are never to be given away at all; body relics are only to be given to ecclesiastical organizations for public veneration; contact relics can be given away in limited numbers to persons known to the officials of the lipsanoteca or those with a letter of reference from their bishop; no relics are ever to be given to tradesmen and shop owners; the authenticity of the relics must be beyond doubt; an authentic has to accompany and verify every relic; a register must be kept recording the applicants' names and the locations relics are given to.

Far-reaching as these directives were, one could argue that in certain respects relics were never fully relinquished, or at least that every effort was made to retain some degree of control even over those that had been given away. A monastery or private oratory may have received its requested relic, but the lipsanoteca would not forget its whereabouts, making it clear where it had come from in the first place and who the generous donor had been, as borne out by the authenticating document. In other words, even while giving, the Roman

²⁷ Raffaele Cardinal Monaco La Valletta (1827-1896, cardinal-vicar for the diocese of Rome since 1876).

²⁸ Notable relics: a legal term for relics of special importance. According to the Codex Iuris Canonici of 1917, canon 1281 §2: *Insignes Sanctorum vel Beatorum reliquiae sunt corpus, caput, brachium, antibrachium, cor, lingua, manus, crus aut illa pars corporis in qua passus est martyr, dummodo sit integra et non parva.* (Notable relics of the Saints and Blesseds are the body, head, arm, forearm, heart, tongue, hand, shin or that part of the body which has suffered martyrdom, provided it be whole and not small.)

ecclesiastic bureaucracy kept (and keeps) its sacred property, displaying itself as the centre of power, the hoard of treasures, the focal point of its global network, and the ultimate source of gifts and graces.

The directives of the Vatican lipsanoteca, both the historical and the contemporary ones, are instructive in a number of ways: for one, they refer back to my discussion of the significance of space: the foundation of a new community, a chapel, a church, a shrine – that is to say: its effective localization in space and time – becomes possible only through the presence and possession of a holy relic. Authority, power, significance are indissolubly tied to place by the continuing presence of a sacred object, it is the pin with which to fix place and from which power can thus radiate. This relic, in turn, is integrated within a larger network of authority, having been granted by an institution such as the lipsanoteca or the curia generalizia of a religious congregation, thus reinforcing notions of hierarchy, privilege, centre and periphery, filiation and dependence. Secondly, they also make a distinction between body relics and contact relics, which are typically cloth relics, a distinction Weiner also draws attention to: bones and cloth, a hard and natural substance the one, soft and man-made the other. According to Weiner, 'hard possessions such as jade, precious metal, or bones are much more durable than cloth, making them better physical objects for symbolizing permanence and historical accountings', whereas cloth offers a more realistic representation of the inherent tension between an idealized, yet insecure permanence and the actual precariousness of human existence, always subject to loss, decay and death (Weiner, 1992: 59). Relics display or reflect a very similar relationship between permanence, fixity, durability (and hence authority) on the one hand, and flux, loss and transience (and hence subordination) on the other, as, by convention, relics are grouped into different classes: usually, one speaks of first, second and third class relics, depending on their substance and origin. First class relics are the actual remains of a saint's bodily substance, such as hair, flesh and, most commonly, as it is the most durable substance, bone. Second class relics are such objects that have been in touch with the saint during his or her lifetime – examples are manuscripts, furniture and, above all, clothing. Third class relics are those objects that have been in contact with the dead saint's physical remains, such as wood from the coffin or, indeed, cloth that has purposely been touched to the remains in order to be imbued with their sacredness, to create, as it were, an object

chain of substances and 'produce' further relics. While it is true that official practice no longer makes these distinctions and, in fact, discourages it, instead distinguishing simply between bodily and representational relics²⁹, the terminology of first, second and third class is still very common currency. On eBay, too, this classification is widespread and often used as a matter of routine when describing a relic. In either case, however, it becomes clear, I think, that bodily substance is to be distinguished from matter that has merely been in touch with the body. This principle effects two important consequences: firstly, it introduces a hierarchy of relics, differentiating between more important and lesser ones, the former being further differentiated as notable or non-notable; secondly, it allows body relics to attain a generative quality, while contact relics come to have only a derivative quality – the bodily remains of a saint are sacred substance *per se*, yet a piece of cloth is, or rather: becomes, sacred substance only in relation to these remains. The hierarchy of notable and non-notable relics, of body relics and contact relics allows to keep while giving, to give away whatever fragmentary exuviae may be found – ashes, tiny bone splinters, hair – or whatever derivatives can be produced – snippets of clothing, cloth touched to the holy bones – while holding on to the generative source.

It would seem to me that the political dimension of such a system is obvious – it produces difference and thus hierarchy, in Weiner's words, entwined with a spatial patterning, a subtle shading or gradient between the sacred, less sacred and non-sacred, a network of places, of centres and sub-centres, differentiated within and against each other: at its heart, Rome; within Rome, the major places of pilgrimage, but also the offices and treasuries from which relics may be issued or withheld, such as the headquarters of religious orders, the lipsanoteca of the Vicariate, or the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. Around Rome, in relation to it, competing with it, or depending on it cluster other hubs of the Catholic imaginary: more or less important localities of cultic practice such as cathedral cities or major shrines, which again will show internal differentiations between core and marginal institutions. In many respects it is the medieval pattern *redivivus*, if it was indeed ever truly dead, the conception of

²⁹ This according to Fr. Angelo Paleri, postulator general of the Franciscan Conventuals, a branch of the Friars Minor, who quoted from the handbook of the so-called 'studium', the training course for postulators run by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

Rome as *caput mundi* in an ontological, if not geographical sense, from Carolingian claims to imperial dignity via the Roman connection (including the importations of holy relics) to the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and the ultramontanism of the nineteenth century (which, in the form catacomb saints, had their own variants of relic transfers, as mentioned earlier). Gell, in *Art and Agency* (1998), provides a striking example of the exercise and preservation of political power in Tahiti through exactly such a distinction between generative and derivative relics, what he calls a ritual of 'decortication', the 'controlled production of divine exuviae' (Gell, 1998: 111), centring on *to'o*, pillar-like effigies of the main deities, usually wrapped in bindings of cordage and bark-cloth. 'The Tahitian political system,' Gell writes, 'revolved around asserting control over the *marae* (temples) of [the state god] Oro; whoever controlled the *to'o* [of Oro], controlled the country' (Gell, 1998: 111). In an annual ritual, the wrapping of the *to'o* was renewed and feathers, woven into the binding and thus in close contact with Oro, were distributed to the *to'o* of the lesser gods when assembled at Oro's temple. They, in turn, gave new, as yet unconsecrated feathers to Oro that were then woven into his new wrappings or otherwise attached to him, until the ritual repeated itself the following year. 'In this way a portion of the sanctity of the primary *to'o* was distributed to the assembly of lesser *to'o* in exchange for tribute paid in form of new feathers, a "natural" product, as it were, potentially embodying power and fertility, but not yet able to generate it' (Gell, 1998: 113).

Applied to my own case, as long as an institution – a church, a monastery, respectively the Vatican itself as the prime example – manages to hang on to its holy body, the saintly remains of a founder or any other fund of major relics it may give away 'tokens of sanctity' without its own substance being diminished, enjoying a structural position of centrality or sovereignty. In this respect, it seems appropriate that the extensive dismembering of saints' bodies is no longer recommended by official directives. As Fr Angelo Paleri told me:

'The excessive splitting up of bodily remains is to be avoided. The body is supposed to remain largely intact and in one place. Small particles, as can still often be found, are typically just coincidental:

little bones or bone fragments found during the recognition³⁰ of the body, which cannot be attributed to any specific body part anymore, may still be split up and distributed (in thecae). While exhumations are a prescribed part of the canonization process, relics are not necessarily produced anymore as a matter of course, but based on individual case decisions.'

However, if authority is strongly centralized, one of the crucial issues affecting a system such as that described by Gell is, I would argue, the competition over the centre, respectively the definition and maintenance of its boundaries. We are again facing Smith's 'locative' ideology with its 'vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing "place"' (Smith, 1993: xii).

Yet we are also looking at an archival ideology in Derrida's sense. Meditating on the notion of the archive, right at the beginning he points out the topological nature of the archive:

'there where things commence – [the] physical, historical, or ontological principle – but also the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given – [the] nomological principle.' (Derrida, 1996: 1; italics in the original)

Etymologically, the archive is *arkheion*, residence of the *archon*, the magistrate who keeps official documents. It is thus also the locus of authority: 'They [the *archons*] do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives' (Derrida, 1996: 2).

While the term 'archive' tends to conjure up images of shelves full of files, books, manuscripts, or more recently perhaps of computer terminals and CD-ROMs as the substrate of memory, knowledge and data, it is quite possible to see the archive in a looser sense, as something more conceptually dispersed, likely to

³⁰ The 'recognition' is a routine part of the beatification and canonization process. The body of a candidate for sainthood is exhumed, its identity is confirmed and, if appropriate, moved to a more fitting and convenient place for the veneration of the faithful (Misztal, 2005: 315-7).

include media such as the above, but also to go beyond them. In many respects, Rome, the Vatican and its institutions function have archival functions. There are, of course, the conventional archives – and a great number of them – such as the Apostolic Library, the Vatican's Secret Archive, the Inquisition Archive, and the archives and libraries of various congregations, agencies, and religious orders, holding media in both, manuscript and printed form. Yet memory is encoded, collected, stored, organized, made accessible or secluded in other forms as well – through images, painted or printed, sculpture, architecture – material culture quite generally. Stressing the spatial nature of the archive, it is in '*domiciliation ... that archives take place.*' The archive comes into being 'by virtue of a privileged *topology*', a 'place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*' (Derrida, 1996: 2-3; italics in the original) – places other than libraries and archives in the narrow sense, places such as the Vatican lipsanoteca or the curia generalizia of the Capuchins. As places, both seem to me to correspond to Derrida's archontic principle – a deposition or domiciliation, gathering together and coordinating a single corpus of signs 'in a system of synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration' (1996: 3). The postulator's office at the Capuchin headquarters is a material store of the order's history as well as its continuity, embodied in its outstanding members, reaching from its early times to the present. I noticed a relic, already set in a theca, of St Fidelis of Sigmaringen (1577-1622, canonized in 1745), the first Capuchin martyr, but was also shown some of the bloodstained bandages with which Padre Pio had covered the stigmata in his hands. Yet as an archive the office is not only a place of collection, of unification and classification, but also of privilege: it is here that Fr Florio renders a sacred, yet anonymous particle – a fragment of bone or cloth – identifiable through his signature and seal, authorizes its veneration through the proper documentation, grants or rejects the requests for relics. The Capuchin's relic chapel can be said to function in a similar way: as a shrine, it elevates the administrative nature of the place into a sacred one. However, its function is also to simultaneously historicize and de-historicize: gathering into one place the collectivity of Capuchin saints it refers to the order's beginning and development, commemorating its outstanding members; yet it does so *sub specie aeternitatis*, representing the Capuchins' place within the salvific history as much as the contiguity between Heaven and Earth, the dead and the living. The

hermeneutic competence of the archive, its power of interpretation and coordination of signs even seek to incorporate the genuinely anonymous trace such as that particular reliquary that Fr Gandolf showed me: made from plaster, cast in a *rocaille* shape and containing three or four large bone fragments, unsealed and without a cedula that would have identified them. It had come, so I was told, from the heirs of an elderly man who had acquired it decades ago in Ethiopia; some vague documents dated it to 1938, which led Fr Gandolf to believe that the relics could be of Blessed Agathangelo and Cassian, seventeenth-century Capuchin friars. Missionaries in Abyssinia (Ethiopia), martyred near Gondar in 1638 and beatified in 1905, they were known to have been exhumed and reburied after Italy's annexation of the country in 1936. It is a curious combination and layering of traces, a most Roman palimpsest in the archive, drawing together popular religiosity, the history of Catholicism, international politics and Church-state relations: the Capuchins' missionary history of the early-modern period, but also Italy's fascist imperialist past (still more alive than one would wish – during my stay I was living in a quarter sprinkled with street names such as Viale Eritrea or Via Mogadiscio, many house fronts covered with posters for far-right youth groups and political parties such as Alleanza Nazionale), a past given the blessing by high-ranking Catholic prelates like Milan's archbishop, Cardinal Schuster (1880-1954), who in a homily had expressed the hope that this colonial war would 'bring the triumph of the Christian cross, break chains, open the road to missionaries of the Gospel' (quoted in O'Grady, 1997: website), apparently forgetting that Abyssinia was already an ancient Christian country (a fact that did not prevent his own beatification in 1996) – all these various strands assembled, given the right hermeneutic competence, in a few pieces of dry bones.

Yet Derrida also points out the importance of technology in the formation of the archive: 'science, in its very movement, can only consist in a transformation of the techniques of archivization, of printing, of inscription, or reproduction, of formalization, of ciphering, and of translating marks' (Derrida, 1996: 14-15). In particular, he highlights the importance of new information technologies, singling out e-mail, though we need to remember that this text was written only at the beginning of the new media revolution. Even back then, however, Derrida recognized its radical potential: 'electronic mail today ... is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity' (Derrida, 1996: 17),

redrawing the boundaries and changing the structures and contents of the archive. What Derrida anticipated for e-mail applies perhaps even more to the Internet, with its vast stores of information (whatever its quality in any particular case) and its possibilities for publicizing and the trafficking of texts, images, sounds and goods. These possibilities have been recognized, for example, by the lipsanoteca and identified as threats to the integrity of its boundaries and contents. The address of Santa Lucia has appeared on the Internet (and on eBay as an object for sale in its own right); counterfeit relics, apparently related to a traditionalist Catholic fringe group in El Mirage, Arizona, USA, have appeared on eBay, advertized as coming from the lipsanoteca, thus drawing unwelcome attention and even implicating the Sisters in the shady dealings. As one website stated, the 'primary source for these relics was supposedly been [sic!] a group of Augustinian Nuns in Rome, who have themselves been associated with trafficking in counterfeit relics ... of highly dubious origin' (Medical Online: website). While Santa Lucia is not explicitly named, the description of Augustinian nuns in Rome clearly points in this direction. Whether this is simply a distortion of facts based on misunderstandings or a deliberate attempt at defamation has mattered little to the dismayed Sisters. At the same time, genuine relics that had been given away by the Sisters in good faith found their way to eBay, thus calling into question, in Derrida's terms, the archontic power of the lipsanoteca, that is: its gathering and sheltering of signs and the retainment of interpretative authority over them to state what these relics were for, what they meant, and how they could and could not be used. What Derrida signals, therefore, is the capacity of technology to subvert the relations of emplacement, of keeping-while-giving, of archivization, the locative ideology, and to open up these relations to much more messy, individual, promiscuous strategies. How these strategies play out on eBay, as my prime example, will be the looked at in the next chapter, moving from place to network.

V. Networks

i. Online religion, online Catholicism

Five years ago, Højsgaard and Warburg (2005: 3) cited figures showing that there existed about 52 million web pages on 'religion', 9 million on 'Christianity', and 65 million on 'churches'. All numbers were up considerably compared to 1999. While these figures can only be approximate due to the fluid nature of the Internet, there is little doubt that current searches would present similar findings, and possibly even a further increase – the result of growing Internet accessibility with affordable flat rates, higher connection speeds, cheap (or even free) web hosting, and user-friendly tools for web page construction. As on so many other social and cultural practices or domains, the Internet has had and continues to have a considerable impact on religion, too, a development reflected in a growing body of scholarly literature. Since 1996, when O'Leary (1996: 782) allowed that it may still 'take some convincing to establish the credibility of the thesis that our conceptions of spirituality and of community are undergoing profound and permanent transformations in the era of computer-mediated communication', scholars such as Miller and Slater (2000), Brasher (2004 [2001]), Apolito (2005), or Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), to name but a few, have convincingly made that case. Cutting across religious traditions, issues that have attracted scholarly attention are far-ranging, covering notions of truth and authenticity; power and authority; perception and ontology; embodiment, virtualization and ritual; place-making, memory and identity; new religious movements; and the mediation and dissemination of religious thought.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue raised vis-à-vis religion and the Internet is that of interactivity and mediation (O'Leary, 1996; Dawson, 2005) – whether religion can be 'done' online in the first place. If we accept a broadly Durkheimian conception of religion as a social, that is to say: shared, participation in ritual practice, how can this be replicated by spatially dispersed individuals online? And how does the textual nature of the medium – after all, most online content still consists of written material, perhaps complemented by illustrations – affect the embodied aspects of religious practice, the immersion in movement, sound and smell that ritual participation tends to involve? Further technological

advances may change and modify this framework – computer gaming may become a paradigm of sorts as the industry is keen to develop more immersive environments that afford gamers a more realistic, sensuous experience, something that theoretically could be translated into religious online practice as well, although this would require considerable conceptual and financial investments (O'Leary, 2005: 43-4).

The most fundamental difference between these studies and my own, I think, is a question of practice: nearly all of them explore how religious activities change when pursued online, when the virtual space becomes the space of religion. This is not my focus. Instead, I have framed my research around the assumption that eBay is a tool, a means to an end – the circulation and acquisition of sacred objects –, but not an end in itself, a space to be inhabited for religious activities. Quite on the contrary, the highly ambivalent attitudes that often transpired make it clear, I think, that eBay is seen as problematic, a space that through its commercial nature resists or even subverts genuine religiosity – a dividing line also drawn by Brasher (2004 [2001]: 11) when she speculates how '[a]gainst the onslaught of commercialization in cyberspace, online religion could rapidly become an Internet endangered species', even though I would disagree with her assessment on both empirical and conceptual grounds (there is no sign that the number of religious websites is dwindling, nor is it clear how and why commercial sites would displace religious websites in the first place. I am also suspicious of the implied notion of 'genuine religion' as somehow untouched by any secular concerns). This is not to say that my informants do not use religious websites or find the Internet *per se* a problematic space for religious practice. On this issue I did not gather any data. What does shine through, however, is a deep ambivalence about eBay as a particular website and the way it can, but possibly should not contribute to offline religiosity. Virtually every informant expressed reservations or found it necessary to hedge the reasons why he or she was using eBay in the pursuit of relics, whether this concerned practicalities such as fraud or price, or ethical or 'ideological' issues. At the same time, eBay was seen to offer access to certain aspects of Catholic practice and Catholic heritage that the Church is felt to be neglecting or has increasingly barred to the faithful – posing, for many of my informants, a kind of double-bind that effectively blurred the category of 'pure religion'.

Perhaps most pertinent for my research is Apolito's (2005) study of religious visionary experiences and Marian devotions and their interaction with contemporary information and media technology, *The Internet and the Madonna*. For one, he focuses on Roman Catholicism and in particular on its more conservative, traditionalist aspects, an attitude often shared by my own informants. Secondly, he highlights the importance of the United States as a central field of religious online activity (and its exploration). The country's high level of technological development combined with an effervescent (Catholic) religious culture make it perhaps quite unique in the world today. Just as 'today the lion's share of the world's seers, messages, and visionary announcements come from the United States' (Apolito, 2005: 3), North America also appears as the main market for (Christian, Catholic) devotional objects on eBay and as the main destination for relics, judged by the sheer number of listings on the company's US site. However, perhaps the most important question raised by Apolito is the relationship between and mutual shaping of the sacred and information technology – what he calls (2005: 4) the

'final culmination of a process that clearly demonstrates the capacity of a religious belief based on wonders and miracles to make use of the resources of late modernity to reinforce its own stature, a stature that is certainly imbued with traditional archaic wonders but, at the same time, rich in unprecedented technological forms of "celestial signs".'

Technologies such as the Internet, often combined with digital imaging, come to be seen as tools not of dis-, but of reenchanting the world, yet they do so in their own fashion and with their own specific consequences. They infuse the otherworldly with a strong immanent quality: once the preserve of charismatics – that is, literally, the 'gifted', those chosen, favoured by Heaven –, it now becomes accessible to all who can use the appropriate technology, and, ontologically even more important, it becomes framed in technological terms. Instead of a fundamentally ineffable presence, the otherworldly becomes expressible and measurable in technical data – the bits and bytes used to store digital information, transmission speeds, picture resolutions, instrument readings. Commenting on the

visionary experience in the age of information technology, Apolito (2005: 117) states that 'when a piece of equipment intervenes ... then the age-old subjectivity of the decision made by the Madonna gives way to the objectivity of her presence captured by a camera, like any other object in the world'. Or, more generally, 'heaven, in the collective technological practice, has lost nearly all the prerogatives of absolute freedom that are still acknowledged in the conventional beliefs that concern it' (2005: 116).

Yet as technology assimilates the prerogatives of heaven, it also flattens out earthly hierarchies and spatial differentiations. Traditionally, the sacred is often conceived as spatially bound – from Eliade's (1959) *axis mundi* to Christian's (1989 [1972]) 'territories of grace' – a conception that also applies to the great Marian apparition sites of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Rue du Bac in Paris, La Salette, Lourdes and Fatima. 'The apparition', Apolito (2005: 60) writes, 'was identified with the place as much as with any person.' More recent apparitions, however, most notably Medjugorje (1981) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, have begun to shift this conception or at least to offer an alternative mode, in that they are bound up more strongly with the person of the seer, who may (and often does) travel, and the Internet has accelerated this process. It allows divine messages quickly to spread far and wide, beyond the confines of institutional control, and to mesh with the messages and visions of other seers and the commentaries and interpretations of the faithful, producing a 'spectacular effect of visionary affirmation' (Apolito, 2005: 69). Yet the authority of the individual visionary, too, is undermined at the same time that the 'visionary experience' is strengthened. Rapidly absorbed into an incessant flurry of constantly changing postings, mailing lists and websites, their personal profile loses power and distinction.

This is not to say that sacred sites or 'living saints' cease to exert considerable attraction and power offline. Yet they have to be seen in context with their online representation and reception, which follow a different dynamic. As the spread of the web grows, Apolito (2005: 77) predicts a continuing shift 'from persons to information, from experience to digital' – something noted, but also questioned by some of the other scholars mentioned earlier: to what extent *can* experience shift to, or even be replaced by, digital? Apolito, too, sees at least one fundamental area where the offline experience radically exceeds online experience

and that is physical healing. In the Christian tradition, healing has always been central to encounters with the sacred, and healing, as far we know, has rarely, if ever, been effected online – instead it would still appear predicated on direct spatial, material and social contact: the pilgrimage to a place, access to certain sacred objects (relics prominently among them), or the touch of a holy man or woman. Such expectations may be even stronger in the Catholic tradition with its sacramentalism that denies the absolute distinction between signifier and signified (O'Leary, 2005: 44-5).

Apolito's work on Internet religion, as well as that of other scholars, thus touches upon a number of themes that are relevant to my own work: the subject of authority and institutional control, called into question by the Internet, winds like a red thread through my study – from the way the Internet simultaneously is and is not like an archive in Derrida's sense, discussed in the last section, and the problems this poses for a centralized hermeneutic authority, to the practical problems of the Sisters running the Vatican lipsanoteca. In the following sections, too, this issue will come to the fore again, both on and off eBay: if authority is so easily undermined and questioned in the welter of voices speaking on the Internet, how do sellers and buyers on eBay negotiate this issue? Who is to tell what users can and cannot do, what objects may or may not be offered, and how their value and authenticity are to be arbitrated? I will present a number of strategies employed in these negotiations. The question of authority also engages other players, such as relic ministries, which I discuss in more detail in sections V.iv and VI.v. Some of them have an online presence and some even intervene (or used to) on eBay. Yet again, like the seers Apolito speaks of, their actions are quickly absorbed by the web and they find themselves as one voice among many, as commanding (or not) as a multitude of others.

The contention that the sacred is inherently transformed as it becomes embedded in a framework of ready-to-hand technology is also resonant. In the case of eBay and the relic trade this often translates into anxiety over the authenticity of an object, respectively a questioning of the concept of authenticity itself – some buyers will adhere to what I call a 'constructionist' approach: a relic is venerable because it is being venerated, and God will not fail to work through it as long as its veneration happens in good faith. Others will adopt a more materialist approach where authenticity is seen as a function of scientific testing

or morphological analysis (compare Apolito, 2005: 130-43, on the 'experiment of the supernatural' trying to prove the physical veracity of mystical experiences).

Finally, the discussion of the ritualistic and sensuous aspects of religious practices and their relative absence from the Internet or the difficulty to translate them into cyber-practice is of obvious relevance. I would agree with Dawson (2005: 33; emphasis added) when he writes that

'there may well be intrinsic reasons why cyberspace is not that well suited to the mediation of at least *traditional* understandings of religious experience. As a medium it may be too exclusively ocular, image-driven, textual, change-oriented, individualistic, detached and disembodied.'

Much of my study hinges on the assumption (and, I hope, its corroboration) that eBay provides a means – albeit a suspect one – to pursue the construction or reconstruction of *traditional* forms of Catholic piety *offline* – forms that are implicitly or explicitly opposed to the kind of ludic, creative self-reflexivity that online religion excels at: an aspect that makes the Internet fairly well suited to certain religious traditions such as neo-Paganism (Dawson, 2005), but which creates risks of ideological 'shipwreck' while surfing the web (Apolito, 2005: 159-73). Ultimately, therefore, this study is little concerned with whether or how the faithful conduct their religious lives online. Even though the participation in mailing lists, the supply of devotional readings and news items by web resources, or the purchase of devotional objects through commercial websites bring the Internet to impact on people's offline lives, these are nonetheless still that – offline. As such, they are contextualized within specific spatial and social locales. In fact, eBay is a clear example of how the Internet is not merely self-referential (as Apolito [2005] makes the case, giving rise to its anti-hierarchical, relativizing nature), but is contingent on an external reality. If one uses eBay, one very much expects the existence not just of the signifier (the image and text of a listing), but also of the signified (the listed object), and not in some general way, but very much in a tangible and available sense. Someone confusing these would run into trouble with bidders and eBay administrators very quickly. It is the negotiation of this external reality through eBay that will be explored in the following sections.

ii. eBay and the politics of nostalgia

In 2004, eBay ran a series of advertisements on US television. In one of these commercials a voice-over asked: 'What if nothing was ever forgotten? What if nothing was ever lost?' – rhetorical questions that, I think, capture well the allure of eBay, but they also indicate some of the underlying problems and anxieties the buyers of collectibles in general, and of relics in particular, are facing. For in their 'brute persistence over time' (Keane, 2006: 311), relics acquire a quality that Benjamin (1999) might have been recognized as 'messianic time': the presence of the past in the now and its resistance to it³¹. Like a giant trawl net, eBay acts to retain and drag up whatever has been discarded at some point in history and offers it up again, at a price, for restoration. Yet what past are we talking about? And how can we be sure that the object memories or memory objects of the past really are what they pretend to be? Finally, does it matter in which way these objects are restored to or lodged in the present?

In his Benjaminian re-reading, Taussig speaks not of nostalgia, but of melancholy, yet perhaps the two sentiments are not too dissimilar for my own purpose here. 'Melancholy,' he writes, 'establishes and confirms the distance separating subject from object, a distance that is necessary for objective analysis, while it simultaneously registers the need to transcend that alienation, which is also the alienation of man as created by history' (Taussig, 1980: 123). What many of my informants, especially among the laity, seem to mourn is the past of a different Church that offered reliable structures, definite teaching, and time-honoured customs. For North America this is the 'confident Church' emblematically represented by the archdiocese of Chicago between 1940 and 1965, during the administration of Cardinals Stritch and Meyer (Avella, 1992). More generally, it is the Church of Pius XII, if not indeed of the whole period of pontificates up to his time since Pius IX (1846-1878)³² that witnessed the development of the modern papacy, assuming ever greater moral authority (or

³¹ Notwithstanding the irony that Benjamin's rescue of tradition would have a very different intention than that of traditionalist Catholics.

³² This period is sometimes seen as constituting a specific period of Church history as four of the six popes reigning between 1846 and 1958 took the name Pius. Despite differences in character, theological repute and style of government, the unifying theme running through these pontificates was a strong concern to uphold doctrinal tradition (Denzler 1997: chapter 13).

authoritarianism) once it was freed from temporal affairs. To what extent this Church ever existed and how it was experienced at the time is a moot point, yet after the 'Catholic revolution' of the 1960s (Greeley, 2005) sparked three decades of conflict between leadership, lower clergy, laity, theologians, reformers and traditionalists, its (or *a*) loss is keenly felt.

But then, as eBay reminds us, nothing needs ever be forgotten or lost, never mind the supreme irony that the solution to the historical alienations of traditionalist Catholics (and socialists alike, if we keep Benjamin in mind) is now being offered by a capitalist, new media corporation, built on the liberal tenet of the friction-free market place. 'The West fetishizes the exteriorization of memory onto objects' (Hillis, 2006: 170), and it is this condition that underpins the appeal of eBay; even though the vast majority of its turnover is generated not through collectibles and antiques but through mundane goods of everyday use value, like cars, clothing, and consumer electronics, collectibles act as 'a kind of advance brigade of publicity that attracts a volume of site visitors far in excess of any proportional relationship to these listings' commercial value' (Hillis, 2006: 168). Through eBay, the past – for example in the shape of devotional objects such as relics – can be maintained within the present or brought back to the present, or so it would seem. The very presence of these objects, their survival against the tides of history, of modernization and secularization constitutes a mute critique, a resistance to a present that is often felt to be deficient, confused, perhaps even threatening. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of my informants who have bought relics for religious purposes (in contrast to the collectors *tout court*, who tend to have different motivations, informed by historical and art historical interests) expressed rather traditionalist views: a preference for the Latin mass, or discontent with a Church that is seen as having lost its path. Some of them also expressed a penchant for certain saints that are representative of more traditional devotions (although such preferences are often also coloured by family lore, local backgrounds or simply the more intense promotion of some saints over others); examples are St Theresa of Lisieux (1873-1897, canonized in 1925), Padre Pio, the legendary St Philomena, the popes Pius X (1903-1914, canonized in 1954) and Pius XII, and St Gemma Galgani (1878-1903, canonized 1940).

'As a set of social practices ... the eBay experience is a living part of culture, and its members are witnesses to the worlds that they are actively making,

for better or for worse' (Hillis, 2006: 169). Yet if certain Catholics do use eBay to recapture or remake the specific temporalities and spatialities of a longed-for past, they have to operate within the framework and the restraints of this particular socio-technological assemblage. For my purpose this qualification brings up two issues that I will discuss in the following sections:

Firstly, the distinction between buyers and sellers, the *personae* they assume when interacting through eBay. While motivations and aims are not directly observable, the structure of eBay does allow to track certain kinds of information that allow at least some informed guesswork: firstly, the listing itself normally conveys a minimum of information on the object for sale, in textual and/or pictorial form, but is sometimes also used to disclose further personal details about the seller. Secondly, users of eBay are strongly encouraged to leave feedback, to give each other ratings for the transaction, thus creating a supposedly self-regulating system of reputations. These feedbacks also include details on the object bought or sold. It is therefore possible to monitor what type of objects a buyer is most interested or a vendor mostly dealing in. Thirdly, eBay allows for the set-up of personal user pages ('about me' pages); often containing technical information such as terms of business, some users also employ them for personal presentations of themselves, their family, business, or life history. This kind of information will form the basis for a discussion of the interaction between buyers and sellers, their conflicting or harmonious expectations.

Secondly, building on this discussion I will then explore the issues of authenticity and propriety. Authenticity, of course, is not so much 'there', but has to be narrated and performed, a process that encompasses the textual and pictorial data conveyed by the actual object listing as well as the kind of 'soft' information just mentioned, such as reputation, measured by eBay's user ratings, or other forms of interaction between buyers, sellers and sometimes third parties such as specific interest groups, which may seek to intervene. As it is in breach of Canon law and, theologically speaking, constitutes a sacrilege, the relic trade on eBay has gained a certain notoriety and attracted its fair share of external criticism, resulting in certain institutional responses by eBay, which in turn have influenced, and continue to influence how relics can be presented and what constitutes a 'genuine' relic. As an issue of propriety it also highlights the ongoing drawing and redrawing of boundaries between institutions and individuals, the negotiation over

what can and what cannot be given, traded and possessed, and by whom. It is the reconfiguration of the archive Derrida speaks of, the effacing, reaffirmation or redefinition of difference in Weiner's terms.

iii. Performing authenticity

It would seem to be a truism to state that eBay connects buyers and sellers, for this, after all, is its very *raison d'être*. Yet especially when dealing with objects such as relics, objects characterized not by their use value, but by more ideological, and therefore conflictual, values it is helpful to recall this basic premise, for it would be naïve to assume that buyers' and sellers' motivations and beliefs are completely congruent.

I have stated above that relics are about memory and its objectification, about the resistance of the past against the present, against the commodification of time. Yet the position of eBay as the enabling interface of these practices is deeply ambiguous. The ideological horizons of buyers and sellers, their concern with temporalities – the past and the present, tradition and commodification – may be rather different. After all, while for the buyer the relic is an object of desire, sometimes urgently so, the seller is prepared to let go of it, so his emotional, ideological or religious investment is likely to be lesser or different than that of the buyer. Where the buyer may be on a rescue mission (a self-description have repeatedly come across) – rescuing the relic as much as his or her own memories, beliefs and histories – the seller may assume a whole host of contradictory roles: accomplice, double agent, adversary, perhaps even destroyer. To supply the buyer with the sought-after object, that object has to come from some place and some time. It may have been abducted from its rightful setting, sold underhand from a church or monastery (as, for example, the case of Signora A in the Porta Portese street market would suggest). The process of reconstitution in one place may therefore entail a complementary process of destruction in another. Or the relic may have been salvaged, found in a place of neglect and oblivion, an old attic, a chest of drawers in which case one may speak of a genuine case of reconstitution – or perhaps better: reproduction – of the past; a reproduction since the new setting of the relic, while possibly motivated and modelled on an idealized idea of devotion is unlikely to restore the original setting: from public veneration the relic

is likely to move into the private sphere, from the possession of a religious it may now pass into the hands of a lay person. Whatever historical moment it encapsulated in 1850 or 1900 or 1950 will only fragmentarily be recoverable and accessible in 2008, for, as Stewart writes,

'the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance. The experience of the object lies outside the body's experience – it is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us' (Stewart, 1993: 133).

One can even argue that in the particular case of relics this holds true in a darkly comical literalness, if we ask exactly whose body-memory is being replaced here by object-memory – that of the saint or that of the believer or that of both? Through a rather gruesome alchemy the living, feeling, thinking saint finds him- or herself transformed into a portable assemblage of brass locket, bone splinters and wax seals, a distributed object as much as a distributed person. Indeed a 'transformation of meaning into materiality' as much as a 'transformation of materiality into meaning' (Stewart, 1993: 140).

So what is one to make of a statement such as the following one, from a regular and respected eBay dealer (user ID: christian-relics) that went with a number of his listings in July and August 2007:

'This is one of the items from an important lot coming straight from a Southern French monastery. The Sisters of this community were in charge of preparing and enshrining relics for the whole country. All items of this lot are of very high quality.'

As usual, more detailed information was not available; like all the professional antiques dealers I have been in contact with christian-relics was careful not to disclose his sources. Given the consistently high quality of his objects and his excellent eBay reputation I have little reason to doubt the accuracy of his statement. Yet what about the Sisters and their relics? It could be that the Sisters themselves are selling them to raise funds for a cash-strapped convent. This, at

least, has been claimed, rather irately, by another informant of mine, Guido, who identified the convent as that of the Poor Clares of Lyon, acting 'in defiance of Canon law, which is obviously considered as just so much scrap paper.' Or, as happens not that infrequently, a community is closed down and its assets liquidated. In any case, it would be difficult to decide whether we are faced with the making or unmaking of religious heritage, its loss or its recovery. For sure, the objects will be dispersed, their collectivity and rootedness in a place and time seemingly dissolved. Yet given that the framework that underwrote their material existence and symbolic significance – the nuns' convent where they were housed – may no longer exist, or that the nuns themselves may no longer cherish these objects, their movement into new caring hands may also represent an act of conservation when compared with a possible, likely alternative – neglect or destruction. In fact, as I argued earlier, it is exactly the knowledge, or at least the assumption, of a relic's rootedness that bestows it with authenticity and significance.

It is because of this ambiguity between emplacement and displacement that I describe sellers as both, accomplices and double agents. They enable buyers to maintain, construct or reconstruct their own individual religious temporalities and spaces³³, yet in doing so they may at the same time abet the forces of the present. But beyond this, the seller is also adversary – firstly, because he or she is a *seller*, a merchant, not a bearer of gifts. By trying to extract a maximum price he or she acts against the interests of the buyer and, especially within the auction setting, pits buyers against each other in direct competition. As I know from my own experience of bids frequently thwarted, the contest for the most beautiful, the rarest, the best-conserved pieces is fierce. On 19 July 2007, for example, christian-relics sold a theca containing (supposed) relics of the Three Magi, in near immaculate condition and beautifully adorned, for no less than \$560. Memory and tradition, it seems, can come at a steep price. If this is not bad enough, the part of adversary can assume a thoroughly sinister character when the seller, be it knowingly or negligently, offers forgeries for sale. Not only will the

³³ I have hesitated to use the word 'individual': on the one hand, the acquisition of religious goods through eBay can easily be interpreted within the classical liberal framework of the *homo economicus*; this, at least, is part of eBay's underlying ethos. Yet religion is, of course, also always a communal experience outside this framework.

buyer have to compete with other interested parties, he also has to engage in an intellectual battle against the vendor, trying to ferret out material or historical inconsistencies in the make and representation of the relic.

It is therefore necessary to ask about the status of the objects thus dredged up through, presented on and circulated by eBay, that is to say: we need ask about authenticity and authority, two terms that frequently operate in a mutually constitutive way. As I will discuss in the following sections, the authenticity of relics is not so much 'there', but has to be narrated and performed. As an act of creation rather than revelation it has to be established through authority (which is, of course, as will become clear below, always open to contestation by competing authorities). Such acts, on eBay, can encompass textual and pictorial information contained in the actual listing; eBay's own institutionalized tool of control, the feedback score, which signals a trader's reputation to other users as each transaction is rated by the respective partners; and, to a lesser extent, authority can be established through the 'about me' pages that users can set up on eBay to convey any additional information about themselves, their business, motivations, experiences, background and the like. In other words,

'when one buys on eBay, one also buys the seller's story about the object ... eBay allows for a coupling of the commodification or branding of authenticity on the part of the seller to a bidder or prospective buyer's experience' (Hillis, 2006: 169).

It is a process, I would argue, that is crucial exactly for those objects that are not easily and not normally commodified, that is to say: for objects that are not meant to be comparable – like a loaf of bread, a car, a computer held against another bread, car, or computer – but that are meant to be incomparable, or only partially comparable: antiques, art works, collectors' items. As Carrier (1994) points out, it is because of their incomparability that these objects tend not to have a standardized market price, but are often sold through auctions (obviously long before the advent of eBay) and are subject to significant price fluctuations. Religious objects such as relics (notwithstanding the fact that they may *also* be art objects) would appear to fit into this category as well: in fact, their comparison is not only difficult, but is actually positively prohibited. To put a price tag on a relic

is therefore not only an act of adequation *within* a prescribed sphere – a relic compared to a relic, which is the logic of the collector (swapping of doublets), or the devotee or, indeed, the religious community (the interchange of relics between monasteries as a common medieval and early modern practice); instead, it is an act of adequation *between* spheres or regimes of value, to use Appadurai's (1986) term, that is: a relic compared to the abstract and general unit of money. Such acts of 'transgressive adequation' carry their own significance, beyond the issue of authenticity and authority.

The unpredictability inherent in the exchange of such incommensurable objects is something I have experienced myself when listing on eBay: prayer cards with contact relics of St Gemma Galgani are fairly easy to come by; domestic traders offer them fairly frequently on eBay's Italian site where they sell for a few euros. On the American site they tend to sell with a small premium, though not normally for more than \$12 to \$15. Occasionally, however, I happened to sell them for a multiple of this amount, for \$30 or even \$40. There is no reason intrinsic to the cards why they should achieve such a price – instead, prices are influenced by external factors: the passion a bidding war can arouse, so that buyers will pay exceptional prices more in order to frustrate the opponent than to actually acquire the object; information deficits of inexperienced buyers, unaware of the strong likelihood to find the same or a similar object again; perhaps an intense devotion to this particular saint, which adds urgency to the acquisition.

Sellers may adopt different strategies to convey this sense of authenticity, which for analytical purposes can be characterized (without aiming to be exhaustive) as 'evident ignorance', 'competence', 'charity', and 'ostensible piety'.

a) Evident ignorance

It may appear counter-intuitive to regard evident ignorance as a strategy of authority, yet its effect – if it works well – is to create the impression of a 'snip', a good deal where the buyer will be able, due to the seller's ignorance, to pick up an item at a bargain price. As a strategy, whether adopted deliberately or inadvertently, it can be a fine line to walk: if the seller is genuinely unaware of the nature of the object, if he or she is unable to recognize a theca as such, it may not even be listed in the appropriate category, but appear, say, in jewellery, advertised

as a sort of pendant. In this case the auction may even close without receiving any bids. However, a certain rudimentary knowledge usually shines through, in which case the manifest or pretended ignorance will be open to the interpretation of potential buyers and their own strategies. The following case shall serve as an illustration: in August 2007, the user ID bet-boy, located in Canada, offered a theca with a bone relic of St Gerard Majella (1726-1755). Its brief and somewhat inarticulate listing read: 'catholic Relic Ex.oss. S. Ger. Maj. in tin. This is a very nice relic catholic. I don't know who is this relic. At back under we have a red wax seal. Measures: 1 2/8 diameter x 5/8 inch thin. Conditions: Nice but the glass is hollow on the rim at one place', followed by some information on shipping costs. The starting price was a modest \$11, but within five days had increased to \$53. Bet-boy was obviously knowledgeable enough to identify the item as a relic and an object of devotion relevant to Catholics. However, the listing title was simply a rendering of the cedula that identified the relic, in a manner seemingly incomprehensible to the seller (*ex oss.* standing for *ex ossibus*: from the bone, followed by the saint's name in abbreviation, St Gerard Majella being a fairly popular figure as patron of expectant mothers). The mentioning of a red wax seal could indicate a certain familiarity with the materiality of relics or at least the nomenclature found on eBay. At the same time, the relic locket was referred to as a 'tin' instead of the more technical 'theca'. A quick glance at bet-boy's recent auctions suggested at best a superficial familiarity with relics, as over the past months he had sold a broad variety of vintage objects, but no other relics or religious items. Furthermore, its very briefness and inarticulateness lent the description an appearance of guilelessness.

The effect is that the object is called upon to speak for itself, establishing a direct rapport between itself and the knowing buyer. The accompanying pictures of the listing, of fairly good quality, showed the front and back of the theca, conveying enough information for those in the know to form a judgment of the relic: the style of the locket, which was consistent with its making after 1904, the time of St Gerard's canonization; the relic itself, looking as if it could have been a bone splinter, thus compatible with the cedula, which, in turn, appeared typeset, not printed by inkjet- or laser-printer, which would have been inconsistent with the overall vintage appearance; finally, the seal, which showed an archbishop's coat of arms, if a bit blurred. Narrative is here revealed as having a double edge:

while it may be used to create authenticity, it can also – as a deliberately or indeliberately misleading description – hide inauthenticity in a process not dissimilar to what Derrida critiqued as phonocentrism, the devaluation of written language as less truthful than the spoken word. While the 'speech' of the object is, in this case, a silent one, it can still claim the immediacy of experience that precedes the written word ('a representation of a representation', quoted in Surber, 1998: 205-6) and is therefore of higher authenticity. It seemingly frees the potential buyer from the burden of having to employ critical reading strategies, of reading the listings against themselves, as it were, since users are well aware of the presence of forgeries on eBay: 'There is a great risk of fraud', one informant, Wes, stated, while another, SDP, even estimated that '90% of relics sold on eBay are fake'. Derrida, critically referring to a passage in Lévi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology*, noted a tendency to define 'writing as the condition of social inauthenticity' when Lévi-Strauss states that '[w]e are no longer linked to our past by an oral tradition which implies direct contact with others (storytellers, priests, wise men, or elders), but by books amassed in libraries, books from which criticism endeavours – with extreme difficulty – to form a picture of their authors' (quoted in Stewart 1993: 176). To the priests Lévi-Strauss might have added the holy men and women whose remains now appear on eBay for exactly the reason that they offer (or promise to offer) 'direct contact' and links to the past. This again raises the issue of presence (and its absence), forming a nexus between the notions of presence – immediacy – authenticity, and it also refers back to Mary Douglas' criticism of the Second Vatican Council for promoting a faith based on 'rational, verbally explicit, personal commitment to God' at the expense of 'its allegedly contrary, formal, ritualistic conformity' (quoted in Fardon, 1999: 108).

Yet even an object 'speaking for itself' requires a certain competence on the part of the potential buyer. He or she needs to possess the expertise to identify the object, to decode its material signals. While some buyers certainly have such specialist knowledge – which may include hagiography, church history, art history, sphragistics, diplomatics, heraldry, some understanding of Latin –, many others have not. Asked how they ascertain the authenticity of a relic, answers reached from 'gut feeling' to more technical analyses ('how the relic seal looks', 'the wear and colour', 'documents', 'the date of issuance'), and from external information ('the reputation of the seller') to methods that are reminiscent of

medieval practices: as one informant stated, '[w]hen I purchased my Neumann³⁴ relic, I prayed a great deal to God and to the saint himself in order to know if it was real or not.' Textual information and narrative strategies therefore often remain indispensable to both sellers and buyers.

b) Competence

The display of competence is therefore the obvious counterpart to evident ignorance: textual information, either directly relevant to the description of the object or circumstantial, is used to 'overwrite', as it were, the buyer's or devotee's hermeneutical suspicion through a focus on objective item descriptions, information of provenance, the state of conservation, historical and/or hagiographical detail, a display of expert knowledge.

A good example of this strategy is user ID christart and the according 'about me' page. Christart is a frequent eBay presence, usually operating at the high end of the market, offering, among other objects of Christian art or liturgy, thecae and standing reliquaries for three and even four digit figures. For example, during July 2008, not an unusual month, christart sold six relics for prices ranging from \$300 to \$3,000. Objects are typically described with historical detail and comprehensively illustrated, showing long shot views as well as high-quality close-ups. For example, the listing of a relic from the tunic of the Virgin Mary with accompanying *authentic*, sold in August 2008 for \$1,500, provided information on the reliquary ('height: ca. 13 inches', 'gilt brass', 'of the last century'), its pedigree ('used by a Roman Monsignore'), the authenticating details ('sealed with the red wax seal of Joannes Lucas Solarius, Vicar General of Don Joannis Lercarius, Archbishop of Genoa, with the threads intact'), as well as the age of the relic and translated details from the documentation:

'The reliquary comes with its original document, issued on May 30, 1778, by Joannes Lucas Solarius on behalf of the Archbishop of Genoa, confirming the authenticity of the relic, which 'was recognized and approbated by the Most Reverend Don Francisco

³⁴ John Nepomucene Neumann (1811-1860), bishop of Philadelphia. Canonized in 1977.

Andrea Corea, S.P. [Scolopine or Piarist Fathers], Bishop of Ripano'
and permitting its public veneration.'

An accompanying picture showed the back of the theca with the wax seal, placed next to the seal on the document to demonstrate their concurrence. Another showed the document in total, allowing the interested bidder to read it for him- or herself. Further details were then given on the history of the relic itself: the existence of a tunic of Mary at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, a reference from the sixth century 'Piacenza pilgrim', a well-known early pilgrim's account, confirming the early devotion to a clothing relic of the Virgin Mary, and an explanation of two parallel strands of tradition, one holding that some vestments of the Virgin had come to Constantinople in the mid-fifth century to be housed in the so-called Blachernae church from which they were stolen during the fourth crusade, in 1204, and taken to Rome; the other tracing the relic to a gift of the patriarch of Jerusalem to Charlemagne in 799, which was divided between Chartres and Aix-la-Chapelle (both cathedrals still display these relics today), although parts of the Chartres relic were also sent to Rome during the French revolution.

The impression of competence is strongly emphasized on christart's personal eBay page: here, christart is revealed as the eBay presence of an established gallery dealing in Christian artefacts. It presents an explicit mission statement, stating that it is the gallery's aim 'to renew the veneration of the sacred relics by the faithful' and to rescue relics from 'unworthy environments. Our wish is to deliver them into the houses of devout Christians who recognize the blessing they represent and venerate them adequately' (christart eBay web page), a strategy that overlaps with the notion of 'charity' described below. To do so, the gallery employs the services of a named consultant, Michael Hesemann, described as 'our expert', who is introduced as 'historian, journalist, internationally published author and art expert'. The claims to expertise are presented in great detail, giving some information on Hesemann's academic background (a degree in history and cultural anthropology from Göttingen University, Germany), listing his publications on various relics of Christ's Passion, mentioning endorsements of some of these works by other scholars, pointing out his connections to Vatican officials who have either authorized his research or been briefed by him on the results. The

textual information is complemented visually by pictures that depict Hesemann presenting some of his books to popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The effect is to impart a quasi-official respectability, authority and trustworthiness on Hesemann and, by extension, christart as a source of authentic, first-rate relics (and other sacred objects) and to deflect potential criticism directed at the commercial aspects of the business. The ostentatious connection to Vatican circles (although their exact nature is not quite made clear) is all the more remarkable given the severe attitude of ecclesiastical offices towards the trade in sacred objects, as my inquiry at the Roman Vicariate in connection with Signora A's dealings in Porta Portese showed. Hesemann, of course, is a figure of some notoriety after having left a less than favourable impression with the Sisters of Santa Lucia, as I described earlier, and my informant Guido, apparently well-informed about this incident, spoke with the utmost contempt of him ('within the Roman curia, because of this, Hesemann has become "someone who has compromised a nun", and no one will ever forgive him'); yet for an American buyer on eBay, most likely unconcerned and unacquainted with Roman ecclesiastical scandal, this strategy of displaying specialist competence is likely to be quite compelling.

c) Charity

Another type of narrative strategy is that of 'charity' in which background information not directly related to the object act as a kind of framing device to situate the listing and the potential transaction, making it more acceptable and engaging. Such information can be inscribed into the listing itself, as is the case, for example, with user catholicauctions. A frequent presence on eBay's US relic site throughout most of my fieldwork, catholicauctions presented itself as an initiative of St Patrick's Catholic Church in Cranston (Rhode Island, USA) to help finance its management and apostolate:

'100% of the Proceeds [sic] from all our eBay auctions directly benefit our building fund and other existing missions and expenses of this church. Please support our auctions as they aid us in

achieving the work of Christ! Thank you and God Bless [sic] you!
(listing of July 2007)

The objects on sale tend to be of low value: pins, pendants and relic medals of a mass-produced type that is available at souvenir shops in Rome, selling for \$5 to \$10. Even so, catholicauctions, during the eight years it has been registered with eBay (as of August 2007), managed to accumulate nearly 8,000 feedbacks from buyers. With an average 1,000 objects sold per year it would appear that the strategy of couching transactions in terms of a narrative of 'good works' has been quite successful in generating some extra income for St Patrick's.

Even more thriving – with more than 9,000 feedbacks from buyers within six years – has been church-woman whose 'good works' narrative is presented on the seller's 'about me' page, while her listings usually refer only briefly to the wider context. For example, in a listing of August 2007 she stated to be 'trying to help out a Carmelite Convent in Cuzco, Peru'. Sometimes the nuns, too, feature in the listings, shown in pictures with some of the merchandise. On the seller's 'about me' page these activities are further explained with an introduction by name and a little personal history: church-woman is the user ID of Berta, an elderly, yet apparently still vigorous lady of 93, and her son, Joseph, based in Miami. They support a community of Carmelite nuns in Ayacucho, Peru. Having worked in the country until his retirement, Joseph, we are informed, 'loved the rich religious art and heritage, but hated the poverty, especially amongst children and old people.' From this grew the idea to sell the nuns' handicrafts as well as any religious vintage objects and antiques they may find locally. Travelling for free due to his connections within the transport industry, Joseph regularly commutes between Miami and Peru, bringing back any objects the nuns have come up with, which are then listed on eBay. 'So as a result, the kind people that win our auctions help kids, old people and the religious who help them EVERY month' (eBay web page: church-woman; capitals in the original). Objects range from religious paintings to jewellery and old books, and from small pieces of furniture to rosaries and reliquaries. Prices tend to be at the higher end, occasionally reaching three and sometimes even four digit figures, so the revenues generated over the past six years are likely to be rather substantial.

While a certain religious impetus is discernible in the story of Berta and Joseph ('How can we do this each month? Mostly with Gods [!] help!'), their activities are very much framed through this-worldly, socially engaged terms in the tradition of Christian charity. Other buyers, also operating with the 'good works' strategy, put eBay to a more otherworldly use. The mission of kangabelle1, for example, according to her personal eBay page, 'is simply to sell Catholica on eBay to raise and fund Masses to be said for the "Souls of the Faithful and for Conversions"', an activity pursued under the heading of The Marian Family Apostolate (eBay web page: kangabelle1). It appears as an example of the classical contractual relationship between this world and the next that is characteristic for traditional Catholicism, although today often frowned upon by official theology and pastoral care. The traditional(ist) aspects are emphasized further through a focus on Marian piety, with pictures of the Virgin and a novena to Mary placed on the 'about me' page. In business since November 2003, kangabelle1 has been less successful economically with 470 buyer feedbacks as of August 2007, mostly for mass-produced relic medals selling at \$4 to \$12. It is tempting to speculate about the reasons for the relative lack of interest in kangabelle1's business; perhaps a low turnover is not overly surprising for transactions that convert this-worldly, economic capital into other-worldly capital (the rather less observable, tangible release from purgatory in contrast to the this-worldly charity of church-woman).

d) Ostensible piety

Finally, a fourth kind of narrative strategy is that of the 'ostensible piety'. Typically, it explicates the relic's devotional significance for the current owner or personal confessions of the benign influence the relic has had on the owner's life. It may also contain hints (or even explicit assurances) of its miraculous potency.

An example is the July 2007 listing for a relic of St Theresa of Lisieux from eBay ID wings-of-an-angel*. Already the user name expresses a certain religious sentiment, which is expounded further in the object description: 'So many love Saint Theresa I also. She has never forsaken me. Always answers with a rose. She also answers in a shape of a rose or picture you may ask a favor all day seeing roses. That is a sign from her' (missing punctuation in the original). Yet not

only is wings-of-an-angel* a devotee of St Theresa and as such consciously part of a larger 'imagined community', in itself an acknowledgment of the social effects of devotional practices, such as the cult of saints, and their associated material culture; she further explains how a relic of St Theresa

'not long ago cured a lady friend of mine Judy of an illness on her lungs feeling it was cancer. After holding a relic to her chest just the same as this one she went back for more ex [sic] rays her Doctor was shocked nothing at all was found any signs of cancer disappeared in the name of Jesus and Saint Theresa' (missing punctuation in the original).

The healing narrative further emphasizes the devotion to St Theresa by giving concrete examples of other faithful who venerate her, but it also ups the ante by introducing an element of the miraculous, inviting the potential bidder's faith not just in the possibility of miracles (not an extraordinary request *per se* within a Catholic idiom), but in miracles worked through a relic *just the same as this one*, thus repositioning divine intervention: from a generally accepted, though normally somewhat abstract notion, it is turned into a concrete possibility for the interested bidder, the implication being that if a relic like this one could work a miracle for my friend, it may also do so for you.

Such a strategy becomes even more explicit in a listing by eBay ID svptours of December 2004: some wooden splinter from the coffins of the Jesuit martyrs of Canada³⁵, in a small paper envelope, authenticated by a paper seal of the Society of Jesus. The starting price was a rather optimistic \$149.95, far higher than the usual price charged for this kind of relic. Remains of the Canadian Jesuit martyrs, while not exactly common, are found fairly regularly on eBay and contact relics, especially when not set into a theca, rarely sell for more than \$30 or \$40. However, these relics had proved their miraculous efficacy, according to svptours, thus presumably justifying their high starting price. Already the heading proudly announced the extraordinary nature of the object: 'RELIGIOUS

³⁵ Ss. Charles Garnier (1606-1649), Gabriel Lalemant (1610-1649) and Jean de Brébeuf (1593-1649), French Jesuit missionaries in New France, killed by Iroquois. Jointly canonized in 1930.

RELIQUARY HAS ANSWERED MY PRAYERS. RELICS FROM THESE SAINTS CONFIRMED MIRACULOUS' (capitals in the original). The actual description developed the theme further: apart from some biographical information on the saints, prospective bidders were informed that

'MY FAMILY[,] FRIENDS AND I HAVE HAD OUR LIVES CHANGED BY THE POSSESSION OF THESE RELICS! FINANCIAL CHANGE. WORK RELATED CHANGE. FAMILY LIFE CHANGE. WE WISH TO OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY OF FAITH & HOPE TO OTHERS FOR CHRISTMAS! TO HAVE A RELIC OF THE SAINT WHO WROTE THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CAROL IN CANADA [St Jean de Brébeuf] UNDER THE TREE OF THE ONE YOU LOVE AT CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR IS A PRICELESS GIFT! WE CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT THEIRS IS A POWER BEYOND REASON AND THAT THIS POWER IS BASED ON: FAITH & HOPE' (capitals in the original).

However, despite 'faith & hope', the success of such 'hard sells' is often small. For one, eBay has seen a number of (in)famous listings of purportedly miraculous relics that occasionally even made international headlines and spawned numerous copycat attempts. Possibly the best-known of these was the 'Virgin Mary grilled cheese sandwich', which, in fact, coincided with the listing for the Canadian martyrs' relics (see, for example, BBC World News of 23 November 2004)³⁶. Listings that focus on the devotional significance of a relic more than on its 'secular' features (such as, for example, its rarity or exceptionally ornate design), let alone play up its miraculous power, risk running into narrative contradictions

³⁶ A slice of toasted bread on which the facial features of the Virgin Mary were supposedly imprinted was sold on eBay in November 2004 for \$28,000 (!). It was bought by Goldenpalace.com, an Internet casino, which has since gained a reputation for acquiring quirky objects likely to generate media coverage. By the time the auction finished, the listing had received 1.7 million hits – an illustration of Hillis' (2006) argument about the publicity value of such otherwise marginal objects. Objects with 'miraculous' imprints of Christ, the Virgin, angels etc. still occasionally appear on eBay though usually without creating much of a stir anymore. They may still be regarded as a genuine part of popular religious culture, since natural as well as architectural structures have also sporadically become the focus of religious devotion after displaying seemingly meaningful patterns, a psychological phenomenon known as *pareidolia* (the misperception of a random stimulus as significant and specific). Its religious implications obviously reach back well before the time of eBay.

and thus invite suspicion and deter bids: if a relic such as that of the Jesuit martyrs is 'priceless', why would one place it on eBay? If the saints' power is based on 'faith and hope', is it appropriate to sell, respectively buy their relics for cash? The acuteness of such questions is underpinned by the general prohibition of the trade in relic by canon law and reinforced by attempts to intervene in this trade by Catholic lobby groups. Frequent buyers of religious objects on eBay are likely to be aware of these debates, with potential effects on purchasing decisions.

Some sellers are, of course, alert to these pitfalls, especially if they deal in relics on a regular basis. Svptours in the end failed to sell the relic, and a look at the user's transaction history showed that relics (or religious objects more broadly) account only for a minimal, perhaps even accidental part of sales. Recourse to a narrative of charity can be one way to defuse charges of self-interest, profiteering or sacrilege, although in such cases it is not the *raison d'être* of eBay activity, as in the examples above, but simply its justification. Wings-of-an-angel*, for example, ended the listing with the statement that 'occasionally I place a relic in the donation goes to 3 organizations. Never is this for my self' (mistakes in the original). More professional dealers of the sacred, such as christart, engage with criticism in an even more pre-emptive way. On the 'about me' page, a link leads to a guide ('Catholic Saint Relics on eBay? A Reply!'), written by the gallery's expert. It is interesting to quote this at some length:

'In Rome, the Pope's city, antique reliquaries are sold e.g. on the Via del [sic] Coronari, the old pilgrim's way to St. Peter's, without any objection from the Church officials. Actually several shops are regularly frequented by priests and bishops who buy pieces for their private collection and often established a long friendship with the antique dealers. I personally consulted a Doctor of the Canon Law who advised the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (Holy Office), since there is some misunderstanding re. § 1190 of the CIC [Codex Iuris Canonici]: "It is forbidden to sell Holy Relics." This, according to all experts on the Canon Law he asked, neither forbids the sale of reliquaries which already are on the profane market, nor does it forbid anyone to buy a reliquary with the intention to protect

the relic inside from any further profanization, which actually would be nothing but a good deed. No paragraph, no statement in the canon law forbids the possession and veneration of relics by the faithful or states that the faithful should not own or buy relics or reliquaries. Therefore, it is definitely NOT prohibited by the Canon Law to buy a reliquary or even a relic.' (Christart review and guide: web page; capitals in the original)

The apologia works on a number of different levels: for one, the relic trade is grounded in Rome itself, virtually in the pope's front yard, and even involves high-ranking members of the clergy without meeting resistance or condemnation – the implication being that the practice can hardly be wrong if Church authorities do not object to it even in their immediate environs. Secondly, it introduces an *argumentum ad verecundiam*, an appeal to authority, in stating that a doctor of canon law, apparently of some renown, has endorsed the trade in relics under certain, fairly lenient conditions: one may offer the reliquary and simply give the relic as a (notionally) free supplement to the transaction; one may buy from non-religious sources (the 'profane market'); one may intend to save the relic from profanation. This last argument also came up in a personal communication with christart's expert when I queried him on the sale of an *ex habitu* relic of John Paul II, supposedly prepared by the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix at their mother house in Rome, despite my objection that the Internet hardly allows for any vetting of potential buyers as to their religious beliefs and devout practices. In fact, during an interview Fr Angelo Paleri, postulator general of the Franciscan Conventuals, mentioned the danger of profanation and the impossibility of checking the genuine religious interest of individuals asking for relics. It was for this reason, he said, that he entirely refused to make relics available to private applicants; another informant, Matthew, mentioned an instance when he bid for an altar stone³⁷ on eBay against a self-confessed witch and prostitute (as he described her), suggesting that relics attract, at least occasionally, rather unholy interests. User IDs such as scuttle666 (bidder for an eighteenth-century reliquary in February 2004) might also indicate less than orthodox Catholic beliefs.

³⁷ Technically known as *mensa* (Lat. table), a slab of stone covering the so-called sepulchre, the cavity containing the relics buried in the altar.

These cases, I hope, show how the Internet in general and eBay in particular influence and change collecting practices, respectively how they contribute to a redrawing of the definitions and hierarchies that govern notions of authority and authenticity. In this, I am following Richard Wilk, who, using the example of nineteenth-/twentieth-century Japanese woodprints, argues the same point (2008, conference workshop): regarded as inferior and not worth critical attention compared to specimens of the pre-nineteenth-century period, Wilk describes how these prints used to be hard to find and collect, despite low prices, due to a lack of committed dealers. A hostile logic of connoisseurship excluded these objects from the established channels of distribution and access, relegating them to a marginal position within Clifford's (1988) art-culture system as well as to the margins of the distribution system, such as estate sales or minor auction houses where they would turn up occasionally and randomly. This situation changed, Wilk argues, with the development of the Internet, and especially eBay, as a widespread, accessible and user-friendly technology (see also Hillis [2006: 179-81] on the importance of fast browser technologies as well digital imaging for the success of eBay). Where 20 years ago a cache of old prints, discovered in an estate clearance, might simply have been disposed of for lack of a viable sales outlet, such finds can now fairly easily be offered to millions of potential buyers; eBay thus radically opened up new sources of supply and connected them to a radically expanded audience of potential buyers. What eBay did was to transcend physical location and to give an integrated, low-cost platform to professional dealers as well as amateurs while at the same time lowering entrance thresholds for potential buyers in practical, social and economic terms, in the process sidelining exclusionary practices of the fine art establishment. As a result, much of the trade in Japanese woodprints is now being conducted online, with their market, according to Wilk, having tripled.

The outcomes of this process are various: one the one hand a far broader range of objects on sale, while on the other hand fakes have become more numerous, too; secondly, item prices have seen a static or downwards development with the parallel emergence of a 'discount' segment; thirdly, the market has widened to include items such as reprints, postcards or books that relate, sometimes only tenuously, to the original collectibles; and fourthly, a further specialization of museums and top-end collectors on smaller niches.

On an ideological level, eBay has, to some extent, instigated a process of deligitimization of established hierarchies within collecting practices. Where the traditional art system is organized through the exercise of a rigid canon of taste and specialist expertise which could, if at all, be challenged by only the most influential dealers and collectors, the Internet appears in contrast as an open system with a far more fluid diffusion of rankings, grades or classifications. In this process, authority becomes dispersed and is opened up to broader discussion, yet it also impacts on objects themselves: as physical location becomes less important, at least in terms of access and distribution, the exotic becomes mundane, the object of contemplation becomes an object of practice.

A number of these effects I could observe myself during fieldwork, respectively they have been confirmed by informants, although they are not necessarily seen as positive developments: ICHRUSA, for example, but also the Vatican *lipsanoteca* acknowledge that relics – like Wilk's Japanese woodprints – would surface occasionally in estate sales, flea markets or small antiques shops, yet without regular distribution channels they never really became collectible, their trade therefore not being much of a moral or theological concern; eBay, however, radically changed this situation. What is also observable is the accrual of a halo of related objects around the category of relics – religious goods in the widest sense, reaching from rosaries to pious images, from religiously inspired soft toys to books and DVDs – the selection is truly vast, running to thousands of listings at any given time.

At the same time, there are also significant differences to the observations made by Wilk: while it is hardly possible to quantify these changes, informants did by and large agree that prices for relics had gone up rather than down due to eBay. Where ten years ago an antiques dealer might not have cared much for the odd relic that came his or her way and sold it to the next buyer for a modest sum, eBay, it was often argued, tapped into a reservoir of strong demand that could not easily be satisfied, resulting in bidding wars and therefore higher, rather than lower, prices.

Secondly, as we have seen, there clearly is a hierarchy of objects, a canon and a nomenclature to identify and legitimize relics of greater and lesser value, for example relic cards compared to thecae, or third-class compared to first-class relics. Thirdly, while physical location may have become less important in terms

of availability, I hope to have shown that, at least for relics, origin is still fundamental as an authorizing and authenticating notion: a relic from the Vatican, from a place and epoch that can be verified by seal or documentation, is more valuable than an anonymous 'stray' relic. And while expertise may be increasingly negotiable, it is not necessarily less important. As my examples of eBay user christart show, there is still clearly a sense of specialist authority that can confer a price premium. After all, to say that expertise is negotiable is also implicitly to state a potential for confusion and trickery, a point made by Ellis and Haywood (2006: 51): 'Collecting rituals are instances of symbolic action through which collectors give objects new meanings that evoke, affirm or revise the existing meaning of objects [...] eBay challenges these rituals.' With greater ease of participation it becomes more difficult to assert differentials of value and rarity as any seller may praise his or her item as 'rare', 'exceptional', 'one of a kind' – something I have tried to capture under the heading of the 'hard sell'. 'Evaluating the rarity of an eBay item remains difficult even for knowledgeable collectors, as listings frequently disrupt the social construction of rarity established by the collecting communities' (Ellis and Haywood, 2006: 51).

iv. Intervention

Whether recourse is made to charity, piety or history, the question of authenticity – whether the offered relic is 'real' – lies at the core of these competing and complementary narrative strategies, with eBay acting as their discursive arena. To succeed, the relic needs to be seen as grounded in a metonymic relationship with a certain place and a certain moment in time. Expressions such as 'from Italy', 'from Rome', 'from a convent', 'from a priest I know', 'from the shrine of X' are therefore frequently found in listings. The identification of the saint is another such link – it ties the object in with a biography, an epoch and a place, such as the saint's tomb or the scenes of his or her life. However, it would seem that the notion of authenticity, of the genuine relic, must inescapably remain an embattled field. In order to succeed narrative requires closure, the concealment of its own narratedness. To narrate invites doubt, thus keeping the field open for contestation. Narrative, as Stewart (1993: 22) writes,

'lacks authenticity, for its experience is *other*. The printed word suffers doubly from this lack, for not only has it lost the authenticity of lived experience – it has lost the authenticity of authorial voice as well. Who is speaking? It is the voice of abstraction, a voice which proclaims its absence with each word' (italics in the original).

It is this lack, I argue, that has kept eBay's stage open for intervention by a number of interested parties. 'Who is speaking?' is indeed a central question in the contested field of relic trade: is the seller someone who simply found the object at an estate sale and shifts it on? Is he or she a professional antiques dealer? If so, does he or she really have the claimed expertise? If the seller trades relics to raise funds, do the proceeds really go toward a charitable cause? What does canon law really say about transactions involving relics, reliquaries and money? How is eBay implicated in all this – is it a case of aiding and abetting a practice that is, if not illegal, then at least unethical? And what is the status of the object traded – is it really what the seller says it is, what it itself proclaims to be (*ex velo BMW* – from the veil of the Blessed Virgin Mary)?

To some extent one must assume that the narrative strategies do work in the intended way, as the trade in relics through eBay has been fairly stable for quite a few years. In my own experience, the numbers of listings have not changed much since 2002, with about 350 to 500 objects listed as relics on the US site alone at any one time, although by no means all objects thus categorized are strictly speaking relics; many are simply sacramentals or liturgical objects such as rosaries, devotional books or pictures, occasionally vestments and chalices. At the same time, however, and throughout the period that I have been monitoring eBay, a number of counter narratives and counter practices have persistently been present, which have in some measure shaped the operation of distributing the sacred through the Internet. As Hillis notes, 'digital technologies increasingly intersect with human desires and needs.' He argues (2006: 169) that 'the West builds its philosophies, internal and logical contradictions included, as an array of complex technologies', in the case of eBay reflecting its founder's libertarian convictions in a friction-free market place. 'People, however, often use technologies in complex ways unanticipated by their designers ... eBay, then, as an information machine and as an array of user and corporate practices,

exemplifies the power of technological assemblages to influence social relations' (ibid.). Yet if eBay is an 'information machine' it is just as much a disinformation machine. As long as authenticity is at stake as the driving force behind exchange, anxiety must remain over the ontological status of the object, an anxiety that narrative strategies can try to allay, but never foreclose. 'User' and 'corporate practices' can, in fact, even add to this anxiety.

The threat of forgery is perhaps the most obvious expression of this, and a number of users expressed concern over this to me with comments such as: 'YES. There is a great risk of fraud', '90% of relics sold on eBay are fake', 'there are fake relics being sold on eBay and other auction houses. And everybody knows that' (capitals in the original). It also surfaced during fieldwork in Rome. Speaking to Sister at Santa Lucia in Selci I was told about a spate of relics that appeared some years ago from an American source, the Our Lady of the Sun International Shrine in El Mirage, Arizona, already briefly mentioned above. The shrine, still in existence, is a traditionalist establishment that at the time was run by the late Fr Francis LeBlanc without permission of the local ordinary, the bishop of Phoenix, who objected to Fr LeBlanc's celebration of the Tridentine mass³⁸. These relics, apparently, were available by mail order from the shrine and 'sold' in return for a donation. As doubts arose over their authenticity, recipients began to contact the Sisters of Santa Lucia as the purported original source of the relics. Baffled, the Sisters contacted the Redemptorist Fathers, as the relics' accompanying documents appeared to issue from the Redemptorists' then postulator general, Fr Nicola Ferrante. It transpired that the authentics were manipulated photocopies and that Fr Ferrante had never authenticated the relics in question. In fact, in many cases he had not even been in a position to do so, as the dubious relics did

³⁸ Traditional or Tridentine liturgy is based on the Roman Missal of 1570, respectively its revisions up to the Second Vatican Council, when Catholic liturgy was altered considerably through a general simplification of ritual, the abolition of certain devotional practices and the introduction of the vernacular instead of Latin. At the same time, the use of the Tridentine liturgy became subject to special dispensation. These changes have encountered resistance and a small minority of Catholic 'traditionalists' continue to refuse them on the ground that the new rites are theologically deficient. 'Traditionalism' (in itself not a monolithic notion) rejects to varying degrees the changes of the Second Vatican Council and partly also some earlier revisions of the mass, implemented by Pius XII in the 1950s. At the more extreme fringes, traditionalists reject the validity of the current papal succession, as all reigning popes since John XXIII (1958-1963) are regarded as heretics for their adherence to the new liturgy. The seat of St Peter is therefore considered to be vacant ('sedevacantism'). In 2007, Benedict XIV eased the use of the last edition (1962) of the traditional mass.

not come from saints whose cause the order had been overseeing. Sister showed me a shoebox full of such relics that the convent had retained from, no doubt, deeply disappointed believers (she also gave one to me, on my request, for study purposes, of St John the Evangelist, according to the cedula). The affair, Sister said, had been saddening and annoying, causing distress to the duped people and unnecessary work for the Sisters, as well as bringing the lipsanoteca into disrepute (as mentioned above, there is still a web page on the Ferrante/LeBlanc relics that refers to 'Augustinian nuns in Rome' involved in shady relic dealings). Ferrante relics still occasionally resurface on eBay, unsurprisingly, as the numbers distributed from Our Lady of the Sun must have been quite substantial.

While researching these forgeries I made contact with Bill, the custodian of a small Catholic lay ministry, For All The Saints, based in the diocese of El Paso, Texas, whose mission it is 'to make authentic holy relics available to local parishes for feast days and other special occasions' (For All The Saints: website). In this, it is quite similar to a number of small groups I have come across, that typically pursue as their aims to uphold the cult of saints and their relics against official indifference; to rescue relics from neglect and possible desecration; to educate the faithful on relics and to make relics available for devotional functions. Quite often they also take a critical interest in the eBay relic trade, though the focus may vary. Perhaps the most high-profile of these groups is ICHRUSA (International Crusade for Holy Relics USA), which has repeatedly condemned eBay for allowing these transactions, occasionally even gaining some coverage in the mainstream media. Rather confrontationally, it has branded sellers as simoniacs and repeatedly lobbied eBay to apply more stringent rules (albeit with limited success). Others, like For All The Saints, are more circumspect – while stating that the ministry 'laments the fact that sacred relics are being openly sold and that so many of the church hierarchy turn a blind eye to this practice' (website), its focus is more strongly on the prevention of fraud:

'It is even more horrifying that there are criminals who take advantage of this laxity and produce counterfeit relics that they foist upon the faithful who have a great devotion to the saints. This ministry will do all it can to expose these criminals and make it

difficult for them to continue their illegal trade.' (For All the Saints, website)

It was through Bill and his ministry that I came into contact with Guido, the informant quoted earlier. As an expert on church history³⁹, he helped the ministry to monitor dealer activity on eBay and to post regular updates on relics identified as forgeries on its website. For All The Saints also maintained a databank of dealer ratings, ranging from 'safe' over 'caution' to 'avoid'. The rationale was that while the ministry did not condone the sale of relics, as long as the relic trade continued it was still sensible to try and protect buyers, if at all possible. Sellers who offered relics deemed to be false would be notified and asked to withdraw their listing. Entries in the databank might read 'unquestionable integrity' or 'impeccable integrity. Absolutely a great seller', but might also contain qualifications: 'While most of the relics sold by this individual appear to be genuine, he/she has no qualms about selling fake relics when the opportunity presents itself' (website). Not surprisingly, For All The Saints also ran into harsh controversy with some of the sellers:

'This dealer was once one of the most respected sellers on both the Internet and eBay. However, in the last year he has let down his guard and purchased fraudulent relics from questionable Italian sources. While *most* of the relics he sells are genuine, he consistently includes several fake relics in the mix and continues to sell them even when warned that they are fakes [...] We have, therefore, dropped his rating to the bottom.' (website; italics in the original)

In addition, the ministry listed a number of notorious instances of forgeries (among them the mentioned Ferrante relics), providing illustrations for comparison and detailed information on how to spot them. Guido also maintained a page on the site headed 'Guido's *Fake du Jour*', on which he would examine

³⁹ Bill provided me with some information about Guido's background and credentials, which are quite impressive, linking him in a professional capacity to the curia of an Italian archdiocese. As I have been asked to treat this information as confidential I cannot give further details.

individual listings, often dismantling the descriptions in rather scathing ways. Ultimately, however, the ministry had to admit defeat, as the workload to monitor and check dozens of listings each week and write updates on them simply proved too heavy. The ministry still offers case-by-case checks of eBay-listed relics if a bidder contemplating a purchase feels unsure over its authenticity.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of the ministry's activities on eBay. Some sellers did withdraw their relics after being advised that they were fake; yet as the above example shows, others simply continued regardless, even though Bill estimated that the dealer in question – for years a major player in eBay's relic trade – harmed himself in the long run by continuing his listings: '[H]is sales are down and many of the prices depressed. Buyers, at least the educated ones, do not trust him anymore.' Even so, I would argue that the ministry lacked an effective tie-in with eBay itself, a way to maintain a continuous presence on the website itself that could have drawn the attention of larger numbers of buyers and thus spread its message.

What is at stake in these interventions are both, the boundaries of authority – what can be said, what can be done, what objects may or may not be legitimately owned and distributed, by whom and under what conditions – and the proper understanding of authenticity, which, at least in part, is a question about the proper understanding of the Catholic faith. One position, we can perhaps call it positivist, sees authenticity as an essential quality inherent in the object, in its very materiality. As such it demands transparency and self-sameness, that is to say: an openness to critical investigation – through methods like documentary evidence, stylistic comparison, chemical or biological analysis – that will reveal an object's continuing identity across space and time: is the particle designated as *ex velo BMV* really derived from the Virgin Mary's veil, are the pieces of wood preserved and displayed at the Roman basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme really the same that bore the body of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion? This position finds its expression, for example, in texts that seek to verify the historicity of the Passion relics kept in Rome and other places (among others: Hesemann, 1999, 2000), or in proposals like that of a ministry called Resurrection NOW to register all known relics in a database to control their movement and to subject them to scientific analyses such as DNA tests or carbon dating; but it also shines through in eBay listings that seek to establish historical and art historical credentials. A

relic of the 'True Cross', on offer from eBay ID christart, exemplifies this approach. Its description seeks to corroborate the authenticity of the object by stating that

'[a]ccording to several Church historians of the 4th and 5th century, the True Cross was discovered in 325 AD when Emperor Constantine the Great ordered the removal of a pagan temple built by Hadrian over the site of the Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre.' (listing September 2008)

Together with the cross was discovered the so-called title, or *titulus*, the inscription that mocked Jesus as king of the Jews.

'A part of [the cross] and half of the title with the inscription I NAZARINUS R... is still preserved and venerated in the Basilica di S. Croce, one of the seven main churches of the Eternal City. In 1998, a careful investigation was commissioned by the Holy See and seven Israeli experts on the dating of inscriptions (comparative palaeography) dated its letters into the 1st century, the time of Christ. This suddenly gave the 'legend of the Finding of the Cross' a lot of credibility [...] The claim of the 'enlightened' sceptics, that all relics of the True Cross would be sufficient to build a ship, was proven wrong in 1870 by the French scholar Rohault de Fleury, who mathematically calculated the volume of all relics of the True Cross in all European Cathedrals and found them all together having the mass of only one third of a Roman cross!' (listing September 2008)

Curiously, while the impetus of such strategies often tends towards theologically apologetic or conservative positions, they are nonetheless indebted to Enlightenment notions of demystification and rational critique as the appeals to textual exegesis (patristic writings of the fourth/fifth centuries), palaeography and mathematics illustrate. One may even trace a path back to Protestant thought such as Calvin's *Treatise on Relics* (1543), where he rejects their veneration not only on theological grounds, as a form of idolatry, but also on historical-critical

grounds, pointing out that most relics are fraudulent and cannot truly be what they purport to be. An arm of St Anthony kept at Geneva thus turns out to be the bone of a stag, St Peter's brain a piece of pumice, the revelations being the result of inquiry and inspection trumping naïve faith and credulity. In response to this sustained critique, the Catholic Church developed its own adaptations of Enlightenment concepts, introducing historical-critical methods, for example, in Bible studies, liturgy and hagiography – what Reinhardt describes as a 'dialectic of the ostentatious sacrifice of the evidently obsolete in order to preserve, indeed reinforce, the inviolable substance [of orthodox doctrine], which is thus exempt from further unrelenting source criticism' (Reinhardt, 2004: 220; my translation). Already the Bollandist project begun in the mid-seventeenth century attempted such a critical undertaking within the field of hagiography. A more recent example is the establishment, in 1930, of the historical-hagiographic section within the Sacred Congregation of Rites, the predecessor body of today's Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. In 1966, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, theologians Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler deplored that the Council's modernist reforms did not go far enough in the treatment of those sacred objects that were now coming to be seen as apocryphal or marginal:

'[U]nfortunately, the Council did not follow the suggestion of a Spanish bishop to respectfully bury the inauthentic relics and from then on keep silence about the matter; it would be relevant for Germany, too, and for some not unknown cases, for example Aix-la-Chapelle, Trier⁴⁰.' (Rahner and Vorgrimler, 1996 [1966]: 47-8; my translation)

Herrmann (2003: 9; my translation) makes a similar point:

'For non-Catholics the veneration of saints and relics in Romanic countries, but also in some regions of Germany, is among the most bewildering and strange sights Catholicism has to offer ... Catholics are well advised to draw the consequences from this puzzlement.

⁴⁰ Both cathedrals still hold substantial relic treasures, especially of relics connected to the life of Christ. Those at Aix-la-Chapelle are exhibited every seven years.

Instead of celebrating new relic displays in Germany year after year, their pastors are called upon to brush the dust off the saints and their remains in the interest of a new, rational (not rationalist) hagiography and to finally clear out those thousands of relics still piling up in churches (and not just in southern Italy), and to end the disgraceful greed for relics and the notorious trade in devotional objects.'

This demythologizing discourse mirrors in a curious way the re-mythologizing pursued by some of the actors on and around eBay. The structure of the reformers' negative argument is replicated under an inverse, that is to say: positive, sign by the apologists: both locate authenticity – a claim for truth – in the material quality of the object that is seen as amenable to a positivist epistemology, embodied, for example, in a particular C14 measurement, the presence of a particular species of pollen (indicating geographical provenance), or a morphological analysis of style. From a devout Catholic perspective such an approach is perhaps not unreasonable; Catholicism is, after all, centred around a belief in incarnation, with the deity itself taking on a material embodiment. Despite radical ideological differences, both positions agree on the stark dichotomy between falsity and truth as meaningful categories to be derived from the material of the object itself and a trust in an epistemological certainty.

Against such debates over original and counterfeit one can posit a 'constructionist' approach. As an alternative paradigm it is possibly accepted by the majority of professional historians today, at least to some extent. Legner, a leading German historian on the cult of saints, neatly summarizes the constructionist position: 'Such a need to have proof of authenticity is nowadays obsolete. Instead our interest focuses on the *culture of veneration* within the human history of mentalities and piety' (Legner, 2003: 9; my translation, italics in the original). In this respect, mainstream academe has certainly moved away from lay conceptions for which literal authenticity is still often of paramount importance: at the exhibition of his relic collection at the Schnütgen Museum for Medieval Art, Cologne, in 1994, collector Louis Peters observed the reactions of the audience: 'Amazed, doubting, yet impressed people discussed the possibility of authenticity' (Peters, 1994: 103; my translation). In the following chapter I will

argue that it is the neglect of such more literal approaches to religious experience that animates the circulation of sacred objects and the (re-)construction of devotional cultures.

VI. Practice and Subversion

i. The absence of presence: the body, the senses and material religion since the Second Vatican Council

In *Natural Symbols* (2003 [1970]), Mary Douglas mounted a critique of the Roman-Catholic Church of the post-Conciliar period of the 1960s and 1970s, or at least of some of its reformist actions. Using Friday abstinence, the denial of meat consumption on this day of the week in remembrance of Christ's sacrificial death, and the Eucharist as her examples, she deplored a loss of appreciation and discernment among the hierarchy for the symbolic, non-verbal dimension of religious practice in Catholicism. More than 30 years later this issue appears still to be burning, at least among certain sections of the faithful, still a cause for anxiety, a feeling of loss, if not, in fact, of having been robbed. It is therefore necessary to understand the context in which (some) Catholics live their religious lives. In particular it is necessary to position them and their Church within the historical developments since the mid-1960s, that is to say: within the developments of the post-Conciliar period.

Already Pius XII had made some alterations of Catholic liturgy, most notably of the celebration of Holy Week, but also streamlining the calendar of feast days, easing regulations on fasting, and making mass attendance more flexible. Yet it was the Second Vatican Council, initiated by John XXIII (1958-1963) and concluded and implemented by his successor, Paul VI, that led to far-reaching and deep changes in ecclesiological, liturgical and, indeed, material structures of Catholic practice. Liturgical issues were addressed in the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that was ratified by the Council in December 1963. As Rahner and Vorgrimler (1996 [1966]) (the former one of its theological advisers) point out, liturgy had been a focus of interest already during the preparatory stages of the Council and they position the discussion within the context of the liturgical

movement, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernity, they argue, has brought about a 'turn to the subject' (though not subjectivism), throwing into doubt the presumed objectivity of merely external signs and rites and giving rise to an acute perception of the latent dangers of a mechanical devotions, magic and superstition (1996 [1966]: 37). Liturgy, it would therefore appear, needs to be concerned less with form and performance, but more with understanding, anamnesis⁴¹ and the (internal) participation of the congregation. The constitution itself states that 'Mother Church has always been a friend of the fine arts', seeking their service so as ensure that those

'things which belong to the holy liturgy may be truly worthy, appropriate and beautiful: sign and symbol of transcendental reality ... With particular zeal she has always been anxious that holy objects and vessels should serve nobly and beautifully to adorn the liturgy; she has thus allowed the changes in material, form and decoration caused by technical progress over time.' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §122; in Rahner and Vorgrimler, 1996 [1966]: 87; my translation).

While this statement is clearly making provisions for the role of material culture within religious practice, such a role is, at least potentially, called into question again and hedged with reservations a little bit later where local ordinaries are called to aim for 'noble beauty' rather than 'mere display'. Bishops are warned to guard against objects that may harm genuine piety through artistic deficiencies, mediocrity or kitschiness (§124). While the custom of having holy images should not be questioned, they should be 'put on view in moderate numbers and according to proper norms' as otherwise they might 'puzzle' the faithful or encourage an 'unsound' kind of piety (§125). When assessing art works, local ordinaries should seek advice from diocesan art commissions and, if need be, from external experts (§126). Conspicuously absent from these instructions are members of the local congregation or any mentioning of a consultation process. Indeed, §128 calls for the immediate adjustment of all regulations relating to the

⁴¹ Technical term for the commemoration of Christ's passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

construction, furnishing and decoration of cultic edifices in the light of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

The faithful, of course, may have had (and still have) their own ideas of what kind of display should be considered gratuitous, what constitutes kitsch and what beauty (noble or otherwise), and whether they are puzzled by or rather engaged with images of the sacred (or media of presence, more generally, as Orsi [2005], calls them), which I understand as a two-way process that may include, but is not confined to discursive interaction. Instead, the constitution reflects a thoroughly modernist approach, already beginning to become superseded at the time of its publication, that implicitly makes a clear distinction between a popular and a 'true' aesthetic, the latter based on disinterestedness and expert connoisseurship. Yet as Morgan (1998: 25) points out, 'popular iconography is thoroughly "interested", "engaged", functional and extrinsically purposive.' Perhaps his statement can (or should) be taken even further as it still employs a framework of 'popular versus elite' that is in itself problematic if taken at face value. Under critical review for at least 30 thirty years (e.g. Obelkevich, 1979; Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979; Brown, 1982; Schieder, 1986), the idea of 'popular' and 'elite' religiosity needs to be understood as an unfinished Enlightenment project, explicitly formulated in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Dipper, 1986), in which 'religious subjectivity and enlightened critique of dogma "converged in the rationalization, emotionalization and ethicization of religion"' (Bödeker, 1989, quoted in Angenendt, 1997: 268; my translation). Keeping such qualifications in mind, Fabian (2007: 61) still sees critical mileage in the concept of popular culture, arguing that 'it has its uses if and when it serves the critique of the classical concept of culture', that is to say: a critique of culture as 'a concept of identity stressing systemic integration, purity, adherence to shared values and beliefs, and conformity in conduct and outlook.' Instead of reifying the dichotomy of popular and elite, therefore, it would better be seen as pre- rather than descriptive, part and parcel of the very project of modernization that the Council document still subscribes to nearly 200 years later. As such, it reiterates the process of materializing and dividing the spheres of sacred and profane that I have described in chapter II and that will occupy me again in chapter VII. Reflecting specific interests of class, as I see it, popular aesthetics and popular religion, if we want to use the term, are characterized by engagement with the

world, forced to connect with it out of necessity. They have to cope with the cares of the everyday, which thus comes to pervade the sacred as much as the sacred is allowed, in fact: must be allowed, to pervade the everyday (Bourdieu, 2000: 15-23, 66-77; following Weber, 2005 [1922]). Pinney (2001, 2002), writing on Hindu devotional practices, has coined the term 'corporethetics' for this mode of engagement, a sensory and corporeal aesthetics that places object and worshipper in a relation of mutual interaction and recognition, comprising various sensorial dimensions (sight, sound, touch, smell, bodily posture) and that has a strong affective component.

Of course, placing ritual object and worshipping subject on a footing of mutuality is to invite charges of fetishism – a notion abhorrent to my clerical informants (who routinely invoked this danger, *as* danger – not surprisingly, given the degree to which religious and secular theologies have tried to exorcize matter from the sacred), and also alarming to many lay informants, who often sought to pre-empt and allay such suspicions, for their own peace of mind and that of their pastors. Yet as I will argue in chapter VII, fetishism need not be regarded as a snare to be avoided, but instead may be reinterpreted as the inevitable outcome of the human condition, that is to say: of being embodied in a material world, and as an expression of human agency. The Jesuit sociologist Andrew Greeley describes this encompassing religious corporethetics as characteristic for the 'Catholic imagination':

'When asked how the Catholic imagination differs from the Protestant..., I reply that we have angels and saints and souls in purgatory and statues and stations of the cross and votive candles and religious medals and crucifixes and rosaries and Mary the Mother of Jesus and First Communion and Candlemas and Ash Wednesday and May crownings and Midnight Masses and pilgrimages and relics and they don't. These days I realize that we don't have most of those things anymore either.' (Greeley, 2005: 135)

This is a Catholicism that once embraced leadership and laity alike within an intense sacramentalism or 'devotionalism' (Orsi, 2005) – in the most general sense

the acknowledgement that God is in some form present in, or at least revealed through objects, events and practices in this world.

Technically, the term 'sacramentals' refers to a fairly open and heterogeneous group of objects and practices that are akin to, yet of lesser importance than and carefully distinguished from the sacraments. Sacramentals comprise, for example, benedictions (of humans, cattle, plants etc.), holy water, the sign of the cross, the saying of grace, rosaries, scapulars⁴², and relics. Conceptually, the idea of sacramentals developed out of early scholastic teaching on the sacraments by authors such as Hugh of Saint Victor (d. 1142) and Peter Lombard (c. 1100-1160), organizing a wide array of common liturgical acts and objects into a hierarchy, that distinguished between those that *effect* and those that merely *signify* salvation. Sacraments are thus both, inherently effective (*ex opere operato*) and necessary for salvation, while sacramentals work through the intercession of the Church and the inner participation of the faithful (*ex opere operantis ecclesiae*) and as such can aid salvation, but are not necessary to it. Despite this relatively clear conceptual distinction, actual religious practice as to what acts and objects belonged in what category remained fairly flexible for quite some time. The fixation of seven sacraments, while already enumerated by Peter Lombard (other authors list as many as 30), was formally defined only by the Council of Trent, while the actual term 'sacramental' first appears even later, in a papal document of 1682 (see Kürzeder, 2005: 58-64). This practical ambiguity is certainly suggestive, as it indicates the difficulty of defining the clear boundaries between signification and causation, sign and presence – a fundamental question that for the Catholics I came across during my research still hovers inescapably in the background when reflecting on their use of or attitude towards relics. It also opens a space for objects, practices and words not clearly (or not always clearly) sanctioned by either official authority or popular custom, which may contribute to the awkward position of Church officials who often simultaneously seemed to revere and to disown relics.

⁴² Scapular: originally a kind of short cloak and as such part of the monastic habit. Here, a form of sacramental, derived from the monastic scapular, but of much smaller dimensions. It basically consists of two small rectangular pieces of fabric, often showing some pious images, held together by two strings and worn over the shoulders so that one piece of fabric rests on the chest, the other on the back of the wearer. Usually, spiritual graces and indulgences have been granted to scapulars, respectively their devout use.

Yet this sacramentalism, while perhaps not (yet) completely relegated to the past, has certainly ceased to be the universal and unquestioned idiom of Catholic piety, an effect of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council: 'American Catholicism in the latter third of the twentieth century offers a case study of the confusion, at least, but also the anger and despair that may be provoked by conflict over media of presence' (Orsi 2005: 51). Theological periodicals of the time give ample evidence of the impetus provided by the Council to rid the Catholic Church (and its churches) of what now came to be seen as remnants of the pre-modern, the superstitious and the immature. It could be argued that the Catholic leadership, at a time when the modernist paradigm was already past its prime and set for internal deconstruction, embarked on a large-scale programme to finally bring the Church into the modern age. Both Greeley (2005) and Orsi (2005) give sensitive accounts of this period in the US, cautiously questioning the wisdom of the liturgical reforms that led to a widespread emptying out of sacred space and a fading of many devotional practices during the 1960s and 1970s. Both are broadly sympathetic to these forms of a waning Catholic sacramentalism, although they approach the subject from different, perhaps even opposite sides of the spectrum. The one, as a sociologist but also a priest and member of the Jesuit order, is primarily concerned with pastoral issues, with the role of liturgy and material religion for community coherence. From Greeley's perspective, a healthy degree of sacramentalism is in the own best interest of his Church, although exactly what degree can be deemed 'healthy' is very much to be determined by the hierarchy, rather than the faithful. In contrast, Orsi, an historian of religion from an Italo-Catholic background, though not a believer, assumes a grass-roots perspective, charting individual and collective experiences of his own immigrant community, its transition from a position at the margins into the mainstream of US society and the sometimes fraught incorporation into secular modernity. To him, normative prescriptions of orthodoxy versus superstition are of interest only in so far as many of his informants have to work through these concepts in the practice and development of their religious lives.

For sacramentalism – or the notion of presence that sacramentalism implies – by and large remains a troubling concept, even with ostensibly sympathetic commentators such as Greeley. He cautions that

'[t]he problem then is not to rid ourselves of statues and crucifixes and medals and angels and saints and holy water and the poor souls [of purgatory] and Mary. The problem rather is how to reinterpret and rearticulate some of our stories so they represent the authentic story and do not degenerate into superstition, folk religion, and magic' (Greeley, 2005: 140).

In the final instance, then, things – even when welcome – have to be secured by hedging them with words as degeneration always looms threateningly in the background should they be left to their own devices. What appears to be lacking in Greeley's approach to material religion is a willingness to let its objects speak and act for themselves, respectively to allow free interaction between them and their human counterparts. That this should be so can hardly surprise. Theology, as a hierarchical system of doctrines, as a centralized discursive practice, cannot by definition tolerate such interaction. Any free and unguided interaction must question theology's claim to undivided magisterial authority and thus give rise to heterodoxies and heresies – or rather, in the very process, undermine orthodoxy even as a meaningful concept. This holds true, obviously, of all organized religion, not just Catholicism. Secondly, to the extent that fetishistic attraction – and I deliberately use the term 'fetishistic' here for its loadedness – works on a pre- or non-linguistic level, it undermines any claim to linguistic closure; in fact, it shows discourse to be just one rather than the only possible mode of grasping reality.

Such a view is routinely rejected by theology (or theologies) and its attempt to reduce objects to signs and to understand signs merely as the 'garb of meaning' (Keane, 2005). 'Recovering and rearticulating our symbols is part of the task of religious maturation...' (Greeley, 2005: 143). Yet what is actually recovered in this process of articulation and, more to the point, what is lost? Personally, I am suspicious of a rhetoric of 'maturation' as it recasts the practitioners of certain religious devotions in the image of the childish savages that twentieth-century anthropology struggled to discard. It is reminiscent of a Frazerian intellectualism with its rigid distinction between magic, religion and science and its assumption that people clung (and cling) to the first simply because mental deficiency did (and does) not allow them to progress to the latter.

'Sacramentals are not instruments of magic that control God and by the use of which we can manipulate God into doing what we want Him to do', Greeley reminds his readers (2005: 142). Indeed, he makes it very clear: 'Neither the Protestant nor the Catholic imagination is without risks. The former risks a God-forsaken universe, the latter superstition and folk religion' (2005: 134).

Yet looking at my informants' statements I wonder how many, if any, of them would actually try to use a sacramental, or more specifically, a relic in this way. While there is certainly evidence that at least a fair number of them regard relics as conjuring or carrying some sort of presence (what exactly this presence is often remains ambiguous), this does not imply a belief that this presence can be commanded in an easy way, or any way at all. And yet 'manipulation' is a term I should like to salvage for further discussion in chapter VII on fetishism and agency: that the saints (and even God) may be open to manipulation will perhaps not seem so outlandish or immature if we relinquish a naïve understanding of the term – at any rate more commonly ascribed to the faithful by scholars, theologians and educators than actually held by them – that understands it as synonymous to coercion, guaranteeing success. Instead, I would submit that we need to understand manipulation as negotiation, discussion, haggling with all the implied possibilities of failure and disappointment. One may bring one's problems and pains to St Rita, patron of impossible causes, relics of whom are fairly easy to come by, usually in the form of prayer cards with a bit of dust from the rock on which she used to pray or occasionally petals from the rose bush that she miraculously caused to flower (both still visible at Cascia, where she lived after entering religious life). Perhaps she will answer, perhaps she will not. Perhaps one is unable to hear. Perhaps having one's prayer answered will not solve the problem (as another saint, Teresa of Avila [1515-1582], remarked, 'More tears are shed over answered prayers than over unanswered ones.'). One may find the situation as dire and depressing after the prayer as before. Or one may not, whatever be the case. Yet if objects can have a presence, that is to say: any form of agency, then we must admit the possibility of manipulation, and that it will be located on both sides of the relationship.

Returning to the developments that followed from the Second Vatican Council, Orsi (2005: 56; italics in the original) describes how in the event changes

to religious material culture did indeed happen, abruptly and often without consultation:

'[P]eople looking back on these years from the perspective of the present invariably remember how surprised they were when all of a sudden the altar was turned around, new movements were required in church, *they could eat meat on Fridays!!!* One day the saints disappeared, the rosaries stopped, the novenas ended, just like that. This provoked resistance and confusion, and in turn this resistance in the parishes to the new agenda heightened the resolve of its advocates.'

What emerges here is a picture, in shades of various strength and emphasis, in which a – noticeable – minority of Catholics appears to have been left behind by historical, theological and liturgical change, change that may (perhaps) have been unavoidable, yet was certainly managed badly and insensitively, leaving communities and individuals feeling uprooted, their certainties challenged, their ritual practice altered nearly beyond recognition. John Cornwell, an Anglo-Irish journalist writing on Catholic and Vatican affairs, called it the 'great adulteration'. A critical cradle Catholic who returned to the Church in his mid-forties after a break of twenty years, he describes his sense of alienation: '...I felt personally and belatedly the full force of a despondency shared by many at the deterioration and adulteration of Catholic worship' (2002: 90). While some things, he felt, had changed for the better – a greater emphasis on participatory worship, a more tolerant attitude towards women within the ritual setting – Catholic practice nonetheless had become a 'religious and aesthetic wasteland' (2002: 91).

These feelings of loss, disorientation and anguish should also be seen in a yet wider context that goes beyond internal developments of the Church. The Church does not exist in a vacuum, and despite the fact that the Roman-Catholicism of the century between about 1860 and 1960 is often depicted as maintaining a siege mentality, trying to shut out the modern world, such a splendid isolation is effectively not feasible. Experiences of displacement, alienation and loss, the search for authenticity and connectedness are, of course, not limited to (traditionalist) Catholics, but are part of the late modern condition

more generally (Jameson, 1991; Baudrillard, 1996), and in particular of the supposedly corrosive influence of an ever-expansive market economy. Under such conditions, Stewart (1993: 133) writes,

'the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence.'

Such notions of *contact* and *presence*, of course, acquire a particular resonance in relation to relics as their very meaning and operability is predicated on an abiding metonymy to a specific point in space and (past) time that they transport into the present of the believer.

It is further possible, and especially in the present case quite instructive, to draw connections between modernity and Protestantism, as, for example, Tambiah (1984) did. This connection has sometimes also acutely been perceived by my informants, as when Guido, with great bitterness, wrote to me of 'una Chiesa protestantizzata', a protestantized Church, faced with which, he argues that 'the devotion to relics is a way of making oneself feel Catholic, of denouncing the betrayal of the clergy, of the ecumenical ecclesiastical hierarchy, who in fact tries to discourage it in every way.' Without mentioning him, Greeley employs a Turnerian allusion to describe the same phenomenon, stating that '[m]any of the Catholic elite are only too eager to denude our rain forest of metaphors because, particularly in our Calvinist American society, they are more than a little ashamed of them' (2005: 134). To be modern – understood not in a reified sense, but as a project, and a utopian one for that, though not an unreal one – is in important ways synonymous with being Protestant, and also (therefore) with something like a Heideggerian 'loss of the gods' and a 'loss of dwelling', an existential dis-ease. Yet despite the attendant trauma, it is doubtful whether an event like the Second Vatican Council could have been postponed indefinitely. Already during the second half of the pontificate of Pius XII, after World War II, signs of ferment

were clearly visible within the Church, although they could still be stifled⁴³. The image of timeless stability and assured self-confidence that is often associated with those years obscured internal, theological as well as external – social, economic, cultural – changes already in motion.

However, as the pontificate of John Paul II has disappointed many theological progressives with his renewed enthusiasm for pilgrimages, Marian devotions and canonizations, it becomes necessary to ask whether the pendulum has been swinging back again. While such deliberations may often appear ill-defined and ill-definable, such practices can nonetheless be taken for institutional signals that the Church may be reconsidering the relation of form and content in her religious practice, moving back to more 'traditionalist' positions. The trend, if it is a trend, appears to continue with the current pontificate of Benedict XVI and indeed gain greater theological, systematic consistency as seen by his re-admission, in 2007, of the Latin mass in its 1962 edition. Effectively (though not legally) proscribed and replaced in 1970 by the current standard edition of the missal, it has now been defined as one possible expression of a single rite that may also be expressed, more commonly, through the vernacular mass. This move may have been prompted, or at least accelerated by Mosebach's book *Die Häresie der Formlosigkeit (The Heresy of Formlessness)* (2002), a sweeping critique of post-Conciliar liturgy (see Nordhofen, 2008).

ii. Memory, nostalgia, heritage

In his (auto-)biographically inspired novel *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)*, 1958), which charts the decline of the noble Salina family, exemplary for the Sicilian *ancien régime* following Italy's national unification, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa concludes the narrative with a chapter entitled 'Relics'. It is a melancholy epilogue, set in 1910, 50 years after the main events of the book have taken place, in which a collection of relics comes to stand as a metaphor of loss and decay, but also of falseness and ambiguity. Long after the death of the central

⁴³ The encouragement of historical biblical studies in a 1943 encyclical (*Divino afflante spiritu*) and the mentioned liturgical changes (*Mediator Dei*, 1947), were offset again through the 1950 encyclical *Humani generis* that sought to counter ideas of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*, dealing, for example, with the nature of the Church, ecumenism, evangelization, or the relation of science and religion.

character, the imposing *principe* Fabrizio Salina, three of his daughters – unmarried and elderly, together inhabiting the family *palazzo* – find themselves under unwelcome ecclesiastical scrutiny:

'In accordance with Papal instructions the Cardinal Archbishop had begun an inspection of the private chapels of his archdiocese, to reassure himself about the merits of those allowed to hold services there, the conformity of liturgy and decorations with the canons of the Church, and the authenticity of the relics venerated in them.'
(Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1996: 174-5)

The relics in question have been gathered by two of the sisters in a manner suggestive of some aspects of relic collecting today – a practice based on personal links, on knowing the right person, on trust mingled with doubts over sources and authenticity: 'she had found somewhere a certain Donna Rosa, a huge old woman, half-nun, with useful connections in all the churches, convents and charity foundations of Palermo and its surroundings.' Bringing a relic every month, Donna Rosa

'had managed, she would say, to get some dilapidated parish or decayed family to part with it. The name of the seller was not given merely because of understandable, in fact praiseworthy, discretion; and anyway there were the proofs of authenticity ..., clear as daylight, written out in Latin or mysterious characters she called Greek or Syriac.' (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1958: 178-9)

I have to admit that this passage came to my mind when I first met Signora A, my antiques dealer of the Porta Portese street market. While certainly not a 'half-nun' (she is married with grown-up children), the sense of secrecy and cunning, of dealing in objects positioned right at the boundary of the licit and the illicit, of the authentic and the fake, felt familiar enough – a dilapidated parish in the one case, a shadowy priest from the Abruzzi in the other, all parties involved, whether fictional or in real-life, valuing discretion, but still assuring the genuineness of the objects in question. The difference, of course, is that I can strongly assume to

have bought the real article, partly because of my own expertise, whereas Tomasi's irony indicates that the Salina sisters were being duped. But then, can I be truly sure? Through the contact with Guido I have also come across relics I would have judged authentic, which he was adamant were not.

For Tomasi di Lampedusa, the relics become a metaphor of the decline of the Salina family's social status as well as of the loss of collective memory, the memory of Sicily's nobility with its traditions, histories and material culture, often stretching back several centuries (the Tomasi family itself can be traced back at least to the twelfth century [Reinhardt, 1992]): 'For the significance of a noble family lies entirely in its traditions, that is, in its vital memories; and [the *principe* Salina] was the last to have any unusual memories, anything different from those of other families' (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1996: 169). Yet despite the sisters' protest, ecclesiastical authority prevails. The collection is largely destroyed after most relics are judged to be false and thus memory, tradition, history, too, turn out to be false, worthless:

'The prestige of [their] name had slowly disappeared, the family fortune, divided and subdivided, was at best equivalent to that of any number of other lesser families... But in the Church, in their relations with it, the Salina had maintained their pre-eminence ... What would happen now?' (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1996: 181)

It is ironic to find the process of modernity – a rationalized and rationalizing faith that is seeking to centralize and standardize its structures and to rid itself of perceived 'superstitions' – driven forward by the policies of Pius X, perhaps the most conservative pope of the twentieth century. The purge of the Salina's private oratory already foreshadows the theology of the Second Vatican Council with its playing down of material religion.

In such ways, the material legacy of Catholicism has experienced changes as precipitous as the non-European societies that early anthropologists saw acutely threatened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by imperial expansion. Reformation, French revolution and the secularization of Church property in various European countries throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries always also caused the destruction and loss of religious objects: the

famous collection of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490-1545), in its heyday comprising over 8,000 relics, fell victim partly to the cardinal's spendthrift habits that forced him to pawn and sell many items, yet also to the religious upheaval of the time. With the archdiocese of Magdeburg turning largely Protestant, he moved to his other see, Mainz, where the remains of the treasure were dispersed and destroyed during the Thirty Years War and, later, by revolutionary French troops. Today, virtually nothing remains but the illustrated catalogue-cum-guidebook that the cardinal had commissioned in 1520 (Nickel, 2001). With the Enlightenment recognition, or construction, of 'popular religion' also came its policing (Dipper, 1986), which could result in the destruction of devotional objects as in the Habsburg empire under Joseph II (1765-1790). A government instruction of 1788, for example, requested the bishop of Constance, Southern Germany, to collect the relics of dissolved monasteries, to keep those with authenticating documents in a space outside of church buildings and destroy all others (Angenendt, 1997: 268-9). Following the political reorganization of the German Empire in 1803, monasteries were widely suppressed throughout the German principalities, in accordance with the revolutionary French model of 1790. Their possessions were confiscated, sold, destroyed or, if found to be of historical value, placed in museums (an action suggesting connected, yet different modes of 'veneration' and remembrance – an emerging secular cult beginning to cannibalize its sacred counterpart). An example for such a process is the monastery of Andechs, Bavaria, which owned one of the most substantial relic collections in Germany surviving from late medieval times. On order of the Bavarian government, the relics were removed from their reliquaries, many of which were then melted down for their content of precious metals. Often this would lead to the loss of the relic since without container and ornamentation it became unattractive, anonymous, unintelligible and was thrown away. Italy itself witnessed the suppression of numerous monasteries after national unification. Apparently, this led to the sudden commercial availability of large amounts of relics, in 1878 compelling the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Holy Relics⁴⁴ to issue a pronouncement that reiterated the ancient prohibition of their trade. It stated that neither sale nor purchase was allowed, not even with the aim

⁴⁴ The predecessor body of today's two separate entities, the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

of rescue. Instead, where found, relics were supposed to be handed over to the local ordinary (Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Holy Relics, 1883: 405). This was followed by a letter of the cardinal-vicar of Rome in 1881 to the episcopate, warning of and condemning the trade in false and fabricated relics, which would suggest that there was indeed a demand strong enough to encourage counterfeiters to produce imitations. With so many sacred objects having become dislodged, this period was also the origin of some of the major collections of religious art and material culture. Canon Schnütgen (1843-1918) of Cologne Cathedral began to gather what was to become the foundation of today's Schnütgen Museum of Medieval Art in Cologne. As van Os (2001: 44; my translation) commented: 'Looking at the crammed storerooms in which Alexander Schnütgen piled up his ecclesiastical treasures ... one may imagine what was available around 1900 and how much was preserved for posterity through the initiative of this one man' – though one may also imagine how much more must have been lost during this period. Another case in point is the amazing collection of relics at St Anthony's Chapel in Troy Hill, Pittsburgh, USA, currently containing over 4,200 pieces and still growing, which I had the privilege of visiting out of its normal hours thanks to the kindness of its pastor, Fr David Schorr, and the custodian, Sr Margaret Glenane. As they told me, the chapel and its collection had been the life work of Fr Suitbert Mollinger (1828-1892), a Belgian priest who had come to the United States in the 1850s. In 1868 he became pastor of the Most Holy Name parish, in which St Anthony's is located and he brought with him the nascent collection of relics. Well travelled and financially well-off, Mollinger had the necessary connections to European clergy, allowing him to procure numerous relics in order to rescue them from the vicissitudes of the time – in a way both reflecting and contravening (albeit with the best of intentions) the Vatican decrees just mentioned. In 1880 he travelled to Europe himself, bringing back even more relics. Mollinger's collection, as well as his pastoral and medical work (he had studied medicine before entering the priesthood) soon attracted large numbers of Catholic believers: 'If Troy Hill flourished during the 70's because of Fr Mollinger's reliquaries and the help he provided medically, it became a veritable mecca for the sick after the reliquary chapel was completed [1883]' (Schorr et al., 1997: 13). With Italy secularizing its

monasteries and the German Empire embroiled in the anti-clerical *Kulturkampf*, the United States appeared as a safe haven for relics.

Such processes of displacement and salvaging were repeated after the Second Vatican Council. Louis Peters, a lawyer from Cologne, began to collect relics in the 1970s, eventually amassing one of the largest relic collections in lay hands⁴⁵. When I spoke to Peters he was harshly critical of the Catholic hierarchy for its neglect of its own religious material culture and asked for greater sensitivity towards relics and a revitalization of a devotional 'culture of touch'. Seeing his collection explicitly as a rescue mission (notwithstanding the individual psychological significance of the process of collecting, which he also readily acknowledged), Peters made it a point to acquire relics only from street markets, jumble sales and antiques dealers, never directly from religious institutions so as not encourage them to give away even more objects. Another informant, Matthew, an Anglican sub-deacon living in London and an avid relic collector, recalled similar experiences in Italy. While today occasionally buying through eBay, initially he had been visiting antiques markets, but also monasteries and the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome (well before the time the nuns were instructed to stop providing relics for private veneration). Especially Southern Italy, he said, used to be a rich hunting ground: 'The further south you got, you know, in the 1980s and early 1990s many private oratories of aristocratic families were dissolved, you could find relics everywhere in Naples, Palermo. There'd be old duchesses and contessas round every corner' – a curious echo of Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Leopard*, a book that Matthew said he knows very well ('that's my world').

To study Catholic material religion, or at least this particular aspect of it, is therefore also a study of absence, loss, memory and nostalgia, ultimately invoking the notion of heritage and its attendant issues of identity and cultural property – what Buchli (2002: 8) called the 'melancholic turn [of material culture studies] in the face of rapid social change.' Yet, as Buchli also points out, this engagement of material culture studies with the transient raises the question of alienability – its nature, negotiation, and conflicts. As a 'tendency towards

⁴⁵ Before it was acquired by the French government, eventually to be housed in a specifically dedicated museum, the collection had been shown in a number of exhibitions around Germany and Austria during the 1980s and 1990s.

fluidity', it 'denies a certain "cultural" mass. As this fluidity quickens it moves, losing the "weight of tradition" towards an increasingly "lighter" and immaterial state' (2002: 15). Quoting Thompson, he asserts the significance of power in this process: 'Those people near the top have the power to make things durable and to make things transient' (quoted in Buchli, 2002: 15), transforming artefacts into rubbish and vice versa, infusing them with permanence or causing them to slip into oblivion through the interventions of various social mechanisms, like the market, science, cultural institutions or, indeed, Church hierarchies. I have discussed the notion of alienability in section IV.iv and explicitly positioned it within a context of authority, competition and subversion. What we encounter through relic practices, including the activities on eBay, their disowning on the one hand, their continuation on the other is exactly this process: what weight does (Catholic, devotional) tradition still have and to whom? How and to what extent can it still be materialized? Who decides these questions, or at least, who is influencing them?

'The crushing ephemerality of late capitalism (its constant material flux) ... combined with the increasingly immaterial nature by which individuals assert agency and intervene in the social world (information technology over production, the Internet, the extreme mobility of capital ...) all create a situation where the insistence on the peculiar, limited and highly contingent fixity of the material artefact seems all the more inadequate to cope with the social effects of these increasingly ephemeral, highly fluid and immaterial interventions within the material world that sustains us.' (Buchli, 2002: 15-16)

I would argue that relics, as a specific kind of material religious culture, acutely highlight – and complicate – these tensions.

We have seen how, between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, the Catholic Church has undergone a process of sudden modernization, propelled by internal forces, by a desire for reform. As critics such as Douglas or Greeley have argued, this process was often concomitant with a drive towards dematerialization – less ritual, fewer formulas, fewer objects, less pomp and

circumstances; instead, more reflection, more introspection, more personal conviction, more ethical action, more faith. At least, this is (or was) what the 'people near the top' of the Church decided, and it had immediate effects on the physicality and durability of religious material culture.

'I think it is sacrilegious how relics are treated by the Catholic clergy. They are hidden and ridiculed. To vilify the cult of relics is thought to be a mark of being modern. Neither their salvational reality, nor their therapeutic potential, nor their aesthetic qualities are being recognized',

Thus Louis Peters (1989: 189-90; my translation), who gathered his remarkable collection in the margins, in places of divestment – antiques shops, flea markets – where, back then, these objects were often 'priceless' in the sense that they had slipped from ready standards of evaluation (which did not necessarily mean they were cheap, but rather that there was no reliable measure, no 'market price'). It is a kind of effacement that, in my own observation, can as well affect the very physicality of the object. Despite the fact that relics have become collectable and are thus returning from the interstices of culture, religion and the market, their nature is still dubious and this may have impacted on their physical condition. Many of the relics I found showed signs of neglect and decay: prayer cards creased or torn, thecae dented or dusty, threads broken, the cedulae faded and the wax seals cracked or worn away, the relics loose inside, and decorations coming off. I remember a little ostensorium, a standing reliquary of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century origin, that Signora A offered me for sale, but which I did not buy. The metal had darkened and appeared nearly black, some of the rocaille and leaf decorations had snapped, the cedula was just about legible, identifying the relic as of St Louis Gonzaga, a sixteenth-century Jesuit. Yet where the effacements, devaluations and displacements of the sixteenth to nineteenth century were mostly the result of external influences – Protestant iconoclasts, looting soldiers, secularizing government bureaucrats – the greater fluidity of relics over the past 40 years has been set in motion by the very hierarchy that had once guarded them. Emphasizing the immateriality of true religion, relics were cut loose. Yet paradoxically, it is through the 'increasingly immaterial nature' of

individual agency – the use of the Internet and of electronic payment systems effortlessly crossing borders and currencies – that individuals seek to counter this development. Seemingly, the 'crushing ephemerality' of capitalism is thus employed to reaffirm the value of permanence, of rootedness as relic collections are assembled again (although this time in different, non-institutional contexts) and the importance of original, foundational time and space is, if possible, confirmed (through the metonymic link to the saint's person, the tomb, through the pedigree of the object traceable to an authoring and authorizing locus such as the Vatican or a religious order).

One might argue that despite, or rather because of, all the emphasis on flow and ephemerality, memory returns compulsively to heritage as the grounded and tangible. Rome is the locus *par excellence* of memory that is at once firmly concrete and tantalizingly fleeting, that speaks incessantly, yet cryptically, on a collective as well as individual level. In its architectural and artefactual sediments, history takes on spatial dimensions: Padre Pio, the miracle-working Capuchin monk, is easily Italy's most popular saint today. His image can be found in virtually every church. It now eclipses earlier cults of popular saints, such as that of St Anthony of Padua, patron of lovers and finder of lost objects, or St Rita, helper in desperate circumstances. Usually dating to the nineteenth or early twentieth century, their statues are still ubiquitous. But the number of *ex votos* (PGR – 'per grazie ricevute', for graces received) that testify to their power and readiness of intercession is dwindling the closer we come to the present. Still, they continue to populate churches, themselves of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century design, which in turn often enough rest on medieval or even antique foundations. Organizing the analysis of historical strata from the bottom up, we may look at a church like Santa Prassede: originally established in the fifth century, rebuilt 400 years later, repeatedly refurbished since, its apses and arches are covered with important Byzantine mosaics, while walls and floors are cluttered with the usual plethora of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century funerary monuments. Meant to transport the *memoria* of their occupants, to keep the prominent dead prominent and thus underscore the claim of the living to equal prominence, they may now be decipherable, in a discursive manner, only to historians and art historians (Karsten and Zitzlsperger, 2004), yet they continue to exert a presence as the church would feel, indeed would be different without

them. While most people may not care or know about some forgotten papal lawyer, provincial bishop, or minor noble, their monuments and family chapels perform the experience of 'the past' or 'history' for today's visitors. For Santa Prassede is also a frequent stop on the itinerary of international tourist groups, who may buy their postcards at a little stall right opposite the entrance to the shrine of the presumed column of Christ's flagellation, brought here in 1223 (though chips of it may be had – or rather not had – at the nearby convent of Santa Lucia in Selci, as I described earlier). Possibly overlooked by most people, kept in an undistinguished side chapel, is the board that was, according to its inscription, part of the table from which St Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), Cardinal of Santa Prassede since 1560, gave alms to the poor. It is a nondescript plank of wood made remarkable only by its historical connection. Or not, as it were, since I found the chapel normally empty, the relic being just so much anonymous flotsam left behind by the tides of history. Having had enough of art and history, one may want to step outside into the open atrium of Santa Prassede for some fresh air (on the way passing a glass cabinet with the rather gruesome nineteenth-century statue of the titular saint as she gathers the blood of early Christian martyrs). Standing in the atrium, surrounded by terracotta pots with palm trees and oleander, one finds that the church is seamlessly incorporated into the residential buildings of its neighbourhood: ninth-century brickwork on one side, on the other, laundry hanging from a window to dry.

Freud (2002), explicitly referring to Rome, illustrated the working of memory through archaeological metaphors, yet ultimately found the image inadequate since space, he argued, can only ever be experienced in consecutive stages, whereas memory retains traces in a simultaneous fashion. Yet I would argue that Santa Prassede, like many other spaces, creates just such a simultaneity of past(s) and present(s), a palimpsest inscribed with layer upon layer of traces, drawing together personal experiences, everyday life and institutionalized discourses and practices, such as art and social history, global tourism, religious devotion.

Central parts of the Church hierarchy have meanwhile been alerted to the consequences inherent to conditions of fluidity and change. The pontificate of John Paul II as well as the current one of Benedict XVI appear engaged in a role back attempt – not change and reform anymore, but a new insistence on stability

and rootedness that would seem quite in line with wider social and cultural trends, as

'[o]ne of the more challenging implications of recent debates on globalization has been to show that an obsession with belonging is the flip side of increasing global flows of recent times [...] In terms of the experience of a particular Euro-American view of modernity, heritage meets the need to salvage an essential, authentic sense of 'self' from the debris of modern estrangement' (Rowlands, 2002: 105-6).

At the same time, this act of salvaging is neither straightforward nor free of conflict. The past and its retrieval in traces, writings, archives and object, is, just as spatial territories, contested terrain (Arnold, 1999; Lowenthal, 1985). The flow of relics in a spatial sense, the attempts to control access to them and control their movements are thus deeply implicated by parallel concerns over the authoring and authorizing of history, that is to say: relics' flow through time. The connections, movements, contacts and linkages, interactions and exchanges that are seen as characteristic of the age of globalization (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002) therefore quickly engender opposing forces, a 'search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries'– globalization, therefore, 'is not only about flows but also entails constant efforts towards closure and fixing at all levels' (Meyer and Geschiere, 1999: 2, 14). Or, if one wanted to turn the perspective around, as would indeed many of my informants, the concern lies not so much with the stoppage of flows, but the unwanted, yet continuing flow of relics as objects that are supposed to be fixed in space and time, yet are revealed to be moveable and alienable – that are, in fact, often enough moved and alienated by exactly those actors who wish to affirm their stability, but are forced to engage *nolens volens* in networks of circulation in order to mend what they perceive as earlier historical and institutional failings and to prevent further and worse destabilizations. This contradiction between the possibility of flows and their stoppage lies at the heart of the devotional and commercial practices that are uneasily brought together through eBay and its relic trade, spanning Italy and the United States, the Vatican

hierarchy and (lay) believers, as well as discourses over objects, representations and agency that are activated by the curious ontological status of relics.

iii. Uses of the past, uses of the body I: institutional practice

As Arnold (1999) points out, the notion of heritage tends to have a specific inflection that evokes an asset or a resource to be managed, which, of course, raises the question of who controls its management, how and why – in short, one may ask, with Hall (2000): what is heritage for? As he suggests, it is related to the exercise of power, 'the symbolic power to order knowledge, to rank, classify and arrange, and thus to give meaning to objects and things through the imposition of interpretative schemas' (Hall, 2000: 4). It is clearly within such a framework that in 1988 John Paul II established (under a slightly different name and with a somewhat different position within the Vatican administration) the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church to preside over the guardianship of the historical and artistic patrimony of the Church. It calls religious communities to preserve and record their heritage – defined as collections, archives and buildings – and reflects the intense concern of the wider society with the past. Affected by archive fever, the Church has made it its official policy that its institutions should keep an 'up-to-date inventory, especially a photographic one, of everything owned by each individual religious house', which should also 'draft the necessary documentation for a full understanding of the material owned (origin, provenance, use, socio-ecclesiastical context)', in order to 'deepen and certify through appropriate means of research, its own historical itinerary in the context of the ample history of the Church and society.' Ideally, 'every religious family should have one or more centers of documentation of its own artistic and historic heritage in such a way to make the best use of it and to continue its constant promotion' (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, 1994: website). Socio-cultural change, but also the forces of the market are explicitly identified as threats to the Church's control of its 'heritage resources' and thus to the integrity of its memory, its symbolic power to order and interpret its history. The required inventories are meant to assist

'the work of judicial guardianship, of protection against the crimes of theft; alienation; or expropriation; of maintenance of cultural items, and also for ecclesial improvement [...] If one considers, among other things, the more frequent closure of religious houses, a dilemma occurs regarding the destination not only of works of art and liturgical furnishings, but of whole libraries and archives. In more than a few cases, this situation is resolved via an irretrievable diffusion of these goods of cultural value on the antique market, which causes great harm to the patrimony of the Church and is in direct violation of both canonical and civil regulations.' (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, 1996: website)

While eBay is not mentioned here, it clearly plays a role in the 'irretrievable diffusion of these goods of cultural value'. The officials at the Vatican *lipsanoteca*, for example, are well aware of it and, as I wrote above, quite alarmed by its impact. Yet given the sheer number of churches and monasteries in Rome and throughout Italy, it must be doubted whether any 'efforts towards closure and fixing', to use the words of Meyer and Geschiere again, as attempted by the Pontifical Commission can ever be very effective.

How the past and its objects can be employed by the ecclesiastical authorities may be shown in a vignette: in November 2004, for example, John Paul II returned some relics of two early Church Fathers, St Gregory Nazianzen and St John Chrysostom, to Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople. In a letter he described the 'transferral of such holy relics' as 'a blessed occasion to purify our wounded memories in order to strengthen our journey of reconciliation, to confirm that the faith of these Holy Doctors is the faith of the Churches of East and West' (John Paul II: website). Both, the act and its official interpretation, are redolent with symbolic meanings that could be unpacked in a number of ways – it resorts to the ancient idiom of the *translatio*, the officially sanctioned transferral of relics, establishing networks of patronage and reciprocity in a classical Maussian sense. It is also unclear whether Rome, in this act, has given away all relics held of the Church Fathers, and thus perhaps relinquished its claims over a part of Orthodox heritage, or merely shared its holdings and thus 'kept while

giving'. It is also tacitly assumed that objects, such as relics, can carry the past with them into the present; that a continuity exists between the historical figures of St Gregory and St John, their relics (leaving aside the question of their authenticity) and today's relationship between the two Christian denominations of Roman-Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy; and that objects and their movement can be made to embody this relationship (or even more specific: shape this relationship into a desired configuration, a state of reconciliation).

Yet the uses of heritage do have their pitfalls: picturesquely built on the Tiber island sits the church of San Bartolomeo. Originally built in the tenth century over the remains of a temple to Asclepius, its current appearance is mostly baroque. Among its relics are those of St Adalbert of Prague (c. 956-997), bishop and martyr, a contemporary of the church's founder, the German emperor Otto III (980-1002); and the large antique metal bowl in which the same emperor brought the remains of St Bartholomew from Benevento to Rome. Yet the church's 'heritage management' draws on a different source, namely on the memory of the 'new' or 'modern' martyrs. Each of six side chapels commemorates the Catholic victims of a particular region and recent historical period: Africa, Nazi-Germany, the Communist countries of Eastern Europe, the Americas, Asia and Oceania, and Spain and Mexico. The chapel dedicated to the martyrs of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), for example, displays a large photograph showing the body of a murdered priest. Clearly visible in the picture is his pectoral cross – the original of which is placed right next to the photograph, a doubling act that in a sudden flash draws together past and present, object and representation, an act of space- and time-travel, turning the cross into a mute, but resonant witness to a brutal act of violence 70 years before. This relic *manqué* is more than a sign, or perhaps something different altogether. It does not stand *for* a cruel murder a long time ago; rather, it participated in the moment. It may have been spattered with the priest's blood, grown cold with his dead body, thus showing in the most insistent way the somatic, nondiscursive dimension of material objects. To see the picture of the dead man with his cross and to see the very same cross hanging next to the picture hits home Baudrillard's (1993) point that only the dead remember everything. As participant in a specific historical moment, the relic carries something of that moment into the present. In it, as Stewart (1993: 133) writes,

'the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and a lack of significance. The experience of the object lies outside the body's experience – it is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us.'

Stewart regards this condition as the outcome of commodification, principally a process of alienation. And while this particular relic may, for the time being, be securely anchored outside the ambit of market exchange, the influence of 'heritagization' can be detected nonetheless – the relic is a resource in the management of history and memory. With its meanings never fully recoverable, the relic does not so much speak, but becomes 'susceptible to being spoken for' (Arnold, 1999: 1). Transposed into an object of historical and ideological significance the relic is made to represent both, the suffering Church, but also the possibility of the Church triumphant, the glory of martyrdom out of which renewed faith may grow. The memory, the truth may be irrecoverable from the object, yet due to its pre- or nondiscursive fascination – the horror, the blood – we find it hard to resist asking for answers. In the process, of course, other meanings are erased or marginalized: during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI several hundred Catholic victims of the Spanish Civil War have been beatified or canonized, while their predecessors, Paul VI and John XXIII, had avoided such recognition because of its political implications, seemingly expressing an endorsement of the nationalist cause, respectively legitimating the victorious regime of General Franco. The highly publicized beatifications and canonizations since the 1980s stand in stark contrast to the slow and torturous process of recovering the memory (as well as physical remains) of the Republican dead, whose literal re-materialization has painfully shown how object memory presents both 'a surplus and a lack of significance', engendering simultaneously heated debate and stony silence, a crisis of memory as well as its superabundance (Ferrándiz, 2006; Renshaw, in print). It is in the light of such debates that places like San Bartolomeo, far from being transparent, begin to cast shadows of an alternative past and material reality acquires a ghostly double-image.

iv. Uses of the past, uses of the body II: individual practice

The previous section discussed the uses of material religion as religious heritage in a collective, politicized context. Yet religious heritage also has an eminently personal and private dimension. The past that is to be salvaged or reclaimed in order to make may just as well be one's own life history, felt to be under threat of loss or damaged by injury and trauma. To restore the present, to make it whole again may involve an attempt of bringing, through the relic, the (or a) past into the present through an engagement with its material traces.

Muensterberger (1994) and Röckerath (1989) point out the psychological underpinnings of objects (and their collecting) in general and of relics in particular. As 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 1969) they provide temporal and spatial links between developmental states, bridging the impact of separation, protecting from the effects of psychological trauma through the imaginary continuity, respectively allowing for the gradual adjustment to a new reality. Resisting transitoriness, objects may help to order reality and thus to control anxiety, to keep emotional chaos at bay.

'Transitional object, linking object, fetish and reliquary share as a common feature that they may always be found in a unchanged form. The contact with them is repeatable and the engagement with them, as in prayer, leads us back a little to the time when everything was still whole.

It would seem to me that reliquaries symbolically condense the entire salvific history, which from a psychoanalytic perspective shows a direct connection to the start of our life. This unconscious link is, in my opinion, the reason why these objects can still fascinate us. They repeat coping mechanisms and developmental steps of our early childhood and are bringers of hope, as it were. They assure us that we are not alone, indeed, that we are as "immortal" as the saints, whose remains we are looking at.'
(Röckerath, 1989: 184; my translation)

The inescapable materiality of relics appeals to somatic, rather than discursive or textual modes of experiences. It is through sight, touch, sometimes even smell that they perform their memory work as becomes apparent in the case of Maria, one of my informants. At the time we were in contact, Maria was in her late 40s, born in Scotland to Italian parents. She was, and still is, a devoted follower of Padre Pio, whose cult reaches well back into the 1930s and '40s, but has become Italy's most popular saint over the past decade, increasingly superseding older devotions and shaping the Italian sacred landscape (McKevitt, 1991; Margry, 2002). Given her family background, it comes as no surprise that Maria has been aware of Padre Pio from an early age:

'My background is Italian, i.e. my grandparents and parents were Italian, from Tuscany and Liguria. I was born in Scotland and have only returned to Italy on visits. My maternal grandmother had a great devotion to Padre Pio. When I was younger (and before Padre Pio's death [1968]), we were on holiday at my grandparents' home and I noticed that amongst all the framed photographs of the family, my grandmother had a framed photograph of a man with a beard. I automatically thought he, too, was a relative! I asked her: "Who is that man?" Very seriously, she told me: "He is a very special priest who lives in the South of Italy. He is a saint." That was the end of the conversation.'

It was not until later that Padre Pio became a significant presence in Maria's own life. This happened when she suddenly lost her husband, who died of a massive heart attack in 1999:

'Some five months later a friend told me there was a Padre Pio Mass being held in the church of St Ignatius ... on 23 Sept for the Feast Day of Padre Pio. She asked if I would like her to drive me there. (Given the suddenness of Gerard's death I was still in a state of shock and rarely went anywhere alone.) At the close of the Mass, the priest placed a mitten of Padre Pio on the head of each individual. This was the first time for me. As soon as the mitten was

placed on my head, I can only describe the feeling as a bolt of lightning going through me. I felt as though I was stuck to the floor and could not move away. I also felt I was standing there for a long time, although this could not have been possible. I made my way to the back of the church, turned to my friend, and instantly burst into tears. I asked her if she felt anything. She replied: "Wow, did I feel that." It was a very emotional night. We returned to this Mass each month, and by this time I had got to know the lady who ran the Scottish Centre for Padre Pio. I had told her my reason for coming. The following month, she left her stall selling devotional material, and called me aside. She placed the mitten in my hand and then her hand on top. I felt the plastic covering the mitten very cold, yet the mitten was burning hot. I cannot explain that. She prayed to Padre Pio to make his presence known to me and show me I was not alone. To cut a long story short, when we returned home (5 November 1999) my friend, my daughter and I were standing talking about general things. All of a sudden there was a very strong, intense perfume of violets coming from the corner of our room. At the same time, the three of us sniffed and said, "what's that smell?" Eventually, my friend said it was "the violets". At this stage I had not yet read books about Padre Pio; however, shortly after this I did read a book which described the perfumes of Padre Pio, including "the violets".⁴⁶

The wide (and wild) popularity of Padre Pio is reflected in the easy availability of his (purported) relics, especially cards and medals, sometimes of rather dubious origins. At nearly any given time there are listings on eBay, but one may also find Padre Pio relics in religious book shops or in churches, as I myself could observe during my stay in Rome. However, these are mostly third-class relics, fabric that has been brought in contact with his remains, his tomb, or with the blood-stained bandages he used to cover the stigmata in his hands. By contrast, substantial

⁴⁶ This phenomenon of the 'odour of sanctity' is a well-worn hagiographic topos, appearing already in early sources (Angenendt, 1997: 119-22) and from then on throughout Christian, respectively Catholic hagiography until the present.

second-class relics such as his mittens (which he also frequently wore because of the stigmata) or the bandages are harder to find and their circulation is controlled by the Capuchin order as much as possible. Fr Florio, at the friars' headquarters, had shown me samples, saying they were kept by the order for the production of third-class relics, but not normally given away. In this respect, Maria has been quite privileged to obtain such a relic.

Following this gifting, she has become directly involved with the friars of San Giovanni Rotondo, Padre Pio's monastery, working as a translator for them and distributing information material on Padre Pio. The mittens continue to play an important part in her local pastoral activities:

'Mainly, people ask us to visit friends/relatives who are sick. We have to ascertain that it is the wish of the sick person to be visited with Padre Pio's mitten. It is not something we push onto people. As lay people, we cannot give a blessing, only a priest can do that. What we can do, however, is pray for a blessing, which is a totally different thing. However, many ask us to go and give a blessing with the mitten, it is just a general turn of phrase used. The words used vary, but the general idea is "may Almighty God, in His infinite love and goodness, grant you (name) through the intercession of Padre Pio, the graces/healing/blessings you need at this time in your life", or "Almighty God, make this not my hand but the hand of Padre Pio, Your Saint in Heaven", "grant comfort to (name) and strength to cope with his/her illness and to carry his/her cross in the same manner Padre Pio carried his cross for 50 years." Many feel the comfort of holding the mitten. As far as I know, other mittens used (which have been "entrusted" and are eventually returned to the friary) are encased in plastic. My mitten was gifted to me, and so I have chosen not to cover it. I have never believed that Padre Pio would put his hand inside a plastic bag before he would allow people to touch him. Every morning, this mitten exudes an "old" smell which I cannot explain. Also, my mitten had some crusts/scabs from Padre Pio's hand inside it, and I know it comforts people to see these. I understand what you say about praying only [I asked about the

relation of internal faith versus external objects], but I think it helps the sick to feel 'closer' to the saint from whom they ask intercession. There have been many positive signs, i.e. I know that four cures were obtained in San Giovanni through my colleague's mitten, although I was not present to see these. Whether the person makes a full recovery or is given the strength to cope with their illness, I think these are both positive.'

The example of Maria shows how relics can be employed to construct, or perhaps better: re-construct – in the sense of rebuilding – not only a collective, but also a personal past to enable a viable present. Through the healing agency of Padre Pio's relics, Maria was able to overcome the trauma of her husband's death.

It is perhaps not accidental that the relics of Padre Pio in particular should elicit such effects. As Margry (2002) points out, his spirituality, his model of holiness is traditional, archaic even, characterized by strongly somatic rather than ethical or theological expressions of faith: healing miracles, stigmata, levitations, the odour of sanctity, bilocations. 'There is great adoration for Pio's wounds and blood, and all sorts of dirty, stained and unwashed items of clothing are displayed and revered, and rather repulsive photographs are constantly in view' (Margry, 2002: 93). To encounter Padre Pio is, often, to encounter the sacred in its most corporeal forms. His emphasis on suffering and redemption, literally inscribed into his body through the stigmata, calls to mind Scarry's (1985) examination of physical pain and its inexpressibility. As Padre Pio developed a language of the body – or perhaps better: as a language of the body emerged through Padre Pio – it would seem reasonable that his/its fragments are conducive for the expression of similar experiences in his devotees.

Yet while healing power is a customary characteristic of relics, what I find remarkable in Maria's case is not only the medical effect, as it were (from paralysing depression to acceptance and a new sense of purpose), but its temporal aspects that seem to indicate a transcending of linear time. In his relics, Padre Pio is simultaneously past and present – he is the charismatic figure remembered and imagined (through numerous hagiographies, or the thousands of prayer groups all over the world devoted to his cult), but he is also experienced in the here and now, for example through the power current experienced by Maria, the heat emitted by

his relics as well as their smells, variously 'old' and flowery. Through the scent of 'the violets' Padre Pio appears in Maria's present, yet his presence goes beyond mere 'being there' – it is portentous, that is to say: it holds a potentiality and points towards a future. In a way, Padre Pio has become timeless, he is as alive in the past as he is in the present and the future; his own temporality exceeds the everyday temporality of his devotees: the significance of the violets, for example, is, at first, unclear to Maria. It is only later that she begins to decipher their meaning when reading about Padre Pio and becoming familiar with his miracles. In the odour of sanctity is therefore inscribed both Padre Pio's presence (a presence that resists a clear temporal pinpointing), but also Maria's future, as a devotee of the saint, even though this future exists, as yet, only in potentiality and still needs to be deciphered and realized by Maria. At the same time, Padre Pio's presence is also projected into Maria's past, as a figure that had always already been there, even if yet unrecognized in its significance. She indicates as much in her narrative of Padre Pio's unfolding presence in her biography: already Maria's grandmother had introduced the holy friar to her, indeed Maria mistakes him for a member of the family. Even though the conversation, back then, ends after a short and seemingly inconsequential exchange, Padre Pio continually reappears, making his presence felt throughout Maria's family history:

'In the early 70s, my young cousin in Italy was born blind. I remember during one summer holiday I was taken to visit him and his mother in a clinic in Florence where he was being operated ... There was nothing significant about this visit. Except to say that many years later, in 1995, when my grandmother was dying (still in Italy), I travelled over to see her five weeks before her death. In the hospital room, she had her beloved framed photograph of Padre Pio. I went to move it to make space for her lunch dishes. Immediately she told me not to move it because she wanted it in view. Then, with my uncle at one side of her bed, and me at the other, she calmly told us that Padre Pio had visited her and that he had said, "Don't worry, I will take care of everything." I thought to myself she was "havering", and my uncle and I did not even discuss it again. In 1998, our family spent a holiday in Tuscany and one

evening, in the home of my uncle, for some unknown reason I mentioned Padre Pio. I told my uncle's wife that my grandmother had said he appeared to her. Immediately, she said, "I believe her." She asked if I remembered being taken to visit her and my young cousin in Florence. She then told me something had happened which she could not explain, whether she had dreamed this, or really seen it. She said Padre Pio had appeared at the bottom of her bed and that he had said, "Don't worry, Giancarlo will see." This was indeed the result, although now in his 30s, my cousin has sight in only one eye.'

It is only in the following year, with the death of her husband, that the loose, yet persistent traces of Padre Pio's presence are revealed as meaningful. He has always been there, has always been taking care of the family and, thus the inherent message, will guide the family in the future, too. In this way, Maria's biography, threatened by disintegration through the traumatic death of her husband, is shown to be whole again, respectively, it might even be said to have never been destroyed in the first place. Where relics, on a collective level, may come to be used as 'heritage', signifiers of a Catholic identity, to 'salvage an essential, authentic sense of "self" from the debris of modern estrangement' (Rowlands, 2002: 105-6), on an individual level they may fulfil a similar function for personal life histories – retaining, reaffirming a sense of identity and of agency, reclaiming a past not as lost and fractured, but as preserved, meaningful and whole despite individual tragedy. Less dramatically than in Maria's case, such concerns also show through in many eBay listings and 'about me' pages, or through the websites of Catholic religious goods shops. The owners of Cukierski Family Sacramentals (www.cukierski.net), for example, position themselves explicitly as 'obedient and devout Catholics' ('in full obedience to the magisterium of the Church. No funny stuff!'), an identity that is sustained through sacramentals as integral to Catholic practice and Catholic identity. The site therefore offers a wide selection of 'healing holy oils', candles, incense, scapulars, prayer cloths⁴⁷, and relic medals (Cukierski Family Sacramentals: website; emphasis in the

⁴⁷ Prayer cloths are pictures, usually of a devotional nature, printed on fabric. Sometimes, as with the prayer cloths offered by the Cukierski website, they have been touched to body relics, turning them into third-class contact relics.

original), sometimes sold as packages addressing specific problems (e.g. the 'St Margaret of Cortona package' for dieting and weight related issues⁴⁸). The use of sacramentals appears as a genuine, if threatened, yet also combative expression of Catholic practice and identity: 'As with many weapons of spiritual warfare, relics are sadly neglected ... our family offers 3rd class relics in order to promote devotion – a devotion sadly lost over the years' (Cukierski Family Sacramental: website).

In the peculiar nature of the relic past, present and future interweave in intricate ways and on different level: first- and second-class relics clearly offer metonymic connections as they form a link to the past in the present – the object as witness and participant into which the past has literally been inscribed. Yet third-class relics exceed metonymy, or rather: in third-class relics the qualities of metonymy change. In a handbook from the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, Misztal (2005: 113; my translation) advises: 'It is not forbidden to the postulators to distribute relic particles of a servant of God to the faithful, in the broad sense of the word, ... to touch the coffin that contains his mortal remains with his belongings.' Metonymy becomes a kind of contagion that can attach to virtually any substrate (although the process is not without its difficulties: first- and second-class relics are 'more' metonymic, their materiality 'denser'). The piece of fabric, the most commonly used material for third-class relics due to its divisibility and easy availability, may be, and most likely will be, new, but the presence of the saint will seep into it, thus creating a hybrid that is at once old and new, respectively confounding these temporal classifications. Referring back to Röckerath (1989) above, one might argue that it is exactly this timelessness of the relic that enables its function as a 'transitional' or 'linking' object – not pertaining to time, or a specific time, it signifies uninterrupted continuity even, or especially, in the face of trauma and disaster. De Martino makes a similar point when he speaks of popular magic employing a strategy of dehistoricization – its spells and rituals reiterating 'historical negativity', by which he means the moment of concrete existential danger such as illness, accident or loss, in a mythical and archetypal form, 'in which everything is already decided in an auspicious manner' (De Martino (2008 [1959]: 105; my translation). Similarly, in the face of

⁴⁸ St Margaret of Cortona (c. 1247-1297, canonized in 1728). Known for her penitential rigours after experiencing a conversion upon the death of her lover, hence the connection to fasting.

momentous change, the relic remains constant – 'always found in unchanged form', repeatable in contact – and thus a bringer of hope, an assurance of ultimate 'immortality'.

The very materiality of the relic is an important factor in this. Holding the mitten, Maria says, conveys a feeling of comfort and closeness to the saint. That this should be the case is perhaps not too difficult to understand. Simone Weil pointed out that even in religious discourse the use of the body and its senses, even to the point of sensuality, is practically unavoidable for an embodied being (see Mazzoni, 1996). Yet despite a greater emphasis within material culture studies on the nondiscursive and somatic (Buchli, 2002: 9), religious discourse has frequently resisted such explorations, and often enough still does. As the external, material religion appears constantly at risk of abduction, of alienation, a risk perhaps deemed too dangerous to run when dealing with ultimate concerns:

'The Holy as a mere thing has the character of externality; thus it is capable of being taken possession of by another to my exclusion; it may come into an alien hand, since the process of appropriating is not one that takes place in Spirit, but is conditioned by its quality as an external object. The highest of human blessings is in the hands of others.' (Hegel, quoted in Brown, 1982: 86)

While commenting on the Eucharist and its clerical control, the issues at stake are strikingly similar – the contested nature of the sacred as a *mere* thing, and (arguably) deriving from this, questions of access, control, and power, its use and abuse. As this study demonstrates, such a risk is real, yet I would also argue that it is inescapable to the extent that the religious is also always caught up with the social, indeed must be caught up with the social, unless we want to postulate a religion existing outside of human experience – a theological possibility perhaps, though unrecognizable to the social sciences.

v. Uses of the past, uses of the body III: relic ministries

Relic ministries can be seen as an intermediary and regulative between clerical and individual practice. I have already mentioned relic ministries in section V.iv

as, usually critical, actors in the arena of relic exchanges mediated by and through eBay. For some, this has been and still is an important concern, most notably for ICHRUSA, the combative International Crusade for Holy Relics USA. However, for the main part relic ministries are small, grass-roots operations, run by a handful of enthusiasts or passionate individuals who see it as their task to promote knowledge of and devotion to the saints and their relics. Thus, they come to mediate particular forms of material religion between the institutional Church and the individual faithful. Given their enthusiasm, members of relic ministries have often been happy to reply to my questions and share their thoughts with me. It was through For All The Saints that I came into contact with Guido, the Italian archaeologist and relic expert. Another most helpful informant was Carlos, who belongs to a religious congregation in Canada and acts as custodian for the extensive relic collection of his community, which he actively utilizes in his pastoral activity.

'I have had a ministry of relics for ten years (shortly after my conversion from atheism). It has taken different forms over the years, but it has always consisted in the worship of God through the veneration of the relics of his saints [...] Basically, my office [of *Custos Reliquiarum*] places the relics in the Community under my overall care, it allows me to speak on behalf of the Community in regards to relics (i.e. to postulators, interviewers, etc.), and it gives me the responsibility of integrating the relics into the liturgical life of the Community and the ministries we serve [...] The most engaged of the ministries involves going to different parishes, schools, etc. and giving an evening of teaching on relics. These *Relic Expositions* are made up of a 60 minute slide presentation (scriptural, catechetical, and devotional in nature) and a time of veneration where the faithful may approach the relics that I bring along (usually about 200).'

Activities such as these are quite typical for the relic ministries I have encountered. ICHRUSA and For All The Saints, too, employ expositions, appear in local or regional media to publicize their work, or loan individual relics to

ministers for liturgical functions. The somatic, experiential aspect of relic veneration – the use of the body – comes through clearly in Carlos' account as well, strongly recalling Maria's healing experience:

'I not only allow the people attending to touch the reliquaries, in fact, I **encourage** them to do so. I do this for two reasons:

1) in all scriptural instances of relics effecting healing, touch was the vehicle by which it was brought about (see, for example, 2 Kings 13:21; Matt. 9:20-22; Acts 5:15; Acts 19:11-12)

2) it is a tremendous faith experience for the faithful to hold something that has such an intimate connection with a saint; it makes the faith tangible and real, removing distance and abstractness.'
(emphasis in the original)

Given the relatively marginal role of relics in contemporary Catholic practice, I asked him whether he felt that we were witnessing some sort of a subtle 'sea change', a greater or renewed desire to interact with sacred in tangible, somatic form, or willingness to conceptualize the sacred in such terms – changes, difficult, if not impossible to quantify, but perhaps running in parallel with the emergence of particular themes – the body, material culture – in the social sciences such as history or anthropology:

'I couldn't agree with you more. There is a tremendous change of current happening. The younger generation does not get caught up in many of the "hang-ups" of the baby boomers. Relics are certainly one of these areas. The young are happy to venerate relics. They are, as you say, much more comfortable with the kind of bodily experience that an encounter with relics affords; or put in a more precise way, the kind of psycho-somatic (spiritual and bodily) experience relics provide. Many of the liturgical changes of the twentieth century were excessively cerebral. The lay-out of church buildings and their decoration often embraced the abstract ... Somewhere along the road we took a turn with Alice into Wonderland.'

Carlos sent me a number of pictures he had taken at one of his missions, taking place in Houston, Texas, in February and March 2008. They show the relics in their reliquaries, set up on tables in a church hall, respectively in a church, people listening to Carlos' presentation and, later, milling about. Interaction with the relics is clearly evident – one young woman holds a little standing reliquary against a baby's forehead, a customary kind of blessing that I experienced myself during fieldwork in Italy⁴⁹. Other pictures of Carlos show individuals touching the reliquaries or holding devotional objects, such as rosaries and scapulars, against them, underlining, as he put it above, the traditional and apparently still acknowledged importance of touch and proximity, but also suggesting notions of the sacred as a kind of substance, like a miasma or radiation that can be transferred and attach itself to objects, or permeate them. The sacred then, again, appears as irreducibly material in these instances. Several people are seen praying in front of the relics; in particular a splinter of the True Cross seems to attract small crowds. Because of its exalted rank, Carlos had placed this particular reliquary in a perspex box, yet this does not seem to hold people back, who simply lay their hands onto the box – although it would also seem to suggest the limits of physical access, ordered hierarchically according to notions of a relic's dignity (and, perhaps, rarity). As the instrument of human redemption that has potentially absorbed Christ's blood, relics of the True Cross (and other relics of the Passion) occupy a position of special importance, and where one may simply pick up a less exalted relic this seems not quite appropriate with a relic of the Lord himself.

At the same time, Carlos' ministry works for and within the ecclesiastical structures: many pastors, as he says, are happy to have him organize a relic exhibition in their parish or to borrow relics to display them on the appropriate saints feast days. As these exhibitions tend to be well attended they can be seen to enliven the daily life of a parish. The display of relics is a custom also upheld in Carlos' own community and their church: 'Naturally, relics are laid out on their liturgical feast days ... After the liturgy the faithful are free to come forward and venerate the relic', usually by touching or genuflecting. And like Maria, whose use

⁴⁹ At the shrine of St Mary Frances of the Five Wounds (1715-1791, canonized in 1867) a neighbourhood saint in Naples' old town, one of the nuns tending the sanctuary bid me sit on the saint's chair, still preserved, and ask for a favour, then held a beautiful nineteenth-century silver reliquary against my chest and forehead.

of the relics of Padre Pio I described earlier, Carlos also employs relics on sick calls, 'using them as tools of intercession', a practice, he pointed out, in accordance with the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* that has been published by the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (2002). While such activities may be described as outside work, relics also function on the institutional inside: his community is supportive of Carlos' ministry as it gives it a specific profile and perhaps even helps to foster its continuation and its spiritual life:

'I especially see it in the face of those who are discerning a call to the seminary and come to visit us to test that call. They are usually taken aback and touched deeply. They often describe their experience with the relics as giving them a sense of peace and increased closeness to the saints, especially to ones in which they have a particular devotion.'

'I am often asked by a brother if a relic may be borrowed, either for the experience of being close to the saint, or for the saint's intercession, or both.'

To the extent that Carlos' ministry aims to mediate between the faithful and their religious material culture, it also aims to regulate and structure this contact: Carlos has built the community's relic collection through networks of ecclesiastical connections, indeed

'the vast majority of our relics were brought into the community by me ... I received the first relics on a pilgrimage to Rome over ten years ago. I met a student there who had obtained several from the Vatican. He had access to them through a relative... a nun who was also his aunt. She was able to obtain them right from the "source".'

The religious community he joined in 2003 already owned a substantial number of relics,

'gifted to it by individuals (mostly clergy) or by other religious communities. A deacon that we know gave us over 200 of them. He had a ministry of relics but has since given it up due to his age. It was one very similar to mine.'

These distribution patterns comply with the official regulations for first-class relics, being free from commercial considerations and privileging clerical over lay actors, and they also tie in with Carlos' (and the Church's) efforts to prevent and impede non-sanctioned forms of distribution:

'Right around the same time, however, I became aware of the trade in relics that was going on and regretted that it was the case. I remember walking into a shop downtown and seeing authentic relics for sale. Even more distressing was that it was a witchcraft and Satanism shop. The proprietor was selling these items to be used for purposes, ceremonies completely antithetical to the will of the Church, completely antithetical to the will and example of the saints whose remains were now being sacrilegied. Thus, I began a ministry of rescuing relics. This was an effort geared primarily to those that were selling them, but also those that had them in their possession but did not give them any veneration (e.g., there are many reliquaries stored in church "junk" drawers where the pens, marker, paperclips, etc. are kept). For example, I approach sellers and appeal to their consciousness, asking them to donate the relics to a Catholic church of their choice (if they do not know of any I offer some suggestions). The biggest marketplace for relics, of course, is eBay. I made my first approach to sellers in February of 2000. Out of approximately 15 sellers I contacted I managed to convince one that it was morally wrong. I suggested where he could send the relics, since it was clear that they had no personal religious significance to him. Instead, he wanted to send them to me, stating that he trusted whatever I would do with them. In all, he sent me 15 relics (and wouldn't even let me pay for the shipping).'

Given the prices that thecae can achieve on eBay – usually from about \$40 or \$50 upwards and not infrequently a good deal more than this –, the seller's reaction to Carlos' appeal was rather generous. Not surprisingly, most other sellers did not respond in the same way, as Carlos found out on other occasions:

'There was one lady whom I encountered that was selling a few relics. I did what I always do in such a situation. I explained to her the Church's teaching and that she should not sell something the Church regards as sacred and holy. She replied that she was not a Catholic but rather a Mennonite, and that these objects were meaningless to her [...] I asked her if in her goodness she would turn them over to me, promising her that they would be used in public veneration. I also promised her a share in the graces obtained by the ministry. She did not accept. She wanted money. I had examined the reliquaries – the seals and documents – and knew they were authentic, so I made her an offer. She rejected that too. She knew these were valuable to me and so she reasoned that she could get more out of me. As it turned out I did not have enough money to purchase all three. I ended up with St Therese and the True Cross. Someone else got Pope St Pius before I could get more money.'

Therefore, instead of appealing to the sellers' moral sentiments, as Carlos did, Bill and Guido at the For All The Saints relic ministry tried to appeal to their sense of business propriety, trying to convince them to remove only those specimens from their listings that were deemed inauthentic. Perhaps because of the more tangible threat of gaining a bad reputation and being held liable for damages, some sellers would indeed withdraw such queried relics. Yet just as Carlos found that interpretations of religiously or theologically informed morality are not uniform, Bill and Guido came to realize that interpretations of authenticity (and propriety) vary in the same way. While they could (and did) blacklist some high-profile sellers, this did not have the desired effect, neither on the sellers, who by and large simply ignored the activities of the ministry; nor on potential buyers, who would often remain unaware of the ministry, unless they undertook some research on their own initiative, as I did; nor on eBay, which, despite an official policy that

prohibits the sale of human remains, has never in any systematic way tried to stop the sale of relics, arguing that it simply lacks the expertise to identify those that breach company regulations.

Even so, relics sometimes do flow back from the private sphere of devotees to the institution: 'It always surprises me,' Carlos wrote,

'but on many occasions I have been asked by people to relieve them of the burden of having the relic. Most of these people have them in a drawer at home, where they have usually been for years. They understand after my presentation that the proper place for relics is in active ministry of the Church. The Church has dispersed relics in order that they be venerated. If this is not done – i.e., if they have been neglected – then there really is something wrong. If taught well, people can usually understand that.'

The statement is interesting in a number of ways: it highlights the idea that relics are meant to be given away – 'the Church has dispersed relics' –, but it also brings out the conditions attached to this dispersal ('in order that they be venerated'). It is proper, then, to reverse the movement of circulation if these conditions are not met. In this case, the Church remains the ultimate proprietor and guardian, even of those objects long since given away. Yet the statement also brings out a certain agentive dimension of the relic itself: it can become a burden – like a silent reproach it may sit in a drawer, demanding that its owner assumes a stance towards it, acts or reacts towards it. If it is an object ready-to-hand and thus exists in a network of relations it is not altogether clear whether the human owners necessarily hold a privileged, dominant position in this network, or whether they may not find themselves entangled in ways not completely within their control. The sacred object appears hedged with taboos, or at least an aura of the uncanny, stemming from its particular position within networks of agency and control, reminiscent of figures such as the 'baptized money bill' (Taussig, 1980: 126-39) that assumes a life of its own, always returning to its owner when spent, yet also exercising a malign influence over him or her.

Carlos' account, as well as that of Bill and Guido at For All The Saints, therefore draw together a number of themes: the complex, sometimes conflicted

nature of constructions of authority and authenticity on eBay – who decides what is 'genuine' or 'authentic', when is an exchange permissible, when is it not? – as well as the question of heritage and its neglect, respectively of the transformation of material religious culture into 'heritage' and back again: 'reliquaries stored in church "junk" drawers' are rescued in order to preserve a specific religious culture and its memory, while at the same time trying to keep this memory in the present as a living practice rather than a museum piece, a navigating between Nora's *milieux* and *lieux de mémoire*. Yet the activities of relic ministries also highlight issues of access and legitimacy: who should, who can have a relic, what are owners meant to do with them, and what should happen if these stipulations are not being met?

vi. Crossed boundaries: re-cognition and alterity

Within the arena of eBay institutional and personal discourses and practices such as described above intersect. The notion of heritage is readily available, even to those users who do not identify as collectors of relics or who employ an idiom of 'rescue'. For example, asked why he was interested in relics, Wes stated explicitly that for him 'they provide a physical, tangible connection with our Christian heritage', while Ronald felt that relics 'become a constant reminder of our past, and history of the Holy Roman Catholic Church through the 2000 years of its founding by Christ through St Peter.' Christine highlighted the collective significance of relics and positioned their veneration within a wider comparative framework by saying that they are valuable as 'remembrances' since 'modern society tends to not place emphasis on ancestor worship/reverence.' Relics thus 'help us to look back on the past and see'.

At the same time, it was only a minority of my informants who focused exclusively, or even mainly, on the heritage aspect of relics. Such a discourse was particularly prominent with informants closest to a (quasi-)academic or professional engagement with relics. This applies, for example, to Guido, the specialist in Christian archaeology who used to work for an Italian archdiocese: 'I think that the Catholic who holds on to relics is like someone shipwrecked, holding on to a piece of debris in a tempestuous sea. Relics are truly remains of a great ship, the ship of the Church.' It also applies to Matthew, the Anglican sub-

deacon mentioned earlier. 'It's a bit of both, really', he answered when I asked him about his collecting practice, driven by the collector's taxonomic interest as much as by religious belief. Rescuing relics from profanation or profiteering is also a rationale, as in the aforementioned (unusual) case of a witch-cum-prostitute bidding for a relic on eBay, or the more common occurrence of professional dealers trying to snap up inexpensive pieces for resale at inflated prices. Yet a classificatory impulse is clearly noticeable, or rather has asserted itself over time: while at the beginning, about 20 to 25 years ago, he said, he would collect more or less indiscriminately, he now concentrates on *ex ossibus* or other first-class relics ('I don't bother with second- or third-class anymore.'). Decisions to acquire a new piece may also be influenced by the identity of a saint as well as the style and age of the reliquary, taking into account how it fits into the existing collection, whether it is a more representative or rarer specimen of its kind. While Matthew's restraint in collecting is partly due to limitations of space, it still expresses a connoisseur's strategy based on 'museological' criteria. On the other hand, there is a strong personal fascination with relics, rooted in Matthew's life history, which transcends distancing scholarly schemata. Describing the religious background of his childhood as rather 'drab' low-church Anglicanism, he was captured by a Catholic or Anglo-Catholic sensibility, described in distinctly sensuous terms, when he was about 20 years old, during a visit to Walsingham, an important Marian shrine in Norfolk, England: 'Like in the *Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy enters Oz, and the film turns from black-and-white to Technicolor, it was like that: "we're not in Kansas anymore".' The major example of the semi-professional collector, of course, is Louis Peters, whose interest in relics grew into a life-shaping pursuit, amassing a collection of museum quality that indeed underwent the eventual transformation from private passion to curated – that is to say: classified, exhibited, scientifically described – object (as captured by the comprehensive catalogue of the 1989 exhibition at the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne; see Legner, 1989). Yet even Peters' occupation with relics, despite his specialist expertise, retains strong elements of the personal that refuse to be subsumed by either the museological gaze or a dematerializing theological discourse (which, as I have argued elsewhere (Geisbusch, 2007) can be seen to exhibit a similar dynamic). Indeed, one might argue that in his practice the curatorial and the experiential dimension appear curiously at odds with each other.

While making his collection accessible through the institution of the museum⁵⁰, he has been scathing of 'overprotective' curators and deplored the 'fixation of our art historians and conservators who would much prefer to let their objects rot in deserted rooms, protected from light and breath. And yet our relic and shrine culture is utterly a cult of touch, badly in need of rejuvenation' (Peters, 1994: 104; my translation). Peters has therefore always been happy to enable physical, tangible access during exhibitions, at least to some of his pieces, a practice that, despite calls for alternative modes of engagement (Pye, 2007), is still the exception rather than the rule within the context of the museum. The sacred in particular appears as a problematic category to be represented within the context of the 'secular cult' of the museum (Arthur, 2000; Durrans, 2000).

For the most part, while often loosely framing the importance of relics within a heritage discourse, the personal seeps in very quickly, which may encompass individual memory practices, but which also anchors relics firmly in my informants' present, their Catholic identity, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. Again, relics are perceived as portentous, containers of potential that can be activated through interaction. The recall of the 'example of a particular saint', as SD put it, has obviously an historical, documented and public dimension, yet as reminders 'of their nearness to God and their power to intercede for us on earth' relics are released from the linear flow of time: the saints are dead, yet alive, gone, but present, fragmented, but whole, and their involvement with the faithful, who live within historical time, continues indefinitely. I remember one buyer, using the ID mariacamille, who repeatedly acquired second- and third-class relics from me through eBay, usually prayer cards. As it turned out, she specifically bought relics of saints belonging to the Carmelite order since, as she explained on her 'about me' page:

'Hello all, I am an [sic] nurse who is in love with God. I won't be Ebaying [sic] much longer, for on July 16th I will be entering the Carmelite monastery in San Francisco, to become another "little

⁵⁰ A decision also based on practical reasons as Peters' collection was simply outgrowing the space available at his home and had reached a financial value that made it impossible to insure against theft or damage. Peters also explored alternatives to museum accommodation, housing the collection for a while in the crypt of a local church. However, this, too, proved unsatisfactory as safekeeping could not be guaranteed and the church's rector felt uncomfortable with the relics, both for reasons of safety and theology.

flower" like St. Therese of Lisieux. Thank you for looking at my auctions! God bless you!

While disposing of some of her own relics through eBay in order to raise money for a convent dowry, she acquired Carmelite relics to surround herself with members of her new 'religious family', or indeed to build such a family. A statement from Christine, an informant of mine, also shows how relics can straddle public and private memory. Asked whether relics embodied memory for her she answered, 'yes, I use them to remember both, the saint and the giver, if it was a gift.' In a similar way, a buyer once wrote to me, thanking me for a prayer card with a contact relic of St Theresa Margareta Redi, a rather obscure eighteenth-century nun. The significance of the relic, for this buyer, did not derive so much from the relic, but from the fact that her mother had once owned an identical card, obtained in Rome at the time of Redi's canonization (1934), which had been lost after her mother's death. Through the purchase of the card she felt that she was retrieving, or securing, a treasured personal memory.

The interaction with the saints through their relics therefore often assumes highly idiosyncratic forms. Jarcuri told me:

'St Therese, [popularly known as] the Little Flower, is a favorite of mine. She always answers my prayers. I became devoted to her because she believed in doing little things for God, ordinary things, like housework, daily duty and in that way become sanctified. Many people think we have to do great things for God, but it's really the day-to-day giving of oneself to others. Mother Theresa of Calcutta also had this Way⁵¹. There is a popular novena, the 24 Glory Be⁵², in honor of [St Therese's] 24 years of life on earth. It is said that as a sign that your prayer has been heard you will receive three roses. I have received the three roses on two separate occasions. The first time after saying the novena a rose was given to me by a man

⁵¹ Capitalised here as it refers to the 'Little Way', a concept developed by St Theresa of Lisieux to describe her theology of seeking to fulfil God's will in complete submission to the humdrum everyday and its chores. The aim is to exercise and attain a position of utter humility and conformity with the divine plan.

⁵² The beginning of the *Gloria Patri* ('Glory be to the Father', etc.), an ascription of praise to the Trinity; a basic Catholic prayer.

pumping gas in my car, he walked to the corner where a vendor was selling flowers and brought me a rose, he had no idea why and said that something just came over him... that is, St. Therese. By the way, I am not beautiful that someone would do that. That actually happened TWICE, and the third time my son bought me a St. Therese picture, not knowing how much I loved her. Also Padre Pio, of course, my spiritual father... Recently, I am looking for a relic to replace one that someone lost on me. It was of St Bernard of Montjoux, Aosta, Menthon (he is known by all those names) because I have a St Bernard service dog and we visit hospitals, blessing those with the relic who are sick. I also love St Catherine Labouré... the miraculous medal. St Michael the Archangel is also someone I depend on for help in times of attack, temptation etc., but of course the Blessed Mother I love with all my heart.' (emphasis in the original).

Jarcuri's practice mixes the contemporary – such as the cult of Padre Pio – with the recent as well as the very distant past: St Theresa and the 'miraculous medal' were among the most popular devotions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. St Theresa of Lisieux once enjoyed a popularity comparable to that of Padre Pio today, perhaps best illustrated by the 17 million relics (!) distributed by the Sisters of her convent (Erret, 2003), and she is still among the best-known saints today; the 'miraculous medal' is a sacramental that originated in the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to St Cathérine Labouré, a French nun, in 1830/31 and it has been reproduced in similar numbers. By contrast, St Bernard (d. c. 1081) while his name is still alive in his eponymous dogs, was never much venerated beyond the mountainous regions of Piedmont and the Swiss canton of Waadt/Vaud, where he founded two hospices to help travellers crossing the Alpine passes. The choice of St Bernard as a patron or devotional confidant introduces canine coincidence into an otherwise quite conventional blend of Catholic devotions.

I am describing these interactions of the institutional, collective and the personal, private at some lengths to draw out what to me seems an inherent, or at least potential contradiction in the practice of cultural retrieval. While aiming to 'rescue' a threatened 'heritage', the very intention of rescue may, in fact, have the

opposite effect – the construction of an 'ethnographic object' whose continued existence comes at the price of its everyday vitality. I think most, if not all of my informants who deal with (rather than in) relics recognized this possibility at least implicitly. In fact, Guido, who was initially highly suspicious of my activities, as he had first encountered me selling relics on eBay, even pointed this out to me: asking me about my collection, I replied that I only approximately knew the numbers, had classified the pieces in a somewhat casual manner and had never made a list or catalogue of them. Over the years, I have gathered maybe 350 to 400 prayer cards with relics and about three dozen thecae, as well as an assortment of other relic carriers such as medals, pins or little paper envelopes. The only principles of order I have imposed on the prayer cards, because of their sheer number. I keep them sorted by gender, a traditional classification of the Church herself, still surviving in the attribution of 'virgin' to unmarried (and presumably chaste) females, though not to unmarried males; and by community (Franciscans, Capuchins, Passionists, Redemptorists etc.), as the vast majority of candidates for sainthood come from religious orders; respectively by religious status (regular clergy, secular clergy, laity). Guido found this arrangement agreeable, saying that, while collecting relics was in itself not quite correct (they are not meant to be hoarded, at least not in private hands, as they should circulate, be venerated, 'worked' with, kept in a living, everyday, devotional context – a sentiment recalling Carlos' words above), it was even more misguided to treat them as the neutral objects of an alien logic that is not inherent to the relics themselves: 'The collectors *tout court*, who are different from the genuinely devout, hasten to compile long lists of their possessions, usually in a conceited Latin that will only cause hilarity if you read them.' In short, what Guido criticized was a museological or curatorial approach, which he felt deadened the relic and robbed it of its real significance. Fabian (2007: 60; italics in the original) theorizes this process through the twin concepts of cognition and re-cognition, arguing that

[a]nthropology/ethnology (*Völkerkunde*), and the practices of collecting *ethnographic objects*, started out to serve (and continued to serve ever since) constructions of *alterity* ... It was to produce knowledge by means of cognition that had to suppress re-cognition

as a threat to objective distance whenever it may have imposed itself.'

He regards the impulse for re-cognition – that is to say: acknowledgment and appreciation – as an element of Romantic thought that valued 'history as the presence of the past, fondly remembered or painfully suffered', a 'running source of present *identity*' (Fabian, 2007: 60; italics in the original). While admitting the simplifications of this model that pins an Enlightenment desire for knowledge against a Romantic desire for experience, Fabian urges a critical awareness of 'modern constructions of alterity' that 'emerged when spatial and temporal distancing merged to form the basis of a denial of recognition (of contemporaneity, or modernity). Intellectually, politically, and economically, identity became identity at the expense of others' (2007: 60). It is therefore by

'asking ourselves to what extent this, the modern, constellation is still in place, or whether and to what extent it has begun to fall apart in a process of globalization, signalled by a breakdown, or breaking up, of empires, that we will come to understand radical change in our conceptions also of the ethnic artifact' (2007: 61).

It is by recognizing the practices of believers such as Jarcuri that we can maybe save the 'ethnic artifact' or 'ethnographic object' both for and from anthropology.

'I have many relics, some 1st class like Padre Pio, some 2nd class like Michael Pro, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, St Michael [the Archangel], Mother Cabrini⁵³ etc., St Therese, the Little Flower. Most of mine have come from religious orders because on eBay they charge very high prices and their authenticity is questionable, but if you believe you receive the same graces even if they are not legitimate.' (Jarcuri, pers. comm., 2005)

⁵³ Bl Michael (Miguel) Pro (1891-1927, beatified 1988), Jesuit martyr, killed during the anti-Catholic persecutions in Mexico of the 1920s. Mother Cabrini (St Francesca Xaviera Cabrini) (1850-1917), born in Italy, foundress of a missionary order working among (Italian) immigrants in the USA and Latin America, first US national to be canonized (1946).

Asked whether she had also sold relics on eBay, Jarcuri told me:

'Yes, I have, the 3rd class ones, not regularly or professionally. It bothers me, the way some are sold and it's obvious that some sellers don't have a clue what they have and only care about the money. I can't sell some of them, would rather give them away and that is why I sell the 3rd [class relics] sometimes, because I use the money to make knotted cord rosaries and relic cloths to give away, and at Christmas time we have a horse and wagon delivering toys to children of crack-addicted parents.'

While having 'many' relics, for Jarcuri they do not exist *in abstracto*, as it were, as objects to be systematized, but first and foremost within a highly personal, intimate network of interactions that blurs categories such as history, authenticity, gift or commodity: the little way of St Theresa of Lisieux becomes associated through a kind 'folk theology' with Mother Teresa of Calcutta; relics can be bought or they may be given; price appears primarily as a practical, rather than ideological concern; authenticity, while desirable, is not strictly necessary since the efficacy of a relic is a relational effect rather than part of its substance ('if you believe you receive the same graces'). Relics may also be sold, although to do so does not necessarily turn them into commodities: while Jarcuri expressed concern over the way in which some are sold, sale is principally acceptable as long as the unique identity of the relic is preserved: even as a tradable good it cannot (or should not) be regarded as randomly interchangeable, undifferentiated in the way that, for example, one loaf of bread is indistinguishable from any other, respectively assumes the appearance of an abstract value equivalent (the improper way). Monetary exchange *may* efface identity – the definition of commodification – or appear offensive if sellers and, presumably, buyers, do not cherish the relic for its own sake, do not care to learn about its background, but simply try to achieve maximum profit (on the seller's side) or, on the buyer's side, acquire it as a collector's item. It is the distinction Baudrillard draws between the order of having and the order of being that animates the quest for authenticity and thus, ultimately, the quest for an absolute reality that can eschew mere functionality, providing the possibility of 'dwelling', or true 'transcendence' (Baudrillard, 1996:

77-9). Yet effects of 'erasure' or commodification need not be automatic consequences of market exchange; they can (and should) be resisted: if there is a wrong way to sell relics, there is also a right way as Jarcuri's own dispersal strategies illustrate. Relics should, preferably, be gifted, but if sold the proceeds may be used to sustain a network of charitable and devotional practices and the production of further religious objects, thus resisting a smooth assimilation into an anonymous market mechanism (perhaps an instructive, and timely, reminder of the mutability of market systems given the current discussions of a possible 'crisis of capitalism'). This leads back to the selling and buying strategies I discussed in the previous chapter.

Such concrete uses of relics, caught up in everyday contexts (perhaps one could speak of relics as being *zuhanden*, ready-to-hand, in a Heideggerian sense), are important because they reflect on their materiality and, in this way, as Fabian (2007: 58) argues, on the production of identity and alterity. As 'ethnic artefacts' their materiality is discounted, for ethnic artefacts are allowed to be part of our environment, as collections and displays,

'only on the condition that their materiality be severely restricted (materiality meaning cultural materiality, culturally informed experiences of and with the body). Who would think of making butter in a churn from Transylvania or sleeping with a headrest from the Sepik River?'

Yet this is exactly what Jarcuri and other informants do, or attempt to do – ignoring or resisting distancing discourses that try to confine relics within the fields of superstition, history, art history, or anthropology. The irreducible materiality of relics does not lend itself easily to such strategies of confinement as some informants observed:

'You have asked many great questions... first off, matter matters!!!! Critically important in Catholicism. Catholic theology doesn't reject nature and materiality, rather it sacramentalizes [the] material. It was Abbot Suger (c. 12th century) who said, "*mens hebes ad materialia surgit*" ("the dull mind rises through material things"). Although he

was referring to the stained glass in Saint Denis, it is also true in other ways. Bread and wine becomes Flesh and Blood of Christ, water and oil transfer grace at baptism and extreme unction, flesh joins flesh and becomes a marriage sacrament. Grace builds on nature as Saint Augustine said [...] Relics are a devotional aid and are part of the grittiness and earthiness and "primitiveness" (Clifford Geertz would agree?) of Roman Catholicism... something I love about the faith.' (Gary, pers. comm., 2005)⁵⁴

Many other informants presented similar, if less theologically or historically elaborated arguments that touched upon their everyday use of or interaction with the relics they own, or on the way in which relics are integrated in their lives spatially or corporally. Philip, another Anglican minister, wrote:

'[The relics] are at my home, along with eikons [sic] and statues as a focus for prayer and reflection. It is a false spirituality that opposes material and spiritual. Christianity is a religion of incarnation. We can worship God anywhere, yet it is of great help to have places and objects set apart, made holy ... They are important.'

Mary: 'I converted a little jewelry armoire into what I call my "reliquary". It has little glass doors on top, and small drawers underneath'. She also keeps a Communion pyx⁵⁵ in it: 'I think a pyx is actually a relic because it touches the Body of Christ when it contains the Host.' Materiality, she stated, matters as can be seen from 'the fact that some of the saints' bodies remained incorruptible long after death', this 'implies to me that their physical objects warrant respect.' Gerald, too, set aside a special place for his relics:

'All my relics are displayed properly... they are not "hidden under a bushel"... If someone is interested in the "shrine" I often bless them with the relic of the true cross... I think it has done miracles to those

⁵⁴ Suger (c. 1081-1151), abbot of the monastery of St Denis, near Paris, since 1122. Historian and influential political adviser to the French Crown.

⁵⁵ Pyx: any receptacle to hold the consecrated host; usually a small box of gold or silver.

who have been sick... even without their knowledge... not magic... miracles...'

Christine, a lay youth minister, described a similar arrangement: 'I have home altars in my bedroom and my sorta "front room".'

Informants often stressed at least the legitimacy, if not importance of materiality in religious practice:

'My parents' parish is Our Lady of Mt. Carmel so I was in a position to learn about the rosary and scapulars with devotion rather than an oddity⁵⁶. Material objects have the potential to be great resources of memories and faith development. Faith can be enhanced by those sorts of material objects [...] It is a small running gag in my family that when in doubt, give my mother a Mary statue ... The regularity of seeing devotional religious items in my house, I think, had a direct effect on my own personal love of material Christianity and the study of the profane becoming sacred images. I currently have a wall of crosses/crucifixes given to me over the past three or four years from various places friends, family and myself have visited. I also have probably a dozen Vatican rosaries from friends who have studied abroad in Rome and thought it was a fitting gift for me. Apparently I could open a good size religious goods store.'
(Christine, pers. comm., 2007)

Yet they also make finer distinctions between kinds or grades of materiality. Christine again on her relics: 'Relics are better than the Holy Cards that are collected sort of like baseball cards.' Similarly, she said

'I think it matters if it is a certain class [first, second, third], and the timing is important as well. Some more "modern" saints have a ridiculous amount of relics produced so they can sell even more laminated junky pieces. I live near Philadelphia, so we have St John

⁵⁶ One of the most popular scapulars is connected to the cult of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Neumann, St Katherine Drexel⁵⁷, and technically St Frances Cabrini (I went to Cabrini College), so for an American city we have a whole lot of saints. But if you go to their locations all you see are hokey pieces of junk that don't show the sacredness of a relic. I prefer the kind that are handmade in some way. This could be pasted to cardboard, lettered in something fancy or pretty script.'

A statement that would surely please Sr C at the lipsanoteca and which, I think, again underlines the materiality of relics as well as the materiality of the sacred more generally. I hope I am not overdetermining my informants' ideas and opinions when arguing that relic practices as lived out by Jarcuri, Christine, Gary and the others show how relics mediate the sacred through bodily experience, indeed require its material grounding in bodily experience for its proper recognition (to use Fabian's term). The assertion of the importance of relic classes also reveals the twofold meaning of bodily experience as both, experience *through* the body (that of the believer) and experience *of* a body (that of the saint). Less 'ethnic objects', these relics are the Transylvanian churn put back into use, the Sepik headrest being slept upon. The words of Christine in particular also recall the importance of space and time, of a 'relic-scape' as an authorizing and authenticating locus, as discussed earlier in chapters III and IV. Removed from such a matrix, instead 'mass-produced' and cased in plastic, relics appear disconnected, their metonymic link, while not severed, is at least compromised, their identity perhaps not removed, but enfeebled, as it were. The dislike of plastic – a substance emblematic of modernity – chimes in many ways with other informants' statements – Gary's connection of Catholicism with and appreciation of its 'earthiness' and 'primitiveness' as well as with Maria's decision to allow direct contact with her mitten of Padre Pio: 'I have never believed that Padre Pio would put his hand inside a plastic bag before he would allow people to touch him.' Perhaps one could even argue that plastic stands outside the cosmological distinction made by Weiner, mentioned earlier, between bone and cloth, the hard and durable opposed to the soft and perishable as signifiers of human existence

⁵⁷ St Catherine Drexel (1858-1955), born into an immensely wealthy banking family from Philadelphia, founder of a missionary order working among Black and Native Americans. Canonized in 2000.

within and beyond time (Weiner, 1992: 59). I would argue that this is also one reason why mass-produced relics – such as those attached to medals and prayer cards – normally achieve much lower prices when they appear on eBay (together with other factors such as principles of supply and demand, and collectors' aesthetic logic of antique, handmade pieces). Despite arguments suggesting that faith can make up for 'material deficiency' (Jarcuri: 'if you believe you receive the same graces even if [the relics] are not legitimate'), materiality, perceived as a property that may exist in variable degrees, constantly reasserts itself as a powerful effective and affective condition of agency.

I think what I have described in the preceding sections would qualify as a 'popular practice' in Fabian's sense. While perhaps not intended in such a way, the relic routines and beliefs of my informants present counter strategies to a museological or taxonomic logic that can only perceive of relics as 'ethnic objects', material signs of alterity that mark relics and the believers who interact with them as the distant, exotic, or pre-modern other. They also resist, effectively, though not necessarily by intention, institutional attempts of 'social disciplining' (Foucault, 1977, 1982; Oestreich, 1982) trying to determine and implement orthodoxy and orthopraxis. However, such an assessment, I think, also poses certain problems and contradictions. To the extent that the notion of the 'popular' can offer a critique of culture as integrated, pure and conforming it raises the question of implicitness or explicitness, of a popular practice existing in or for itself: exactly where would I position my informants within this framework, and where would they position themselves? The contradiction arises as they are often enough willing to adopt exactly those notions that Fabian would want to question: identity, purity and conformity. They are, they strive to be 'Catholic' or 'traditionalist' (Jack: 'I am a *traditional* Catholic who loves the old things of the Church'; emphasis in the original); they may oppose a contemporary Church that at least some of them experience as corrupt, tainted or confused – one may remember the bitter words of Guido. The question of alterity, or cognition, through the suppression of re-cognition reveals itself as rather more thorny and complex. The believer, especially the conservative Christian believer is quickly cast as the Other of the secular, atheist social scientist (Harding, 1991), yet the conservative, traditionalist believer may also be cast as the Other of an enlightened, modernizing Church; only that this very Church may now be again

in a process of 're-traditionalization', newly valuing Marian devotions, Latin masses and the veneration of the saints. Figures of alterity, it appears, can hardly be stabilized, they are morphing and assuming shifting appearances.

The second issue concerns the role of technologies such as eBay. While it seems certain to me, following Wilk, that eBay does open up a space of intervention or participation – in short: of agency – that in this form had not been available before, the question remains of exactly how this space is structured: what actions are invited and allowed, who can participate and under what conditions, respectively what actions, which actors are discouraged, marginalized or excluded? I hesitate to ascribe a straightforward, manifest liberatory potential to what is, in the final instance, a capitalist corporation with its own interests that may, perhaps, produce such a potential simply as an epiphenomenon. The retrieval of memory objects through eBay, the drive for archivization and its problematization by eBay, the ready availability of the notion of 'heritage' in common discourse, yet also recent Church policies regarding beatifications and canonizations as well as religious material culture (for example the re-evaluation of the Latin mass), raise complex questions over the nature – or perhaps better: natures – of time and memory in religious practice. It would seem obvious to me that through the acquisition of relics – often tellingly referred to as a 'rescue' – some of the Catholic faithful try to recapture the past (or *a* past), bringing to mind Benjamin's notion of messianic time: '[O]ur image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption', he wrote, so the 'same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history' (1999: 245). Looking backwards at the debris of change like the angel of history, they pick through heaps of discarded material, hoping to find in the rescued relics the kind of object that is able to serve them as material memory, to bring the past into the present and secure it for the future. However, '[t]o articulate the past', Benjamin writes,

'does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory of as it flashes up at a moment of danger ... The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it

... *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins' (1999: 247; italics in the original).

Such a plea for a liberatory practice of historiography, memory and tradition is not without its uncertainties: who are the ruling classes, who is the enemy in this arena of partly competing, partly corresponding interests and actors?

VII. Value, Fetish, Agency

i. Dividing heaven and earth

The issue becomes even more blurred when we consider the conflicting spheres in which these actions are taking place; or perhaps better: spheres commonly held to be in conflict: matter and spirit, commerce and the sacred, transcendence and immanence. In this chapter I will argue that these spheres, while constitutive for many of my informants as everyday categories, can and need be interrogated and that this kind of interrogation does, indeed, also shine through their common taken-for-grantedness even though this may not necessarily be reflected upon.

The construction of materiality and immateriality as opposed conceptual spheres regularly throws up problems, thus indicating demarcations that are less than straightforward – whether for Church officials concerned with orthodoxy and orthopraxis; for the faithful negotiating their way through modes of access and restriction, of legitimization and de-legitimization of devotional practices and cultural memory; or for dealers navigating between concepts of authenticity, fake and fraud. The question of how much materiality is permissible, how it is to be infused with a necessary degree of spirituality, or, to be put it somewhat differently, how matter can be kept transparent enough for the immaterial to come through, remains an ongoing concern.

In this respect, the figure of the fetish is central as it condenses two key issues: firstly, agency – what Graeber (2005: 407) calls 'social creativity', the 'creation of new social forms and institutional arrangements.' Who are the actors, both human and non-human, in the networks of relic circulation that I have tried to map out, where are they located within these networks, and how do they shape

social reality. And, secondly, value (as well as values), that is to say: definitions of that what is deemed of ultimate importance. As Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988) developed the notion in a series of essays, the fetish came into being through and within the conflictual and culturally relativizing encounters of early-modern European merchants, missionaries and adventurers, and African societies. Where the Europeans adhered to a Christian cosmology that assumed an empty space of 'virtually nothing in between God and the world of material objects' with the result that 'social relations tend to disappear', African cosmologies comfortably lived with a 'middle zone' in which everything can be social and fluid, both material and spiritual at the same time – 'the zone in which we encounter the "fetish"' (Graeber, 2005: 431-2). The fetish thus appears as a figure of misconception, although – as with Marx' later ironical use of the term – it is by no means clear whose misconception: on the one hand the fetish has been made to 'absorb' the epistemological contradictions and doubts arising from the encounter with an 'other'; yet at the same time, through its very existence, it does, of course, invite reflections on this other and, by extension, on the self.

Exactly where this European, Western self is located vis-à-vis the created world and exactly how it is acting within the world and towards its creator is a central question. While there is no space here to give a thorough explication of the long and complicated lineage of Christian theology on the subject and its broader transformations in Western thought, I would trace this concern with the clearance of an empty space between God and world to Augustine (354-430) and his victory over Pelagius (c. 354-c. 420/40): writing on free will, grace and salvation, Augustine taught that due to its fallen nature the human being is inescapably condemned to perdition unless divine grace intercedes. Such intercession is a volitional act of God, which a human being can do nothing to impel or influence and which is both irresistible and entirely gratuitous. By itself, the human being is habitually incapable of progressing towards virtue or even of acting virtuously due to the spiritual corruption caused by original sin. An upshot of this teaching is the notion that only relatively few will be saved, and that such salvation is preordained. Against this, Pelagius denied the notion of original sin, arguing that Adam in his fall had set an example of evil, yet did not alter human nature as such or in a transmissible way, and could indeed serve as a useful warning to the virtuous soul. The human being can therefore, through its own will and

determination, choose to work towards perfection, or, more precisely: it is called to strive for perfection as free will also gives it responsibility for its acts:

'Whenever I have to speak on the subject of moral instruction and conduct of a holy life, it is my practice first to demonstrate the power and quality of human nature and to show what it is capable of achieving, and then to go on to encourage the mind of my listener to consider the idea of different kinds of virtues, in case it may be of little or no profit to him to be summoned to pursue ends which he has perhaps assumed hitherto to be beyond his reach; for we can never end upon the path of virtue unless we have hope as our guide and compassion... Any good of which human nature is capable has to be revealed, since what is shown to be practicable must be put into practice.' (Rees, 1991: 36-7)

Where Pelagius' approach appears as a philosophy of practical individual agency, Augustine's position presupposes a radical divide between God and an irredeemably fallen creation. It would thus appear to imply a questioning, if not a denial, of free will that Pelagius, coming from a tradition of strict monastic asceticism, regarded as prone to moral laxity, in its final consequence absolving the human being from responsibility for its acts. The theological debate between Pelagius and Augustine exercised a number of synods and councils during the first third of the fifth century, initially with contradictory results, yet Augustine's literary and political influence eventually secured the condemnation of Pelagius' teachings as heretical. Even so, the shadowy, if recurring presence of Pelagianism turned Augustinian theology into a 'fateful question of Roman Catholicism well into the Middle Ages' (Denzler and Andresen, 1997: 465; my translation). It obviously reverberates strongly and explicitly in Martin Luther's development of justification based on faith alone and rejecting the efficacy of works, a position for which he found support in Augustine's writings against Pelagius (Livingstone, 1996: 312); and, even sharper, in the theology of Jean Calvin, which took the notions of grace and predestination to their grim and final conclusion. Within the Roman-Catholic Church, too, debates over justification, grace and free will continued on and off, only coming to an end in the mid-eighteenth century. The

main controversy was triggered by the treatise *Augustinus* by the bishop of Ypres, in the Netherlands, Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638). Posthumously published in 1640, it maintained a rigorist position against Jesuit 'Semi-Pelagianism', arguing that without God's grace the keeping of his commands is impossible to the ever-sinful human being. Quickly becoming embroiled in wider moral and political debates of the day, Jansenist teachings, respectively their adherents, were repeatedly censured by Rome over the next century.

Despite his central position for Christian (and, more narrowly, Catholic) theology and despite his veneration as a saint and 'Doctor of the Church', the figure of Augustine is thus not without its problems and contradictions. It is easy to see, I believe, how his ideas on grace and predestination can appear to posit a pessimistic anthropology that conceives of humanity as both depraved and dependent. As Denzler and Andresen put it:

'Through his study of Pauline writings (Rom. 9-11), then through enquiries by North African, later by Southern Gallic monks, [Augustine] had since 426 arrived at a negative judgment regarding human free will and the meritoriousness of pious works, which could only disquiet both popular Catholicism as well as those monks striving for perfection.' (1997: 549; my translation)

The strong focus on divine grace and predestination, and the depreciation of works appears at odds with the pastoral practice of a Church that has virtually throughout its entire history employed mechanisms of effective interaction with the sacred by material means, such as the veneration of saints as intercessors in their relics, prayers for the dead or burial in the vicinity of saints' tombs⁵⁸, all amply documented by catacomb inscriptions, early liturgies and patristic writings.

I have ventured into this brief and unavoidably schematic summary as it is relevant to anthropology and its conceptions of the sacred in particular, and of the study of religion more generally. Cannell (2006: 14) discusses how social science

⁵⁸ A practice that Augustinus also regarded with some doubt as expressed in his treatise *De cura gerenda pro mortuis* (Allies, 1914). Written in response to a question by a friend regarding the merit of *depositio ad sanctos* in the hope of the saint's protection and intercession, he accepted the custom, though appears equivocal, to say the least, in his conclusion.

'takes some of its earliest and most important steps towards a separate disciplinary identity by means of a unilateral declaration of independence from metaphysics, including Christian theology – a declaration which, however, it has proved easier to make than to fulfil.' While typically conceived as a liberal, relativist and agnostic (if not atheist) discipline, the foundations of an anthropology of Christianity are, of course, built on a Christian anthropology, that is to say: Christian, theological thinking on the nature of 'man', his relation to the divine and to nature, time and history, and the ensuing social, moral and ethical implications of these relations. It is therefore important to be aware of the "archaeology" of mainstream social science "discourse", as Sahlins (1996: 395) put it. The notions of a fallen world, radically divided from God's perfection, are 'native cultural structures of the long term that still inhabit academic anthropology' (Sahlins, 1996: 395). One could argue, for example, that Durkheim's binary conception of sacred and profane reiterates just such a structure, but it also appears in the devaluation of the material against the spiritual, the latter being routinely conflated with the immaterial.

'Gradually, the religious forces became detached from the things of which they were at first only the attributes [...] But it is only with Christianity that God finally goes beyond space; his kingdom is no longer of this world. The dissociation of nature and the divine becomes so complete that it even degenerates into hostility.'
(Durkheim in Cannell, 2006: 15-16)

As I have discussed earlier, such a perspective hampered not only the anthropological study of Christianity in general, but in particular that of material Christianity. At the same time, the social sciences are not alone to blame as Catholic theology and Catholic institutions, too, somewhat ironically followed this particular lead into a (Protestant) modernity, fostering a more intellectual, cerebral and spiritual stance at the expense of ritual and material culture – a philosophical ouroboros swallowing its own tail, as it were. Latour's (1993) criticism of the separation between nature and culture or subject and object also addresses this problem as does, more directly, his discussion of iconoclasm:

'As is well known from art historians, many sacred icons that have been celebrated and worshipped are called *acheiropoiete*; that is, *not* made by any human hand [...] Thus, *to add the hand* to the pictures is tantamount to spoiling them, criticizing them. The same is true of religion in general. If you say it is man-made you nullify the transcendence of the divinities, you empty the claims of a salvation from above.' (Latour, 2002: 16; italics in the original)

If materiality must be admitted to religion's 'project of immateriality' (Engelke, 2007: 224), at least, so the argument of theologians and many of the faithful goes, it should be purified of human agency. Curiously, it is the natural sciences that seem to offer a solution to the obvious dilemma of embodied beings having to engage with an ideally immaterial sacred. As Latour (2002) argues, we have come to regard scientific images as unmediated and objective representations of the world, and it is therefore medical, biological, chemical or physical analyses that have become the privileged strategies of producing truth claims in religious discourses, too: DNA tests show that a much revered relic is human and not a Chaucerian sheep's bone as Protestant detractors might have it; pollen found on an ancient piece of fabric – such as the Turin shroud – provide evidence for its Palestinian provenience; palaeography helps dating the *titulus*, the alleged inscription on Jesus' cross, to the first century CE. As discussed in chapter V on the production of authenticity, such scientific methods do hold a convincing appeal at least for some of the faithful: as with *acheiropoeisis*, the true object is the unmade or, at any rate, the not deliberately constructed object: pollen have attached themselves to the fabric of Christ's burial shroud without the knowledge or intention of the weavers or the mourners and by natural processes only, just as the *titulus* was written in an unselfconsciously idiosyncratic way that no forger would have used (or so it is argued).

Within this 'empty space' that Europeans tried (and try) to maintain between creator and creation the fetish must persist as a haunting presence; an embodied, spatially and temporally limited being can only fail when attempting to conceive of unmediated thought or action, and the result are 'true' fetishes, that is to say: unrecognized fetishes, fetishes that successfully hide their constructedness and therefore transport a purer form of ideology – the realms of pure, immaterial

religion, science or art (Latour, 2002). Yet if fetishes, as Graeber (2005) says, are 'gods in the process of construction', they come to be valuable critical devices. Gods, of course, by definition, cannot, must not (be seen to) be constructed. By the same token, therefore, fetishes are gods not only in the process of construction, but also of deconstruction. Located on the fault line between divine agency and (supposed) human non-agency, between the (supposedly) neatly divided material and the immaterial, relics inhabit an inherently ambiguous position, and I would argue that it is exactly this ambiguity which renders them both potent and ontologically and theologically suspect. I have described before how awkward the subject is for many members of the clergy, but also for devout lay people. To mention relics often and quickly elicited protestations of orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

The sense of unease, which I see as a sense of critical examination making itself felt, increases even more when it is mixed up with such commercial interests as they become evident in the eBay relic trade. I am following Comaroff and Comaroff (2005) when I regard commensuration as the salient feature of such unease as it plainly introduces an element of human agency where only divine agency should operate; respectively, if we want to take the argument a step further, it threatens to question divine agency and reveal it as or even replace it with 'social creativity', in Graeber's (2005) term, thus reopening the space between God and the created world that Christian cosmology had sought to evacuate. The point of this argument is not to demonstrate a case of 'false consciousness', but to come to a different understanding of the term 'fetishism'. Historically, "'fetish" has always been a word of sinister pedigree', as Pietz remarked (1985: 5). Since its inception it has denoted the folly of others as well as the other and has thus become an awkward, if not, as Mauss saw it, an unusable term for anthropological project that aims to de-exoticize the other – notwithstanding a minor revival in academic debate in the 1980s and 1990s (Pietz, 1985, 1987, 1988; *Etnofoor*, 1990; Apter and Pietz, 1993; Spyer, 1998). Yet while naïve applications, usually in the form of accusation or vilification, need to be questioned, the notion of fetishism, I would argue, is valuable because it begs to ask the question of its opposite: what would non-fetishistic, that is to say: unmediated and non-material relations look like? And are they conceivable in the first place? Since I doubt the possibility of such a premise, I would agree with Latour that, 'of course, fetishes have to be

made' (Latour, 2002: 22). What matters is how they are made and how they are used, and it is at this point that relics, eBay and market exchange re-enter the picture.

ii. Bridging heaven and earth

Certainly in the Christian West, and certainly for the people I have come across during my research, money and the sacred have a troubling, yet curiously entangled relationship that stubbornly refuses to untie into cleanly separate spheres (see, for example, Parry, 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005). This relationship dates far back in time as a source quoted by Pernoud (2004) illustrates. Around the year 1100,

'a witty cleric from Toledo named Garcia wrote *The Comic and Mocking Story of Saints Albinus and Rufus*⁵⁹, in which he tells of their relics and their miraculous ability to open every door. Albinus stands for silver (*albus*, white), Rufinus, the Red, for gold. "Oh, how precious are the martyrs Rufinus and Albinus! Oh, how much applause, how much praise must those receive who, cleansed from their sins for eternity, possess their relics: no matter how worldly they may be, through them they are fit for Heaven; no matter how godless they may remain, through them they are rendered innocent...!" Saints Albinus and Rufinus, their martyrdom and relics amply convince us that there was never a lack of self-criticism and that strident arguments were employed to move those to a more honest view of things who had been deceived by their passion for relics and led astray through their trade.' (Pernoud, 2004: 255; my translation)

Garcia's story is a morality tale intended to shame and rectify transgressive behaviour, directed, however, not so much at relic dealers in particular, but at the worldliness and corruption of the Roman curia, as it is the doors of the pope and

⁵⁹ Also known as *Treatise of Garcia of Toledo*, or *Tractatus Garsiae Tholetani Canonici de Albino et Rufino* (Thomson, 1973).

his cardinals that Albinus and Rufinus help to open. What makes the tale pertinent for my argument is the intimate parallel that canon Garcia draws between money and the sacred, a parallel, I would argue, that revolves around a fairly explicit notion of agency, the capacity to get something done, to influence the course of things: Albinus and Rufus open doors, grant access, sway opinions, and entice the decision makers of their time. Notwithstanding the mockery and moral disapproval, in order for the trope to work an underlying similarity between the two – between money and relics – has to be recognizable and reasonable to the contemporary reader. The common potential of relics and money, or rather: the fact that relics and money should have such common potential in the first place, in other words: their commensurability, is at once scandalizing and intriguing, a contradiction that remains clearly relevant to today's faithful. Most obviously, it shows through the moral wrangling over the relic trade on eBay as it draws together a plethora of often conflicting motives and actors – collectors, dealers, devotees, some aiming to make money, others to save a cultural heritage from neglect or holy objects from defilement, gain access to the sacred, express and perform their understanding of Catholic piety, educate others on the uses and abuses of material religion in general and of material religion as mediated through the commercial sphere in particular. What shines through all these negotiations, however, is a concern with dividing a messy reality into an ideal system of clearly distinct spheres, those of sacred and profane. If the trade in relics is forbidden and if it is offensive to treat sacred objects like profane ones, we need to ask – why? What exactly is it that renders relics sacred and why is it necessary to remove the sacred from commercial exchange? Respectively, we may turn the question around and ask whether it is their keeping out of (commercial) exchange relations that renders certain objects sacred – a point of view taken by Godelier (1999: 200) when he stated that

'there can be no human society without two domains: the domain of exchanges, whatever is exchanged and whatever the form of this exchange...; and the domain in which individuals and groups carefully keep for themselves, then transmit to their descendants or fellow-believers, things, narratives, names, forms of thinking. For the things that are kept are always "realities" which transport an

individual or group back to another time, which place them once again before their origins, before the origin.'

Based on my brief exploration of Christian, Augustinian thought above I think it should become clear why money can be seen as both, similar and radically dissimilar to the sacred, in a way that is structurally comparable to relics – it appears to contain, harness, indeed embody agency, yet as such it is antithetical to a cosmology that, ultimately, grants agency only to God, whereas money, of course, is promiscuous, widely dispersed, principally at everybody's disposal (notwithstanding actual and often drastic socio-economic differences between individuals). It is this characteristic that, as Graeber (2001: 102-4) argues, also prompted the creation of coinage in antique Greece: money, as a measure of value and medium of exchange, needed to be controlled by a central authority, by stamping it with the emblem of the state, in order to manage its furtive power that might prove socially destructive in private hands. This recalls ecclesiastical practices that seek to limit and steer the promiscuity of relics, ensure that major ones remain firmly in place in public view (and institutional control) rather than have them slip into private hands, and demand that every relic should bear an official seal. As Brown (1982: 32-6) describes, the 'privatization of the holy' by the better-off was a potentially problematic issue for the Church of the third and fourth centuries as it could be socially divisive. He relates the case of various local benefactresses who were able to obtain the remains of martyrs and deposit them in family graves or even their homes (see also Snoek, 1995).

One way to counter such processes is, of course, the invocation of an altogether different sort of power and this is, I think, what happens through the establishment, in Godelier's sense, of domains within and domains without exchange, the concealment of agency from its own operations and thus the formation of a seemingly autonomous domain, free from human interplay. Godelier explicitly recalls Weiner's notion of keeping-while-giving and its role in the creation and upholding of social difference, yet to me it also echoes Graeber's account of European (fear of) fetishism and the need to keep God and world apart, to prevent an intermingling in an arena of social creativity, respectively it echoes the Augustinian pessimism that goodness and virtue could ever derive from such intermingling. What interests me, however, is not so much how such domains are

maintained, but how they are subverted. As Graeber notes, speaking on the well-known example of Tiv spheres of exchange, 'division between spheres was never absolute. It *was* possible to convert food into valuables, if one found someone sufficiently desperate for food, or, under other circumstances, valuables into additional wives' (2005: 421; italics in the original). I would call this the intervention of objective conditions (or of power) in an ideal system, and the parallels to the circulation of relics are, I think, clear: ideally, their circulation is restricted by a specific set of conditions: 'low grade' relics may be made available to the lay faithful, 'high grade' relics are the preserve of clergy (and, historically, of elite lay groups), all are to be distributed within a gift economy under central control. Factually, however, as I have shown, relics circulate in a number of ways that may not necessarily fulfil all, or indeed any, of these conditions.

The clerical response to this situation has been twofold: firstly, transgressions are censured as sacrilegious, as inherently wrong and likely to incur spiritual, if not practical, sanctions. Secondly, the whole system as such has been relegated to a position of relative insignificance – while the relic trade may be deplorable, the greater transgression consists not in their trade, but in the mistaken appreciation of material objects as opposed to, or instead of, spiritual truths, in short: a case of fetishism, at once folly (because of a mistaken conception of the nature of things) and vice (because of the immorality implied in such confusion). In effect, we are witnessing a practice in which a notional prohibition is consistently being circumvented or ignored not just by individuals who could with some reason claim not to be affected by it (such as non-Catholics), but also by a significant number of the faithful themselves, that is to say: individuals who should be offended by their very own actions.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, I do not mean to postulate a 'levelling effect' brought about by the use of money, what Bloch and Parry (1989) described with critical reservation as the alleged 'revolutionary implications of money in Western discourse' – a discourse reaching from Aristotle via Thomas Aquinas to Marx, which has also until fairly recently influenced much anthropological thinking on 'traditional' versus 'modern' societies, or 'gift' versus 'commodity' exchange. I hope to maintain a broader theoretical stance by focusing on the aspect of agency, of which money, in the way it is used, for example, to compete for objects in auction and thus keeping eBay going as a network of circulation,

can be one form or expression, among others. In fact, the assumption that non-monetary exchange is to monetary exchange what traditional is to modern or the sacred to the profane needs to be questioned: it is true that the condemnation of the relic trade stands in a long (though not necessarily straightforward) tradition – stretching from Garcia of Toledo to the present, as statements of eBay critics illustrate:

'Don't people realize that the sale of relics is one of the things that got us Catholics in such hot water during the Reformation? [...] It was during the Middle Ages ... that abuses began to creep in. The faking, sale and other scandalous abuses of the Church doctrine in relics became widespread.' (Ball, website)

'It may sound like the Middle Ages, but unfortunately it is all too true. At the end of the Twentieth Century, on the eve of the Third Millennium, an illicit trade in relics (authentic or otherwise) is flourishing. A number of antique dealers and profiteers have somehow obtained relics of the saints – fragments of their bodies or clothing, or even relics of Jesus Christ such as splinters of the True Cross – and are selling them at incredibly inflated prices, at enormous profit to themselves, without any regard for the sacred character of these objects or for the law of the Church (the source of these relics) which strictly forbids such activities.' (ICHRUSA, website)

While such assessments may not satisfy a professional historian⁶⁰, they do reflect fairly accurately the viewpoint of many critics of the relic trade on eBay. Yet it is

⁶⁰ Trade it is often inaccurately conflated with other forms of fundraising through relics. Guibert of Nogent, for example, describes processions in which relics are carried around in order to solicit pious donations, yet the relics do not actually change hands (Benton, 1970). In general, trade, while undoubtedly occurring, appears to have played a smaller role than received wisdom would suggest. Geary (1990 [1978]) has pointed out that purchase was possibly the least favoured way to obtain relics compared to gift-giving and theft. This is supported by Legner, a leading authority on medieval relic practices in Germany: 'Relics changed hands and locations in a multitude of ways ... However, the simple plea for the relic as a gift remains by far the most common manner' (2003: 45; my translation). There are a number of reasons why this should be so: for once, buyers were aware of the seller's

curious to see how monetarization in these cases comes to denote pre-modernity rather than modernity. The idea that the sacred (even if its contents may have profoundly changed over time) is non-negotiable emerges here as a distinctly modern idea – to buy and sell the sacred sounds 'like the Middle Ages'.

The International Crusade for Holy Relics USA (ICHRUSA), the most vociferous campaigner against the eBay relic trade, brands these activities as simony, defined by canon law as the sale and purchase of spiritual things. The term is used by ICHRUSA as a fighting word, deriving its power from the seemingly commonsensical agreement that making the spiritual, or the sacred, available for sale can only be offensive and wrongheaded. Yet what simony implicitly does is the underhand introduction of the idea (even if only in the form of an immediate negation) that negotiations with God, the sacred, the numinous may be thinkable, possible – to render the sacred, in principle, open to human agency. Indeed, money, in its genericness, can be seen as an index or potential for action (Graeber, 2001: chapter 4) and thus in latent competition with a hierarchical structure that is built on difference and distinction, on strategic giving and withholding. A little flier dating to 1929 from Altötting, a popular Marian shrine in Bavaria run by Capuchin friars, makes this connection clear in rare explicitness. Explaining the meaning of consecration, it states that the Bavarian Capuchin priests have the privilege to confer 'supernatural powers' on any object as well as to attach indulgences to sacramentals such as rosaries, medals and crucifixes. However, 'consecration and indulgences are lost when consecrated objects are being sold or the better part of them is destroyed. They may, nevertheless, be lent, given away, bequeathed and mended' (Kürzeder, 2005: 174, figure 42). A similar conflict over the correct engagements with the sacred is described by Hauschild for 1980s southern Italy:

'It is with good reason that many devotees of [the local patron] St Donatus insist on the custom to affix money directly to [his] statue. Even Don Peppe [the local parish priest] has not yet been able to escape the magical power of money [...] Priests denigrate such

self-interest and incentive to cheat. More importantly, no signs of celestial approval could derive from purchase – unlike in the case of theft, which could only succeed with the saint's assent, thus indicating his or her approval of the relics' new owners. Nor could purchase establish relations of reciprocity, as gift-giving could.

sacrifices as *do ut des, I give so that you will give* – supposedly, people are bargaining with the higher powers ... Despite their theological education they do not know that the proverb derives from Roman law. Correctly it translates as: *I give, so that you may give*. This specifies exactly the tension between voluntariness, gift and coercion that characterize free alliances, whether between humans, or between humans and God.' (Hauschild, without year: 452; my translation, italics in the original)

This practice can be compared to other instances of money intermingling with religion that have drawn equally fundamental criticism and that have come to be regarded as remnants of a pre-modern mindset, namely indulgences and purgatory. Both allow a kind of 'pious calculation', or, in other words, acts of commensuration between spheres commonly meant to be kept apart. Purgatory, the idea that those who died contrite, yet without having done proper penance for their sins, would undergo a period of cleansing, turns the afterlife into a thoroughly social state with everything this entails for human action and interaction. It stresses the continuing bonds of kinship and patronage between the living and the dead through the exercise of suffrages by the living, calibrated according to the gravity of the sins committed (Le Goff, 1986, 1988). Unlike a reliance on faith alone – the Lutheran principle of *sola fide* – suffrages follow and apply a logic of practice, the carrying out of particular actions such as alms, fasts, prayers, vigils and masses in order to sway divine justice. Purgatory itself appears as a space, both literally and metaphorically, in which the sharp distinction between mutually exclusive options – heaven and hell – has been blurred and complicated. It is a third space where human agency receives a final chance to influence human fate. While such an approach has been sharply repudiated by Protestant theology as an insufferable limitation to God's omnipotence and omniscience, and while it is likely to appear mechanistic and naïve to modern sensibilities that value internal states rather than outward actions, recent historiography on early modern piety and mentalities has pointed out the regulative and psychologically relieving aspects of such practices (Lentes in Paulus, 2000: xxix-xxxiii). Even when faced with an all-powerful and unfathomable godhead, the individual human being need not be an entirely

passive patient, but may, at least to some extent, assume the role of agent. Historically, one group to benefit enormously from the 'birth of purgatory' between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries were usurers, as the charging of interest on loans was traditionally regarded as a mortal sin that would more or less inevitably condemn its practitioners to eternal punishment. Controversially, as he himself says, Le Goff ventured that purgatory, 'by making the salvation of the usurer possible, contributed to the birth of capitalism' (1986: 305), thus explicitly linking changing representations of the cosmic order with changing social and economic conditions, that is, in this case, the rise of monetarism and growing cities. In Marxist terms, one could perhaps speak of the sublation of a contradiction between structure and superstructure as an increasingly influential social group, the emerging commercial elites, sought and achieved ideological, social and political recognition – in this world and the next.

In a way similar to purgatory, the concept of indulgences today tends to cause indignation and embarrassment. This is no doubt partly due to a simplistic understanding, typically equated with the outright purchase of salvation. While medieval and early modern practice on the ground could certainly come close to such an understanding, theologically an indulgence is simply a sacrifice (monetary or otherwise) made in atonement for a transgression. Always subject to genuine contrition and the confession of sin, an indulgence grants the remission of punishment, though it does not in itself obtain forgiveness. It thus combines an internal affective state, contrition, with external actions, i.e. penance and the giving of satisfaction. In this manner, while rarely drawn attention to nowadays, the concept of indulgence is still taught and applied by the Catholic Church, although the sacrificial component is typically performed through acts of prayer or pilgrimage, rather than the surrender of cash, and the remission of punishment is no longer expressed in temporal units, precisely in order to discourage any salvational arithmetics. However, older relics cards, dating to pre-Conciliar times, still often carry an indulgenced prayer to the blessed or saint in question, granting usually between 50 and 200 days of indulgence, always with the implicit proviso that the individual is in a state of grace. Like purgatory, to which it is closely related, the idea of indulgences emphasizes social and praxeological aspects over propositional and innerworldly concepts of religion and, of course, introduces an

obvious element of commensuration or adequation, whether this be expressed in monetary or other terms:

'Contracting with God, contracting with one's family, neighbours and friends produced spiritual, emotional and social obligations as well as legal and financial agreements. The one did not preclude the other. Moreover, in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, merchants and preachers contended for the same audiences. But while they competed, they also used each other's techniques and resources.'
(Welch, 2005: 301)

In simony, as in the granting of indulgences and the belief in purgatory, human agency is again shown to invade the sacred and thus to reveal the extent to which the sacred itself is part of the ambit of social creativity – a creativity that I would regard as fundamentally irrepressible, although at the same time such suppression is a crucial structuring feature of Christian cosmology, providing the basis for what Weber termed a 'theodizee of privilege', and thus also constituting a 'sociodizee' (Bourdieu, 2000: 66-77; Weber, 2005 [1922]: 2.V. §§ 7 and 8). To the extent that Western philosophy (and anthropology) has build on Christian cosmology these structural features will obviously reach beyond what we have come to recognize as the purely religious: exchanging things and keeping things out of exchange produces a distinction between value and values, whether the latter are conceived in religious or secular terms, defining not only exchange relations, but also relations of power and limits of action. It seems an interesting observation that in the late medieval period 'the instrumentality of money reached farther than today' (Sprandel in Lentes, 2000: xxx; my translation), which would suggest that modernity is at heart a project committed to immateriality, a withdrawal from messy social realities and their attendant materiality. Despite its alleged drive towards disenchantment, it holds on to a surprisingly wide range of 'taboos' in which the sacred has assumed secular form. We may think here of notions such as universal human rights, the right to life, to one's own body, but also of cultural rights, or the difficulty we have in putting a price on life and limb (for example in assessing and granting compensation payments to victims of crime or soldiers wounded in action; money, somehow, is never adequate in such

cases, yet to withhold it would be even less acceptable). While central to our understanding of what it means to be human, such notions cannot be regarded as universal – for Aristotle the existence of slavery was naturally given, while Germanic law had no problems with fixing specific penal tariffs for the maiming or killing of an animal, a slave, a free man or woman, a member of the group or an outsider. Yet while it is the involvement of money that most ostensibly perturbs the domain of sacred, the tale of Saints Rufus and Albinus indicates that money is in fact only an intermediary. More fundamentally, what is at stake is value as the importance of actions, as Graeber (2001: 43-54) put it. Value and values thus come to be seen as 'refractions of the same thing' (Graeber, 2001: 78). That this should be the case with objects such as relics is, I think, not coincidental: they are thing-like, dividable and distributable, yet at the same time they are human, and in all his or her fragments the saint remains a unified person. What is more, the saint is not just any individual: his or her capacity for action goes beyond the normal human limit as evidenced by the working of miracles.

Bearing in mind this importance of action as it plays out within the domain of the sacred, we need also take technological factors into account, in addition to money, such as the Internet generally, or eBay more specifically. Where money enables processes of commensuration, information technology draws these processes together in far-reaching networks of communication and information (as well as dis-information). Where Kula partners need to undertake sea voyages and pilgrims have to travel to distant shrines, information technology offers an extended control over space and time – buyers and sellers make their name on eBay as reliable or notorious exchange partners at a mouse click, they get hold of prized objects by trawling a website for a few hours rather than by travelling days or weeks, and they interact across continents without having to leave their desk. This does not necessarily abolish the importance of time and space – as I have tried to show, discourses of authenticity often still revolve around notions of spatial and temporal origin. But the operation of these notions is being reconfigured as the Church's 'locative' ideology of defined, hierarchical spaces (Smith, 1993) as well as its archival logic (Derrida, 1996) are being questioned. Derrida, writing *Archive Fever* before the Internet assumed today's ubiquity and technological sophistication, argued that electronic mail was redrawing the boundaries of public and private – a boundary that is at the heart of the Church's

self-concept: it is a community, albeit a hierarchically organized one, with its ruling echelons ideally able to define and control access to the sacred, as well as its dispersal. The effect envisaged by Derrida has only gained ground with more recent Internet applications: the picture hosting site Flickr, for example, operates in important ways like an archive – collecting and categorizing images on a vast scale –, thus potentially offering a valuable tool for social history research, while at the same time subverting this potential through the constant change of its contents; social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter are explicitly predicated on a blurring of private and public, inviting and producing a steady stream of thoughts, images and communications to be disseminated across the Internet; or Wikipedia, conceptualized as a collective endeavour of writing and re-writing factual knowledge. The Internet opens a space in which participants may operate partly outside traditional structures of expertise, control and hierarchy. This poses a challenge not alone to the Catholic Church; we can observe similar effects in other domains, too: as discussed earlier, eBay redraws the boundaries of specialist expertise and dealership in the art market (Wilk, 2008); museums, while recognizing the Internet's potential for widening access through institutional websites and searchable databases, also have to confront its challenges to curatorial, interpretative authority and disciplinary coherence (Cameron and Mengler, 2009). Another example is the challenge to medical authority and control as shown by Internet pharmacies, which have become significant distributors of drugs despite warnings by medical practitioners and the attempts of health authorities trying to impose legal restrictions (Bee, 2008). The comparison with Internet pharmacies, in particular, is instructive – pharmaceuticals, like relics, are 'active substances' the agentive potential of which is usually controlled and not freely available. Both have an instrumental, functional dimension as healing agents. Above, I have already mentioned the use of Lourdes water for such purposes (McDannell, 1995), and in a similar way water or wine in which a relic had been immersed was widely used as a curative well into the eighteenth century and beyond (Harvolk, 1990), even though this practice was (and is) strongly discouraged by the Church. Devotional pictures might be swallowed for the same reason (McDannell, 1995). Even the consecrated host could be treated in such a manner: cherished for its therapeutic powers, the faithful of the first centuries would sometimes preserve it and take it home like, or

rather: as, a medicine (Nordhofen, 2008: 28, 74), a practice still mentioned to me, with great consternation, by one clerical informant who had experienced this himself when administering the Eucharist.

By offering alternative routes of access to such secular or sacred 'medicines', the Internet allows its users to shape not only discursive, but also material structures. Whether such practices should be encouraged and supported, or criticized and prevented – doctors will point out the risks for bodily, clergy the risks for spiritual health – cannot be my concern. Yet what eBay, or more generally: what the trade in relics, does, is to question certain forms of social agency and certain demarcations of structural domains – religion, economy, society –, though without necessarily rendering them impotent. As Carrier (1995: 106) argued, 'the dominant cultural constructions of these realms exaggerate the changes that occurred and the resulting differences between realms.' An informant once branded the activities on eBay as 'mercenary'. As an expression of his anguish and revulsion I accept this description. To the extent that it is 'done from or actuated by motives of gain' (Cassell Concise English Dictionary) it certainly describes accurately the motives and actions of some, though by no means all, participants. Yet by the same token it invites the question of what other motives may be or should be involved in relic practices. Commerce may erase the gift, but it may also interpellate it. As Kamp (2005: 102, 104; my translation) writes on the medieval uses of money by the ruling elites: 'It would seem that the economy and morality of the gift in the 12th and 13th centuries really began to thrive exactly because of [and not despite] the spreading use of money.' The gift economy began to flourish 'as if the engagement with money had only made it visible as the Other in the first place.' A similar argument, with wider theoretical implications, has been advanced by Slater (2002: 59; emphasis added) when he criticized socio-cultural thinking

'in which culture and economy are seen as macro structures operating on each other as externalities: each sees the other as a global force or potential *impurity* pressing in from the outside... the very notion of culture largely arose in the eighteenth century ... as a defence against the incursion of economic rationality into more

broadly conceived ways of life, or against the domination of economic "value" over true social "worth".'

The politics of groups such as ICHRUSA affirm exactly such a rigid (and hostile) demarcation between sacred and profane – which, of course, still forms a kind of everyday doxa and remains influential even within much of sociological and anthropological discourse on religion from Durkheim onwards. Yet given the frequent practical criss-crossings or transgressions, such a rigid distinction is theoretically as well as empirically unsatisfying. While there are certainly traders in the market just out to 'make a quick buck', there are also eBay users – both buyers and sellers – who interpret their actions very differently, and reasonably so: as the expression of an honest appreciation for antiques and collectibles, the desire to bring neglected objects into circulation again in order to promote traditional forms of Catholic piety, or to rescue the same objects from oblivion.

While I am aware that some of my informants would disagree and are indeed openly critical of such practices – a position I have to respect –, it must also be pointed out that the contradicting assertions of others cannot simply be discounted as misguided or even malicious. If money is the antithesis to the sacred, as it is often affirmed, it must still be noted that real-life practices are multifaceted and tend to blur rigid distinctions and, what is more, that money and the sacred, in all their perceived incommensurability, operate and interact in ways that are as much mutually exclusive as they are mutually constitutive. In forming to halves of human experience and agency, they also form one whole.

VIII. Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate how a particular type of material object – relics, the physical remains of the saints – has continued to play a diminished, yet continuing and still developing role within the devotional practice of Catholicism.

As such, as objects, things, relics bring to our attention the material dimension of practices that are frequently, perhaps too frequently, framed in terms of belief and transcendence. The charge of fetishism is rarely far from the surface, and it is as often levelled by secular 'rationalists' as it is by members of the

Catholic clergy or the faithful. That this should be so highlights the still unresolved, maybe irresolvable, double bind between the desire for an ultimate reality that is conceptualized as immaterial and unmediated, and the embodied state of human beings. 'Yet, of course, fetishes have to be made. Human hands cannot stop toiling...' (Latour, 2002: 22). This is reflected, for example, in the negotiations and contestations of what constitutes authenticity in the case of relics: how much human toiling can a relic tolerate before it turns into a 'fake'? To argue over such questions is to argue over the boundaries of the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine, the immanent and the transcendent, subject and object, even though current anthropological theory on materiality may seek to undermine these dichotomies and transcend them. Commenting on this critical endeavour, Miller (2005) reminds us that anthropological practice must not avoid ethnographic empathy with the 'common sense' of our informants, and, indeed, for most of my informants these dichotomies are not only unquestionably 'there', but also of the utmost importance. On the other hand, the anthropologist cannot and, I believe, should not, sidestep his or her own engagement with the material at hand – not in order to 'explain the Other', a hazardous and presumptuous task, especially when it comes to magic and religion, two fields that in modern, Western anthropological discourse have always hovered close to a supposed 'irrationality' (Argyrou, 2002: chapter 4); but rather in order to engage with the issues it gives rise to, such as our own conceptions of sacred and profane as two distinct and opposed domains; the possibilities of human and non-human agency or social creativity; or the creation of value as well as values.

Relics, the boundaries they highlight and the arguments they throw up point at wider issues than 'merely the adherence to some old-fashioned custom or the indulgence of a nostalgic whim. They are a matter of tradition, and tradition, in the Catholic understanding of the term, means truth. The appreciation or condemnation of relics therefore signals differing understandings of what today's Catholic Church is, what it was, what it has become, how it got there, and what it should be in the future:

'My name is Jack. I am a *traditional* Catholic who loves the old things of the Church [...] This small group of collectors, myself included, not only helped to save these precious items, but more

importantly, allowed a younger generation to learn about them and what they represented.' (Jack, 2007: website; emphasis in the original).

As objects with cosmological significance – as contact points between heaven and earth – relics are also hedged by restrictions that curtail their circulation. They derive their significance from being anchored in a specific time and place and while they need to flow and mingle to do their work, it is important that certain relics stay where they are and that only certain people and under certain conditions may get hold of them. Such a concept, as Weiner (1992) showed, is the foundation of hierarchies and the exercise of authority. As the Catholic Church itself has partly abrogated these structures in its engagement with modernity, a significant share of its material, cultural, and devotional heritage has become unfastened. Technologies such as eBay have latched on to this free-floating 'debris', creating a curious and contradictory mix – combining the open, unrestricted and individual with the closed and hieratic, and the commercial with the sacred. The results have been controversial, but also pragmatic. eBay has become an arena where cultural anxieties over the failings of orthodoxy, the loss of memory, the construction of history, and the limits of agency and control can be worked out.

IX. Glossary

Authentic

A document drawn up by a competent ecclesiastic official that confirms the authenticity of a relic. Canon law requires that any relic destined for public veneration, i.e. put on display in a place of worship, must be accompanied by an authentic.

Brandeum (pl. brandea)

A piece of cloth, usually linen or silk, used to cover a relic, reliquary or saint's tomb. Through contact with the sacred object, the brandeum itself becomes a contact relic.

Cedula (pl. cedulae)

A small label made of paper or parchment, set inside a reliquary to identify the relic or relics contained therein.

Congregation for the Causes of Saints

The department of the Roman Curia that oversees the processes of canonization and beatification. Once the Congregation is satisfied that a case has fulfilled certain requirements, it presents the case to the pope with whom rests the ultimate decision to declare an individual a saint or blessed.

Lipsanoteca

The relic treasure of a church, monastery or similar institution.

Postulator General

The official in charge of pending processes of canonizations and beatifications, which he represents at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. It is his responsibility to gather the evidence for a candidate's holy life and to present that evidence in a prescribed form. He is usually a religious designated by his order as the chief official to supervise the cases of members of that order and any lay persons the order may choose to act for. He can appoint collaborators (referred to as simply 'postulators') for individual cases or specific geographical regions.

Theca (pl. thecae)

A small reliquary, a relic locket. Usually made of metal and of round or oval shape.

X. References

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