Christian Materiality

An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe

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Introduction

Nicholas of Cusa and the Hosts of Andechs

In 1451, the papal legate Nicholas of Cusa, sent to Germany to preach church reform, issued a decree at Halberstadt. That decree categorically rejected the supposedly miraculous objects that had proliferated in Germany over the previous seventy-five years. Cusanus stated:

> We have heard from many reliable men and also have ourselves seen how the faithful stream to many places in the area of our legation to adore the precious blood of Christ our God that they believe is present in several transformed red hosts [*quem in nonnullis transformatis hostijs speciem rubedinis habere arbitrantur*]. And it is clearly attested by their words, with which they name this colored thing [*talem rubedinem*] the blood of Christ, that they thus believe and adore it, and the clergy in their greed for money not only permit this but even encourage it through the publicizing of miracles.... [But] it is pernicious...and we cannot permit it without damage to God, for our catholic faith teaches us that the glorified body of Christ has glorified blood completely unseeable in glorified veins [*sanguinem glorificatum in venis glorificatis penitus inuisibilem*]. In order to remove every opportunity for the deception of simple folk, we therefore order that...the clergy...should no longer display or promulgate such miracles or allow pilgrim badges [*signa plumbea*] to be made of them.[1]

The decree was reissued in somewhat different versions at Mainz and Cologne. At Mainz, a reference to the veneration of bloody

cloths was included. Although specific sites were not mentioned, Cusanus probably had in mind the famous hosts of Wilsnack, which were visited by the English holy woman Margery Kempe on her continental pilgrimage, the popular bleeding-host site at Gottsbüren, and the miraculous altar linen at Walldürn, on which the face of Christ had allegedly appeared in drops of spilled Eucharistic wine.[2]

It is no surprise to specialists in the fifteenth century to find Nicholas of Cusa rejecting such holy objects as transformed wafers and blood-stained altar furnishings. A committed man of action who evolved from supporting councils to championing the papacy, always with the goal of effecting reform, Nicholas of Cusa devoted much of his life to efforts to improve the morals of both clergy and laity by stamping out venality, superstition, and mechanical religious practices. Yet he also produced a series of spiritual and contemplative writings, the earliest and best-known of which, *On Learned Ignorance*, argued that God is beyond the reach of human reason and that there is no proportion between finite and infinite. Christ's undestroyability, like God's unknowability, was increasingly a central theme of his Christology.[3] Although Nicholas, like all orthodox theologians, had to stress that Christ truly died in the Crucifixion, spilling salvific blood for humankind, he developed, in a series of complicated arguments, the claim that Christ's humanity was never divided or corrupted, even in the short period between the death on Calvary and the resurrection of Easter Sunday. Indeed that humanity served as a *manductio*, a leading back of all creation to God.[4] As our link to the God who lies beyond all categories and divisions, the human Christ was, to Cusanus, beyond any real dissolution. Never fragmented, he could not leave holy particles behind or appear again in even miraculous stuff on wafers, altar cloths, or wood.

In his reforming efforts against what were suspected to be fraudulent pilgrimages fueled by popular credulity and clerical greed, as in his negative theology, which strained sometimes

toward light, sometimes toward darkness, but always toward a God beyond human categories, Cusanus is sometimes taken as a paradigmatic fifteenth-century figure. Looked at from the perspectives I just elaborated, it is not unexpected to find that he fulminated against pilgrimages to holy stuff. Yet Cusanus was himself forced into contradiction. Called upon to pronounce on the supposed miracle hosts of Andechs, which some claimed to have been consecrated by the sixth-century pope Gregory the Great, Cusanus approved the pilgrimage.[5] Avoiding any reference to blood spots on the consecrated wafers (that is, to their metamorphosis), he based his approval on their incorruptibility (that is, their changelessness). Ever the politician, Cusanus perhaps acted to avoid offending the duke in whose region the pilgrimage took place. The duke was favorable to the reform agenda; both Cusanus and the pope he served needed ducal support.

But this somewhat curious and perhaps compromising incident is significant for two reasons quite different from the political situation it reveals. First, it shows that it was almost impossible for church leaders and theologians to avoid the issue of holy matter. The transformed statues, chalices, wafers, cloths, relics, and even mounds of earth to which the faithful made pilgrimage in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries presented a challenge that was theoretical as well as practical for a religion that held that the entire material world was created by and could therefore manifest God. Second—and ironically—Cusanus's approval of supposedly transformed objects rested on the claim to miraculous changelessness: the hosts' supposed resistance to the natural processes of decay and fragmentation. Issues of how matter behaved, both ordinarily and miraculously, when in contact with an infinitely powerful and ultimately unknowable God were key to devotion and theology. The God who lay beyond the world in unimaginable and unanalyzable darkness or light was also a God to whom human beings were led back by a human Christ—a Christ whose substance (in the Eucharist) and even whose particles (in blood relics) might be present on earth.

The chapters that follow are not an effort to smooth over the inconsistencies we see in Cusanus's actions and ideas or in those of his contemporaries. They are rather an exploration of one of the central contradictions of the later Middle Ages: the increasing prominence of holy matter in a religion also characterized by a need for human agency on the part of the faithful, a turn to interiority on the part of spiritual writers and reform-minded church leaders, and an upsurge of voluntarism, negative theology, and mysticism. In this extended essay on the period from circa 1100 to circa 1550, I stress one pole of this contradiction—a pole that, where noticed, has been misunderstood. I call this pole "Christian materiality."

I do not mean, by this phrase, to return our understanding of the later Middle Ages to old interpretations of the period as one of literalizing and mechanistic piety, a morbid fixation on death and hell, or a fascination with intimate and slightly embarrassing details of the holy family's domestic life. Nor do I adopt another conventional interpretation—one that sees reaction against such things as reform before the Reformation. I mean rather to take cult objects such as the Andechs hosts as only one type of holy matter in a piety characterized by intense awareness of the power of the material and to understand the theology, devotional writing, and natural philosophy such objects stimulated as a locus of some of the period's most profound religious exploration. In the paradox—we might even say the crisis—of holy matter lodged at the heart of late medieval religion, we may see seeds and foreshadowings of the coming reformations (Catholic and Protestant), but my point is not to interpret the period, as is so often done, with a view to what comes after. This book is intended to understand the period's own character by taking seriously aspects usually treated cursorily or with incomprehension and condescension.

It seems wise to begin by setting out explicitly two aspects of this study that may appear problematic to other scholars: the periodization I argue for and the understanding of "materiality" I employ.

The Periodization of Holy Matter

The early Middle Ages is frequently described by historians as a period in which people inhabited an animistic and insecure world.[6] Philosophical exploration of the laws of nature supposedly disappeared before what was at best encyclopedic collecting of bits of past learning. Chroniclers recounted rains of blood from the sky; extraordinary events such as comets and ordinary objects such as buckets and cabbages were taken to be messages from God or manipulations by demons; tales of miraculous vengeance by Christ and the saints proliferated.[7] Such descriptions have sometimes led to a view of early medieval piety as credulous, mechanistic, and materialistic, dominated in practice by the use of apotropaic objects and in theology by a confusion of the physical and the spiritual. In comparison with this, the later Middle Ages has been characterized in recent scholarship as moving toward inner piety and visuality.[8] A number of phenomena have been adduced in support of this interpretation. By the thirteenth century, for example, pilgrims tended to visit cult sites to offer thanksgiving after receiving visions rather than traveling to holy graves to make petitions.[9] Viewing the elevated Eucharist came, also in the thirteenth century, to substitute for physical reception of consecrated bread and wine.[10] By the fourteenth century, images sometimes replaced relics as conveyers of healing power.[11] A visionary and visual culture flourished, one in which revelations to women played a crucial role.[12]

Although there are elements of truth in this interpretation, one might argue that it puts things backwards. Matter was a more insistent and problematic locus of the sacred in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries than in the early medieval period. (The operative words here are "insistent" and "problematic.") Indeed the great popularity of enduring Eucharistic miracles such as the hosts of Andechs or the corporal at Walldürn—objects unheard of in early medieval culture—suggests that the piety of the later period might be characterized as a turn to, rather than away from, the object. To argue this is not to deny the complex ways in which

holy matter pointed its viewers and users to something beyond.[13] It was exactly the materialization of piety that created theological and disciplinary problems for the church, stimulating not only resistance from dissident groups but also intellectual creativity on their part and the part of their opponents. The striving for inwardness and for encounter beyond all word, thought, and representation that characterized such fifteenth-century theologians as Nicholas of Cusa was, in part, a response to the increasing prominence of holy objects. Holy matter was, as I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, both radical threat and radical opportunity in the later Middle Ages.

Of course, no historian would deny that physical objects were already central in the religion of late antiquity. As Peter Brown, Patrick Geary, Arnold Angenendt, Victor Saxer, Cynthia Hahn, and many other students of the early Middle Ages have stressed, saints' bodies and body parts and all sorts of materials that had touched them (water, cloth, earth, and so forth) were understood to contain and transport a power to heal or protect;[14] objects such as candles and herbs blessed by clergy or holy people were understood to convey power as well. Devotion to the cross, as to the crucified God-man, was central to early medieval spirituality; and cross relics, followed by other relics of the Crucifixion and of the saints, spread across Europe from the fourth century on. Recent scholarship, relying on dendrochronology, tends to give earlier dates than were assigned previously to beautiful and expressive visual objects such as those monumental German and Italian crucifixes of which the famous Gero crucifix from tenth-century Cologne used to be thought the earliest.[15] Already by the tenth century, craftsmen were creating vibrant three-dimensional sculptures, such as the Golden Madonna of Essen (see fig. 7, p. 55) or the St. Foy reliquary in Conques, that announced their power through the precious metals and jewels with which they were adorned (although such objects were still very expensive and very rare).

But living holy matter (animated statues; bleeding hosts, walls, and images; holy dust or cloth that itself mediated further

transformation) is mostly a later medieval phenomenon. It was the decades around 1100 that saw not only a new enthusiasm for some of the older forms of holy matter—an enthusiasm triggered partly by access to relics from the Holy Land made possible by the crusades—but also the appearance of new kinds of animated materiality. Although stories from the Byzantine church of bleeding images were told earlier, a vision received by Peter Damian in circa 1060 is usually considered the first case of a claim literally to drink blood from the crucifix.[16] As Giles Constable has shown, assertions that bodies were literally and miraculously branded with the cross appear in accounts of the first two crusades, although there are hints of such claims in the eleventh century.[17] The earliest cases of stigmata (the wounds of Christ appearing on the bodies of adherents, sometimes miraculous, sometimes self-induced) are late twelfth century and are often described and depicted as carvings or inscribings into the bodies of the devout, not by Christ but by the crucifix. Such claims proliferated in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.[18] Eucharistic visions are reported earlier, but references to transformed Eucharistic objects that endure (called by German scholars *Dauerwunder*) appear first in the late eleventh or twelfth century (and then only very occasionally), and documented pilgrimages to them are found mostly after the widely publicized Parisian miracle of 1290.[19]

It is in the later Middle Ages, moreover, that stories proliferate of relics animating or themselves undergoing metamorphosis. In Naples, the blood of St. Januarius (a supposed martyr of the early fourth century) has, since the later fourteenth century, been claimed to liquefy in early May and on the saint's feast day in mid-September; on one occasion it supposedly stopped an eruption of Mount Vesuvius.[20] Although stories of bread, herbs, water, and other material things that cure or convey power are found in early saints' lives, and some (for example, the oats blessed on Christmas Eve and thought to protect animals during the coming year) may have roots in folklore or pagan practices,[21] widespread references

to such things, and the rituals for blessing them, come mostly from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.[22] Most instances of animated images and paintings (at least in the West) come from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, and are often accounts of older objects (twelfth- or thirteenth-century) that change color, weep, bleed, or walk in order to rekindle devotion or protest neglect.[23] Despite the fact that images sometimes replaced relics in healing miracles, these images functioned in a way that suggests that they conveyed power as physical objects.[24] Hence, they are more analogous to the relics they replaced than to the visions they sometimes depicted. Even when it was a vision that provided the occasion for a new cult, the apparition tended to be materialized almost immediately into an object. Small physical reproductions of the miraculous event—prayer cards, badges, little silks, and so forth—became important, in part because they could be taken away and referred to in prayer long after pilgrimage to the site of the ephemeral revelation had been completed, but in part because they were felt to incorporate the event itself.[25] To take a well-known early modern example: the Virgin of Guadalupe in the New World *became* to many adherents the supposedly miraculous picture of her that appeared on the cloak of the peasant who received the apparition in 1531.[26]

In the period after 1100, new forms of devotional art—especially panel paintings and the devotional statues German historians call *Andachtsbilder*—burst onto the religious scene. Some of the most expressive and monumental devotional images, such as winged altarpieces, were creations of the fourteenth century, and it was in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that devotional figures with articulated arms and legs came to be featured as part of the liturgy. For example, a wooden figure of Christ was sometimes lifted by ropes into the rafters at the feast of the Ascension or laid in a sepulcher on Good Friday (fig. 1). Although gold and precious gems were employed earlier to adorn three-dimensional sculptures, new techniques and new materials made possible the proliferation of devotional objects,[27] and those who crafted

Figure 1. Painted wood sculpture of Christ in the sepulcher from the Cistercian convent of Lichtenthal, made in the middle of the fourteenth century. Such sculptures were often used to act out the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The fact that the feet and toes of the Christ figure are badly worn makes it likely that they were kissed in the liturgy. A host was perhaps placed in the figure's chest and buried with him in the grave on Good Friday. Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe, Inv.-Nr. V 12456 a-g. (Photo: Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe.)

them used the powerful and multivalent physical stuff of which they were made (vermilion paint, parchment, gold leaf, jewels, brocade, leather) to underline doctrinal points or induce spiritual reactions. The way in which such objects were constructed came to call attention to their materiality by means both obvious and subtle. Some images included *tituli* (texts inserted, often on banderols) that enjoined the worshiper to kiss them; others deployed their layers of presentation in such a way that the inner part of the object was three-dimensional, whereas the outer panels were flat, thus impelling viewers to experience greater tactility as they penetrated to deeper soteriological significance.[28] (See fig. 30, p. 96 for an example of such *tituli*, figs. 38, 13, and 14, pp. 133 and 68–69, for examples of three-dimensionality in the inner, feast-day opening of a winged altar.) Moreover, devotional objects themselves both inspired and reflected a proliferation of inner visions in which physical things were crucial. Hence visions, like iconography, became more "material" in their content.[29] Visionaries *saw* grace as a golden tube, Christ's veins as woven cloth; artists depicted the Eucharist as a winepress or grain mill. (See figs. 24 and 25, pp. 84–85.) Even the enigmatic Trinitarian God beyond knowing was evoked by the illuminator of the Rothschild Canticles as a bundle of textile or a starry wheel (fig. 2).[30]

At the same time, of course, image hating—and image bashing—increased. And it is significant that the visual objects attacked (usually three-dimensional statues and stained glass) were those that were most tactile, friable, and materially insistent. Spirited rejection of relics, sacramentals, and *Dauerwunder* also increased. Moreover, as we will see, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastics tended to naturalize the miraculous, employing various theories to rein in material and physiological transformations without denying them entirely. The very theologians and ecclesiastical authorities who castigated as heresy the denial of images or divinely transformed matter endeavored with equal fervor to theorize such objects as only triggers of devotional response, not visible instantiations of the divine. In praxis

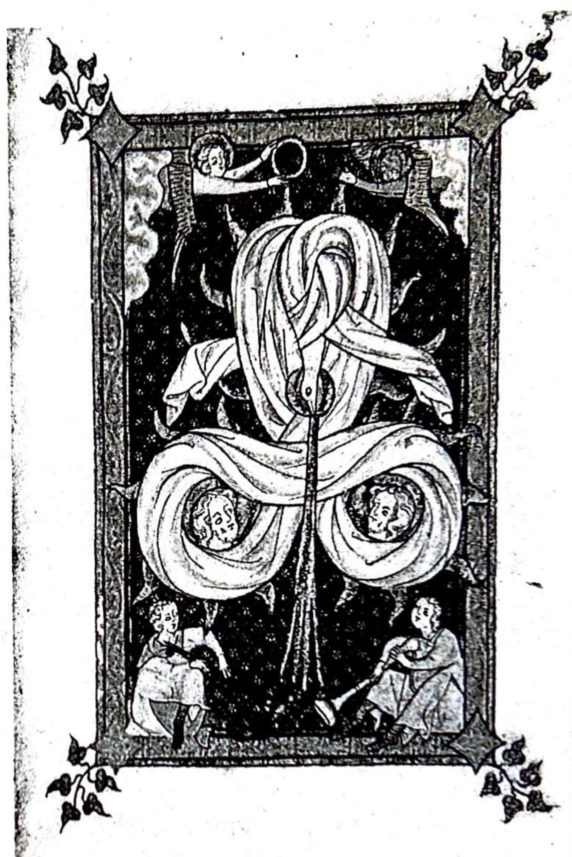
and theory (both philosophical and theological), material transformation was affirmed and denied—the subject of fascinated ambivalence.

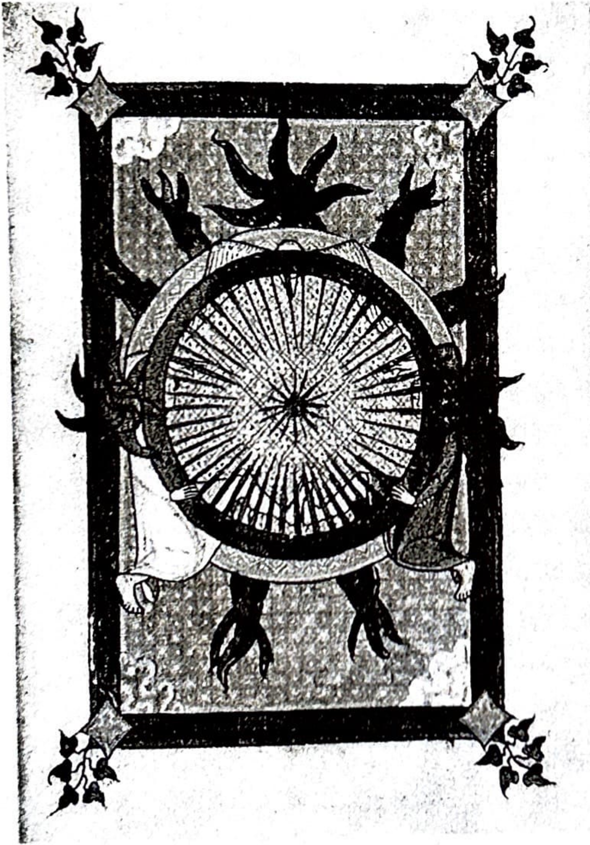
Throughout the Middle Ages, matter was defined—and explored—as the locus of change. Spontaneous generation fascinated, as did various sorts of action at a distance, such as the lunar pull on tides, and these phenomena tended to be theorized as the action of bodies on bodies. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even in learned circles, there was a growing sense that material objects were not merely labile but also alive. Even phenomena such as magnetism came to be conceptualized as animation. Skepticism concerning alchemy and astrology gave way to their enthusiastic embrace. Stories of werewolves and the metamorphoses caused by witchcraft came to be understood by some as literal rather than illusionary transformations. But, needless to say, these discussions carried with them increasing anxiety, disagreement, even an impulse to persecute. Behind both the enthusiasm for material change and the hostility to it lay a keen sense that matter is powerful, hence dangerous, because transformative and transformed.

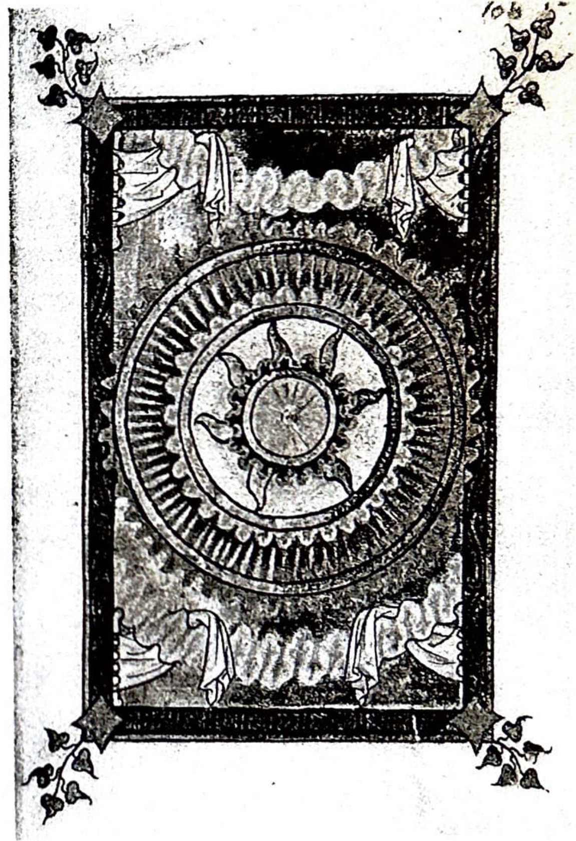
Materiality

It should by now be clear that what I mean by "holy matter" is complicated. I include relics (bones and body parts that generated and focused pilgrimage), contact and effluvial relics (material stuff such as cloth or dust that supposedly became holy through contact with Christ and the saints or their burial places or that erupted or oozed from holy bodies), sacramentals (objects such as bread or herbs that absorbed power through ritual blessing or through contact with other sacral objects), the material of the Eucharist and other sacraments (the bread and wine of the mass, the oil of anointing, the water of baptism), and *Dauerwunder* (miraçulous transformations that not only appear but also endure, thus becoming themselves foci of devotion). I also include the devotional images—statues, winged altarpieces, prayer cards,

Figure 2. Folios 84r, 104r and 106r of the Rothschild Canticles, New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, MS 404. Although the texts in this Trinitarian section of the prayer book emphasize the difficulty of seeing God, the Trinity is evoked in homey images of knotted cloth, fire, and wheels. On folio 84r, the three figures of the Godhead are caught up into a knotted cloth or veil, which signifies a hiding that nonetheless reveals. In the miniature on folio 104r, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit disappear into the circle of their Unity, yet toes, hands, and wing tips remain visible. In folio 106r, the Trinity as Unity whirls in a starry circle, and the veil is drawn back so that the soul of the worshiper can itself disappear into the glory. (Photo: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library.)







stained glass, and so forth—that proliferated in the later Middle Ages. It is in this context that I emphasize the widespread appearance of animated statues and wall paintings. And in Chapter 1, I relate such animation to their formal qualities of plasticity and tactility—aspects of medieval art that Michael Baxandall and Herbert Kessler, among others, have emphasized.[31]

The goal for the crafters of such things as pietàs, Books of Hours, and winged altarpieces was, I argue, not so much conjuring up or gesturing toward the unseen as manifesting power in the matter of the object. Medieval art was neither naturalistic nor illusionist. Unlike the painting of a Renaissance Madonna, for example, in which the artist concentrates on making the viewer see paint on canvas as fabric or skin and hence (among other things) admire his or her skill at creating illusion, a medieval image induces the viewer to notice that it is made from paint and wood or vellum and ink. But the stuff of which medieval images were made was not incidental to their form or simply functional, nor indeed was it only an iconography to be decoded. The viewer cannot avoid observing the particular materials employed (see fig. 6, p. 54), and these materials have multiple meanings, again both obvious and subtle. Some are, as current slang puts it, "in your face"; others need to be decoded. For example, the crystal on a reliquary was a window to look through, but it mattered that the window was crystal; it encased the bone within in the nondecayable quintessence of heaven. Thereby it not only made a statement about the status of its contents as already glorified, it also raised them to glory. (See fig. 19, p. 76.) Moreover, late medieval devotional images call attention to themselves not just as materials but also as specific physical objects. Depictions of Christ's body as a charter on which nails or a flail write in blood ink *are* what they depict when the charter is drawn on real skin—that is, parchment. (See fig. 28, p. 92.) This argument will become clearer in Chapters 1 and 3 when I discuss the visual rhetoric of parts and wholes. Here I point out simply that I am not so much making a general statement about how all objects "mean" or "perform" as

claiming that late medieval devotional objects speak or act their physicality in particularly intense ways that call attention to their per se "stuffness" and "thingness."[32]

Holy objects did not fall simply and easily into the categories I just listed: relic, contact relic, image, and so forth. Rather, they tended to be conflated.[33] Panel paintings and three-dimensional sculptures occasionally had relics inserted in them, or in the case of panel paintings, in their frames.[34] Hence, what modern art historians would call "iconography" or "image of" could become the thing itself. For example, in the Holy Cross chapel of Karlštejn Castle in Bohemia, rebuilt by Charles IV in the 1360s, the painting of Christ on Calvary between Mary and John has bits of the true cross, even of the thorns, lance, and sponge of the Crucifixion, embedded directly in it.[35] (See fig. 37, pp. 118–19.) Conversely, images and wafers that bled and oozed, changed colors, spoke, and moved by themselves—especially in cases where they produced stuff that could be preserved—became relics, asserting their transcendence (their more than ordinariness) exactly by asserting their materiality. Indeed, we often do not know whether late medieval monstrances contained relics, the Eucharist, or *Dauerwunder*, so similar was the treatment of these objects devotionally and liturgically. (See figs. 21 and 42, pp. 78 and 146.)

Despite the conflation of holy objects to which I have just pointed, it may appear that the term "materiality," as I employ it, is only a homonym. Neoplatonic theories of the soul of the universe or scientific understandings of the magnet may appear to have little to do with theological discussions of Eucharistic miracles or pilgrimage patterns. To relate, much less assimilate, a sophisticated playing with the stuff of depictions to a popular belief in living statues or bleeding wafers of the sort anthropologists and historians often call "animism" may appear simply a category confusion.[36] Such interpretations may even seem to return the culture of the later Middle Ages to the kind of literal freezing of symbol into object that Johan Huizinga is sometimes thought to have attributed to the period.[37] But despite my admiration for

Huizinga and my conviction that his arguments have been undervalued and often misunderstood, I am not returning to them. Nor am I arguing that all these "materialities" are the same thing or had the same trajectory or chronology. I am connecting, not equating, the tactility of art, the pervasive stress on all sorts of religious objects, a shift in natural-philosophical formulations, and the increase of miracles of material transformation. Nonetheless, I will suggest, by the end of this book, that there was a basic understanding of matter that underlay both medieval practices and the complicated, learned arguments that concerned relics, images, sacramentals, and *Dauerwunder.* In contrast to the modern tendency to draw sharp distinctions between animal, vegetable, and mineral or between animate and inanimate, the natural philosophers of the Middle Ages understood matter as the locus of generation and corruption. Although questions of the difference between living and nonliving and worries about decay and dissolution were common, the basic way of describing matter—the default language, so to speak, into which theorists tended to slip—was to see it as organic, fertile, and in some sense alive.

It therefore turns out to be significant that theorists employed parallel intellectual strategies to rein in very different sorts of holy things, arguing that—whether image or relic, bleeding host or bits of wax—such objects merely referred beyond themselves or triggered a power other than their own. Yet people, even dissidents who objected increasingly violently to relics, *Dauerwunder*, and images, did not behave as if such materiality merely gestured beyond itself. The forcefulness with which they fought it reflected fear of it. Moreover, the same theologians who theorized relics and images as pointing beyond themselves vehemently condemned those who denied their veneration. It was iconoclasm, not credulity or enthusiasm, that was characterized as "heresy." And the philosophers whose arguments in some cases naturalized transformation miracles displayed an understanding of physical change that made more probable exactly the sort of miraculous events they wished to rein in or deny. Medieval ideas of the

material and the sacred both restrict and unleash the power of matter. By the time I come to the theories of the intellectual elite in Chapter 4, I will argue that their conception of matter ties together attitudes toward physical objects as diverse as fear of their animation, on the one hand, and the sophistication of their deployment of materials, on the other.

Beyond "the Body"

Because my use of the term "materiality" may mislead, a brief cautionary note is necessary. Much recent work in Cultural Studies has focused on "the body," on "materiality and agency," and on "material culture."[38] But what I mean by "materiality" is not quite what these terms mean in any of their current denotations or theoretical implications. I am interested here not so much in what we can learn from archaeology or from chemical and dendrochronological analyses of medieval objects as in how they functioned and what they meant religiously. Moreover, I have not attempted to engage with technical work on the physical stuff of medieval art. Lying in the background of my argument are, of course, facts about late medieval society that made increased spending on church furnishings and private devotion possible; I am not unaware of how new pigments and woods made statues vivid in depiction and altarpieces easier to acquire.[39] But my study is not an exploration of the material conditions of production.

Nor am I addressing general questions of materiality in culture. Although my sense of the "agency" of objects does parallel, in certain ways, the insights of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Daniel Miller, and other social scientists,[40] I do not intend to contribute to universalizing theories about the power of things. Moreover, I do not here engage directly with art-historical scholars, such as Hans Belting and David Freedberg, who are interested in theorizing response.[41] Questions of how we talk about visual objects in the era before art,[42] theories about the agency of ordinary objects (from domestic aids to scientific equipment),[43] and the somewhat reductive investigations into the physiology of seeing currently

popular with some art historians have, of course, shaped the way I have pursued my topic.[44] But my argument is a historical one; it explores the cultural background to the emphasis on material objects found at a particular moment in Western Christianity. Despite my use of quotations from David Shulman and Lorraine Daston as epigraphs to evoke the sense of objects I am exploring in this book, my focus is not on cross-cultural comparison. Indeed, as my conclusion below will make clear, I intend the specificity of the late medieval situation to cast some doubt on generalizing that has been done by others.[45]

I am also not explicitly engaging recent work on the history of the body. I in fact find some of it problematic insofar as it has tended to substitute the term "body" for "human individual" or "person."[46] In this study, I am interested in bodily metamorphoses (for example, stigmata), especially where they parallel transformations in other sorts of matter—in bleeding hands that are analogous to bleeding wood and bleeding bread. But as I have made clear in earlier work, I do not equate person with body.[47] What I wish to do here is not so much to explore body as a crucial part of psychosomatic self or person—a topic about which I have written before—as to move beyond study of "the body" to study of matter itself.

In what follows, I explore medieval understandings of cult and praxis by resituating understandings of body (*corpus*) where medieval theorists themselves located such understandings—in conceptions of matter (*materia*). As we will see in Chapter 4, medieval theorists, following Aristotle, Isidore, and the entire natural-philosophical tradition, understood "body" to mean "changeable thing": gem, tree, log, or cadaver, as well as living human being. Understood in medieval terms, to explore "the body" was to explore stars and statues, blood and resin, as well as pain, perception, and survival. The materiality I study here includes human bodies, but body is in no way the equivalent of—although it is integral to—what we call "self."[48] Resituating body in matter, however, helps us to a far more complex understanding

of how medieval persons responded to other persons and the world of which they were a part.

A second point is related to this. Much sensitive recent work on medieval images and objects—on devotional art, on relics, on miracles—locates the physicality so central to medieval Christianity in the doctrine of the Incarnation: the teaching that God came into a human person (that is, an entity whose individuality and identity is constituted by soul and body) with the birth of Christ.[49] This is not wrong. The Byzantine defense of icons at the time of the iconoclastic controversy (725–842) was related to defenses of Christ as fully human—as incarnate God. Later Western defenses of Eucharistic visions and wonders, like defenses of relics of the Crucifixion (above all blood relics), were statements of the full humanity of Christ and of the accessibility of that humanity. But more was at stake than the doctrine of the Incarnation. As we will see throughout the chapters that follow, the support for and criticism of such accessibility through the physical stuff of panel paintings, bones, and consecrated bread was an exploration of the nature of matter—a question, that is, of ontology as well as of Christology. Jean-Claude Schmitt and André Vauchez are right that the presence of so many physical objects in late medieval religion was a "logical working out" of the doctrine of the Incarnation, just as Euan Cameron is right that late medieval religion can be considered an overbalancing of devotion onto objects and saintly presences and hence onto the humanity rather than the transcendence of Christ.[50] But in the later Middle Ages, the expression of and reaction to Christ's humanity, even his bodiliness, were part of a larger religious discourse about the material itself and how it might manifest or embody God. If Christ took all his bodily particles into heaven—so some theologians argued—we ordinary humans can hope for similar reassemblage in resurrection. If he left particles behind—others argued—we might gain grace through those particles.[51] Exactly how God acts through matter was a disputed question long after the belief that Christ was both God and man (man being understood as a psychosomatic unity) was established as dogma.

Matter as Paradox

My argument proceeds in steps. After establishing in Chapter 1 the materiality of late medieval devotional objects and placing this in contrast to theological discussions that seemed to reduce them to merely gesturing toward the divine, I move in Chapter 2 to consider other forms of holy matter and suggest that much contemporary theory tended to reduce their role also to pointing beyond or deriving from the material (usually via clerical consecration, which implied clerical control). According to such theorists, sacramentals were only signs of God's grace or expressions of pious hopes for blessing; relics were mementos of the saints; bleeding hosts were special effects created to reward faith or banish doubt. Yet there was a contradiction. Formulae for blessing objects such as water and bread suggest that power lies *in* them. People behaved as if relics were the saints. The Eucharist itself *was* Christ. And many understood *Dauerwunder* to be the body and blood of Christ in a more immediate sense even than the Eucharist. In Chapter 3, I then move to demonstrate the complicated understanding of holy matter such a contradiction involved by considering medieval attitudes toward part and whole, both in praxis and in theology.

In Chapter 4, I consider theoretical (natural-philosophical as well as theological) discussions of matter itself. In a world where alchemical change, the possibility of human/animal metamorphosis, spontaneous generation, and manipulation of matter by magic and witchcraft were increasingly topics of fierce debate among intellectuals, matter itself was under interrogation. I argue here that understandings of matter themselves focused on both controlling and unleashing its power.

In the Conclusion, I turn to a larger context for my argument, especially its implications for comparative study. I also consider paradox as a basic interpretive principle. Here, I argue that paradox lies at the heart of late medieval Christianity. And paradox, I suggest, is not dialectical. Paradox is the simultaneous assertion (not the reconciliation) of opposites.[52] Because of the paradox not

just of Christ's Incarnation (God in the human) but also of divine creation (God's presence in all that is infinitely distant from him), matter was that which both threatened and offered salvation. It threatened salvation because it was that which changed. But it was also the place of salvation, and it manifested this exactly through the capacity for change implanted in it. When wood or wafer bled, matter showed itself as transcending, exactly by expressing, its own materiality. It manifested enduring life (continuity, existence) in death (discontinuity, rupture, change). Miraculous matter was simultaneously—hence paradoxically—the changeable stuff of not-God and the locus of a God revealed.

The materiality of art with which I begin thus brings us full circle. Images encapsulate the paradox I try, in these chapters, to explore. When they insistently display—and even comment on—their own materiality, they show that they are matter. In other words, they show that they are not God. But matter is God's creation—that through and in which he acts. Matter is powerful. In their insistent materiality, images thus do more than comment on, refer to, provide signs of, or gesture toward the divine. They lift matter toward God and reveal God through matter. Hence, it is hardly surprising that they call attention to the material through which they achieve their effects rather than merely using it to create the illusion of something else. Nor is it surprising that they frighten, empower, or console, sometimes even speaking, bleeding, or weeping—in other words, that they disclose, not merely signify, a power that lies beyond.

My purpose in this book is not to minimize the central importance of Christ's Incarnation in Christian theology. Indeed, insofar as creation is, to some medieval theologians and mystics, summed up in Christ, my interpretation should enhance our understanding of medieval theories of the Incarnation.[53] Nor is it my purpose to deny aspects of the later Middle Ages other than materiality or to relate the significance of holy objects only to ideas of matter. Rather, I hope to redress the balance of recent scholarship by calling attention to a characteristic of the period

that is often reductively understood as superstition or exteriorized devotion and to embed that aspect in a broader context than is usually recognized.[54] Doing so may tell us something about the place of materiality in the *longue durée* of Western history and perhaps even stimulate us to think more deeply about the problematic nature of matter—the stuff and condition of human existence medieval theorists struggled with such sophistication to understand.