Hermits and the powers of the frontier

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The study of men and women who adopted the secluded life of either a hermit or anchorite in England during the middle ages is still dominated by the work of Rotha Mary Clay whose book, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* appeared in 1914. She was a pioneer who showed mastery of the sources and skill in discussion which have not yet been equalled over the whole range of the pheonomena which she examined. For the rest of her long life she continued to amass evidence, but although she published two significant supplementary articles, in 1953 and 1955, she never completed work on a second edition of her book, and to a large extent the whole subject remained rather on the fringes of scholarly discussion of religious history.[1] It is interesting, for example, to note how rarely hermits featured in Knowles' *Monastic Order*, although in footnotes he pointed to the great interest of the Lives of Godric and Christina.[2] English hermits scarcely featured either in general histories of the period, despite the fact that Henri Pirenne's reference to Godric in *Medieval Cities* made him known to a wide European audience as early as 1925.[3]

Since Clay wrote her book, three major sources have appeared in scholarly editions, namely the Lives of Wulfric of Haslebury by John of Forde, edited by Dom Maurice Bell (1933), of Robert of Knaresborough, edited by the great Bollandist Père Grosjean (1939), and of Christina of Markyate by a monk of St Albans, edited by C.H. Talbot (1959).[4] Undoubtedly the last of these has had greatest impact, since it made available, after painstaking labour with ultra-violet light, a fascinating text, which had lain until then almost unknown in one of the Cottonian manuscripts damaged by fire, Tiberius E.I. Talbot also opened this Life to a world whose knowledge of Latin

might be weak, by providing it with a readable translation into English, whereas neither of the two other 'new' Lives have yet been so assisted. For this reason, as well as the intrinsic interest of the text, particularly for the growing band of historians concerned with the history of women, his achievement has had by far the largest influence on the development of the subject since 1914.

Things are now changing fast. Three years after *Christina* first appeared, Dom Hubert Dauphin surveyed the English evidence for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in a notable paper given at the conference held at La Mendola in 1962 on the theme *L'Eremetismo in Occidente nei secoli XI e XII*.[5] The next important discussion appeared in 1975 when Henry Mayr-Harting looked at the experience of Wulfric and Godric with eyes widened by ideas developed by Peter Brown when discussing holy men in the late antique period in a seminal paper published four years before in 1971.[6] Since then the female side of the movement has received two very substantial discussions in books by American scholars, Ann K. Warren and Sharon K. Elkins, whose *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* and *Holy Women in Twelfth-Century England* were published in 1985 and 1988 respectively.[7] The latter, very interestingly, looks at women following a religious life in communities as well as in much smaller groups, but it will readily be seen from their titles that no one, so far has reopened the whole field pioneered by Clay.

The aim of this paper must be more modest; it is to reconsider the known Lives of hermits and recluses in twelfth century England, and to do so in a particular way. I, like Dr Mayr-Harting, have been much influenced by Peter Brown, whose paper I had the good fortune to hear at one of the late Arnaldo Momigliano's seminars in London. My title hints at another debt, to Victor Turner's discussion of liminality, which one might translate as living on a frontier, in his book *The Ritual Process*.[8] Here, I would suggest, is a concept with which we can better understand the character of the power exercised by these individuals in this period. I also wanted to explore one of the ideas put forward by Leopold Génicot in another of the papers presented at La Mendola in 1962.[9] There he argued that there were no links between the flowering of the eremitic movement in Europe and changes in wider society, although he admitted that what he called the 'slide to cenobitism' was linked to the economy. These seemed interestingly contradictory conclusions which ought to be examined

in an insular context, which, writing in 1962, he had excluded from consideration.

First, a brief word on the sources and chronology. Very little is known about most 'solitaries'; there was, alas, no Palladius or Theodoret at work in twelfth-century England (though one might hazard a guess that if Goscelin of Saint-Bertin had lived then, rather than a century earlier, he might have filled the role). For most individuals, therefore, we have little beyond a personal name here, or a mention of a hermitage there. Nonetheless it was possible for Ann Warren to list eighty-three places where there were anchorites during this century, and for Dauphin to conclude that England seems to have had more followers of the eremitic life than any other European country, with the one exception of Italy.[10] My attention will be directed, however, not at that wider evidence, but at that contained in six *Vitae* of Henry of Coquet (died 1120), Wulfric of Haselbury (1155), Christina of Markyate (1155/66), Godric of Finchale (1170), Bartholomew of Farne (1193), and Robert of Knaresborough (1218).[11] With the one exception of Henry of Coquet, all their Lives were written within at most thirty years of their deaths, that is to say relatively close to events.[12]

This presents us with what seems to me an interesting contrast to six Lives, mainly relating to people who had lived between the Rhine and the Loire in the same period, which were analysed by Milis in 1979.[13] He showed that only four of them were written between seven and fifty-four years of their subjects' death. We can also note that all of his lives were the work of authors who lived in communities which had grown up around places where those hermits had lived. Among the English Lives this is probably only true for the Life of Robert of Knaresborough, although four of the six Lives are by men who belonged to monasteries which had some oversight of the life of the hermit/recluse during their lifetime: the other remaining Life, that of Wulfric, comes from a cistercian house which had links with him during his lifetime, but which had no responsibility for him.[14]

I am not sure how significant this contrast with Milis's group is; it may have lessened the degree to which the writers were concerned to inflate the status of the person about whom they were writing as a way of increasing the fame of their monastery, but it certainly remains true that these Lives, like those studied by Milis, are known to us because people believed that the lives of the individuals concerned showed that they were inspired by God, who had

demonstrated their holiness by works of power.

I believe that it is also significant that all of the English group, with the exception of the last, Robert, died before 1200, and that most of their eremitic experience occurred between the last years of the reign of Henry I and the first half of the reign of his grandson, Henry II, i.e. between about 1115 and 1170.[15] Small as is this total number of *Vitae* relative to the total number of hermits and recluses that probably existed, I think one may also say that for no other period in English history did such people attract hagiographers to popularise their cults, a point to which I shall return towards the end of this paper.

There are, of course, dangers in arguments derived from the absence of evidence, but a more subtle problem arises from the fact that the *Vitae* were composed by men who had literary models and historical precedents in mind. How much weight, for example, may one put on an author who comments that three of Bartholomew of Farne's miracles paralleled miracles of St Cuthbert, St Benedict and Godric of Finchale?[16] To what degree had the earlier records shaped his telling of the story? This is a problem which needs much longer treatment than I can give it here but it deserves two brief comments now. In the first place we are not entirely dependent upon the *Vitae* for our knowledge that these people did have influence; there are other sources, notably charters which throw some light upon the communities which grew around most of them.[17] Secondly, we may surely believe that there is *some* significance in every story attributed to an individual, and that even if there were precedents well-known to those who wrote the Lives, the very fact that they partly delineated their subject in earlier colours may point us towards understanding what role it was that they thought their own holy person filled.[18]

One feature which quickly leaps to the eye in the *Vitae* is that the people with whom they are concerned come from one section of the society of their day, the Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian part of it. Henry of Coquet apart, who was a native of Denmark, the rest are all said to have come, or we can deduce that they came, from the non-Norman part of the population. Godric's parents were called Ailward and Aedwen, Christina's father Autti (whereas her mother's name was Beatrice which sounds 'French'), Bartholomew was originally called Tostig, which made his young friends laugh, Robert, a York man, had parents called Toki and Sunniva, whereas of Wulfric we are told that he came from middling English stock.[19] None of them, that is to

say, haled from the upper drawer of society, although Christina and Robert came from reasonably affluent urban backgrounds.[20] This characteristic seems to have been shared by many of those hermits of whom we know little more than their names; for example, four of the eight hermits in Christina's Life have Anglo-Saxon names, whilst further north we may note the hermit Seleth who was persuaded to become a cistercian by the first abbot of Kirkstall.[21] At first sight it is perhaps scarcely surprising that most hermits came from the largest section of the population, but as we look closer at what these people did, their nationality takes on a more interesting perspective.

The special interaction of the hermit or recluse with other people was expressed in four ways: through counsel, cursing, healing and prophecy. The first head, counsel, included far more than one would expect to receive from a counsellor today since the hermit might hear confessions and relieve the tensions felt by the penitent, whilst this advice might well appear to those who heard it to be based on knowledge which could only have come to them through supernatural means. Henry of Coquet, for example, confronted a monk visitor with the fact that he had been drunk in such a place and at such a time which had the effect of startling him into a full confession.[22] Nowadays counsellors are trained not to give advice, but things were otherwise then. In addition those who sought guidance were often aware that the holy person was in touch with, if not always in control of, alarming powers which could be expressed in a curse.

Perhaps in comparison with the Syrians of late antiquity or the Irish of the ninth to eleventh centuries, English hermits in the twelfth century were not notable cursers, but this side of their activity is worth a closer look since it expresses most dramatically the character of the forces which they were felt to manipulate.[23] Let us look for a moment at three curses uttered by Wulfric which are full of resonance.[24]

The first concerns the cellarer of Montacute, a monastery near his cell which had become accustomed to provide him with some regular provisions. After a time the monks there began apparently to feel less warmly towards their neighbour, and so the cellarer began to treat the boy who came over to fetch the dole badly, often sending him home empty-handed. One day this same man went to visit Wulfric who welcomed him warmly and invited him for a meal. As the cellarer got up to go, the anchorite suddenly pointed out that he had been behaving in an unfriendly fashion and called upon God to judge

between the two of them. Next time the boy went for supplies, he was sent away with nothing save for 'blasphemies and curses', and when Wulfric heard of this he burst out 'May God today remove his sustenance from the man who took my sustenance away.' That very day, the cellarer drowned, but when this news reached Wulfric although he expressed some guilt, he explained to his friends that he couldn't help himself from speaking as he had. The force of even his casual word is revealed in the story of how he cursed a mouse which had damaged a new cap which he had been given. At once the mouse rushed right out of its hole, up to the anchorite's feet, where it died. The writer comments: 'So great was the violence of the word which fell from his lip accidently and carelessly (transitorie et negligenter) and not on purpose, that even the mouse as though conscious of its guilt hastened to submit itself to sentence of death and by his death to give glory to God and peace to God's saint.' Which of us would not like to be able to dispose of mice so fast?

The third example concerns what we may call the curse at a distance. One of the courtiers of Henry I was struck with some form of paralysis after he had called Wulfric (who was far away in Somerset) a charlatan, suggesting that the king would do well to have his cell searched for ill-gotten money. The scene must have been startling, and John of Forde probably does not overstate the case when he says that those who hastened round the stricken man took his condition as a sign that Wulfric was indeed one of God's holy men whom he would protect with his hand. Among contemporary hermits and recluses Wulfric stands out by the force of his curse, but there are striking incidents involving the power of a holy person's illwish in the lives of Bartholomew, Godric and Robert.[25] Even of the less aggressive Christina was it said that those who molested her were requited by Christ with illness or punishment, blindness, or dying without the healing medicine of the sacraments.[26]

Peter Brown suggested in his fine study that 'in the majority of cases, the exercise of the curse points backwards to the position of the holy man as arbitrator and mediator'.[27] This seems not quite so clear in the twelfth century, where the curse seems to serve as a peculiarly virulent demonstration of the hermit's power, although of Godric at least it was recorded that he used his power to influence the outcome of two trials by battle. Here the holy man intervened in a kind of test in which God himself was supposed to affect the outcome.[28]

In addition, the same sense comes across from the twelfth century

as from the much earlier period that the holy man's power was rooted in a particular place where it evoked enormous loyalty. No doubt the power felt to inhere in the hermit grew as local people found that he could meet their needs, and their loyalty increased as he lived on among them. The relatively long periods for which all these people dwelt in one place is surely significant; for none of them was it less than twenty years, and for most probably over thirty.[29] So it is said of Godric that whereas early in his life he was often aware of what was going on, particularly at sea, for the last ten years of his life he knew all that was happening within a radius of ten miles from his cell.[30] To us it hardly seems remarkable that one who had been a sailor should be able to deduce from the movement of the clouds whether storms were brewing up not far away in the North Sea. We can also 'read' the way that by his old age all the news of the area reached his cell and the small community that had by then grown up around it, without having to have recourse to the miraculous for an explanation. The author of the *Ancrene Riwle* would almost certainly have reacted in a very down-to-earth way if he had heard of this side of Godric's life, since he reported the saying 'From mill and from market, from smithy and from anchor-house one hears the news.' I am reminded, too, of the way that the old village post office, or general store, served as a 'listening post' for often quite startlingly intimate happenings in the locality. With Wulfric too this feeling of local power comes across very strongly as when we are told, for example, that monks from the cistercian monastery of Forde did not feel it safe to pass by Wulfric's cell without visiting him.[31]

The more benign signs of the hermit's power do not need perhaps so much discussion, particularly healing which has been so well discussed by Ronald Finucane.[32] We may note, however, that it was often achieved through the use of placebos, as it often has been, and that probably many of those who claimed that they had been cured had experienced little more than a spontaneous cure, or remission, of their condition which would have occurred without the holy person's intervention. Nonetheless we find Wulfric sending the sick bread, or water, which he had blessed, Godric dispatched apples as well, and they also conveyed healing by the imposition of hands and by making the sign of the cross, whilst Wulfric acted as exorcist where he believed that possession by the devil was involved.[33] There are some indications that in this last category the procedure acted as a dramatisation of the sick person's mental state, enabling the sufferer

to come to terms with what had gone wrong and to take a decisive move in a new direction. This comes across clearly in the case of a man who had been tempted by avarice and ambition to the point where he thought that he had made a pact with the devil. For a time things went extremely well for him so that he amassed money, but finally he became alarmed and wanted a different kind of life and set off to find help from Wulfric. Arriving at the ford in the river outside his village, the man became stuck, unable to go either forward or back, but Wulfric's friend, a priest, was able to release him with holy water and the sign of the cross. Then at Wulfric's cell a second scene, a tug-of-war with the doubtful man followed by reception of the Eucharist, completed his cure. The man seems to have been a soldier adventurer, one who might well feel some doubts about his way of life, however profitable, whilst the methods used enabled him to work out his sense of impotence, to be overcome and incorporated back into the community.

Prophecy, another generally benign act, was a very marked sign of the hermit's power, involving him or her in prognostications about their own future, typically about the date of death and the struggle which would ensue for possession of their body afterwards (a nice form of self-advertisement), as well as about the death of others.[34] Clairvoyance can for the present be linked with prophecy, and like it must sometimes have caused alarm, as when, for example, Christina claimed to know exactly what her sister and brother-in-law had been saying whilst lying in bed at Huntingdon miles away from her at Markyate.[35] Wulfric and Godric were both notable prophets letting fall forecasts of the fate of the insignificant as well as of the great.[36] When Henry I took it ill that Wulfric prophesied that he would not return alive from his next visit to Normandy, and sent to know from Wulfric whether this was indeed what he had said, he responded, 'If I did say it, I am not sorry because I did not speak it of my own volition.'[37] No doubt it was prudent for him not to be seen to wish for the king's death, but we may also realise that his comment betrays the sense that when he spoke prophetically, as when he cursed, he was being controlled by another power.

Yet how had the hermit or recluse, according to the *Vitae*, come to be open to this power which endowed him or her with such remarkable gifts? The answer is clear, they had won through to it through struggle with the devil, by prayer and by their whole austere, hidden life. Admittedly the idea of the Christian life as a battle against

principalities and powers and all the works of darkness has firm Biblical basis (e.g. Ephesians 6.10-17), and a long tradition of hagiography and exhortation since the earliest days, which must have influenced both the hermits and those who wrote about them, but the appositeness of some of the symbolic practices which they adopted to the actual problems of their day is also inescapable. So when Godric, for example, is called the unconquered knight of Christ, or is said to have fought a duel with the devil, or when he and Wulfric (like many of their contemporaries on the mainland of Europe) equipped themselves with hauberks, those shirts of chain mail which were such a crucial part of the equipment of a knight, and which they wore for years on end, the accessibility of the meaning of their acts and the record of them to their compatriots and readers is obvious and not a mere repeating of old forms.[38] Just as the knight fought serious enemies in the world, the hermit strove in his hidden cell against the devil, who might take many forms, and when he won he had access to power.[39]

The individual who had withdrawn from his world had also battered down the gates of heaven through prayer. Christina, taught by the old monk Roger through word and example, gave herself earnestly to contemplation and prayer at night, whilst of Wulfric it was said that he built himself 'an interior solitude' in which he sought to draw on the strength of the Holy Spirit.[40] The words may be a conscious echo of Anthony's move to the inner mountain recorded by Athanasius, but they reflected also his actual situation. Not surprisingly the *Vitae* portray the hermit or recluse experiencing strange visions whilst at prayer, which brought them, either an assurance that their way of life had the special interest of the Virgin, Christ, or a saint, or a revelation of something happening beyond the confines of their normal sight, for example the death of a holy person elsewhere.[41]

Just as the hermit was one unsatisfied with second-hand experience of the powers of God, or of the devil, so he was one who lived, partly at least from the fruit of his own labours and not from the work of others. Godric was a powerfully built man who made the countryside ring with the sound of him clearing woodland through the night as he made himself a garden.[42] Bartholomew and Robert likewise raised some crops, whilst Christina and Wulfric, confined as they were within cells, did less energetic work, like embroidery and book-production.[43] Admittedly, they might come to receive gifts in money or kind, or even land, as time went on, but a fairly clear message of

the *Vitae* is that they did not intend to be a burden upon the local community. The information is not always as conclusive on this, as on many points, as we would like because the writers upon whom we have to depend were not primarily interested in describing lives in strictly chronological order. But of Godric we are clearly told that in his early days he would accept nothing from locals, and whatever they did bring him he took to an open spot where he commended both gift and giver to God. We may observe, however, that at what seems a later stage of his life a woman from Richmond thought it advisable to bring a bull (perhaps we should translate *taurus* here bull-calf, rather than a grown animal) when she wished to consult him.[44] This caused Godric to direct her to lead it on to the priory in Durham since he had no need of it, and also to explain to her that no-one who approached him 'simplici animo', with a pure heart, had to bring anything with them. The reputation which he, and other hermits, seem to have built up as people who needed 'their palms crossing with silver', to use words traditionally applied to gypsy fortune-tellers, comes across in the occasional criticisms contained in the Lives. Wulfric, as we have seen, was thought to have laid his hands on a lot of money, Godric, again, was accused of being a fat peasant, whilst some claimed that Christina was a good business-woman, or as her biographer put it 'they attributed to earthly prudence ... what was a gift of God.'[45]

There was nothing second-hand either about the austerities of food and drink, clothing and bedding which these people adopted. They pushed themselves to the edge of endurance in their quest of a form of martyrdom appropriate to an age in which Christians, as long as they had orthodox beliefs, were unlikely to be persecuted. One can scarcely forebear to comment that despite these austerities, most of them survived far longer than the ordinary person in their day. Godric lived to be a centenarian, Christina into her sixties, Bartholomew probably survived to his seventies, and whilst it is not possible to calculate the births of Wulfric or Robert, the one spent about thirty, the other twenty, years as a solitary.[46]

Such austerities, however, placed these people on one margin, or edge, of their world, and this leads me next to enquire whether there are any other senses in which they lived on a frontier, and if so whether this may have any connection with the power which they were thought to tap. I suggest that we may recognise that the hermit or recluse lived on at least three frontiers; geographical, social and temporal. They sought a home retired from the world, they sat loose

young girl by her beauty and breeding.[50] Christina literally fled her parents and had to keep her whereabouts unknown to them because they wished to see the marriage which they had forced her to contract, consummated.[51] No doubt marriage in the twelfth century was no bed of roses - the author of Hali Meiðhad wrote peculiarly vividly of its sordid side - but be that as it may, the rejection of marriage and the raising of a family which all the hermits made must have seemed to their contemporaries as a clear refusal to live within the normal conventions of family responsibility.[52] The struggle with unchaste thoughts which afflicted most of them, besides having a basis in their denial of physical and psychological needs, may have gained an edge from their denial of a social role. On the other hand, as we have seen, hermits were careful to support themselves and not to enter into relationships with those among whom, or near to whom, they had settled which might involve them in any sense of obligation. Godric's rejection of the presents, and peculiarly those of food, cut right at the roots of the way in which fellowship would most naturally have been expressed.[53] Wulfric, for his part, treated it as a joke when the priest who had helped him for many years complained that the hermit's power had never done anything good for him.[54] His complaint was strong because he knew no French and so felt a fool when the bishop and archdeacon were in his vicinity, since he could not speak to them, whereas Wulfric had restored speech to a dumb man not only in English, but also in French.

On the other hand one must recognise that hermits could not cut so free from the bond created between themselves and the men whose land they settled upon, or by whose church they had their cell. Wulfric, for instance, knew well the man who sent him to become an anchorite at Haselbury, he had lived in his house for some years, and once in his cell was often visited by him. But he established his independence from him by small, but meaningful ways. He rebuked, for example, William fitz Walter's lack of faith in his powers, having previously kept him waiting before opening his window to speak to him, or informed him that his new religious foundation, doubtless the pride and joy of his heart, would fail.[55] Similar incidents can be found in the relations between other recluses and hermits and their 'patrons'; Christina and the abbots of St Albans, Robert and William de Stuteville, Godric and the prior of Durham.[56] In Godric's case he was described as 'colonus Dei', the slave or serf of God, and in a vision he was assured that the Virgin had taken him under her protection, that

she had become his lady.[57] If chastity may be seen to have been the distinctive virtue by which the hermit expressed his freedom from the ties of kin and family, his humility may be singled out as the virtue which expressed his contempt for the lordship of the world. Self-forgetfulness, trust only in powers of the God to whom he or she prayed, these demonstrated freedom from the pride and glory of those who were great in the land. Mayr-Harting drew attention, too, to Wulfric's 'simplicitas' which gave him the freedom and magnificence to give orders to a bishop or criticise a saint. His avoidance of the use of formal titles was, according to the Vita, 'either by design (judicio) or simplicity.'[58]

It was partly because the hermit had rejected involvement with the normal bonds of human society that he seems to have become unaware of the usual barriers dividing men from their animal neighbours. This does not appear to have happened to the same extent with the recluses, not surprisingly since they had little contact with animals, except small intruders into their cells like mice or toads. For Godric, Bartholomew and Robert, on the other hand, there are striking stories which illustrate their openness to animals, enabling them, for example, to control their depredations on hard-created gardens, or indeed to use them to extend the area under cultivation.[59] One is reminded here of the spirit of Isaiah's vision of the holy mountain upon which all animals and humans would dwell in amity, and also of the widely attested experience of those who break loose from human company, that communication seems to open up with the rest of creation.[60]

The third frontier on which both hermit and recluse dwelt is perhaps the most potent, since death for most people most of the time, has a fearful rather than a loving face. The idea of the eremitic life as a living burial is clearly expressed in the surviving liturgies to mark inclusion, and in the surviving works of spiritual direction written for recluses.[61] The *Vitae* of Wulfric and Christina convey the message too, although those devoted to the four hermits put this message less directly.[62] After all, the hermit was not so enclosed, he could move around beyond the confines of his cell, but it remains true that he thought of his way of life as a death. Choice of sleeping quarters and unconcern about vermin seem to me particularly significant. Godric and Robert normally slept on the ground with a stone to support their heads, Bartholomew stretched himself out on a cross of wooden beams for the first four years of his isolation, whilst

Godric is said to have suffered gladly the vermin which infested his hair shirt.[63] Altogether their 'shaggy' appearance would seem to have been another expression of what Mary Douglas has termed 'social peripherality', another way of putting liminality.[64] Often Godric left his food until it was mouldy and he ate bread in which the grain had been mixed with cinders.[65] We know, of course, that such practices were very old by the twelfth century, they were not new, but they surely served to emphasise to the hermit, and to those who observed him, that he had made himself a person whose whole way of life symbolised his walk with death.

At this point I believe that it is interesting to bring our consideration of the'frontier' situation of the hermit explicitly into contact with Professor Turner's concept of liminality. This arose out of study of *rites de passage*, those rituals which accompany change of place, status, social position and age. The liminal phase of these ceremonies occurs when the neophyte is in an ambiguous position between the condition he was in at the start, or will be at the end of the ceremony.[66] Turner has identified certain characteristics of the symbols widely used to describe the condition of a person in the liminal phase, parts of which at once raise echoes of the eremitic life. His state is 'likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun and moon.'[67] His description of those in the liminal situation also sounds familiar; they show a reversal of worldly status, in which the underling comes on top whilst the highest is brought low, they practise humility, silence, continence, and are believed to be in contact with 'protective and primitive powers of divine preter-human beings and powers.'[68] Turner argues that in Christianity (and in other world faiths) what was 'in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture and society, has become itself an institutionalised state', so that the life of the believer has itself become thought of as liminal. But he also argues that within the great faiths the 'institutionalisation of liminality' is most clearly marked within the monastic and mendicant orders, and illustrates the point with a brief discussion of the Benedictine Rule and later with a longer one of the Friars Minor.[69] I think one may claim that the eremitic life represents the most complete working out of permanent liminality in the Christian tradition and that it often offers a remarkable parallel to the situation, for example, of the shaman among the Saora of mid-India who take

on what he calls 'a permanent condition of sacred "outsiderhood".' It is because a shaman or prophet (or we may add, hermit) has assumed 'a statusless status, external to the secular social structure' that he has 'the right to criticise all structure-bound personae in terms of a moral order binding on all, and also to mediate between all segments or components of the structured system.'[70] Might not this description be applied to the hermits we are considering, and help to explain their power? In a brief paper one can do little more than to suggest that here are lines worth following for the historian of eremiticism, or indeed for the historian of rituals in the Christian tradition.

Four other points raised by Turner may perhaps be mentioned briefly to indicate still further the appositeness of his ideas. Firstly, his realisation that in the liminal state the neophyte is filled with a sense of the togetherness of humankind, what he calls 'communitas', seems also to have a parallel with hermits, indeed, as we have seen they experienced a still wider unity with creation.[71] Secondly, he noted that the liminal states were accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency, of powerfulness, which we have already observed occurring with hermits.[72] Thirdly, he pointed out that those who are concerned with *structure*, with society as a regulated and differentiated system, tended to consider the liminal state dangerous and polluting to those not incorporated by ritual into it, just because it was a place where power was released and from which came criticism of ordered and settled society.[73] Here we can, I suggest, find interesting echoes in the ambiguous views that canon lawyers had in the twelfth century about whether the hermit was a *religious* person or not, i.e. whether they were the equivalent of a monk or not, and in the increasingly effective means developed to subject the recluse to episcopal control.[74] Lastly, his suggestion that societies may need to undergo a dialectic in which 'the immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure' may provide another way of explaining what Génicot has called 'the slide of cenobotism', the often fairly rapid surrounding of a recluse or hermit by followers, so that their isolation became lessened.[75] The isolated hermit, following this line of explanation, may not have been able to stand an extreme experience of isolation, of liminality, and may well have welcomed followers and the growth of some sort of structured, hierarchical community around him or her.

Turner's work, then, seems to me to provide a useful series of concepts which give shape to the consideration of the powers of the

hermit. But we need to look again at English society in the twelfth century to bring our analysis into sharper focus. The implication of what has been said so far is that the hermit or recluse wielded power because of the type of life they lived 'on the frontier'. Now we need to suggest why that power was needed.

It is a truism to say that England after 1066 was a conquered country, but it is a fact which one cannot overlook in this context. A major gap was created between men and their lords by the Conquest, which probably did not begin to heal up until the second half of the twelfth century. The new lords spoke an alien tongue and were often far away from local problems and needs. Reginald Lennard in his great study of rural England between 1086 and 1135 wrote 'In many, probably in most, villages there was no resident lord; and throughout the vast areas covered by the demesne manors of the great monastic estates the lords were certainly absentees.'[76] The situation was partly the result of military and political arrangements, partly a result of the fact that the estates held by lords were often more widely dispersed across the country than they had been under the Confessor.[77] Lords were lacking, and alternative controls exercised through 'royal' courts and law were weak.

It is interesting here to note that there are a few traces of an English parallel to the movement of the lord's house from the heart of the village to the edge of the village territory which Georges Duby found occurring in the Mâconnais between the eleventh and early thirteenth centuries.[78] The excavators at Wharram Percy, for example, noticed that the manor house moved twice from its original position by the church in the middle of the village to positions up the hill away from most of the peasants' houses. The first of these moves seems to occur in the twelfth century, a period when at Northolt in Middlesex the owners of the manor house rebuilt it on a site which had previously been occupied by peasant houses, which were now moved a distance away.[79] Are these signs that English lords were ceasing to be neighbours to their peasants and beginning to treat them as subjects whom they judged and punished and kept at a distance? There may be things here for archaeologists and historians to consider.

All this adds up to saying that there was a need in the aftermath of Conquest for someone to exercise power locally, and that to a certain degree the hermit or recluse took on some of the powers of the absentee, foreign lord. He or she was a resident advisor, peace-keeper,

and patron who could understand what was said to him or her, and interpret it to others when necessary. In this sense he or she was indeed, as Mayr-Harting pointed out, fulfilling a crucial 'hinge' function.[80]

The Conquest may also have undermined the old customary centres of ecclesiastical power, since now the shrines of Alban, Augustine or Swithun were presided over by aliens. Admittedly in those guardian communities the Saxon-born monks who remained kept alive the memory of the Saxon past, but they may have been to a degree isolated from the surrounding population by their association with new styles of lordship, brought in with new abbots from overseas.[81] Churches and monasteries, like lay lords, were now subject to the obligations of a military and somewhat alien feudalism. The changes consequent upon the Conquest were peculiar to England, but as part of the wider Christian community, the English church was also undergoing two other changes which must have weakened for a time the old centres of power. On the one hand what has been called the crisis of cenobitism was exposing the old Benedictine houses to a new kind of criticism which tried them against the standards of the desert, and often found them wanting.[82] On the other hand, the Gregorian reform with its insistence upon clerical celibacy involved an attack upon the worthiness of the old priesthood, many of whom were married.[83] Where, in this situation, did people now go for assurance of salvation as the old order crumbled and before a new, more centralised order emerged? Hermits and recluses represented a familiar and yet still effective power in this world being reconstructed on new lines. They were 'old professionals' who could retain the confidence of ordinary people.[84]

So the suggestion of this paper is that in England in the century and a half after the Conquest there was a definite connection between the position of the hermit and the state of society. There were discontinuities in the social and religious worlds which he or she could fill and so we find another age of Holy Men and Women, not too dissimilar to that in Late Antiquity. Now they lived on the frontier meeting the needs of a conquered people for whom other sources of direction, reservoirs of power, were, for a time untappable. Hermits and recluses continued to exist beyond the twelfth century, but they attracted hardly a biographer, scarcely a cult, because no longer was the power of their liminal existence drawn out into the wider world. New structures of lordship and local community, new

courts, new laws, as well as new monastic centres, new preachers and teachers, did not leave the kind of gaps which the holy man or woman had sometimes filled.

NOTES

[1] *Journal of the British Archaological Association*, xvi 1953, 74-86, and *Archaeologia Aeliana*, xxxiii 1955, 202-17.

[2] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd ed. Cambridge 1963, p. 499 n.2, 188 n.1. This second note was an addition to the first edition of 1943.

[3] Cf. 82, 83, 84, 86, 88.

[4] For details see note 11 below.

[5] 'L'érémitisme en Angleterre aux XIe et XIIe siècles', in *L'Eremitismo in Occidente nei secoli XI e XII* (Miscellanea del Centro di Studi Medioevali, IV, Milan 1965), 271-303.

[6] 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse', *History*, LX 1975, 337-352; cf. P. Brown, 'The rise and function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 1971, 80-101, reprinted in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 1982, pp. 103-52.

[7] Berkeley 1985, and Chapel Hill, N.C. 1988.

[8] London, 1974 (first published 1969).

[9] 'L'érémitisme du XI siècle dans son contexte économique et social', in *L'Eremetismo*, 45-69, espec. 66, 'L'anachoretisme a ainsi glissé fréquemment vers le cénobitisme ...' and 69, '(l'enquête) n'a revélé aucun rapport entre l'érémitisme et les structures ou la conjoncture sociales.'

[10] *Anchorites*, p. 38; *L'eremetismo*, 303.

[11] The life of Henry of Coquet by John of Tynemouth is in *Nova Legenda Anglie*, ed. C. Horstman, II (Oxford 1901), pp. 22-26: *Wulfric of Haselbury by John, Abbot of Ford* (Somerset Record Society xlvii 1933), ed. Maurice Bell: *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. and transl. C.H. Talbot, Oxford 1959: *Libellus de vita et miraculis S. Godrici*, by Reginald of Durham, ed. J. Stevenson (Surtees Society, XX 1845): *Vita Bartholomei Farnensis* by Geoffrey of Durham, ed. T. Arnold in *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* (Rolls Sereis, 75 I, 1882), pp. 295-323: 'Vitae S. Roberti Knaresburgensis' (two Latin prose lives), ed. P. Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana* LVII 1939, 365-400 (the Middle English and Metrical Latin Lives were ed. J. Bazire, *Early English Text Soc.*, Original Series, 228, 1953).

[12] Henry, died 1120, Life xiv century, Horstman, 25: Wulfric, died 20 Feb. 1154, Life, begun soon after 1180 and completed before 1191, Bell, xxxiii, xvii: Christina, died c.1155-66, Life written, c.1155-66, Talbot,

10, 15: Godric, died 21 May 1170, Life. c.1161-95, Stevenson, 326, ix-xii, and T.A. Archer in *Dictionary of National Biography*, VIII (1908), pp. 47-49: Bartholomew, died 24 June 1193, Life, pre 1212 when prior Bertram died, Arnold, 320, 295, and David Knowles, C.N.L. Brooke and Vera London, *The Heads of Religious Houses England and Wales940-1216* (Cambridge 1972), p.43; Robert, died 1218, Life, ? mid XIII century, Bazire, pp. 20-22; the vernacular Lives are later. Robert's Lives need further study on their dating.

13 L. Milis, 'Ermites et chanoines réguliers au XIIe siècle', *Cahiers de Civilisation Mediévale*, xxii 1979, 39-80, espec. at 40-41.

14 Cf. note 11 above.

15 Henry probably began c.1100; his Life gives no date: Wulfric, after 1125, Bell, 139: Christina, c.1115, Talbot, 14: Godric, c.1105, see Archer, *DNB*, VIII, 47: Bartholomew, c.1151, Arnold, 299: Robert, pre 1199, since Richard I occurs in his Life.

16 Bartholomew, 311-12.

17 See for example C.R. Peers, 'Finchale Priory', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, IV, 4th Ser. 1927, 193-220 and Holdsworth, 'Christina of Markyate' in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Studies in Church History, Subsidia I, Oxford 1978), 185-204.

18 Cf. Clare Stancliffe, *St Martin and his Hagiographer*, Oxford 1983, espec. pp. 183-202.

19 *Godric*, p. 22: *Christina*, p. 35: *Bartholomew*, p. 296: *Robert*, p. 378 (and Bazire, pp. 83-84): *Wulfric*, p. 13 (de mediocri Anglorum gente ...).

20 *Christina*, pp. 10 and 49 make the merchant background clear; *Robert*, p. 378, born 'ex preclaris parentibus', p. 381, the appearance of his mother after death suffering pains 'pro usuris et measuris aliis(que) malificiis, quibus vivens usa est ...'

21 Cf. *Christina*, p. 16; D. Baker, '"The Surest Road to Heaven": ascetic spiritualities in English post-Conquest religious life', in *Sanctity and Secularity* (Studies in Church History, ed. D. Baker, 10, Oxford 1973), 50.

22 *Henry*, p. 24, cf. *Bartholomew*, p. 303, *Godric*, p. 138.

23 Brown, 'Holy Man', 123: Kathleen Hughes, 'Sanctity and secularity in the early Irish church'pp. , in *Sanctity and Secularity*, 28.

24 *Wulfric*, 61-63, 46-47, 63-65; Mary-Harting, 347-48 discusses the former with other stories illustrating Wulfric's concern for supplies, and the second 342-43.

25 *Bartholomew*, p. 310: *Godric*, p. 114: *Robert*, pp. 384, 390.

26 *Christina*, p. 173.

27 Brown, 'Holy Man', 122.

[28] *Godric*, pp. 346-68.

[29] Cf. notes 12 and 15 above.

[30] *Godric*, p. 130; cf. *Ancrene Riwle*, ed. M.B. Salu, 1955, p. 39.

[31] *Wulfric*, p. 99.

[32] Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (1977), who makes considerable use of miracles at Godric's shrine.

[33] *Wulfric*, pp. 54, 26: *Godric*, pp. 255, 138, 181, and *Wulfric*, pp. 31-35, cf. Mayr-Harting, 342.

[34] *Bartholomew*, p. 318: *Robert*,p. 396: *Wulfric*, p. 126. Foresight about a visit: *Christina*, p. 145: *Bartholomew*, p. 304.

[35] *Christina*, pp. 191-93, and *Henry*, p. 24.

[36] *Wulfric*, pp. lix-lxiv: *Godric*, pp. 169, 175: cf. *Christina*, p. 159, concerning her brother.

[37] *Wulfric*, pp. 116-17.

[38] *Godric*, pp. 67, 76, 77, 82, 199 (this last a naked struggle lasting from the first to the ninth hour seen and heard by others after he had been bed-ridden for five years), p. 77 (he wore out three hauberks): *Wulfric*, 19, 22-23 (a miracle to cut it shorter): *Robert*, pp. 392-93, struggles with devil.

[39] *Bartholomew*, p. 305, the multiform devil.

[40] *Christina*, p. 105: *Wulfric*, p. 15.

[41] *Godric*, p. 117: *Christina*, pp. 135-36, and see my article (see note 17 above), pp. 198-201 which discusses this kind of material in her Life: *Bartholomew*, pp. 316-17:*Robert*, p. 381.

[42] *Godric*, p. 84.

[43] *Bartholomew*, pp. 300-301 which implies he raised crops of some kind; he fished too at first: *Robert*, pp. 390-91: *Christina*, p. 9: *Wulfric*, p. 45.

[44] *Godric*, pp. 72, 239, where Godric foresees the woman bringing the *taurus*.

[45] *Wulfric*, see note 24 above. Mayr-Harting, 347-48, shows that he was very vindictive about his food-supplies: *Godric*, p. 234: *Christina*, p. 172.

[46] See notes 12 and 15 above.

[47] *Robert*, pp. 373, 383, 384: *Godric*, pp. 66, 74-75,48.

[48] *Wulfric*, pp. l-liv.

[49] *Godric*, p. 139 (just when they arrived is not clear, but it seems to be after he had become widely-known); p. 40.

[50] *Henry*, pp. 22-23.

[51] Cf. Christopher Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, Oxford 1989, pp. 144-48.

[52] *Hali Meihad* ed. Bella Millett (Early English Text Society, 284, 1982), pp. 16-17; cf. xxv the audience may have been recluses, or indeed nuns. I am grateful to Dr Avril Henry for his reference.

[53] *Godric*, pp. 71, 73, though in the second case described he accepted the food and then took it to a lonely place and left it there.

[54] *Wulfric*, pp. 28-29.

[55] *Wulfric*, pp. xlvii-xlviii, 14, 107-8.

[56] *Christina*, pp. 135-39: *Robert*, p. 384: *Godric*, p. 175.

[57] *Godric*, pp. 42, 117-18.

[58] Mayr-Harting, 339: cf. the discussion of the saint as socially amphibious and enjoying frank speech by Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 1978, pp. 386-99.

[59] *Godric*, pp. 63, 67, 96, 98: *Bartholomew*, pp. 309-10, 311, 315: *Robert*, pp. 390-91.

[60] Isaiah, 65.25: cf. the discussion of people who enjoy only infrequent social relations by Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (1970), pp. 60-61.

[61] H.A. Wilson, *The Pontifical of Magdalen College* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 39, 1910), pp. 243-4 and discussed by Warren, pp. 97-99; Ailred, *De institutione inclusarum*, 14, 28 (*Aelredi Rievallensis Opera Omnia*, ed. A. Hoste, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, I. Turnholt 1971, pp. 649, 660); *The Ancrene Riwle*, trans. M.B. Salu (1955), pp. 155, 167.

[62] *Wulfric*, p. 15: *Christina*, pp. 93, 103-104.

[63] *Godric*, pp. 84 and 77-78: *Robert*, p. 381: *Bartholomew*, p. 300.

[64] *Natural Symbols*, p. 85.

[65] *Godric*, pp. 79-80.

[66] *The Ritual Process*, p. 80. I have not been able to see Caroline W. Bynum, 'Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality' in R.L. Moore and F.E. Reynolds, eds., *Anthropology and the Study of Religion* (Chicago 1984), 112-17, which is mentioned by Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (1988), p. 265 note, from which it appears she criticises liminality as far as women religious are concerned.

[67] *Ritual Process*, p.81.

[68] *Ritual Process*, pp. 88-92.

[69] *Ritual Process*, pp. 93-94, 128-43.

[70] *Ritual Process*, p. 103.

[71] *Ritual Process*, p. 82.

[72] *Ritual Process*, p. 115.

[73] *Ritual Process*, pp. 95-96.

[74] G. Le Bras, *Institutions ecclésiastiques de la Chrétienté medièvale* (Fliche et Martin, *Histoire de p. l' 'Eglise*, 12, 1959), I, pp.196-97.

[75] *Ritual Process*, p. 116: Génicot, see note 9 above.

[76] *Rural England 1086-1135* (Oxford 1959), p. 390.

[77] *Rural England*, p. 33.

[78] Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région Mâconnaise* (Paris 1971), p. 473.

[79] Maurice Beresford and John G. Hurst, eds., *Deserted Medieval Villages* (Lutterworth 1971), pp.127-28.

[80] Mayr-Harting, 340-41.

[81] R.W. Southern, 'The Place of England in the Twelfth Century Renaissance' in *Medieval Humanism* (Oxford 1970), 158-80, at 164-71.

[82] The phrase was coined by Dom Morin in 1928 in an article in Revue bénédictine, and made well-known by Jean Leclercq in 1958, 'La crise du monachisme aux XIe et XIIe siècles', *Bulletino dell 'Instituto storico italiano per il medio evo*, 70 1958, 19-41 (translated by Noreen Hunt, *Cluniac Monasticism*, 1971, 217-37). For a critical review of the matter see John Van Engen, 'The "Crisis of Cenobitism" Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150', *Speculum*, 61 1986, 269-304.

[83] Cf. R.I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (1977), pp. 53-63. Mayr-Harting, 347, notes that the hermit may have lost a role when the 'status and education' of the parish clergy rose.

[84] Cf. Brown, 144, 'the holy man was the professional in a world of amateurs.'