

Determining the Importance of Saint Veneration Practices for the Growth and Maintenance of Early Christianity Through the Use of a Theological/Historical Perspective

Many religious studies scholars and historians have tried to account for what has been perceived as the phenomenally rapid growth of Christianity through the fourth century C.E. The generally accepted explanation has been that the rapid growth was due to mass conversions. Rodney Stark in his book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, offers a different perspective. While acknowledging that there were many contributing factors, he applies various social scientific and mathematical analyses to support his thesis that the spread of Christianity was not phenomenal or the result of mass conversions, “The [arithmetical] projections reveal that Christianity could easily have reached half the population by the middle of the fourth century without miracles or conversions en masse” (Stark 14). Instead, he argues that the perceived rapid growth of Christianity was the natural outcome of various situations for which Christians were better equipped to handle through their life-sustaining health practices, superior fertility rates, more respectful attitude towards women and children and high rates of exogamous marriage. While examining various social factors, Stark does not reject the impact of Christian doctrine and practices: “I do not reduce the rise of Christianity to purely ‘material’ or social factors. Doctrine receives its due – an essential factor in the religion’s success was what Christians believed” (Stark 3).

Indeed, the rapid rise of Christianity is probably due to social, environmental and religious factors. Yet, within the realm of religious factors, an important contributor to the successful

spread of Christianity and maintenance of growth is the development of a set of practices connected with commemorating and venerating the early saints of the Christian faith. This aspect of Christian history has received little attention from religious studies scholars and historians through the years. More recently Victor Turner and Peter Brown have become known as experts in this area encouraging other scholars to give serious study to the subject. While the few studies that have been conducted provide information on the rise, function, and importance of saint veneration practices, none of them adequately or completely address why such practices were needed and allowed to continue in early Christianity.

One reason why the academy's scholars of saint veneration practices may not have seriously addressed the need in early Christianity for such practices could be due to what Robert Orsi identifies as the "severity of the injunction against theology." Orsi notes that the rise of Religious Studies departments within the American academy after the Second World War occurred through a strong alignment with the scientific world of research and a strict dissociation from seminaries and theological schools. This dissociation was so strict as to guarantee that academy scholars would avoid any hint of moral and religious (theological) elements in their research conduct and presentations with the exception of liberal Protestant moral assumptions that overtly and covertly permeate the discipline. Orsi states, "Theology is the reflection upon the thought and practice of a religious tradition by its adherents; Religious Studies is an outsider's discipline by definition, aspiring to the status of science through a strategy of distance" (Orsi 213). However, Orsi notes that this paradigm is currently being examined and attacked.

In a move away from the above-noted paradigm, this paper will provide both the impact of saint veneration practices upon the development and growth of early Christianity. Additionally, I attempt to provide a historical/theological perspective of how such practices originated and why they were necessary for the maintenance of membership.

Historical Background

The earliest Christian saints were martyrs, those put to death for their faith, most usually by the Roman government who executed believers for involvement in Christian activities or by Jewish people who stoned fellow Jews for blasphemy. Stephen, the protomartyr or first martyr of Christianity, was tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin, found guilty of blasphemy due to his evangelizing activities of spreading Jesus' message and then stoned by an angry mob of Jewish people. Peter and Paul, primary and secondary disciples of Jesus respectively, were among the earliest to be executed by the Roman government after Jesus' crucifixion. According to Stark, Eusebius in his work, The Martyrs of Palestine, listed Procopius as the first Christian martyr (163). Another early martyr and saint was Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, who was executed in Rome in an arena with wild beasts around 110 C.E. (Ehrman 137). Prosecution of Christians continued intermittently through the first decade of the fourth century. The last record of a Christian being martyred was in 310 C.E. two years before Constantine's defeat of Maxentius outside Rome, the victorious event that ultimately led to Constantine's declaration that Christianity would become the official religion of the Roman Empire (Hunt 1). Regardless of who actually had the honor of being the first martyr, by the time that Ignatius was arrested and sentenced, Christians had developed the attitude and belief that dying for their faith served three purposes – 1) offered them an opportunity to emulate Christ's suffering during his death, 2) provided a means for expressing their depth of faith and commitment and 3) guaranteed that

those executed for their faith will attain God or Christ (Ehrman 137-8). In fact, as Ehrman states, “[t]he proto-orthodox authors [of scriptural texts] considered this willingness to die for the faith one of the hallmarks of their religion” (Ehrman 138). Stark further posits a social scientific corollary of religion, “[m]artyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom” (Ehrman 174).

Though some scholars purport that a large number of Christians were arrested and executed for their faith, Stark contends that there were actually very few. “The actual number of Christians martyred by the Romans was quite small, and the majority of men who were executed were officials, including bishops” (Stark 110). Though there may have been a small group of martyrs, if Stark’s argument is to be accepted, the early Christian historians made sure that the details about the martyrs’ lives and deaths were recorded. The first such accounting, a martyrology, was an eyewitness report of Polycarp’s death sometime around the middle of the second century C.E. Later martyrologies and treatises, including one written by Tertullian, urged Christians to embrace martyrdom. According to Ehrman, “the legendary details of the account ... are designed to show God’s stamp of approval on a martyrdom of this kind” (Ehman 139).

Martyrs’ bodies were retrieved by Christians, often with the permission of the Roman government, for burial purposes. Shrines were built around the tombs to honor the members who so courageously displayed the depth of their commitment to the new religion. Early Christians regarded the martyrs’ bodies and anything connected with their bodies (relics) to be holy. This was the means through which miracles were performed. Their grave sites and shrines

were considered to be privileged places where the opposing poles of Heaven and Earth met, a view directly transported from Judaism into Christianity (Brown 3). “Their occupants [of the tombs of the patriarchs in the Holy Land] were ‘holy’ because they made available to the faithful around their tombs on earth a measure of the power and mercy in which they might have taken their rest in the Above” (Brown 3). Or, as Turner states, “[s]uch sites were places where, according to believers, some manifestation of divine or supernatural power had occurred” (Turner 189). The saints were considered to be present at their tombs on earth (Brown 3).

A period of building and restoration occurred after the Nicene Council in 325 C.E. where Constantine had made clear in his letter to the bishops that his goal was to have all Christian properties, especially including the tombs of and shrines to the martyrs, properly restored. In addition he called for the destruction of all pagan shrines and the erection of new Christian buildings in their stead (Hunt 7). By 600 C.E. many elaborate and monumental shrines for martyrs’ and other venerated deceased Christians (including church leaders, wealthy patrons such as Constantine’s mother and monastics who had lived severe ascetic lifestyles) had been erected in or near the cemeteries outside Roman cities and villages. Shrines were also built for the saints’ relics - parts of the saints’ bodies and any objects associated with or having had contact with the same. Such shrines became sites for worship services and the ecclesiastical life of the community. “This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be ‘present’ at his tomb on earth” (Brown 3). And as such, the saint’s presence served as a connection to God since the saint was viewed as God’s friend. From early times, Christian historians recorded miraculous events that occurred at the saints’ tombs or shrines. This led to the popular belief that the saints could intercede on the behalf of Christians who brought themselves and their concerns to these holy places.

The Impact of Saint Veneration Practices and Belief in Saints Upon the Development of Early Christianity

There were many practices associated with the veneration of saints which included the building of shrines for the bodies and relics of the saints (as referenced above) and churches dedicated to the saints. Though many church officials, including Augustine and Vigilantius, objected to the degree of veneration and the type of behavior displayed at the saints' grave sites, the church hierarchy quickly realized that the saints' bodies and relics could end up as the exclusive property of the wealthy elite, who under Roman rule functioned as patrons yielding much power and receiving many privileges (Brown 32-33). Such a movement, it was realized, would create inequities in the Christian community where only the wealthy would have access to the saints' holy remains and the holy places where earth connected with heaven. Through the building of elaborate and monumental shrines and churches in honor of the saints at their grave sites and the holding of communal worship services open to all believers at the shrines on important feast days, the church hierarchy was able to officiate the sites and establish a patronage system of invisible patrons (the saints) that rivaled and replaced the one held by the wealthy elites (Brown 41). The impact of such activity upon the state of Christianity was seen in the solidifying of the bishops' and priests' political position and power.

Many of the early shrines were sponsored and funded by women from affluent, leading Christian families. As patrons or sponsors dedicated to specific saints, women were guaranteed public roles and recognition in their societal circles as well as within the Church, one of the few avenues of public opportunities available to women in the late Roman Empire (Brown 47). Such opportunities had the effect of helping affluent women feel respected, important and needed at a time when non-Christian women struggled for recognition and identity.

Brown provides another reason why Church communities erected huge, elaborate shrines. By the fourth century, churches had amassed a large, non-taxable wealth that exceeded what they needed for their public-assistance projects and operating budget. The bishops faced the challenge of how to spend the excess money so as to avoid public disapproval and envy of the Church for being so wealthy. Affluent citizens handled this same problem by making ostentatious public gifts to show that they were willing to flirt with bankruptcy by sharing their wealth. The most expeditious way for the Church leaders to resolve the situation was to create new ways to spend the money – by building shrines and sponsoring worship services and ceremonial feasts (Brown 40). “The cult of the saints was a focus where wealth could be spent without envy and *patrocinium* [author’s emphasis] exercised without obligation” (Brown 41). The resulting impact was that this activity cast Christianity in a more positive light.

A second saint veneration practice was the holding of ceremonial feasts and festivals to honor the saints especially on their birth and death dates. These services provided an opportunity for believers of all backgrounds and status, including women and the poor, to congregate at a shrine for common purposes – worshipping God, paying respect to the saints who had given their lives so bravely for the Christian faith and witnessing various miraculous events that frequently occurred. Many of the attendees probably experienced Turner’s spontaneous *communitas* or the feeling that “all mankind is a homogeneous, unstructured and free community” (Turner 169). Such gatherings most likely demonstrated a strong sense of Christian solidarity to both the Christian and non-Christian public. The impact upon Christianity may have been an increase in membership as friends and family members of participants expressed a desire to become a part of the *communitas* experience. [Stark argues that conversion occurs not through evangelizing

but through networking where those closest to the members of a new faith convert to receive approval or acceptance. Converts are those “whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to nonmembers” (Stark 16).]

Another veneration practice of believers was making pilgrimages to the shrines either a short distance of a few miles outside a city or a longer one requiring months to complete. There were several reasons why believers embarked upon pilgrimages, whether short or lengthy. Brown describes the phenomenon of entire communities of people making mass pilgrimages a short distance outside city walls to a shrine sites where celebrations and festivals were held. Though these sites could be accessed within a few hours or a day’s journey, they had the potential to produce the effect of Turner’s *communitas* or solidarity of community where for a brief time distinctions of social differences are generally suspended or modified in a liminal state (Turner 170-1). Turner posits that the anticipation of the experience of *communitas* was the primary motivating factor for early pilgrims. Brown quotes the ancient Roman Prudentius who wrote of such an event that occurred at the shrine to Saint Hippolytus:

The love of their religion masses Latins and strangers together in one body...
The majestic city disgorges her Romans in a stream; with equal ardor
patricians and the plebeian host are jumbled together, shoulder to shoulder,
for the faith banishes distinctions of birth (Brown 42).

Though this passage seems to describe an experience of *communitas* that occurred most likely on a pilgrimage of a short distance, it should be noted that recent studies of current lengthy pilgrimages have not supported Turner’s thesis (Van Dam 5). Instead of social distinctions being modified and lessened during a pilgrimage as Turner noted, it was found that differences were

actually maintained and social boundaries reinforced (Eade and Sallnow, 5). However, the results of these recent studies may not be applicable to pilgrimage practices of early Christianity.

Hunt describes two types of early Christian pilgrimages, those made by the affluent who often rode in carriages accompanied by their personal clergy members, usually bishops, (Hunt 67) and those, either practicing and aspiring ascetics, who traveled by foot. Hunt's description of two types of travel also calls into question the applicability of Turner's thesis regarding the reduction of class distinctions to long pilgrimages in early Christianity if different classes were not traveling together.

As a part of the veneration practice of making pilgrimages, devotees used the journey to the pilgrimage site as a time to deepen their faith. Those pilgrims who chose to make lengthy pilgrimages by foot often desired to subject themselves to various hardships and dangers of travel in a devotional effort "to enter into the life of Christ, through supposedly following directly in his footsteps, as in the Holy Land, or by emulating his sufferings" (Eade and Sallnow 25). Eade and Sallnow term this as "sacrifice discourse" where pilgrims, healthy when embarking upon their journey, endure physical, social and economic hardships while completing their pilgrimage so as to build their faith.

As indicated previously, wealthy pilgrims traveling by carriage were often accompanied by their clergy so that they could engage in continuous prayer and worship services during the time they were traveling. Whether traveling by foot or in a carriage with companions, Hunt purports that for both type of travelers the pilgrimage journey afforded them the opportunity of living their commitment to their faith. "[T]he pilgrim on the road saw himself as engaged in an enterprise of

pious devotion to the saints, and as clearly set apart from his surroundings” (Hunt 68). Similarly, Van Dam states that the essential characteristics for pilgrimages were the commitment, dedication and vow to the saints (Van Dam 127). “Pilgrimages were...journeys from the present into the past in order to fulfill vows about the future” (Van Dam 117). The impact upon Christianity is that pilgrimages to the shrines served to deepen members’ commitment to the Christian faith, which would increase maintenance of membership and influence membership networks a la Stark’s thesis.

Once pilgrims arrived at the shrines, another saint veneration practice was often displayed – that of praying intercessory prayers to the saints for healing, transformation and reintegration in the community. Many pilgrims traveling to shrines were afflicted with illnesses or disabilities. Because early Christians believed that the shrines were holy places - the manifestation of the supernatural (Turner 189), they also believed that these shrines were sites for healing miracles.

The presence of sick pilgrims praying intercessory prayers at the shrines most likely created a feeling of unity, *communitas*, for those in attendance. John Eade and Michael Sallnow conclude from their review of recent studies of current pilgrimage behavior that “sick pilgrims served to unite a group of near strangers into a coherent single group, both through the physical care of the sick by lay helpers and through the construction of supernatural discourses around the meaning and value of the suffering body (Eade and Sallnow 16). They argue that the relationship between sick and healthy pilgrims goes beyond suspending social distinctions. Instead, the sick are elevated to an exalted position with everyone focused on their illness or disabilities (Eade and Sallnow 17). Most likely, the practice of asking for intercessory prayers deepened the faith of

late antique Christians and created a sense of group solidarity, both of which served to maintain and build membership.

Accounts of intercessions for healing have been recorded by early Christian historians who noted that not all prayers were answered as desired. Yet, even those who did not experience miraculous healing left the sites with their faith deepened. “[H]ealing alone was not necessarily an indication of a successful pilgrimage” (Hunt 127). Just the acts of having completed the journey and visiting the shrine were seen as success (Eade’s and Sallnow’s sacrifice discourse presented above).

According to Turner, intercessory prayers were not only for physical healing. His review of studies found that many pilgrims offer prayers for inward transformation of spirit or personality (Turner 197). While Turner’s reference is to current studies, it is possible that some early Christian pilgrims may have also prayed for spiritual transformation which, if received, would have strengthened their faith and possibly influenced others within their relationship network. Brown argues that a similar type of healing occurred at shrine sites during early Christianity – that of exorcism where those who were possessed by demons and/or guilty of crimes could be “tried” before the tribunal of the invisible saint who was believed to be present at the shrine. Exorcisms served as dramas of reintegration which usually involved some form of torture to drive out demons. “The human being who had been swept far away from the human community was solemnly reinstated among the warm mass of his fellows” (Brown 112). Exorcisms, like physical healing and spiritual transformation, resulted in a strengthening of individual and group faith which served to maintain membership.

A practice closely associated with pilgrimages was that of extending hospitality and charity to the pilgrims. As pilgrimages to saint shrines and biblical places in the Holy Land became popular, the Church became increasingly concerned about providing hospitality and facilities for pilgrim stops along the way. The responsibility for hospitality generally rested with the bishops who often relied upon ascetic orders to open their facilities or to manage hostels where pilgrims could stay up to a week before being asked to work for their room and board. “These [bishops and monks] were heirs to a tradition of attention to the needs of strangers and travelers which went back to the origins of Christianity, and which, by the fourth century, had come to be incorporated into the regular organization of the church” (Hunt 62). Pilgrims were offered worship services, tours of shrines and biblical sites and parting gifts as part of the organized Christian hospitality. The offering of hospitality was a way for some Christians to live their lives in accordance with the scriptures; the receiving of the hospitality was an opportunity for the pilgrims to deepen their faith through their gratitude to God and their patron saint for providing for their needs. Both the giving and receiving of hospitality served to maintain membership.

The final saint veneration practice to be considered is that of translation where a saint’s relics are moved from one location to another. Early in the development of practices to venerate saints, relics became important to Christians as early as the middle of the second century C.E. (Sox 8). Originally relics were classified as real (skin, bones, and personal items belonging to the saint) or secondary (any object that came in contact with the saint’s body, possessions or grave). Christians believed that the saint’s presence and power to make miracles happen was just as strong in a tiny real or secondary relic from the saint as in the saint’s entombed body. Eventually, the Church realized that the saints could be made more accessible to more Christians through the movement of relics from one site to another. Translation was the reverse of

pilgrimage – instead of believers traveling to the saints’ shrines, the saints in the form of relics traveled to the believers (Brown 88). By the sixth century C.E. translation became the preferred means for connecting with the power of the saints.

Though at first many church leaders disapproved of relic translation and veneration, later it became more acceptable especially as bishops noted the increase in worship attendance and membership after saints’ relics were installed in churches (Sox 5). Helena, the mother of Constantine, and Bishop Ambrose are credited with creating the cult of the relics during the fourth century (Sox 5). Helena made pilgrimages to the Holy Land in search of Christ’s cross and other holy relics which she supposedly found. After her discoveries, interest in relics for private and public veneration became widespread.

Brown describes the importance of the presence of the saints in their relics: “*praesentia* [author’s emphasis], the physical presence of the holy, whether in the midst of a particular community or in the possession of particular individuals, was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy” (Brown 88). The transfer (often via stealing) of a saint’s relic brought to the residents of its new location a sense of God’s amnesty. “[T]he relic itself may not have been as important as the invisible gesture of God’s forgiveness that had made it available in the first place, and so its power in the community was very much of the condensation of the determination of that community to believe that it had been judged by God to have deserved the *praesentia* of the saint” (Brown 88). Thus the presence of the holy saint in the relic translated to a new community brought hope of forgiveness, reconciliation and especially salvation to early Christians.

One can probably argue successfully that Christianity would still have grown at what appears to be a rapid rate without saint veneration practices. Yet, social scientist Stark posited the important role of personal sacrifice, the giving of one's life, (martyrdom) for growing the new Christian religion. Picking up where Stark leaves off, the veneration of those who made personal sacrifices, the saints, could also be theorized as important in attracting new members and in maintaining membership commitment and involvement.

While it can be seen from the presentation of the various practices how each practice affected believers personally and Christianity in general, the question "why did early Christians feel the need to be in the presence of saints" still remains to be answered. An examination of the emerging theology and doctrine of early Christianity may provide some answers.

Theological Explorations of the Need for Saint Veneration in Early Christianity

At the time that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, there was a growing concern among Christians, no longer with persecution, but with sin and salvation. How did this concern with sin and salvation relate to saint veneration? Van Dam posits that Christians developed an intimate relationships with saints who they believed would act as protectors and guardians to be able to "cope with conversion and its consequent reorientation of social identity, or with deep anxieties about sin and guilt" (Van Dam 4). But, once again, one can ask why there were such anxieties about sin and guilt.

Van Dam addresses this question through his research that focused on how people viewed the concept of physical health during the fifth century C.E. He frames his research with the overarching principle that all aspects of life for the fifth century Christian came under the great

principle of God. Illness, included as one of those aspects of life, was closely linked with guilt for sins. “Churchmen such as Gregory consistently linked ordinary illnesses and healings with larger theological concerns about the incarnation of Christ and the bodily resurrection of the dead” (Van Dam 85). An illness was viewed as a physical manifestation of a hidden or private sin that required confession, judgment, forgiveness and reconciliation with the church community for complete healing (Van Dam 89). Thus, festivals at shrines celebrating saints’ birth and death days often became events where illnesses could be healed through the miraculous elements of confession, judgment, forgiveness and reconciliation under the direction of the invisible saint whose presence was felt by everyone, usually during the liturgy which featured the four elements needed for healing (Van Dam 97).

Van Dam further posits that Christians believed the condition of the physical body at death impacted an individual’s future life. The human body was viewed as sacred because of the incarnation doctrine that Jesus was the Word of God in the flesh, and thus all human life was sanctified. Bodies were to be kept sacred without blemish which required the avoidance of sinful behavior.

In a roundabout way the Catholic doctrine of Christ’s incarnation reaffirmed the causal links between sins and illnesses and between correct behavior and good health that were so influential in shaping private and public conduct, even as it extended the implications of that nexus of associations. Not only did people want to remain healthy in order to ensure their standing in their communities, but they also had to think about the future by assuming the responsibility of preparing their bodies, and not simply their souls, for eventual residence in Paradise (Van Dam 109).

Church leaders theologized that all Christians would experience the Final Judgment some time after their death when during the Resurrection people’s bodies and souls would be reunited (Van Dam 112). However, Bishop Gregory theologized and taught his community to believe

that the Judgment might happen more quickly, and that the conditions of their bodies at the time of death would indicate how they were to be judged – more favorably for a healthy body free of sins, less favorably with physical, bodily punishment for a sick body consumed with

unconfessed, unforgiven sins, “People therefore wanted to live healthy now in order to die healthy and be resurrected healthy in the future. . . . [H]ealings represented not only forgiveness for those sins now but also guarantees of favorable verdicts in the future at the Final Judgment” (Van Dam 113).

Van Dam presents a strong argument that links theology and the maintenance of Christian membership with saint veneration practices. Yet, the underlying question of what in Christian doctrine led to this theological position regarding physical health, salvation and resurrection still remains to be answered. This author proposes that the doctrine regarding Jesus’ identity and significance of his death and resurrection are at the center of this issue.

Beginning as early as the second century C.E. there was much debate and discord in early Christianity over the issue of Jesus’ identity and the significance of his death and resurrection. The first problem concerned his death – how to explain or account for a common criminal’s death that may have not only been embarrassing, but discouraging for those who wanted Jesus to be the Messiah who would overthrow the Roman government. The early doctrine had to reframe his death to remove any connection to an earthly political kingdom.

In reframing his death, connections were made instead with the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament). Jesus was viewed by proto-orthodox Christians as the

new Adam from the lineage of King David who died to atone for the sins of all. Thereby, Jesus brings about reconciliation between God and humans, bridging the gap that developed when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

In making this connection, the concept of original sin played a strong role. All humans, except Mary and Jesus, were born with the taint of Eve's temptation. Jesus' death removed that taint and reconciled humans with God. Through the sacrament of baptism Christians are wiped clean of original and subsequent sins and reborn into a reconciled relationship with God.

The accounting of Jesus' resurrection was not an extraordinary or unusual event according to Freke and Gandy who state that several mystery cults including those of Attis, Dionysus and Adonis, celebrated the death and resurrection of their godmen (Freke and Gandy 54-5). There was no embarrassment attached to Jesus' resurrection. Instead it became an important focal point of the Christian doctrine that Jesus' resurrection was a victory over death, and Christians believing in the salvation brought to them by Jesus would also experience the victory of life over death. This is seen in the scripture from John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Early apostles including Paul preached that Jesus would be returning quickly as promised to collect his faithful followers and take them into the Father's kingdom. Yet, as years went by and the promised remained unfulfilled, the problem became one of controlling the widespread diversity as various interpretations of Christ's life, death, resurrection and teaching. Ehrman presents the tension between the different interpretations as a battle between emerging orthodoxy which he terms as proto-orthodoxy and heterodoxy or heretical movements among which were

many Gnostic systems with widely differing views (Ehrman 151) which he claims were driven by the failure of apocalyptic hopes to materialize (Ehrman 120).

Different interpretations presented the life and death of Jesus with different significance. The Ebionites viewed Jesus as wholly human and not divine. Marcionites viewed Christ as a phantom sent from the Pleroma to deliver a message of gnosis for those awaiting salvation. Other Gnostic systems viewed Christ as totally divine, having inhabited Jesus' human body for a short time. (Ehrman 124-5).

There were also various interpretations regarding Jesus' death. Some Gnostic systems dismissed the idea that Jesus' death provided salvation. Others stated that Christ did not die as he departed from the human body of Jesus prior to Jesus' death. Some systems stated Jesus died, but did not rise from the dead. Still others claimed that Jesus only appeared to die and therefore there wasn't really a resurrection (Ehrman 2). In addition, many Gnostic systems were founded by individuals who claimed to be receiving revelations from God with messages that often conflicted with the beliefs and emerging theology of proto-orthodox Christianity.

The diverse beliefs of early Christianity led to a diversity of actions based upon these beliefs. Some Gnostic Christian systems rejected everything connected with physical life while at the opposite extreme some systems advocated a hedonistic view of no limits on physical pleasure of any type.

As proto-orthodox Christianity began to emerge as the winner of the heretical battles that occurred in the second and third centuries, specific beliefs about Jesus' life, death and

resurrection were presented to the body of followers. What emerged from these battles was not just the doctrine that Christ was both divine and human, the Son of God (whose death and resurrection atoned for human sins and provided salvation for believers) but also the idea that a final judgment awaited all believers. This aspect of theology may have been developed in response to the diversity of beliefs and behavior coming out of the first century. People who truly believed that Christ's death had removed their original and current sins, making them sinless, may have had no reason to be concerned about salvation. Like the Gnostics who believed that anything goes, these Christians may have fallen into a complacency that allowed them to indulge their desires at the expense of helping others and providing good examples of Christian behavior.

If this was an issue for the Church leaders, as it may well have been given that Paul was addressing inappropriate behavior through his epistles to various church communities, one solution would have been to expand the doctrine to include a belief that would hold Christians accountable for their actions throughout their lives. While Christ's death and resurrection reconciled Christians with God, it was their appropriate Christian behavior and good works as specified in the Scriptures that would allow them to actually enter the promised Kingdom of God after the Final Judgment.

At the same time that there was an emphasis on the importance of pious, sinless behavior, there was also a push to finalize Jesus' identity as more than just human. Once the proto-orthodox Christians' view of Jesus as both divine and human won out and was finalized at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., Jesus began his eight-hundred-year ascending journey of moving from human immanence to divine transcendence at the end of which he, the incarnation of the Word,

could be found sitting at the right hand of the Father peering down from the heavenly heights as expressed metaphorically in the architecture of the immense cathedrals constructed during the Middle Ages.

This journey of the image of Jesus coming to rest in a divine place made Jesus' human life less accessible to and imitable by Christians. With Jesus literally out of the earthly picture, with the Final Judgment awaiting all Christians upon their death and with the idea that the condition and health of the physical body is an indicator of future consequences, there was an increasing need to fill the ever-growing gap between human and divine existence. This gap was filled by the presence of the saints who stood at and as the connecting point between heaven and earth. It was these humans who had successfully faced many challenges, temptations and even persecution with whom early Christians could more easily identify. Having seen how the saints conquered their trials and tribulations, early Christians were fortified and strengthened by their examples. Saint veneration practices allowed Christians to stay connected with the divine as they attempted to secure the salvation promised them through Christ's death and resurrection.

Conclusion

Could early Christianity have survived as well as it did without the cult of the saints connecting physical and divine existence? This author contends that given the struggle to develop a theology that could address conflicting or contentious aspects of Jesus' life and teachings, unifying the Church while simultaneously controlling believers' behavior, Church leaders ended up producing a set of beliefs that left the laity in need of something else to help strengthen and maintain their faith. This something else for many early Christians were the practices associated with veneration of the saints who became their patrons, personal protectors and role models.

Without these veneration practices the realm of the divine would have remained inaccessible and the degree of commitment to a transcendent Christian God would have been no stronger than that displayed by the Greeks and Romans to their many gods. Without such practices Christian membership may have not have continued to increase or even been maintained, a fact that became recognized and appreciated by the early Church leaders who did not always approve of the practices, but eventually utilized them to make Christianity stronger.

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