

## CULTS OF DEATH IN NORTHWESTERN PORTUGAL

Psalms 16:10

'For thou wilt not leave my  
soul in Hell; neither wilt  
thou suffer thine Holy One  
to see corruption.'

Shortly after I began field work in northwestern Portugal I became aware of a set of cults the significance of which was, at first, not clear to me. It was only later that I realised that there was a pattern unifying them. These cults had to do with the opposition between physical life and death and spiritual life and death. This paper is an attempt to deal with these cults as a group so as to arrive at general conclusions about their significance.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'cults of death' itself may be misleading. I refer mainly to three local cults not all of which are specifically related to physical death. As they centre around the life/death opposition, however, and can be understood only in that context, I refer to them by means of this term. The life/death opposition is perhaps the single most important symbolic unit in the northwestern peasant culture of Portugal. It can be observed in practically every field of action and thought, and it is to this that I attribute the great importance that these cults assume locally. Furthermore the term 'cult' may be misunderstood. Cults are not considered by the people to be separate entities of cultural action. It should be made clear that the people see what I have called 'cults' as an integral and indistinct part of their dealings with the world at large and the supernatural world in particular.<sup>2</sup>

The first cult at which we shall look is that of the Souls of Purgatory; that is the souls of the recently dead burning in Purgatory, waiting for the day on which they will be purified by fire of their earthly sins. The second is the cult of *incorrupt bodies*.

These are the bodies of people who, after burial, remain incorrupt, their bodies preserving the flesh and their clothes remaining in perfect condition. Finally, we shall deal with the cult of people who are reported not to eat or drink - and therefore not to have normal bodily functions. These people are considered to be saintly and I shall refer to them as 'non-eaters'. These cults are not at all specific to Portugal, and may in fact be found throughout the Catholic, and indeed the Christian world. Naturally I cannot claim that my arguments have validity for such a broad field as I have limited myself intentionally to northwestern Portugal.

In their recent book, *Celebration of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Huntington and Metcalf argue that the funereal rites

express the social order by differentiation between people of unequal status. This type of argument lends itself to extensions in many directions. Hertz himself connects it with the practice of preserving relics of individuals of high esteem, and hence the origin of ancestor cults. (1979:73).

In my opinion this argument, which has its value, cannot explain the internal consistency of these cults. I found then, that in order to cope with them, I had to go beyond this explanation. The attempt to do so forms the main argument of this paper.

Before examining each cult separately, I shall give a short account of burial rites in the area where I carried out fieldwork, giving particular attention to the specific practices and conceptions that will illuminate the analysis of the three cults.

In northwestern Portugal there are three very distinct types of death to which people's reaction vary accordingly.<sup>3</sup> A person can die of old age. In this case he has had time to prepare himself for death: he has taken the Extreme Unction which, as Van Gennep rightly points out is a 'rite of incorporation into the other world' (1960:165), and his death is therefore not problematic, for the passage from the living to the dead was well delineated and ritually complete. One can, on the other hand, die of some illness: this is the second type of death. Although in this case one may have been able to take the Extreme Unction and to go through the rituals of separation from the living and incorporation into the dead, this type of death creates greater problems for it wrenches a previously able member from the midst of the living, thereby threatening the social order. To this type of death the reaction is more violent, the wailing is stronger and the dangers that surround the pre-burial period are more acute. Finally, there is violent death. It is this type of death that produces the greatest reaction on behalf of the local community. The wailing is very strong and all the practices attached to the fear that the dead person's soul may not have separated itself from the world of the living, are strongly enforced.

Immediately after any type of death all gates and doors of the house of the deceased are thrown open. The relatives abandon themselves to wailing usually keeping to an inner room, until the body

is prepared for viewing. This is the first bout of wailing and it has the effect of calling the attention of all close neighbours. These come to the house, and a group is immediately organised which consists of a few women neighbours who look after the kitchen and a man who *corre com o enterro* - literally, 'runs the burial'. This man, who is chosen by the family as a particularly trustworthy person, calls the relatives and the undertaker, buys the food and prepares the house for the sudden surge of people after the second bout of wailing. This takes place when the coffin is brought to the house and the body is exposed in it. The family then emerges dressed as if it were the middle of winter, even though it may be summer. In this way they feel they are protecting themselves against the bad influences generated by this death. They sit wailing, accompanied by their relatives and visitors who, towards evening, start coming to the house. The visitors go to the foot of the coffin and sprinkle the dead person with holy water in a practice which, as Hertz rightly emphasized, has the function of pushing away the evil spirits (1960:83 and fn. p.151). Indeed, if the person died at home, the sprinkling with holy water and the recitation of *Ladainhas* (long prayers designed to scare away the Devil) would have already begun when he or she entered his or her last moments. It is believed that, if we could see through the eyes of a dying person who had not been sprinkled with holy water, we would not be able to see the light of day because the devils around him are so numerous that they obscure light.

Following the rite with the holy water, each visitor greets the members of the household individually. The visitor then leaves money for a mass, and writes his name down on a list. This practice too can clearly be seen as a rite of separation, for each mass that is said for a dead person helps him or her to be released from Purgatory sooner. Therefore, by offering a mass, visitors are helping with the process of transition of the deceased from the world of the living into the world of the dead. During all this time, prior to the mass on the seventh day after the death, nobody ever pronounces the name of the dead person. They call him *o falecido* - the 'deceased'. Indeed, before the burial, they even call him *o falecido sobre terra* - literally 'the deceased above the earth'. Only close relatives keep this practice for the duration of the whole year of mourning.

As has often been pointed out, death as a social phenomenon is a process and not a complete event that takes place at the time of physical death. There is a local conception which illustrates this very well which is the belief in *remédios da desempata* - literally, 'medicine of the deciding game'. The metaphor implies that there is a draw, as in a game, between life and death. When a person is very sick and is approaching death, the locals believe that there is a point at which the doctors give him or her this medicine. If the person has life in him or her, he or she will survive; if, on the other hand, the person is fated to die, death will immediately ensue. This conception is made even more evident in the visions of the Procession of the Dead, which afflict some locals. These processions consist of people who have recently died, accompanying

a coffin inside which lies the soul of the member of the parish who is next going to die. The coffin is followed by those who will die immediately after that. These visions, however, are only seen by a few *voyants* who cannot disclose the names of those in the procession. Similarly there is a belief that the soul of a person who dies far away from home or during sleep, wanders around at night bidding farewell to those who remain alive, and gently touching them.

Here we see clearly that death is a process that develops before the person's actual physical death. This conception - that the soul is separated from the body and that its movements have to be directed - is evident, too, not only in the practice of not calling a person's name (for fear the soul answers the call) but also in a series of other practices. No fire should be taken out of the house where the corpse lies, for the soul would follow it. This soul would then be *penada*, literally, 'in pains' or 'in sorrow' and it would haunt the community. The priest must accompany the funeral procession otherwise the soul will go astray. The close relatives, however, do not go in the funeral procession for, should they go, the soul would be so sad that it would not go to the grave. When the coffin is being lowered, most people shift about, otherwise the soul would find them and remain with them. After the coffin is in the grave most people throw a bit of earth into the pit because, without this rite of separation, the soul would remain 'in pains' for it would follow them. It must be noted that all these rituals have two symbolic functions: by pushing the soul away, the people are not only protecting themselves from its bad influences, but also helping it on its way to Salvation.

The danger that the soul should remain 'in pains' is specially great if the deceased has suffered violent death, in particular if he was murdered. The soul of a murdered person will sit on its homicide's back till it breaks. The only way to avoid this is to plant a cross on the spot where death occurred. Even under normal circumstances, however, the soul of the recently deceased is dangerous, for its calls to other souls. When a funeral procession passes by, people who are lying down, even if they are sick, get up, otherwise the soul of the deceased would collect theirs. Souls 'in pains' are very specifically feared, for they are those for whom the rites of separation were not fully operative and, as Van Gennep says, 'these dead without hearth and home sometimes have an intense desire for vengeance. Thus funeral rites also have a long-term utility; they help to dispose of eternal enemies of the survivors' (1960:161).

Before entering more fully into the discussion of the Souls of Purgatory and the cult related to them, I would like to speak of the practices related to the body after its first burial. Unlike Greece (cf. Alexiou 1974) where the process of secondary disposal involves quite clearly defined rituals, in northwestern Portugal this practice tends to be rather understated. My opinion is that it is in an overt state of decadence due to the repressive legislation that was passed in the middle of the nineteenth century as an attempt by the state to curb most of the traditional burial

practices (e.g., the Maria da Fonte uprising). The State has allocated a minimum period of five years during which nobody is allowed to open a grave. As a rule, however, this law is not strictly kept and usually the disinterment takes place after three to four years. The grave digger is given orders to go ahead by the family at least one member of which would be present at the time. The grave is opened and the bones are cleaned. If there is a bone-house they are deposited there; alternatively they are put into plastic bags which are tightly sealed and deposited in a corner of the grave. The justification for the disinterment is that the grave may be needed for some other member of the family, but my experience is that this is done even when no member is predictably approaching death. This acceleration of the process is due to the fact that secondary disposal marks the complete separation of the deceased from the living. After this ceremony the grave is no longer looked after by the relatives with the same intensive care. Some rites are nevertheless always performed by the family until the memory of the deceased dies, which usually happens at the level of the person's great-grandchildren. These rites take place during the days of All Saints and All Souls, and although they are specifically directed at the last occupant of the grave, they apply equally to all its previous occupants. With secondary disposal the period of liminality is finally over, for it is only then that the relatives know whether the body has corrupted or not. We shall soon see the relevance of this.

In order to grasp the meaning of the cult of the Souls of Purgatory we need to understand the local eschatological beliefs. These are in theory the same as those of the Catholic Church. In practice, however, they differ slightly. Locally most people are believed to die with *culpas* - sins, wrong doings, guilts, debts: this word can have all these meanings. Thus most people have to spend a greater or lesser amount of time in Purgatory according to the number of their *culpas*. The problem, however, is that, although Hell is often referred to, it is never really claimed that a certain person has probably gone there. The only instances I have come across of people being reported to have gone to Hell, were those in which souls that were in Purgatory were specifically sent to Hell by means of exorcisms, because they were bothering the living. Local informants were hesitant when questioned on this, and I have never encountered the idea that people go directly to Hell. However, everybody goes to Purgatory where there are two kinds of souls, those 'in pains' or 'in sorrows', and others. In theory, everybody in Purgatory is 'in pains'. In fact, however, some of the souls are redeemed and go to Heaven while others, for reasons which I shall explain, remain in Purgatory until they are either liberated or sent to Hell by the living. The latter are more properly referred to as *penados* - 'those in pains' - and they are the ones to haunt human beings.

There are two main reasons why souls remain 'in pains': the first and most important of these is that the soul has left *culpas*, debts, in this world. The word 'debts', understood in a wide sense, is perhaps the best translation for *culpas* here. For example, if a person has made a promise to a saint and has died before being

able to fulfil it, this will be used as an argument for his being 'in pains'. Another very common and important cause is if, at the time of death, the relatives discover that there is an absence of money that they cannot explain. This either means that the person left business deals incomplete or that money is hidden in a secret place. The most commonly experienced 'debt', however, is that when the deceased, during his lifetime, secretly moved the landmarks that divide the plots of the various families. As there are no land maps of the area, people are very fearful of this. The soul of a person who has done this remains 'in pains' and hovers around the area of the crime until someone moves the landmark back to its original place.

The second reason for being 'in pains' is if some ritual aspect of one's burial was not properly effected, for example, if the ground where a person was murdered or suffered sudden death has not been sanctified by the placement of a cross. Other instances have also already been mentioned such as when fire is taken from the house, or when the deceased is not purified with holy water. I have never heard of an antidote to these latter problems. I presume that they are possibilities that people consider but which are seldom, if ever, actually used to apply to specific situations. What lies in common between these explanations is that, either for material or economic reasons or for supernatural and ritual reasons, the soul of the person 'in pains' has not been able to go through the process of separation effectively. One therefore understands the rigour with which people follow these rites and avoid dying with these *culpas* unpaid.

I shall now discuss the three cults that I have mentioned at the outset of this paper. The cult of the Souls of Purgatory, in the minds of the people, only refers to those souls in Purgatory that are not 'in pains'. These souls are going to be freed by the action of St. Michael who, much against the Devil's wishes, redeems them from Purgatory due to the grace of God, mainly through the intercession of the Virgin, St. Anthony, and Christ. When these souls go to Heaven they are thankful to those who prayed for them, and they therefore ask the saints to intercede with God for the salvation of the faithful. This is the theological and popular basis of the cult of the Souls of Purgatory.

The Souls of Purgatory then are in a liminal position between life and death and they therefore assume both a sacred and a frightening character. Because of their transience they are used as mediators between this life and the next: between the powerlessness and blindness of this fallen world, and the powerfulness and omniscience of the world to come.

I shall now deal with the cult of incorrupt bodies. As we have seen, after death, a person is allowed to rest for a period of three to five years. Usually, after that time, all that remains of the deceased is a skeleton. In some cases, however, and for reasons that do not really concern us here, some bodies do not corrupt.<sup>4</sup> Descriptions I have heard of the discovery of incorrupt bodies are very similar in kind: the coffin is opened and both the person's clothing and body are perfectly intact. There is, accompanying this unexpected

vision of perfection, a smell of sanctity which, in the numerous and various accounts I have read, is always described as the smell of a flower, either rose, violet or jasmine. Most of the bodies react quite badly in coming in contact with the air, and many disintegrate shortly afterwards. This, however, is not always the case.

When an incorrupt body is discovered, the people as a rule claim it is that of a saint. Whilst the authorities and priests are interested in burying it immediately, usually they are prevented from doing so by the people. This pattern has repeated itself in all recent cases that I have studied. While the body is above ground, the priest practices a ritual of 'lifting of excommunication', that consists mainly of whipping the corpse. This detail greatly surprised me until a priest guided me to a passage of the *Rituale Romanum* (tit.III, cap.4<sup>o</sup>) in which the priest is told to whip the corpse of an excommunicated person while saying prayers so as to unify him or her with the body of the Church, thus allowing his or her soul to go to Heaven. What the priests in this area do is perhaps very similar to all those rites of integration described by Van Gennep when he says

Whipping is an important rite in many ceremonies ... and is equivalent to the New Guinea rite of hitting the person over the head with a club to incorporate him into the totem clan, the family, or the world of the dead. (1960:174)

The Portuguese priests' actions can be understood if we take into consideration the theory that, when a body is discovered to be incorrupt, this is either because it is that of a great sinner or that of a saint. If the body belonged to a great sinner, then it would corrupt after being spiritually reincorporated into the Mother Church, the community of the living. As a rule, when this ritual has been completed, the priests and the authorities manage to rebury the corpse. If, however, when the body is again disinterred after five years, it is still intact, the pressure exerted by the people to keep it above ground is too great and the priests and authorities are forced to compromise.

I have studied eight cases where this cult is very much alive, but I have references to at least twelve other similar cases in northwestern Portugal alone. Of the cases I studied two have been known for more than five centuries, whilst the other ones were all disinterred in the twentieth century. As I have previously pointed out, cases of incorrupt bodies are fairly frequent in this area. In the small county of Ponte da Barca where I worked, I have come across at least four cases of people that are known to be incorrupt underground and two that are exposed in an aura of sanctity. Now this raises a problem: why should some be prayed to whilst others are not?

There are two main answers to this problem: the first has to do with the personal characteristics of the deceased. Their lives have to conform to a pattern of sanctity. If they were known to have led morally dubious lives they are then perhaps forgotten when they are reburied. Some bodies then are forgotten because

people's attention is directed to other cases that have a greater appeal. This leads us to the second answer: the sociological setting behind the cult is very significant. If two cases of a similar type are found, the one which was discovered last tends to be forgotten.

It is necessary to give a further note concerning the incorrupt bodies of sinners. Apart from the practice of flagellation of incorrupt bodies by priests, in the assumption that they belong to sinners, as was described above, I have never heard it claimed that an incorrupt body belongs to a sinner. When, in northwestern Portugal, an incorrupt body is discovered and a cult does not develop, this is due to a kind of social amnesia, as I noted above, and not to the belief that the body was that of a sinner or of someone excommunicated. The most widely accepted conception is that incorrupt bodies belong to saints and not to sinners. Some local informants have even told me that they do not know of sinners' bodies remaining incorrupt. I presume therefore that the practice of flagellation has its roots not in the people (who in fact resent it), but in the Church hierarchy. I do not want to discuss at length the problem of the incorruption of sinners here, since it is largely outside the concerns of this paper.<sup>5</sup> My opinion, however, is that the symbolic structure of this conception is very different from that which ascribes saintliness to incorrupt bodies. The body of a sinner is incorrupt because he left behind so many *culpae*, 'debts', that he could not even decay: in other words, he could not go through the most basic process of separation from the living. This is why, as soon as he is incorporated with the dead by means of the lifting of the excommunication, his body immediately shrivels up and decays. He has to be seen as an extreme case of a soul 'in pains'. As with the other souls 'in pains', the rites of separation were ineffectual, only with these sinners, they were more so.

Of the eight cases of incorrupt bodies I studied in detail, three belonged to women. All of these are reported to have been unmarried and in fact claimed to have been virgins. Purity, endurance, and love are the qualities that are constantly ascribed to these women. In this they are very similar to the Virgin Mary. As in her case, incorruption is seen as a particular outcome of purity. Mgr. Poble (quoted in Winch and Bennett 1950:73-4) argues 'The incorruptibility of Our Lady's raised body may also be inferred from her perpetual virginity. There is an inseparable causal connection between *incorruptio virginalis* and *incorruptio corporalis* - the one if the fruitage of the other'.

The male saints are characterised in a somewhat different fashion. In their case purity is not such a focal point, although two of them were priests and the others were reported to be of the most unimpeachable morality. There is a similar stress on endurance to pain and suffering, and especially a great stress on their material generosity. This difference is rather significant for it clarifies the difference between male and female roles: whilst women are mainly subject to corruption in their sexual behaviour, men are subject to corruption mostly in their social and economic behaviour. On the other hand, the common stress on endurance to pain is connected with these saints' lack of concern for the base



needs of their fallen condition, and therefore their predominant interest in spiritual life.

Before going into the next and last cult I will try to clarify the issue of what makes incorrupt bodies saintly and why the locals award them special attention. Like the Souls of Purgatory, these incorrupt bodies are ambiguous cases. Although they cannot be said to be in a transient state, as the Souls in Purgatory are, they certainly are in a position of liminality for they lie somewhere between the dead and the living. Dead people normally do not have a body, as this decays a short while after death, unlike the living who are characterised by their possession of a body. As having a body is a characteristic of being alive, incorrupt bodies can metaphorically be said to be simultaneously dead and alive. When we take the lead suggested by Mgr. Poble in the quote above, where he related *incorruptio virginalis* to *incorruptio corporalis*, we understand the symbolic mechanism behind this cult.

I shall now give a brief account of the cult of 'non-eaters'. These are people who, due to their 'saintliness', can live in a state of permanent and total fasting. They do not eat or drink, or so it is assumed. I have heard locally of three cases, but I know only of one case in any depth. This was a girl who, at the age of fourteen, had been sexually persecuted by several men. To avoid them she jumped out of a window, and as a result was crippled for life. Whilst she was bed-ridden all that she ingested was the Host every Sunday. She was reported to have 're-lived' the experience of Christ's Passion every Friday night and as a result of this she was said to have 'an almost supernatural endurance to pain'. She died at the age of 51. We find here characteristics similar to the ones of the previously discussed cult. This woman was a virgin and it was in order to remain 'pure' that she embarked upon this life of saintliness and great suffering. It is worth noting that the other two cases of non-eaters that were encountered in northwestern Portugal were also women and both of them are reported to have been sexually 'pure'.

The Bavarian case of Theresa Newmann, reported by Vita Sackville-West in *The Eagle and the Dove* is similar in most points to the one described above. But why should these women be considered saintly; what in them explains people's readiness to believe in their healing power? Once more we are confronted with an ambiguity of definition that leads to a situation of liminality. These women are alive, but every Friday they 'die with Christ', for it is emphatically stated that they physically suffer Christ's Passion. At the same time they do not participate in those body functions that characterise human needs in this fallen world: they do not need to eat or drink and they are sexually 'pure'. They also obviously do not have bowel movements. These people are alive, but they truly behave as if they were dead. It is, I believe, in this ambiguity that one must look for the symbolic significance of this cult.

In all cases referred to above, the relation between the saints and the people is very close. A parish or a county feels unified in the common possession of a saint. People are proud of 'their' saints, and the offerings which they give the saint are payments

in gratitude for the success that they have had in the 'favours' and 'miracles' that they have asked the saint to perform. Their harvest does not look promising, someone is sick, the son is in the army, etc., all these situations correspond to direct needs which the saint helps to fulfil. The saint therefore has an immense economic significance. This significance rests on a symbolic structure and it is this which needs explaining.

The three cults discussed above all deal with entities that lie between two worlds. These are, therefore, in a liminal situation. But we have a further complication involved here, and that is that life and death are used in two different senses, the physical and the spiritual. This interplay of meaning in the use of these concepts is central to Christianity. Cobb, a theologian has said, 'It will be clear that the New Testament and Christian antithesis is not that of the Old Testament and Judaism, between this world and the next, but between two kinds of life both here and there' (1915-30:19). The body, as the centre of physical life, is at the same time, due to its needs and demands, the centre of spiritual death, and it is with the corruption of the physical body that spiritual purification in Purgatory can take place. Physical death may lead man back into spiritual life. Physical life and spiritual life are then used as metaphors for each other in certain circumstances, whilst in others they are seen to be opposites. Although they use life and death in two different senses, Christians seldom explicate the specific meaning it assumes in each instance. If we attempt to do this, however, we find that there is an immense contradiction involved in the use of the same term with these two different meanings. What characterises physical life is that it occurs in this world, whilst physical death leads one into the world beyond. Thus, spiritual life and death are characterised by occurrence both here and in the beyond. The two concepts therefore do not correspond. We see, therefore, that what characterises physical life is the presence of a body and its needs, whilst that which characterises physical death is the absence of the body and its needs. Conversely, spiritual life is characterised by the negation of the body, the stress being on the state of the person's soul, whilst death is characterised by the indulgence in the satisfaction of the bodily needs and desires.

By this argument I do not mean to imply that every single characteristic of the physical life/death opposition is negated in the spiritual life/death opposition. Rather there is a contradiction at play and this contradiction requires a mediation. Lévi-Strauss said: 'the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction ....' (1963:229). I would contend that these cults can be looked at in a manner similar to myths. They are, therefore, seen as attempts to mediate between the basic contradictions that are found in the local worldview. The Portuguese peasant, like all Christians, lives in a fallen world, one of hardship and despair, one of continual approachment to death. Yet he believes that there is a state of perennial life that can be achieved already in this world. To mediate between this conflict he takes recourse to entities which, because they are not clearly classifiable as dead or alive, can be used as mediators.

We now reach the point where we have to consider the position of Christ and the Virgin Mary in relation to this life/death symbolism. In the 1950's the Assumption of Our Lady became a dogma of the Catholic Faith. This belief, which had been widespread in the Christian Church since the 6th century, states that the Virgin died but that her body did not corrupt, for she was taken to Heaven in bodily form. The Virgin, thus, became with Christ one of the two only people who are believed to have been actually resurrected. They died, yet they are alive for their death did not imply the corruption of their bodies. In this, as we can see, they are similar to the case of the incorrupt bodies. But there is a great distinction between these two cases for Christ and the Virgin are *incorruptible*, while the saints are merely *incorrupt*. Christ and the Virgin were immaculately conceived, that is, they never participated of spiritual death, for they did not inherit the original sin. If their bodies did not corrupt this was because, through their heightened spiritual life, they managed to overcome the corruption of death. Christ and the Virgin lived a physical life and suffered a physical death but, because they were resurrected almost immediately after their death, they are alive in Heaven and their bodies are united with their souls. Once again we find a situation of ambiguity but here life has definitely won. This is an instance of what Lévi-Strauss would call a *helicoidal* mediation. Jesus and Mary, who are characterised by the forces of life (both spiritual and physical), confronted the evil forces of death (once more spiritual and physical); they suffered human death (here, however, only physical), and therefore managed to achieve spiritual life for all mankind, that is, the eventual abolition of evil.

If we look at the cults of non-eaters and incorrupt bodies we find that they effect a similar type of mediation. They too are characterised by forces of life (i.e. their arduous strife to achieve spirituality) and they confront the evil forces of death (both physical and spiritual). Through their death, however, (virtual in the case of incorrupt bodies and metaphorical in the case of non-eaters) they manage to bring about a victory of purity over the forces of death. This mediation is, however, no longer *helicoidal* in that it does not abolish the original polarity of forces, as the mediation of Christ and the Virgin had done, but merely postpones the action of the forces of death.

This second type of mediation is not specific to these two cults for it can be said to extend to the cult of all saints, since they all mediate between the spiritual life that they acquire and the physical death to which they are subjected. This idea of mediation is not mine and, in fact, the Church itself phrases the position of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints in a very similar fashion. As far as Christ is concerned it is enough to quote from Paul's Epistle to the Romans (5:18-19) where he says, 'For as by one man's disobedience [that is Adam's] many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.' It is, however, when I categorise the Virgin's mediation together with Christ's that I am going against Catholic Theology. But even here I am accompanied by most non-Catholic theologians who openly objected

to the establishment of the dogma of the Assumption on the basis that it leads inevitably to an equivalence between Christ and the Virgin. When we hear Salazar speaking on this subject we see that the problem is very real. He says of Mary:

She acted as a mediatrix with the Mediator. The work of our salvation was so wrought. The Virgin expressed to her son the desires of the human race; but the Son, deferring to the Mother, received these, and again presented to the Father the desires both of His mother and of His own; but the Father granted what was wished first to the Son, then to the Mother.' (Winch and Bennett, 1950:107).

It is obvious then why Winch and Bennett complain that 'the general tendency of Mariology has been to parallel the Blessed Virgin with her Son, so that every prerogative that belongs to Him should in some measure be imputed to her also' (1950:107). For the north-western Portuguese people the dogma of the Assumption and its related conceptions are so deeply ingrained that I can incur no grave mistake in interpreting their cult of the Virgin as a form of mediation that is, in its symbolic bases, similar to the mediation of Christ.

As we saw when we looked at the broad symbolic structures of the three cults, however, the mediation performed by the saints (including incorrupt bodies and non-eaters) is a weaker version of the mediations of Christ and the Virgin. The mediation effected by means of the Souls of Purgatory is weaker still. The latter pray for us after our prayers have saved them. But, as their liminality is based on a transition and is not permanent, their mediation, too, is short-lived.

To summarise I would like to point out that, in looking at three cults related to death, we have to place them within the broader framework of the mediation between life and death in Christian theology. This mediation was interpreted as having been effected mainly by means of an analogy between physical and spiritual life and death. We found three types of mediation at play:

1) a *helicoidal* type, where the result is the complete abolition of the original conflict, i.e. that of Christ and the Virgin;

2) a *non-helicoidal* one, which was nevertheless *permanent* in its effects, i.e. the saints;

3) finally, a *non-helicoidal* one that was based on the *temporary* state of liminality of the Souls of Purgatory, and therefore the weakest of the three.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. All of the data used in this paper refer to the northwestern Portuguese Province of Minho.
2. A mistake often made is the separation of strictly Catholic Religion from the local folk religion. This distinction misses the very important point that these people do not see any intrinsic difference between those beliefs which the Church opposes and those which it fosters.
3. I am not considering here a fourth type of death, that of children, because it does not play any part in relation to these cults. Children are 'pure' yet they are not saintly for they have not had time to confront this 'Fallen World' and to 'conquer' it. Significantly enough I have never come across any cult to the incorrupt body of a child.
4. The scientific reasons for incorruption are to be found either in the nature of the earth or of the coffin. Locally the coffins are often lined with lead. This practice may be the basis for the frequency with which incorrupt bodies appear.
5. The belief that incorrupt bodies are those of sinners is indeed frequent throughout the whole of Southern Europe. In Greece (cf. Campbell 1964:357), although there are incorrupt bodies of established saints, the most common practice is to classify cases of incorruption as related to sinners. In Southern Portugal a similar practice is found. A clear example is the 'Capela dos Ossos' in the Church of St. Francis in Evora where two incorrupt bodies have been hanging on the wall for many years as a *memento* of spiritual death.

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