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The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography

Volume II: Genres and Contexts

Edited by

STEPHANOS EFTHYMIADIS

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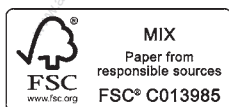
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The Hagiography of Doubt and Scepticism

Anthony Kaldellis

Scepticism in religious matters is not what comes to mind when we think of Byzantium. In fact, it is routinely asserted that there was no such thing, indeed that it could not have existed because a credulous religious mentality was allegedly pervasive and overpowering. To quote only one scholar, A.H.M. Jones: 'Sceptics and rationalists, if they existed, have left no mark on history and literature'.¹ This belief, however, is the result of a commitment to a particular view of the 'essence' of Byzantine culture that rests on modern needs and inventions. Ironically, the genre that testifies powerfully to the ubiquitous presence of scepticism is hagiography, the very corpus that is commonly cited to prove the opposite case. The recurring figure of the man who doubts the saint's power and expresses scepticism at his alleged miracles, only to be struck down by God and eventually converted, has been taken as proof that Byzantium was a thoroughly saint-fearing society. But it can also be taken to prove the opposite. Thousands of miracles – allegedly witnessed, then celebrated and often retold – failed to overcome innate human incredulity, which had to be confronted anew in each text. The pervasive scepticism attested in the sources reflects the literary strategies through which hagiographers hoped to counter fully anticipated reactions. The expectation of credulity is modern; the Byzantine hagiographer knew that he had a much more critical readership. Literary strategies reveal, through anticipation, cognitive and social patterns of reaction to new exemplars of holiness.

Byzantium produced intellectuals who questioned or dissented from Christian beliefs,² and it is clear that the bulk of the population disregarded many rules of social and private life that the Church wanted to impose; they may also have been

¹ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 957.

² Magdalino, 'In Search of the Byzantine Courtier: Leo Choiroshaktes and Constantine Manasses'; Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*; idem, 'A Byzantine Argument for the Equivalence of All Religions: Michael Attaleiates on Ancient and Modern Romans'; Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon*.

more indifferent to (or ignorant of) official doctrine than many of us imagine.³ Depending on how we interpret their social psychology, this may imply a rejection of aspects of the faith. In this chapter, we will be specifically concerned with the evidence of hagiography and the relationship it establishes between saints and sceptics. Our focus is largely on saints who established their credentials by performing miracles, generally in the provinces, for the scepticism that appears in hagiography is mostly a reaction to the disruption of natural order by supernatural power. Hagiography, of course, evinces other types of controversy, for social and religious institutions and ideals were often sites of conflict rather than unanimous acceptance. Many bishop-saints, for example, tended to be enmeshed in political, courtly or theological struggles. This means that they had enemies, people who were not prepared to accept them as saints. Cultural differences may have played a role in some cases: 'As late as 1072, the Greek metropolitan of Kiev is said to have disbelieved in the sanctity' of the Rus' saints Boris and Gleb.⁴ Conversely, religious scepticism is attested in Byzantium that was not directed specifically against saints, for example when it was provoked by military defeat or natural catastrophes.⁵ We will not, however, be discussing these cases here, though we should not forget that they constituted a regular personal and societal response. There always were dissenters from the dominant narratives, in this case that misfortune represented divine punishment.

To state the uncomfortable and unacknowledged fact bluntly, in virtually all texts of sufficient length about miracle-performing saints (or icons or relics) there appear men and women who doubt, question, dissent or challenge the truth of a saint's or a shrine's supernatural powers. This phenomenon can be considered an extension of the scepticism directed in ancient Roman society toward the claims of the elite. Saints' *Lives* 'were part of the new leadership's hard sell ... We would do well to recall the distrust that the people generally had for those in authority and the scepticism they showed toward traditional religious practitioners'.⁶ This is to say nothing about cases of doubt that were not documented but which we can infer

³ Beck, *Byzantinisches Erotikon: Orthodoxie, Literatur, Gesellschaft*; and Kaldellis, 'The Kalends in Byzantium, 400–1200 AD: A New Interpretation'. Some of the papers in the recent volume by Sarris, Dal Santo, and Booth, *An Age of Saints?*, discuss similar phenomena to those examined here.

⁴ Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453*, 403.

⁵ See, e.g., Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, 5–7, 42 for the seventh century; and Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, 421–7, 435. Augustine's *City of God against the Pagans* and Salvianus' *On the Governance of God* testify powerfully to a similar loss of faith in the West occasioned by the barbarian takeover. Similar defeats in the later Byzantine period also led many to religious scepticism, as is attested in many works seeking to combat that problem: these are discussed in Siniosoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium*. For disasters, see, e.g., Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: A Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics*, 154.

⁶ Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome*, 194.

from the history of religious phenomena and institutions,⁷ the ‘invisible hand’ of the economy of the miraculous. Confronted by this vast corpus, it would be better to offer a selective typology here. Sceptics doubt different kinds of things depending on the degree, tenor and motivation of their opposition to the saint as well as the specific goals of the particular work in which they appear. Still, the basic typology that we find in hagiography remained relatively consistent during the Byzantine period, though there were periods of deeper scepticism among the literary elite or opposition to monastic groups on the part of the authorities. The vocabulary associated with these phenomena in hagiography, at any rate, is persistent and fascinating in its own right (especially as it is completely occluded in most of the scholarship). This chapter will begin by considering some factors that seemingly complicated this dynamic in late antiquity, the Dark Age and Iconoclasm, before turning to a general examination of the problem, drawing on later periods as well. Despite the ups and downs in the available documentation, the main parameters of the social and literary phenomenon of scepticism did not change much.

The religious landscape of late antiquity was the most complex. Saints’ *Lives* and miracle collections reflected and aimed to promote the dynamic of conversion and to bring unbelievers into the fold through persuasion, threats or by healing their ailments. The unbeliever in late antiquity, according to one recent typology, could be a pagan (in some cases a learned one), a Jew or a heretic.⁸ Usually they are converted, for that is their function in the narrative, but not always. As early as Athanasios’ *vita Antonii* (ca. 360), ‘two Greek philosophers believed that they would be able to put him to the test (πειράσσειν)’. He saw through them and exposed them, whereupon they withdrew in awe, but were apparently not converted (BHG 140 – ch. 72). Likewise, the majority of the pagan population of Gaza was evidently not impressed by the miracles of the bishop Porphyrios (ca. 400), for, despite the many conversions noted by his biographer, idolaters continued to challenge his authority (BHG 1570 – chs. 19, 21, 25, 28–32), even after he had resorted to state-backed violence, amplified by more miracles, to destroy their temples (BHG 1570 – chs. 95–99). The memory of their opposition was apparently strong much later, when the *vita* was written.⁹ Stories about the conversion of pagan philosophers who had doubted Christian doctrines continued to circulate as late as the seventh century and were linked to sacred artefacts still shown to visitors in Kyrene (John Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow*, ch. 195).¹⁰

⁷ Wortley, *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, xiii.

⁸ Csepregi, *The Compositional History of Greek Christian Incubation Miracle Collections: Saint Thecla, Saint Cosmas and Damian, Saint Cyrus and John, Saint Artemios*, ch. 10, for a useful typology, though it omits sceptics of Christian background, a blind-spot in the field.

⁹ The most recent discussion of the historicity of this text is Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, 260–83.

¹⁰ For permutations of the learned critic in Syriac hagiography, see Wood, ‘We have no king but Christ’: *Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest* (c. 400–585), 201.

In the case of Athanasios and his hero Antony, we may suspect that the concerns of the hagiographer, a bishop of Alexandria, were more important in shaping the text than the facts of the saint's life. Athanasios was more harassed by pagan philosophers, urban and bookish creatures one and all, than was his Greekless hermit-hero. Athanasios used the *vita* as a platform for his own polemic against the philosophers, to warn his readers against them by deploying the authority of the saint. Significantly, he uses the opportunity presented by these pagan visitors to digress into an extended attack on Hellenism (*BHG* 140 – chs. 72–80), something that he had already done in a separate treatise (the *Contra Gentes*).¹¹ We see here how scepticism in the narrative may reflect the concerns of the hagiographer, rather than of the saint, and how the *vita* is shaped to address contemporary and future concerns. The philosophers are not converted by St Antony, which means that they are still out there: a warning by the bishop to his readers, and a proposal for how to confute the enemy. Yet we do not want to confuse the issue of scepticism with that of interreligious conflict – or, when barbarians invade the empire and attack saints, with foreign wars – because that would involve us in a different set of historical problems. It is enough to stress that for a few centuries the saints could count on a non-Christian segment of Roman society to oppose them and doubt their powers. More importantly, we have already seen how the narrative of a *vita* can offer a commentary on the state of contemporary society by outlining the dangers and threats that a new saint might face. The texts could continue to serve this purpose when non-Christian elements disappeared from the scene. Below we will focus on the forms of scepticism that emerged among Christians in reaction to the miracles of the saints, not those that were largely a function of pre-existing religious differences.

In a survey of Constantinopolitan monasticism, Peter Hatlie has described the era from the late sixth to the early seventh centuries as disappointing, with a thin record of accomplishments, whether worldly or spiritual. In this context, 'monastic prophecies met with doubt and disparagement ... A pronounced spirit of scepticism that was typical of everyone and everything in the age may have been responsible for the local monk's under-achievement in this realm'. The problem was compounded by the existence of 'false holy men and prophets'.¹² It is refreshing to see this period, the 'Dark Age' of Byzantine history no less, which was previously thought to be hopelessly mired in superstition and monk-rule, described in these terms. Yet as we will see, prophecies, miracles and monasticism were always embattled ideals in Byzantium, not merely during this period. Hatlie's description can be generalised.

The brief period of Iconoclasm is also somewhat irregular. Saints who defended the veneration of icons, most of them monks, were too busy fighting other enemies and challengers to bother with what we might call the common sceptic; put differently, the authors of their *vitae* were more interested in using these saints to score points in intra-Christian doctrinal conflict and less to uphold the truth

¹¹ See Hägg, 'The Life of St Antony between Biography and Hagiography', in *ARCBH I*.

¹² Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350–850*, 250–51.

and power of Christian sanctity as such against sceptics whose doubts were not predetermined by sectarian differences. Iconoclasts, 'all-wretched men who in no way accept the intercessions of the saints nor indeed venerate the holy relics', count as sceptics of a sort, especially the emperor Constantine V (741–775) and his followers, who own a chapter in the as-yet unwritten history of Byzantine anti-monasticism.¹³ But their motives and policies were a function of theological and political partisanship and too closely linked to a specific historical period for our purposes. Moreover, we cannot believe most of what their enemies wrote about them: attacks against them were meant less to prepare readers for dealing with their type in the future and more to vilify their memory after the Iconoclast movement had ended. This is not to say, however, that saints of the iconoclast period did not also face the common sceptic, but these cases can be discussed along with those from later periods, independently of their iconoclastic historical context.

In Christian communities, then, that were not challenged by pagans or divided by doctrine, we observe a range of sceptical reactions, individuated by the degree and localisation of doubt. At an extreme, we have what may be called the village atheist, such as a certain Michael on Lesbos who challenged Gregory of Assos (eleventh or twelfth century). He was 'a fool, about whom David has written, he who said in his heart, 'There is no God' (*Psalms* 13: 1). Michael said that what he had seen was not *thaumatourgia* (miracle-working) but rather *magia*, i.e. magic, for which he was struck down for as long as the saint lived, after which he converted and paid his dues to God and the saint to make up for his disbelief (*κακοπιστία*) (*BHG* 710 – chs. 22–23).¹⁴ Anastasios, a *scholastikos* in Antioch, who is described as 'unbeliever' (*ἄπιστος*) and 'blasphemous' (*βλάσφημος*), would make fun of St Symeon Stylites the Younger (d. 592) and assert that he did not perform his healing miracles through God. The saint was unable to endure this for long and soon brought about his sudden death (*BHG* 1689 – ch. 224). The term 'unbeliever' here need not signify more than disbelief in the holiness of this particular saint, but by generalising and perhaps exaggerating the extent of his disbelief the *vita* presents a vision of social reality that included more radical options. When Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) was building his church, two brothers would insult him in abusive terms. One of them, Anthes, loudly called him a hypocrite and a fraud to all who came to visit, until finally the saint called on divine power and struck him dead. The *vita* adds that 'this was done to terrify all uneducated and foolish people, lest they despise the saints and the grace that dwells in them' (*BHG* 1692 – ch. 124). We will return to Symeon below.

¹³ Gero, 'Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy'. The quotation is from the *vita* of *Ioannikios* (*BHG* 936), ch. 35 written by the monk Peter. See the discussion by Dagron, 'L'ombre d'un doute: L'hagiographie en question, VI^e–XI^e siècle', 65–7. Dagron's article is important for the issue of scepticism, but does not concern itself with examples drawn from hagiography, dismissing them as 'banal' (69).

¹⁴ Cf. also the *Synaxarion* notice by Nikephoros Xanthopoulos (*BHG* 710c), ed. Halkin, 33–4, for Komes, a violent doubter of the saint's posthumous miracles. On Gregory of Assos, see Kaldellis, Efthymiadis, *The Prosopography of Byzantine Lesbos (284-1355)*, no 87.

One could of course believe in God but not the power of saints (without necessarily being a follower of Constantine V at that). When St Nicholas of Sion (sixth century) arrived at the village of Arnabanda, a man fell before him and beseeched him for mercy: ‘do not treat me on the basis of my lack of faith (ἀπιστία)’. He explains that when he first heard of the saint, he said, ‘Who is the servant of God? The Lord our God lives, but I would not believe in any man upon the earth. But God saw my lack of faith (ἀπιστία)’ (BHG 1347 – ch. 22). A few miracles later, the priests of the village emphatically state: ‘Let no one doubt him (ἀπιστήσει) from this day onward’ (BHG 1347 – ch. 25). Finally, one may believe in saints in general but have doubts about a particular one. Here are the words of a man in the *vita* of *Ioannikios* (mid-ninth century) who had a report of the saint’s miracles from another: ‘Sir, the tales you tell seem strange to me and exaggerated and I have no confidence in them. But if you want to make a believer of me, take me with you, if you have ready access to the saint, as you say, so that I too may see with my own eyes and no longer be hesitant’ (BHG 936 – ch. 51). A pious monk who joined a community founded by Symeon the New Theologian was struck, when he saw the saint’s image in the very midst of the celebration of the liturgy, by ‘thoughts that led him to doubt (λογισμοὶ ἀπιστίας)’. How can I know, he reasoned to himself, that this man is a saint like those of old who are celebrated by the Church? (BHG 1692 – chs. 141–2). The icon punished him, and the other monks were only barely able to save his life (and the following story in the *vita* is about the ἀπιστία of another monk). These are forms of ‘pious doubt’, more examples of which we will consider below.

These stories testify to the variety of scepticism that saints were likely to encounter in Byzantine society, certainly when they were active in non-native lands (the theme of foreignness is especially prominent in the *vita* of *Nicholas of Sion*). But given that we are dealing with literary texts written for the political arena of sanctity, in which holy figures had to overcome many obstacles to claim a place among the pantheon of the saints, we should view such episodes also as tools by which hagiographers tried to overcome or forestall expected opposition to their saint and his cult among those people who had not directly witnessed his miracles, that is, the vast majority of the Christian community, if not its entirety by the time the texts began to circulate. Effectively, they constitute warnings in the form of stories against scepticism on the part of the *reader*. ‘What you are thinking has already been thought and acted upon by others’, they suggest, ‘and it had painful consequences’. Through repetition of this motif, they work hard to establish a mental link between doubt and punishment and possibly arouse their readers’ wrath against the always-present infidels in their own midst. By deploying this *topos*, they were countering a clear and present threat to their own agenda.

Doubt could infect even men in the saint’s following. A woman left her son, who was dumb from birth, with Daniel the Stylite, who admitted him. But his followers ‘suspected that from stress of poverty the mother had suggested to him to feign dumbness’, so they tested him in various ways (BHG 489 – ch. 89). Such suspicion could be directed against the saint himself. One of the frequent visitors of Loukas the Younger or of ‘Steiris’ (d. 953) suspected, ‘in the pangs of ἀπιστία’, that the saint only pretended to devote himself to prayer and study and

that he in fact slept the night away and knew nothing of Scripture or the Fathers. So he decided to make a trial of him (διάπειρα), which, however, dispelled the λογισμοὶ of his ἀπιστία (BHG 994 – ch.17; for another case, see ch. 62–63). The motif of the inquisitive or sceptical companion is frequent. After all, it had solid scriptural precedent in the figure of the disciple of doubting Thomas, who had to see and touch before he would believe (John 20: 25–29).¹⁵ Even one of the pious men *already healed* by St Nikon Metanoieite (tenth century) briefly doubted that the miracle had truly happened (διαπιστεῖν), suspecting that he had imagined it (BHG 1367 – ch. 63). Later, a child threw himself from a window of the monastery when he was caught stealing and yet was preserved by the power of the saint; some of the monks, however, were ‘curious’ about this (περιεργότερον) and threw some fruit from a parapet just below, to see what would happen to it and ‘test’ (ἀπόπειρα) the matter (BHG 1367 – ch. 75; to say nothing of the text’s open polemic against those who assumed that the boy was in the monk’s cell for other reasons...). These ‘investigators’ function as insiders who reassure the reader that the saint has been tested by those who enjoyed intimate access to his regiment and miracles and whose motives were pure; in other words, that belief in his power does not entail abject incredulity. They were not atheists or troublemakers, like Michael of Lesbos. The pious are allowed to have doubts, but are excused through these stories by the hagiographer, and this is done precisely because he expects his readers to have the same doubts.

On a few occasions, disbelief is treated almost indulgently. In the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, the ascetic Kopres recounts the miracles of his instructor Paternouthios, but when he begins to tell his circle of visitors about how he used to walk across the Nile, fly and teleport himself, ‘one of our party’, overcome with incredulity (ἀπιστία) at what was being said, dozed off. He saw a wonderful book lying in the father’s hands, which was inscribed in letters of gold. And beside the father stood a white-haired man, who said to him in a threatening manner, ‘Are you dozing instead of listening attentively to the reading?’ He immediately woke up and told the group who were listening to Kopres, in Latin, what he had seen (*Historia monachorum*, ch. 10²⁵). The problem is that Kopres’ narratives really are fantastic, even by the standards of the genre. Surely the reader can be excused for being sceptical, and the brother is not punished, only told to be more attentive. But it is not clear that the dream-vision solves the problem on the literary level, for it can elicit the same response that Kopres’ tales do in the first place.

Doubt, after all, could have its roots in faith, specifically in humility. For example, St Demetrios appeared in a dream to a certain Onesiphoros but the latter put it down to the workings of his imagination (φαντασία) because he was convinced ‘that saints do not appear to sinners’ (*Miracula S. Demetrii*, Coll. I, mir. 7 [66]). He had to have the same vision many times to think otherwise.

Another group of doubters who appear often in our sources are notables who refuse to obey the saint’s command to desist from evildoing. Unlike other cases presented so far, their motives are usually social and economic rather than

¹⁵ Cf. Most, *Doubting Thomas*.

intellectual, but their refusal to obey, coupled with the fact that they are aware of many stories of the saints' wrath against men such as themselves, makes it likely that their disobedience stemmed from strong doubts about saintly power and a sceptical rejection of those stories that circulated. Some notables refuse to obey the saint even when they know his reputation, which suggests that they doubt the reality of his power (e.g., *Syriac vita of Symeon the Stylite*, ch. 56). Other such men have to be struck down or killed to convince the reader that the upper class was not beyond the saint's reach. It is important to note that we are not dealing here with opposition based on religious or doctrinal differences. Instead, these stories expose an aspect of the social politics of establishing a saint's cult, as the support of notables would be crucial. The *vitae* give these men every reason – both the bait and the switch – to cooperate and obey the saint's hagiographer, who most likely needed help to promote the cult of his hero. At the same time, they reassure the laity at large that the saint did not play favourites with the rich.

Nikon's repressive policies faced considerable opposition in Sparta. A certain John Aratos objected to his expulsion of the Jews, openly denouncing it as unjust and abusing the saint throughout the region of Laconia (SE of the Peloponnese). He even brought one of the Jews back, but this went too far and so Aratos had to be killed by God (*BHG* 1367 – ch. 35).¹⁶ Brigands to whom Nikon had preached likewise paid no attention and continued their life of crime, which is attributed by the hagiographer to demonic influence. They even gave the saint a beating when he came back, but this time the earth opened up and swallowed them whole (*BHG* 1367 – ch. 57). When other brigands, also under demonic influence, later attacked the monastery and kidnapped a girl, the saint struck them blind. When they promised to return her, their sight returned. But now, possessed, it seems, by a spirit of scientific curiosity, they wished to put the matter to the test (βάσανος). They took the girl away anyway, whereupon they were made blind again. This time they pleaded for forgiveness, renouncing their διαπιστία and ἀμφισβήτησις (*BHG* 1367 – ch. 70).¹⁷ In sum, saints faced both well-intentioned sceptics (those who *wanted* to believe in spite of their doubt) and ill-intentioned ones, who had to be forced to recognise the saint (or else, usually, be killed). In terms of the structural logic of the late antique narratives, the latter corresponded to the pagan philosophers who 'tested' Antony but were defeated, the former to pagans who wanted to convert to Christianity and so 'tested' the pagan oracles in order to ascertain their veracity.¹⁸

Exotic ascetics, especially stylites and holy fools, generated considerable opposition even beyond the legitimate concern over the magnitude of their pride. One of their biographers, Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus, felt compelled to explain the Stylite's decision to live on a pillar, which seems to have embarrassed him

¹⁶ For this episode, see Anagnostakis, Lambropoulou, 'Καταστολή, μια μορφή ανοχής στην Πελοπόννησο του 9ου και 10ου αι.', 56–8; Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100*, 153–6.

¹⁷ For the theme of the converted robbers (or bandits), see Wortley, *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, X.

¹⁸ Trombly, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529*, II, 7–9.

(*Philotheos Historia*, ch. 26¹²⁻³). We may assume that those who did not believe that these peculiar saints lived according to the precepts of the faith would also doubt the reports of their miracles. Their biographers, on the other hand, our main or only witnesses, were obviously partial and so unreliable when it came to these conflicts. Yet even though they tried to downplay controversy, traces remain. A 'war' broke out between 'believers and unbelievers' over Daniel the Stylite (fifth century). The hagiographer attempts to demonise the latter as heretics (*BHG* 489 – ch. 39). But even the high official Gelanios, later a supporter, was at first angry that the saint had set up on his property (*BHG* 489 – ch. 27). And the reports of the feats of Symeon the Stylite were greeted with considerable apprehension in the monastery where Daniel had served as a young man: the monks deemed this new form of asceticism as un-Christian and vain (*BHG* 489 – ch. 7). Symeon himself had encountered scepticism among the monks with whom he had served before climbing up his own pillar. One of them had decided to 'test' him out of 'envy' by giving him a red-hot poker to hold. This is followed by a story about how Satan also wanted to test him, nicely linking human sceptics to their real master (*Syriac vit. Sim.* 22–23).¹⁹ In this case the hagiographer's objective was to overcome the doubts of Christians devoted to other, more legitimate, forms of asceticism. But as late as the tenth century, the young Loukas of Steiris came across a man in Patras who was making fun of a stylite to his face (*BHG* 994 – chs. 35–36). By then the vogue for such bizarre forms of asceticism seems to have somewhat passed.²⁰

The case of Barsanouphios (early sixth century) gave rise to a different form of suspicion, in this case over the saint's very existence during his own lifetime. Barsanouphios governed his community of ascetics from a place of seclusion, by writing letters and issuing opinions. At one point, a segment of the community, in conflict with their superior, doubted that he existed, whereupon he appeared and washed the monks' feet, removing their 'disbelief (δυσπιστία ... ἀπιστία)'.²¹ Nor was it clear when he died. Years later it was believed that he was still there, in a remote cell. 'Eustochios, the prelate of Jerusalem, did not believe this (δυσάπιστον), but when he decided to dig through into the little room where the man of God was confined, fire blazed forth and almost consumed all who were there'.²²

Doubt is a universal human reaction that no amount of indoctrination, repression, or cultural consensus can fully eliminate. It is a natural function of

¹⁹ Cf. the discussion of the curious monk Angoulas who opposed Symeon the Stylite the Younger (sixth century) by Déroche, 'Quelques interrogations à propos de la *Vie de Syméon Stylite le Jeune*', 74–5.

²⁰ Kazhdan, 'Hermitic, Cenobitic, and Secular Ideals in Byzantine Hagiography of the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries'.

²¹ See Letter 125 of Barsanouphios and John, *Correspondance*, ed. Neyt, de Angelis-Noah, 470–75; English tr., Chrysavgis, *Letters from the Desert (A Selection of Questions and Responses)*, 88–90. See also Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*, 119–20.

²² Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* bk 4, ch. 33; tr. M. Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, 237, with parallel cases cited in the note.

the human brain, and often spurred by personal interests (the saint advocates policies you oppose, such as the expulsion of Jews; he sets up on your land without permission; his followers want money from you to establish his cult; he seems to you to be a charlatan; and so on). Faith itself involves a constant tension and negotiation between belief and doubt and there are ways in which the very logic of faith itself could generate a permanent state of doubt. Nicholas of Sion, for instance, rebuked the blind man Antony for not having faith in the saints, arguing that his continued blindness itself was the result of ἀπιστία (BHG 1347 – ch. 33). Such logic may convince anyone who is not whole that deep down he lacks faith, even if he sincerely believes in the power of the saints. Moreover, few are so pious that they never lapse or become discouraged. The saints themselves were often their own worst sceptics. Antony, hiding in his desert tomb, was tormented by constant doubt and temptation. John Moschos (early seventh century) told a story about a monk who was depressed because he was assailed with doubts about having become a monk: in the end, he feared, it would all be in vain (*Spiritual Meadow*, 208).

Our monolithic view of medieval culture-as-religion has robbed us of the psychological complexity of life in Byzantium. This is revealed in hagiographic texts, if only we pause to study the subtlety and the strategies with which their authors addressed the problem. Just as faith itself could paradoxically lead one to doubt the saints, the latter could conversely restore lost faith in God. 'If anyone doubted', notes the *vita* of Symeon the Stylite, 'his mind was put right' (*Syriac vita*, ch. 114). Scepticism existed everywhere where there were saints, even within the monastery and soul of the most pious brother. Its regular attestation in the sources must reflect its pervasive presence in society at large. If not – if, say, all these sceptics are a rhetorical convention of some kind – then hagiography is useless to social historians and our history books will have to be rewritten. The saints stand or fall with their deniers.²³ This, in the end, is because hagiographers understood the world they were writing for far better than we do because they actually had to succeed in it and they had to address the right concerns. Doubt was a routine part of life, even good for laughs. The tongues of 'men who did not fear God' wagged because abba Daniel had visited the house of a man whose wife could not conceive. A miracle established the child's paternity (Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow*, 114). A hilarious situation developed one night during an incubation in the church which hosted St Artemios' relics, as a scoffing Alexandrian actor grew a hernia after urinating inside the building; he heaped abuse on the saint, in his mind an impostor who sent rather than cured diseases, in a story obviously written for comic effect (*Mir. Artemii*, no 17).²⁴ According to Cyril Mango, 'a reading of the *Miracula* reveals

²³ For general consideration on the value of hagiography for social history and the problem of its *topoi* – sceptics are a *topos* of sorts – see Pratsch, 'Exploring the Jungle: Hagiographical Literature between Fact and Fiction'.

²⁴ See also the story from the *Miracles of Kosmas and Damian* discussed by Wortley, *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, IX, 161–2. For this 'Other Byzantium', see Ševčenko, *Observations on the Study of Byzantine Hagiography in the Last Half-Century, Or Two Looks Back and One Look Forward*, 18–20.

that the ordinary man was shrewd and unsentimental: he usually approached the saint only after he had tried medicine and sometimes magical means; he was often discouraged if treatment in the shrine did not show quick results and quite ready to call the saint an impostor'.²⁵

This brings us to the ultimate sceptic: the (Christian) reader himself. 'We must not doubt (ἀπιστεῖν)', Athanasios admonishes his readers directly in the *Life of Antony*, 'that such great miracles have happened through a man' (BHG 140 – ch. 83). Every 'truly' and 'indeed' that punctuates his prose and every witness he calls on is another brick in the dam holding back the floodwaters of our (understandable) doubt. The same Athanasios understood that ordinary believers did not identify as much with the words and deeds of the saints as they did with the Psalms, which they took on with their own voice in prayer; the former material was 'external' to them and so they approached it as outside observers.²⁶ Hagiographers, unlike hymnographers, did not have the advantage of being able to fuse subject and object. Hence the constant struggle against doubt. The author of the famous *vita of Mary of Egypt* (seventh century) tries to pre-empt his readers' disbelief right at the outset: 'If there are some people who happen to read this account and, allegedly because of their amazement at the extraordinary [aspects] of the story, refuse to believe it readily, may the Lord be merciful to them' (BHG 1042 – ch. 1). Peter the monk, author of the *vita of Ioannikios* (mid-ninth century), is also explicit in addressing his readers' doubts: a man saved by God 'through the pure entreaties of our blessed father is still alive and, if some people should have some doubt about this miracle – may God not allow it! – let them make a journey . . . let the darkness of their doubt be dissolved' (BHG 936 – ch. 62). In sum, hagiographers were open about the fact that they *expected* incredulity. The same author is indignant in his preface: 'I will add even this, lest anyone suspect that I write falsehood and fabrication, for it is customary to defile what is useful with disbelief' (BHG 936 – ch. 3). The triumphant refutation of disbelief – the disbelief of other *Christians* – is the explicit goal of much hagiography, and countless more texts could be cited. Scepticism and doubt, far from being 'unthinkable', were the norm.

Most scepticism elicited by hagiography had to do with the supernatural element. In the preface to his short *vita of Symeon the Stylite*, Theodoret of Cyrrhus acknowledges that the story will seem to many to be devoid of truth because what the saint did surpassed nature, 'and people are accustomed to measure what is said by the yardstick of what is natural' (*Philotheos Historia*, ch. 26¹). This statement refutes many modern notions about 'how the Byzantines thought', that 'the frontier between the natural and the supernatural was obscured'; that 'to the Byzantine man, as indeed to all men of the Middle Ages, the supernatural existed in a very real and familiar sense'; and that 'the miraculous was a normal part of the

²⁵ Mango, 'The Pilgrim's Motivation', 7–8.

²⁶ Athanasios of Alexandria, *Letter to Marcellinus* 11 (PG 27, 21–4); Peers, *Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*, 53.

early medieval world ... there was little doubt about it'.²⁷ Quite the contrary, the supernatural would not be anything special if it were the normal and familiar thing that these scholars suggest. It was, precisely, something incredible, in both senses of that word. If we combine this with the Byzantines' persistent 'experimental' attempts to 'test' the power of the saints, a different picture emerges. Average men and women knew perfectly well what it meant for the world to function according to natural laws and had to be persuaded with strong evidence, which the hagiographer aimed to supply, that a certain saint had accessed supernatural means to overcome the natural order. The difference between their attitude and that of modern scientific rationalism was in the nature of the evidence they were prepared to accept and their openness to the possibility of the supernatural, their desire to believe.

Accordingly, saints were expected to perform miracles not only to assist with the matter at hand but also to head off doubt, which was always simmering beneath the surface, or lurking around the corner. Sometimes God had (to be made) to engage in elaborate and convoluted conspiracies to steer the faithful between belief and scepticism. According to the *Miracles of St Demetrios*, God brought it about that the city had few defenders precisely to ensure that no one would doubt (ἵνα μὴ διαμφιβάλλοι τις) that it was He who then saved it from the barbarian attack (*Miracula S. Demetrii*, Coll. I, mir. 14 [135]). The point of the miracle is not so much to save the city – for God could presumably have made it so that it was not in danger to begin with – but to counteract 'doubt'. This micromanaging of potential scepticism appears again in a striking passage during the ensuing siege. God, acting through the saint, protected the city from the stones hurled by the barbarians' catapults, but, lest anyone think that this was not caused by divine power but by the ignorance of the barbarians, he allowed one stone to hit the wall and smash a segment of it to bits (*Miracula S. Demetrii*, Coll. I, mir. 14 [154]). This was what we would call the 'control case' in a modern scientific experiment.

A parallel and almost exactly contemporary case from the West has God engage in similar contortions to counteract doubt. After the cincture of St Cuthberht had healed two nuns, God caused it to disappear before it was needed again. Bede, the Northumbrian historian of the Anglo-Saxon Church (eighth century), explains:

by those two miracles of healing he manifested Cuthberht's holiness to the faithful and then removed the cincture lest it should lead the faithless to doubt such sanctity. Had it been allowed to remain, the sick would have flocked to it and if anyone though lack of merit were left uncured, the fact would be taken not as a proof of that person's unworthiness but as a reason for disparaging the relic (vita of Cuthberht, ch. 23; tr. Webb and Farmer).

²⁷ Respectively: Kazhdan, 'Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers', 80; Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, 151; and Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000*, 179, who does go on to qualify, not without some contradiction, that miracles were not natural and that 'writers did recognize that there was a danger that they might not be believed'.

There is a similar rationalisation in an unfortunately lacunose and almost certainly sarcastic passage in the historian Prokopios. The Persian king Khusro I (531-579) wanted to capture Edessa because it was widely believed that Christ had promised that the city would never be captured. Prokopios himself doubts the authenticity of this promise but notes that God felt obligated to protect the city now, lest its capture cause the people to lose faith. God, in other words, ever constrained by popular foolishness, must make a false belief come true, lest people fall into scepticism (*Wars* 2¹²).²⁸

We observe the same presumption of doubt at work in sermons on local saints, where bishops are constantly and defensively addressing the doubts of their flock. For example, John, archbishop of Thessalonike in the early seventh century, discussing the miracles of his city's patron-saint Demetrios, expects his congregants to disbelieve what he is telling them; he knows that the burden of proof is on him.²⁹ This collection overall is a highly defensive text (see especially *Miracula S. Demetrii*, Coll. I, mir. 13 [111]; Coll. II, mir. 14 [156]: addressing 'the most distrustful' (λίαν ἄπιστοι); Coll. II, mir. 1 [194]: μηδεὶς ἀπιστεῖτω). At times it seems to be trying hard, perhaps too hard, to counteract different versions of the events in question, versions that served other interests than the shrine of the saint and may well have been dominant among the citizenry, including among the saint's congregation. Unfortunately, we have no 'exit-polls' to gauge the matter, only the miracle accounts, from which we must infer, by working backwards, a climate of general incredulity. At one point the author even says that he will stop narrating the saint's countless miracles 'lest we lead people into the sin of doubt (ἀπιστία)' (Coll. I, Mir. 12 [100]). Doubt was not only something that people brought to these stories, it could even be reinforced by them.³⁰ Their faith had critical standards. In another passage the author pauses to consider objections that he possibly heard among his congregants. How can we be sure that this healing was the work of the saint? Specifically, why would he heal us when you have told us that the plague itself was sent by God? (Coll. I, Mir. 3 [41]). This elicits some deft footwork on the balance-beam of religious logic.

²⁸ Kaldellis, 'Prokopios' *Persian War*: A Thematic and Literary Analysis'.

²⁹ Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector, 4th–7th Centuries CE*, 122–3.

³⁰ Canon 63 of the Quinisixt Council (in Trullo) bans the recitation in church of martyrologies that were forged by the enemies of the truth and lead the audience into *apistia*: text and tr. in Nedungatt and M. Featherstone, ed., *The Council in Trullo Revisited*, 144. It is not clear what type of texts and what enemies of the faith are meant. It is unlikely that openly heretical texts would have been read in churches, and in that case the Canon would have been more specific. One suggestion is that the narratives are 'of such extravagant nature as to induce unbelief': Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church from Apostolic Times until the Council of Florence*, 66–7.

The challenge faced by saints' spokesmen was often a function of rivalry between the cults of different saints,³¹ each trying to establish its credit among a local audience whose capacity to support holy sites was limited. Scarce resources led to competition, though this rarely took the form of comparisons in extant sources (for example, some officers encountered by a man in the accounts of the *Miracles of Anastasios the Persian* (BHG 89g–90) disagreed over who was the greater saint, Théodore, George or Merkourios: *Mir.* 13: ed. Flusin, I, p. 145). To be sure, some of the men of God themselves were capable of making their own enemies, as we saw in the case of St Nikon Metanoieite. Such enemies were sometimes a strong feature of the contemporary scene in which the hagiographer wrote and so he could not pretend that they had all been killed miraculously or converted by some punishment. On the other hand, he could not openly give voice to their opinions. So in many texts relating to recently established cults, they remain in the margins, though for all we know they may well have been the majority of the population, their voices suppressed in surviving texts.³² Unlike their critics and sceptics, saints generated institutions devoted to the propagation and praise of their memory. We should not confuse hagiographical views with those of the population at large. When the eastern armies mutinied in 588 over a reduction in pay, the general Priskos sought to cow them by bringing out from Edessa and parading before them the *mandylion*, the holy relic upon which Christ's image had been impressed, 'so that by respect for the holy object, the anger might be humbled'. But they instead 'pelted the ineffable object with stones' and the general had to run away.³³

We come, finally, to a feature of the religious scene that contributed to the persistence of scepticism: fraud. 'False prophets' were part of the Christian tradition from the beginning and they existed at all times thereafter. Were miracles accomplished through the power of God or that of demons? Was this a holy man or a sorcerer?³⁴ How could anyone know for certain? 'You doubt concerning this poor man whom you have received into your house, your mind doubts and hesitates as to whether he is a sincere man or, perchance, a deceitful man, a pretender, a hypocrite. You hesitate to be merciful since you cannot see his heart', wrote Augustine.³⁵ The false ascetic Gourias, a 'deceiver of people', insinuated himself into the company of St Ioannikios with the intention of destroying him through demonic invocations

³¹ Cf. Efthymiadis, 'Medieval Thessalonike and the Miracles of its Saints. Big and Small Demands made on Exclusive Rights (Ninth–Twelfth Centuries)'.

³² For enemies of Nikon's monastery, see Gerolymatou, 'Πελοποννησιακές μονές και εξουσία (10ος–12ος αι.)', 46.

³³ Theophylact Simocatta, *History* bk 3, ch. 1^{11–2}, ed. de Boor, 111; tr. M. and M. Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, 73. For the context, see Kaegi, *Byzantine Military Unrest, 471–843: An Interpretation*, 68–72.

³⁴ In general, see Kazhdan, 'Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers', 76–9, 81–2; James, 'Pray Not to Fall into Temptation and Be on Your Guard': Pagan Statues in Christian Constantinople', 17; Wortley, *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, I, 24–5.

³⁵ Augustine, *Sermon* 41.7, quoted in Getty, *The Life of the North Africans as Revealed in the Sermons of Saint Augustine*, 95.

and poison; the saint eventually expelled him from his company (*BHG* 936 – chs. 20–22). Such evil wizards belong to the less mature facets of hagiography. The reality of religious deceit was usually more banal. When he was a youth, St Lazaros (later of Mt Galesion, eleventh century) fell in with an itinerant monk who went around swindling money from villagers. This ‘false monk’ tried to sell him into slavery in Attaleia, but Lazaros was warned and escaped (*BHG* 979 – chs. 8–9). Soon afterwards he met a man pretending to be a demoniac in order to gain fame and money (*BHG* 979 – ch. 12). Lazaros himself, once established as an ascetic, came under suspicion (there was trouble with the bishop of Ephesos) and efforts were made to ascertain whether he was a true or false ascetic (*BHG* 979 – ch. 114).³⁶ ‘Hostility toward Lazaros is a constant and at times urgent theme of the *vita*’, to such a point that ‘a visit to him must necessarily have been perceived as an act of criticism, of disapproval ... with what Ephesos had to offer’ (that is, the ecclesiastical establishment).³⁷ Such situations of tension and competing interests and versions meant that the Byzantines had to exercise their practical, day-to-day judgment to distinguish between charlatans and the real thing. This created a permanent state of suspicion that is rarely acknowledged in modern studies, which have lavished their sympathy on authentic religious experience while distrusting the very concept of religious fraud as an invention of nineteenth-century rationalism. The sources again set us straight.

Maurice (582–602) was generally remembered as a pious emperor, even as a saint,³⁸ and he supported various saintly cults. But consider his reaction to the reported miracles of the relics of St Euphemia, described by Theophylact Simocatta, not an overtly hostile historian of the reign (*Hist.* 8.14). On the anniversary of St Euphemia’s death, her body, kept in a silver sarcophagus, would allegedly produce sweet-smelling blood that the priest gathered in a sponge and showed to the crowd. Yet Maurice ‘belittled the miracles, rejected the wonder outright, and attributed the mystery to men’s crafty devices (ῥαδιουργικαὶ ἐπίνοιαι)’. His ‘counsel of bold disbelief (ἀπιστία)’ led him to place guards around the tomb on the anniversary day, nevertheless ‘rivers of aromatic blood sprang from it’ still. The emperor was persuaded. But why should the fact of his conversion – inevitable, given the genre of the story – be more important to us than his initial disbelief? Nor was Euphemia a new saint clamouring for attention in the crowded sacred topography of the broader capital region: hers was one of the most established and venerated cults (dating back, at Chalcedon, to at least the fourth century). Maurice’s piety was a complicated thing, involving reservations, contradictions, selectivity and standards, a willingness to question established institutions, and even political calculation. And what sorts of ‘crafty devices’ did the emperor suspect? Grégoire suggested that it was a move to appease opponents of the Council of Chalcedon (451), but this is unlikely.³⁹

³⁶ Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100*, 120–21.

³⁷ Greenfield, ‘Drawn to the Blazing Beacon: Visitors and Pilgrims to the Living Holy Man and the Case of Lazaros of Mount Galesion’, 240–41.

³⁸ Leroy, Nau, ‘Histoire de Saint Maurice, empereur des Romains’.

³⁹ Grégoire, ‘Sainte Euphémie et l’empereur Maurice’; cf. Karlin-Hayter, ‘A Note on Bishops, Saints, and Proximity to Constantinople’. For the cult of Euphemia in Constantinople,

Moreover, it needs to be situated in relation to ancient traditions of mechanical fraud and scepticism, before specific political motives are attributed to it.

The basilica of St Demetrios in Thessalonike may illuminate the emperor's scepticism and the defensive assertions of so many hagiographic texts. From the middle Byzantine period we begin to get references to a myrrh that poured forth from the martyr's relics, a similar holy effluence. The basilica was damaged by fire in 1917 and the ensuing excavations revealed a system of pipes connecting the holy site to a secret chamber with a small basin accessible only from the Holy of Holies. This modification was dated to the same time that we begin to hear of the myrrh. Whatever the solution to this mystery, we should not be surprised at such devices, for cults were under pressure to produce miracles. Archaeologists have found numerous busts from antiquity that were hollowed out to enable priests to speak through them from the other side of the wall. Similar devices are exposed by the Old Testament figure of Daniel in the romantic (Greek) addition to his book called 'Bel and the Dragon'. The satirist Lucian exposed the false prophet Alexander who made a snake speak through wind pipes, and early Christian apologists denounced pagan priests for duping worshippers in such ways. A whole chapter can be written on 'false prophets, cheats, and charlatans' in the Roman world. These practices, along with the scepticism and conflict that they engendered (one man's saint being another's charlatan), continued into the Byzantine world. Icons of the Virgin have been found with small holes drilled from behind into her hands.⁴⁰ No wonder Maurice was cautious.

Let us also not discount the continued force of the scientific tradition in Byzantium, though few were probably exposed to it at any time. Psellos (in the eleventh century) wrote a treatise on an echo-chamber in Nikomedeia that, some believed, produced sound 'from no cause whatever' while others believed that it was a wonder (τέρας) or fraud produced by hidden pipes. He gave a physical explanation for the occurrence adding, significantly, that the experimental proof that many demanded of him would not be conclusive as conditions in the room could not be controlled. To support this he cites some of Archimedes' experiments.⁴¹ This scientific rationalism

see now Ousterhout, 'Constantinople and Medieval Urban Identity', 338–40.

⁴⁰ Basilica: G. and M. Soteriou, *Η βασιλική τοῦ ἁγίου Δημητρίου Θεσσαλονίκης*, 54–5; but cf. Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector, 4th–7th Centuries CE*, 54–5, 103. Archaeology: Poulsen, 'Talking, Weeping, and Bleeding Sculptures: A Chapter in the History of Religious Fraud'; for the technical side, see Landels, *Engineering in the Ancient World*, 202–03. For Daniel: Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of the Jewish Tradition*, 169. For examples from Egypt, see Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*, 147–8, 150–52, 168–9, 205, 209; from late antique Gaul, Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, 195ff.; for mechanical devices used to create miracles, see Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529*, I, 49 and n. 205, 111, 132–4, 136–7. For a chapter on false prophets, etc., see Anderson, *Sage, Saint, and Sophist: Holy Men and their Associates in the Early Roman Empire*, 131–50. For the manipulation of pilgrim's emotions through architecture and staging, see Hahn, 'Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines', 1088–90.

⁴¹ Michael Psellos, *On the echo-chamber in Nikomedeia*, 106–09.

was not different from experiments performed by average Byzantines to 'test' the power of saints.

But religious fraud is more often a function of personal charisma than technology. The power of saints was psychological and exerted through personal presence (which is what made many in the Church uneasy with the largely unregulated activities of would-be holy men). Identifying false prophets or scheming charlatans was difficult, and had been a problem since antiquity (for example, with fake Cynic philosophers).⁴² This, in turn, would have put society at large on the alert, leading to many of the sceptical reactions we have surveyed. The spirit of Lucian was never fully extinguished. The fourth-century monastic author Evagrius Pontikos displayed considerable psychological subtlety when he warned that the spirit of vainglory could lead monks to imagine that they could hear the cries of demons and heal women. But this was self-deception. The bitter and cynical Kekaumenos, a writer of maxims of the eleventh century, warns against having anything to do with holy fools (σαλοί), because you never know whether they are genuine and what kind of trouble they will get you in. Eustathios, the scholar of Homer and bishop of Thessalonike in the late twelfth century, wrote a massive critique of the monks of Thessalonike, noting that false monks pretended to have visions and performed false miracles to part rich people from their money. His contemporary, the scholar John Tzetzes, rails against false saints in many of his letters, exposing the scams by which they squeezed money out of trusting patrons. It seems that many exploited their sanctity as a 'value-added tax' to inflate the price of ordinary items that they gave as 'gifts'. The complaints and warnings of these men are part of a critical view of monasticism that emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the gradual rejection of extreme or bizarre forms of asceticism, at least on the part of the intellectual elite.⁴³

We tend to think of holy men with established cults and *vitae* as 'saints' while only a few marginal figures are referred to obliquely or only with opprobrium in our sources as frauds. But in their lived experience both groups occupied the same ambiguous middle ground where doubt and opposition probably tended to prevail; put differently, these two groups were often one and the same, only viewed from different perspectives. It was, perhaps, only a matter of history and politics which group you ended up in. Social values shifted, especially in the eleventh-twelfth centuries, and the saint of one era could end up being dismissed as a fraud, false prophet, or troublemaker were he to reappear in another. A *vita* was the best (posthumous) chance a potential saint had to shift the balance in his favour. But some *vitae* are so defensive and reveal traces of such widespread opposition – for example, that written by Symeon the New Theologian for his spiritual father Symeon Eulabes and that written for the former by his admirers – that we suspect that their heroes

⁴² See, e.g., Dion Chrysostom, *Or.* 32.9.

⁴³ Evagrius, *Praktikos*, ch. 13, ed. A. and C. Guillaumont, 528; Kekaumenos, *Strategikon* 69; Eustathios, *Critical investigation of the monastic life*, ch. 120, ed. Metzler, 132; John Tzetzes, *Letter 57*, ed. Leone, 79–84. See, in general, Magdalino, 'The Byzantine Holy Man in the Twelfth Century'; and Angold, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261*, 289–91, 348–59.

remained trapped in a grey zone of ambiguity; their cults served a 'niche market'. Niketas Stethatos, the saint's biographer, set out to refute the belief of some that the age of saints had passed, that it was no longer possible for men of the present times to attain such heights of virtue.⁴⁴

In 1991, Susan Reynolds argued that the modern assumption that unbelief was somehow alien to 'the medieval mind' is unprovable, psychologically implausible, based on a simplistic view of culture and a predisposition to trust official sources, and refuted by numerous counter-examples. She concluded by proposing that a belief in such monolithic cultural mentalities is a symptom of our own uncritical *mentalité*. 'Evidence of indifference or scepticism, whether among intellectuals, nobles, or peasants, cannot be convincingly explained away on the ground of *a priori* ideas about medieval mentality that must themselves depend on the absence of evidence of indifference or scepticism'.⁴⁵ Reynolds discussed a wide range of phenomena of scepticism, from intellectuals to village atheists. Recent years have witnessed a flurry of studies on medieval scepticism and unbelief, reacting against the Age-of-Faith model.⁴⁶ It is time for the field of Byzantine Studies to likewise escape its nineteenth-century historicist framework in examining this issue.

We close, therefore, with one of the most remarkable men in Byzantine history, a certain Paul Tagaris, who, over the course of an eventful life in the fourteenth century, managed to con and swindle himself into the graces of bishops and kings throughout Europe and the Near East, claiming to be the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and obtaining the post of Latin Patriarch of Constantinople. In the confession made by this anti-saint in 1394, Paul admitted that his career in fraud began when he came into the possession of a holy icon that he exploited for financial gain. Men such as he must have kept scepticism alive during the Byzantine millennium. It is dizzying to speculate what he himself might have believed about saints, icons, and miracles during his long career, and what he might have been able to tell us about his victims, the people whose mentality we, as Byzantinists, study professionally.⁴⁷ What could he teach us about them? His views, unfortunately, are not recorded, but then we must remember that neither are those of the majority of Byzantines.

⁴⁴ Oikonomides, 'How to Become a Saint in Eleventh-Century Byzantium'; and Paschalides, 'Ο ανέκδοτος λόγος τοῦ Νικήτα Στηθάτου Κατὰ ἀγιοκατηγόρων καὶ ἡ ἀμφισβήτηση τῆς ἀγιότητος στὸ Βυζάντιο κατὰ τὸν 11ο αἰώνα'.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, 'Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism'.

⁴⁶ Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 221–2 for doubting the power of saints; Flanagan, *Doubt in an Age of Faith: Uncertainty in the Long Twelfth Century*; Dinzelbacher, *Unglaube im 'Zeitalter des Glaubens': Atheismus und Skeptizismus im Mittelalter*.

⁴⁷ Paul Tagaris, *Confession*, in ed. Miklosich, Müller, *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi sacra et profana*, v. 2: *Acta Patriarchatus Constantinopolitani*, 225–6; text, tr., and commentary in Hunger, 'Die Generalbeichte eines byzantinischen Mönches im 14. Jahrhundert'. See Nicol, 'The Confessions of a Bogus Patriarch: Paul Tagaris Palaiologos, Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and Catholic Patriarch of Constantinople in the Fourteenth Century'. Tagaris may be compared to Nikephoros Basilakes' (twelfth century) semi-fictional literary creation *Bagoas*: text in ed. Garzya, *Nicephori Basilacae orationes et epistolae*, 92–110; discussion in Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, 283, 330, 385.

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