

# FORUM ON ROBERT BARTLETT'S WHY CAN THE DEAD DO SUCH GREAT THINGS?: SAINTS AND WORSHIPPERS FROM THE MARTYRS TO THE REFORMATION

## *Introductory Remarks*

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PONDERING the miraculous deeds of the early Christian saints and martyrs in his *City of God*, St. Augustine queried, “Why can the dead do such great things?”<sup>1</sup> Robert Bartlett’s magisterial study takes up this question by examining the veneration of the holy dead from the age of the martyrs through the Protestant Reformation. While its center of gravity is medieval Europe, the book’s long scope and comparative dimensions make it relevant to historians and scholars of religion across a broad chronological and geographic spectrum. Alongside its erudition, Bartlett’s study is also remarkably accessible—full of engaging stories, good humor, and profound insight into human nature as well as social practice.

In the essays that follow, three scholars address and develop Bartlett’s treatment of this topic from their own areas of expertise. Claudia Rapp begins with an analytical overview of the book, showing how it reflects twenty-first century trends in historical studies, yet at the same time departs from traditional approaches to the cult of the saints. She then comments more specifically on saints, cults, and hagiographical texts from the perspective of Byzantium, which Bartlett rightly includes in his study, showing the interconnectedness between East and West. Richard Kieckhefer explores aspects of the cult of saints that became particularly prevalent in the later Middle Ages. The intercessory function of saints, the localism of saints’ cults, associative clusters of saints, and underlying notions of the communion of saints all attest in different ways to the social dimensions of this devotional practice. Building on Bartlett’s brief treatment of the Reformation, Euan Cameron considers the reformers’ theological objections to medieval notions of sanctity and the cult of saints; yet he also reflects on Protestants’ development of their own replacements for sainthood through

<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 22.9.

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martyrologies and iconography that commemorated the faithful. Finally, Bartlett himself responds to these commentaries, ending with the enduring fascination with saints and some peculiar transformations of their cults in our contemporary world.

As this forum and Bartlett's extraordinary book suggest, the cult of the saints is hardly a mere relic of medieval history. The recent canonization of Mother Teresa by Pope Francis reminds us that the great age of canonization was not the Middle Ages, as Bartlett emphatically notes, but rather the late twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> And while the exotic, the miraculous, and the supernatural feature heavily in the book, as they are integral to the cults of the holy dead, it is perhaps the humanness of the saints that makes them so compelling—for scholars who study them as much as for practitioners who venerated them. In his concluding chapter, Bartlett reflects on how the saints "shared humanity and mortality with the human mortals who prayed to them."<sup>3</sup> *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?* uncovers the complex life stories of these holy yet mortal men and women; at the same time, the appeal of their cults sheds light on the realities of the faithful in diverse premodern contexts. Indeed the lives of saints and their worshippers, so rigorously yet humanely analyzed in Bartlett's encyclopedic book, reveal the needs and hopes, the yearnings and desires that are common to humankind in all ages.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 60.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 609.