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## Religious Belief and Popular Culture

To count up the churchgoers and chapel-goers and argue that the neighbourhood is without religion or to estimate the proportion of children and young persons in places of worship and then say 'religion has no hold on them' . . . is a serious error. It is a confusion of formal outward signs and inward spiritual graces. Many of the poor rarely attend church, not because they are irreligious but because they have long since received and absorbed the truths by which they live; while the idea that attendance at public worship is a duty doesn't occur to them and does not seem credible when suggested . . .<sup>1</sup>

When the district nurse Margaret Loane ventured into the homes of working-class families in London at the end of the nineteenth century she encountered what historians and anthropologists have since called popular religion. Far from matching the typical irreligious caricature ascribed to them by most Victorian religious commentators, the working families with whom she spent time adhered to their own distinctive styles of religiosity. These regulated ethical behaviour and provided a symbolic system whereby individuals and communities made sense of their world. Yet until relatively recently, historians of the nineteenth century have neglected these more subtle and nuanced dimensions of belief. They have focused predominantly on the 'formal outward signs' or institutional expressions of religiosity and they have excluded from their definition of the religious realm those patterns of popular belief expressed in the homes, streets, and alleys as well as in the churches and mission halls of this period.

Influential writers such as E. R. Wickham and K. S. Inglis set the tone for this neglect. Their books *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957) and *The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (1963) laid the foundations for an orthodox interpretation of the relationship between urban life, the working class, and irreligion which

<sup>1</sup> M. Loane, *The Queen's Poor* (1906), 26.

has proved remarkably resilient. Like many of their nineteenth-century predecessors, both historians ascribed lower levels of church attendance in the industrial towns to the alienation of the working classes from the churches. Working-class non-attendance was judged to be symptomatic of a profound spiritual malaise and it was on this basis that the religious life of the cities was measured.

The simplistic identification of religion with institutional church practice remained implicit in much of the work done during the 1960s and 1970s. The incorporation of the secularization thesis into historical interpretations gave this tendency a theoretical underpinning. By the end of the 1970s the arguments put forward by Wickham and Inglis were caught up in a wider theoretical schema in which the inevitable diminution of religious values, sentiment, and institutions was envisaged as part of the transformation of traditional agrarian communities into the modern associational state. Early formulations of this thesis propagated a theoretical relegation of the dimension of religious belief by denying the self-claims of religionists and seeking an alternative explanation for the form and content of religion within social phenomena. The effect of this approach was to undercut attempts to consider the formative role of belief in the interpretative processes whereby individuals ascribe meaning to environment and action. It also gave precedence to the analysis of socio-structural change over and above an examination of the actual content of religious ideas. The consequence of this was the consideration of religion, no less than class, in terms of the realities of the material life, the dismissal of religion in studies of the urban environment as either a waning force or as an interesting pre-industrial hang-over, and the analytical supremacy of social context, social forces, and a new sociological determinism. One has only to look at the work of Gilbert, Horsley, and Currie<sup>2</sup> to see the development of this line of thinking in the writing of religious history. These writers specialized in counting up the numbers of church- and chapel-goers and thereby quantifying the extent of religion from 1700 onwards.

Today, as a result of over a decade of revisionism, few historians would commit the 'serious error' of confusing 'inward spiritual graces' with 'formal outward signs' in an unqualified manner. Most would nod in assent at Loane's emphasis and agree that the sum total of church- and

<sup>2</sup> A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740-1914* (1976); *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (1980); and R. Currie, A. Gilbert, and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977).

chapel-goers is an inadequate gauge of religious fervour and even point to the importance of popular religion in the daily lives of working-class people within the urban environment.<sup>3</sup> But it none the less remains the case that a concentration on formal religious behaviour so outweighs a consideration of the more intangible expressions of belief that popular religion continues to elude us as a serious subject of enquiry in its own right. Even within the revisionist camp there are very few who are prepared to carry this tacit assent into an active understanding of the nature of these 'inward spiritual graces' and to explore the concept of religious duty which excused individuals both from public worship and from the label of 'irreligion'. Furthermore, the revisionist work that has been done remains inhibited in a number of important respects. It has failed fully to liberate itself from the enduring legacy of secularization because of its preoccupation with the question of religious decline. Despite the heavy critical fire to which the secularization thesis has been subject, the model continues to shape the agenda for the historiographical debate. Its theoretical framework still creeps into the writing of religious history, perpetuating the picture of popular religion as a mere concomitant of institutional creeds or as a corrupted version of orthodoxy.

Revisionist writers, no less than those of the orthodox school, have devoted their attention to assessing the timing, the extent, and the causes of religious change. They have arrived at some radically different answers to the questions concerning the place of religion in society. The picture of weak ineffectual churches failing to respond adequately to the chaotic social and economic changes which marked the nineteenth century has given way to an appreciation of both the variety and the vibrancy of church life at the close of the Victorian era. Much of the work of the last decade has been directed towards attacking the secularization thesis for its perpetuation of 'simplistic historical myths'<sup>4</sup> which are seen to substitute for grass-roots, empirical analyses of local churches. Writers such as Jeremy Morris,<sup>5</sup> Simon Green,<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Cox,<sup>7</sup> Callum Brown,<sup>8</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. H. McLeod, 'New Perspectives on Victorian Class Religion: The Oral Evidence', *Oral History*, 14 (1987), 31–50; *Piety and Poverty* (New York, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> C. G. Brown, 'Did Urbanisation Secularise Britain?', *The Urban History Yearbook* (1988), 1.

<sup>5</sup> J. N. Morris, *Religion and Urban Change: Croydon 1840–1914* (Bury St Edmunds, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870–1930* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> C. G. Brown, *The Social History of Scotland since 1730* (1987); 'Did Urbanisation Secularise Britain?' *Urban History Yearbook*, 15 (1988), 1–15.

Mark Smith<sup>9</sup> have stood against the assumption of a necessary correlation between urbanization and secularization of the kind made by Gilbert, Horsley, and Currie. They have reassessed the response of the churches to the urban environment in terms which stress the achievements rather than the failures of the institutions. Green, for example, attacks the application of an inevitable universal process of social change as a means of explaining the decline of the church. He looks instead to the crisis of the associational ideal within the local church community as the specific source of its weakness in Yorkshire in the early decades of the twentieth century. The consideration of evidence such as statistical material on the occupational composition of churches and chapels has reinforced this approach. Mark Smith's work on Oldham and Saddleworth suggests that most congregations in the area had a larger working-class component than is traditionally assumed.

Yet, for all their innovation in relocating the extent and causes of religious change, these writers have continued to allow their agenda to be shaped by questions of decline, often at the cost of developing new avenues of enquiry and considering interpretative approaches which are able to give insight into the more elusive dimensions of popular religious culture outside the churches. Hugh McLeod's recent book *Piety and Poverty* (1996), for instance, seeks to 'define the nature, the extent and the causes of the secularization of the working classes during this period and to explain why these varied so considerably between the different parts of Western Europe and North America'.<sup>10</sup> The comparative approach adopted by McLeod, along with his use of a range of hitherto under-used sources, such as oral history, permit a far more nuanced and detailed picture of the relationship between the churches and the working classes but the basic framework employed in the book remains unaltered. Popular religious belief emerges in the description as one further factor by which to gauge the relationship between secularization and urbanization and to measure the extent of religious decline in the different areas. It is introduced like a trump card into an old debate, forcing new conclusions from those offered in the 1960s but repeating in the 1990s the same questions which are themselves in need of reconsideration.

If we are to understand 'popular religion' as a cultural phenomenon with its own parameters, concerns, and definitions we need to be willing

<sup>9</sup> M. Smith, *Religion and Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth 1740-1865* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> H. McLeod, *Piety and Poverty* (New York, 1996), p. xix.

to move away from these familiar lines of questioning and to begin to explore belief in new and wide-ranging ways which will inevitably take us beyond the urge to measure and quantify religion whether in favour of or in reaction to a linear scale of secularization. One of the barriers to the development of these new avenues of enquiry has been the continued preoccupation of orthodox and revisionist writers alike with measurable, outward, and tangible signs of religiosity. For some this has been the product of a particular theoretical stance. Callum Brown, for instance, undertakes his critique of the orthodox school from the point of view of the social scientist adhering to the materialistic categories which are themselves so problematic. His definition of religion is based on observable forms of religious behaviour which leave untouched the more amorphous aspects of religious culture. Long-term trends of religious adherence and practice form the basis of Brown's examination and, although he recognizes that religious statistics are not the only measures of the social significance of religion, he none the less argues that 'there are probably none better to be had in the realms of religion'.<sup>11</sup> This search for religion in social phenomena means that belief itself continues to elude us. It remains a dependent variable of some more obvious reality such as social class, just as it did in traditional formulations of the secularization theory.

For other revisionist writers this preoccupation with outward measures of religiosity is more a matter of focus than theory. In the work of Jeffrey Cox and Alan Bartlett, for example, 'inward spiritual graces' are considered merely as they merge with 'formal outward signs' and overlap with the facilities, sacraments, and teachings of the church. Cox makes reference to the 'spectrum of beliefs encompassed by diffusive Christianity',<sup>12</sup> but in practice he isolates the 'Christian end'<sup>13</sup> for consideration, while the culture of which these beliefs were a part is not really considered. Alan Bartlett has in many ways gone further than Cox in attempting to correct the external perspective of studies of working-class religion.<sup>14</sup> His use of oral interviewing in particular allowed a deeper examination of working-class religious belief, but he too explores popular religion primarily at the points at which it touches the institutional church. His focus is on the work of the churches within the

<sup>11</sup> C. Brown, 'A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change', in S. Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernisation* (1992), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Cox, *The English Churches*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>14</sup> A. B. Bartlett, 'The Churches in Bermondsey 1880-1939' (Birmingham University Ph.D. thesis, 1987).

Borough of Bermondsey and towards the reaction of the community to this work rather than on the beliefs of that community *per se*. His oral interviewees were drawn from among former working-class churchgoers. Yet such church-based aspects of religion remain unconsidered as part of a far broader range of popular beliefs which both included and extended beyond the sphere of the church and which cannot be understood simply in terms of orthodox criteria.<sup>15</sup> Folk customs and traditions were not confined to the traditional rural setting nor were they just hangovers of an earlier era. They continued to be expressed within the local urban subcultures of London as important elements of popular culture. These customs included a number of rituals and practices used to avert misfortune and to attract prosperity. They involved the employment of specific objects such as charms, mascots, and amulets in order to effect these purposes or to act as preventative or curative guards against various kinds of disease. Folk wisdom and medical lore also combined with more overt expressions of folk superstition which sought to manipulate and control the super-empirical sphere and to bring order and predictability to the local human environment. Cox's brief dismissal of aspects of folklore in urban Lambeth as mere survivals of semi-pagan magic, reflective of a purely general belief in luck, does not do justice to this material. Folk beliefs continued to combine with more official dimensions of religiosity and overlapped to form a distinct pattern of religious expression. The complexity of religious ideas within popular culture cannot be understood without appreciating the coalescence of these different types or languages of belief and without extending the parameters of our questioning to include popular culture as a setting for religious expression alongside the church.

This book is devoted to exploring these kinds of belief. It does so within the context of a local study of the London Borough of Southwark. By the 1880s this area had developed an identity which remained characteristic until the Second World War. The cries of street sellers, and the barrows and market stalls of the costermongers filled the byways of the borough. The pearly kings and queens added their distinctive presence, while the music-halls and ramshackle theatres epitomized the colourful but less salubrious side of London culture. The borough's working-class inhabitants were famed for low levels of church attendance and tarred with the brush of lamentable irreligion. Yet the 'poor who rarely attended church' in this area at the end of the nineteenth century and in

<sup>15</sup> S. C. Williams, 'Urban Popular Religion and the Rites of Passage', in H. McLeod (ed.), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830-1930* (1995), 216-39.

the period prior to the Second World War, certainly did receive and absorb the truths by which they lived, as Loane suggests. They continued to attend church on occasions such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, and watch-night services to celebrate New Year. They sent their children to Sunday school with dogged determination, sang hymns in one another's homes, prayed in private, and continued to separate the sabbath from the rest of the week by a series of rituals and observances which broke the normal rhythm of life. Orthodox rites and images formed a vital part of their sense of heritage and tradition, not merely as a residue of a former 'golden age' or, as Jeffrey Cox puts it, 'the best that a millennium of protestant indoctrination could achieve'.<sup>16</sup> They were expressed alongside a range of folk customs, beliefs, and practices usually associated with English villagers and earlier periods.

However, to tap such belief and to attempt to enquire into the character of these 'inward spiritual graces' necessitates the development of a method which is able to yield a nuanced account of both personal belief and popular culture. The preoccupation of religious historians with the debate over religious decline has inhibited the development of these areas. Methodology has to form a key priority in the questioning of religion in this period. There is much to learn in this respect from recent developments in the field of social history. In this discipline a search has taken place for an appreciation of the ways in which the historical actor constructs the meaning of social structures and values. An attempt has been made to move beyond the external consideration of social structures and institutions to consider the dimension of mentality and culture. The symbolic interactionists have been a formative influence in this regard. They, and their successors the ethnomethodologists led the way in challenging the treatment of belief and its ascribed role in the modern world. Herbert Blumer, for example, focused his analysis on the interpretative methods by which actors assemble the meaning of social structures in their day-to-day activities. The notion of social reality as external to the individual, constraining him to behave in typical ways and forcing upon him certain modes of conceptualization was challenged by these writers in favour of an approach which regards the meanings that are attached to and derived from social interaction as the primary agents in the construction of social value systems.<sup>17</sup> Studies

<sup>16</sup> J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930* (Oxford, 1982), 95.

<sup>17</sup> H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ, 1969); P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York, 1966); K. Dixon, *The Sociology of Belief* (1980); J. A. Hughes, *The Perspective of Ethnomethodology* (1983); and H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New York, 1967).

such as Louisa Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1987) took this perspective on board and incorporated the analysis of symbolic and cultural phenomena such as self-representations, myths, and stories into the reconstruction of political behaviour and experience among the Turin working class during the Fascist regime. She emphasizes the conflicts of power which took place on a cultural and symbolic plane rather than concentrating merely on those which took place within the narrow political sphere.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Joanna Bourke in her recent book, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1960* (1994), is concerned with the subjective dimension of class identity. She constructs her definition of class on the basis of the label individuals gave themselves and which emerged from the routine activity of daily life rather than from economic determinants, status, or institutional affiliation. Bourke, like Passerini, highlights the symbolic expressions of power in social relationships over and above the purely material realities.

In other studies a strong emphasis is placed on the notion of popular culture as an alternative interpretative model by which to describe political, social, and economic configurations to those based on class and class consciousness. Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid, for example, in their book *Currents of Radicalism* (1991) follow in the tradition of Gareth Stedman Jones<sup>19</sup> and stress the importance of reconstructing the language and thought of those participating in popular radical movements at the end of the nineteenth century. They begin from the assumption that it is vital to approach political radicalism from within rather than in terms of its consistency with external norms of revolutionary rhetoric or with teleological models of historical development.

What ordinary people thought and the way in which they expressed it matters and ought to be taken seriously by historians: what the politically active among them demanded cannot be assessed in abstraction from their own needs, desires and capacities.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See also L. Passerini, 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 82–108.

<sup>19</sup> G. S. Jones, *Languages of Class 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983); see also J. Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty; Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 22 (1989), 75–119; J. R. Cronin, 'Language, Politics and the Critique of Social History: Languages of Class', *Journal of Social History*, 20 (1986), 177–84; W. Reddy, 'The Language of the Crowd at Rouen 1752–1871', *Past and Present*, 34 (1977); J. Thompson, 'After the Fall: Class and Political Language in Britain, 1780–1900', *Historical Journal*, 39/3 (1996), 785–806.

<sup>20</sup> E. F. Biagini and A. J. Reid, *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 5.

In the same vein Patrick Joyce has considered ways in which the social order has been represented other than on the basis of class, by looking at varieties of language and inclusive universalizing cultural discourses such as the concepts of nation and people which he includes within the category of populism.<sup>21</sup> Joyce argues that the 'search now is for how meanings have been produced by relations of power rather than from external or objective class structures or other social referents'.<sup>22</sup> Instead of human subjects being seen as the centre of multiple identities imposed by the external environment, human subjectivity is itself regarded as an historical creation worthy of study.

This wide-ranging reconsideration of notions of industrial, economic, and class development has profound implications for the study of Victorian working-class religion, yet this challenge to modernization theory by social historians has not extended to a thorough re-evaluation of the role and dimension of religion in modern popular culture. In Patrick Joyce's recent book, *Visions of the People* (1991), for example, little more than lip-service is paid to the dimension of religion within the development of popular concepts and social identities and to the forms in which these concepts are constituted in terms of popular discourse and language. Likewise, Joanna Bourke dismisses religion altogether in a brief discussion of the failure of the church to provide a centre for social communion in working-class areas.<sup>23</sup> Yet religion needs to be considered not merely as it impinges upon the examination of popular politics,<sup>24</sup> but as an integrated and formative factor within studies of popular culture.

These approaches suggest a number of possibilities for the establishment of a method through which to explore popular religion. First, they highlight the need to reconsider understandings of religiosity on the basis of criteria of the religious behaviour and experience adopted by the actors themselves, rather than merely viewing them in conformity with institutional codes, dogmas, and practices. Secondly, they suggest the need to treat these explanations as an indispensable part of the final account of belief, not merely as the product of causal social explanations which are in some sense more fundamental. Furthermore, they point to the importance of the language of those engaged in varieties of religious activity as a means of understanding how belief is constructed in

<sup>21</sup> P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1840–1914* (1991).

<sup>22</sup> P. Joyce, 'The End of Social History', *Social History* (1995), 82.

<sup>23</sup> J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1960* (1994), 145–8.

<sup>24</sup> P. Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Late-Victorian Factory* (1980), 176–8 and 243–8.

different cultural settings. By giving participant criteria a central place in defining the parameters of that which is considered to be religious one can escape from many of the problems associated with establishing a definition of religion which is wide enough to embrace all dimensions of popular religious experience. The tendency when defining religion is to create distinctions such as natural and supernatural, Christian and unchristian, orthodox and unorthodox, high and low, élite and plebeian which may make theological or analytical sense to the historian or the observer but which impose categories alien to the actors themselves. This is particularly pertinent when considering popular religion, where the interaction of theoretically distinct religious idioms forms a central characteristic of the phenomenon. In Southwark a consideration of participant accounts of belief alongside institutional descriptions, revealed the multidimensional character of religious experience. Church rituals, for example, were performed for the social benefits conferred as well as for spiritual or magical efficacy. Both the social sentiment and the spiritual formed parts of a single religious expression which was too closely interwoven to be separated. Likewise individuals could insist on the regular attendance of their child at Sunday school and still cut a lock of hair of that same child, place it between two pieces of bread, and give it to a passing dog as a cure for the child's whooping cough.<sup>25</sup> The religious professions of the vicar and the ritual practices or remedies of the local fortune-teller could both be ascribed validity in this way. In urban Southwark the popular religious response was characterized by a defiance of many of the analytical categories frequently imposed by contemporary observers and historians. Orthodox and folk religion cannot be crudely juxtaposed as two separate spheres. Folk elements of belief operated, as David Clark suggests in his study of the Yorkshire fishing village of Staithes at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as part of unofficial aspects of doctrine, theology, and worship found within the church as well as outside it<sup>26</sup> while church-based religion in turn was appropriated into the symbolic structure of popular culture. John Rule highlights a similar pattern of interwoven religious idioms in Cornwall between 1800 and 1850.<sup>27</sup> He describes the convergence of popular Methodism with the indigenous beliefs of the

<sup>25</sup> S. C. Williams, 'Religious Belief and Popular Culture: A Study of the South London Borough of Southwark c.1880-1939' (Oxford University D.Phil. thesis, 1993), 38.

<sup>26</sup> D. Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew: Folk Religion in a North Yorkshire Fishing Village* (1982), p. viii.

<sup>27</sup> J. Rule, 'Methodism, Popular Belief and Village Culture in Cornwall', in R. D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York, 1982), 48-70.

people. Popular religion included a conception of Christian doctrine which, as he argues, was 'adapted and transformed as it moved from the church to the cottage'.<sup>28</sup> Village people, therefore, possessed a background of beliefs which were partly Christian and partly magic against which they sought to understand the realities of the human situation. As Clark argues, the religion through which the villagers made sense of their lives consisted of a combination of 'official' and 'folk' religion. Clark highlights the divergent traditions from which these two kinds of religiosity sprang but argues for their complex interconnection in the social setting into which the ordinary villager was born: 'The highly complex interconnections between official and folk religion reflect their symbiotic relationship'.<sup>29</sup>

Popular religion is more appropriately defined, therefore, as a generally shared understanding of religious meaning including both folk beliefs as well as formal and officially sanctioned practices and ideas, operating within a loosely bound interpretative community. These formed part of a particular value orientation or culture: a generalized and organized conception of nature, of man's place in it, of man's relation to man and of the desirable and non-desirable as they relate to man's environment and interpersonal relations.<sup>30</sup> They did so in a manner akin to the ways in which a community possesses a verbal repertoire<sup>31</sup> with a variety of linguistic codes or types of language. The inhabitants of the borough were exposed to a range of religious idioms, perspectives, or discourses which in combination constituted popular religion. The voice of the vicar can be described as one 'field of religious experience' as Lawrence Taylor argues in his study of south-west Donegal.<sup>32</sup> This church-based, official or orthodox religious discourse embodied a series of shared meanings, attitudes, and values through which a regime of truth about the world was structured and communicated. It involved a particular conception of nature and of the human world, of man's place in it and of his correct and incorrect behaviour towards his fellow man. It was distinguished by the prescription, regulation, and socialization of these values via the medium of specialized

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>30</sup> C. Kluckholme, 'Values and Value Orientation in the Theory of Action', in T. Parsons and E. Shils (eds.), *Towards A General Theory of Action* (New York, 1962), 388–433.

<sup>31</sup> In his study of socio-linguistics, *Socio-linguistics* (1974), Peter Trudgill has argued for the use of different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes.

<sup>32</sup> L. J. Taylor, 'Languages of Belief', in M. Silverman and P. H. Gulliver (eds.), *Approaching the Past* (New York, 1992), 146.

institutions or orthodox doctrine. The church-based religious discourse, thus defined, may be equated with Robert Towler's and David Clark's description of 'official religion'. Both Towler and Clark use the term official religion to refer to all aspects of religious belief and practice which find a warrant in the formal teachings of any church, denomination, or sect.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, magical remedies, rituals, and explanations which were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next may be seen as an alternative narrative or folk religious discourse. This included a variety of beliefs and in some cases a more overt concept of the supernatural. This discourse was far more eclectic and thematic than that of church-based religion. It was not systematic and the absence of any formal institutional base meant that it was subject to a greater degree of personal and local interpretation. None the less it remained a way of seeing and interpreting the world and of acting towards it in response.

These religious perspectives or discourses both formed part of the popular religious repertoire. At an event such as an infant baptism the two narratives could operate in conjunction with one another, not merely in terms of a crude opposition between the vicar and the participant but within a range of beliefs held by the single actor. For the participants, the two discourses were intermeshed. They may well have been able to employ an orthodox narrative to explain their motives in bringing a child forward for baptism. This was not merely adopted to placate or appeal to the vicar or the lady visitor on the doorstep, nor was it solely an instrument of *embourgeoisement*. The participants may have believed sincerely in the efficacy, the validity, and the importance of the content of that narrative, and yet at the same time they may also have acted and justified their behaviour as part of a folk discourse in which certain other expectations and assumptions were operating to constrain them to act in a certain way.

The dual operation of these two dimensions or languages of belief did not necessarily diminish the depth of each component part. Christian hymns, orthodox rites and symbols continued to hold an evocative power in Southwark in this period, while elements of folk belief had not been fully depersonalized nor had they degenerated into mere luck as some suggest.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, this overlap of different discourses was not simply reserved for certain specific events such as the watch-night service

<sup>33</sup> Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew* (1982), p. viii; R. Towler, *Homo Religiosus* (1974), 148.

<sup>34</sup> Cox, *The English Churches*, 94.

or the infant baptism; it also operated in popular definitions of what it meant to be truly religious, to sin, and to be moral.

By letting go of the instinct to view official and unofficial religion as monolithic and immutable entities and considering instead the inter-related character of different patterns of belief, it is possible to escape from the often repeated misconception that popular religion is always rural, primitive, and traditional as opposed to urban, civilized, and modern. Instead, the dynamic role of popular forms of devotion which encompassed both official and non-official religion, can be appreciated.

Furthermore, this approach allows popular religion to be defined as primarily a cultural phenomenon in the Geertzian sense of a system which gives meaning to the world.<sup>35</sup> This has the corresponding advantage of releasing the notion of popular religion from too close an association with ideas of class. Social historians of the nineteenth century have tended to confuse symbolic communities, based on the creation of cultural meaning, with more straightforward analyses of structural communities based on social processes.<sup>36</sup> Communities do undoubtedly possess both these components, but they each demand different interpretative approaches if they are to be adequately understood. On the one hand one is dealing with the interpretation of symbolic meaning and on the other with social structures. The mixing of these approaches can be particularly problematic when one is seeking to decipher the role of belief. In Southwark a symbolic or popular cultural community bound by a common set of beliefs, values, and norms was apparent at the end of the nineteenth century through to the Second World War. Religion formed part of the symbolic system of meaning by which this community was constituted. The community was not simply the product of structural processes determined by social and economic criteria: its foundations lay in the expression and experience of a common world-view. When religion is simply interpreted in structural terms on the basis of class these essential phenomenological aspects tend to be overlooked in the endeavour to establish the extent to which religion, along with the structural group, has or has not withstood the onslaught of social change. Religion tends thus to be typified, like the structural community itself, as uniquely traditional, surviving only in the context of certain pre-industrial social relationships and necessarily excluded from the social forms of the modern exemplified by the impersonal, urban,

<sup>35</sup> C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1966), 1–46.

<sup>36</sup> A. P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1992).

rational, and classed-based social structures of industrial society. The crude correlation of symbolic communities of this kind with the structural analysis of class prevents us from understanding the new, varied, and complex ways in which religion continues to help establish cultural meaning and identity in modern social situations.

Although this study of Southwark takes the non-elite and the poor as its starting-point it does so simply to establish some kind of limit on what would otherwise be an unrealistically huge undertaking. It is not intended to imply that 'popular' should simply be equated with the 'working class'. This starting-point makes sense for the straightforward reason that it is this social group around which the historiographical debate has revolved since the days of Horace Mann, the Registrar-General who constructed the report on the Religious Census of 1851.<sup>37</sup> The report, which was not published until 1852, caused intense contemporary debate. It revealed not only that about 40 per cent of churchgoers in England attended non-Anglican churches but also that on the day of the census only 7.26 million of the 17.92 million inhabitants of England and Wales attended religious worship of any kind. The findings focused attention on the religious condition of the working poor who were blamed for these statistics. The connections which Mann made between urban life, the working class, and irreligion remained the prevailing view throughout the nineteenth century and they have continued to inform the assumptions of the twentieth-century historiographical debate. The 'working classes' are treated here not monolithically but as a group within which there was division based on belief, culture, and world-view. Of those considered in Southwark, some identified themselves specifically with the church, employing the language of the regenerate and the unregenerate, the believer and the unbeliever. Others (although very few in Southwark) defined themselves in terms of an ideological commitment to a creed of secularism. The 'popular religious community' often defined itself both in opposition to those who formally allied themselves with the institutional churches whether through conversion, confirmation, or church membership and in opposition to secularism. In practice this meant disassociation from those who failed to drink with the 'herd' at the local public house<sup>38</sup> or from those who did not participate in the informal network of neighbourly

<sup>37</sup> H. Mann, 'Religious Census of 1851'. Results published in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852-30, 89 (England and Wales), 1854, 59 (Scotland).

<sup>38</sup> R. Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (Oxford, 1986), 243.

support. This cultural community established its own definitions of who was bad and who was good, who was unChristian and who was genuinely religious, and these attributes were not strictly defined by class. As Patrick Collinson points out in his Ford Lectures on sixteenth-century protestantism, 'The friction between the godly and the ungodly could arise within and not necessarily between social classes'.<sup>39</sup> The criteria which separated them was one of world-view or culture while personal experiences and issues of gender and of age played their part alongside more general economic determinants. It is the boundary of this community which this study seeks to reconstruct.

In adopting this kind of method it becomes essential to draw participant definitions out of the historical material available and to consider the language itself as it reveals the cultural symbols used by individuals. It is often the difficulty of finding appropriate material through which to reconstruct popular religion which prevents the development of these lines of questioning. The challenge here is to discover, as the sociologist Victor Branford pointed out in 1914,

. . . some method of observing and recording what the French call *état d'âme*—the thoughts and emotions, the habits of mind and life of persons in their interior and ultimate relations with one another and with their surroundings. The sort of question this more intense study has to put before itself is how can we decipher and record people's ideals, their characteristic ideas and cultures and the images and symbols which habitually occupy their minds.<sup>40</sup>

This problem is all the more complicated as most of the material upon which we rely consists of the comment of middle-class observers who attributed a set of meanings to these beliefs on the basis of their own pre-suppositions. Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London*, completed in 1902, Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith's *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1931), works such as *Across the Bridges* (1911)<sup>41</sup> written by the philanthropist Alexander Paterson, the annual reports, reminiscences, and writings of local churchmen, all consist primarily of the expression of the opinions of others on the beliefs of the working

<sup>39</sup> P. Collinson, *The Religion of the Protestants: The Church in English Society* (Oxford, 1979), 193.

<sup>40</sup> V. Branford, *Interpretations and Forecasts: A Study of the Survivals and Tendencies of Contemporary Society* (1914), 72.

<sup>41</sup> See also C. M. Davies, *Unorthodox London* (1874) and *Orthodox London* (1873), J. E. Ritchie, *Days and Nights in London* (1880) and E. J. Orford, *The Book of Walworth* (1925). Local newspapers such as the *Southwark Annual*, the *South London Chronicle*, the *Southwark Recorder*, the *South London Press*, the *Daily Graphic* and the *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser* also provide an additional source of observation and opinion.

classes. Booth's *Life and Labour* provides a particularly rich example of these problems. This work was intended as a comprehensive survey of the industrial and social status of the population of London. The first series—'Poverty' (first published in 1898)—consisted of a study of the social conditions of the inhabitants of every household in London. Evidence was drawn from the records of school board officers and checked against police records, poor law statistics, and the personal observations of the investigators. The second series—'Industry' (first published in 1900)—attempted to connect the conditions of life with the occupations of the people. It consisted of a review of work trade by trade, an enumeration of the age and gender of the employed, and a description of the social conditions of the employees. Having completed the 'Poverty' and 'Industry' series Booth undertook a survey of the 'Religious Influences' acting on the lives of the inhabitants of the capital. This appeared in 1902 and consisted of an appraisal of the effects of the agencies which sought to influence the people of London, most notably the churches. The fourth volume on the 'Religious Influences' gives detailed descriptions of the Southwark area and the summary given in volume vii included conclusions based, in part, on the evidence drawn from interviews with churchmen in the area.

Booth's inquiry provides a valuable corrective to the statistical approaches of Richard Mudie-Smith<sup>42</sup> and Robertson Nicoll.<sup>43</sup> It offers a glimpse of the wider social impact and the influence of religion on the people, but it does so by relying purely on the official perspectives of churchmen and philanthropists. Booth's staff of five interviewed the head of every religious and social agency in London. Their opinions were then weighed against a visit to the church and the comments of other church leaders. There was no attempt, however, to include the opinions of the beneficiaries of these religious institutions. The product was a characterization of the religious beliefs of the people based on descriptions selected and mediated by Booth's personal value criteria. The 'people' are characterized as, above all, indifferent to religion. The descriptive terms, 'indifferent', 'vague', 'ignorant' and 'uncommitted' are used throughout the third series, to describe the beliefs of the less articulate sections of the population in relation to a standard of orthodoxy arising from the perspective of the institutional churches. These terms are also highly generalized. Booth specifically used the widest possible variety of opinion in order to identify the extraordinary

<sup>42</sup> R. Mudie-Smith, *The Religious Life of London* (1904).

<sup>43</sup> *The Religious Census of London*, reprinted from the *British Weekly* (1888).

and to define the consensus. His concern was to escape from the sensationalism and subjectivity of previous attempts to analyse social behaviour, but the third series presented particular problems. The lack of equivalent sources to the records of relieving officers and school-board visitors which were used in the first and second series rendered the application of a statistical yardstick impossible. Booth had, therefore, to rely on second-hand observation and impression, the evaluation and selection of which was subject to his personal discretion. He did not lay out a systematic methodological foundation for the 'Religious Influences' and the result was a concentration upon oversimplified stereotypes which Robertson Nicholl described as 'Religious gossip served up in a miscellaneous manner'.<sup>44</sup>

This problem was fuelled further by Booth's reliance on characterizations of the male as representative of the working people as a whole. Booth himself argued that the habits of the home were stronger than the precepts of the school and the influence of the churches but he did not examine the female dimension of religiosity in any detail. His assumption was that accounts of male attitudes and opinions were sufficient to reflect adequately the outlook of the social group as a whole. The divergent material, social, and cultural worlds of contemporary males and females makes such neglect peculiarly problematic<sup>45</sup> as does the fact that women played a key role as conduits of belief and culture in working-class homes.<sup>46</sup>

Yet despite these problems, *Life and Labour* should not be laid to one side as an historical source.<sup>47</sup> The beliefs described, often in a derogatory and dismissive manner, can be reinterpreted and understood through a perspective other than that of Booth and of those professionally involved in equating religion simply with the institutional structures of which

<sup>44</sup> *British Weekly*, 2 Apr. 1903.

<sup>45</sup> The separation of the male and female environments is highlighted by Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London before World War I', *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 4–28; 'Fierce Questions, Angry Taunts: Married Life in Working-Class London 1870–1914', *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1982), 575–602.

<sup>46</sup> E. Roberts, *Working-Class Barrow and Lancaster 1890–1930* (Lancaster, 1976); *A Woman's Place: an Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984); 'The Working-Class Extended Family: Functions and Attitudes, 1890–1940', *Oral History Journal*, 12 (1984); and *Women and Families: An Oral History 1940–1970* (Oxford, 1995); see also Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960* and C. Chinn, *And They Worked all Their Lives: Women and the Urban Poor in England 1880–1990* (Manchester, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> R. O'Day and D. Englander have recently argued in favour of the value of the inquiry as an historical source in *Mr. Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People of London Reconsidered* (1993).

they were a part. To do so two primary methods are used in this study. The first is to adopt a strategy of cross-verifying the descriptions of socio-religious observers such as Booth against a series of impressions drawn from a wide range of fragmentary material; the second is to examine the cultural symbols used by individuals to interpret meaning in both written and spoken language. The endeavour is, as Lucien Febvre wrote,

... to make mute things talk, to make them say things which of themselves they do not say, or about the societies that produced them, in order to build up between them the vast network of mutually supporting relationships which make up for the absence of the written document.<sup>48</sup>

Oral history, autobiographies, popular ephemera, street literature, local newspapers, music-hall songs, folklore, and the manuscripts of the original Booth Collection are drawn alongside socio-religious comment such as Booth's. The Booth manuscript material, for example, containing the original lists, letters, maps, and interview notebooks reveals Booth's impressions and descriptions as well as the structure and the intention of the questioning in individual interviews. It allows the quotations contained in the published volumes of *Life and Labour* to be attributed and located within the broader context of the interview rather than merely within Booth's argument. Much of this material counter-balances, challenges, and elaborates on the material found in the published editions. By considering his comments in the light of a range of fragmentary evidence, the points at which his opinions are inappropriate to the criteria of religiosity and meaning employed within popular culture are revealed and their validity as characterizations of the beliefs of non-church-attending sections of the population can be assessed. The perspectives of the actors are thus able to elucidate or even contradict impressions given elsewhere.

Oral history played a particularly important part in this process. Interviewing allowed a centralizing of participant accounts of behaviour and belief while the twenty-nine interviews carried out in Southwark were specifically directed towards exploring the language, symbolism, and imagery employed among those on the edge of church-based culture and to communicate their experience of life.<sup>49</sup> Religious historians have tended to use oral history to support studies of the institutional church

<sup>48</sup> P. Burke (ed.), *Lucien Febvre—A New Kind of History* (1975), 34.

<sup>49</sup> See Luisa Passerini's vindication of the use of oral history in this way in 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 82–108.

and as a tool with which to extract additional factual information on such issues as church attendance.<sup>50</sup> It is all too easy to go into an interview and raise topics in a way which suggests that one merely wishes to hear what the interviewee thought about formal church services and how frequently they attended them. This has its place of course, and there is no doubt that the perspective given by oral material allows a glimpse of an otherwise hidden life. Yet, the sense of abundance which one feels when one begins to work with the oral source, can lead to a preoccupation with the detailed reconstruction of everyday life, where thick description becomes the sole life-blood of research. This approach can produce a naïve realism, that goes to the interview seeking only the reality content of the oral text and neglects to consider the more fundamental issue of what that text reveals about the symbols and images through which reality is communicated. If this deposit of historical truth is all we seek in the oral testimony then we are likely to spend much of our time separating the factual core from the impediments of rhetorical excess, political bias, or personal hindsight, while crucial issues of factual reliability and the representativeness of the source will present major obstacles. However, when the focus of the endeavour becomes the way in which memory is constructed and the manner of the telling is treated as equally important as that which is told, then the way is opened for the source to yield its unique value, which lies in the first instance in its expression of culture.

Social historians using oral history have been moving in this direction for some time now. The approach has been pioneered in Italy by Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli and recently publicized more widely in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson's book *The Myths we Live By* (1990). James Fentress and Chris Wickham in their excellent book *The Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (1992) make 1960s oral history their chief target of attack. They challenge the methodological naïvety of the early work of Paul Thompson and Jan Vansina in his book, *The Oral Tradition as History* (1985), arguing that social memory is least reliable at the level of information, but most informative when used to consider shared meanings and remembered images. They argue that even at a stylistic level the devices used to make the narration of a story memorable and which may apparently vouch for its reliability, may

<sup>50</sup> This point is made by Hugh McLeod in his article, 'New Perspectives on Victorian Class Religion: The Oral Evidence', *Oral History*, 14 (1986), 31-50, where he argues that oral history may be used as a means of exploring personal and private dimensions of religious belief.

at the same time serve the function of detaching the account from its historical context. Similarly, Lusia Passerini argues that,

The subjective dimension does not allow a direct reconstruction of the past, but it links past and present in a combination which is loaded with symbolic significance. When the oral sources have been placed in a proper framework they are highly relevant to historical analysis. These testimonies are first and foremost statements of cultural identity in which memory continually adapts received traditions to present circumstances.<sup>51</sup>

Psychological research supports this approach. It suggests that the memory itself falsifies distinctions based on truth and untruth, for what the memory retains are not specific data but concepts. Psychologists such as Alan Baddeley, for example, argue that people remember in terms of their previous assumptions and beliefs and that subjects will try to make sense of a given incident by recalling their feelings and interpretations rather than what they actually and literally observed.<sup>52</sup>

Religious history has much to learn from these approaches. In particular, oral history offers a medium for assessing the language in which social meaning is created which is, as yet, under-exploited as a means of understanding religious belief. The free-ranging life history interviews carried out in Southwark allowed religion to emerge (or not emerge, as the case might be) within a structure dictated by the interviewee and as part of a discussion of a wide range of topics. In this way the participants themselves were given room to establish the contours of what they considered to be religious, and the associations, assumptions, and the types of language used to structure popular belief systems could be analysed. A distinct language was identified in which beliefs were formulated and conveyed, which was common to many, although not all, of those interviewed. The parameters of the cultural group could be discerned on the basis of this common formulation or conventionalization of belief.<sup>53</sup> Assessing the language in which social memory is created also provides a medium through which to consider varieties in cultural

<sup>51</sup> L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1987), 18.

<sup>52</sup> A. Baddeley, 'The Limitations of Human Memory', in L. Moss and H. Goldstein (eds.), *The Recall Method in the Social Sciences* (1979), 4–35.

<sup>53</sup> i.e. on the basis of social memory as defined by J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *The Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford, 1992), *passim*. Fentress and Wickham give a valuable description of the character and construction of social memory but their book does not examine in detail the conventionalization of memory as it relates to the dimension of belief nor do they develop the distinction between male and female patterns of recollection and narration.

symbolism, not only between individuals and groups but also between genders.

The connections made between events, beliefs, symbols, and values, for example, provide insight into the role of particular memories. Certain events in an individual's life were often formative in establishing or changing a particular pattern of belief. In a number of the interviews memories of specific incidents led on to the recollection of particular beliefs. An act of hypocrisy on the part of a vicar, for example, could engender a specific statement of unbelief which was anchored in the memory with a particular moment in time. One interviewee's recollection of a limelight concert precipitated a discussion of her belief in the person of Christ. Her description of a particularly vivid slide show led on to a description of how she and her sisters returned home to catch a glimpse of what they believed to be the figure of Jesus standing in their bedroom. The discussion then continued as Mrs Luke described the powerful sense of fear which she associated with a belief in the immanence of Jesus. Her discussion of this belief was punctuated by sharp recollections of the bruises incurred when she made a rapid descent from the bedroom on that particular evening.<sup>54</sup> Memories of Sunday school frequently triggered memories of specific hymns which in turn evoked a sense of nostalgia associated with the home and particularly with the mother. Such associations were informative when considering the place of religious ideas within the mental framework of the interviewees. The connections made between events, beliefs, symbols, and values are vital to the reconstruction of the role and impact of the memories which are recorded. The subtleties of these kinds of evidence can be overlooked in the examination of other types of source material. As David Vincent argued in the case of autobiographical material, these sources have the potential to tell us not merely what happened but the impact of an event upon an actor in the past.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise this kind of interview gave access to the ephemeral world of the joke, the rumour, and gossip which are valuable in revealing the attitudes of the observed.<sup>56</sup> A community's verdict on the local churchman or on a regular church attender in a local street could be gleaned from an incidental comment, a throw-away remark, or an anecdote included in the course of recollection. Stan Hall, the son of a bus con-

<sup>54</sup> SCW, Int. 6.

<sup>55</sup> D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth Century Working Class Autobiography* (1981), 6.

<sup>56</sup> G. E. Evans, *Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition* (1970), 22-3.

ductor, who was born near the Elephant and Castle in 1901, recalled the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Southwark in relation to the rumour which circulated in the Borough concerning the hand print of Jesus which was believed to be impressed on the wall in blood. The recollection of the chapel's impressive façade was given in relation to the fact that local boys were afraid to play near it in case the rumour proved true.<sup>57</sup> Specific memories can in this way be reconstructed within an emotional and personal context and in relation to both the impact felt and the role which incidents play within an individual's understanding of the past.

By bringing the perspective of the actor to bear upon the types of activity observed and the meanings attributed to those acts by the observer, the oral testimony can reveal, for example, the reasons given for non-church attendance within popular culture and the justification adopted for having one's child baptized or sending one's children to Sunday school and participating in prayer and hymn singing at the local mothers' meeting. In so doing it can demonstrate the gap which existed between the perspective of the socio-religious observers and the observed.

In addition, the evidence permits a reconstruction of the rich oral folk culture which persisted within the urban community in this period; as Bernice Martin calls it, 'the ritualised repetition of wisdom in oral form'.<sup>58</sup> Verbal folk wisdom of this kind formed a framework of assumption and belief underlying the use of a range of folk artefacts found in the Lovett Folklore Collection. The meaning and the distribution of the artefacts were gleaned from the autobiographies and oral testimonies. Some of the charms, mascots, rituals, and practices which the folklorist Edward Lovett (1852–1933) collected and deposited at the Cuming Museum in Southwark were mentioned in passing by interviewees or were tucked in as incidental asides in written reminiscences. The use of coral necklaces as a charm and cure for minor throat complaints was corroborated, for example, by a number of interviewees, as were the sayings and rituals to which Lovett refers in his articles and books. Mentioning specific artefacts such as these often stimulated recollection on themes which might otherwise have lain dormant and such comparative techniques shed light on rich seams of folklore, folk custom, and superstition.

Oral testimonies thus provided an alternative form of evidence in which interpretative and phenomenological dimensions are stressed.

<sup>57</sup> SLSL, A. S. Hall, 'Reminiscences' (1988), 5.

<sup>58</sup> B. Martin, *The Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1981), 65.

When used together with the folklore, ephemera, and autobiographies, this material can challenge simplistic descriptions of the irreligion and indifference of infrequent church attenders as caricatured by Booth. It demonstrated the vibrant and distinctive character of an alternative form of religious expression which drew on church-based religious discourse in a selective and conditional manner. Furthermore, when used alongside the Lovett Folklore material, the oral evidence qualifies a crude association between popular religion and orthodox religiosity by highlighting the folk discourse which remained in the modern urban environment.

Whilst stressing the character of the language through which beliefs, ideas, and attitudes are expressed, this study also seeks to relate this analysis, as far as possible, to the local historical context and to avoid the dangers of what has been called 'the semiotic dissolution of history'.<sup>59</sup> The social milieu is considered alongside the content, form, and expression of beliefs without suggesting that an account of the social context explains why the beliefs were held. Thus the analysis of religion to follow begins with a consideration of the Metropolitan Borough of Southwark.

<sup>59</sup> See e.g. D. Thompson, 'Languages of Class', *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, 52 (1987), 54–7; J. R. Cronin, 'Language, Politics and the Critique of Social History: Languages of Class', *Journal of Social History*, 20 (1986–7), 177–84; J. Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 122 (1989), 75–118. See in addition, P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics* (1974), 32 and G. M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 59–87.

### 3

## Urban Folk Religion

An article published in *The Times* and reprinted in the *Folklore Journal* in 1917 claimed that 'faith in the supernatural still obtains in London'.<sup>1</sup> This comment summarized the conclusions drawn from the evidence presented in an exhibition in Southwark Central Library of the folklore material collected by Edward Lovett in the latter years of the nineteenth century. The article continued: 'It shows how widespread is the belief especially in East and South London that the fortunes of individuals can be affected by some inanimate object deemed to be lucky or potent against diseases'.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition contained details of folk rituals and superstitious charms, amulets, dolls, cures, and mascots carried for the purpose of averting misfortune, ensuring good luck, and curing specific diseases. Folk wisdom and medical lore also combined with more overt expressions of folk superstition which sought to manipulate and control the super-empirical sphere and to bring order and predictability to the local human environment. This evidence represented only a small section of Edward Lovett's work which had begun in earnest in the 1880s and which continued into the 1920s. Numerous articles in the *Folklore Journal* and in other newspapers and periodicals summarized Lovett's findings and presented his tentative conclusions on the character of folk tradition in the south of England.

Lovett (1852–1933) ranked among the band of zealous folklorists who flourished in Britain in the late nineteenth century. He was the cashier of a large London bank who, from the age of 8, began an extensive collection of charms, legends, and superstitions which continued to occupy evenings and weekends throughout his working life. He was made president of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society in the late 1880s and by 1905 he was recognized as a national authority on folklore and superstition after a series of exhibitions of his findings in

<sup>1</sup> E. Lovett, 'The Belief in Charms', *Folklore*, 28 (1917), 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

England and Wales. He joined the Folklore Society in 1900 and submitted letters and articles to its journal. His first major exhibition opened in 1914 in Cardiff. This was moved to Southwark Library where it was reported on by *The Times* in 1917. He lectured at the Horniman Museum and at Hove Natural History and Philosophical Society and also at the Royal Society of Arts. After the war he concentrated on London folklore. He made numerous excursions among street traders, exchanging small toys for popular stories and superstitions. "The people from whom I gather these records belong to what is called the "hawker class" whose business is carried on by means of a hand barrow."<sup>3</sup>

The high concentration of street traders and costermongers in south London ensured that the area featured prominently in both his collection and his writings. Lovett did not have a specific theory as to the persistence of magical beliefs in the modern urban environment; his interest was in the collection and accumulation of evidence. In the preface to his book *Magic in Modern London* printed privately by the *Croydon Advertiser* in 1925, he wrote, 'I not only have no theory as to the reason why these remarkable beliefs in magic still exist in modern London, I simply say, I don't know'.<sup>4</sup>

The cumulative effect of his findings, however, demonstrates both the prevalence and the diversity of folk customs, practices, and beliefs within the urban environment. Far from having been extinguished within this context many aspects of folk custom and tradition remained part of the popular religious repertoire. This is corroborated in a number of ways by the written and oral reminiscences. The oral interviews provided a particularly effective arena in which to explore folk customs, practices, and beliefs, particularly as many of them existed in the form of proverbs, sayings, and stories which were transmitted in oral form from neighbour to neighbour and from generation to generation.

For some of the interviewees the practices described were nothing other than trivial or habitual incidentals which appear to have had little substance in terms of actual belief. Touching wood, throwing salt over the shoulder, or not walking under ladders, for example, could emerge in the course of interviewing as isolated and perhaps even humorous or quaint quirks of custom and speech which mean little or nothing as an expression of genuine sentiment.

In other cases, however, these same practices were described as preludes to a discussion of a broader range of beliefs which extended

<sup>3</sup> E. Lovett, *Magic in Modern London* (1925), p. ii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

into more overt and tangible practices involving a sustained ordering of activity in relation to the transcendental realm, such as the use of charms for the enactment of rituals. In such cases the description of what may appear to the observer as 'trivial superstition' must be treated seriously as part of an attempt to respond to existential questions. Such beliefs may well have been subject to various personal idiosyncrasies which could appear at one level to be random and independent of any commonly held system of belief. Yet, although eclectic, in some cases these contributed to a wider pattern of belief which extended beyond individual households to form part of a more extended narrative of meaning. The oral character of folk wisdom ensured that it remained closely bound to the personal associations of popular culture and to a concept of family, community, and popular heritage. These traditions were perpetuated primarily, although not exclusively, by women. They formed part of an explanatory framework of belief which placed the human world within a super-empirical and, on occasions, a supernatural frame of reference and it is as such that they are described here as a folk religious discourse.<sup>5</sup>

It is an assumption frequently made that folk beliefs of this kind were excluded from this sort of highly urbanized arena. If localized pockets of superstition are identified they are considered anomalies or treated as fossils of a previous pre-industrial age doomed to inevitable extinction in the course of socio-economic change. The persistence of a folk narrative in urban Southwark during this period qualifies the view that the kinds of folk beliefs traditionally associated with the countryside had either disappeared entirely or had degenerated into a mere residue of arbitrary and impersonal forms of luck. There was no straightforward process of decline from a traditional past to a modern present in which superstition and folk belief gradually fell by the social and religious wayside. The Lovett material and the oral evidence together call into question the assumption made by Jeffrey Cox, for example, that 'The spread of scientific ideas and the emergence of an urban working class culture finished the job begun by the Protestant Reformation and purged diffusive christianity of centuries-old non-Christian accretions'.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, it suggests that a number of the features of folk practice and belief identified by James Obelkevich in rural South Lindsey<sup>7</sup> were

<sup>5</sup> Robert Towler argues for the status of superstition as a form of common religion in *Homo Religiosus* (1974), 156, and David Martin includes superstition in his discussion of religion in *A Sociology of English Religion* (1968), 74.

<sup>6</sup> J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930* (Oxford, 1982), 95.

<sup>7</sup> J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society in South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford, 1976).

also found in London at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The use of the term 'traditional' as a descriptive category for folk beliefs of this kind must bear at least some of the responsibility for their treatment as mere pagan, antiquarian, or pre-modern survivals. The term is often applied to particular forms of belief or behaviour at certain stages of social development. Yet custom and tradition are more profitably seen, as most folklorists now insist, as a dynamic process of social interaction rather than as a set of artefacts or as components in a canon of certain kinds of defined belief. Emphasis is placed, for example, on the process by which tradition is created and upon the conferment of customary or traditional status on recently acquired practices. The inhabitants of Southwark considered a particular remedy, such as the use of cat skin as a remedy for rheumatism and chest complaints,<sup>8</sup> as 'traditional' when it had in fact been newly introduced to the Borough of Southwark by Belgian refugees during the First World War. The status of such remedies as 'traditional cures' lies in a particular concept of the past with which the present claims continuity. The creation of an idea of popular heritage in which superstitious cures, remedies, rituals, and practices were central is in itself as significant as the persistence of particular traditions through time.<sup>9</sup> At the same time familiar folk customs like those found in rural areas and earlier periods were employed in different settings and invested with different meaning. The urban environment created new contexts in which anxiety and uncertainty were expressed and in which aspects of folk custom were employed. The so-called gap between certainty and uncertainty, anxiety and assurance did not inevitably diminish with social and economic change;<sup>10</sup> rather the points at which the controllable and the capricious met were located in different places and in different ways within the experience of the individual and in the culture as a whole. As the anthropologist Anthony Cohen has argued, aspects of culture from the past continue into the present,

... not because of inertia or conservatism but because they play important roles within contemporary social settings. Indeed some are revived from the past

<sup>8</sup> Original labels of the Lovett Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Both A. Gailey, 'The Nature of Tradition', *Folklore*, 100 (1989), 143–61 and P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1840–1914* (1991), 145–71, examine the idea of tradition as process.

<sup>10</sup> N. Abercrombie, J. Barker, S. Brett, and J. Foster, 'Superstition and Religion: The God of the Gaps', *Sociological Yearbook of Religion*, 3 (1970), 93–129.

to serve in the same way. Others are of recent origin and yet others are being continuously created for new or for old purposes.<sup>11</sup>

For a number of those interviewed in Southwark, and in much of the material amassed by Edward Lovett, seemingly trivial and incidental habits such as avoiding the spilling of salt, the crossing of knives, the opening of umbrellas indoors, and the placing of shoes on the table, were caught up in a more extensive expression of folk belief. This included a belief in portents and foreknowledge, the enactment of spells and rituals, and the employment of specific objects, charms, mascots, and amulets for particular purposes including the cure of diseases. Furthermore, the expression of these beliefs remained associated with certain figures within the community and embraced a more general fascination with the supernatural including a belief in the visible and personal manifestation of the spiritual realm in the form of ghosts. Mrs Cotton (the daughter of a compositor from Peckham, born in 1910), Barbara Luke (the daughter of a ladies' tailor from Peckham, born in 1921), Anna Telby (the daughter of a laundry woman from Colbar Square, Marylebone, born in 1905), and Elizabeth Merritt (the daughter of a carpenter from Walworth, born in 1912), all recalled how in their households and in their mothers' households particular activities were prohibited on the grounds of preventing the intervention of ill luck which threatened to strike the family at the slightest opportunity. For each of them, seemingly trivial or apparently incidental activities were diligently avoided as part of a broader system of belief in the presence and power of a supernatural realm to affect the course of everyday life. The placing of slippers on the table, for example, could induce a violent reaction in Mrs Cotton's household because of its unlucky associations: 'Wouldn't have slippers on table. They'd be slung flying . . . you might have got a wallop for that.'<sup>12</sup>

The same was true for Anna Telby and Elizabeth Merritt.

Never put a pair of shoes on the table or slippers that's bad luck, never, that's bad luck, right, that's bad luck . . .<sup>13</sup>

If I put some shoes on the table, take 'em off it's unlucky.<sup>14</sup>

A number of those interviewed recalled a similar reaction to the cross-

<sup>11</sup> A. Cohen, *Two Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (1974), 3.

<sup>12</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>13</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

<sup>14</sup> SCW, Int. 21.

ing of knives and the upsetting of salt. Barbara Luke, for example, described how for her mother, '... you could never cross two knives together, or there'd be a row, you couldn't never do that and if you dropped salt you had to sling it over your shoulder for good luck...'<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Mrs Cotton recalled: 'Tell you what; my mum if she spilt the salt she'd throw a bit over her shoulder'.<sup>16</sup>

Such practices were commonplace and widespread not only in the interviews carried out in Southwark but throughout the country in rural and urban areas alike.<sup>17</sup> The journal *Notes and Queries*, for example, recorded the aversion to placing slippers on the table in Shropshire in 1869,<sup>18</sup> in Stromness and Orkney in 1909,<sup>19</sup> and in London in 1884.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the crossing of knives was described as unlucky and liable to precipitate a quarrel by both E. M. Leather in Herefordshire in 1912<sup>21</sup> and by C. S. Burne in Shropshire in 1883,<sup>22</sup> while averting the ill effects of spilling salt by throwing a little over the shoulder was widely recorded.<sup>23</sup> The Primitive Methodist, Agnes Bowlin, who appears in Robert Roberts's recollections of Salford in the early years of the twentieth century, was said to be horrified at any of the above. 'You'll pay for that', she would say when any of them were transgressed.<sup>24</sup> In the recollections of these individuals, however, such practices emerge alongside a wide range of personal superstitions and practices. At least two of the women interviewed recalled avoiding certain colours for fear of incurring ill fortune. Mrs Cotton would not wear red. She described how she rejected a gift of some slippers as they had red rose buds on them which she believed were sufficient to attract bad luck. Elizabeth Merritt described in some detail how her mother would not have the colour green in her house.

I had a little black doll (only about as big as that), and the lady downstairs she knitted an outfit for it in green. I told mum, 'Oh', she said, 'unlucky colour'. I

<sup>15</sup> SCW, Int. 6.

<sup>16</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. I. Opie and M. Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford, 1989), 350, 342–5, 219.

<sup>18</sup> *Notes and Queries: A Medium of Communication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquarians, Genealogists*, 4th series, 4 (1869), 307.

<sup>19</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 10th series, 12 (1909), 484.

<sup>20</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 6th series, 9 (1884), 66.

<sup>21</sup> E. M. Leather, *The Folklore of Herefordshire* (1912), 87.

<sup>22</sup> C. S. Burne, *Shropshire Folklore: A sheaf of Gleanings*, edited from the collections of G. F. Jackson (1883), 279.

<sup>23</sup> Opie and Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, 342–3.

<sup>24</sup> R. Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling: Growing up in a Classic Slum* (Manchester, 1976), 102.

said, 'It's only a doll' and put it away in my little toy cupboard 'cos I was pleased with it. The next day I went to look for it, I could find the doll but not the dress. 'Oh', I said 'Mum the dress has gone'. 'Yes I burnt it, put it on the fire . . .' Oh I was upset.<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, Philippa Ivy of Dulwich, born in 1904, described how her mother insisted, among other things, that lavender and lilac must never enter her house. 'Lavender, mustn't have lavender, my mother used to put her hands in her ears when the lavender people were crying and you couldn't take lilac into the house.'<sup>26</sup>

Although personal and idiosyncratic, the beliefs which lay behind these specific aversions were verbalized on the basis of a narrative in which the immanence of misfortune was stressed and the medium through which it could be averted described. For some, such practices were also associated with a belief in portents and foreknowledge. Mrs Cotton recalled how the behaviour of the household was restricted on the basis of certain portents of future evil or good fortune. These were discerned from reading the cinders which fell from the fire.

You know when you get a clinker, bit of cinder come out of the fire, leave it don't touch it, she'd wait and she'd pick it up. I know many a time . . . 'Oh my gawd', she'd say 'throw it back'. I know once it had a dent in it . . . oh yes in her mind she'd just touch it, shape of a coffin . . . she'd crush it and throw it back.<sup>27</sup>

Both Anna Telby and her mother insisted that the dropping of a knife was a sign of a surprise, and the dropping of a spoon an indication that a letter would soon be arriving and Anna Telby even argued that

If a sparrow comes in your place (and it's true . . .) If a sparrow comes in your place that's bad luck (and it does happen), someone dies in the family or they've been robbed or they've had an accident (that's true). The other one is . . . If I buy a loaf of bread (and I still do this today) if I buy a loaf of bread, a loaf of cut slice, and I take one and put it under the toaster and it's got a hole in it like that, I say that's someone died that I know and more or less that's always someone died that I know . . .<sup>28</sup>

Sayings which dictated behaviour surrounded not only the placing of cutlery but also fallen pictures and broken mirrors.<sup>29</sup> The latter were believed to presage a death in the family. As the folklorist E. M. Leather argued in the case of Hereford in 1912, little sayings about good and bad luck were found in almost everything that happened fortuitously.

<sup>25</sup> SCW, Int. 21.

<sup>26</sup> SCW, Int. 17.

<sup>27</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>28</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

The crossing of a knife is the sign of a visitor; a coming stranger may also be announced by a smokey film hanging on the bar of the grate or by the lid of the tap being left open or by a bumble bee coming in through the window. If you go to see a neighbour and find that she is poking the fire as you enter it is a sign that you are not welcome. She may pretend to be glad to see you but that's no difference. If when dressing a woman put her stocking on the wrong side out it is for luck, but if she turns it the luck will change.<sup>30</sup>

Elizabeth Merritt recalled her belief in this last practice. She described how she would avoid turning her clothes the right way round if she accidentally put them on inside out, in order to preserve her luck.<sup>31</sup>

The active avoidance of bad luck was interwoven not only with portent and foreknowledge but also with the enactment of certain rituals and the specific use of charms, mascots, and amulets. Alf Westall of Rockingham Street, Southwark, born in 1910, recalled the commonplace ritual of turning round three times at the sight of a black cat,<sup>32</sup> while Jim Bower from Abbey Street, Bermondsey, born in 1919, described avoiding the cracks in the pavement, especially when one had had a bet,<sup>33</sup> and spitting on the ground at the sight of a white horse and saying 'first luck'.<sup>34</sup> Such commonplace rituals could be related more specifically to certain objects and to more elaborate spells and charms. Helen Westall, the daughter of a labourer from Deptford, born in 1915, recalled picking up pennies, keeping them, and rubbing them from time to time and saying ' . . . that will bring me luck'.<sup>35</sup> Her recollection may explain the large number of old English copper coins which were found in the Lovett Collection and which he described as good luck charms. Lilian Tims from Massinger Street, Southwark, born in 1918, recalled how one old man in her street, who sent her to place his bets for him, would enact the ritual of tapping his rabbit's foot whenever a bet was made.<sup>36</sup>

The Lovett Collection also suggests that more elaborate rituals were used to secure specific forms of good fortune such as love, just as they had been in rural areas half a century before. Lovett recorded in *Magic in Modern London* (1925) how the root of a small yellow wild flower (*potentilla tormentilla*) was purchased by girls in the East End of London

<sup>30</sup> Leather, *The Folklore of Herefordshire*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> SCW, Int. 21.

<sup>32</sup> SCW, Int. 2.

<sup>33</sup> SCW, Int. 1.

<sup>34</sup> SCW, Int. 1. Cf. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem's description of this practice in Opie and Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, 444–5. See also I. and P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford, 1970), 208.

<sup>35</sup> SCW, Int. 2.

<sup>36</sup> SCW, Int. 23.

when they suffered in love.<sup>37</sup> Tormentil root was burnt at midnight on a Friday. The special efficacy of this ritual was believed to lie in its power to revive a dead or waning affection.<sup>38</sup> It was guaranteed so to torment and worry the offending male that he would soon return to his sweetheart. Lovett goes on to write that

Some years ago I was informed by one of my herbalist friends 'down east' that he often had visits to his shop by girls of the locality, chiefly factory hands, and that they came to buy penny packets of dragon's blood. His interest being aroused he asked them what they wanted it for and from the amused and sometimes confused appearance of the girls added to his own experience and knowledge he said there was no doubt the dragon's blood was used as a love philtre.<sup>39</sup>

Similar instances are recorded in Bromley-by-Bow and in Shore-ditch.<sup>40</sup> These descriptions bear a marked similarity to incidents recorded by E. M. Leather in Herefordshire in the early 1900s. 'Dragon's blood' was used here as a love charm. It was thrown on the fire while the enquirer chanted,

Tis this blood I mean to burn,  
Hoping ——'s heart to burn,  
That he (or she) can neither rest nor sleep  
Till he come to me to speak.<sup>41</sup>

The collection also suggests that in twentieth-century London evil could be avoided through spells and magical rituals. The ritual of piercing a heart with pins was not unheard of as a more elaborate measure used to avert the evil influence of a spell. A dairyman in Bethnal Green during the 1920s was convinced that a spell had been put on his cows after two of them had fallen ill and died. He took the heart of one of the dead cows, pierced it with pins, and hung it in his fireplace. It was not long before reparations were made to the dairyman by a neighbour who had poisoned the cows with yew.<sup>42</sup> Lovett's exhibition in 1917 also contained a sheep's heart pierced with pins to break the spell of a black witch. It was prepared by a woman who practised witchcraft in London in the 1910s. She both practised and recommended the remedy of piercing a heart with pins and hanging it in one's chimney as a means of protecting property against the machinations of an evil

<sup>37</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Lovett, 'Belief in Charms', 99.

<sup>39</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> E. Lovett, 'Folk Medicine in London', *Folklore*, 24 (1913), 120-1.

<sup>41</sup> Leather, *The Folklore of Herefordshire*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> E. Lovett, 'Londoners still Believe in Superstitions', *The Evening News*, 1 Oct. 1926.

marauder.<sup>43</sup> These examples bear remarkable similarity to an incident recorded by Lovett in the *Folklore Journal* for 1909. A shepherd from the South Downs believed that his pigs had been 'overlooked' by a witch when a number of them began to sicken and die. His response, as in the cases cited in London, was to take the heart from one of the pigs and stick pins in it, thereby bringing various misfortunes upon the person with the evil eye and forcing him or her to renounce their malevolent influence.<sup>44</sup>

Both good and bad luck could be controlled not only through rituals of these kinds but also through a range of charms, amulets, and lucky objects. Lovett contended that most Londoners of the hawker class, by which he meant those who carried out their business by means of a hand barrow, carried some charm or mascot or performed some ritual which was believed to have magical efficacy.

It is a common idea that few traces of folk beliefs can be found in great cities but my experience is that, at any rate for the seeker after amulets, there is no better hunting ground than the hawkers' hand barrows in the poorest parts of our slums of such dense aggregations of people as London, Rome and Naples.<sup>45</sup>

The use of such mascots was to 'assist in bringing about the desires of the wearer or to ward off all that may be hurtful or unfortunate'.<sup>46</sup> The malevolent effects of 'overlooking', for example, could be averted not only through spells but also through the use of preventative mascots and charms. Lovett claimed that a fear of the evil eye was widespread in London during this period and that a number of charms were used to avert its influence.<sup>47</sup> It was the first piercing glance of the possessor of the evil eye which was believed to be formidable and which demanded a protective charm. Lovett attributed the practice among soldiers of pinning little golliwogs to their tunics to this particular fear of 'overlooking'.<sup>48</sup> He also cited the use of horse-shoe brasses by costermongers and hawkers as an example of an amulet used to effect the same purpose.<sup>49</sup> On occasions the wearing of a charm was accompanied by the ritual of crossing the fingers or raising the index and little fingers to achieve the same purpose

<sup>43</sup> Lovett, 'Belief in Charms', 100.

<sup>44</sup> E. Lovett, 'Superstitions and Survivals among Shepherds', *Folklore*, 20 (1909), 65.

<sup>45</sup> E. Lovett, 'Amulets and Coster Barrows in London, Rome and Naples', *Folklore*, 20 (1909), 70.

<sup>46</sup> E. Lovett, 'English Charms, Amulets and Mascots', *Croydon Guardian*, 17 Dec. 1910.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 83.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

or with the piercing of a pigeon's heart with pins in more extreme cases.<sup>50</sup> The former may be compared with the widespread custom in Rome and Naples during the same period of placing in shop windows a stuffed glove with the two middle fingers and thumb stitched to the palm so that the other fingers made the sign of horns. This device was also employed in these areas specifically to ward off the threat of the evil eye in conjunction with various amulets attached to horse brasses.<sup>51</sup>

Charms of various kinds were believed not only to avert bad luck but also to attract good luck. All abnormal forms of natural objects, such as the left-handed whelk, were considered lucky for the owner.<sup>52</sup> Examples were collected throughout London. Charms resembling the human heart were often worn in the early decades of the twentieth century for the specific purpose of charming love. Hawkers in Whitechapel sold these charms at the price of one penny in 1910. Lovett claimed that small copies of shoes were also found all over London. These were carried as lucky symbols to represent the path of life.<sup>53</sup> A patchwork pincushion in the shape of a boot was found by Lovett in Camberwell in 1919 and was used for the same purpose of attracting prosperity to the owners as they journeyed along the path of life. Similarly, Helen Westall, born in Camberwell in 1915 carried a small elephant charm in her bag to effect the same purpose: 'I've got my little elephant in my bag and ur . . . it been in there for years. If I change my bag that comes with me'.<sup>54</sup>

Both Barbara Luke<sup>55</sup> and Anna Telby<sup>56</sup> carried similar mascots in their bags. Philippa Ivy's mother also had a little silver brooch. Mrs Ivy recalled, 'When she lost it "Oh, we're not going to get any work, we shan't get any work" . . . and everybody had to search round for this little brooch'.<sup>57</sup>

The practice of carrying rabbits' feet was considered common by a number of those interviewed in the oral project. Sydney Barry of Mellow Street, Walworth, born in 1921, argued that it was widespread.<sup>58</sup> Small glass rolling pins were, likewise, a common feature in households in the

<sup>50</sup> Lovett, 'Londoners still Believe in Superstitions'.

<sup>51</sup> Lovett, 'Amulets and Coster Barrows in London, Rome and Naples', 71.

<sup>52</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>54</sup> SCW, Int. 2. There are a number of suggestions elsewhere that elephants were considered lucky. D. Scannel, for example, in *Mother Knew Best* (1974), 53, described how everyone knew that an elephant's hair bracelet was lucky.

<sup>55</sup> SCW, Int. 6.

<sup>56</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

<sup>57</sup> SCW, Int. 17.

<sup>58</sup> SCW, Int. 12.

London docks. These were given to sailors filled with rum. When the rum had been consumed they were carried home filled with perfume and hung as lucky charms in the homes of sailors. The idea behind these charms bears a remarkable similarity to Mrs Cotton's practice of hanging a small bottle which used to contain French liqueur in her home for luck.<sup>59</sup> She described how she fixed coins or silver into the cork of this bottle and would never be without money because of it.

Lovett expressed surprise at the degree to which London street dealers could articulate the particular beliefs underpinning the practice of carrying amulets and charms of these kinds.<sup>60</sup> They were consciously employed as preventative guards against undesirable spiritual influences to which the individual was potentially subject. Moreover, a number of them derived particular efficacy from their association with the Deity or with overtly Christian symbolism. The Lovett material, for example, includes a small leather shoe found in Whitechapel in 1920. The intricate design of the Christian cross interwoven with the sun which covered the shoe was considered a particularly powerful charm and it was hung in the home for good luck. The collection also contained a charm against sudden illness in the form of a small sacred heart made of black silk containing ashes collected on Ash Wednesday. These were believed to be a potent preventative guard against illness because they had been blessed by the nuns at Donerville, Cork in 1845. In addition, Lovett's collection of charms and mascots contained a series of medals belonging to sailors of the London Docks area. These were worn to avert the specific danger of storms. On one side was the figure of St George and on the other was a design representing Christ directing the storm with the words, '*In tempestate Securitas*'. These were very similar to sacred heart charms collected by Lovett and carried by sailors in order to charm the demons of the storm.<sup>61</sup>

The connection of certain charms with Christian symbolism is borne out in the oral material. During the course of an interview with Anna Telby, for example, a number of objects were produced from her handbag. These included a rosary, a medallion which she claimed showed Christ in the garden of Eden, a set of keys which had formerly opened a money box, and a small piece of cork in a brown leather purse.<sup>62</sup> The set of keys was kept as a charm to bring prosperity alongside the medallion

<sup>59</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Lovett, 'Amulets and Coster Barrows', 70-1.

<sup>61</sup> Lovett, 'English Charms'.

<sup>62</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

and the rosary. Both of these had been worn on a string around her neck earlier in life and they had been kept subsequently in her bag for fifty years. She considered the rosary to have particular efficacy as it had been blessed: 'That rosary's been blessed, so I know that's alright. It's all been blessed.'<sup>63</sup>

The piece of cork was associated with a specific ritual through which Mrs Telby made wishes: 'You put that on the floor, go round it three times, say to yourself, I wish I could go, so and so . . . wish I could go so and so and it 'appens'.<sup>64</sup>

This practice of wishing by means of the cork was carried out in association with prayer. When Mrs Telby needed anything she would pray and wish and when she received the object of her desire both God and the cork would be thanked without any sense of incongruity in her mind.

For others the crucifix and the Bible were believed to be particularly potent lucky objects or charms. In her oral interview Elizabeth Merritt used the cross as an example of a lucky charm and she described how she was given it specifically to wear for luck.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Jim Bower wore a crucifix during the war. When asked if he remembered soldiers carrying any charms during the war he replied immediately, 'Oh yeah, yeah, I used to wear a crucifix. Others had all sorts of things like sacred hearts pinned on the inside you know . . .'<sup>66</sup>

Copies of the Bible could be used in the same way. Possessing and carrying a Bible was also considered lucky. When asked if her family had a Bible, Mrs Ivy replied, 'Oh yes, you had to have a Bible otherwise you were unlucky if you didn't have a Bible'.<sup>67</sup> When asked why it was unlucky not to have a Bible she merely re-emphasised the point by saying, '. . . my mother used to say, yes, you won't have any luck if you don't have a Bible in the house'.<sup>68</sup>

Sid Venables, the son of a greengrocer, born in Camberwell in 1913, had little contact with church-based culture at any point in his life beyond attending Sunday school as a child, and yet he attached considerable importance to a Bible which he was given as he joined the Royal Air Force at the beginning of the Second World War: 'I had the Old Testament and the New Testament when I was in the RAF I always carried that wherever I went'.<sup>69</sup>

His concern to keep the Bible with him was an attachment similar to that displayed in Mrs Ivy's interview. He carried his Bible in the manner

<sup>63</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> SCW, Int. 21.

<sup>66</sup> SCW, Int. 1.

<sup>67</sup> SCW, Int. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> SCW, Int. 8.

of a preventative guard to secure good fortune and to prevent ill luck, in much the same way that Elizabeth Merritt and Jim Bower wore crucifixes. An article in *Cassell's Saturday Journal* for 1900 included a description of copies of the Bible in a more general list of charms carried by soldiers in times of war.

Numbers of men even among the volunteers do not depart from the front without a charm of some kind. One laid deeply to heart the old story about the bullet lodging in the Bible—a providential escape that really happened two or three times during the last Egyptian campaign. The 'Tommy' in question purchased a copy of the scriptures that was partly perforated at Omdurman, deeming it a 'lucky object' that would preserve him against harm at the enemy's hands. But to make doubly sure, he brought a copy of the Bible to which no history out of the usual was attached and thus became, as he thought quite bullet proof.<sup>70</sup>

The Bible and the crucifix were part of a more extensive range of mascots and amulets carried in wartime. The same article went on to describe other 'curious mementos of the battle field'.<sup>71</sup> These were all brought at a high price as 'luck bringers'. They included a bent and battered penny which had been struck twice by a bullet. Other military mascots were carried which had been handed down in fighting families from one generation to the next. The same article described how one soldier

. . . now at the front, for instance, is carrying about with him a 'lucky' wallet which an ancestor bore through the peninsula war and which has since been in the thick of many a bloody fight. There is said to be a strange tradition associated with the article which is supposed to render its owner invulnerable.<sup>72</sup>

Lovett also described how most soldiers carried mascots into action during the First World War both to attract luck and to prevent misfortune.<sup>73</sup> A number of lucky boots were found in the Lovett collection which were carried as a charm by soldiers in the Great War. In addition, Lovett reported that 'During the Great War many men had a farthing sewn on the left brace just above the position of the heart'.<sup>74</sup>

These acted as lucky charms in much the same way as those described by Jim Bower. In July 1917, Lovett also found pincushions carried widely by sailors from the London docks as a charm against drowning, and 'Old

<sup>70</sup> *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, 4 Apr. 1900, 620.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

Charlie', who kept an oyster and whelk stall in Whitechapel, is recorded as having given left-handed whelk shells to soldiers returning from action.<sup>75</sup>

Such descriptions of the use of amulets and charms during war-time conditions is strongly supported elsewhere. Samuel Stouffer, for example, in his extensive study of soldiers in the wake of the Second World War, recorded many magical or semi-magical practices among combat men. These included the carrying of a protective amulet or good luck charm such as a rabbit's foot. In addition, certain supposedly unlucky actions, such as three men lighting their cigarettes on a single match,<sup>76</sup> were carefully avoided. Pre-battle preparations were carried out in a fixed 'ritual order'. Articles of clothing and equipment which were associated with some past experience of escape from danger were kept jealously.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Gorer estimated that during the Second World War one serving man or woman in three had his or her own 'piece of solid magic'.<sup>78</sup> Many of these charms and practices were also associated with the act of prayer. Most men prayed before going into action. Stouffer argued that 'the Lord's Prayer is on men's lips all the time'.<sup>79</sup> He described this kind of prayer as expressive of a 'quasi-magical act'<sup>80</sup> which was born out of a deep-seated belief in an 'unseen power who they feel is there'.<sup>81</sup> This was closely identified with a more general and wide-ranging resurgence in the belief in luck, fate, and fortune which emerged during the war and which persisted into the interwar period.

The uncertainty of wartime conditions was seen to precipitate a revival of fatalistic beliefs. The Army and Religion Survey which recorded the attitudes of soldiers during the First World War, carried out by a committee chaired by the Bishop of Winchester, noted common sentiments such as 'If there is one for you [a shell] you'll get it if your number is on it', 'I'm not for it until one comes for me . . . If I've got to go, I've got to go it's no good worrying. I'm what you'd call a fatalist I am'.<sup>82</sup> Jay Winter has argued on the basis of this kind of material that

<sup>75</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 10.

<sup>76</sup> This practice was common in Walworth in the interwar period. See, for example, E. J. Orford, *The Book of Walworth* (1925), 61.

<sup>77</sup> S. A. Stouffer, *The American Soldier; Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, 1949), 188.

<sup>78</sup> G. Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (1955), 265.

<sup>79</sup> Stouffer, *op.cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 167.

<sup>82</sup> D. S. Cairns (ed.), *The Army and Religion, An Enquiry and its Bearing upon the Religious Life of the Nation* (1919) 159.

The sense of the uncanny, the over-determined nature of survivals in combat can be found in many memoirs and letters written by service men. Many maintained the paradox between belief in personal invulnerability and belief in the power of fate determining whether a sniper's bullet or the shell had 'their number on it'.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, Hubert Llewellyn Smith associated the explosion of popular gambling during and after the war with the same kinds of belief and with a social climate in which chance predominated.<sup>84</sup>

Recourse to these kinds of beliefs and activities was not limited to the front line. Llewellyn Smith was careful to point out that popular gambling and its associated mentality were also prevalent at home.

If there was a great temptation to gamble amongst soldiers and sailors there was not much less amongst the civilian population. With them too a profound sense of instability was the prevailing emotion. The only certain thing was the uncertainty of the morrow.<sup>85</sup>

He estimated that four out of every five families in poorer London undertook some form of gambling from time to time.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in his study of Walworth, E. J. Orford associated gambling with the uncertainties of the interwar period: 'Life is so full of hazards that the first voluntary plunge that leads to the habit is almost inevitable'.<sup>87</sup> At home as well as the front, prayers were associated with these kinds of fatalistic beliefs. Mrs Croft, born in 1908, the daughter of a soldier from Dulwich, described how her mother would often pray and teach her children to do so whilst at the same time avoiding certain practices on certain days and adhering to an active philosophy of 'whatever shall be shall be'.<sup>88</sup>

During the war and interwar period when uncertainty and change were felt to be key characteristics of the period, a familiar folk theodicy took on a new significance, whereby suffering was placed within a wider explanatory and mitigatory framework on the basis of notions of good and bad luck.<sup>89</sup> The forms which various responses to the super-empirical sphere took, both during and after the war, were determined by already familiar folk responses. Lovett, for example, identified how certain superstitions took on a renewed significance during the upheaval

<sup>83</sup> J. M. Winter, 'Spiritualism and the First World War', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (eds.), *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society* (1992) 191.

<sup>84</sup> H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1931), x, 273-4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 274.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 281.

<sup>87</sup> E. J. Orford, *The Book of Walworth* (1925), 61.

<sup>88</sup> SCW, Int. 18.

<sup>89</sup> David Clark uses this definition of a folk theodicy in *Between Pulpit and Pew: Folk Religion in a North Yorkshire Fishing Village* (1982), 8.

of the war. At the time of the Napoleonic wars there was a limited trade in cauls as a popular charm against death at sea. A single specimen would fetch as much as twenty pounds. For most of the nineteenth century, however, there was less demand for these objects and in 1910 they sold for as little as twenty-five shillings a piece. Lovett argued in 1917, however, that, 'Now thanks to the activities of the German underwater craft they are being sold at the London Docks for two pounds ten shillings'.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, practices which were in themselves specific to the early twentieth century such as the practice of avoiding 'three on a match', resembled many earlier forms of prescriptive behaviour. Moreover, various folk artefacts and customs were employed in adapted and novel forms as a means of bridging the gap between the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar. In much the same way new urban phenomena of various kinds were accompanied by charms and folk rituals. Notable among these were certain kinds of modern house decoration and motor car mascots. In 1926 Edward Lovett wrote an article for the *Daily Mail* in which he described the common practice of incorporating 'old-fashioned' witch balls into modern house decoration. Coloured glass balls suspended in a part of the room where they attracted the most light were becoming a frequent accessory of modern dwellings. Lovett identified these witch balls as revivals of some made in Bristol in the latter part of the eighteenth century. They were supposed to bring good luck to the owner as they gradually accumulated dust. Modern copies of witch balls were being manufactured for this purpose during the 1920s in various colours to blend with a choice of decor.<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, there was a great demand for the new motor mascot during the same period. These included metal dogs or cats, tigers, teddy bears, and other toys and wooden effigies of motor cars. These were often advertised as part of the package one received when purchasing a motor car and as an additional means of ensuring the reliability of the vehicle. These new or 'commercial' charms were frequently used in conjunction with older types of travelling mascot in the form of representations of St Christopher. In addition, Lovett noted that chauffeurs often carried a nail which had caused a puncture or a holed stone as a charm to prevent the repetition of such difficulties. Other items included effigies of policemen with hands outstretched to stop the traffic bearing the words, 'propitiate the fate'.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Lovett, 'Belief in Charms', 99.

<sup>91</sup> E. Lovett, 'Old-Fashioned Witchballs in Modern House Decoration', *Daily Mail*, 29 Dec. 1926.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

Both the witch balls and the motor car charms were subject to a degree of commercialization which was accompanied by a change in the language used to describe charms and amulets from the 1880s onwards. Lovett argued that the word 'mascot' was replacing earlier words such as amulet or charm. He traced the currency of mascot to the popularity of the comic opera *La Mascotte* which made its debut in 1880. This change in nomenclature is borne out in an article in *Cassell's Saturday Journal* in 1899 entitled, 'Do You Possess a Mascot?' Here the writer defines a 'mascotte' as an object carried widely to bring good luck and to ensure the possession of a 'good eye' rather than an 'evil eye' for the owner. The writer also describes how the shorter term 'mascot' was more frequently used in recent years.<sup>93</sup> These mascots were part of wider exploitation for commercial advantage of the various beliefs in luck. During this period numerous advertisements harnessed the notion of obtaining luck by things worn or carried as an effective medium through which to appeal to the consumer. Newspaper and periodical advertisements of this kind were designed to appeal particularly to women of all ranks of society. Lovett described articles which used as their opening line the question, 'Do you want to know what are the lucky days, months, numbers, colours or the Christian name of the person you should marry?'<sup>94</sup> He argued that while the servant girl studied her *Dream Book*, her mistress had *Planets of the Month*, *Consult the Oracle*, and many other books telling her what to do and what to avoid for luck.<sup>95</sup> A language of luck and popular superstition was interwoven with popular advertising. Dr Tibbe's Cocoa, for example, was advertised with the slogan: 'Never despair. A silver Six-pence may be your mascot . . . but just straight away invest it in a packet of cocoa.'<sup>96</sup>

Lovett did not believe that the upsurge in commercial exploitation undermined genuine beliefs of this kind; rather he saw it as an indication of the expansion of a belief in luck which he argued had taken place during the later decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, there was continuity both in form and function between the modern mascots and earlier types of charms. Newly imported green stone or lucky jade mascots from New Zealand, for example, continue to resemble earlier charms designed to hang in the

<sup>93</sup> *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, 5 Oct. 1899, 85.

<sup>94</sup> Lovett, 'Belief in Charms', 99–100.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> E. Lovett, 'Specimens of Modern Mascots and Ancient Amulets in the British Isles', *Folklore*, 19 (1908), 288.

home. Similarly, although large department stores such as Spiers and Ponds and Hamleys were in this period selling 'Nelro's cup of fortune', the same modern teacup was used widely for the traditional practice of tea-leaf fortune-telling.

The possession of various types of charm and the enactment of certain rituals described above were believed not only to secure luck and avert misfortune but also to cure specific diseases. Lovett found that whooping cough was treated in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century London by an ancient witchcraft custom. The hair from the head of the suffering child was taken and placed between two pieces of bread. This was then given to a passing dog who, it was hoped, would carry the disease away: 'Put a hair of the patient's head between two slices of buttered bread and give it to a dog. The dog will get the cough and the patient lose it.'<sup>98</sup>

William Henderson recorded the use of a similar ritual in the 1860s in the northern counties of England. Here the crown of the head was shaved and the hair hung on a bush or tree in the belief that the birds would carry the cough away.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, a common cure for warts was to touch each wart with a different small stone and to place the stones in a parcel which was then left in the road or footpath. The warts were thus transferred to the person finding the parcel.<sup>100</sup> John Harland and T. T. Wilkinson, recording Lancashire legends in the 1870s, described the same practice.

In order to cure warts we are told to put the same number of small pebbles into a bag as there are warts, then to drop the bag where three or four roads meet and the person who picks it up will obtain the warts in addition.<sup>101</sup>

A similar practice was found by William Henderson a decade earlier in the northern counties and the Borders,<sup>102</sup> by Robert Hunt in Devon at the same date,<sup>103</sup> by Richard Blakeborough at the end of the nineteenth century in North Yorkshire,<sup>104</sup> and by E. M. Leather in the early years of the twentieth century in Herefordshire.<sup>105</sup> Like the other writers, Leather records how a packet was made up, in this case of grains of wheat or

<sup>98</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> W. Henderson, *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties of England* (1879), 111.

<sup>100</sup> Lovett, 'Folk Medicine in London', 120–1.

<sup>101</sup> J. Harland and T. T. Wilkinson, *Lancashire Legends* (1873), 226.

<sup>102</sup> Henderson, *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties*, 108.

<sup>103</sup> R. Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England* (1865), 210–11.

<sup>104</sup> R. Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs in the North Riding of Yorkshire* (1898), 146.

<sup>105</sup> Leather, *The Folklore of Herefordshire*, 83.

notches in a stick of elder wood, and was thrown over the shoulder of the sufferer at a place where four roads met, in the hope of transferring the warts to the one who discovered the packet.<sup>106</sup>

Teething children were also treated in London in much the same way as they had been elsewhere. The parents' teeth were preserved and placed in a small bag around the baby's neck.<sup>107</sup> Where the parents' teeth were unavailable it seems that some Londoners were not averse to placing a calf's tooth in the bag instead. Lovett found one market-stall keeper selling calves' teeth for this purpose in south London in 1905.<sup>108</sup> Small bags containing preventative or curative objects for the same purpose were used elsewhere during the same period. In King's Pyon in Herefordshire, for example, seven or nine woodlice were placed in a bag around the baby's neck.<sup>109</sup>

The enactment of rituals to cure specific diseases was also found in the oral testimonies of Anna Telby. In the event of an accident involving bleeding, Mrs Telby's mother would adopt the folk practice of stopping the cut with a cobweb.

And if she cut her finger . . . she wouldn't bandage it up. She'd go right round the room looking for cobwebs. She'd stick it in the cobweb like that and that's it healed up. My mum used to do that . . . She never believed in bandaging up her fingers she used to put it in the cob web (go like that . . .). If she cut her finger she'd be looking for the cobweb.<sup>110</sup>

In addition, if her daughter had either toothache or mumps, she would adopt a ritual which she had learnt from the 'old woman' who brought her up.

If I'd been wearing socks, she used to take the sock off what I wear every day and every night I went to bed with a sock round me throat pinned with a safety pin. To stop me mumps and it stopped me mumps . . . my mum cured me . . .<sup>111</sup>

Certain specific objects were also used alongside the performance of various rituals as a means of preventing or curing diseases. Many Londoners, for example, adhered to the practice of wearing blue beads in infancy and maturity as a preventative guard or cure for bronchitis.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Lovett, 'Londoners still Believe in Superstitions'. These bags were also found in the Lovett Collection and his original labels suggest they were collected in south London.

<sup>108</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 23.

<sup>109</sup> Leather, *The Folklore of Herefordshire*, 81.

<sup>110</sup> SCW, Int. 13. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem record the use of spiders' webs as cures for ague. Opie and Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, 370-1.

<sup>111</sup> SCW, Int. 13.

<sup>112</sup> Lovett, 'Londoners still Believe in Superstitions'.

This was particularly the case among women. At Islington Market during the early 1920s, Edward Lovett was informed by one old woman that 'everyone wears them . . . I do myself'.<sup>113</sup> When Lovett protested that they were not in evidence she explained that they had to be worn next to the skin and when he raised the delicate question of what happened to them when she had a bath the same woman replied that 'they were never taken off or she would catch cold. If the string broke she would at once thread them again but they must be worn throughout life and be buried with her'.<sup>114</sup>

In order to verify such statements Lovett visited 130 small shops throughout London.<sup>115</sup> In every one of these shops he found that blue beads were sold to be worn by children to prevent and cure bronchitis. The special efficacy of these beads was ensured by their colour. As blue was the colour of the sky, it was believed to put the wearer in sympathy with heaven.<sup>116</sup>

Blue beads were only one example among many of the use of lucky necklaces in the medical lore of London in this period. Coral and oak-apple necklaces were both used against sore throats in children. Amber fragments were worn for general good health, 'fairy' or 'adder' beads<sup>117</sup> were worn to prevent nightmares and acorns were worn for diarrhoea. Both Anna Telby and Philippa Ivy possessed coral necklaces when they were young. Mrs Ivy recalled how 'I had some coral beads. They were round. They were put on tape and I didn't dare take them off. If I did I'd catch cold'.<sup>118</sup>

Molly Layton also recalled how she placed amethyst under her pillow to aid in sleeping.<sup>119</sup> Lovett claimed that potatoes were also used as a less elaborate charm in east London in this period in order to guard the carrier from rheumatism, as they had been used in Lancashire in the 1860s. John Harland and T. T. Wilkinson wrote that "Those who suffer from rheumatic pains are to carry a potato in their pocket . . .".<sup>120</sup>

Lovett found that the bone of a sheep was also carried by some for the same purpose in 1916. Cramp was similarly prevented by the possession

<sup>113</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 81.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> He described these shops as small establishments usually presided over by an aged woman selling cheap toys and sweets.

<sup>116</sup> Lovett, 'Londoners still Believe in Superstitions'.

<sup>117</sup> A fossil organism found naturally perforated.

<sup>118</sup> SCW, Int. 17.

<sup>119</sup> SCW, Int. 20.

<sup>120</sup> Harland and Wilkinson, *Lancashire Legends*, 226.

of various charmed objects. These included a mole's front paw, a dried frog, and dried skins of various kinds. A number of other writers record the use of dried skins as preventative cures. Eel skin was particularly popular. It was tied round the ankle when swimming as a charm against developing cramp while in the water.<sup>121</sup> Lovett also observed the widespread use of the acorn in London as an amulet against being struck by lightning.<sup>122</sup> Likewise, donkeys' shoes covered in cloth were found hanging over the beds of a number of south Londoners as a charm to drive away nightmares.<sup>123</sup>

Many of the charms, rituals, and remedies described above were associated with the person of the wise-man or woman who, Lovett claimed, was trusted in London as well as in many parts of the countryside.<sup>124</sup> The dairyman from Bethnal Green, for example, on suspecting a spell, visited a 'local wise-woman' who recommended the procedure of piercing the heart of a dead cow.<sup>125</sup> In this example the wise-woman was clearly employed to provide an antidote for the malignant power associated with either a spell or the witch, as individuals had been in rural South Lindsey in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, the *potentilla tormentilla* was recommended by an East End wise-woman,<sup>127</sup> as were the use of a snake skin worn in the hat as a cure for sunstroke,<sup>128</sup> the supplying of a dried frog as a cure for croup and whooping cough, the root of black briony for pains in the limbs, oak-apples for throat troubles, stems of nightshade for cutting teeth, a knuckle bone and sealed bottles of mercury as cures for rheumatism.

The term wise-woman was not used in any of the oral interviews, autobiographies, or reminiscences, but memories about local fortune-tellers do suggest that these women may well have fulfilled the same function and that the distinction was perhaps in some cases simply a matter of terminology. Mrs Cotton, for example, described how she regularly accompanied her mother to visit Mrs Rose, the local fortune-teller who lived in the Old Kent Road.

Yeah her name was Mrs Rose. She lived in the Old Kent Road and then she

<sup>121</sup> Henderson, *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties*, 17.

<sup>122</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 65.

<sup>123</sup> Cuming Museum, Original Lovett Collection.

<sup>124</sup> E. Lovett, 'London Witch Doctors', *The Star*, 23 Apr. 1927.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society in South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford, 1976), 286.

<sup>127</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 9.

<sup>128</sup> Lovett, 'London Witch Doctors'.

moved to a turning down here . . . She was very good . . . She'd sit there and go into a kind of trance but she was true. My mum sat one side she used to have her fortune told. What she told us did happen.<sup>129</sup>

Jim Bower also described the existence of local fortune-tellers in Bermondsey who could be consulted for the fee of a penny.<sup>130</sup> Like the wise-women consulted in Cleveland in the 1890s, these women were sought in their homes. They were believed to possess extraordinary power in remedying diseases and in foretelling the future,<sup>131</sup> while their position remained based on local trust as it had been elsewhere.<sup>132</sup>

Such activities appear to have possessed some heritage in urban south London. An interesting example of belief in the power of the wise-woman is given by the case of a girl of 20 who was brought before Bermondsey police court in 1869 charged with fortune-telling. One man had paid her many shillings to turn the heart of his sweetheart towards him. Eventually in desperation he paid the 'wise-woman' a gold ring to cast a spell to cause the girl to turn and love him. After seeing no results he took the woman to court.<sup>133</sup> She was eventually charged with obtaining money under false pretences and was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment.<sup>134</sup> The failure of her spell is, however, perhaps less significant than the fact that a 'wise-woman' was sought to intervene through magic in the arena of love. Examples of local consultations of this kind are similar to those given by Robert Roberts in his autobiography *A Ragged Schooling* (1976). Roberts described a Mr Carley who appears to have performed a balance of magic, occult ritual, and the dissemination of medical lore in urban Manchester in the early twentieth century. Mr Carley was widely consulted for his powers and his wisdom. He could 'fetch up' poltergeists. He ran seances and as a sideline he could treat 'female bad legs' (varicose veins) through various herbs and magical ceremonies.<sup>135</sup> Like the south London fortune-tellers described in the oral reminiscences, Mr Carley lived on the gratuities handed out by satisfied clients.

In south London, fortune-tellers were not averse to visiting the clients in their homes or workplaces. Philippa Ivy described in detail how a

<sup>129</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>130</sup> SCW, Int. 1.

<sup>131</sup> J. C. Atkinson, *Forty Years in A Moorland Parish* (1891), 111.

<sup>132</sup> P. Rushton, 'A Note on the Survival of Popular Christian Magic', *Folklore*, 191 (1980), 118.

<sup>133</sup> *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 24 Oct. 1868.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling*, 151–2.

fortune-teller would come each Thursday to her parents' clothes workshop in order to read the employees' fortunes.

She used to come every Thursday, one of the workers told my Mum about it . . . We used to give her six pence. She used to go upstairs and the workers used to go up there one by one and she used to tell them their future. She told a lot true she did.<sup>136</sup>

Similarly, Rose Embleton recalled how

An old girl used to come round, to read tea cups, she used to come and see my old granny and she said 'all right Tops', she said, 'my mum's come in this afternoon, all right Tops' she said 'I'll tell you your fortune', she said. 'Oh' she said, 'you a bit hard up now', she said 'in time you'll come round, you'll never be hard up, you'll be able to build up', she said, 'so don't worry'. And it's funny my mother like after a time, she always got a few bob, she was never, never without, know what I mean?<sup>137</sup>

The presence of such figures in the community appears to have been firmly linked to female culture in particular. No examples of wise-men have been found in London and even Mr Carley in Manchester appears to have specialized in a female clientele. Both Mrs Cotton and Mrs Ivy were insistent that the practice of consulting a local fortune-teller was strictly a matter for the grandmother, the mother, the daughter, and, in the case of Philippa Ivy, the female workforce. The fortune-teller was admitted to her father's on Thursdays only, when he had gone to deliver coats in the City. Mrs Ivy emphasized the female character of these meetings by pointing out, 'mustn't let Father know . . .'.<sup>138</sup> Later in the interview she returned to the subject and described her father's opposition to the practice; 'Oh no he wouldn't have had that . . .'.<sup>139</sup> In much the same way, Ivy Cotton described how she and her mother would say they had been to visit the 'King and Edward's' in order to hide their visit to Mrs Rose from the male members of the family.

My sisters don't mind, but one of my brothers, 'You bin to that fortune-teller?', 'No we bin round to Farmers or King and Edward's'.

Q: Your brother didn't hold with that then?

A: No, but my Mum did see.

Q: What about your Dad?

A: Oh no, he wouldn't have that but we did.<sup>140</sup>

Jim Bower's description of local Bermondsey fortune-tellers was

<sup>136</sup> SCW, Int. 17.

<sup>137</sup> EOHA, Int. 299, 11.

<sup>138</sup> SCW, Int. 17

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

couched in language which reflected his opposition to the practice. This opposition was not the product of disbelief, however, but it was based rather on a strong belief in fate. He considered it wrong to interfere with the process or force of fate through foretelling the future because, as he argued, 'If it's going to happen it will happen . . .'.<sup>141</sup> In contrast to the women, he appears to have held a belief that fate was non-negotiable. He seems to have believed that it was not open to manipulation or to the control exerted through foretelling the future.

A large number of the oral interviews also describe specific local women within the community who were consulted in the event of illness, accident, birth, and death. Although it is impossible to state a clear connection between these women and those who acted as fully fledged 'wise-women', they were undoubtedly consulted for their wisdom and their advice. They were the chief propagators of 'old wives' tales', as one Walworth churchman called their specific brand of advice,<sup>142</sup> and the respect which they commanded in the community suggests that the values which they represented continued to hold explanatory authority within the community. Emma Reynolds of Red Cross Street off the Borough High Street described how everyone in her court knew her mother, Mrs Reynolds. She was called upon in moments of anxiety within the community and particularly in the event of a death.

If anyone died (say in the flats) they used to come and say Mrs Reynolds (say Mrs Jones died) would you come and wash and lay her out. My Mum used to do that, she used to go round with a collection for the flowers and she used to have the job of getting tea ready when they got back from the funeral.<sup>143</sup>

Dora Bargate also recorded how her mother was respected throughout the tenement block as a woman of particular wisdom on whom others relied. Although Bargate does not specifically mention any magical powers or the recommendation of specific charms or cures, it is clear that her mother fulfilled a remarkably similar position of trust to that which appears to have belonged to the wise-woman: 'She would be called upon to act as midwife or to perform the office of laying out of the dead or perhaps supply a cure for a cough, or sore throat, a cold or a sore knee'.<sup>144</sup>

In her autobiography, D. L. Ash describes a similar role for her mother, as did a number of those interviewed for an Age Exchange

<sup>141</sup> SCW, Int. 1.

<sup>142</sup> L. J. Carter, *Walworth 1929-1939* (1985), 61.

<sup>143</sup> SCW, Int. 4.

<sup>144</sup> Brunel University, Burnett Collection, D. Bargate, 'Memories', n.d., n.p.

project on attitudes towards medicine and health care in the early part of the century.<sup>145</sup> This survey revealed the extent of traditional remedies and beliefs in 'old wives' tales'. In place of the doctor there was a wide range of home cures passed down from one generation to the next. These were propagated in the community by certain women who were believed to have a particular knowledge of the subject.

I know I was climbing a brick wall and they had all glass sticking in the top and I gashed my leg and there was a lot of blood and when I got home my mother took me across to Mrs. Dixon, she wasn't a nurse or anything but she knew a bit about surgery and I'd lost a lot of blood like, you know. But she looked after me and done me well. And every time we had any other accident we were over there, she only lived across the road.<sup>146</sup>

A personal connection was thus maintained between certain individuals within the community and particular kinds of communal practice and wisdom. In these examples the help given is apparently straightforward and practical, yet the evidence also suggests that it may well have overlapped with various kinds of superstitions, as Mary Chamberlain and Ruth Richardson have argued.<sup>147</sup> The practice of laying out the dead, for example, appears to have retained a spiritual colouring. One of Mrs Reynolds's responsibilities was to say a prayer over the dead body. Similarly in other cases the administration of practical help operated alongside the expression of prayer. Louise Codd, for example, born in 1899, the daughter of a carman from Jamaica Road, Bermondsey, described how her mother would attend to sick neighbours.

Yes anyone ill, she would go in. . . . Mrs Panning was dying next door to us and she went in, she said, 'Oh I didn't like her pillow cases, I thought they looked grey'. So she took her in—took her in a couple of her pillow cases, and when she took them in she said, 'would you like me to say a prayer for you?' And she knelt down, said the Lord's Prayer.<sup>148</sup>

In these ways, therefore, many of the customs and beliefs described in this chapter maintained a link with the community in a manner which had not become entirely diffuse or impersonalized. The female community in particular was still able to rally together on the basis of these beliefs against what was considered to be an outside threat. L. J. Carter, for instance, described the deep-seated influence of 'wives' tales' in

<sup>145</sup> Age Exchange, *Can We Afford the Doctor?* (1985).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>147</sup> M. Chamberlain and R. Richardson, 'Life and Death', *Oral History Journal*, 11 (1983), 31–44.

<sup>148</sup> EOHA, Int. 235, 235.

Walworth which united the population in common opposition to the introduction of modern medicine and hygiene during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>149</sup>

The customs and beliefs, rituals and charms described in the early part of this chapter were not only linked to a personal figure within the community but were also enacted within the context of a more wide-ranging fascination with the supernatural and the corporate perpetuation of legends and stories concerning the visible manifestation of the spiritual realm. A striking aspect of this preoccupation was the belief in ghosts. One notable incident which occurred in Bermondsey during the 1860s became part of the lore of the community. The calendar of notable events published in the *Southwark Annual* continued to record the appearance of the Bermondsey ghost each year until 1895. The ghost became a legendary figure after crowds had been seen nightly surrounding the churchyard in Abbey Street, Bermondsey in July 1868. Their intention was to take a look at the ghost of a man who had drowned in the Thames some days earlier and had been conveyed in a coffin to the dead house adjoining the church in order to await the coroner's inquest.<sup>150</sup> The ghost appeared first on Sunday evening after divine service. This drew crowds, which, according to the police constable on duty in the area, were numbered in hundreds. They congregated by the church walls and waited. One man, James Jones, was remanded in custody for assaulting a police officer while trying to catch a glimpse of the apparition. He had left his employment at a local tan-yard at twilight to see the ghost. The judge overseeing the case, Mr Bucham, expressed his surprise that in the nineteenth century, when education was making such rapid progress, the people ' . . . should be so superstitious as to surround Bermondsey Churchyard for hours in the chance of seeing a ghost'.<sup>151</sup>

The judge went on to add 'That in the year of our Lord 1868 such a tale should be so easily credited does not say much for our boasted civilisation or the alleged superiority of the cockney over the country bumkin'.<sup>152</sup>

Like the ghosts of Lancashire recorded by John Harland and T. T. Wilkinson,<sup>153</sup> the Bermondsey ghost was believed to be most likely to reveal himself at the hours of twilight and midnight and, like the ghosts

<sup>149</sup> Carter, *Walworth 1929-1939*, 61.

<sup>150</sup> *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 6 Aug. 1868.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 30 Jul. 1868.

<sup>153</sup> Harland and Wilkinson, *Lancashire Legends*, 226.

in South Lindsey, his existence was largely dependent upon the socially created expectation within the community.<sup>154</sup> In his work on authority and social structure in three Black Country towns between 1840 and 1890, R. H. Trainor notes a similar instance. A West Bromwich newspaper recorded with dismay the widespread belief in ghosts in the area during the 1880s.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, the evidence presented by Geoffrey Gorer in his book *Exploring English Character* (1955) suggests that this may have been a feature of urban life which persisted through to the 1950s. He writes of his surprise on discovering that the belief in ghosts was most evident in London and the South East, followed by the Midlands.

I had thought that the belief in ghosts would be most common in the west country and in small towns and villages. In point of fact it is nearly as frequent in the metropolis as in the villages and somewhat less in the middle sized towns.<sup>156</sup>

Furthermore, the work of Gillian Bennett has shown an extensive belief in ghosts among the inhabitants of the Manchester suburb of Gaitley during the second half of the twentieth century. During the course of 120 oral interviews with elderly people in the area, she collected a wide range of stories describing the intervention of ghosts in domestic crises and in the regulation of family affairs. The ghost frequently appears in recollections as the embodiment of a deceased member of the family who returns to make his or her presence felt at decisive moments in family history. Bennett locates these beliefs within a wider system of belief which extended to concepts of premonition, omens, second sight, and telepathy which she argues were widely diffused within the modern environment.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, the recollection of ghosts was structured and narrated on the basis of a common pattern or discourse. Personal stories of the supernatural which circulated within the community thus provided the material from which a consensual view of the supernatural was built. Personal experiences and beliefs were narrated as part of a wider cultural tradition. They both appealed to and were subject to local opinion which shaped, interpreted, and adapted them on the basis of a social folk discourse as well as a personal or individual rationale.

<sup>154</sup> Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 282.

<sup>155</sup> R. H. Trainor, *Black Country Elites* (Oxford, 1993), 190.

<sup>156</sup> G. Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (1955), 263.

<sup>157</sup> G. Bennett, 'Aspects of Supernatural Belief, Memorata and Legend in a Contemporary Urban Environment' (Sheffield University Ph.D. thesis, 1985); see also, G. Bennett and P. S. Smith, *Contemporary Legend* (Sheffield, 1990).

The visible manifestation of the supernatural in the form of ghosts or spirits was also connected with the person of the wise-woman or the fortune-teller in the community. These figures could act as popular spiritualists. Southwark's local fortune-teller Mrs Rose, for example, also performed the role of a medium.<sup>158</sup> A resurgence of spiritualism has been attributed to the closing decades of the nineteenth century<sup>159</sup> and to the period of the First World War in particular.<sup>160</sup> Contemporary observers described an increase in the number of those consulting mediums both at the front and at home. An officer in a highland regiment claimed that a very dangerous belief in spiritualism was gaining ground<sup>161</sup> both in the army and especially among the bereaved at home.<sup>162</sup> Alan Wilkinson argued that

The pressures of bereavement drove some mourners to spiritualism and seances were reported to be increasing in number. At one stage of the war there were said to be one-hundred and eighteen mediums in the Kensington area alone.<sup>163</sup>

The experiences of the trenches and of bereavement drove many to spiritualism. Tales of the return of the fallen were common in the popular literature of the war and interwar period, while numerous stories circulated about the experience of supernatural phenomena on the battlefield.<sup>164</sup> John Morley associated this expansion with a general fascination with the supernatural which predominated from the closing decades of the nineteenth century to the interwar period.<sup>165</sup>

This association is supported in Southwark at this time by the resurgence of Southcottism in Walworth during the 1920s. The prophecies and foretellings of the Devonshire woman by the name of Joanna Southcott, who made her home in Walworth in 1802, were treated with a new fascination at this time. Parades and petitions were organized in the early 1930s to insist that the sealed boxes containing her prophecies should be opened once more for the people of Walworth.

In 1934 a strange event occurred. Sandwichmen paraded through London, enormous placards appeared in the underground stations, churches were flooded with pamphlets and papers and up to ten thousand signatures appeared

<sup>158</sup> SCW, Int. 22.

<sup>159</sup> L. Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and the English Plebeians 1850–1910* (1986).

<sup>160</sup> Winter, 'Spiritualism and the First World War', 187.

<sup>161</sup> Cairns, *The Army and Religion*, 20.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>163</sup> A. Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (1978), 179.

<sup>164</sup> Winter, 'Spiritualism and the First World War', 191.

<sup>165</sup> J. Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (1971), 104–6.

on a petition left at Lambeth Palace asking the bishop to open Joanna Southcott's Box.<sup>166</sup>

Southcott was originally a domestic servant born in Devonshire in 1750. At the age of 42 she claimed that voices had spoken to her calling her the 'Bridge of Christ' and commanding her to give prophecies and write books. Her first book, *The Strange Effects of Faith*, appeared in 1801. It was a forty-eight page pamphlet which sold all over England at the price of nine pence. In 1802 Joanna Southcott took a coach to London and made her home in Walworth. There she achieved renown. L. J. Carter claims in his study of Walworth that 'thousands of lay folk became her disciples'.<sup>167</sup> In one mission alone 14,000 people became her adherents. A chapel was set up in Amelia Street, Walworth to act as her headquarters. Handbills issued at the time claimed that the chapel had been opened by the express command of God. Southcott remained a popular figure in the local lore of Walworth. Yet this sentiment was revived particularly in the incident outlined above. During the 1920s a short book entitled *The Southcott Despatch* was published. This claimed that the prophecies of Southcott had been fulfilled in the events of the First World War while her prophetic message of peace, which was eventually re-published in 1936 due to the popular demand, was considered particularly appropriate to the interwar period.

The material considered in this chapter suggests a widespread belief in the possibility that one's fortunes could be affected through certain actions, practices, or rituals. These included seemingly 'trivial' practices and the enactment of commonplace rituals but also extended on occasions to the weaving of spells and to more elaborate rituals. In addition, they involved the employment of specific charms, mascots, and amulets and a body of folk wisdom in the form of medical lore. The latter involved strategies for controlling, allaying, or transferring the adverse effects of illness through the enactment of rituals or the use of charmed objects. A continuity is thus suggested between the kinds of beliefs found in the English villages during and before the early nineteenth century and those found in urban Southwark at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century. The concept of the cosmos which James Obelkevich identified in South Lindsey between 1825 and 1875 had not disappeared by the end of the century nor had it been entirely depersonalized. In Southwark the super-empirical realm continued to act 'as a treasury of separate and specific

<sup>166</sup> Carter, *Walworth 1929-1939*, 60.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

resources to be used and applied in concrete situations'.<sup>168</sup> Like the South Lindsey villager, the south London costermonger used charms and enacted rituals to harness the super-empirical realm in order to serve the present and to assist, as Lovett argued, 'in bringing about the desires of the wearer or to ward off all that may be hurtful or unfortunate'.<sup>169</sup> Lovett specifically pointed out that the costermongers' avid use of charms and mascots was in contrast with his lack of interest in contemplating the constellations of the stars.<sup>170</sup> In Southwark, no less than in South Lindsey, absorption in daily toil and the drudgery of the home did not necessarily mean indifference or disbelief in the super-empirical realm, as some contemporary commentators suggested. It was exactly when next week's rent had to be found that a lucky boot hanging above the fireplace was believed to have particular efficacy. The 'well-nigh universal tendency to cling to the visible and concrete and to ignore all else'<sup>171</sup> which Paterson ascribed to the south London working man, did not necessarily preclude an appeal to the 'treasury of resources' to affect 'concrete situations'. Similarly, the relative prosperity which many members of the working class enjoyed from the 1890s and which was accompanied by what Paterson called the 'flash material order of life' did not prevent an individual from tapping his rabbit's foot when placing a bet, or turning and rubbing a copper coin to increase the family's material prosperity. An interest in the cosmos to affect one's fortunes within the context of daily life was not, however, the only interest which individuals displayed in the super-empirical sphere. Obelkevich juxtaposed the concept of the cosmos as 'a treasury of resources' with the idea of the cosmos as a realm to be 'contemplated and worshipped'.<sup>172</sup> The material considered in this and the following chapter suggests that to divide these concepts of the cosmos into two exclusive categories misrepresents the complexity of contemporary perceptions of the non-rational and super-empirical sphere. To use it to enhance one's present material or physical standing did not always preclude a desire to worship or contemplate the Deity.

The perpetuation of this kind of concept of the cosmos, as well as a 'mass of low grade magic and superstition',<sup>173</sup> also continued to encompass personalized superhuman forces and in some cases could extend, as it did in South Lindsey, to the notion of the witch, the wise-woman, the

<sup>168</sup> Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 281.

<sup>169</sup> Lovett, 'English Charms, Amulets and Mascots'.

<sup>170</sup> Lovett, *Magic in Modern London*, 65.

<sup>171</sup> Alexander Paterson, *Across the Bridges* (1911), 46.

<sup>172</sup> Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 281.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

evil eye, and the ghost. In the case of the dairyman from Bethnal Green, for example, the cows were 'overlooked' by a personal figure whose contact with the dairyman was direct. Furthermore, the antidote used to reverse the effects of the spell was personal and recommended by a specific figure within the community. This example is in contrast, however, with the more general fear of 'overlooking' which drove soldiers during the First World War to pin 'tiny golliwogs' to the inside of their tunics as a general guard against the first piercing glance of the evil eye. The range of examples suggests that a general and diffuse fear of the evil eye or of ill luck did not necessarily preclude more elaborate, defined, and personified confrontations with superhuman forces. Moreover, it qualifies a straightforward and oversimplistic portrayal of the process of 'impersonalization' which Obelkevich envisaged as a linear decline from earlier and 'higher' forms of popular belief associated with the countryside towards 'lower' and more diffuse remnants of belief in the city. These kinds of belief continued to operate within the context of local communities and as part of the fabric of family life. Certain local women were still regarded as fountains of folk wisdom and many of the practices and beliefs considered in this chapter were passed down from one generation of women to the next. Furthermore, these kinds of belief were considered part of a notion of communal and familial heritage. They were talked about as that which was 'always done' or as the 'way things were'. They were thus incorporated within the community's, or within a family's sense of past and present identity.

The kinds of continuities between the rural and urban environment which are suggested by the material considered in this chapter also qualify some of the comments made by Jeffrey Cox in his discussion of diffusive Christianity. The evidence suggests the persistence of 'semi-pagan magic' of the kinds described by Obelkevich, for the survival of which in London Cox claimed there was 'not much evidence'.<sup>174</sup> It challenges the notion that these beliefs had simply 'subsided into a belief in luck'.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, the material also leads to a questioning of Cox's terminology: first, it qualifies the treatment of these beliefs as mere 'survivals'; and secondly, it raises a number of questions concerning the validity of categorizing these beliefs as 'semi-pagan' or in direct contrast to Christian or orthodox beliefs. Many of the practices and ideas considered were invested with new meaning in the urban context. They were not subject to inertia but were adapted in form and character to play important roles in different social settings. Moreover, a number of the

<sup>174</sup> Cox, *The English Churches*, 95.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

charms and amulets which were described incorporated Christian imagery and language. Anna Telby, for example, considered the items which she carried in her bag to be part of her devotion to God. Although most of the elements of folk custom and tradition examined in this chapter have been considered without reference to the institutional church or to orthodoxy, they did not exist in isolation from other elements of the popular religious repertoire and they cannot simply be labelled as 'pagan'. The following chapter will broaden this discussion by considering in more detail the intermingling of folk dimensions of the popular religious repertoire with church-based customs, values, ideas, and practices.