

Preface

The *Golden Legend* is an extraordinary work, both in itself and on account of its fortunate history. Written during the last third of the thirteenth century, this text, the 178 chapters of which take up over a thousand pages in the edition of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, has come down to us in over a thousand medieval manuscripts, a figure that places it second only to the Bible in its circulation in the Middle Ages.

With the development of printing the *Golden Legend* long held a prominent place among printed books. Unlike most works of the Middle Ages, which were written in Latin because they were destined for a public of clerics and a limited number of educated laymen, the *Golden Legend* was soon translated into the vernacular. We possess, from the Middle Ages, ten manuscript editions in Italian, seventeen in French, ten in Dutch, eighteen in High German and seven in Low German, three in Czech, and four in English, for a total of sixty-nine copies. Printed versions were almost as many: forty-nine between 1470 and 1500, twenty-eight between 1500 and 1530, only thirteen between 1531 and 1560, with the last translation into the vernacular, in Italian, in 1613. The fame of this work was partly

due to the fact that it was produced and put into circulation at that essential moment in the history of the written word when vernacular languages began to rival Latin, when a growing number of laymen became capable of reading, and when, during the latter half of the twelfth century, the spread of the practice of silent reading permitted individual reading and put an end to total reliance on reading aloud, the only form of reading practiced in the Middle Ages. Thus the *Golden Legend* benefitted from exceptional historical circumstances. It had, as we shall see, outstanding qualities that enabled it to take advantage of those circumstances. Before we leave the topic of medieval translations of the *Golden Legend*, let me note that one of the most famous of them was made during the second half of the fourteenth century by Jean du Vignay, who held the title of translator to the king of France, having as his royal sponsor Charles V.

Between 1260, the probable date at which he began writing the work, and 1297, the year of his death, Jacobus de Voragine, the Dominican author of this work, enriched or modified his work on a number of occasions. Similarly, the copyists of the Latin text and those who translated the *Golden Legend* into vernacular languages often made modifications in the text. Thus, despite excellent recent editions and translations that make use of manuscripts chosen and established according to the best scientific methods (and on which I shall rely), the text of all the remaining manuscripts of the *Golden Legend* have not been explored completely, hence they remain living and evolving works.

After the great success that it enjoyed for over three centuries, the *Golden Legend* underwent something like an eclipse from the mid-seventeenth century until the beginning of the twentieth. For one thing, whatever the interpretation given to the *Legend*, it is essentially a series of saints' lives, and for that reason it was long (and still is) classified by specialists as hagiographic literature. Chief among those who relegated the *Golden Legend* to the purgatory of oblivion were the Bollandists, the leading specialists in the saints in the modern period. That Jesuit institution, which set itself the mission of pre-

senting the saints in a scientific manner, stripped of the phantasms of medieval credulity, came close to wiping out all knowledge of a work that, as we are now aware, was one of the great masterpieces of the Middle Ages. It was Father Baudouin de Gaiffier who, relying on a study by Monsignor J. Lestocquoy, identified the true source of the unfavorable opinion of the work that was later picked up by the Bollandists. That source was Juan-Luis Virès (1492–1540), a famous Spanish scholar who developed the critical spirit of the Renaissance and who wrote that the *Golden Legend* was in fact a “leaden legend.”¹

In order to measure the meaning and the impact of Jacobus de Voragine’s work, we need, first of all, to do away with a notion that does an injustice not only to the *Golden Legend*, but to a large portion of the works of medieval culture. Even as fine a connoisseur of the *Golden Legend* as my student, colleague, and friend Alain Boureau treats the work as a “compilation.”² Since the eighteenth century, that term communicates a sense only slightly less pejorative than “plagiarism.” Compilation was widely practiced in the Middle Ages (Jacobus de Voragine makes use of it in the *Golden Legend*), and its connotations during this period were entirely positive. The person who probably explained this best was the master compiler in the field of etymology, the learned Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century: “The compiler is he who mixes things said by others with his own, in the manner of color merchants whose wont it is to mix different substances in a mortar. A certain soothsayer from Mantua was accused one day of having mixed some verses of Homer with his own, and authors eager to emulate the Ancients denounced him as a compiler. He responded: ‘It is to possess great strength to tear Hercules’s club from his hand.’”³ Moreover, Alain Boureau, thanks to his excellent comprehension of the *Golden Legend*, ends up admitting, “The compiler was also an author.”

Second, the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine is usually placed within the category of Latin legends.⁴ But although the *Golden Legend* does indeed contain a collection of saints’ lives (arranged within a work that treats the liturgy), it reaches far beyond

the quite limited character of a simple collection of saints' lives implied by the term "legendary." It is true that the *Golden Legend* is an expression of the Dominican Order, new in the thirteenth century, and of its will to frame in its own way the choice, the presentation, and the use of saints' lives. Jacobus de Voragine did not hide what he owed to two of his Dominican predecessors, Jean de Mailly and Bartholomew of Trent, who authored a true legendary in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Other scholars who have specialized in Jacobus de Voragine have seen in the *Golden Legend* something like a condensation of the Dominicans' intellectual contribution to the Christian apostolate. This view is unacceptable, however, because Jacobus de Voragine, although he did not turn his back on the theological and scholastic activities of the Dominicans, as has been falsely alleged, preferred to leave that side of their intellectual activity to certain of his brothers in order to devote himself to a more active apostolate. For still other scholars, the *Golden Legend* is a veritable encyclopedia. As I myself have attempted to show, the thirteenth century was indeed an "encyclopedic century," for in its course encyclopedias were composed by Dominicans such as Thomas of Cantimpré and Vincent of Beauvais, and by the Franciscan Bartolomaeus Anglicus (Bartholomew the Englishman). Jacobus de Voragine, however, despite the interest he showed in animals (to pick but one subject example), does not include in the *Golden Legend* any entries on God's other great creation, nature, such as were of course included in genuine encyclopedias.⁵ Jacobus does link time to the rhythm of the seasons though, something that was rarely done in the Middle Ages.

In my opinion, Jacobus de Voragine's work is indeed a *summa*, as was his intention, but it is a *summa* on time. He says as much in the very first line of his text: "Universum tempus presentis uite in quatuor distinguitur." (The whole time-span of this present life comprises four distinct periods.⁶) The great originality of Jacobus de Voragine is not only that he considers and embraces time, a great question critical to all civilizations and all religions, in its totality;

he also arrives at that total time through a combination of three varieties of time, which I shall examine in succession in this essay: the *temporale*, or the time of Christian liturgy, which is cyclical; the *sanctorale*, or the time marked by the succession of the lives of the saints, which is linear; and, finally, *eschatological* time, which Christianity sees as the temporal road on which humanity travels toward Judgment Day. The combination of these three times is also original to Jacobus de Voragine, as is the essential role that he attributes to the saints as markers of time.

Our Dominican's overriding interest, then, is in demonstrating how it is that only Christianity has the means to structure and sacralize the time of human life in such a way as will lead humanity to salvation. The subject of the *Golden Legend* is not abstract time, but a human time, willed by God and rendered sacred, or sanctified, by Christianity. Marcel Gauchet, returning to an expression of Max Weber's, titled his great book, *Le Désenchantement du monde*. Jacobus de Voragine was attempting just the opposite. He used time to enchant and sacralize the world and humanity—without, however, ignoring the devil's efforts to obstruct that endeavor.