

INTRODUCTION: SAINTS AND VIRTUES

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Here in the West our notion of both religion and morality tends toward the didactic: teachings and precepts seem to buttress the lives of those we call good. The religious person is pictured as someone who has internalized what is often termed a “system of beliefs,” and the moral person is one who lives up to his or her principles. The world’s great religious traditions are hedged about with articles of faith and codes of conduct—commandments great and small—that enhance this way of seeing things; and today, when people are more ready than ever to question their traditions, these commandments loom especially large in the popular view of religious life. But the great religions did not gain their hold on us by precepts alone. Within each religion a powerful body of tradition emphasizes not codes but stories, not precepts but personalities, not lectures but lives.

This literature of lives is widespread and deeply influential. Christendom has its vast corps of saints: their individual stories were already being strung into hagiographical garlands in the fourth century, and papal legislation about the canonization process was still being formulated in the nineteenth. Jewry has its righteous ones (*tsaddiqim*), patriarchs, and prophets. Muslims, too, have stories of the prophets (*qışaş al anbiyā*)—though what is meant by the term is rather different—and anecdotes about the life of the “seal of the prophets,” Muhammad, and a range of lesser figures. Stories of spiritual guides and about the righteous and still potent dead (*walis, shaykhs, şūfis, pīrs*) also flourish. Hindu hagiographical collections sometimes begin high, at the level of divinity, but soon descend to the still remarkable but distinctly human lives of their devotees. Sacred biographies in Buddhism concern not only the life of the Buddha but those of his immediate followers as well; tales of other notable personages such as *bodhisattvas* and world-renouncers have also been carefully preserved. In China, Buddhist accounts were paralleled by

and sometimes integrated into an enormous body of Confucian and especially Taoist hagiography, the latter dealing with everything from local adepts to heads of therapeutic lineages to divine agents who carried the force of Lao Tzu; and often a distinctly didactic note was sounded as a life was told.

These collections of extraordinary and exemplary lives differ significantly from one religious community to another, and from subgroup to subgroup and period to period; but they bear family resemblances that are often striking. Indeed these various hagiographical traditions might be threads drawn from a single skein of yarn: the weavers of the larger fabric of tradition had different ideas about where a thread should go and how often it should be used, but once one knows what color to look for, one will almost always find it. And this worldwide attention to "the lives of the saints" has by no means been neglected in our own time. On the way to the airport from downtown Seattle, freeway drivers pass a huge concrete retaining wall on which a devotee has spray-painted a latter-day postscript to the Chinese hagiographical tradition. "Chiang Ching," it announces: "Live like her."

When this reminder went up, Jiang Qing was on trial in the People's Republic as the leading member of the Gang of Four, who had been spearheads of the subsequently discredited Cultural Revolution. Like so many Christian saints, particularly the earliest, she seemed to be preparing herself for martyrdom. Like the Christian martyrs, she refused to recant, displaying exemplary adherence to the cause for which her followers thought she had lived, even when others fell away in discouraging numbers. Like them, she participated in a select fellowship of the just to which she was tied, as many of them were, by bonds of personal friendship and cooperation. And, like them, she lent her name as an amulet for the succor and aid of those who never knew her, but believe. The American revolutionaries who inscribed her name must have felt that its very letters were enough to call forth an image sufficient to guide correct behavior. Their exhortation, even in old-style imperialist transliteration, tells us much about the persistent moral force of saintly lives.

It seems unlikely that the bishops at the Second Vatican Council had Jiang Qing on their minds when they issued their authoritative pronouncement on "the authentic cult of the saints," but the factors that lifted her name to such prominence might have come straight from the council's own words:

Let the faithful be taught, therefore, that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the intensity of our active love. By such love, for our own greater good and that of the Church, we seek from the saints "example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid in their intercession."¹

1. Walter M. Abbot, S.J., gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder/Association Press, 1966), 84. The quotation is from the preface granted for use in various dioceses.

With this pronouncement the council drew attention to three areas in which the lives of remarkable persons could serve to enrich and empower the lives of ordinary individuals: example, fellowship, and aid. While the bishops, of course, assumed only one community of faith tying saint to commoner — the Christian Church — these three aspects of veneration go a long way toward explaining the power of saintliness in a wide spectrum of religious and cultural traditions, and suggest a context within which all saints exert their moral force.

EXAMPLE

The key term is *example*, a word whose meanings diverge in two directions that are only distantly related. In one sense an example is an instance, an illustration, a case in point. In the other, an example is not a subset of something larger but a paradigm that sets the shape for a series of imitative phenomena that follow in its wake. It is a model, a prototype, not merely an example but an exemplar. Both these usages help us to state the moral impetus so often present in hagiographical traditions. On the one hand, saints can be examples *of* something, or even of someone; on the other, they can be examples *to* someone. Often, of course, they are both — and sometimes, one must admit, neither.

In the first instance one finds saints portrayed so as to exemplify virtues already known to those who hear their stories. What is remarkable about a life, then, is the purity with which it reflects a particular mode of character. In Butler's *Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and other Principal Saints* the narrator's eye in story after story is trained on the way in which the saints gave away their earthly wealth and abjured all luxuries of the body. Many of these accounts center around great donations — made all at once or staggered according to some rational program — and the adoption of a regimen of bread and pulse. If they are read as a group, the stories seem a single lesson in self-abnegation told over and over again.

Other hagiographical collections strike a slightly different note. Rather than instantiating a single well-known virtue or a small set of interrelated virtues in a multiplicity of lives, they choose lives to represent each virtue, thereby displaying the range of virtues that life ideally ought to comprehend. The tales of the charismatic *tsaddiqim* in Hasidic Jewry since the eighteenth century frequently illustrate this principle — stressing the fervent devotion of one master, the charity of another, the humility of a third, the unshakable trust of a fourth — and some collections of Buddhist *avadānas* do the same. Several of the earliest of these collections highlight particular virtues exemplified by the Buddha's disciples: Ānanda's compassion, Sāriputta's wisdom, and Moggallāna's magical power. These virtues could be replicated in similar hagiographical anthologies that were created for later generations. The "eminent monks" described in the *Kao-seng-chuan* of sixth-century China remind one of the Buddha's own disciples and the virtues they exemplify, and

accounts of *bodhisattvas* also served as emblems of cardinal Buddhist virtues: in particular Avalokiteśvara stood for compassion and Mañjuśrī for wisdom.

In *jātaka* tales, which related the praiseworthy actions of the Buddha Śākyamuni in past lives, a whole series of virtues that had theretofore been taught in ethical fables were made a part of the biography of the One whose life comprehended all virtues. And it is charming to see that Aesop, who seems ultimately responsible for having framed a number of these moral tales, found his own way into hagiographical literature. In certain Muslim lists of prophets he appears as a man named Luqmān, and as one of the prophets his lineage was fulfilled by a figure with a range of personal virtues as comprehensive as the Buddha's own: Muhammad. In accord with the general centralizing urge of Muslim faith and with the conviction that Muhammad was the unique prophet of the present age, official Islam had little impetus to disperse his virtues among several hypostatizations, but in compensation the literature of early Islamic tradition (*ḥadīth*) has an overwhelmingly influential collection of tales concerning his own life. Both individually and collectively, quite a number of these tales can be read as preaching certain virtues—generosity, truthfulness, submission to God—and they, like other, seemingly incidental features of Muhammad's life, have served to give shape to the imitation of the Prophet in Muslim piety.

In such ways virtues that were expounded as principles took on flesh and blood. In Buddhism the first treasure of the faith, its teaching (*dharma*), was amplified by a second, the person of the Buddha himself. In Islam it was not only the message of the Prophet but the exemplification of facets of that message in the character of the messenger that built the tradition: The Qur'ān was supplemented by the *ḥadīth*. And in both these traditions, as well as in others, such virtue was also taught in the lives of a panoply of ancillary figures. Strikingly, this exemplification occurred even in traditions such as the Chinese and the Hindu, where the central "secular" virtues were kept at arm's length from the ecstatic realm that served as the home of so many saints. The lives of not a few Taoist luminaries are told in such a way as to proclaim the efficacy of filial piety, a seemingly secular, Confucian virtue; and in India, virtues such as generosity and courage, which have a clear place within the scheme of *dharma*, are sometimes surprisingly exemplified in the lives of *bhakti* saints.

This understanding of saints as persons who attain their status because they exemplify what is generally preached and accepted might from an ethical point of view be called a "deductive" conception of sainthood. Here virtues predate the saints that give them living form. But the exemplary power of the saints can be understood in another way: they can be seen as models, persons from whom one can learn patterns of life for which no principle or code can serve as an adequate representation. This approach would be an "inductive" conception of sainthood, which corresponds to the second sense of the term

example. And this approach is perhaps even more critical than the first to an appreciation of the centrality of saints.

In the article that begins this book Peter Brown explores this notion of exemplar as it appears in the Christianity of the late Roman Empire — that is, near the generating point of the Christian cult of the saints. He suggests that such saints gathered and exerted their moral force through a process of intimate learning that rendered them “personal classics” from the point of view of Greco-Roman *paideia* and “representations of Christ” against the background of Jewish and Christian thinking about the nature and transmission of “the image of God.” These men and women represented Christ and the unblemished humanity he had restored, not as parts of a more complex fabric or as instances of truths generally known, but as whole people who “carried Christ” with such totality as to “re-present” for their generation the luster that had characterized the original. Their personhood was the crux of the morality they taught — often implicitly rather than discursively — and what they sought to imitate and perfect was no specific aspect of the life of Jesus, as in later understandings of the phrase *imitatio Christi*, but the unfallen Adam that waits to be rediscovered within us all. They were not examples typifying aspects of the whole, they *were* convincingly the whole; as exemplars they contrasted markedly to a world of shards and fallen fragments by which they were surrounded. They showed the way through to a level of being so coherent that in contrast to the dimness or at best reflected glory of ordinary existence it seemed able to generate its own light. Hence the language of luminosity pervades descriptions of them. Their impact was registered in “flashes of signal light” and “shining visions,” not in what is usually meant by moral instruction.

This sense of virtue as something exuded as light, and of moral learning as something in the nature of seeing or experiencing revelation, is by no means confined to the literature of Christian saints. Such luminosity is a staple of Hindu descriptions of the saintly and divine, and Hindus travel great distances literally to obtain the sight (*darśan*) of those they venerate, often expecting no verbal communication. One focus of such devout journeys is Sathya Sai Baba, a modern saint with a pan-Indian following, who is described in Lawrence Babb’s contribution to this collection. Jewish accounts of the *tsaddiqim* often stress a similarly palpable glow in the saintly faces of these sometimes enigmatic teachers — a radiance whose history takes one back to the visage of Moses himself and that confirms the lineage to which they belong, as if it had been transmitted by blood. And adepts in certain Taoist traditions, to cite still another milieu, are also said to manifest this inner luminosity. Such descriptions reveal that human excellence, including moral excellence, cannot fit, ultimately, into discrete categories of words and acts. It is a pervasive quality — a “becoming,” as Caroline Bynum says in characterizing the imitation of Christ among medieval women mystics — and

one can appropriate it only through an act of absorption. It is not a thing to be mastered.²

This returns us to the problem inherent in the two divergent senses of the word *example*. According to the word's first meaning, the saintly example instantiates and thus clarifies general principles of morality and qualities of character that can be articulated as meaningful and understood as possible for all participants in a society or community of faith. When one speaks of one's saintly mother, one is probably pointing in the direction of such perfection in the living out of ordinary morality. In its second sense, by contrast, the saintly exemplar does not always accord so easily with the moral standards that articulate a culture's highest sense of itself. Often saints do not just heighten ordinary morality. They implicitly question it by seeming to embody a strange, higher standard that does not quite fit with the moral system that governs ordinary propriety and often cannot be articulated in normal discourse.

In discussing stories that depict some of the devotional (*bhakti*) saints of north India, I have called this a "morality beyond morality." Because such saints exemplify something deeper than ordinary morality, they cannot always be expected to serve as examples for action in "this world." As Christians have pondered their saints, too, they have recognized that ordinary people should not always be bidden to follow the saints' example. One might wonder at the saints, one might try to imitate the virtues they teach, but one should not necessarily imitate what they themselves do, for their actions are sometimes unpredictable, even outlandish.

Hester Gelber draws our attention to this aspect of things in her essay on St. Francis. She explains the significance of the moment in which Francis insisted on having himself paraded naked before the good people of Assisi and notes the resistance of one of his own disciples to participating in the display and the hesitancy of his chroniclers to let it stand on in its own terms as an example for posterity. For Francis himself, it was probably, as Gelber puts it, a "theater" more than a paradigm, and other saints occasionally sounded a note of overt caution in recommending their acts to their disciples. They sometimes saw that their model might be too seductive, too heady for the ordinary. At times they would urge people to go beyond a concern with rules and works, to trust in the force of love and accept the attraction of union with God; but at other times they would dwell on the importance of humility and obedience in an effort to find a common ground that could relate their extraordinary states and acts to other people's ordinary ones.

One suspects that in the enthusiastic telling of the lives of *bhakti* saints there is also an implicit note of caution. On the one hand, it is a matter for wonder and celebration that the extraordinary virtues of these saints manage

2. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 201–2.

somehow to generate a confirming, sympathetic response in the wider world. Such moments of response — the saints' miracles — are often called just that in the original: *acaraj* — “surprises,” “wonders.” But by labelling these moments wondrous, the authors effectively issue a caution to ordinary mortals. The medium in which the saints live is not quite their own and should perhaps be regarded at a certain distance.

This two-sided presentation is a genuine ambivalence. The world of love and ease that such saintliness makes possible is clearly valued as superior to the realm of ordinary interactions, and it exerts a strong attraction on the Hindu and Indian Muslim populace. Followers often appeal to their saints — *sants*, *bhaktas*, and *pīrs* — for miraculous egress from the difficulties of this world. Yet at the same time both the authors of these hagiographies and the crowds who hear them appear to understand that the attractive, exemplary power of the saints is not exhausted if their extraordinary power cannot be directly assimilated into the workings of life as we normally know it. The saints' lives reveal a supernal standard against the background of which the limitations of ordinary morality are easier to bear, even if nothing visibly changes in the near at hand. Even in that indirect influence the saints' power is being tapped. As Lawrence Babb says in regard to Sathya Sai Baba, a notoriously enigmatic figure, in his article in this collection: “The overarching moral message of his persona . . . seems to be a recipe less for how to lead a virtuous life than for how to lead a life in which virtue has meaning.”

In certain settings the two sides of the ambivalence with which religious communities view their saints can be broken apart. Most familiarly, this split follows a division between religious specialists and the general populace: lay audiences are expected to react one way to the example of the saints, clerical or religious audiences in another. One can see this clearly in Stanley Tambiah's essay on the wide and many-layered following of Acharn Man, a forest monk of modern Thai Buddhism. Acharn Man's monastic pupils related to him in a “professional” way, receiving his instruction, emulating his deeds, and, now that he is dead, reading his biography. His lay devotees, by contrast, appropriate his virtue less as moral canon than as charismatic power, which is mediated to them through amulets blessed by his successors. A similar tension exists in the medieval Christian West. When a lay audience is assumed for a hagiographical work, the saint tends to be depicted as extraordinary in a miraculous sense, while the saint will appear as a devotional model if an audience of monks is assumed. And if the audience assumed consists of mystics, the saint is hardly delineated as a model at all.

Religious traditions that resist this bifurcation between religious specialists and the laity are apt to generate images of saintly exemplitude whose correspondence to the patterns just sketched is complex and hard to predict. Two essays in this book particularly illustrate the complexity. Tu Wei-ming's study of the Confucian tradition depicts in the sage a figure whose virtue is ultimately inimitable, not because he stands at a distance from common

humanity, but because he identifies with it so totally. It is the humility of learning that makes him sagely — a humility that must be personally learned and cannot be appropriated from a model. The ideal of the “wise pupil” (*talmid ḥakham*) is also one of the great standards in Judaism, as Robert Cohn’s essay explains, but it is only one of several ideals that loosely correspond to the notion of “saint.” Cohn proposes that Judaism’s characteristic refusal to regard any ideal as unattainable by all Jews (at least all Jewish males) has prevented the emergence of a special class of beings such as saints and has played a role in keeping the several ideals of Jewish personhood in tension with one another. At the same time it is fascinating to note how many of the features associated with saints and their virtues — a sense of righteousness beyond the law, an ability to intercede in affliction and transfer merit after death, the power to perform miracles, and last but not least, the familiar tension between exemplitude and inimitability — can be found in the “saints” of Judaism, too.

FELLOWSHIP

The pronouncement of Vatican II about what was authentic in the cult of the Christian saints singled out the saints’ fellowship as the second important element. In part the bishops had in mind contacts between ordinary people and this select company, but that the elect do form a company is itself a notable phenomenon. Saints typically come in flocks — even the most unusual have analogues elsewhere in the tradition that make them meaningful — and one of their functions is to provide an image of a divine society, a community that can serve as a nurturant family of faith spanning the seen and unseen realms. This community can be conceived in a number of ways. The prophetic lineage that occupies so important a place in Jewish thinking is one. Another in the Jewish sphere is the notion of an elite core of hidden “righteous ones” (*tsaddiqim*), numbering from two to thirty-six at a time, who link the generations in a moral bond that extends far into the past; it endures and causes history to cohere, whatever the failings of the mass may be.

The closest analogue to this concept in Islamic thought is undoubtedly the idea that there are saints who at any given time form an invisible hierarchy in the world, with the “lodestar” (*quṭb*) saint at the top. But one can make other comparisons too. The succession of God’s messengers (*rusul*) bears some resemblance to these *tsaddiqim*, since Allah is said to have distributed them on a regular basis to different generations and communities until he revealed his message in its fullness through Muhammad; and in Sufi traditions, such as those discussed by William Brinner and Lamin Sanneh in this volume, it is typically conceived that there are forty generations’ worth of masters (*shaykhs*) extending from the present age back to the Prophet. Christians have adopted the somewhat similar idea of the “fellowship of the saints” (*communio sanctorum*), which is conceptually and historically

related to this wider milieu. Though in its earliest meaning the phrase *communio sanctorum* referred to participation in the sacraments, it soon acquired the additional meaning that has become more familiar, since *sanctorum* could be construed not only in the neuter but in the generic masculine, and thus refer not to the sacraments but to members of the church, or specifically to the saints.

One can readily appreciate the impetus toward conceiving of and trusting in such linkages. A sense of comfort is conveyed by the conviction that one is not alone in the struggles of faith but rather accompanied by a “cloud of witnesses” whose spiritual accomplishments far exceed one’s own. For all the distance that separates God’s saints, prophets, and righteous ones from ordinary human beings, their lives are intertwined with ours: the background scenery and accompanying figures in their stories are recognizable. And so too, sometimes, are their inner motives. Hence their lives are often told not only with awe but with an element of fondness that springs from the knowledge that they shared at least some of the common vicissitudes of humanity. This tone of familiarity can be heard in stories of Hindu saints, particularly those of a *bhakti* stripe, as well as in certain Christian accounts. Not infrequently, moreover, some of the most memorable accounts in the lives of Hindu and Christian saints occur at just those points when one saint meets another. Encounters between the canonized women of Jesus’ world are vividly remembered — the meeting of Saints Mary and Elizabeth when both are pregnant, for instance — and the tradition of Vaiṣṇava singer-saints in south India begins with a moment when three of them take shelter together from a storm. St. Athanasius writes a biography of St. Anthony; Periyālvār adopts Āṇṭāl as his daughter; St. Francis gives counsel to St. Anthony of Padua; Mīrā Bāi goes to Ravi Dās for her initiation. And in a way vaguely reminiscent of the Renaissance delight in drawing St. Anne and St. John the Baptist into a common frame with Jesus and Mary, Hindu popular tradition continues to create encounters between saints who are not reported to have met at all in earlier hagiographies.

This desire to create an extended sacred family is very much the rule in the history of religions; Protestantism’s insistence that God’s family is strictly nuclear remains a definite exception. The Reformers’ efforts in the direction of hagiographical birth control have been much studied, but the more prevalent urge to enlarge the family is equally intriguing. It generates a network of familiar spirits — sometimes organized with greater hierarchical precision, sometimes with less — who communicate a sense of the continuity, variety, and amplitude of the community of faith, and who as erstwhile denizens of this world span the gap between the known and the unknown. They mediate between the numbingly quotidian phenomena of this life and the central, sometimes densely mysterious forces that control it. Hence they often serve as apt patrons and protectors to draw particular places — churches, temples, towns, or groves — into a wider and more complex grid of reality.

The existence of such great numbers of saints significantly alters the ethical medium in which actions in this world are conceived to occur. Acts are no longer neutral; they take place in a context charged with family resources and responsibilities. Even in such traditions as the Muslim and the Jain, where the possibility of shared spiritual merit is officially disavowed, there is a popular urge to venerate exemplary guardian figures. Doubtless this stems in part from the plain observation that one is not alone in this world, but surely it may also arise in the hope of mitigating that reality. If there are saints, then the social nexus given by birth or circumstance need not provide the only context determining one's acts and giving them meaning. The community of saints provides a supplement, and many of the lives of individual saints underscore the distances at which members of this special corps stand from the common mass. Theirs is a society apart, hence it significantly enriches the environment within which actions make sense.

Few traditions contend that the only powerful spirits are those that use their power for good, and in the Vodou conception, as Karen Brown makes clear, the ranks of the saints themselves (*lwa*) contain ambivalent possibilities. But even Vodou saints serve to leaven the moral environment of ordinary living, providing an element of depth and enrichment that serves to restore what Haitians call "balance." And this happens, not unexpectedly, in distinctly communal contexts. Most societies that have been drawn into the great historical religions concede that the world is habitually out of balance, fallen into error. Hence the general impetus of hagiological thinking is to weight the scales toward the good — the auspicious and harmonious, the path to salvation — both by providing an image of a familial environment in which good acts can succeed and by giving assurance that members of this sanctified family stand ready to help the weak if but petitioned.

AID

Prayer and petition constitute a major element in any ethnology of religion. Their aim is often not only what we would normally consider greater moral adequacy but greater well-being in general, for the hearers of these prayers are persons, not principles. As living beings they potentially superintend a greater range of behavior than that designated by "ought." Muslim sailors and fisherfolk in Bengal take their appeals for safety at sea to Pir Badar, and a host of other *pīrs* across the Indian subcontinent — some with backgrounds that seem as much Hindu as Muslim — are responsible for curing diseases, guarding cattle, or restoring fertility. In Buddhist Thailand, talismans conveying the blessings and psychic energy of saintly forest-dwelling monks are used in a variety of worldly pursuits, and the gracious powers associated with relics of the Buddha and those close to him have long played a significant role in stimulating pilgrimage in the Buddhist world. The bones, ash, and memorabilia of Christian saints have been no less potent in attracting the petitions of

the faithful, and in Haitian Vodou, as Karen Brown points out, talismans of the saints serve as “condensation points for the complex and contradictory stuff of life,” providing help in the orientation of individual personalities and acts. Even the Prophet Muhammad himself, whom one might have thought to be invulnerable to such “popular” usages, is sought for his intercessory powers, and as William Brinner reports in his essay here, a well-known Arabic poem depicting the Prophet’s powers is used as an amulet throughout the Islamic world.

The widespread importance of such a petitionary cultus makes it plain that saints are perceived, not merely as exemplars in an abstract sense — images of right living — or as an imaginary family of faith and morality, but as living agents of ethical and even physical change. They are besought not just as models to guide behavior but as purveyors of the power that makes action possible. The achievements of the saints are not all that make them extraordinary; in fact, such miraculous doings are considered in more than a few traditions to be strictly incidental to what makes them saints. Central instead is the saints’ power to effect changes in the lives of others; what they possess is intrinsically contagious.

In a curious way this contagious power often seems to stem from the fact that the saints do not ultimately own the force they wield. They are frequently conceived as a second echelon of holy beings, dependent for their own power upon their access through devotion to a more encompassing, higher divinity. They minister to devotees, but they are themselves devotees. This symmetry of roles makes them not only accessible but also effective as conduits of power, for their personalities exemplify the modes in which such power can be received. No wonder, then, that Vatican II stressed the intercessory role that the Church has traditionally attributed to the saints, and laid emphasis as well on the counterpart role assigned to the believer: an attitude of devotion or love.

Not every tradition makes so clear a place for a mediating role in understanding its saints, but in the portraits of exemplary figures that are painted by other communities one often finds a similar sense that the saints’ power to elicit submission in others derives from their own submission. To speak of submission is to suggest Islam — the word means precisely that — and the lives of Muslim prophets are told in such a way as to underscore this cardinal virtue. Orthodox Muslim teaching recoils from the notion that prophets or anyone else should exercise an intercessory role, since that would imply a distance between ordinary believers and God. As William Brinner’s essay in this volume makes clear, that revulsion has been a significant driving force in purist movements within Islam from the ninth century to our own. Yet as Lamin Sanneh’s essay suggests, the Muslim world is densely populated with *walīs*, *shaykhs*, *ṣūfīs*, and *pīrs* who seem able to exercise just that function by virtue of the means by which they gain their power: prayer and submission. Many of these personages share with the prophets not only this sense of

submission but also the strength provided by lineage, which in their case is enhanced by the devotion of one *pīr* to another in a student-teacher succession. When an ordinary Muslim comes to a *pīr* or *walī* for help, then he or she receives as aid a power doubly transmitted: once through the *pīr*'s submission to God, and a second time through his submission to his own *pīr*, and thereby to God again.

In Judaism, Hasidic lines of charismatic authority roughly approximate the Muslim cult of *ṣūfis*, *walīs*, and *pīrs*, and in Judaism too the power of the prophets' words derives from a fundamental displacement of self. Similarly in portraits of Hinduism's *bhakti* saints, one finds an emphasis placed on such "open" virtues as generosity, fearlessness, and selflessness; and their devotion is again the source of the effortless capacity to be of aid to others. Even in Buddhism, where a suspicion of theism blunts directly intercessory ways of speaking about the power of exemplary figures such as the forest-dwelling monks of Thailand, there is the sense that the merits of their sanctity are transferable to the laity. These merits do not inhere in the monks themselves but are essentially shared and sharable. They are a force that flows naturally outward because it is generated by self-abnegation, rather than by any effort on the part of an adept to concentrate strength within himself. Such self-abnegation may not always correspond to our inbred notions of the "saintly," as is made clear by the flamboyant virtuosity of Alourdes in her role as medium and mediator — or, as Karen Brown implies, orchestrator — for the Haitian *lwa* archetypes. But in her case it is perhaps more obvious still that saintliness has crucially to do with an ability to receive and communicate a power that aids others, a power that is learned through the saint's submission to a transcendent and encompassing reality.

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between saintly personalities than is revealed by seeing Mohandas Gandhi in as close a proximity to Alourdes Champagne as he is in this volume. But the ability to help others looms as large in any portrait of Gandhi's saintliness as it does in that of Alourdes, or of Sathya Sai Baba, who stands between these two, and coming to the help of others was near the core of Gandhi's own conception of what he was about. Like many other saints, he insisted, as Mark Juergensmeyer explains, that the power he had to offer others was in no way particularly his; but the name he used to describe that source was distinctively new. He said it was truth itself (*satya*), and the aid to be found if one grasped onto it (*satyāgraha*) had much to do with the fact that it was no one's special possession but accessible to all. To seize onto the truth was to reach out toward wider and wider communities — including, pointedly, one's adversaries, people who perceived the truth quite differently. Yet people turned to Gandhi as if the power he communicated was his own, and the man's intense absorption in his "experiments with truth" and determination to achieve control over his baser impulses suggest that the sainthood people attributed to him was something he sought himself. He, however, stoutly denied this,

protesting perhaps a bit too loudly and insisting, as with his “experiments,” that such sanctity was available to all and could not be had by proxy.

One of the attractions of Gandhi, particularly for his Western followers, was that he appeared to construct his saintly identity *de novo*, rather than accepting any single cultural tradition as a guide. One can see that he adapted to his own ends such trappings of traditional Hindu ascetic practice as the ashram, the place of retreat; *brahmacarya*, the practice of celibacy; and the *dhotī*, his unpretentious garb. But he used each of these in a somewhat unconventional way, and the saintly lineage he embraced for himself was hardly what one would expect in a Hindu. No wandering poets, no world-abjuring fakirs — Gandhi’s holy community was activist, international, and strongly Christian: Jesus, St. Francis, and Tolstoy were its great pillars. As a consequence of this mix of traditions, Gandhi appeared somewhat strange to both his constituencies, the Indian and the Western, and to this he may have owed some of his charismatic appeal.

In a certain way Gandhi’s eclecticism puts him squarely in the company of many generations of saints, whatever tradition they belonged to, for it sprang out of a mission he felt to break through the unsatisfying commonplaces of ordinary existence. In another sense, however, it is a feature of his life that emerges with particular ease in the modern world and is particularly appropriate to it, since the twentieth century stands out from all others for its heightened capacities of global communication and for the increasingly fragile boundaries that separate its parts. On this account Gandhi may especially serve as the patron saint for this volume, in which we try to see whether there are beings who can recognizably be called “saints” no matter what tradition they come from, and whether the communities they represent have recognized them in those terms.

It is perhaps fortunate that because Gandhi is historically near at hand and because he was such a public personality, we have almost as powerful a sense of his frailties and conceits as of his determined sanctity. In dealing with him, we cannot ignore questions about the difference between a life as it is lived and as it is reported, and our attention is inevitably drawn to the important role played by followers in constructing their saints. Because memories are still relatively fresh and records massive, we can raise the embarrassing question of just how saintly Gandhi was, but we cannot dispute how saintly he felt to the great numbers of people who looked to him for guidance. And because the history of Gandhian movements is still being made, we have a chance to take a new look at the old, perhaps central dilemma that saints present to ethical understanding: to be exemplary, the saint must reveal a deeper morality than the world can seemingly abide; yet in the act of doing so the saint ceases to be a model that people really can — or perhaps should — follow.

Does Gandhi show that sainthood is alive and well in the modern world, or is he an untimely aberration? With questions such as these, John Coleman

opens the essay that concludes this book. He finds it hard to deny that the “culture of saints” is gone from the Judeo-Christian West: saints are no longer a significant part of our vocabulary or expectations. But referring to a central tension that persists throughout these essays, he notes that saintly virtue has never been experienced merely as ordinary virtue in perfected form. The saints contravene pious expectations at least as much as they fulfill them, providing a “critical negativity” that has the potential to correct and re-orient ordinary values. In that sense there has always been a measure in which saints are absent from a culture’s currency and invisible to its eyes, which suggests to Coleman that one ought to look in other directions than traditional ones — perhaps even to fiction — if one wants to locate the saints of the modern West. He leaves us with the sense that the game of saints is an important one, and that it is not yet over.