CURRENT THEOLOGY

A DECADE OF RESEARCH ON THE SAINTS: 1980–1990

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM

University of Notre Dame

Veneration of the saints has been a hallmark of the Catholic tradition from its earliest days. These virtuosi of the Christian life, honored in the liturgy and a mainstay of popular devotion, have not received much scholarly attention from theologians until recent times. Part of this neglect can be explained by the fact that the tradition about the saints is inextricably tied to a hagiographical literature that did not seem amenable to the more austerely precise formulations of school theology. The old clerical quip "you lie like a second nocturn" reflected the conviction that this tradition, with its embroidery of the fantastic, stretched the credulity of the serious theologian. The hagiographical tradition, as a consequence, became the province of the folklorist, the antiquarian, the literary critic, and the historical sleuth (the best of the Bollandists possessed all of these skills).

More recently, however, the emergence of the study of spirituality as a discrete discipline, the serious interest in narratology, and the turn towards the analysis of religious experience have provoked a renewed concern with the saintly life as a locus for theological reflection. Yet as theologians take up that topic, they must confront the complex world of hagiographical research.

To grasp how complex a survey of even a decade of research on the saints might be, one could begin with a consideration of Stephen Wilson's well-received anthology with bibliography published near the beginning of the past decade.[1] Wilson's bibliography runs to over thirteen hundred items (and it does not pretend to be exhaustive), while the anthologized articles span the gamut of interests and methodologies that, as the subtitle indicates, touch on history, folklore, and the sociology of sainthood. The very range of interest reflected in those essays demands a more restricted focus for this survey.

My presumption is that this journal's readership would be less interested in the more specialized pursuits of the interdisciplinary study of the hagiographical tradition (although those so interested might be amused and edified by the only novel I know of which has, as one of its

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[1] Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (London/New York: Cambridge Univ., 1983).

main characters, a student of hagiography who was in close consultation with the Bollandists[2]) and more concerned with the saintly tradition as it impinges on, and is cognate with, theological reflection.

For that reason, I will simply note in passing that a good number of important historical studies of the saintly tradition have appeared in this decade[3] and refer back to them as they shed light on the three areas to which this review essay addresses itself. We will consider the following broad areas of research: (1) the problem of defining who and what a saint is; (2) the role of saints in theological reflection; and (3) the place of saints in the arena of comparative theology. We will then finish with some general conclusions. This survey will not mention biographies of saints unless they are directly relevant to our more restricted discussion.

WHO OR WHAT IS A SAINT?

If we leave aside the New Testament practice, most frequent in the Pauline corpus, of designating the members of the *ekklēsia* as saints (*hagioi*), the question we pose seems easily answered, at least from within the Roman Catholic tradition: the saint is any person who is recognized as such by the Church in an official way (canonization) with the result that the person may be the legitimate object of liturgical *cultus* in the universal calendar of the sanctoral cycle or in the same cycle for a particular region or religious order.

Such an understanding of saints could make legitimate appeal to the implied definition in canon 1187 of the New Code of Canon Law: "Only

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[2] I refer to the wonderful first novel in Robertson Davies's Deptford Trilogy: *Fifth Business* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

[3] Some that have come to my attention would include: Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1981); *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1981); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1982); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1982); Andre Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1981); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1984); Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1988); Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints: The Diocese of Orleans 800–1200* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1990). A comprehensive guide to such materials may be found in the "Bulletin des publications hagiographiques" in each issue of the *Analecta Bollandiana*. For such studies the *Hagiography Society* has been recently founded; interested readers may contact Sherry Reames/Department of English/University of Wisconsin/Madison, WI 53706 for further particulars.

those servants of God may be venerated by public cult who have been numbered by ecclesiastical authority among the Saints or the Blessed." It could appeal, further, to the previous canon (1186), which speaks of the saints both in terms of edification and also, more pointedly, in terms of their powers of intercession, mainly in the context of their legitimate cult in the liturgy.

The problem with a definition like the one given above (quite apart from the fact that there were no papal canonizations before the tenth century for the many saints who are venerated in the Church but who were never formally canonized, e.g. the Apostles) is that it cannot account for the living saints among us. "Saints" is an appellation widely used in the Church, albeit unofficially, for those persons who are genuine models of holiness, but who enjoy neither public nor, in many cases, private cultus. For example, if one were to ask many committed church persons who makes a greater impact on their lives, the recent martyrs in El Salvador or the late Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton or Mother Teresa of Calcutta as compared with, say, some of the recently canonized members of religious orders, the answer would obviously be the former rather than the latter.

There is, thus, a perceived discrepancy between the way saints are officially characterized *by* the Church and the way they are popularly perceived *in* the Church by many people. One issue that we must consider, then, is the degree to which we can call these noncanonized persons "saints."

There is a further issue. In the early history of saints, the single most important of the criteria used for the establishment of the cult of saints was their thaumaturgical powers exhibited both during their lives and, more importantly, after their deaths.[4] That important criterion still hovers over the canonization process in the requirement that narrative instances of miracles accompany any petition for can-

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[4] Agostino Amore, "Culto e canonizzazione dei santi nell'antichità cristiana," *Antonianum* (January-March, 1977) 38–80. This was true also in the Middle Ages; Weinstein and Bell point out that what interested devotees of the saints in the medieval period was not just the holiness of their lives but, above all, "evidence of supernatural power" (*Saints and Society* 142). For a detailed study of the relics of the saints as a locus of sacrality protected and mediated by a community, see Lisa M. Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ., 1990). Bitel's book is also a good example of how hagiography can be used for the reconstruction of social history. It is also true, however, that in the early history of hagiography one can distinguish encomia and aretalogies which put little premium on the miraculous; see Clare Stancliffe, *Saint Martin and His Biographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 98–99, 249–61.

onization unless the candidate is patently a martyr who dies on ac-
count of *odium fidei* or an exception is made by the pope.[5]

There is nothing per se objectionable about the notion that sanctity
should include the miraculous. After all, such a conjunction of sanctity/
thaumaturgy has a long history in the Church. But, judging from most
writing today, insistence on the miraculous seems the most likely rea-
son why there is a discrepancy between what the official Church calls
sanctity and what the popular estimation of a saint is. In many cases,
our notion of the saint does not necessarily involve the miraculous. We
might expect miracles from Padre Pio, but from John Henry Newman?
One could argue, for instance, that they are different kinds of saints;
hence, again, the problem of definition or, at the very least, discrimi-
nation about what kind of saint we are considering.

Finally, it is useful to offer a distinction made famous by Pierre
Delooz: the distinction between real saints and constructed saints.[6]
Real saints are those historical persons who had an actual life and
played a real part in the economy of salvation either as part of the
biblical tradition (e.g., the mother of Mary) or in subsequent history
(Saint Anthony of Padua), as contrasted with the development of a
social pattern of religiosity *constructed* through pious embroidery (the
legend of Saint Anne) or through the development of devotional prac-
tices tangentially connected to a person (Saint Anthony's bread). There
was, to cite one more example, an apostle Jude (real) who later be-
comes a patron saint of impossible situations (constructed), just as
there was an unnamed martyr (possibly real) who later acquired a
reputation as a ferryman and was constructed into a Saint Christo-
pher. What is obvious, however, is that a Francis of Assisi is a saint for
the Church in a much different manner than a constructed saint like,
for example, Saint George. One might hazard a rule of thumb: con-
structed saints are more commonly seen as intercessors or emblematic

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[5] The best account of the current practices of canonization is Kenneth Woodward's
Making Saints (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990). The Anglican Communion does not
have a formal mechanism of canonization; for the various procedures employed in that
communion for designating additions/omissions in the sanctoral cycle, see Michael Per-
ham, *The Communion of Saints,* Alcuin Club Collections no. 62 (London: Alcuin Club/
SPCK, 1980) 127–41. On the role of the Roman dicasteries in the canonization process
there are valuable historical considerations in *Miscellanea in occasione del IV centenario
della congregazione per le cause dei santi (1588–1988)* (Città del Vaticano, 1988); also see
Pietro Card. Palazzini, "I quattrocento anni della Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi,"
Divinitas 35 (1991) 86–92.

[6] Pierre Delooz, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Saints," *Saints and Their
Cults* 189–216.

figures, while real saints are primarily seen as paradigmatic models who also function, to a greater or lesser degree, as intercessors and/or loci of power.

The problem, then, is this: How does one define a saint so as to take into account the many diverse usages that spring from the various ways we have used the word "saint" in the historical tradition? What is common to a Saint George (a constructed saint), to a Teresa of Ávila (formally canonized and a real saint), to a pacifist martyr under the Nazis (Franz Jägerstätter) who was never canonized, and to a figure like Mohandas Gandhi, who was not a Christian, that would permit us to attempt a definition? How, in short, do we account for these phenomena—cultus, the miraculous, the role of intercession, and character of life—which seem to constitute sainthood, but which may not be characteristics universally observed in the life of each saint?

Recent writing on this issue has fallen back on the strategy of avoiding a too narrow definition in favor of providing what Wittgenstein has called a "family resemblance," which is to say, a complexus of characteristics ("overlapping and crisscrossing," as Wittgenstein says) which would permit us to think of a class.[7]

With that wider understanding, we might describe saints as religious virtuosi and/or exemplars who manifest in their lives (and, by extension, at least in some conspicuous cases, in their doctrine) the ideals and peculiar insights of the religious tradition. In that sense, at least, a saint is a paradigmatic figure or, to use the language of David Tracy, a "classic."[8] Such figures may or may not be the focus of cultus, or the conduit of grace derived through intercession, or a channel for the miraculous.

In my own work I have argued for the primacy of the paradigmatic and tentatively defined the saint as "a person so grasped by a religious vision that it becomes central to his or her life in a way that radically

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[7] On "family resemblance," see Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Elizabeth Anscombe (New York/London: Oxford, 1953) where this theory is worked out in detail.

[8] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) sets out the notion of the classic and argues that such classics in the Christian tradition can be art or persons as well as texts; for Tracy, the saint sets out a paradigmatic example of authentic Christian living. Of course, different ages may see different things in a saintly life to model. Saint Jerome, e.g., was projected as a model of asceticism in the 14th century, a model of Christian humanism in the 15th, and an "inspired" translator of the Vulgate in the late 16th (*pace* the Reformers); see Edmund F. Rice, Jr. *Saint Jerome In the Renaissance* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1985). Such cases illustrate the classic's capacity for carrying a surplus of meaning.

changes the person and leads others to grasp the value of the vision."[9] After a decade I would still defend that description even though it is open to the charge that by talking about radical change in a person it moves too restrictively close to William James's famous distinction in *Varieties of Religious Experience* between the "once born" and the "twice born". Such was not my desire, however. My intention was to highlight the almost universal phenomenon of constant *metanoia* in the lives of the saints.

To that description, heavy in its emphasis on exemplarity, two other characteristics should be added. In the introduction to his interesting volume on saints in world religions John Stratton Hawley singles out three areas where the saint plays a role: (1) as a model, (2) in fellowship, and (3) as an aid or conduit of the Holy.[10] The saint not only exemplifies the highest ideals of the believing community (and saints without a community within which they function are rare); saints are also sources of power either through the charisma of their transformed lives, as conduits of a specific form of holiness (e.g. the Russian *starets* or the spiritual mother/father),[11] or as *loci* of grace and/or miraculous powers.[12]

The very notion of imitability, of course, raises its own set of problems. In Christianity there is the commonplace observation that "everyone is called to be a saint." On the other hand, the exemplary value of the saint is diminished if, for example, a saint is best known to us as a wonder-worker whose greatest power rests on acts done after his or her death. To desire to be a thaumaturge, to put it bluntly, would seem to be at best an eccentric, and, on closer examination, an unworthy sort

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[9] Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) 65. This is not distant from Avery Dulles's definition of the saint as "living embodiments of the Gospel and archetypal instances of its transforming power" (*The Catholicity of the Church* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985] 85).

[10] John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, 1987) xiii. Hawley, interestingly enough, gets this paradigm from a reading of *Lumen gentium* chap. 7 no. 51.

[11] Kallistos Ware argues that spiritual fathers/mothers are in a line of "charismatic succession" somewhat analogous to apostolic succession; see his remarks in the introduction of Irenée Hausherr's *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1990) vii.

[12] Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints* puts an emphasis on the saint as conduit, but Brown balances that judgment in a later essay where he underscores the saint as a paradigmatic figure or "Christ-Bearer"; see "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," in *Saints and Virtues* 3–14. For a critique of Brown's work, see Jacques Fontaines, "Le culte des saints et ses implications sociologiques: Reflexions sur un récent essai de Peter Brown," *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982) 653–976.

of goal for Christian life. The tension between the imitability of the saint and his/her extraordinary powers is, as Richard Kieckhefer has written, the tension between the saint as exemplar and the saint as other. This tension is not always resolvable.[13]

The point that Kieckhefer urges is that the greatest saints have been so singular that it would not always naturally occur to us to use their lives as templates for our own. The singularity of their lives may serve as spurs to further spiritual effort or may function as prophetic judgments on our own lives, but it is not immediately clear that we are called upon to imitate them with anything like fidelity to their styles of life.

Thus, then, the saint's otherness can serve as a prophetic judgment on the distance between his or her life and our own. In that sense the saint serves as a standard against which progress in the spiritual life or the life of Christian service can be measured. Or, again, as Karl Rahner noted in an extremely suggestive essay, the saint helps us to see a new or different way in which the gospel can receive life in actual practice.[14] Or, finally, the saint (e.g. Mother Teresa of Calcutta) can reflect the perennial virtues of the Christian tradition, illustrating that they still have vigor. In this later instance, the saint offers us hints for the restoration of values which have been lost or minimized in a particular time, while, in Rahner's construction of it, the saint shows forth the *novum* of the gospel.

Any broad description of the saint, at least in the Christian tradition, would have to take into account the characteristic of *imitability* in the wide sense that has been described above. That concept of imitability must exist in some dialectical tension with singularity. Within that tension we might consider the saint's imitability as his/her *pedagogical* function while saintly singularity might serve as a prophetic gesture to underscore the very facticity of saintliness.

However, we must also factor in the further considerations that saints are honored in the liturgy and that such cultic honor is intimately tied to the doctrine of the communion of the saints. *Lumen gentium,* we recall, views the saints in terms of their intercessory function, their aid in edification (i.e., building up the Church), as well as their paradigmatic value: they bring "greater consolation to the

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[13] Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, eds., *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, 1988) 248. Kieckhefer stresses this tension between imitability and singularity in the saintly life.

[14] Karl Rahner "The Church of the Saints," *Theological Investigations* 3 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon, 1966) 91–105.

holiness of the whole Church," they "do not cease to intercede for us to the Father," and "in a variety of ways [they] contribute to the building up of the Church."[15]

What *Lumen gentium* underscores, in short, is that any understanding of the saint must take into account the saint as an eschatological and ecclesiological sign energized by the conviction that "there is a communication of spiritual gifts among all the redeemed, including those who have passed into the life to come."[16] The saints, in short, are for others—both in terms of their imitability and their intercessory powers, but also in terms of their "community building": they add to and enrich the tradition by the expansion of our understanding of the gospel.

A consideration of the *communio sanctorum* in any discussion of the saints is important in the Catholic tradition, so that we do not detach the saintly narrative from the witness of the community and its sense of solidarity "in the Lord." The common custom of naming institutions for saints or taking a saint's name at baptism is a tacit tribute to this sense of solidarity; the tribute is more explicit in the intercessory prayers of the liturgy and in the naming of the saints, for example, in the eucharistic prayer.

When we take into account all of the above factors it is easy to understand why any sense of what a saint is or may be must be ex-

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[15] *Lumen gentium* 7 no. 49. On the complex evolution of the term "Communion of the Saints," see Kenan Osborne, "Communion of Saints," in *The New Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Joseph Komonchak et al. (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1987) 213–16. Whether saints are imitable because we are devoted to them or vice versa is more of a conundrum than M. T. Machejek would allow; see his article "Santi," *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità,* ed. Ermanno Ancilli (Rome: Città Nuova, 1990) 3.2240.

[16] Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1985) 84. Also, see Robert Imbelli, "Towards a Catholic Vision: The Theology of the Communion of Saints," *Review for Religious* 42 (1983) 289–96. This communion can also be described under the rubric of the "fellowship of prayer" in which we pray *with* the saints as a sign both of solidarity and of eschatological longing; see Peter McKenzie, *The Christians: Their Beliefs and Practices* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1988) 222. This solidarity with the saints has profound ecumenical implications. See Elizabeth Johnson, "May We Invoke the Saints?" *Theology Today* 44 (1987) 32–52; *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue* 8, ed. Joseph Burgess (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1992). More generally, Steven T. Katz has argued persuasively that in the case of mystics, too much emphasis has been placed on their putative eccentricity and not enough on their role in the religious community; see "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions,* ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford Univ., 1983) 3–61. For a rich, liturgically theological understanding of the Communion of Saints, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Catholicism and the Communion of Saints," *Communio* 15 (1988) 163–68 and Christoph Schönborn, "The Communion of the Saints as Three Stages of the Church," ibid. 169–81.

pansive rather than restrictive. It is probably safer to say, as many scholars point out today, that the saintly phenomenon is such a large genus under which one finds a range of characteristic species that one does better to seek for specific typologies under the broad umbrella of the term *saint*.[17]

For the above reasons I am satisfied that we would do better, following the suggestion of John Coleman, S.J., to think of the saint as typically fulfilling one (or many) of the following functions: exemplary model; extraordinary teacher; wonder-worker or source of benevolent power; intercessor; and possessor of a special and revelatory relation to the Holy.[18]

The merit of Coleman's suggested typologies (not meant to be comprehensive) is that they give us a broad calculus of discrimination when the place of the saint in theological reflection is discussed.

SAINTS AS RESOURCES FOR THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Theological reflection on the saintly life moves in many directions. Such reflection may track an ethical line (What does the moral life look like and what are its contours?), or seek a new venue for approaching foundational issues, or simply search for the enfleshment(s) of religious revelation. All of these approaches and others have been taken up in recent literature.

It is a commonplace in the history of spirituality to identify a given saint with a tradition of prayer or a style of spirituality. We speak correctly of Ignatian prayer or the Theresian little way or Franciscan Christocentrism, and to those traditions we often apply the term "doctrine." What is becoming more common, however, under the impetus of a renewed interest in narrative theology and narratological theory, is an appreciation of how the lives of the saints, understood as icons of the gospel, can help purify our ways of thinking about theology from the perspective of the recuperation of lived experience.[19]

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[17] That is the basic conclusion of F. Chiarvaro in his concluding remarks at the end of a recently published multi-volumed popular encyclopedia of the saints: "L'impossible définition," in *Histoire des saints et de la sainteté chrétienne* (Paris: Hachette, 1986) 10.213.

[18] John A. Coleman, S. J., "Conclusion: After Sainthood?" in *Saints and Virtue* 214. See also Francesco Chiarvaro, "Typologie de la sainteté chrétienne," *La Vie Spirituelle* 143 (1989) 425–36. (The entire year's theme of *LVS* [1989] was on sanctity.) Elliott Wright's *Holy Companions: Christian Heros and Heroines* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) avoids the entire question of typology and simply uses the broad terms of his title.

[19] The literature on narrative theology is enormous. For a recent bibliographical survey of some of it, see William C. Spohn, S.J., "Parable and Narrative in Christian Ethics," *TS* 51 (1990) 100–14.

One extremely interesting exercise in the recuperation of the saintly life with respect to moral living is Edith Wyschograd's attempt to juxtapose such a life to the insights of postmodern philosophy.[20] Wyschograd understands the saint to be "one in which compassion for the other, irrespective of cost to the saint, is the primary trait."[21] What she finds most fecund for contemporary moral philosophy is a complex of characteristics associated with the saint that resonates with postmodern concerns. First, there is the narrative character of hagiography which is, as much as the saint's life itself, an event in its own right constituting a field of action and a field for reflection. Secondly, hagiography makes much of corporality in its preoccupation with the demands of, the mastering of, and the transformation of the body. Thirdly, there is the issue of textuality in that "saints' lives are communicated not only *in* texts but *as* texts."[22] Finally, the very narrative construction of saints' lives signals historicality in the sense that their lives are presumed rooted in reality so that they may make moral demands on the hearer/reader of those textured lives—they "read" the reader.

Wyschograd's angle of vision is doubly interesting because it dovetails so nicely with the concerns of other writers on the saints who look to their narratives as resources for the re/construction of the moral/ saintly life. As Woodward makes clear in his study of the canonization process, the compilation of a narrative is a key to canonical procedure; there is a concerted effort to see if a life, considered *tout court* is a saintly life.

Wyschograd's work is closely philosophical. An earlier monograph attempts a three-way dialogue between philosophy, theology, and the tradition of saintliness.[23] Sherry's tightly organized study argues that one can speak intelligibly of spirit, some analytical philosophers notwithstanding, and, further, that the biblical notion of spirit as power/ activity provides the clue for such talk. The action of spirit (and preeminently of Spirit) can be seen in the lives of those who are effected/ changed/transformed by spirit/Spirit. While Sherry concedes that the evidence of holiness does not provide a *strong* proof of theism, he does

[20] Edith Wyschograd, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1990).

[21] Ibid. xxiii.

[22] Ibid. 30. For some sensible reflections on how to "read" hagiography, see William J. Short, O.F.M., "Hagiographical Method in Reading Franciscan Sources," in *Metodi di lettura delle fonti francescane*, ed. E. Covi and F. Raurell (Rome: S. Lorenzo da Brindisi, 1988) 291–34. Heffernan's *Sacred Biography* 38–72 has an interesting discussion of the textuality of the saintly *vita*.

[23] Patrick Sherry, *Spirits, Saints, Immortality* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1984).

defend the idea that the "existence of saintly people is a truth condition of Christianity and many other theistic religions, in that the absence of saints would tend to falsify some doctrines."[24]

Sherry's final conclusion is twofold. First, the study of saints (a study of those who seek greater perfection in God and who seek to replicate in their lives the iconic presence of Christ) may provide a valuable venue for understanding what God "is like." Second, the lives of the saints is a much more important fact than is generally realized in Christianity, precisely because the absence of saints would disconfirm some basic doctrines of the faith. Thus there is apologetic value in the saintly narratives. Finally, Sherry hopes that philosophers will take the saints more seriously, at least to the extent of asking the question: "If in a dedicated religious life people come to have certain experiences and to be changed in various ways, what does this show?"[25]

Sherry's work points to something that has been of much concern in recent writing, namely, that the saintly life can be seen as a resource every bit as valuable as a printed source for the work of the theologian. Although Sherry does not use the language of postmodern philosophy, there is no doubt that he would endorse the notion of the *textuality* of the saintly witness: the life of the saint provides data on which theology can reflect.

One area where interest in the saints and theological reflection has recently flourished is the field of feminist theology. It is now a commonplace to observe that a retrieval of female voices in the Christian tradition is imperative; the studies of scholars such as Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Clark, Margaret Miles, Caroline Bynum, and others demonstrate that the desired retrieval is in full force. One effect of that scholarship, beyond the recovery of texts written by women, is an increasing amount of evidence that the spiritual experience of women has given its own angle and dynamic to the doing of theology. Women's theology, lacking access to the schools, was mainly generated through vehicles open to women—female communities that provided a modicum of autonomy or, in Virginia Woolf's phrase, a "room of one's own." At any rate, this retrieval confirms the truth of the insight that the lives saints live may also function as texts.

This fertile area of research provides us not only with numerous

[24] Ibid. 48. He concedes the problem of nontheistic religions.
[25] Ibid. 84. One response to Sherry's challenge might be that of Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982) 419–39, but Wolf's notion of saintliness is abstractly idiosyncratic ("a person whose every action is as morally good as possible") and divorced from any recognizable religious tradition. See the response of Robert M. Adams, "Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984) 392–401.

panoramic surveys of these voices,[26] but also with substantial mono-
graphs which attempt to construct systematic theological worldviews
from these writings. We now possess, for example, a fine translation of
the *Scivias* of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179).[27] Equally important,
however, is that this extraordinary woman's life and thought has been
the subject of careful studies, one of which systematically argues that
Hildegard had a vision of theology done in a sophianic mode that
repays careful attention both in terms of her own time and with an eye
to contemporary reconstructions of theology.[28] In this one instance,
typical of a large field of research, we have recovered a life, a "doc-
trine," and a new way of envisioning theology.

Similar strategies of retrieval have been employed to link together
spiritual theology and male/female friendship[29] or to recover female
lives from the prejudices of earlier interpreters.[30] Individual studies of
this sort come from the presses monthly, while resources for fuller
constructions of a feminist spirituality/theology based on the historical
and actual experiences of women are now seen as a desideratum soon
to be realized.[31]

What is true of feminist retrieval studies is also true, mutatis
mutandis, of theologies coming from the liberationist base. Eduardo
Hoonaert, a church historian writing from Brazil, has made a first
attempt at seeing church history from the perspective of the local com-

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[26] Some representative examples: Elizabeth A. Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Vision-
ary Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1986); Lillian T. Shank and John Nichols, eds.,
Medieval Religious Women, 2 vols. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1987); Sherrin Mar-
shall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe: Private and Public
Worlds* (Bloomington: Ind.: Indiana Univ., 1989); Emily Zum Brunn and Georgette
Epiney-Burgard, eds., *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (New York: Paragon, 1989);
the appropriate essays in Annice Callahan, ed., *Spiritualities of the Heart* (Mahwah,
N.J.: Paulist, 1990); Bradley C. Hanson, ed., *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodolog-
ical and Historical Essays* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, 1990).

[27] *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop
(Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1990).

[28] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Saint Hildegarde's Theology of the Feminine*
(Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, 1987). For a more biographical study, see the work
of Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen 1098-1179: A Visionary Life* (New York: Rout-
ledge, 1989). Such careful works stand in constrast to the (mis)use of Hildegard by the
votaries of "creation spirituality."

[29] Wendy Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Francis De Sales and Jeanne de Chantal* (Mah-
wah, N.J.: Paulist, 1985) is a good example.

[30] Clarissa Atkinson. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and World of Margery Kempe*
(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ., 1981) is a fine example of revisioning a life once dismissed
as hysterical and worse by scholars as eminent as the late Dom David Knowles.

[31] *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn
(Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1986) is a useful source book for such a construction.

munity rather than reading it from the privileged perspective of the high culture of theologians, conciliar deliberations, and the ruling classes.[32] Such a reading inevitably brings with it a confrontation with the world of miracle, intercession, pilgrimage, etc., i.e. with all of the factors which were once included under the rubric of "popular religion." Such a rereading of popular religion serves for more than grist for the mill of the social historian. Popular religion is a central topic in liberation theologies, and, as has recently been noted, the Catholic Church has opted for "managing" such devotion rather than condemning it. This has actually developed into a point of tension in ecumenical conversation.[33]

Finally, we should note the recent work of William M. Thompson. He has made the first systematic attempt to describe a foundational theory for the use of the saintly life as a locus for the doing of theology. But he does draw on a tradition which would include the names of von Hügel, Congar, Rahner, and von Balthasar.[34]

Thompson's main thesis is implied in his title: the *fire* of saintly experience and the *light* of critical reflection on that experience should not be seen as discrete operations but as a kind of exchange (*perichōrēsis*) in which one draws upon the other and vice versa. The desirability of such an enterprise would surprise no one who has pondered the critical importance of Karl Rahner's existential engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* as foundational for his theology, or the role of Catherine of Genoa as a test case for von Hügel's classic *The Mystical Element in Religion*. In fact, Thompson cites the work of Rahner and von Balthasar as primary examples of theologians who have combined "fire" and "light" in an holistic manner in their approach to theology.

Beyond the desirability of such an "exchange," Thompson offers some further reasons why the saints are important for theology. First, the lives of the saints are a needed corrective to the postbaroque tendency of theology to favor the abstract. The saintly life, as it were, incarnates the demands of the gospel to show what the following of Christ looks like in the concrete. Second, and following closely on the first, this embodied revelation highlights the centrality of religious experience: the saintly life reflects God's Word without reducing it to

[32] Eduardo Hoonaert, *The Memory of the Christian People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

[33] George Tavard, "The Veneration of Saints as Ecumenical Problem," in *Walking Together: Roman Catholics and Ecumenism Twenty-Five Years after Vatican II*, ed. Thaddeus D. Horgan (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990) 118–33.

[34] William M. Thompson, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1987). Thompson summarizes his thinking on the saints with respect to Christology in *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 121–33.

the saintly experience (there is always more that a saint could do or could be).

SAINTS AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

We have already mentioned two books which deal *ex professo* with sainthood in world religions: *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions,* edited by Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond; and *Saints and Virtues,* edited by John Stratton Hawley. Both books emerged after long scholarly consultations and seminars, and both were concerned with the question of the applicability of the term "saint" to persons in different religious traditions. Finally, both books acknowledge the difficulty of a narrow definition of sainthood but agree that there is, as we have already noted, a "family resemblance" that is useful as a heuristic device for studying the phenomenon.

Kieckhefer's anthology concentrates on a broad consideration of the major religious traditions of the world. By focussing on the twin characteristics of *imitability* and *veneration* its authors can make the case that the Jewish *saddiq* or the Confucian *sage* or the Buddhist *arahant* (Theravada) and *bodhisattva* (Mahayana) can, like the Islamic *wali* of the Sufi tradition and the Hindu *rsis,* be seen within the family of the saint/holy person while, at the same time, locating those personages within their own traditions in meaningful and nonreductive ways. Thus, to cite one example, Robert Cohn's essay on the saint in Judaism[35] is at pains to disentangle the common use of the word "saint" (e.g. "Martin Buber was a saint") in Judaism from the precise way a *saddiq* or *hasid* actually is located within, and functions in Judaism.

What the editors of this volume finally conclude is that careful historical studies of the category of saint and its analogues is crucial for a clarification of the genre in comparative studies. That conclusion, of course, reinforces the points we have made earlier. If we wish to use the term "saint" in a meaningful fashion, the very elasticity of the term in common coinage demands that we put under the term a range of meaningful typologies of the sort suggested by Coleman so that our discourse is consistent.

Hawley's volume, by contrast, studies sainthood not as a global phenomenon in world religions but from the perspective of the role of the saint as an exemplar/source/energizer of moral action by focussing on specific examples from various religious traditions. The merit of this approach is in its ability to uncover specifics which sharpen the gen-

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[35] "Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism," in Kieckhefer and Bond, eds., *Sainthood* 43–68.

eralizations one makes about the saint. Thus, for example, Hester Gelber's essay on Saint Francis[36] makes the interesting point that beyond the exemplary power of the life of Francis there were elements in his life which set forth statements which could not, or were not, imitable: his walking through a town totally nude was not a practice enjoined on his followers. Thus, in at least this instance, what one sees is not imitability but theatre—and that for reasons of divine pedagogy. Likewise, in a very provocative study, Mark Juergensmeyer traces the complex way in which Gandhi becomes denominated and depicted as a saint in such a way that the notion of sanctity interpenetrates both Christian and Hindu categories.[37] In both instances (that of Francis and Gandhi) one sees the tension between imitability and singularity discussed by Kieckhefer.

Let me cite one last example, since it sheds light on something that is common in the Christian hagiographical tradition. Stanley Tambiath's contribution to this volume studies contemporary Thai Buddhist *arahants,* who bless amulets which are thought to bring blessings and power to their possessors.[38] These "forest dwellers," conspicuous for their advanced states of contemplation, can reify their charisma through blessed amulets and continue their work through informal networks of disciples and lay devotees. Tambiath compares them to medieval saints who exuded power and to the circles of disciples surrounding hasidic masters in Judaism. What occurred to me, however, in reading his essay, was how close these *arahants* are to the desert tradition of early Christian eremetical monasticism in their reputed power to charm and pacify animals, their gathering of disciples, their relationship to lay devotees, and in the production of hagiographies which make use of the topoi of parallelism with the imitation of Christ or Buddha.

The work of Tambiath and others cries out for further close comparative study for the light such study might shed on ascetic/spiritual similarities in the world's religions. Such studies would not only advance our understanding of religion but would be a valuable entry into the more complex field of comparative theology.

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[36] "A Theater of Virtue: The Exemplary World of St. Francis of Assisi," in Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* 15–35.

[37] "Saint Gandhi," in Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* 187–204.

[38] "The Buddhist Arahant: Classical Paradigm and Modern Thai Manifestations," in Hawley, ed., *Unquiet Souls* 111–26. The essay is a synopsis of his larger study, *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulets* (New York/London: Cambridge Univ., 1984).

CONCLUSIONS

What common threads can be detected in the disparate literature we have surveyed?

First, from the perspective of theology, and largely deriving from the consideration of the saints in *Lumen gentium,* there has been a consistent effort to integrate the lives of the saints into a broader ecclesiological portrait. The saints are seen as epiphanies of the workings of grace who are remembered in the memory of the Church. In a recent essay on the place of Mary and the saints in the Church, Elizabeth Johnson writes:

> Based on vital solidarity, the narrative remembrance of Jesus and with him of his friends both known and unknown articulates and mediates the experience of saving grace in the midst of the disasters of history. Inevitably critical of the banality of evil, this theology orients believers to praxis, to action on behalf of the reign of God in the face of the godless world.[39]

Second, the very force of these remembered narratives opens up the power of Christomimesis so that we can either learn new ways of being Christian (thus, Rahner), or be reassured that older models still have power and efficacy (thus, Cunningham), or find "proof" that the Spirit still moves in history (thus, Sherry), or, finally, intuit theological truths as incarnate in the narrative shape of a given life (thus, Thompson).

This "narrative remembrance" operates both for the individual (e.g. as a model to be emulated) and for the believing community. The Church, as *Lumen gentium* centrally insisted, is an eschatological reality; its pilgrim nature means that it is "not yet there." The commemoration of the saints in the liturgy of the Church is not meant simply to honor heros/heroines who are dead, but to proclaim that they are a pledge of our own hope and faith. We are all part of that community, across time and space, who stand in solidarity in the unity of the Spirit.

While it is easy to find fault with the ideological underpinnings of the formal canonization process as it stands today (Delooz, Vauchez, Weinstein, and Woodward are useful here), the ideal process would state symbolically: These are the ones we invoke because they bear witness to the presence of grace in the world; they are the "cloud of

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[39] Elizabeth Johnson, "Saints and Mary," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives,* 2 vols., ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) 2.168. Johnson's concept of "narrative remembrance" is taken from John Baptist Metz's *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

witnesses" who impell us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Heb 12:1).

When we enlarge the picture to see the saint against the background of the holy person in world religions we notice both continuity and difference. Continuity, because the Christian saint (studied as a phenomenon in the religious culture of humanity) is not sui generis except in terms of the symbolical framework in which he or she is defined. One sees analogues to saintly behavior in the other religious traditions, but saintly persons in those traditions may express modalities of behavior which do not fit exactly with the kinds of lives recorded in the Christian hagiographical tradition. Both Christianity and Hinduism, for example, know the tradition of the "holy fool," but it would be reductionistic to say that they are the same in both traditions since their "foolishness" is played out against the background of quite different worldviews and anthropologies.[40] Examples of this kind could easily be multiplied.

Difference, however, clarifies. To the degree that we see the singularity of the saint in the Christian tradition we learn more about the "retrievability" of the Christian tradition as a potential source for living and praxis or, even, as a salutary warning against exaggerations and/or dead-end misappropriations of spiritual strategies. Precisely because the saintly life demands careful attention to the *experience* by which a person becomes a saint, the study of saints should (will) loom large as the discipline of spirituality becomes better focussed and methodologically more sophisticated. Sandra Schneiders's recently published *status disciplinae* in these pages defines spirituality as the "field of study which attempts to investigate in an interdisciplinary way spiritual experiences as such."[41] Surely part of the enterprise will involve a careful consideration of those experiences as they come to us from the hagiographical tradition.

[40] In this regard, compare, e.g., Carl Olson's *The Mysterious Play of Kali: An Interpretative Study of Ramakrishna,* AAR Studies in Religion 56 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, 1990) with John Seward's *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (New York/London: Oxford Univ., 1980).

[41] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *TS* 50 (1989) 692.