



The Holy Person in Comparative Perspective

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A holy person is one who serves as an exemplar of virtue and an embodiment of sacred power. The holy person lives according to the highest ideals of a religious tradition. The word "saint" is frequently used in English for such persons. Explicitly Christian in its origin, this term (and many many linguistically similar terms in modern European languages) comes from the Latin *sanctus* (holy man) or *sancta* (holy woman). It was Peter Brown who--in a 1971 article entitled "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity"-- coined the phrase "holy person" in its modern scholarly usage through the brilliantly simple expedient of taking his Christian sources literally. Brown has since (see the citations below) regularly rethought this concept in the light of more recent scholarship on Christianity. Scholars of other religious traditions have freely used this term and concept in studying other traditions. Three fruits of those studies provide a useful mirror on the practice of holiness in Christianity.

Early Christians, such as those studied by Brown, honored as saints specifically those persons who were thought to have earned immediate entrance to the kingdom of heaven after their death. In practice only a limited number of people were so venerated. The first to be so recognized were martyrs, who had died for their witness to the name of Christ. With the end of persecution, monks who endured the symbolic martyrdom of rigorous self-denial came to be officially honored as saints. Still later bishops, teachers, visionaries, and others were included in the possible ranks of the saints. As residents of the court of heaven, saints were capable of working miracles and their prayerful intercession could aid ordinary Christians gain salvation. The veneration of these saints was central to the practice of medieval Christianity, and continues to be important in modern Orthodoxy and Catholicism, although it was rejected by the Protestant reformers.

Both Islam and Judaism are at root religions which, out of fear of idolatry, reject the use of any image of the divine or of any human intermediary with the divine. Nonetheless rabbinic Judaism of the classic period gave reverence to a large group of exemplary biblical heroes. Medieval Jewish communities compiled lists of martyrs whose example served as instruction in the need for steadfast faith. More recently, various rabbinic schools have extended veneration to the *tsaddiqim* or *hasidim*, the "disciples" of various important masters who embody the power of mystical teachings. Nonetheless the holy person has always remained of marginal importance in Judaism. Islam, on the other hand, has developed a number of centrally important categories of venerated figures whose

importance is widely accepted. A *shahid* is a martyr who has died for the faith. The *awliya*, or "friends of God," are teachers and ascetics who have earned a close relationship to the divine and thus wield miraculous powers, particularly at their tombs. A number of historical *imams*, or leaders of the community of Muslims, are revered by Shiites.

In Hinduism it is not always possible to make precise distinctions between holy persons and the anthropomorphic appearances of divinities. The range of types of people who over the course of history have been thought to embody holiness is immense, but focuses on three categories: those who have had close relationships to divinities, such as the *rsis* or sages of the Vedas; those who have achieved some form of spiritual liberation (*siddha* or "perfected one"), and thus amassed miraculous powers through accumulated austerity; and great *gurus* or teachers, of whom Sankara (eighth century Christian Era) was apparently the first accorded posthumous veneration.

Buddhism and Jainism define holy people more exclusively within the context of the attainment of enlightenment. Jainists venerate *tirthankaras*, those historical figures who taught the Jainist path and achieved enlightenment, as well as more recent monks of particular piety who are known as *sadhu* or "spiritually great souls." For Theravada Buddhists, an *arahant* can be either an historical disciple of Buddha or a more recent monastic "worthy" who has achieved the highest stage of spiritual development. In addition to the wisdom and virtue they attain on the path to enlightenment, they also can perform miraculous and magical feats. For the Mahayana, a *bodhisattva* is a "Buddha-to-be," that is someone who will achieve enlightenment in the current lifetime and can transfer merit to fellow humans, thus speeding fellow human beings on their own paths to enlightenment. The former ideal is specifically confined to monks, while the latter is open to all. These concepts all betray a basic tension between the ideal of enlightenment as a pure state of being and the practical reality of the great powers which are believed to accompany its attainment.

In other religious traditions, persons who hold sacred offices can transcend them through the unique holiness of their actions or instruction. A Confucian teacher, for example, can become a *sheng*, or venerated "sage." Similarly, various Native American and African shamans have become leaders of large-scale movements. The devotion of their followers marks them as holy persons.

This list by no means exhausts the possible analogues to "holy person" in the world's religions. Nor is an analogue present in all traditions. Protestant Christians reject the cult of saints and use the term "saint," if at all, to refer to all true members of their community. Similarly some rigorist interpretations of Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism avoid the veneration of any human being.

One of the most common means by which holy people in virtually all traditions develop and display their sacred charisma is through those acts of physical renunciation known under the rubric of asceticism. Asceticism (from *askesis*; Greek, "exercise" or "training") the use of the renunciation of physical pleasures or other forms of bodily self-denial as a

means of spiritual development. The term literally referred in its origins to exercises performed by soldiers and athletes. By the fifth century BCE philosophers had adopted the word to refer to their own very different physical regimen which was intended to train the body in search of spiritual benefit. The varied schools of Greek philosophy employed different forms of bodily training: Stoics, for example, ate a very spare diet, while Cynics could be recognized by their simple clothing and aversion to money. All shared a vision of the human individual as divided into a (superior) spiritual soul and a (inferior) material body. Plato (a Greek philosopher of the fourth century BCE) wrote eloquently of the need for withdrawing the soul from the body. The goal was to purify the soul by controlling the body's appetites and thus achieve a state devoid of passion.

While asceticism is a word of western origin, the term is now used to refer to practices common to many religious traditions. Asceticism is often practiced in conjunction with spiritual exercises such as meditation and contemplative prayer. No single definition, however, can be universally applied; each tradition uses its own terms for these practices. The underlying assumption of asceticism in both western and eastern traditions is that the training of the body will aid in the training of the will or the soul and hence aid in the attainment of greater virtue or spiritual perfection. The Buddha, for example, preached the utility of *dhuta*, those actions which one vows to undertake for a period of time and which literally aid in "shaking off" bodily passions body. Indeed Buddhism is a tradition, like Catholic Christianity and classical Hinduism, in which asceticism is central to the practice of the religion.

The most common forms of ascetic renunciation focus on food and sexual relations. The practices range widely in rigor: from simple abstinence from certain forms of food (most typically meat) to long-term fasts in which the ascetic survives on meager foods (such as bread and water); from the chaste avoidance of sexual passion to a vow of lifelong virginity. Other important practices include the rejection of money or personal property in favor of a life of voluntary poverty and the withdrawal from normal modes of social interaction to live in seclusion or in an isolated community of like-minded ascetics. In extreme instances asceticism can go beyond self-denial to self-inflicted mortification, although the propriety of such action has been vigorously debated. Ascetic practices should be distinguished from the ordinary pious actions required of all adherents of a given religion. In general such a distinction is a matter of extent, intensity, or duration. All Muslims, for example, are required to fast during the month of Ramadan, but members of some Sufi orders practice rigorous fasting for their entire lives.

A brief comparison of the development of two basic versions of the ascetic holy person in west and east will serve to highlight certain common elements, as well as certain distinctions, in the cross cultural consideration of sanctity. Christianity developed in an Hellenistic environment and inherited this ideal of physical training in search of spiritual perfection, as well as the misogynistic assumption that women were more material than men and hence less capable of spiritual development. Christians, however, set the practice of asceticism within the context of the search for salvation. Early Christian saints were frequently referred to as "soldiers of Christ" or "athletes of God." This context added a moral dimension to asceticism, because it was practiced for the purpose of

penance as well as purification. The body was seen as sinful and in need of punishment in order to attain spiritual perfection. Thus it was not sufficient to withdraw the soul from the body; rather the ascetic had to withdraw from human society, which was sinful in its fallen state. The most enduring expression of ascetic ideals within Christianity was the monastic movement. By the fourth century Christian ascetics had begun to create an alternative society by forming communities in desolate places such as the Egyptian desert, which became, as one author remarked, "a city." The monastic life then and later was marked by a spare diet, frequent fasts, a vow of life-long chastity, lack of personal property, and silence which was broken for prayer but not personal conversation. Monastic communities were restricted to a single sex and fewer developed for women than for men. Benedict of Nursia (6th century monk) described the monastery as "a school for God's service." One purpose of asceticism for the Christian monks was to share in the sufferings of Christ and thus to gain salvation. As Benedict explained, "Never departing from God's guidelines, remaining in the monastery until death, we patiently share in Christ's passion, so we may enter into the kingdom of God."

An analogous set of ascetic institutions developed from a concept of ancient importance in Indian thought, that of world renunciation. The *sannyasin* relinquishes all property and social relations in order to take up life as a wandering beggar who possesses only a begging bowl, a staff, and a simple robe. This poverty assures a certain level of asceticism, but many renouncers undertake further feats of self-mortification, such as extended fasts which leave them emaciated or lead to their death. Asceticism serves as a means of eliminating all attachments: the robe of the renouncer resembles a burial shroud and thus serves as a symbol of death to the world. The purpose of renunciation is to seek liberation of the self from the world and thus from the round of reincarnation. Traditionally this life is considered to be a possible final stage in the life cycle of a Brahman. While in theory available to women, it is in practice usually undertaken by men and only after their sons have male offspring. Gautama Buddha was a world renouncer, as was Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. Their new religions incorporated the concept of renunciation as a fundamental organizing principle. The use of asceticism, however, distinguishes the Buddhist monk from the Hindu *sannyasin*. One of the discoveries which the Buddha made on his path to enlightenment was that the feats of self-denial which he had once performed as an ascetic had served to focus his attention on his body and thus actually hindered his quest. The Buddha therefore preached the need for moderation in monastic asceticism. Nonetheless Buddhist monks have no personal property and practice chastity; they eat only what they beg, then moderately, and nothing after the noon hour. Historically there was a monastic order for women: in Buddhism became extinct only to be refounded recently, while it has survived in Jainism.

Monks and nuns by no means exhaust the possibilities for the attainment of a reputation of holiness or sanctity in either Christianity or Buddhism. But the practice of monasticism, in which the individual ascetic (ordinary or saintly) lives in dynamic tension with both a tradition of practice and with a wider community of fellow practitioners helps to highlight a fundamental tension present in the concept of the holy person. In the eye of the believer the holy person has inherently become an exemplar of how to live one's life and has thus become an embodiment of sacred power. In practice,

however, a person cannot attain holiness in isolation; his or her achievement must be recognized by a community of fellow believers. These are the disciples of a living teacher or the pilgrims who flock to the shrine of a martyr. Without such an audience the holy person could not serve as an exemplar and there would be no clientele for miraculous powers. The example and sacred powers of the holy person provides are in fact social constructs which are informed and constrained by their humanity and their gender, by their life and their death, as well as by institutional considerations.

People become holy in different ways than do places, or totemic animals, or ritual objects. A sacred mask, for example, confers holiness upon the dancer who wears it, but that dancer does not become inherently holy in the manner of a martyr or an ascetic monk who has attained enlightenment. The holiness of the dancer is evanescent, that of the holy person enduring. The masked dancer is a ritual performer, the holy person has become a living embodiment of the sacred, an actual piece of the kingdom of heaven or of *nirvana*. As a human being, the holy person transmits sacred power in ways that are quintessentially human. Devotees gather to hear the sermons of a great teacher, bring gifts to the shrine of a saint or bodhisattva, or build genealogies to demonstrate their descent from a martyr or *imam*. The veneration of holy people implies that sacred power can be dispersed not only through rituals or sacraments, but through social relationships.

The construction of holiness is also constrained by gender or, more accurately, by the cultural construction of gender. A medieval Christian woman, for example, could become a saint as a visionary or martyr, but not as a preacher or bishop (offices from which they were excluded). Confucianism restricts teaching, and thus sagehood, to males. While there have historically been monastic orders for women in both Buddhism and Jainism, they have produced few figures of widespread veneration. Just as the power wielded by holy people necessarily reflects its social and cultural context, so too the ways in which women have attained positions of veneration as holy people (notably in Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam) also reflects the historic misogyny of the world's religions. The holy person becomes an exemplar for others as a result of the way in which he or she has lived. For an exemplar to have meaning, however, it must be disseminated beyond the circle of those disciples or students who have intimate knowledge of that particular person. Written or oral legends (known under the general heading of hagiography) serve to transmit that example and play a vital role in the construction of holiness. This literature follows traditional forms and is intended to convey a moral message rather than historically accurate biography.

While the power of a holy person begins during his or her lifetime, miracles are performed not only by the living, but also (and perhaps most often) posthumously, usually in relation to physical objects known as relics. Corpses are the favored relics and tombs the preferred sites of shrines in Christianity and Islam, but teeth, clothing, statues, and books can all serve as relics. These act as the continued physical presence of the holy person in the material world after their death. They should not be regarded as symbols, but as an actual extension of the holy person's charismatic power. The miracles performed by holy people and their relics include such visible marvels as cures and exorcisms, but also invisible acts such as the remission of sin or the transfer of merit. The

institutional hierarchy of a religious tradition often seeks ways to control the power of the holy person, declaring their right to validate a person's holiness through such processes as that of canonization in Catholicism. Most religious traditions have categories such as witch or heretic which serve as the antithesis of the holy person. They, too, can perform wonders, but their powers are opposed to the correct practice of religion and have their origin in an evil debasement of a correct life.

Note: A version of this essay has appeared as part of the entries which I wrote on "asceticism" and "holy person" which appeared in the *Harper's Dictionary of Religion*, eds. Jonathan Smith and William Scott Green (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 77-80 and 61-464. I would prefer that any published citation deriving from this on-line essay should be made to these printed versions.

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