

Response

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I am very grateful to the three discussants, not only, of course, for having agreeable things to say about the book, but also for the way they have used their reflections on the subject to extend and develop it.

Very early in my book there is, I find, a fairly succinct description of what it is about: the idea that “the dead bodies of holy people should be cherished as enduring sources of supernatural power.”⁶⁷ Not everyone embraces this idea. Giving a talk about the cult of the saints recently to an educated but non-academic audience, I was struck by one listener’s response: “This is not Christianity!” When asked what she meant, she clarified that she meant what is in the Gospels. If that is the benchmark, then one can only agree with her. But at least by the time of Augustine, things had changed. He stated clearly that there were two kinds of Christian dead: “We pray for the other faithful departed but we do not pray for the martyrs (*pro aliis fidelibus defunctis oratur; pro martyribus non oratur*).”⁶⁸ We do not pray for the martyrs because we pray to them. Many Christians had objections to this whole bundle of beliefs and practices: they objected to the idea of there being “two kinds of Christians,” to the practice of praying to the saints, and to the practice of praying for the dead. These were targets of attack by some medieval heretics and by Protestants.

But although Augustine believed in efficacious prayer to the saints, this was not for him part of the natural order, since, to use Richard Kieckhefer’s words, he saw “interaction between the living and the dead as not natural but marvellous.” Indeed, a question that Richard Kieckhefer highlights—“Where are the saints?”—is linked to the more general one, “Where are the dead?” Where the dead were and what they could do were vexed questions. The treatise *The State of Souls after Death* by the sixth- or seventh-century author Eustratius of Constantinople debates the possibility of post-mortem activity, which was a necessary condition for saintly activity.⁶⁹ Richard Kieckhefer notes that a consensus seems never to have been reached about the state of the dead, including the holy dead, while Euan Cameron, dealing with the Reformation period, talks of “considerable disorder among the reformers’ beliefs” on the subject.

⁶⁷ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 622.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 589–590.

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There is a remarkable imbalance between the importance of the cult of the saints in the lived religion of the Middle Ages and the lack of really deep or sustained theological discussion of it. It might even be reasonable to say that there was virtually no theology of sanctity. In contrast, there eventually developed a considerable amount of canon law on the subject, especially that dealing with canonization. Unlike Christology, conceptions of the Trinity or Eucharistic theology, the cult of the saints was relatively detachable. Abandoning it involved a psychological and social upheaval, but not a rethinking of basic theology. My book is thus about social practice, or “what people did,” as Claudia Rapp puts it so cogently, rather than theology, although, of course, social practices do involve thinking and can generate theories and explanations.

But if, in one sense, the question “where are the saints” leads to theological uncertainties, in another sense there was no doubt about where the saints were: they were everywhere. In his comments, Richard Kieckhefer gives a German example of the density of the network of shrines, while one of the cases in my book concerns a woman who, in her will, asked that after her death someone should visit nine shrines on her behalf; all these shrines were within twelve miles of her village, so a half day’s walk.⁷⁰ The geographical aspect of the cult of the saints can be plotted graphically, as in the beautiful map of the cult of St Remigius found in the *Großer Historischer Weltatlas*, and it is informative and useful to distinguish, as is often done, universal, regional, and local cults. It is important to remember, however, that the relationship between localism and universalism is dialectical. One can become the other. All saints start as local saints, but some make the leap to the universal. Claudia Rapp gives examples of the flow of cults from East to West and from West to East. And a universalism can become localism, as in cults of the Virgin Mary that manifested themselves in very specific ways: the Virgin Mary is not only the Queen of Heaven, but is also incarnated in the rather parochial forms of Our Lady of Ipswich or Our Lady of Rocamadour.

Claudia Rapp also highlights an important negative point. For the most part, despite claims sometimes made to the contrary, sanctity is not *imitatio Christi*, an emulation of Christ, although it does usually involve an embrace of the ascetic life. The apostolic life was a model for some famous saints, who were moved by hearing Christ’s counsel of perfection—Antony and Francis are the best known examples—and most Christian saints of the Middle Ages were distinguished by heroic asceticism, the renunciation of property and sex and the reduction of food and sleep to a minimum.

Yet it was not impossible for saints to be rich or sexually active. One of the earliest, most credible, and most moving, records of Christian martyrdom is the

⁷⁰Ibid., 426.

account of the imprisonment and death of Perpetua of Carthage, a well-born wife and mother. Along with her in prison is the slave Felicity, who actually gives birth there. There is not the slightest hint in this account of any self-consciousness or embarrassment about Perpetua and Felicity being sexually active women. Later texts, after Christianity had been transformed by the ascetic revolution of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, are more apologetic about both sex and wealth. The hagiographic vita of Gerald of Aurillac, for example, begins with the attempt to refute those who doubted whether “a powerful, wealthy man” could be a saint, and, while there were married saints, their marriage is often presented as something entered unwillingly, or even as unconsummated.

Saints are not simply “good people.” To be a saint meant being recognized as a saint, that is, having others recognize a person’s sanctity, and hence the question arises, who decides that someone is a saint. Martyrdom always remained a trump card, the most compelling mark of sanctity. Thomas Becket’s bloody end transformed him immediately from a controversial and infuriating figure into one of the most important medieval saints. In the case of another murdered archbishop, Engelbert of Cologne, who was assassinated in 1225, his hagiographer made no attempt to disguise the fact that it was his death, not his life, that qualified him for sainthood: “The sanctity that was lacking in his life was supplied by his precious death.”⁷¹ And, as Euan Cameron points out, martyrdom had a special value and power also among Protestants. It is revealing that, as he points out, in 1571 Canterbury Convocation decreed that Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* should be available in every parish church.

The decision that someone was a saint was an exercise of authority, and for many centuries it was the local bishop who played the chief role in that decision. Claudia Rapp raises and also nuances “the role of bishops in promoting and controlling the cult of the saints.” But from 1200 onwards, in the Latin Church, papal canonization eroded the bishop’s autonomy, in this matter as in others. Historians love canonization because of the mass of written evidence it produces. But canonization was only for the few. The statistics laboriously compiled by Michael Goodich enable a generalization to be made: in the thirteenth century, newly revered saints who were never canonized were twenty times as numerous as those who were. Richard Kieckhefer wonders whether such statistics suggest that the canonized few were actually “epiphenomenal” and the uncanonized many “the real core.”

Euan Cameron is welcomingly clear-cut that Reformation understanding of the saints was “quite different from that of the Middle Ages,” and he points out the reformers who were “deeply hostile” or “deeply averse” to this entire aspect of

⁷¹Ibid., 183.

Christian religiosity. It looked too much like paganism. And this question, whether the Christian cult of the saints was essentially the worship of the pagan gods reborn, was a recurrent one. It was an issue for Augustine, for the reformer Bullinger in *On the Origins of Error*, and for the confessional polemicists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether or not there was continuity in cult between the ancient and medieval worlds, there has certainly been continuity in discussion of continuity of cult.

Eventually, in the Protestant world, Euan Cameron remarks, “sainthood slides off into commemoration.” He points to the role of the Protestant icon and makes the arresting claim that Luther’s portrait was the most widespread image of an individual there had ever been, a success which continues, it appears, as Luther is reportedly the most popular Playmobile figure. The gradual transformation of sanctity into celebrity explains the taste for the kind of parallelisms found in J. F. Hopgood, “Saints and Stars: Sainthood for the Twenty-first Century” (1999) in *The Making of Saints* (2005), a volume that also treats of Evita, Che Guevara, and Elvis, where the difference between saints and stars are downplayed in favour of some simple resemblances.⁷² These kinds of similarities and echoes seem to have a continuing popular appeal. Not long ago a kind correspondent sent me a postcard showing the burial site of Stonewall Jackson’s arm in Virginia, regarded as a modern relic. He also said he intended to read my book eventually, “but golly, it is big!” It is big, because the subject is big. My book, despite its length, just dips into the topic. The three commentators here show very well some of the ways that the study of the cult of the saints can be further developed and refined.

⁷²James F. Hopgood, “Saints and Stars: Sainthood for the Twenty-first Century,” in *The Making of Saints*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 124–142.