

# I

## Introduction

*Katherine K. Young*

Much has been written recently about the lives of saints, usually in Christianity but occasionally in other world religions as well. This scholarly activity has both inspired and responded to the new interest in vernacular literatures and popular religions. When the topic is female saints, it has also been stimulated by the desire of women to know more about powerful, female religious figures in the past and the desire of feminists to find role models for women in the present. This book tries to fill some important gaps by introducing some neglected female saints: each author presents translations of excerpts from their works (or from other sources about their lives) that had not yet been translated and discusses the general concept of sainthood (or its functional equivalent in non-Christian religions).<sup>1</sup> This volume also presents the first comparative analysis of female sainthood. But first, a word about these particular saints and the religions they represent.<sup>2</sup>

### JUDAISM

Judith Baskin discusses the Dolce of Worms, a twelfth-century exemplar of Ashkenazi piety in Germany. The study is based on Baskin's translation of a biography written by the Dolce's scholarly husband Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, well-known as a pietist and mystic. The daughter of one rabbi and the wife of another, the Dolce belonged to a circle of Jews in Germany (the Hasidei Ashkenaz) known not only for the fervor of their pietism but also for their esoteric, mystical works. The Dolce took care of her family. She was also a major banker and moneylender, activities undertaken to allow her husband, her son, and her husband's students to spend their time studying the Torah. And more than that, she made parchment for scrolls, thread and wicks for ritual items, and food for the students. Her altruistic activities included those for the women of the community. She

helped adorn brides; taught other women about religion (drawing on extensive education from her husband); recited prayers in Hebrew; and sang hymns sweetly. She visited the sick, bathed the dead, and made their shrouds. Tragedy hit this family when two men entered the home and used their swords to strike everyone. Wounded, the Dolce fled. She cried out for help. When the attackers followed her, her husband managed to lock the door behind them. This saved his own life and that of his son (his two daughters and his wife, however, died from the attack). In the rabbi's lament, he repeatedly describes his good wife as a "saint" (*hasidah*) and a righteous woman (*tzadeket*).

#### CHRISTIANITY

Marie Ann Mayeski and Jane Crawford have translated the story of Saint Radegund, a sixth-century Merovingian queen of France, as told by the nun Baudonivia and preserved in the *Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum*. As a child, Radegund was caught in an internecine struggle that virtually obliterated her family (the Thuringians). Rescued from the battlefield by Clothar, king of the Franks, Radegund was raised to become one of his many wives. After her husband killed her last brother, she left Clothar and moved to one of the villages that belonged to her dowry. When Clothar wanted her back, she fled to Poitiers and managed, through the intervention of a bishop, to have him endow a convent there for her and others. Radegund is said not only to have been a remarkable exemplar of virtues, but also to have had supernatural abilities: protecting the convent from demons by making the sign of the cross every night; banishing noisy birds by uttering blessings; healing the sick; and expunging demons from possessed women. In addition to religious powers, she continued to exercise political ones, drawing on her family's name for its connections with ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Of her passing, we are told that she chose a significant day on the Christian calendar; after dying, she was taken by angels to heaven. Meanwhile, the bishop arrived and saw an angel where her body, with its still-radiant face, was lying. While her corpse was being transported to Saint Mary's basilica, a blind man was cured. After her entombment, the basilica became famous as a site of miracles.

#### ISLAM

Valerie Hoffman describes the life of Sayyida Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan (762–824), a member of the Prophet Muḥammad's family (more specifically,

the great-granddaughter of the Prophet's grandson al-Hasan). Hoffman's contribution is to translate excerpts from the *Al-Sayyida Nafisa, Daughter of Sidi Hasan al-Anwar*, by contemporary Egyptian preacher and prayer leader Aḥmad al-Shihāwī Sa'd Sharaf al-Dīn. Sayyida was so well-educated that legal scholars came to consult her. She was known for her beauty and piety (rigorous in fasts, prayers, and pilgrimages), even though some accounts say that she was shy, modest, and weak. Biographical sources mention a pivotal spiritual experience while visiting the tomb of Abraham. Hoffman describes how she asked "God to immerse her heart in the blessings and fragrances of the Friend, and to cause her to be complete with his divine effusions and graces. . . ." Dozing at the tomb, "she saw the Friend of God in her sleep welcoming her and greeting her, speaking to her spirit, counselling her, and telling her of her high standing with God." When the Prophet's family was persecuted by Sunni Caliphs, Sayyida moved with her husband and children to Egypt. She became very popular there. Not only did ordinary people bring their problems to her, so did scholars and government officials. According to biographies, she gained a reputation for miracles. She united in herself the special status of belonging to the Prophet's family, and that of a close relationship with God, signified by her ability to perform miracles. Despite her saintliness, Sayyida's personal life was one of tribulations. Her husband abandoned her. Then came the deaths of her father, her daughter, and finally her son. Her own death was extraordinary. Even though she was struck by a severe illness, she did not stop her fasting during Ramadan. When her doctor commanded her to resume eating, she got rid of him (not caring whether she lived or died). Then, she had a curtain removed to reveal the grave in which she wanted to be buried. She told those assembled that she had recited the entire Qur'ān there 1,000 times, performed *rak'as* (prayer cycles) 100,000 times, and uttered God's name 200,000 times. After saying that she would break her fast only in heaven, she began to recite the Qur'ān, and then just the name of God, until "her pure spirit and her blameless soul returned to their maker, rising to the heavenly council."

## HINDUISM

Rajeshwari Pandharipande's chapter marks the debut in English of the story of Maharashtrian saint Janābāī (circa 1263–1350). For this project, she translates from Janābāī's own poems (*abhanga*) found in the *Śrī Nāmadeva Gāthā* (collected works of her guru Nāmadev) and various hagiographic sources in Marathi. Pandharipande shows how Janābāī,

daughter of a low-caste tailor, became a maid servant (*dāsī*) in an upper-caste household after being orphaned. A son of this family, and her junior, would later become a famous saint known as Nāmādev. At first, Janābāi was his maid. Eventually, she began to think of herself as his disciple (a relationship that had already existed, according to her, through several births) even though she continued to perform chores for him and his family. Finally, in her own eyes, she surpassed Nāmādev. In fact, she claimed to be the supreme deity himself: Lord Viṭṭhal. This realization was caused by an experience of the “divine flood of self-knowledge,” observes Pandharipande, that overcame Janābāi and blinded her, even though she tried to resist it: “What I eat is divine, what I drink is divine, my bed is also divine. The divine is here, and it is there. There is nothing empty of divine. Jani says—Vithabai [the Lord] has filled everything from the inside out.” All worldly distinctions have disappeared and the servant is now one (*advaita*) with the supreme Lord, or, in her own words, “*santa* is God and God is *santa*” (saint). She, too, had an unusual death; the hagiography states that she entered a final meditative trance and “died” at the same moment as did her teacher, Nāmādev.

#### BUDDHISM

Miriam Levering writes about the female Ch’an (Zen) masters in China from the tenth to the thirteenth century, “the first period when women in Ch’an were publicly visible and had their sacred biographies composed and recorded.” She translates excerpts from the sacred biography of the nun and Ch’an teacher Miao-tsung (twelfth century) along with material from other genealogical histories. Miao-tsung was the granddaughter of a prime minister during the southern Sung period. Although she had an early spiritual experience and wanted to pursue a religious path, she was pressured into marriage by her parents. Because of her spiritual proclivities, marriage was not to her liking, and so she began to seek the guidance of Ch’an masters. This well-educated woman was more than the equal of any monk; she was a master of verbal debate, and the epitome of sanctity with her quick wit and dialectical mind (which was recognized by other masters according to traditional accounts). These things indicated that she had reached a high level of attainment on the *bodhisattva* path, and therefore, that of sainthood. She donned the robe of a monastic and went into concealment, practicing an ascetic life. Later, she became the abbess of a convent; wrote sermons and poetry; taught and preached. Her writings were widely disseminated. After sanctification, her body and

relics came to be venerated. (Prior to this time, the bodies of exemplary Buddhist founders of lineages or masters were preserved and displayed as "flesh bodies." These were considered eternal sources of power, because they did not decay; this was due to an unusual technique of mummification.<sup>3</sup> This became common for female saints in the Sung period, which suggests the increasing status of Ch'an nuns).

## TAOISM

Suzanne Cahill writes about Pien Tung-hsüan, a Taoist saint of the T'ang Dynasty (618–907). The essay is based on her translation of a biography in the "Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City," which is part of the *Cheng t'ung Tao tsang* by Taoist master Tu Kuang-ting (850–933). Tung-hsüan, like most other saints, showed early signs of spirituality: feeding wild animals and birds during winter, for instance, and saving the lives of tiny creatures. Although she refused to marry, her parents pressured her to follow the norm. Before anything transpired, though, her parents died. During the long mourning period, she fasted almost to the point of death. Then she decided to join a monastery and become a master. Like others in this convent, who supported themselves by spinning yarn and weaving silk, Tung-hsüan worked industriously. Fasting for years, according to her biography, she gave the "five grains" (a euphemism for food) to animals, even rats. In addition, she stored these "five grains" and gave them to people during famines. The only things Tung-hsüan consumed were elixir drugs, such as cinnabar. Then she met an old man, also on the spiritual path, who had to help a fellow seeker. He gave her some special pills and promised that, within fifteen days of taking them, she would ascend to heaven. She flew immediately to the top of a nearby building. On the day of her ascent to heaven, crowds collected, music spontaneously filled the air, as did a strange fragrance.

### *The Problem of Naming and Classifying*

All anthologies presuppose selection. That presupposes definition. And that, in turn, presupposes some degree of arbitrariness in the formation of categories. The term "saint" is an obviously Western term with a Christian heritage. Early Christian martyrs who submitted to persecution and death rather than renounce their faith were called *hagioi* (holy men) or *hagiai* (holy women).<sup>4</sup>

The term *hagioi/hagiai* then developed a different connotation in Christianity: someone who has extraordinary religious qualities—

charismatic gifts or powers—and has conquered death in some extraordinary way before entering heaven. Because martyrs are supposed to be emulated, many saints have willed their own deaths. Their tombs contain the resulting power and have become the venues of posthumous miracles, where God conveys his own power by enabling his followers to exemplify virtues and dispense his power by miraculously transferring it to others in order to solve problems such as illness, danger, or sin. Transference has been facilitated at specific places (especially the tombs of saints) or times (annual public ceremonies held to commemorate their lives).<sup>5</sup>

Some historians of religions today—when scholars are especially sensitive to “cultural diversity,” thanks to the intellectual fashion of postmodernism—have worried about using the Christian term “saint” as a cross-cultural category. Robert Cohn, for instance, comments that historians of religions “have liberated the category of sainthood from its narrower Christian associations and have employed the term in a more general way to refer to the state of special holiness that many religions attribute to certain people. . . . The problem for the historian of religions is whether the term *sainthood* so broadly applied retains any meaning. Can a category that grows out of one religion be properly and usefully extended cross-culturally?”<sup>6</sup>

Gerardus van der Leeuw understands saints as figures through whom divine power is revealed. As conduits, their very bodies are important. The key signs of this corporeal power are their miracles during life and their bodies (as relics) after death. For him, in fact, saints are pre-eminently the power of the tomb or relic; their roles during life (and there are many different ones) are incidental to their power after death. These features distinguish saints from other figures such as prophets, preachers, and teachers.<sup>7</sup>

Joachim Wach compares saints across religions. He, too, thinks that they are different from other types of religious figures: founders, prophets, mystics, or teachers. They are more passive, he suggests, than prophets, less authoritative than founders, and more charismatic than teachers. Saints, according to Wach, are people who achieve fame primarily because of their religious experiences, which often occur early in life. Because of their experiences and the resulting charisma, they become guides for others (but usually in a personal rather than in an institutional manner). Sometimes, of course, categories overlap.<sup>8</sup>

Other scholars include prophets, mystics, teachers, and so forth among the saints. Despite his initial concern about the difficulties of

cross-cultural comparisons, Cohn points to a very wide range of types. He lists the following as representative saints in various religions: the Jewish *hasid* or *tsaddiq*, the Muslim *waliy*, the Zoroastrian *fravashi*, the Hindu *ṛṣi* or *guru*, the Buddhist *arahant* or *bodhisattva*, the Taoist *shen-g-jen*, and the Shinto *kami*. Despite the variety, he concludes that three basic paths lead to their fame: 1) the moral (involving discipline, asceticism, chastity, and control, martyrdom being the latter's most extreme form); 2) the intellectual (contemplation of the self, world, and ultimate reality); and 3) the emotional (unqualified love that heals or redeems others). Cohn is especially interested in how religions define spiritual perfection. With that in mind, he argues that sainthood can be understood as imitable (a model for behavior) or inimitable and venerable (a power to be tapped for intercession with a yet higher power for direct help, especially in the form of miracles). He emphasizes death-defying acts.

John Stratton Hawley, following Cohn's basic definitions, writes that inimitability consists of extraordinary signs, powers, miracles, or transgressions of conventional morality. Saints who have these are remembered especially by their relics.<sup>9</sup> And Charles Keyes defines saints as those charismatics who have had contact or union with chaos and have domesticated it to manifest the ineffably sacred or to communicate with it. This is indicated by signs of charisma representing the domestication of chaos by death-conquering acts (resurrection, martyrdom, symbolic death), curative acts, unitive acts of any duration (vision quests, initiation rites, spiritual disciplines), and miracles.<sup>10</sup>

It is striking that only one of these authors discusses any differences between male and female saints—and very briefly, at that. At the end of his article, Cohn notes that female saints are less common than male ones, because the path is less accessible to them in Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. And where the path does exist, it is more rigidly or supernaturally defined. Moreover, the paths for women place greater emphasis than those for men on penitance (especially to purge female sexuality, as in the higher stages of the Mahayana *bodhisattva* path), nurturing, and helping others.

In this book, Baskin argues that there is a Jewish analogue to the Christian concept of sainthood for men and women: the ethical person characterized by three closely related virtues: *kedushah* (sanctity through Torah), *tzedakah* (righteousness), and *hasidut* (piety that goes beyond the demands of Torah). People with these virtues obey God, emulate him, follow the commandments of the law (*halakhah*), and maintain purity for his sake. Because Judaism recognizes the categorical limitations of hu-

man nature (which distinguish human beings from God), these virtues must remain ideals.<sup>11</sup> Even so, some people come closer than others to perfection. Those who have deep experiences of holiness (mysticism)—the goal of which is communion with God who extends his grace to complete the efforts made by people—are said to have acquired *hasidut*, which has been translated into English as “saintliness.” Their lives are considered exemplary. Most men and women who have been remembered earned their reputations by fulfilling the normative ideal (established by the Torah’s commandments) and acting altruistically (that is, beyond the selflessness required by duty). And those who have died rather than deny their faith, the martyrs, are the most exemplary of all. Women in this category are represented by the postbiblical story of Hannah who watched her seven sons die (they would not bow down to idols, thereby refusing to become apostates) and then followed them in martyrdom. She was the prototype of the *Dolce of Worms*, who heroically sought help when her house was attacked, thereby saving her husband and son, though she herself died in the process. (Her husband describes her as a “saint” rather than a martyr for the faith. In my opinion, it is not inconceivable, however, that he could have considered her a martyr, not only because of Jewish precedents but also because Judaism in Germany during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was under the influence of Christianity, which had established a close connection between martyrdom and sainthood.)

Apart from these prevailing virtues and the occasional martyrdom by which Jews of both sexes have earned reputations for saintliness, a closer look at authoritative texts reveal examples of Jewish saints more akin to the Christian model. Rabbinic (postbiblical) Judaism had described extraordinary people with extraordinary powers. In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, people of outstanding piety perform miracles.<sup>12</sup> In some sources (elaborated in folklore and mystical works), the good deeds of righteous ancestors can be transferred to others. And in the mystical tradition (especially Hasidism),<sup>13</sup> the ultimate goal of piety is communion with God.<sup>14</sup>

Baskin points to a second source for concepts of sainthood: the fact that women’s religion takes place mainly in the private realm of the home and often in exclusively female circles such as women’s prayer groups.<sup>15</sup> Women usually pray spontaneously for themselves and their families, and in vernacular languages.<sup>16</sup> In this context, they often have invoked the merits of the biblical mothers (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel)—just as men remember the merits of the biblical fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).<sup>17</sup> Although women have not traditionally studied



Torah in terrestrial academies, which is obligatory for men, they have maintained the hope (in one prayer) of doing so in the celestial academy. There, they hope to study under the guidance of an extraordinary biblical woman. That poses no problem for orthodoxy, in theory, because the celestial academy is a feature of life in the World to Come. In fact, though, it presents a potential problem. Women could use this idea to legitimate their own renegade piety in their own separate domain.

Next, take the example of intercession. Baskin points out the example of prayers in which women ask deceased female relatives to intercede for the petitioner. One example would be the seventeenth-century text, *Shloyse she'orim* by Sarah bas Tovim: "May God have mercy upon me and upon all Israel. May I not long be forced to be a wanderer, by the merit of our Mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and my own dear mother Leah pray to God, blessed be He, for me, that my being a wanderer may be an atonement for me for my sins." (Traditional Jews have two problems with the notion of intercession, whether by women or men: 1) it suggests that some people are more than human, which would contradict the strict demarcation between God and creature; 2) the popularity of intercession in Christianity might have worried and troubled the rabbis in a context of extreme Christian hostility. Therefore, belief in the intercession of Jews living in Christian countries carried the danger of inspiring a renegade tradition.<sup>18</sup> With the invention of the printing press, women's prayers were collected and disseminated. This, according to Baskin, created the potential for widely disseminating a "Little Tradition" of female Judaism.

Yet another source for concepts of sainthood would be popular Islam, which might well have influenced Sephardic Jews (most of whom, after the fifteenth century, lived in Islamic countries). Drawing on Susan Sered's research, Baskin observes that, in the Middle East, martyred Jewish ancestors (male and female) have been recognized as saints. In the popular imagination, moreover, they have been considered 1) part human, part divine; 2) able to cross the boundary separating these two realms; 3) able to intercede on the behalf of women (and men) who want help for their families; and 4) approachable through dreams, prayers, candle lighting, visits to cemeteries, and pilgrimages to tombs.<sup>19</sup>

Baskin observes that the sexual segregation which has characterized Judaism (though modern denominations have desegregated) might have influenced the number of women publicly recognized for saintliness. Some men have had the opportunity to choose a life of study, which could lead to extraordinary piety in the public world, or of mysticism.<sup>20</sup> Some Hasidic men have also practiced prolonged sexual abstinence,<sup>21</sup>

despite the antiascetic bias of Judaism, and this was also said to qualify them for mysticism. All these have contributed, thinks Baskin, to the recognition of *extraordinary* behavior and to its public recognition as sainthood.

But Torah learning (and even prolonged abstinence in some cases), which has contributed to public acclaim for piety and mysticism, has been strictly forbidden to women because this would undermine duties to their husbands and families. (The kabbalistic tradition, for instance, has produced no female leaders that we know of). Baskin explains this in connection with sexual segregation. Women's religion belongs in the domestic realm, men's in the public one. Women such as the Dolce of Worms have had some public functions in relation to other women, of course: helping arrange their marriages and dowries, say, or instructing them in prayers and domestic rituals. In addition, they have visited the sick and performed other acts of charity. But they have been especially esteemed for supporting the Torah study of their husbands and sons. This support has been based on their dowries as well as their own financial skills, initiative in business, and (in the past) moneylending. For these activities, they have become literate in the vernacular languages and skilled in bookkeeping. Their work has provided the essentials of life, relieving the men from responsibilities that would prevent them from studying Torah. Women have produced parts of the *tefilin*—sometimes known as “phylacteries,” these are small boxes containing parchment inscriptions, which are worn on the forehead and arm during weekday liturgies—made candles for synagogues or schools, and so on. In addition, their work has made it possible to hire other teachers and to buy parchment, books, or oil. They have cared for the (male) students of their husbands by mending their clothes, feeding them, and repairing their books. Baskin thinks that few “extraordinary women” are *remembered* by the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition because of the self-effacing nature of these *supportive* activities and lack of opportunities for Torah study.<sup>22</sup>

Hoffman discusses the Islamic notion of sainthood in terms of *walāya* (or its variant *wilāya*), from the word *walī* (plural *awliyā*) meaning a “friend of God.” According to a sixteenth-century Egyptian biographical dictionary of Sufis, a *walī* is: “one who has been brought near to Him, granted special favour enabling him to be diligent in worship, purify his soul of its base passions, and receive mystical illumination.”<sup>23</sup> The roots of this concept are found in the Quranic reference to *awliyā* as people who believe and are pious (10:63–64). This definition is often embroidered onto the cloths covering saints' tombs. It is also elaborated in a *hadīth* (an authority second only to the Qur'ān) that eulogizes servants

who fulfill religious obligations and perform altruistic deeds; these are the most beloved of God and recipients of his favor. For Sufi adepts, this culminates in a state of nearness to Him in which they are free from error, indifferent to the physical world, and channels of divine “grace, blessings, and guidance to humanity.” The concept of *awliyā* is characteristic of the Sufi tradition, but it has influenced popular forms of Islam as well. In the latter, it signifies those who have especially close relationships with God. In addition, therefore, it signifies those who have contact with the *baraka*: spiritual power that entered the world with Muḥammad and can be transmitted, in turn, to others. The friends of God are usually those who perform miracles, dispense blessings, and act as intercessors.

Descriptions of Sufi saints often include reversal motifs. The Sufi philosopher and mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), who had himself had a female teacher, radically reversed customary gender restrictions in his description of the Sufi path. Hoffman describes how the Sufi should become as if female, viewing himself in continuous coition as a female in the passive role, becoming pregnant, and giving birth. After this, he may keep company with women and love them without harm.

Closer yet to God, and in a third category, are those belonging to the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt* (literally, the people of the house) and descendants of the Prophet (*sharīf*; plural *ashrāf*). These include Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima, his cousin and son-in-law ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb, and the sons of Fāṭima and ‘Alī (Ḥasan and Ḥusayn) as well as their descendants. They are the “ultimate exemplars of holiness and purity.” These “people of the house” provided links by family (blood or marriage) and virtue between the Prophet and the common people. They did so within the Prophet’s lifetime, and they do so in perpetuity through his descendants. The Shi’is claim the descent of their *imāms* from the family of the Prophet.

Pandharipande notes that the conventional meaning of *santa* (the Hindu word for “saint” in Hindi and other North Indian languages) comes to include the virtues of “compassion, love, and selflessness.” Virtues can be signs of either divinity (in the form of incarnations, *avatāra*) or human perfection (people who are liberated on earth and in this life, *jīvanmuktas*). Both *avatāras* and *jīvanmuktas* are recognized as saints. In addition, the category of *saint* can include those who are endowed with divine qualities. Pandharipande considers a variety of figures over the long history of Hinduism: *ṛṣis* who had the *apauruṣeya*, or suprahuman vision of ultimate truths; priests whose own divine powers ensured the efficacy of the sacrifice; heroes as divine incarnations who saved the world; learned philosophers and teachers (*ācāryas*), who taught paths

leading toward enlightenment; teachers and guides (*gurus*); and devotees (*bhaktas*). If a broad definition of sainthood is warranted, I would add to this list the following: the great souled ones (*mahātmās*), a term now of universal fame, thanks to Mahatma Gandhi; *yogis*, beings with special powers as a result of their ascetic regimens (*siddhas*); and heroes (*vīras*). After surveying the typologies provided by various historians of religions.

Miriam Levering prefers those of Wach and Keyes. She finds them most helpful for understanding the Ch'an Buddhist concept of sainthood,<sup>24</sup> because they note fluid boundaries between the concepts of teacher and saint. (Remember that her topic is a female "teacher-saint.") Levering observes that students published the *words* of their male and female teachers as a direct manifestation of the Dharma-body of the Buddha, which could instigate enlightenment in others." In other words, teaching was the medium for direct contact with the Buddha. (This implies, I would add, that the teacher is a channel for the transformative power of the Buddha.)

The Taoist notion of sainthood, according to Suzanne Cahill, is captured in the term "transcendent." Taoist adepts are called "transcendents," because they follow a path specifically designed to take them beyond the ordinary moral world. They vow not to marry; refine the body through special fasts, adopting dietary regimens including the consumption of alchemical substances such as cinnabar; feed wild birds and animals; and physically ascend to heaven.

I will return to the problem of definitions and discuss distinctions between male and female saints at the conclusion of this introduction. But first, several dimensions of female sainthood warrant discussion.

### *Sainthood, Asceticism, and Monasticism*

It has been said many times before, and must be said again, that officially separate space provides women with more opportunities for religious experiences and for cultivating leadership roles. In Christianity, the convent provides this. In voluntary monastic communities, women experience love and mutual support, service to others, constant prayer, reading from scripture, preaching sermons, almsgiving, and ascetic practices. Christianity took a major step away from Judaism in providing an alternative role for women. Care was taken, of course, to prevent it from undermining the role of women in reproduction and family life. This was done by sanctifying marriage<sup>25</sup> and by making convent life ascetic (which would be too demanding for most people). Mayeski and Crawford ask

whether the Christian convent represents nothing more than "safety and closure, which have always been held out to women as the ideals of female destiny"? But they conclude that the story of Radegund exemplifies a struggle to control life within the limits of social and political realities.

Like Christianity, Buddhism has established convents (though the female order has died out in some countries), thereby providing women not only with an alternative to marriage but also with a separate space in which they can pursue enlightenment and develop leadership skills. At the same time, Buddhism has recognized an official lay orientation for householders. Moreover, it has maintained a symbiotic relation with other religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, that support families in no uncertain terms. Levering introduces the subject of female Ch'an saints by observing their choice of celibacy and asceticism over marriage and their practice of Buddhism, culminating in sudden "awakening" or enlightenment. The latter has been interpreted as a sign of their sacred knowledge and their charisma. But an even more important sign, points out Levering, is their capacity to preach, teach, and spar intellectually with the monks. As with Miao-tsung, this illustrates their high attainment along the bodhisattva path and their worthiness for veneration after death.

Taoism, too, has provided alternatives for women. Few of the female Taoist transcendents marry; they remain celibate and childless. In his "Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City," Tu Kunag-t'ing describes the Taoist path. It begins with a spontaneous expression of faith, good works, and spiritual practices (chastity, fasting, meditation, visualization, the study and teaching of scripture). It culminates in physical youthfulness, divine knowledge, communication with the deities, magical powers, and ascension to heaven. The really great saints visibly ascend to heaven, an event witnessed by others; the lesser ones appear to die but actually leave their bodies and go to paradise. Because there were more accounts of male than of female transcendents, Tu wrote a separate book on the latter. It was modeled on the biographical genre used by the Confucians and Buddhists. His description of the path for women, and his references to their titles, indicates important differences between male and female adepts. Women face some specific problems, for instance, even before beginning their spiritual journeys. They are expected to marry. Some avoid marriage (in fact, this is a sign of their ability to leave ordinary society and their necessary discipline for the arduous path). Most others enter the monastic order only after their children have grown up or after they have become

widows. (Tu is quick to point out that the Taoist Order does not threaten the family system. The families of those who join benefit, because the virtue of these women helps save their relatives; this makes it a superior form of filial piety. It also helps support the emperor and the mandate of heaven, thereby making it a superior form of loyalty to the state.) Sexual or gender differences are factors even within the path. Cahill observes that these differences need not be interpreted in terms of inequality; they can be interpreted in terms of complementary—along the lines of *yang* and *yin* (male and female) in Taoist cosmology. Both men and women follow their separate paths according to their own virtues and skills. Ultimately, both attain immortality and positions in the heavenly bureaucracy.

Hoffman points out that those Muslim women who have broken out of material restrictions have been primarily Sufis. The asceticism of this path provided an opportunity to circumvent marriage, dependence on and obedience to men, and the responsibilities of motherhood, although some Sufis were married. (The same applies to many men who join monastic orders or semi-institutional ascetic groups to avoid marriage. Many women belonging to Sufi orders have been widows. Others has been divorced; joining Sufi orders has been a convenient way to maintain their chaste reputations, while waiting for the opportunity to remarry. It is true that the lists of Sufi saints found in the biographical dictionaries consist mainly of men. And of the women, most are nameless (being listed as the wives of male Sufis). Nonetheless, some male leaders have established just for women—Sufi teachers, retreat houses (*ribāts*), or sections of retreat houses. A few have acknowledged that women can attain the supreme spiritual rank (*quṭb*) or become teachers. Two famous examples are the *shaykha* Zaynab Fāṭima bint al-'Abbās (died 1394) and Hāgga Zakiyya 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib Badawī (1899–1982). Sayyida, the Muslim saint discussed in this volume, also practiced ascetic regimens, especially during the month of Ramadan. In Egypt, the great Sufis of the day visited her home. Some of them even received *from her* the principles of asceticism. Given her life of fasting, it is befitting that she died during a fast. Her biography has Sufi images.

### *Memory and Sainthood*

Sainthood is intimately related to genre. Hagiography, a term derived from the Greek word *hagios* (martyr; saint), though popular, originated as a literary genre. According to Paul Connerton, written accounts are often about elite, spiritual men whose lives progress as they accumulate

influence or power. Oral accounts, by contrast, are more cyclical than linear.<sup>26</sup> It is worth asking from the outset, therefore, whether the lives of the female saints under consideration here have been transformed by a literary genre created for elite men. Does this distort the lives of upper-class (often literate) women? Does it distort the lives of lower-class (often illiterate) women even more?

In the field of religious studies, we consider biography factual and hagiography not factual, because it traffics in the supernatural.<sup>27</sup> Those who study religions that have traditions of “historical” writing (although these might be more like hagiographies than the modern concept of *history* would allow) prefer the category *biography*. The Chinese tradition, for instance, includes a genre of history, so scholars prefer to translate the term *zhuan-ji* as “biography.” Sinologists have recognized the limitations of the term “biography” for this genre, however, recognizing that early tales were about the “marvellous” and that some originated in the tales of shamanistic Taoist women. Nevertheless, among the first “biographies” were the *Lieh-nü chuan* (*Biographies of Women*) written between 80 and 9 B.C.E. by Liu Hsiang<sup>28</sup> and the somewhat later *History of the Latter Han* by Fan Yeh (died 445 C.E.). The Chinese biography begins with general geneological data—the person’s name, historical era, lineage (offices of male ancestors), class, birth registry, career, and place. Kathryn Ann Tsai shows how the genre of historical writing in China has as its *raison d’être* not just reportage, but moral guidance, inspiration, and remembrance for both men and women. Biographies of Confucian women are often shorter than those about men, because they are based on vignettes that illustrate Confucian virtues (righteousness, say, or human-heartedness) and vices. These are used for the didactic purpose of instilling feminine norms. The most prominent feminine virtues cited are associated with marital duties and roles in the patrilineal family: producing sons, and performing acts of filial devotion. Women are praised, moreover, or blamed because of their effects on fathers, husbands, or sons—the three types of man to whom they should be obedient throughout their life. Women are praised, moreover, for choosing death not only in cases of conflict between duties but also to preserve their reputations or those of their families (this is martyrdom for Confucianism). In other words, they promote Confucian morals in both life and death (as do men).

Once this genre was established, it was adopted and transformed by other religions in China.<sup>29</sup> Consider the case of Taoism. In Taoist biographies, the general geneological details are followed by details of the saint’s childhood: special talents, signs of saintly behavior such as spontaneous and “natural” reverence, faith, or selection by the deity. Al-

though the Taoist canon had preserved stories of the lives of many male "transcendents," it had preserved few of women. This was corrected by Tu Kuang-t'ing in his "Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City," which presents twenty-eight accounts of female Taoist "transcendents" from the late T'ang dynasty.

Next consider the case of Buddhism. In the preface to his *Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan* (*Lives of the Nuns*),<sup>30</sup> the Buddhist Pao-ch'ang mentions his method of collection: "The achievement of their aspirations is not yet collected into books and writings, and I have frequently deplored this. It is a long time since I first began extensively to gather epitaph eulogies, widely searching in notes and collections. Sometimes I interviewed those who had heard a lot about it; sometimes I inquired from old people. Explaining and ordering [the material] from beginning to end, I wrote down their biographies. . . . I worked to preserve the essential facts hoping that those who seek liberation will exert the wish to emulate [the nuns'] virtue."<sup>31</sup> Because this author collected information between the fourth and the sixth centuries, he was sometimes far removed from the subject; his details can be questioned. Nevertheless, his treatment is interesting. He classifies nuns as follows: virtuous and wise; chaste and obedient; intellectual and capable of reasoning; ascetic; contemplative; faithful and steadfast; and teachers of great influence. He is most impressed by the ascetics, who perform self-willed death in honor of the Buddha; the steadfast, who escape marriage by daring means; the contemplatives, who become like wood or stone in their trances; and the teachers, who have hundreds of disciples. In his discussion of the lives of the nuns, Pao-ch'ang highlights the Buddhist aspects of their lives (keeping the precepts, say, or teaching the law). But sometimes, he draws on Confucian virtues such as filial piety and obedience as well. That is because he wants Buddhism to uphold tradition as well. According to Tsai, Pao-ch'ang collected everything available to serve his didactic and laudatory goal, which made the genre more akin to hagiography than biography.<sup>32</sup> And yet, these "biographies" do reveal some details that could well be factual: The saints' high degree of literacy, for example, or the marital problems that prompted them to take refuge in the order. Tsai observes that biographies from the Ch'i and Liang dynasties, with their sober tone, might be closer to historical circumstances than other biographies.<sup>33</sup> Each Buddhist lineage had its own source, as did the Ch'an source used by Levering in this book.

Islam, too, has a tradition of "historical" reporting. Scholars of Islam have been more inclined to use the term "biography," even though the accounts of Sufi saints and others, with their channels of divine



power, make them seem supernatural in the modern or common imagination—and therefore closer to the genre of hagiography. Hoffman notes that Sufi biographies are usually terse, presenting the basic details about lives, miracles, and famous sayings. The one she consults, however, reads more like a novel.

By contrast, scholars of Hinduism are comfortable with the term “hagiography” for *bhakti* saints. These have been characterized by extraordinary powers, reversals of conventional norms, and sometimes liberated, incarnational, or quasidivine status. In my own studies of two female Hindu saints, Āṅṅāl, a Tamil saint of the ninth century, and Ānandamayī Mā, a modern Bengali saint, I have found the following features: unusual or divine conception; extraordinary birth; extraordinary childhood; life stretched to eccentric boundaries; social conventions ignored; reversals; miracles; possession or dreams (a special conduit of the divine); homologization with the lives of other saints; and unusual death.<sup>34</sup> But by reading between the lines of their own works and of early hagiographies, I have detected clues to their real-life situations (*Sitzen im Lebin*)—especially when other kinds of evidence are available.

In this book, Pandharipande’s presentation of the Maharashtrian saint Janābāi<sup>35</sup> reveals general features of the Hindu hagiographical genre I have just surveyed. Janābāi herself says “Blessed (indeed) is my birth,” a point echoed by hagiographies that describe how her parents overcame lack of progeny by prayers to Lord Viṭṭhal. The Lord then appears in a dream to her father, telling him that he will have a daughter who will uplift her family through association with the guru Nāmadev. Next consider the “reversals” in her later years. Lord Viṭṭhal follows her when she washes clothes in the river. He comes and lies down beside her, “whispering the secrets of love.” He turns out to be the real thief when she is accused of stealing a pendant. (This incident provides a context for the miracle that established Janābāi’s status as a saint: when she is about to be hanged for stealing it, the tree melts into water.) Finally, the life of Janābāi exemplifies the genre by her homologization with the life of another saint. In this case, it is Nāmadev (the hagiography declaring that she entered a final meditative trance and “died” at the same moment as he did).<sup>36</sup> In any case, Pandharipande’s discussion shows how Janābāi appropriates the genre for her own ends. She plays on associations of the word *dāsī* (servant), for example, because she is both a female servant in the secular sense of the term and a servant of the Lord in the religious sense (*dāsa/dāsī* being technical terms for a devotee). As a woman, she selects those aspects of the tradition that are feminine. She prefers to think of Viṭṭhal as a mother, for instance, even though motherhood is

only one of his attributes. Indeed, it is as if she knows that she “fits” the genre or that the genre was created to fit her (as a way of giving the religion universal appeal). Through this genre, she can uplift other women: “[D]o not be depressed because you are a woman; saints and mystics are born in this form (of a woman) among the people!” Her ultimate act is to appropriate a superior status for herself. Nāmadev was just a saint, but she is the very incarnation of the Lord himself! In short, she has bested him by circumventing the status defined by male roles, such as being the founder of a sectarian path (*sampradāya*), a philosopher, or teacher. Pandharipande also notes the innovative aspect of sainthood and hagiography: “The saints by their very nature are innovators [because] they interpret the religious beliefs to make them relevant within the context of a particular time and the sociocultural reality.”

Hagiographical details are imperceptibly intertwined with the historical ones of Muslim saint Sayyida Nafisa, boosting her saintly status as a member of the Prophet’s family. According to the story, her birth is extraordinary: she has the most beautiful face and an illuminated forehead. The Prophet later tells her father in a dream that she will have “a bright future filled with glory and miracles.” Aside from the supernatural features reported in her “biography,” there are clues of her real, high status in the community, by virtue not only of her birth but of her accomplishments as well. The story of her life, moreover, has a *Sitz im Leben* marked by personal tragedies: abandonment by her husband, and the death of her children.

Mayeski and Crawford raise a question: “Is Radegund the real hero of her own story or is the story so recast into the conventional Christian pattern that it becomes not individual at all, but a reinforcement of the accepted pattern of feminine behavior?” Looking for clues to her real life situation, they focus on her early status as queen and her noble upbringing; both subtly inform the conventional narrative. This saint makes decisions, persists to achieve her goals, and demonstrates courage and compassion. She destroys places of pagan worship, redeems captives, offers alms, refuses to listen to slander, feeds pilgrims, and washes the feet of the sick. Although some of these acts belong to the typical acts of a saint found in other Christian hagiographies, they are expressed here in an informal way. This, thinks Mayeski and Crawford, indicates her internalization of the model.

The lives of saints are connected not only to the literary genres of biography and hagiography, but also to public cult. Connerton thinks that memory of groups is conveyed and sustained by ritual practices in the form of commemorative performances involving habits and bodily

automatisms. The story is re-enacted and re-presented in the metaphysical present, which develops a kind of mnemonic power. Re-enactments—more formalized, stylized, and repetitive than myths—at sacred sites become sacred cults. Continuity with the communal past is established by the economy of form/performance encoded in set postures, gestures, movements, and utterances. What is being remembered, then, in the sacred cult of a saint's life? It is memory of the religion's master narrative, what Connerton calls its "collective autobiography,"<sup>37</sup> sustained by the ritual performances of those who are habituated bodily to them. The past becomes the present, and the transmission of an embodied authority is expressed with ease and flow. It can remain latent or be invoked. When men appropriate saint's lives for public cults, they encourage formalism. This focuses on the body of the saint. Just as the body is the substratum of a saint's life and death, it is the substratum of collective memory in the form of ceremonial cults of the body. Women's connections with the bodies of saints are less formal, characteristic of their nonliturgical and more spontaneous religion (although men, too, participate in this type of religious expression).

### *Class and Sainthood*

Female saints have come from all classes. Cahill observes that over half the Taoist women in her collection are of low birth, for example, and the focal points of local cults. The Hindu saint Janābāi is yet another example of a lower-class woman (by both caste and orphan status). But female saints have come from elite families, too. Consider Radegund, the Merovingian queen who became a nun; Sayyida Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan, a descendant of the Prophet who had connections with important officials in Egypt and other Islamic countries; the well-educated Dolce of Worms, daughter of a famous rabbi and wife of another one; and the Ch'an teacher Miao-tsung, daughter of a prime minister and wife of an important Sung official. The fact that many elite women become saints can be explained partly by the fact that they are more educated than other women, sometimes extremely well educated, and have high social status and political connections; for these reasons, they have access to the public realm. The fact that many lower-class women become saints can be explained in two ways. In some cases, they have worked in the public realm as laborers and have always had some freedom. In other cases, men might promote their saintly reputations as propaganda for the universality of their religions, using these exemplary women to attract other women and lower-class or marginalized people. In any case, the fact that

female saints come from all classes suggests that women have appropriated whatever openings the religious traditions have offered or have created ones to serve their own spiritual interests.

*The Political Significance of Sainthood*

The political significance of sainthood has two dimensions. One is the connection to mundane political power through human connections. The other is the connection to supramundane power through spirituality (extraordinary virtue, for example, being acclaimed as magical power or a sign of being an intercessor).

The connection with mundane power is a feature of several saints discussed here. The Christian saint Radegund was a Merovingian queen. Mayeski and Crawford write of Radegund that she herself was a victim of the violent and coercive struggles for power that surged around her, threatening every goal she pursued. Even after becoming a nun, she continued to traffic in power (albeit for the welfare of her monastic community). On occasion, she stopped conflict between warring factions, using old but not forgotten political skills.

Miracle stories recall the supramundane power of saints. This power exists because saints are channels for, have contact with, or embody divine power. The latter enables them to intercede or work miracles. Miracle stories are an effective way of proselytizing. They promote the status of holy places and inspire pilgrimages. In Christianity, according to Mayeski and Crawford, "often the author of the miracle intends to demonstrate that the biblical story of salvation was continued in the 'later days' and new cultural contexts of the saints whose stories were narrated." Similarly, the life of the Hindu saint Janābāi was politically important, because it contributed to a general Maharashtrian revival with its inclusive message for all castes, women as well as men. This occurred because India had been ruled by the Muslims; the result had been low morale for Hindus, the rigidification of rituals, even the abandonment of Hinduism itself.

The Muslim saint Sayyida Nafisa was not only a descendant of the Prophet's family via Ḥasan, she also married the great-grandson of Muḥammad's grandson Ḥusayn. Her marriage itself had political connections, because it reunited two major branches of the Prophet's family through the two sons of 'Alī (who was, in turn, the son-in-law of Muḥammad). Politics entered the life of Sayyida, too, because the Sunni 'Abbāsīd Caliphs' persecuted the Prophet's family called the 'Alids (who were Shī'ī). This forced some of the 'Alids to leave Medina for Egypt,