

# Women Saints in World Religions

Edited by Arvind Sharma

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Just as men are difficult but not impossible for women to understand, and similarly women for men, so could it also be said that those of us who are not saints find it challenging but not overwhelming to understand those who live in continuity with, but beyond the boundaries of, conventional religion. The task is even more daunting when we admit that the very word "saint" does not possess a comparable definition across cultures. To go one step further, we find no assurance that, even within the conventions of a single religious tradition, the meaning of "saint" is the same when the term is applied to a woman as when it is applied to a man. Finally, if all of this were not enough already, "saint" as a concept within the academic study of religion must also be located amidst the bewildering array of methods available for investigating the human phenomenon called "religion".

Arvind Sharma has assembled a diverse but cohesive collection of essays about the lives of female saints and their function in the historical development and present reality of religious traditions in *Women Saints in World Religions*. Comparative studies of saints and their functional significance for religions have been attempted before—University of California Press published two important collections of essays, *Saints and Virtues* (ed. John Stratton Hawley, 1987) and *Sainthood* (ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George Bond, 1988)—which consider whether it is possible or helpful to use the saint category outside of its original Western Christian context. These essays considered both current studies of sainthood and referenced the many past comments by scholars of religion who discussed saints in the course of their systematic expositions of religious phenomena. Much current feminist scholarship in religion has mined the patriarchal structures of the world religions for gems of responsible, reform-minded womanhood, highlighting those persons who have molded lives of religious devotion

without compromising the self-determination of their moral agency.

Sharma's collection presents many new examples of such women, with several essays offering fresh translations of writings by or about women saints in six religious traditions: Judaism (Dolce of Worms), Christianity (St. Radegund), Islam (Sayyida Naf'isa), Hinduism (Janābī), Ch'an Buddhism (Miao-tsung), and Taoism (Pien Tung-hsüan). These six expositions are structurally related in an introductory essay by Katherine Young which reviews the many approaches to studying saints and provides an illuminating typology of four kinds of saints: those who rescue the religious community in time of chaos by appeal to powers beyond the human realm, those who strive to provide a radically different example of religious devotion through severe ascetic practices, those who preserve the community's existing norms by facilitating the work of others in the community, and those who live within the community's routine norms while challenging its behavioral assumptions by embodying a slight variation of the existing norms.

Quite naturally, the lives of the women profiled in these essays are more complex than such typologies allow. Even those women most single-minded in their devotion to their religious observances must tend to the messy details of (celibate or married) daily life. What emerges in slightly cleaner fashion is the boundary that each tradition gives to the self-other quality of religious experience, thereby placing restraints on how people can live saintly lives. Whether the relationship between subject and object of devotion is one of fundamental continuity or fundamental discontinuity significantly determines what qualifies as saintly activity. For example, when a tradition posits an unbridgeable gap (either of knowledge or of experience or of nature) between the believer and what is believed (in), the prospective saint does in fact act within certain predetermined

boundaries. Even those actions which are meant to challenge the tradition—in the authenticity of its witness or the justice of its organizational structures—do not, so far as this evidence suggests, ever challenge the tradition's fundamental formative beliefs.

Indeed it would be fair to say that this male reviewer learned much more about the central motivating concerns of the traditions here discussed than he did about the lives and motivations of the women saints here profiled. This may be due to the preponderance of third person biographical

reports (only the short excerpts of Jan**□**□'s poetry present first person insights). However, the interesting question remains whether research about women saints is meant to be primarily an exploration of women or an exploration of religious life. If it is meant to be both, the more helpful approach would be to offer multiple stories of exemplary religious women in each of only two traditions, with an emphasis of collecting as many first person accounts as possible.

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