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## Why 'Saints' matter

### ABSTRACT

The essay examines arguments for and against identifying specific individuals as exemplars of holiness. These include familiar considerations such as (against) the danger of usurping the divine prerogative as well as several others that may be less well-known such as (in favour) their possible evidential role in confirming the existence of God and the enhancement they might provide to the social side of Christian teaching. While past abuses are conceded, the intention is to legitimate such interest in a way that transcends denominational differences.

Initially, some readers may find it odd that a consideration of the importance of saints is offered as tribute to Vincent Brümmer on his eightieth birthday. After all, the specific term as such scarcely finds a mention in Vincent's own writings, and that would of course be true in general of the Reformed tradition to which he has remained so faithful throughout his life. Nonetheless, three factors pull in the opposite direction. First, although the term except in its standard abbreviation is largely absent, much of his work has in fact been concerned with analysing the religious experience of those close to God whom others might well label as saints.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, his writing and practice have been consistently ecumenical in their scope, and so a topic that attempts to bridge differences between Geneva and Rome and written by an Anglican would seem not entirely inappropriate. Finally, and most importantly, it is my hope in what follows to emulate in some small way the model of careful analysis, sound scholarship and measured reasoning that has been so characteristic of his contributions to theology.

In using 'saints' in this narrower sense let me concede at once that I thereby depart from New Testament usage where such holiness or sanctity is seen as the vocation and aspiration of all and the term therefore applied indifferently to Christians of all kinds on more than sixty occasions.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, no one would deny the existence of conspicuous sanctity. So the issue at stake is not the fact as such but whether there are advantages or otherwise in identifying such a narrower group. I shall begin by rehearsing three objections with possible responses before exploring three positive arguments on the other side. As will become clear, my argument as a whole is cumulative.

### THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST SINGLING OUT SAINTS

(1) The first is that any such focus inevitably detracts from a proper sense of the uniqueness of divine holiness, and thus brings with it the usurpation of functions that rightly belong to God alone, among them, most obviously, an intercessory role. That this is a problem by no means unique to Christianity will have become obvious to Brümmer on his lecture visits to Iran; so it is worth pausing briefly to observe how the issue affects Islam.

Although Arabic has terms that parallel the Catholic hierarchic distinction between 'saint'

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1 E.g. mystical union in Brümmer (1993), 57-79; *amicitia Dei* in Brümmer (2006), 295-302.

2 It is possible that the usage derives ultimately from the Book of Daniel's identification of the elect with 'the saints of the most high' (7.18, 22, 25, 27).

and 'blessed' (*wali* and *tahir*), there has in fact been a long history of opposition to all such differentiations that continues to this day. Notoriously, the inherent dangers were observed as early as the Persian al Hallaj's claim to identity with God.<sup>3</sup> However, thanks to writers such the philosopher al-Ghazali and the poet Farid ud-Din Attar more moderate approaches eventually prevailed.<sup>4</sup> Even so dangerous claims to a mediatorial role might be said to be implicit in the very architecture of saints' shrines among the Shi'ites of Iran,<sup>5</sup> while the marabouts of North African Sunnis could also be seen as exercising a not dissimilar role even while still living, although even as early as Ibn Khaldun's early fifteenth century classic history Shi'ites are blamed for thus leading Sunnis astray.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary Islam the influential Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia is particularly forceful in its objections. For them the uniqueness of God (*tawhid*) is thereby fatally compromised.

So the potentially problematic character of saints might be said to be inherent in any monotheistic religion. Yet there is no doubt that the problem is intensified within Christianity, with Christ's unique mediating role with the Father now also seen as under threat. Instead of the prayers of Christ being sought, saints may be asked to intercede and indeed be viewed as more friendly and sympathetic. The nadir of such an approach is often identified as occurring in medieval attitudes to the Virgin Mary. Yet, in recalling that history it is important to remember that the primary fault lay with an inadequate conception of Christ as a stern judge reluctant to forgive.<sup>7</sup> A more balanced conception of the Saviour would have made desperate flight to gentler intercessors unnecessary. It was partly to correct such misconceptions that the Second Vatican Council insisted upon the removal of so many saints' images from churches. Equally, much modern Roman Catholic theology has sought to place the two types of sanctity (wider and narrower) in closer relation to one another. A particularly good example is to be found in Elizabeth Johnson's attempt to set the existence of persons of special sanctity within a strong doctrine of the *communio sanctorum*, the sharing of the entire Christian community in such a vocation (Johnson, 1998). Their primary purpose as exemplary (not intercessory) is thereby underlined and maintained.

(2) A related objection concerns the way in which the identification of the possibility of such singular sanctity may lead not only others astray (towards assuming a mediatorial role) but also even the individuals themselves so identified. It could so easily encourage pride on their part rather than a sense of humble service under divine grace. This seems to be the heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's objection. He describes how initially he was greatly impressed by a French pastor who had spoken of his desire to become a saint, but on further reflection he took a quite different view:

I discovered later ... one must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties ... In so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings but those of God in the world (Bonhoeffer, 1963: 69).

Nor will it do to say such arrogance has never befallen those whom the Church has identified

3 A mystic, he was tried for heresy and put to death in Baghdad in 922.

4 Attar's *The Conference of Birds* is a classic work of Persian spirituality. For a brief historical survey of attitudes within Islam, Peters (1994), 307-57.

5 Resting on a cube symbolising the earth, they are topped by domes indicative of heaven, while in between is an octagonal drum, used to represent the transition from this world to the next.

6 Ibn Khaldun (1967), vol. 3, esp. 83-6, 92-3, 99-101.

7 See further, Brown (2000), 250-60.

as saints. On the contrary, as the dying words of Polycarp testify, the deliberate search for martyrdom was a conspicuous feature of the earlier Church, while in subsequent centuries where such an option was no longer available there was usually still a focus on heroic virtue and so on the necessity for extreme and at times horrific forms of asceticism and self-abasement.<sup>8</sup> It was abasement that could all too easily turn into a sense of satisfied self-achievement, as can be seen in the life of St Thérèse of Lisieux. Sadly, her appropriation of contemporary teaching on the doctrine of the treasury of merit led to a rather depressing counting of her own good acts, even their conscious balancing against the wrongs or suffering of others.<sup>9</sup>

All this might suggest that any talk of saints in the narrower sense is best discouraged, but my earlier reference to Paul's wider usage belies the fact that even in his writings the distinction between the two types of saint is already being made. Although Paul's most famous reference is to the imitation of Christ, surprising as it may seem, more commonly he refers us to his own example.<sup>10</sup> 'I urge you to become imitators of me'; 'You yourselves know that you ought to imitate us'; 'Brethren, join in imitating me.'<sup>11</sup> Such formulae may be taken to imply that identification of good in oneself need not necessarily be wrong, and indeed a constant denial might well soon lead to the sort of hypocritical false modesty that is so often parodied in literature.<sup>12</sup> It seems as though aspiring saints must walk a narrow tightrope that on the one hand avoids a false estimate of their own condition and on the other any haughty assumption that this has all been achieved from their own resources.

(3) A final objection arises from the way in which extremes so often generate their opposites. Where sanctity is acknowledged, there is often a regrettable tendency towards the production of its dualistic opposite, in the demonization of individuals on the other side. This is perhaps the well nigh inevitable result of the way in which the lives of the saints have commonly been told in the past. In effect, their life stories have been portrayed as a struggle between two types of supernatural force, one for good and the other for evil. St Antony of Egypt, for example, does not battle alone in the desert but with demons.<sup>13</sup> Again, those who held power in the Roman Empire and opposed the martyrs were more often than not demonised for their role in such a struggle. Especially in fictional accounts, a simple execution was seldom enough. Instead, the saint's opponents were envisaged as adding numerous gratuitous tortures, so cruel and callous is all that is opposed to them taken to be.<sup>14</sup>

Sadly, it is possible to detect this kind of problem within the New Testament itself. In the Book of Revelation the world is essentially divided into two opposing camps, with all views different from that of the writer placed firmly on the other side. Indeed, even Paul is implicitly treated in the same way, since those who take a position like Paul's on food offered to idols are consigned

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8 Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) ate her own vomit, St Margaret Mary Alacoque (d. 1690) scratched the name of Jesus on her breast.

9 While such practices were even advocated in earlier twentieth century biographies, the feature is downplayed in more recent treatments.

10 For imitating Christ, Phil. 2. 5-11; cf. Rom. 15.7. The paucity of such references of course parallels the infrequency of appeals to Jesus' teaching: only explicit twice, at I Cor. 7.10 and I Cor. 9.14.

11 I Cor. 4.16; 2 Thess. 3.7; Phil. 3.17 (RSV). For imitation of Paul and Christ combined, I Thess. 1.6.

12 As with Uriah Heep in Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Gilbert and Sullivan's Poobah in *The Mikado*.

13 Central to St Athanasius' account in his *Life of Antony*. Admittedly, that may well have been how Antony himself experienced the struggle, with hunger inducing hallucinations of devils, but one suspects a degree of literary license on Athanasius' part, not least to draw a parallel with Christ's own temptations.

14 So, for example, St Catherine of Alexandria's famous torture on the wheel before her beheading or St Sebastian's attack by arrows before being clubbed to death (he survived the former thanks to the solicitations of the widow Irene).

to Satan.<sup>15</sup> Again, faults that had once been freely admitted in earlier versions of admired lives either disappear altogether or else are projected onto others. Within Scripture itself the most conspicuous of this trend is found in the treatment of King David. Detailed comparison of his story as told in the writings of the Deuteronomistic School of historians and in Chronicles demonstrate the desire to exonerate David from all, or almost, all sin.<sup>16</sup> Gone is all reference to his adultery with Bathsheba as also the key role played by the northern tribes in his rise to power, and in their place comes an almost exclusive focus on Jerusalem as the eventual home for the Temple.

It is a pattern that continues into later history. Within the Jewish tradition Jacob, for example, becomes the model *tzaddik* or righteous one who has been carefully schooled in the ways of rabbinic thought.<sup>17</sup> Within Christianity even as customarily careful a historian as Bede succumbs to the same sort of temptation. In light of the fact that he supported the centralising Roman policy that was adopted at the Synod of Whitby in 664, it is fascinating to observe how, apart from Oswald's relations with St Aidan, minimum attention is given to the positive role of the losing Celtic faction in his account of St Oswald's life. So, for instance, Oswald's invocation of St Columba at the battle of Heavenfield (recorded by our earliest source Adomnan) is omitted, while little is made of the fact that the defeated Britons were also led by a Christian, Cadwallon. As others have observed, there must have been some rough edges on Oswald, were he to have any change of survival in the type of royal courts that *Beowulf* so vividly portrays for us.<sup>18</sup> Yet none of this survives into Bede's account.

This tendency to create a world of pure black and white, of crude contrasts between undefiled goodness and unremitting evil, is among the most glaring deficiencies in the history of western spirituality that need to be confronted by the modern Christian. Not that the motives were necessarily wholly bad. Presumably, one thought may have been that, since the saints were intimate with God, it could not but be the case that divine holiness would inevitably be clearly reflected in the life of the saint. But the wrong kind of intimacy was presumed, one in which God would simply override any contrary beliefs or elements of moral blindness. As both Judaism and Christianity have wrestled in more recent years with the fallibility inherent in their own histories, they have at last come to see that God does not quite work like that. Instead, God gives human beings the necessary space to come to see the truth for themselves, and that means accepting limitations both in the community history as a whole and in the lives and attitudes of specific individuals. So, just as in the case of Scripture if we are to learn fully from its pages we must acknowledge its shortcomings no less than the profundity of its insights, so in the individual case as much can sometimes be learnt from the flawed side of the saint as from his or her undoubted holiness.

Fortunately, this is increasingly being recognised in the way in which biographies of the saints are now being written. In my own case it is a recurring theme in one recent book of mine that attempts to explore Church history through the lives of the saints (Brown, 2005). It is also sometimes evident in the very title chosen by an author for such a work, as in Simon Tugwell's *Ways of Imperfection* (1994).<sup>19</sup> If Joseph Heller goes too far in his provocative re-telling

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15 Contrast Rev. 2.14-16 & 19-23 with I Cor. 6.12ff.

16 Two actions seen as sins are still recorded, though both are made less significant. There is the undertaking of a census (I Chron. 21. 1), now blamed on Satan rather than on directly on divine judgment (2 Sam. 24.1) and there is the transfer of the ark from Kiriath-jearim by non-Levites (I Chron. 15.13) but with David's dubious motive for desiring possession of the ark now omitted (2 Sam. 6.12).

17 For similar transformations in Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, see Brown (1999), 208-71.

18 For the battle, Bede *History* 3.2. For reflections on the changing story of Oswald, Stancliffe & Cambridge ed., (1995); for Bede and *Beowulf*, 39-41, 71-75.

19 Tugwell's focus, though, is rather different from mine. He is less interested in identifying faults in the saints as in picking up from their writings recognition of a continuing battle with sin.

of David's story (1994), what he does indicate is how spiritually challenging the imperfect can be no less than the perfect. Such changes in perspective constitute a welcome development, as it makes the possibility of learning from the lives of the saints more feasible. Instead of august figures fundamentally different from ourselves and so with a particular entitlement to the divine ear, they are now to be seen standing in solidarity alongside ourselves, imperfect just as we are. The difference lies rather in the degree to which they consistently strove to move towards perfection in a life lived under divine grace. The traditional Protestant objection that saints are put on the wrong side of the dividing line between God and the rest of his creation is thus very effectively undermined. They bridge the gap precisely because they so obviously at one and the same time stand on both sides of the divide.

### THREE ARGUMENTS FOR ASSIGNING SAINTS A KEY ROLE

In suggesting that it is their exemplary rather than intercessory role that makes saints important I have already begun to move to more positive considerations. Just as I noted three types of objection to the concept, so here too I want to pursue the issue through three more positive arguments.

(1) The first attempts to answer the objection that to speak of them as exemplary sets them up as a barrier that the ordinary Christian must still cross before a more direct relationship with God and Christ becomes possible. Is not Jesus' own example enough? In the most obvious sense that must of course be true, since Jesus remains the standard for the Christian against which all human morality must be judged. Even so, the admission does not of itself entail that help is not needed in mediating such standards into what are often quite different human scenarios. So it is as a bridge between Christ and us in a quite different sense that I want to advocate the relevance of saints' lives here: that they can enable us to see more easily how a Christ-like life might be lived in situations quite different from the original context of Jesus' own life.

Such a strategy may already be in play even as early as Paul. Certainly, that is one possible explanation of why, as noted above, Paul so often chose to refer directly to his own example rather than that of Christ. Whether Paul's motivation or not, with the advance of the centuries the problem has undoubtedly increased proportionally, as the imaginative distance between the setting of Jesus' life and that of his followers has grown. Not only is martyrdom no longer an issue for most of us, there are also huge differences in standards of living and resultant options, in choices of life-style, in engagement with other cultures and ideas, even in life-expectancy itself.

Elsewhere I have identified three types of distance that encouraged focus on the lives of saints as a way of bringing the example of Christ closer to the sort of lives Christians now lead: what I called there metaphysical, spatial and temporal distance (Brown, 2000: 66-79). 'Metaphysical' refers to Christ's unique relationship with his Father, and the difficulty of converting such absolutes into the more ordinary conditions of human life. The obsession of the early Church with martyrdom may be used to illustrate one version of the tensions encountered, the monastic ideal seen in the middle ages as a higher (and not different) calling another. By 'temporal' I alluded to the changing cultural conditions that have confronted the Christian community across the centuries. Modern capitalism, for instance, hardly presents exactly the same challenges as ancient agrarian societies. With all of us increasingly conscious of a single interdependent world, spatial distance might seem very much less an issue in our own day. Yet for most of human history the distant was seen as strangely alien. That was one reason why not only were local saints cultivated but also sometimes even those who were formerly distant were now brought close by the removal of their bones to a more immediate locality.<sup>20</sup>

20 Technically known as *furta sacra*, they were commonly justified at the time in terms of some perceived

Despite the strength of these concerns the Church proved surprisingly slow to respond, with little recognition given to the fact that sanctity was a possibility for laity just as much as for those called to the religious life. Even then female religious had significantly more of an uphill struggle towards recognition than men, while acceptance of married women in this role remained few and far between. Indeed, the latter seemed only to gain admission if they had the added advantage of royal birth, and so an already existing band of powerful advocates. That helps explain exceptions such as Queen Margaret of Scotland (d. 1093) or Elizabeth of Hungary (d.1231). Not that male royalty had it that much easier since their hands were usually seen as polluted by war. This probably explains why King David I of Scotland was not exalted to such ranks despite his undoubtedly devout life.<sup>21</sup> More successful was Louis IX of France. That had much to do with the fact that he was monarch of a more important country, and played a key role on behalf of the Church in the Crusades.<sup>22</sup> What little thought was given to what holiness might mean in the conduct of ordinary warfare is well illustrated by the fact that King Oswald's attempts to advance the kingdom of Northumbria had to be re-presented as a battle on behalf of Christianity. That way, he could be declared a martyr, although he actually died in the course of an ordinary battle.<sup>23</sup>

In more recent times the papacy has attempted to correct such faults, and now there is a much more representative spread of types of vocation and life.<sup>24</sup> Other churches have done likewise, as in the Church of England's modern calendar.<sup>25</sup> Even so, it should not be thought that such a search for a greater range of mediated examples is entirely a modern phenomenon. Instead, in earlier history alternative strategies were commonly adopted that relied, significantly, largely on the imagination. The lives of legendary saints were adapted to speak to conditions that were not directly addressed elsewhere. One astonishing case is how the issue of pregnancy was dealt with: Margaret of Antioch's legendary struggle with a dragon was used as an analogy for what in the past was often a highly dangerous moment in women's lives.<sup>26</sup> A small but significant illustration of its widespread application is in Jan van Eyck's famous Arnolfini marriage portrait, in which a small carving of Margaret and the dragon is to be found by the bedside.<sup>27</sup>

On my view it is also here in such considerations that the elaboration of Mary Magdalene's life story is to be found, and not, as so many modern feminists allege, in suspicion of, or hostility to, women.<sup>28</sup> Although the composite tale that combines various women in the New Testament and extends this beyond into ministry in France was undoubtedly sometimes used negatively to denigrate women, this was by no means its primary or most common application.<sup>29</sup> Instead,

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neglect by those in their previous location: Brown (2000), 71-2; Geary (1990).

21 Writing probably one year after the king's death, St Aelred of Riveaux tried hard to advance his cause, and Archbishop Laud included him in his Scottish Prayer Book of 1637. For the various factors that pulled in opposing directions, Oram, (2004), esp. 145-65, 203-25.

22 The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Crusade. For details, Richard, (1992), esp. 85-152, 293-329. Yet the book does end by conceding that Louis was 'the greatest peacemaker that the thirteenth century had known' (332).

23 Probably at Oswestry in 642.

24 John Paul II created more saints than all previous popes combined.

25 *The Alternative Service Book* of 1980 also attempted to be thoroughly ecumenical, in including Counter-Reformation and Non-Conformist saints (e.g. Teresa of Avila and John Bunyan). *Common Worship* (2000) went even further in including Newman who had deserted the Church of England for Rome in 1845.

26 For further discussion of her legend, see Brown (2000), 83-5, 89-93.

27 Surprisingly, even whole books devoted to the painting take little or no account of the image: cf. Hall (1994); Seidel, (1993), 119-123.

28 For a detailed presentation of this view, see Brown (2000), 31-61.

29 Gregory the Great is largely responsible for the western integration of the various Gospel women into a single figure. In his defence it needs to be noted that even the evangelists seem to have adapted Jesus' anointing to their own purposes (Ibid., 40-3), while the name of Mary Magdalene is mentioned by Luke

the elaborated fictional tale gave readers and hearers of Scripture the opportunity to observe a sinner's growth in holiness across the various New Testament incidents, as the composite woman was observed progressively deepening her faith and understanding in her developing relationship with Christ: first receiving his forgiveness, then learning at his feet; identifying with him in his death on the cross, then discovering the new life offered in his resurrection.<sup>30</sup> Medieval Christians found in Mary Magdalene someone ordinary like themselves growing in holiness and so the promise that the possibility might also be their own, whether their own besetting sin was sexual or otherwise. The point of the sexual aspect was thus its very ordinariness, not woman as temptress, however much that theme might intrude elsewhere. Perhaps one example of that earlier attitude may suffice, St Anselm's prayer to Mary Magdalene:

Most blessed lady, I the most wicked of men do not touch once more on your sins as a taunt or reproach but seek to grasp the boundless mercy by which they were blotted out ... Draw for me from the well where I may wash my sins ... For it is not difficult for you to obtain whatever you wish from so loving and so kind a Lord, who is your friend living and reigning (*Oratorio*, 16).<sup>31</sup>

Some readers may regret, even despise, the resort to fiction upon which the power of Mary Magdalene's story depends. They should not. Even today such means remain the most common form of moral reflection among the population at large. Think, for instance, of the key contribution TV soaps have made in allowing viewers to explore and wrestle with some of the major moral issues of the day, gay relationships among them.<sup>32</sup> It is of course possible to argue that all that is happening here is a reflection of already changing social values. But it is not without significance that the first television treatments of such issues occurred before opinion polls were reporting a majority sympathetic to gay relationships. The script writers do thus appear to have played a key role in helping viewers to explore how they might appropriately regard family members or colleagues at work similarly situated.

Equally, Christians have sometimes found it easiest to explore moral dilemmas in contexts such as war or sexual ethics through the medium of the novel. So, for instance, some of Graham Greene's works seem to have fulfilled just such a function for Roman Catholics struggling in situations where moral absolutes seem hard to apply.<sup>33</sup> Again, novelists like R C Hutchinson helped an earlier generation over the preservation of integrity and sanctity in the face of the conundrums of conflict and war.<sup>34</sup> That conceded, something of course would still be lacking, were the imaginative never to find reflection in parallel real lives. So the better way remains that such matters be pursued through actual historical examples, if at all possible, which is where the notion of saints would continue to have relevance.

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almost immediately after his own account of the anointing of the penitent sinner (8.1-2).

30 'Learning at his feet' because Mary Magdalene was also identified as the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This is not as implausible as it might initially sound, as in John (12.1-8) their sister is identified as performing an anointing at their home village of Bethany, precisely the place chosen by Mark for his anonymous anointing (14.3-9).

31 My trans: excerpts from sec.10-26 in Schmitt ed., (1946), 3.64-5.

32 *Eastenders* featured the first TV gay kiss, while *Emmerdale* included discussion of the possibility of a priest blessing a lesbian couple's union. Even the longest running British soap, the more conservative *Archers* featured one of the principal families agonising over how to respond to a son entering into a civil partnership.

33 For an introduction, Sharrock, (1984).

34 As in novels such as *The Unforgotten Prisoner* (1933) that deals with revenge and reconciliation in the aftermath of the First World War, *Testament* (1938) that explores the Russian revolution, and *The Fire and the Wood* (1940) that examines some of the dilemmas associated with the rise of Nazism.

(2) That admission links with a second major argument for the importance of saints in theological reflection. This is the contribution they might make to the question of evidence for the existence of God. Apart from professional philosophers few now give credence to the traditional arguments for the existence of God. They seem at most to raise the possibility rather than push an open mind decisively in one direction or the other. One philosophical theologian (admired by Brümmer) who used the saints to tip the balance in just such a way is the former Warden of Keble College, Oxford, Austin Farrer.

Such a life, then, is evidence; and what other evidence could you hope to find? We have no inspection, no insight into the works of nature, which could conceivably let us through them to a vision of anything that lies beneath ... The only being we can know from within is our own; we are forced, however inadequate it may be, to take it as a sample of the rest, and judge the world from man. And man knows God only by yielding to him; we do not know the fountain of our being, so long as we are occupied in stopping it with mud. So the saint is our evidence, and other men, of course for the glimpses of sanctity that are in them.<sup>35</sup>

Discounting the customary male-orientated character of the language of the day, what most strikes us now in Farrer's discussion is his ready admission of the powerful impact one such individual had made on his own life, and the inevitable consequence this entails in selecting some individuals over against others. As he observes in a memorable phrase, 'the evidence of faith is incorrigibly aristocratic.' More recently, Rowan Williams has moved in a similar direction. Quoting St Ambrose's remark that 'it did not suit God to save people by arguments', he goes on to indicate the key role played by others in shaping belief or otherwise in the truths of faith: that sometimes even 'the very angst and struggle they bring to their relation with God is a kind of argument for God.'<sup>36</sup> In particular, he offers the intriguing observation that sometimes people 'take responsibility for making God credible in the world,' as appears to have been the case with ETTY HILLESUM, a young Jewish woman sentenced to Auschwitz, who wrote that she felt called to 'bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times.'<sup>37</sup>

The point is that, where sanctity is of a truly heroic kind, it seemed simplest to accept the saint's own account of what has made this possible, the aid of divine grace. Sometimes of course individuals do appear able to maintain a similar witness to the good without reliance on faith, but for the Christian the unrecognised hand of grace will still usually seem the best explanation for such persistence, however much the individual may insist on an alternative explanation. How plausible such an account might be is too complex a question to enter on here. Suffice it to say that it seems supported by the individual Christian's own experience of divine guidance, for this too is often only discovered in retrospect.

(3) Finally, and perhaps surprisingly to some readers, something needs to be said on the way in which the idea of saints can help strengthen our sense of social interdependence. Much contemporary Christian theology has been preoccupied with the apparent disintegration of western societies into narrow, self-centred individualism, and various counter-strategies have been proposed, among them a revived social doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>38</sup> Thus far I may have conveyed the impression that attending to the lives of the saints is part of that individualism, all just a matter of personal piety, each individual modelling his or her life on that of another (the saint), however much each might find their ultimate rationale in the life of the Saviour himself.

Yet such a formulation ignores the essentially social character of human identity, something

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35 'Narrow and Broad' in Loades & MacSwain ed., (2007), 184-9, esp. 187.

36 Williams, (2007), 20-6, esp. 20, 21. The quotation from Ambrose is from his *De Fide* I, 42.

37 Williams, 22; Smelik ed., (2002), 506.

38 With Jürgen Moltmann setting a pattern in (1981) that many others followed.

that must carry implications for our understanding of the person of Jesus both as incarnate and as now exalted to heaven. Whereas for most of Christian history theologians assumed the existence of special infused knowledge in the incarnate Lord, biblical criticism has now compelled recognition of a more complex reality in some form of kenosis, even if the more precise formulations of the nineteenth century failed to gain any wide acceptance.<sup>39</sup> There was a real shaping of Jesus by his own culture and surroundings that would have included important contributions from others, among them not only his human parents, disciples and friends but perhaps also the local rabbi, the Syro-Phoenician woman and so on.

Here I allude to that strange incident (Mark 7.24-30) because it was possibly this encounter that moved Jesus decisively towards a more positive appreciation of Gentiles. The passage is one in which pagans are described by the diminutive for dogs. Although the Greek (*kunaria*) is occasionally interpreted as a diminutive of affection, more probably, it seems to me, it was an unthinking use by Jesus of a typical Jewish term of abuse.<sup>40</sup> The woman's response then provoked Jesus towards a re-think. At any rate, that might be one possible reason why remembrance of the rather puzzling exchange was preserved: it was seared on Jesus' own consciousness. Whether true in this particular case or not, my general point holds. The social shaping of Jesus' identity would have been expressed in the fact that, as well as giving, he also received, precisely in order to give more deeply. Indeed, one might say that it was Jesus' acceptance of the very definite cultural setting in which he found himself that gave his ministry such power. Audiences heard what he had to say in terms of, and within, frameworks with which they were already familiar. Nothing was wholly *de novo* but built upon an already familiar base.

While such dependence might well have ceased with the end of his earthly life, and that is often how the issue is treated (with resort once more to infused knowledge), I wonder if such an approach does not after all undermine the basic claim of the Ascension which is of humanity permanently exalted to heaven, not of humanity now effectively absorbed into the divinity. Certainly, we are happy to think of Christ continuing to be dependent on humanity to act on his behalf in this world. Thanks to their use in many collections of prayers, words attributed to St Teresa of Avila are now quite familiar:

Christ has no other hands but your hands to do his work today; no other feet but your feet to guide folk on his way; no other lips but your lips to tell them why he died; no other love but your love win them to his side.<sup>41</sup>

While of course applicable to all Christians, such comments would be especially true of saints. Interdependence is thus demonstrated not just in the fact that they are found performing actions on Christ's behalf but, more profoundly, in the distinctive contribution they make in adapting that message to the specifics of their own lives.

But such patterns of interdependence I would argue continue not only with respect to this world but also in the very nature of Jesus' existence in heaven. That may seem an extraordinary claim, but it makes good sense once we start to reflect more deeply on what it might mean to assert the permanent exaltation of Christ's humanity to heaven, as the doctrine of the Ascension asserts. Given that human beings only flourish in the presence of others like themselves, it is hard to see why Christ should be treated as an exception. Donne's 'no man is an island' is more

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39 Although Aquinas did eventually admit growth in Jesus' empirical knowledge (a matter on which he changed his mind; contrast *Summa Theologiae* III.9.4c with the earlier III *Sent.* d14.a3), he was always insistent that the beatific vision was infused right from the moment of Jesus' conception (ST III.9.2, q10). For nineteenth century kenoticism, Brown (2011).

40 Cranfield is among those who defend the alternative view, assuming here an untypical Jewish reference to pets: (1959), 248.

41 Probably derived indirectly from Evelyn Underhill's (1913) translation.

than a merely contingent fact.<sup>42</sup> It points to an underlying ontological reality. So, even if now no longer dependent on others for his development and knowledge, Jesus would still be dependent on them for his full flourishing as the social being all humans are. One obvious implication is that Christ could not possibly, therefore, be heaven's only current human occupant. To talk of the presence of the saints in heaven should thus not be seen as their fitting reward but rather entertained by Christ's own exaltation to heaven. The Ascension thus speaks of the realisation of a corporate social reality: of the presence of the body of Christ in more senses than one.

The modern fashion in theology is to downplay or even reject entirely talk of heaven as a present reality and to substitute biblical talk of a final culmination of the human story in a new heaven and a new earth. But this is by no means the only biblical position. While expected imminence of the world's end meant that not much attention was given by New Testament writers to the topic of heaven,<sup>43</sup> the beginnings of later attitudes are already there.<sup>44</sup> That is why I disagree with scholars such as Tom Wright who wish all the emphasis to be on the eschaton. So worried is he by the Church's traditional position on the saints that he has even proposed abandoning All Saints' Day and its associated hymns,<sup>45</sup> something that would have worried John Wesley, so scarcely just a conventional Catholic/Protestant dispute.<sup>46</sup> While Wright is quite correct in objecting to the way in which saints were sometimes treated as more like influential patrons ready to act for their clients before the divine King,<sup>47</sup> he errs badly in my view in ignoring this more corporate dimension to the Christian faith.

Of course the resurrection was a unique event, but that does not mean that it is without more immediate implications for others. In the more distant past this was expressed through the doctrine of the harrowing of hell, with Christ conceived of as releasing Adam and the saints of the Old Testament into the new life that he came to bring.<sup>48</sup> But the saints of the new covenant also have their place. There is nice irony in the fact that on the front cover of Wright's major work on the resurrection a painting by Titian is used to suggest that Christ rises alone,<sup>49</sup> whereas, if taken into conjunction with the two side-panels, a quite different story emerges. Seen as whole with various saints in these side panels, the triptych effectively indicates that others too now share in the exaltation of Christ to life with his Father in heaven.<sup>50</sup>

The suspicious minded may think that such observations are but a prelude to the invocation of saints in precisely the form to which Protestants have traditionally taken exception but nothing could be further from my intention. Once this strong social interdependence is stressed, it becomes clear that the saints can accomplish nothing on their own. Their invocation would thus not be a matter of some special influence they might have over Christ but rather clear acknowledgement of this essentially social dimension to our humanity. Just as we ask our friends and local church for their prayers in times of special need, so the wider Church beyond the grave may be invoked. While it is pointless to speculate in any detail how and in what form such a

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42 'No man is an Island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the Continent': part of his *Meditation XVII*.

43 For imminent expectation, e.g. I Cor. 7.29; I Thess. 4.15-17.

44 E. g. in Luke 23.43; 2 Cor. 12.2; Phil. 1.23.

45 Wright (1), (2003).

46 John Wesley's entries in his *Journal* for All Saints' Day, 1756 and 1767 are especially revealing.

47 Cf. Wright, 3, 16.

48 Based on Matt. 27.52 and I Peter 3.18-20, the theme was developed and popularised in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. To this day it is still the most common way of representing Christ's resurrection in Orthodox icons.

49 Wright (2), (2003).

50 I discuss the painting and the issues involved at rather more length in Brown (2005), 11-19. For an illustration of the complete painting (still in its original location in the church of Santi Nazaro e Celso at Brescia), see Pedrocco, (2001), 127-9.

petition might be communicated to them, what we can say for certain is that such knowledge would need to be mediated. Only God could know directly what occurs in this world and only God could grant what the petitioner requests. So, such prayers would remain held firmly within the corporate reality that is the body of Christ, and not just a matter of a purely personal relation between two individuals, the petitioner and his or her favourite saint.

## CONCLUSION

Not all clauses in the Apostles' Creed are equally clear. So, for example, the article that speaks of Christ's descent into hell was once taken to allude to the release of the Old Testament saints from their waiting, to share now in salvation from Christ, whereas in contemporary theology it is more commonly understood, as it was in Calvin, to express the extreme limits to which Christ's suffering went,<sup>51</sup> and that dispute is reflected in uncertainty over the Latin's correct form at this point.<sup>52</sup> In a not dissimilar way, *communio sanctorum* is ambiguous. Although usually rendered into English as 'the communion of saints,' the Latin could equally mean 'a sharing in holy things.' Yet that very ambiguity could be the article's strength, for it is by participating in the Church's reading of Scripture and the sacraments that we are drawn closer to one another (the wider sense of saints) and also to saints in the narrower sense, as we aspire through divine grace to emulate those who have preceded us in following in the steps of Christ.

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51 As in Hans Urs von Balthasar, e.g. *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 148-88. For Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book II, ch. xvi, para. 9-11.

52 'Descendit ad inferna' seems to have been the original form ('he descended to the depths'). But this was eventually modified in the Roman Breviary to 'ad inferos' ('to those below'), presumably to indicate more clearly that the descent was to the departed, not to the place of the damned.

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**KEY WORDS**

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