

Whose Saints? How Much Can We Recognize Holiness beyond the Pale?

Ron (Serafim) Grove

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 294)

The author examines what might be called “cross-confessional” or “trans-jurisdictional” sanctity, i.e., figures accounted as “saints” in one Church who are also venerated as such by another Church which may not be in communion with the canonizing Church and may indeed even be otherwise vigorously opposed to their theology and practices. The author explores this often-contradictory phenomenon as it is found in Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches, Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches, and in Protestant bodies, analyzing particularly the liturgical calendars of each. In addition, and by means of contrast, the author also provides a brief analysis of “saint-making” as it occurs in some secular circles and non-Christian religions, especially Judaism and Islam. This analysis reveals several things: that veneration of holy figures is a catholic practice not confined to explicitly religious people but seems almost globally humanly ingrained; that such veneration often proceeds quite independently and “democratically” as people venerate holy figures irrespective of decisions made about them by their leaders; and that such veneration highlights (sometimes almost comically so) a theological incoherence that can be nonetheless ecumenically useful as people today seek out spiritual relationships with those once accounted heretics and enemies. The author concludes with a salutary warning not to assume too blithely that “if our saints are true, yours must be false” because in the search for Christian unity accommodations will eventually have to be made in hagiographical canons and liturgical calendars.



Introduction

Western Christians are sometimes surprised at the number of pre-Christian saints commemorated by various Orthodox Churches. Yet Orthodox Christians are in for their own surprise when contemplating the number of outright *non-Christian* figures commemorated, for example, in the iconography of the decidedly Western parish of Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, San Francisco. When the Societas Liturgica met there in 2001, we were given to see a fascinatingly all-encompassing mural of “dancing saints” in that church.¹ This gathering of “saints” was catholic in the most nonsectarian sense.²

Such a collection of figures raises numerous questions not simply about the departure from received canonical norms for the writing of icons, but in fact about the necessarily prior question of what one might call cross-confessional or trans-jurisdictional sanctity, that is, saints canonized in one Church but venerated in others, including those not officially in communion with the canonizing Church. Conversely, one must also attend to questions of saints considered by some Christians as either heretics or, worse, indistinguishable from common pagans given their communion with a church not recognized as such by others. Bearing in mind George Orwell’s dictum that “saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent,”³ the following represents an attempt to consider both sets of questions in the light of the liturgical calendars of numerous and various Christian bodies: Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Catholic, Byzantine Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox. We begin, however, with some brief considerations of non-Christian “saints” to provide

¹ See Mark Dukes, *The Dancing Saints* (San Francisco, 2001). This is a labeled sketch of the murals in the church and available therefrom.

² I was glad to recognize my own saint, Seraphim of Sarov, and relieved that his friend the bear, also dancing, lacked a halo, as did Francis of Assisi’s wolf.

³ Glenn Frankel, “A Seer’s Blind Spots: On George Orwell’s 100th, A Look at a Flawed and Fascinating Writer,” *Washington Post*, 25 June 2003, C01. Available on-line at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A28471-2003Jun24.html> (visited 30 June 2003).

a greater sense of the universality of “sainthood” on the one hand, and, on the other, to put into relief Christianity’s distinctiveness.

I. Non-Christian Saints

i) Secular Saints

The impulse to venerate saints is universal, and many non-Christians engage in behavior very similar to the Church’s cult of saints. For example, the self-mummified bodies of two seventeenth century Vietnamese Buddhist monks are venerated in the Dau Pagoda south of Hanoi. They sit, as they reposed after several years of special diet and exercises aimed at preserving their bodies, in the lotus position. Although painted with red lacquer, it is still remarkable that these bodies remain incorrupt, even though no internal organs were removed, as is usual in the preparation of mummies.⁴

Not far away geographically, but perhaps less edifying spiritually, in Anlong Veng, Cambodia, villagers pray to Pol Pot for help winning the lottery, recovering health, and all the usual human needs and desires. One of the most notorious mass murderers of a particularly murderous century rewards with miraculous cures those who tend his grave.⁵

The few remaining Communist countries maintain “cults of personality” so reminiscent of the Christian cult of the saints that the same vocabulary is used to describe them. A journalistic report from March 2003 has the subtitle “China dusts off an icon from the Mao era to promote selflessness.”⁶ The “icon” in question is the “fool-for-Mao,” Léi Feng, a literal child of the Revolution who died in a freak accident at the age of 22 after having been orphaned very young when his peasant

⁴ “The Mystery of the Mummies, *Vietnam Investment Review, Timeout* 19–25 June 2000. On-line at http://www.gocvietnam.com/fa_the_mystery_of_the_mummies.html (visited 7 March 2003).

⁵ Seth Mydans, “Praying to Pol Pot, Seeking Health and Good Luck,” *The New York Times On The Web*, 23 June 2001. On-line at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/23/world/23CAMB.html> (visited 25 June 2001).

⁶ Ching-Ching Ni “Anachronistic Altruist,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March 2003, A20.