

## Article

# Comparative Methods for Teaching Contemporary and Ancient Saints

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that a comparative study of saints is not only a useful classroom tool for historians and religionists, but an exceptionally powerful locus of pedagogical insight and cultural understanding. By reframing contemporary consumptive patterns, media representations, and power discourses as religious vectors of saintliness, the professor has an opportunity to explore and assess cultural values, rituals, beliefs, worldviews, communities, traditions, and meaning making in the contemporary college student's world. By acknowledging the dangers and possibilities of the category of saint while reframing the ascetical impact on developing subjectivities, we propose six pedagogical examples of how this might best be deployed.

**Keywords:** hagiology; saint; celebrity; media; pedagogy; capitalism

## 1. Introduction

In the final project of a recent seminar, students were encouraged to contemplate who are the contemporary saints in our culture and how and why they might be considered as such.<sup>1</sup> A wide variety of figures were rendered “saints,” including: influencers (David Goggins), music stars (Taylor Swift and Harry Styles), market leaders (Steve Jobs and Elon Musk), politicians (RBG), icons of social movements (MLK), and even reimagined Christian icons (St. Sebastian). This fascinating moment when students grappled with the concept of sainthood in contemporary culture acts as the foundation of this paper, asking what a comparative study of ancient and contemporary saints offers and how it might best be collaboratively accomplished. We will explore some problems with the study of saints (including whether the term “saint” is useful); consider how askesis, media, and consumption figure into the comparative model; and then examine the payoff of placing conventionally understood saints in conversation with a reimagined contemporary form of sainthood. Finally, we will offer some pedagogical exercises and approaches to deconstruct sainthood in culture and classrooms.

Although a subsection of students may be drawn to the study of typical saints on the grounds of theology or personal relationship, our focus in this research is the social aspect of saints, expanding the category as an engine of renewed interest in religion and humanities.<sup>2</sup> As any seasoned humanities professor will tell you, the direct connection of ancient religious literature to contemporary college students' lives is tenuous at best. It is further complicated by the type of media used to relate its messages, namely that which champions the supernatural. Early Christians heard and retold the stories of saints, resulting in theological traditions of commemoration, pilgrimage, votive offerings, and personal identification. Through contemplating these stories, and wondering if they too could reject ordinary life and reimagine new subjectivities, early Christians connected themselves to the idea of the saint. Their relationship might hinge on moments of physical proximity, as the saint moved between desert and city, lore and text, but was more often one of imagination. In a similar way, students from my seminar regularly alluded to their own inability to achieve what modern saints could, but were often satisfied to participate in mediated or imagined connections.



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But what, if at all, is the importance of the historical saint to the contemporary college student? Can they function as anything more than bizarre and anachronistic stories that are distant from the hopes and interests of this latest generation? Addressing these questions is part of the joy of teaching in these fields, as professors repeatedly make the case that these subjects have innate value. In this spirit, this paper will argue that hagiology is not only capable of sustaining interest and functioning as an intelligible site of inquiry for the contemporary college student, but that it also represents dynamic and useful tools for understanding how religion functions in both ancient and contemporary societies. The “saint” continues to capture the imagination of humans seeking answers to how one should live in their society by representing a locus of rich mediated purpose and operating as a dense transfer point for human understanding and religious practice. The term “saint”, reimagined in the contemporary, expands the category of “religion” as a site of profound relevance.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. “Saints” and “Religion”: Refining Our Terms

The term “saint” has its problems. The historical ties to Western Christianity render its ability to encompass the wide range of exemplary religious individuals in our world awkward at best. This issue has been carefully and fruitfully explored by a range of leading scholars in Hagiology (Hollander 2020; Rondolino 2017; Keune 2019; DiValerio 2019; Brown 1983; Hawley 1987; Rondolino 2019; Ritchey 2019). Even so, we have chosen to use the term in this paper as a signifier because it connects with a predominant culture in our context. In many ways, the work we lay out in this paper acts to subversively challenge many of the predominating characteristics of this culture by unveiling some of the ways that saints are constructed, promulgated, and supported by various hegemonic structures. We acknowledge that while the term is imperfect, it does the work of bringing students together in our culture around a shared understanding that is quickly translatable into contemporary “religious” forms.

We also propose moving beyond a definition of religion that rests simply on identification with the major “World Religions” towards something more dynamic that addresses all the ritualized worldview building, networking, meaning making, belief structuring, media, consumption, and discourse with which humanity engages.<sup>4</sup> Our two chosen areas of comparison, late ancient Christianity and late capitalism, are best understood through an expanded definition of religion that includes economic, cultural, mediated, and mediating forms of networks.<sup>5</sup> As Lofton argues, “Where our social and ritual interests are placed now is not in denominational tradition but workplace culture; not in inherited objects but recently purchased goods; not archaic icons but an endlessly rotating cast of minor and major celebrities.”<sup>6</sup> Considering this model, the concept of religion and its saints expands immensely, encompassing a wide array of domains with a deep impact on students’ lives.

By engaging students in a comparative study of saints, new layers of meaning and reflection emerge. In their most basic form, saints render systems, conjure media, and create cultural impact. If one can grasp the saint historically, one can see an essential apparatus of religion, bringing the “system” into relief amidst the noisy blur of civilization.<sup>7</sup> The student is granted the opportunity and tools to make the familiar seem strange and recognize the appeal that their contemporary society has for the emulated and fetishized spectacle of the modern moral exemplar.

Understanding saints as mediators of culture is bound to inspire conversations on complex and controversial topics given religion’s temporal span across human history. But should a professor reach back into the archives of ancient Christianity for material troublesome to our modern sensibilities? Ancient saints starve themselves, deny life-saving aids,<sup>8</sup> undergo torture<sup>9</sup> and abuse,<sup>10</sup> forcibly tonsure children,<sup>11</sup> undertake all manners of bodily punishment (Palladius 1965, chp. 18. Section 4, p. 59), and inflict death upon whoever gets in their way.<sup>12</sup> Many stories read like engaging fiction, and yet so many of the topics would need trigger warnings in our classrooms. With eating disorders estimated

to be prevalent in 8–17% of college students, is the study of saints who gloriously starve themselves to salvation a non-starter?<sup>13</sup>

Rather than avoid the complicated histories of Christianity, the comparative hagiological approach asks the student to understand the underlying cultural systems that beget comportment. Allowing for the full exploration of these ideas in context and in comparison to contemporary society, we open a range of pedagogical possibilities in the classroom. Scholars of hagiology are not asking students to judge historical figures, but rather understand the system that might encourage a monk to starve himself to gain access to heaven. Identifying these systems and transposing awareness of the system of the saint onto contemporary frameworks encourages the student to see the underlying foundations of their own desires and behavior. It also helps elucidate the less attractive elements of devotion that we would rather overlook. We would benefit from remembering J.Z. Smith's call for religionists to do the hard work of understanding those pieces of religion that stand incomprehensible to us, including saints that transgress our moral standards (Smith 1982, pp. 102–20).

### 3. A Word about Ascetic Discourse

One of the most intriguing aspects of hagiology is its close relationship with ascetic discourse. Asceticism is usually linked to bodily practices that deny the natural needs of the human. A more expansive social definition of asceticism, built on Foucault, Weber, and Harpham, is fruitfully argued by Richard Valantasis, who proposes: "Asceticism may be defined as performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity" (Valantasis 2002, p. 548). With this broader framing of asceticism, a range of saints find themselves included, and new aspects of sainthood emerge in the multiplying connections to contemporary life. In other words, viewing asceticism as a framework for creating subjectivity through actions that inaugurate alternative cultures and new social relations allows one to encourage college students to consider the multiplicity of identities they engage in through their practices.<sup>14</sup> How we construct our communities through our actions, making ourselves into who we are by denying some things and practicing others, is particularly poignant for college students embarking on their adulthood.

Saints were capable of remarkable ascetic feats that boggled the mind and inspired the imagination of the common person. Exemplary figures of today—those that a college student might render saints—are no different. They offer a touch of the extraordinary while inspiring us to mimetically desire their success. Extraordinary actions alone, however, do not constitute sainthood. Like ancient examples, saints need community to deem their actions worthy of admiration, reverence, and retelling. Humans are involved in the co-construction of the saint, imbuing them with the genius, excellence, or superiority that renders them exemplary.

An effective pedagogical comparative model I have employed when explaining asceticism to contemporary students is the example of modern Indian ascetics, like Lotan Baba, the Rolling Saint (Malik et al. 1995). Lotan Baba (Mohan Das) engages in a variety of ascetic feats, including rolling across India, where he is regularly met with veneration from the broader community. The action of rolling when he was expected to be walking or riding is simple but extraordinary and functions to reframe him as holy.<sup>15</sup> How one acts in relationship to one's culture teaches students how identities are shaped, reflected in social relationships, and eminently capable of adjustment and reimagination. For college students attempting to understand their relationship to their world, I can think of few other concepts that are notably fluid, enlightening, and inspiring.

### 4. Media and the Saint

The saint without the hagiographer is lost. It is the apparatus of religion engaged with media that creates the saint; however, they could be vastly different from their historical renderings.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the ways a figure is constructed, performed, and promulgated

in the ancient context opens students' eyes to a powerful tradition of religion in history, the power of media. Employing this tool to understand contemporary saints in a comparative format is an exploratory pedagogical model with profound impact. Seeing the saint in the spectacle, as a simulacrum of reality, exposes an abiding mechanism of religion that continues to shape contemporary society. We want to offer the possibility that perhaps religion has re-emerged in this moment, not as the over-ritualized gestures of religious leaders, but as the connective and media-driven reverence and emulation of extraordinary figures,<sup>17</sup> a challenging and enlightening idea to a classroom full of the "not religious" (Blankholm 2022, See also, 'Nones' on the Rise 2012).

### 5. Mediating Past and Present

A particularly intriguing aspect of the saint in culture is their ability to act as a mediator between the ordinary human and that which is above. In the ancient world, the saint offered a touch of holiness, a portal to the divine. They embodied power; radiated identity; and, above all, helped people. In the contemporary world, the saint reprises many of the same roles, if couched in a different community and belief structure. They offer a touch of the extraordinary, setting examples for emulation by achieving remarkable feats and offering help to those seeking it, for example, through exercise programs, psychological inspirations, or economic guidance. At the core of many social-media-oriented interactions is a relationship founded on mimetic desire.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a major reason social media operates as efficiently as it does in creating deep relationships is rooted in the desires created in us through seeing others desire and acquire.

In the ancient context, one might address a saint if they encounter struggle in their culture, and they would intervene in and help with social, economic, political, or theological issues. These stories had a phenomenal effect on the culture surrounding the ancient saint, ascribing power and prestige to those that set themselves apart. Peter Brown has noted that it was by "catering for the day-to-day needs of his locality, through allowing his person to be charged with the normal hopes and fears of his fellow men" that the saint gained power enough to achieve the occasional "coup de théâtre."<sup>19</sup> Brown's choice of language sheds light on the performance of sainthood. In our current context, the saint functions as spectacularly and relationally as the ancient saint did, matching problems with solutions and garnering fame through the retelling of their overt successes and spectacular gestures.<sup>20</sup>

### 6. The Saint of Today

Consider defining a saint by their ability to channel power to everyday life through an ascetic performance that creates new subjectivities through cultural recognition. In our society, new ways of social religiosity center their political and economic values at the system's core.<sup>21</sup> Sainthood can translate into contemporary paradigms to provide insight into the culture of today through the lens of late capitalism. College students may benefit from deconstructing sainthood in a comparative framework because it explains the ways in which culture operates as religion, and asceticism shapes their identity and relation to power. Understanding signifiers that construct the saint of today can give college students resources to define their society beyond an academic setting through newfound critical tools. Beyond a moral exemplary figure, might we consider a saint as a cultural benchmark through which social, political, and cultural traits are codified? The first required step to do so, one rich with pedagogical value, is to understand and explain how interactions with the saints of today mediate students' culture, defining what society is, what message is mediated, and what type of transcendence they offer. Additionally, college students will need to recognize that the saint of today mediates power in ways that mimic disparities in the systems. The oppressor and the oppressed will interact with two faces of the same saint. One may glorify the exemplar of capitalism and another may denounce that same figure, raising the question of whether saintliness is uniquely tied to that which we perceive as "holy" or "righteous," as well as how saints can be polyphonic.

## 7. The Culture of the Saints of Today

Defining a saint in a cultural setting means determining the morality the system intends to promote. For example, in the times of persecution in early Christianity, saints like Stephen were valued for their martyrdom; meanwhile, during the Crusades, saints like James the Moor-Slayer were revered for their conquering abilities (Castelli 2004; Navarrete 2008). Saints become mediators between society and cherished cultural values, informing moral sensitivities and defining socio-cultural relations. If the saints of the past were mediums for people to access divinity, what can we consider the framework of power for the saints of today? We might consider it contemporarily as an economic power, with capital as its language and commodities as its signs. If a person of the past revered a saint for their display of divinity or as a vessel to transcendence, we currently revere saints for the performance of power through capital represented in commodities.<sup>22</sup>

As in the past, the saint of today is defined by the culture surrounding their mystique, being adopted by a community defined by common language, rituals, symbols, and costumes associated with its adoration. The contemporary saint mutates from a moral connector into a performer of status, a symbol to mediate a person's engagement with society at large. For college students, understanding their engagement with saints critically will promote a deconstruction of their relationship with consumption and how it defines their identities.<sup>23</sup> The interaction with saints of today happens in a two-way communication system, which has resonance with some historical models, if less immediate. We not only learn about our saints but consume the spectacle of their products and ideas. When engaging with a saint of today, we act as hagiographers and emulators, interacting with and producing their sainthood and histories.

## 8. Interacting with the Saint of Today

For college students, understanding their religious relationship with saints will also explain the fervent adoration they have for certain commodities.<sup>24</sup> Current systems fulfill the role of religion by creating "waves of enthusiasm" for a product, transposing responses to divine artifacts and symbols of the past onto an extraordinary reaction to commodities—the ancient pilgrimage is now the queue for a concert (Debord 2002, p. 60). As with saints of the past, a globalized society can create saints with polyphonic interpretations, opening the possibility for saints to be polarizing within their own context.<sup>25</sup> In contradistinction to a more hermetic ancient context, however, contemporary exemplars can exist as "saints" as much as "sinners" in their mediated worlds. Recognizing the controversy of the saints of capitalism can help college students to understand the overarching cultural and economic systems through an interdisciplinary perspective. The proliferation of capitalism beyond the West also happened in a process of cultural dominance that creates a disparate relationship between the power-wielding and the powerless societies, mediated by a cultural process of economic engagement.<sup>26</sup> Neocolonial systems, including the veneration of their saints, represent a way of mimicking the reigning power.<sup>27</sup> Colonized cultures adopt the saints of capitalism as figures of either reverence or contempt.<sup>28</sup> For example, the opinion of a sports fan about an athlete who promotes a pair of shoes will be vastly different from the sweatshop worker who produces them. In a multicultural world, it is imperative for college students of today to sensibly recognize the impact their engagement with their saints has on people in other societies and to understand how a saint can be perceived and constructed by people with different cultural signifiers and identities.

## 9. Pedagogical Exercises

We intend for students to be able to remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create knowledge, so they can learn why they benefit from the study of the saint, both in the classroom and outside of it.<sup>29</sup> While living in a culture of endless access to information through the Internet, we want students to draw from resources mindfully, expanding their abilities to think about their world and giving context to the endless stream of information in which they might be found. In this sense, the study of the saint is not

only relevant because of the fascinating stories that it includes, but because of the learning abilities that students will acquire in a multidisciplinary setting by accessing different areas of knowledge (Willingham 2014, p. 28).

The study of the theory of the saint is accompanied by the experience of the interaction with it, which functions akin to a flipped classroom. This structure allows students to gain exposure outside of the course content in order to spend time in the classroom comparing those results, solving problems, critically thinking, and writing.<sup>30</sup> Saints are not only figures of historical interest but exceptionally powerful loci of study because of the way they serve to concentrate and condense a host of epistemological, cultural, ideological, and social abstractions into the subjectivity of contemporary life.<sup>31</sup> Saints are not outsiders of culture, practicing piety in deserted regions, but active nodes in the web of consumer networks. Hagiological teaching has unique potential to converse with real-life examples of contemporary sainthood and position itself as inherently multidisciplinary.

With our comparative terms now in place, we want to propose some exercises that may exemplify how to approach these questions in a college classroom. The objectives would be to help college students engage with the saint's cultural, social, and moral influence based on pedagogical approaches and methodologies that promote critical thinking and learning abilities.

### 9.1. Mediating Saint

Charles Hirschkind has argued that "For the anthropologist concerned with religious traditions, the *analytical* task may lie precisely in learning to *observe* how practitioners differentiate between icons and idols. . .and how this skill of discrimination shapes the way they relate differentially to different objects" (Hirschkind 2011, p. 94). Here "icons" operate as conduits to the holy, while "idols" act as holy apparatuses themselves. Deciphering how a saint accesses and utilizes power (icon), becomes the power (idol), or at times is manipulated through power relationships for various purposes enlightens the students' view of the saint in context.

- After selecting a historical saint of your choosing, e.g., St. Anthony, consider how the saint is mediated and how this affects their message.
- Can you detect the author's voice in the description of the saint's deeds? How were saints conceived, constructed, and developed through media in the ancient world? Explain the saint, the story of the saint, and the reception of the story about the saint.
- Compare this model to a contemporary figure of your choosing. How are figures mediated in our contemporary context for various purposes?

### 9.2. Asceticism and the Practice of Subjectivity

Valantasis has argued that "Asceticism may be defined as performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity" (Valantasis 2002, p. 548).

- By applying this idea to a historical saint, how do you see performances inaugurating alternative cultures? What did it take for the figure to become a saint?
- Consider our current context. How do we create our identities through our practices and performances?
- Select one of your current practices and related identities. Consider changing this practice into an alternative or opposite form (from vegan to omnivore, from NFL fan to dancer, from athlete to academic). How would the change in performance affect your culture, social relations, and identity? To what extent are you the originator of your own practices?

### 9.3. Refiguring the Religious

An updated definition of religion allows one to see the expanded modes that religious systems operate in throughout our global context.

- What contemporary systems would you consider a religion? Why?

- How does the framing of a practice as religion affect its reception or power in society?
- Consider the latest Supreme Court decisions on what counts as religion and not (Sullivan 2014, 2018). How do you see this creating or solving current and future problems in society?
- By acknowledging an expanded category of contemporary saints, what would you call their/our religion?
- How does this line of thinking affect your ideas about religion? Formulate your own definition of religion. Is this a useful way to consider one's world? What does this framework help to explore and explain?

#### 9.4. *A Culture Not Mediated by the Saint*

We consider saints to be mediators of culture, and that to interact with them is to perform and display symbols of their power. In this sense, saints translate the immaterial and abstract morality of a system into the recognizable and aspirational. Students benefit from identifying how saints of today inform their understanding of their social surroundings.

- Can we find saints that do not mediate consumption in today's culture?
- Challenge students to engage in deep conversations not mediated by their saints. What do students have in common besides Marvel movies or football teams?
- If any, what would be the alternatives to our contemporary system, which entails understanding commodities as signs, saints as models, and power as transcendence?

#### 9.5. *A Saint Not Mediated by the Culture*

A historical approach allows us to study saints of the past through an outsider's perspective on their cultural, social, and political development. The pedagogical techniques from this approach can be extrapolated to deconstruct present saints and unravel their social codex.

- Compare a saint of the past and a saint of today. What characteristics would be considered anachronistic and which ones are still revered?
- What values would an outsider extrapolate from our society after studying our saints? Similarly, what can we learn from the study of saints outside of our own culture in contemporary times?
- In Japan, Hatsune Miku is a pop star; however, she is an online avatar, created through digital art and media rather than a human body. She is a hyperreal figure who creates parasocial relationships (Ng 2021). Contemplating this example, what are the essential elements for a contemporary saint's creation?

#### 9.6. *Understanding the Consequences of Our Saints*

Given the moral limitations of the system, consumers engage with fetishes in a state of commodity narcissism, creating socially acceptable demonstrations of systematic violence.<sup>32</sup> For example, eco-friendly clothing from a fast-fashion brand does not solve the ecocide caused by the industry, but it misleads the consumer into using a not-as-bad alternative while still engaging with the system. By deconstructing the saint and the embedded morals of their commodities, college students can recognize and compare symbols, identifying those that do not align with their values.

- Should we revere the saints of today while acknowledging the imperfections of their message or do we have responsibility to ask for accountability?
- Are we complicit in the moral failings of our saints and symbols?

### 10. Conclusions

The comparative hagiological method allows contemporary college students to witness a transhistorical phenomenon of encounters with figures mediating cultural values. Beyond a simple retelling of histories, the comparative method calls on students to reckon with their own points of reference, deciphering the mediating systems that drive contemporary life.

As teachers, we continually strive for activities in the classroom that achieve the highest levels of learning. We argue for a method that goes beyond a regurgitation of historical details about saints, asking them to assess the “why?” and “how?” of the saint in context, then applying this model to a tangible but fundamentally different world and asking them to make sense of the patterns vis-à-vis a variety of communities’ voices. Finally, we encourage them to think critically and creatively in a collaborative context about how these traditions influence and affect their own lives and imagine how they might be employed for a range of purposes in emerging contexts. Through the creative conjuring of new saints, cross-cultural and chronological comparison, the extrapolation of values from cultures of consumption, the assessment of mediating power, and linking subjectivities and ascetic practices, the classroom becomes a laboratory of religious exploration. The notion of saint is not just an interesting vestige of religious frameworks, but among the densest of transfer points for meaning making and social identity development. The work of the humanities professor is to help students grapple with their humanity. Few contexts are so influential and conspicuous as our relationship to mediated capitalism through the exemplary figure. The reframing of religion in the contemporary classroom as more than a field of moralizing traditions in need of interreligious dialogue, but rather a type of dynamic world-shaping network operating on humanity, opens vast new landscapes for student exploration. It makes the saint not only relevant but essential to deciphering the human conditions we have received, created, and now accept as normal.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper emerged from a seminar called “Saints and Sinners,” offered at Rollins College in Spring 2023. The course was constructed as a meditation on sainthood with roots in late ancient Christianity and a trajectory toward modern culture.
- <sup>2</sup> We are grateful for our reviewer’s language here. This is not intended to undermine the value of studying saints as normally conceptualized and received, but rather to expand the categories by engaging with a wider array of students in the college classroom.
- <sup>3</sup> Hollander argues that historically there has been a gatekeeping effect in hagiology that impedes “some of the most interesting analyses that comparative hagiology may engender—for instance around sanctifying representations (verbal and otherwise) of politicians, soldiers, celebrities, or animals” (Hollander 2020, p. 6).
- <sup>4</sup> This is akin to Mark Taylor’s definition of religion as “an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure” (Taylor 2007, p. 12).
- <sup>5</sup> Early in the course on saints, time is spent working with definitions of religion and asking students to create their own in conversation with their classmates. Considerable time is granted to thinking about late capitalism, as Jameson explores in his chapters on culture and economics (Ch. 1, 8) (Jameson 1991).
- <sup>6</sup> She goes on to explain, “At the heart of each of these realignments of religious interest is the explicit monetization of value. The economy isn’t understood just as an operational good but actually as an entity capable of the highest spiritual accomplishment, hence the increased diagnoses of the neoliberal economy as a *spiritual economy*” (Lofton 2017, p. 9).



- 7 When considering the complicated terrain of contemporary religion, numerous theories emerge, including the reliance or even transformation of the religious into economic paradigms. Taylor traces these developments in his argument concerning the aestheticization of money and its relationship to the religious. See (Taylor 1999, pp. 140–67).
- 8 See Syncretica’s slow devolution into putrefaction (Burrus 2008, p. 109; Harvey 2006, p. 217).
- 9 The slave girl, Potamiaena, is slowly lowered into boiling pitch over the course of an hour (Palladius 1965, pp. 34–35).
- 10 Elizabeth Clark reminds us that when Patermutus was ordered to throw his son into a fast-moving river by the Abbot, his obedience was hailed as heroic, mimicking Abraham. See the story from John Cassian’s *Institutiones* 4.27–28 (SC 109.160.162) in (Clark 1995, pp. 365–66).
- 11 A notable example comes from John of Ephesus where Simeon the Mountaineer corrals all the pagan villagers’ children by offering gifts and then forcibly tonsures them against the parents’ wishes. See (John of Ephesus 2003, p. 299).
- 12 Habib effectively causes the death of an unrighteous deedholder by saying “If God wills their deliverance, let them never see him again” (John of Ephesus 2003, pp. 5–18).
- 13 See also Scott Harrower’s contribution to this collection of essays (Eisenberg et al. 2011).
- 14 I regularly use a playful thought experiment in my courses in which I ask the students to imagine me leaving our class and climbing up into a tree. I ask them to play out as a class what they think would happen, and how long it would take before my relationships were affected by my alternative practice. I ask them to consider how mundane the action of climbing a tree is, pointing out that many of us have tried it, but also that a simple action carried out in a community that does not expect or acknowledge it might be seen as a powerful moment in creating different social relations and new identities. If I stay in the tree, what are the impacts on my job, my family, my college, my power? The results are surprising and immediately evident. The professor is no longer the classroom educator, but the tree-dwelling scholar. My extraordinary, if mundane, action has now given me a voice on the evening news as the media tries to grasp what my purpose might be.
- 15 In like manner, sitting atop a pillar in a suburb of Constantinople does not seem all that remarkable, but Symeon the Stylite becomes holy through it (Theodoret et al. 1992).
- 16 Attention to this detail is useful in explaining the history of the ancient saint. St. Antony, the famed bellwether of desert ascetics was nothing without the *vita* which told his story. To put it more succinctly, the *vita* created the Antony that Christians loved to champion and emulate. In the hands of a writer like Athanasius or Augustine, Antony’s impact was outsized. On authorship and impact, see (Brakke 1995). Augustine mentions Antony by name; see (Augustine 1998, Book VIII, Section 14–15, pp. 142–43). The life of Antony is an amazing theological treatise, packed with historical details and important political landscapes (Athanasius 1980).
- 17 On religion as media, see (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). On religion/saint and media, see also (Hollander 2021; Meyer 2020; Ritchey 2019; Rondolino 2019).
- 18 We might consider the relationship a fan has to a young songstress who creates relatable music about female identity and struggle or loss of love. The desire for, and the relatability of, the figure factor higher than the possibility of actual connection. See the section on triangular desire, excerpted from *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, pp. 1–17, in (Girard and Williams 1996, pp. 33–44).
- 19 As Brown notes, “It was through the hard business of living his life for twenty-four hours in the day, through catering for the day-to-day needs of his locality, through allowing his person to be charged with the normal hopes and fears of his fellow men, that the holy man gained the power in society that enabled him to carry off the occasional *coup de théâtre*” (Brown 1971, pp. 80–81).
- 20 For cures for cancer, financial freedom, self-discipline, physical achievements, weight loss, music, humor, wisdom, and sexuality, the saint has what society wants.
- 21 “Capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers. The proof of the religious structure of capitalism—not merely, as Weber believes, as a formation conditioned by religion, but as an essentially religious phenomenon—would still lead even today to the folly of an endless universal polemic” (Benjamin et al. 2004, p. 288).
- 22 In this understanding, transcendence, merging with the eternal, is the conclusive goal, and divinity, rendered as a supernatural act, is a means to demonstrate one’s journey to it.
- 23 “The spectacle, understood in its totality, is simultaneously the result and the project of the existing mode of production” (Debord 2002, p. 3). The spectacle merges our perception of past and present to promote itself as the only way of living, negating other systems’ viability. See (Fisher 2009, p. 2).
- 24 Commodity fetishism encompasses the cultural mystique that commodities hold as cultural signifiers, proposing the idea of a commodity as a sign of social currency beyond its use value (Baudrillard 1981, pp. 88–101).
- 25 On “culturally configured discourses” in hagiography, see (Hollander 2021, p. 87). See also my argument on the polyphonic nature of hagiography (French 2020, pp. 199–227).
- 26 Said explains that “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 1979, p. 5).
- 27 See Anderson for a related treatment of these power dynamics through nationalism (Anderson 2006, p. 181).

- 28 International commerce outsources production to capitalize on the difference in labor costs (Fernández and Valencia 2013). Colonized societies not only interact with commodities as consumers but also as producers, which gives them a different perspective on saints that the commodities represent.
- 29 Anderson's new taxonomy uses updated categories of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson 2000, p. 31).
- 30 Within a flipped classroom, students would engage in a warm-up discussion led by the instructor about the subject to study, then the class would break into smaller discussion groups that would later communicate with each other and the instructor to ask questions and give feedback, and the class would conclude with an introduction to the next material (Huang and Hong 2016).
- 31 We are grateful to Will Sherman for his clarifying language here.
- 32 According to Cluley, commodity narcissism is the psychological exercise of becoming seemingly oblivious to the consequences of consumption in order to satisfy a perception of self-righteousness (Cluley and Dunne 2012).

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