# IN WORLD RELIGIONS

EDITED BY ARVIND SHARMA

# *Women Saints in World Religions*

*edited by*
*Arvind Sharma*

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For
My Daughter
Bhakti

Men achieve sainthood:
women are saints?

—Anonymous

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# Preface

The comparative study of religion goes back to the middle of the last century, whereas studies of women in religion to the middle of this century. This book brings together these two approaches to the study of religion.

The theme chosen for orienting the discussion is the category of women saints. In the literature of world religions one reads more about a woman's curious and even dubious ability to corrupt a saint than to become one. And some have ruefully, if equally dubiously, wished that she make saints of them, if they cannot make a sinner of her! In more generous accounts of women in saintly literature, this is precisely what some women accomplished—made saints out of men—either by intent or accident.

But producing a saint is not the same as being one. This book sets out to correct this parasitic perception of women in relation to sainthood. It presents new material, in translation from original sources previously unavailable in English, around the life of a figure considered "saintly" within the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The implication of this material for the concept of sainthood within the tradition is also examined, as well as the implication for "women saints" as a cross-cultural category. In doing so the book hopes to not only deepen our understanding of the concept of sainthood (as applied to women), but also to bring to light original material pertaining to women, as the table on the following page illustrates. It has been said that the merit of originality consists not in its novelty but rather sincerity. We hope that the readers will find the book original in both the senses, even if it is ostensibly translational at the conceptual and also a more literal level.

To the various contributors who made this volume possible—Katherine K. Young, Judith Baskin, Marie Anne Mayeski, Jane Crawford, Valerie Hoffman, Rajeshwari Pandharipande, Miriam Levering, and Suzanne Cahill—one can only offer one's heartfelt thanks, for bringing off a project even more successfully than one had initially dared to hope. If we are a part of all whom we meet, then how much more those we collaborate with, a part of us.

| Religious Tradition | Woman Saint | Date | Original Language of Text | Author |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Judaism | Dolce of Worms | Twelfth Century | Hebrew | Her husband, Rabbi Eleazer |
| Christianity | Saint Radegund | c. 525–587 | Latin | Nun Baudonivia |
| Islam | Sayyida Nafīsa | 762–824 | Arabic | Aḥmad al-Shihāwī Sa'd Sharaf al-Dīn |
| Hinduism | Janābāī | c. 1263–1350 | Marathi | Janābāī herself |
| Buddhism | Miao-tsung | Twelfth Century | Chinese | Ssu-ming T'an-hsiu (compiler) |
| Taoism | Pien Tung-hsüan | Ninth Century | Chinese | Master Tu Kuang-T'ing |

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# I
# Introduction

*Katherine K. Young*

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

## Judaism

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

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

## Christianity

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

## Islam

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

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

## Hinduism

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



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

## Buddhism

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

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

## Taoism

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

### *The Problem of Naming and Classifying*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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