



## **Religious Genius: Planning Grant**

### **Report on Boston Meeting**

**June 24-26, 2012**

**Presented to the John Templeton Foundation**

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#### **Introduction**

On June 24-26, 2012 the Elijah Interfaith Institute held the first meeting of the “Religious Genius: Planning Grant” project. 14 scholars (listed in Appendix A) attended the three day meeting, held at the Center for the Study of World Religions, at Harvard University. The meeting focused on the project’s core essay, previously circulated, and on a series of responses that project members composed, in advance of the meeting. Participants came to the meeting having read the background essay and the various responses, and were therefore in a position to engage the subject in a focused and sustained way. The group process, prior to and during the meeting, provides a firm foundation for the continuation of the project, having achieved the following:

- A. Overall buy-in into the project’s goals, vision and methodology, as set forth in the concept paper.
- B. Offering critique and suggested revisions of important points in the paper.
- C. Identifying ways of broadening the disciplinary foundations of the project.
- D. Suggestions for projected related activities as part of long-term planning.
- E. Suggesting participants for the next round of work.
- F. Identifying next step of actions for participants in the Boston meeting.

#### **Documentation and the Present Report**

The proceedings of the entire meeting have been recorded, and can be listened to. Written notes were taken by two participants. All these provide the basis for the present report. A synthetic report inevitably highlights some points, while considering others interesting for the moment, but not necessarily part of the long term accumulated memory, which itself is largely shaped by the report. It is acknowledged that it is my best effort to synthesize proceedings and to retain for the project’s future key points of our discussion. As the editorial process is necessarily subjective, inasmuch as it reflects my own understanding, I do invite project members to respond to any inaccuracies they feel the report may suffer from.

The present report will not replicate the entire proceedings, available elsewhere, but highlight key areas that I consider to be accomplishments of the meeting. I will offer, in the main, synthetic summaries of discussions, wherein multiple voices are integrated into a paragraph or a position. Points will be brought in bullet point, and the sequence in which they are brought does not always



suggest their relative importance. Points will be brought without mentioning who the contribution derives from, an expression of the collective wisdom, engendered by our project. Only where a sustained discussion was devoted to a thesis or contribution of one of the participants will I refer to the thesis by reference to the participant's name.

I shall group the various contributions according to subject headings, preferring a conceptual presentation of our discussions over a chronological report.

## **Recognizing the Potential Contribution of our Project**

- *A project of translation.* This project may be considered a project of translation on two levels. First, between different communities, who can through this translation better listen to each other. Second, it is a project of translation between religion and others. How extensive the translation project could become will depend on our ability to integrate additional disciplines into our project.
- *The intuitive appeal of genius.* Genius is implicitly admirable, though not in a religious way, which is precisely why using it can be beneficial to a discourse on religious figures. Genius has an aesthetic component, recognizing brilliance and making it intuitively admirable. Genius has the potential to serve as corrective to public image of religion.
- *Improving the image of religion.* What is particular to our project, in relation to most existing saint-studies, is the attempt to approach our subject on a first order basis: what is it to be a saint or religious genius (henceforth: RG)? First order questions concerning the nature of RG, its experience and reality, as distinct from its sociological or historical expressions, also suggest theological interest. Allowing us to engage core theological and religious issues, as refracted through this specific lens, could contribute to improving the image of religion among the wider public. In fact, it could suggest a way of being religious that is an alternative to much of how religion is commonly perceived. This allows us to present exemplary religion, as opposed to religion as commonly portrayed, especially in the media. It allows a deeper and more sophisticated approach to being religious. It also permits the study of religion to deepen in terms of first order concerns, similar to those that can be found in fields such as history and philosophy.
- *Deeper appreciation of what it means to be human and religious.* We come to this project with the intuitive sense that certain individuals, whether we call them saints or something else, have the capacity to speak across traditions. As human beings, they tell us something about the fullness of living a human life. This is why saints excite us, and why their personalities draw us. They speak to



our common humanity, even if in order to hear their voices we must enter the specificity of their traditions. What they have to tell us is important in an intrareligious and interreligious context. Thus, whatever else we may learn about them, they do teach us something fundamental about what it means to be human. And in so doing, they teach us something fundamental about what it means to be religious.

- *Advancing interfaith relations.* The recognition that the same characteristics that one appreciates in figures from one's own tradition can be recognized in figures of other traditions fosters greater respect. Moreover, this creates an attitude that invites learning from other traditions and their exemplars.
- *Pedagogical benefits - Religious Genius as a point of entry to the study of religion.* We face the continual challenge of introducing students to discussions of religion across traditions in a way that engages them. The study of saints and the exploration of their significance in terms of religious genius holds much promise in this context, a promise born out by participants' experience of focusing on saints in world religions on the introductory level. However, for this notion to work on the introductory class level, we might have to approach the topic less strictly than the model suggests. The concept, as well as the model, would, nevertheless, have great heuristic benefits. It would allow us to engage various individuals, through the lens of religious genius, by asking in what ways is a person who is admired as a paragon for a given religious community worthy of such recognition. For a course to work nowadays, it must be compelling, and the ability to critique and test individuals in light of the model and vice versa can have great appeal. Establishing the model allows us to engage a broad variety of figures, critically, in relation to a defined model (whether defined strictly or loosely). That RG can be problematized is part of what makes the category exciting.

## **Defining Religious Genius in Relation to Saints**

- The category of RG is not identical to the category of saints, broadly construed. Not all saints are religious geniuses, and as will be noted below - not all religious geniuses are saints. RG has cognitive associations, related to knowledge, teaching, understanding and discovery, as these apply to questions that are fundamental to the religious quest and to the historical traditions within which religious geniuses are found, and to their canons. Thus, a religious genius is a sage-saint. In some way, directly or by example, he or she teaches. One looks to the RG for understanding, illumination, wisdom of a high order. What distinguishes RG from the philosopher is the grounding of wisdom and insight in a higher order of reality, a higher state of consciousness. This contrasts with more



common expectations of the saint (who is not a sage), where one looks to the saint for intercession. At times the same personality might provide both functions, but it is often the case that there will be a difference between the ingroup of students who seek the wisdom and the outgroup that seeks the blessings and intercession.

- A RG provides an answer to a question, rather than bringing aid to a situation. The question that is answered may be a collective religious problem, specific to the tradition, or more broader question, relating to the meaning of existence. Because RG in some way addresses the meaning of reality, RG can have appeal across traditions.
- According to this definition, a religious genius may be considered as someone who is innovative in the field of religion, providing solutions to religious problems, or making the teaching of religion more broadly available to others, through how he or she configures or restates the tradition and its teaching, whether in terms of theory or of practice.
- This definition of religious genius in terms of wisdom and cognition also leads us to exclude from our project the long list of messianic leaders who lead revolts against existing orders, even though some aspects of their work and person may be congruent with how we construct the category of “religious genius”. If they are suitable at all for inclusion in our discussions, it is on account of other aspects of their person, not on account of their messianic pretenses.
- This distinction has implications for the kinds of materials to be studied. Recognizing that the RG is the sage-saint, we will be drawn to teachings and to such autobiographical or biographical materials that provide a window unto the unique interior vision of the RG. Miracles and intercessory activities typically are expressed in more stereotypical ways in the hagiographical literature, that is not of major significance for our project.
- The upshot of relating saints to RG is that we are not studying saints as examples of RG. Rather, the focus of our study is religious genius, using saints as examples. With the primary emphasis on RG, our study might open up to the study of religious geniuses who are not saints. Because the primary focus is on RG, this means we will be considering the theological questions as first order questions, rather than many of the second order questions, typically associated with the study of saints.
- One of the implications of focusing on RG, as distinct from saints, is the choice of a category that does not carry the same evaluative associations or weight. The term “saints” carries



with it an evaluative dimension, whereas RG could be considered more descriptive, even if implicitly admirable. In constructing the category of “religious genius” one does not deal with a pre-populated category, that one seeks to make sense of. Rather, one can construct the category so that it is descriptive of specific aspects that one seeks to highlight.

- Entering the domain of knowledge and the mind can lead us to the domain of competing truth claims. In order to maintain the capacity of “religious genius” to speak across traditions we must find the way of recognizing the genius, its universal significance and its broader existential grounding, while bracketing ultimate truth claims.
- In thinking of genius, we are drawn into the realm of achievement of the mind. Reference to saints, by contrast, brings up associations of the person in his/her fullness. This raises the fundamental tension of whether the category of “religious genius” should be constructed purely on intellectual accomplishments (great authors, philosophers, commentators, etc.) or whether there are some fundamental aspects of sainthood that we would wish to carry over to the category of “religious genius”.
- This question could be related to another. Is “religious genius” a genius operating in the field of religion, just as an artistic genius is a genius who operates in the field of art, and a political genius is one whose genius manifests in the field of politics, or is there something particular in the nature of being a *religious* genius. If so, that would lead us to make some fundamental demands in terms of achievements in other dimensions of the person, beyond the purely intellectual or cognitive, in light of which we would consider the person a *religious* genius.
- More particularly, what are our expectations or assumptions in terms of the relational qualities of the RG. Does he or she have a transformative personality? Does he or she show outstanding capacity for human relationships, in terms such as love, compassion, empathy etc.? Two assumptions inform our approach to RG. The first is that the RG excels in the “stuff” of religion, or alternatively stated: is a paragon of religious values. The other is that the RG has what to teach us. Do these dual assumptions lead us to consider that the RG’s teaching has consequences that are broader than the teachings of religion, narrowly defined, and do these include also teachings and models of excellence in the field of human relations?
- A working assumption of our project is that the cognition of the RG is often grounded in a transformed state of awareness. As a function of this broader awareness (see below on porous ego boundaries), the RG exhibits extraordinary capacity for identifying with others and of loving or otherwise living for others.



- The tension between cognitive, on the one hand, and moral and relational dimension, on the other, in the person of the RG, plays itself out in relation to what might be called the “flawed religious genius”. Flaws, ostensibly, would not relate to his or her genius, as far as the more cognitive dimensions are concerned, but rather to the relation between these dimensions and aspects of the person typically associated with sainthood. Whether moral or relational imperfections, we would need to consider whether the “flawed religious genius” could sustain a greater degree of imperfection than the “flawed saint”. While we could construct a category that assumes a great degree of perfection on both fronts, our discussion of a broad range of personalities, listed below, does problematize the possibility of limiting “religious genius” to only those individuals who were extremely saintly and who attained great perfection, in all aspects of RG as spelled out in the model described in the concept paper. The tension between the “saint” and “genius” dimensions of the RG will thus need to be tested out with reference to a large base of case studies, as we seek to apply the category in ways that are contiguous with application of “genius” in other fields, while continuing to appeal to a broader range of perfections, usually associated with “saints”.
- A final methodological concern, regarding saints and RG. In studying saints we note that different patterns may govern the lives of men and women saints. How does gender awareness impact our approach to religious genius?

### **The Particularity of Religious Genius**

- We may consider the following a working definition of religious genius: the capacity of applying intuition and intellect to bringing about new understanding, grounded in awareness of a broader existential dimension, of reality, that leads to deep transformation of the person. The new understanding offered by the religious genius provides creative and constructive solutions, for solving religious and spiritual problems, usually within the framework of a particular community or tradition. A religious genius will accordingly have high positive output, effectively addressing challenges and issues that are fundamental to a tradition, or more universally: to being religious. A religious genius is thus able to accomplish something, by means of his or her special capacities. Accordingly, the RG may be described as having deep comprehension of a field (reality, God, the spiritual life) that results in a transforming discovery or realization that can be shared with others and that has some enduring impact.
- The contribution of the RG may be a creative presentation of the tradition in ways not previously known, rather than the discovery of a new truth. Much of what RG is about is vivid



realization of aspects of reality or of tradition not previously appreciated. This is also a major expression of creativity.

- The creativity of the RG often comes as a response to something problematic. The old ways lose their savor, they don't work any more. Conditions change. The creativity of the RG comes in response to that problematic situation. The problem could be focused intellectually, emotionally or in relation to ritual. Unlike the common saint who ordinarily interprets, according to existing canons, the RG offers new ways of understanding. When old ways of interpretation no longer work, the RG may find new means of engaging tradition or the existential issues it addresses. Example: according to this understanding a figure like Ramana Maharshi might be considered a RG. Ramana taught a path to the discovery of non dualistic truth that one doesn't see previously in the tradition. His method of self inquiry has something creative, innovative. It solves a problem - the problem of self ignorance. Various examples of people seeking for a long time, not finding, and coming to him and discovering that his method works for them, in solving a problem that they couldn't otherwise solve.
- Because RG addresses a problem that is viewed through a contemporary lens, there will always be some interaction between the being and contribution of the RG and the historical and sociological context within which he or she is being appreciated. While our project seeks to address the first order question of what is a RG, in fact who is a RG and what his or her contribution is will also be determined by the historical perspective within which his contribution is appreciated or overlooked (as our discussion of Mani suggested).
- We take as a working assumption that religious geniuses do not exist outside religious traditions. This working assumption can certainly be reexamined as the project unfolds. Several reasons may be brought for this:
  - A. Being a paragon in the field of religion requires association with religion.
  - B. Only religion provides the consistent discipline that would lead to religious genius.
  - C. Religious genius does not stand in a vacuum, but in relation to canon and community, and therefore belongs properly within religious traditions.That being said, we must beware of excluding individuals who do not belong to mainstream traditions. The reformer may also be a form of religious genius, as may be someone who launches a new religion or new religious movement. However, discipline seems fundamental to the life of a religious genius, and sets him or her apart from other forms of personality and other psychological and phenomenological happenings.
- Genius is not simply a gift. It grows in relation to and out of disciplined life, study or practice. The particularity of religious genius is the type of practice, lifestyle and processes associated





with the cultivation and manifestation of genius in the religious field and of the kind of genius that would be described as religious genius. In studying religious geniuses, we must therefore pay attention to the relationship between the overall discipline of their religious lives and the specific manifestation of genius.

- Because RG is found within tradition, we must be careful about how we present the relationship between tradition and innovation. In one way, what makes a RG a genius is the innovative approach or understanding to matters of ultimate importance in the field of religion. The RG offers a fresh perspective on important aspects of reality. On the other, this innovation takes place within tradition. The innovation may be a novel form of communication and articulation of the tradition, rather than a new tradition.

- In order to highlight the uniqueness of the RG, it is useful to distinguish between the RG and the adept. The adept would be the Greek Orthodox practitioner who practices theosis. Advancing along a prescribed path of spiritual transformation does not require genius, inasmuch as it does not require, and likely does not value, innovation and creativity. The adept may thus be a saint, but would not qualify as a religious genius.

- The RG may be presented as situated at a point of confluence, wherein some insight, intuition or understanding is received, and then communicated further along. Genius manifests either at the point of reception or at the point of transmission; usually, there is some important connection between them.

- In thinking of how to construct the category and whom we study, some initial sense governs our choice of how narrowly or how broadly to construct the category. Pitching the category too broadly might make it too diffuse; pitching it too narrowly might exclude figures who might seem, to some, as natural candidates. Our initial working assumption is that we will be constructing the category on the narrower side. Beyond the well defined core, there is room for the flawed religious genius and for various stages of approximation. In this way, not every achievement or innovation qualifies an individual for the category of RG.

- There is some similarity between possession and RG, inasmuch as both are open to something beyond, and both bring forth some cognition or understanding that may transcend processes of discursive thinking. However, meaningful distinction may be drawn between them. Someone who is possessed is not a RG, at least not by virtue of or in the very act of possession. What makes a RG more than a case of possession is the broader framework within which transcending faculties of the person occurs. These include lifestyle, capacity for maintaining or





integrating discursive reasoning, and the efforts required in the application of the quest for wisdom. Consequently, the medium is not a creative transmitter, as the RG is.

- A religious genius would have habits of heart, mind and will that conform to the broader vision of reality that he/she perceives and that consequently define the manner of being and the contribution of the RG in an ongoing manner.
- Recognition of the processes that involve more than rational thinking and the comparison with possession take us back to the original etymology of genius. We recall that the roots of the term genius are Roman, where the genius was the guiding spirit or tutelary deity of the person. Achievements of exceptional individuals were taken as indications of the presence of a powerful genius, who provided the inspiration. To speak of “religious genius” is therefore in some way to return to the originary meaning of the term, recognizing its religious basis.
- It may be argued that in phenomenological terms “religious genius” is really genius par excellence. Considering the dynamics of discipline, effort, intuition, gift and other dynamics associated with genius (see below with reference to Simonton), these may find their fullest expression in the field of religion, inasmuch as only in religion is there a conscious and intentional effort to approach the field of the beyond and to integrate it consciously, as something that could produce genius. Thus, rather than concentrating on the various activities or fields of life, wherein genius is manifested, in religion we find concentration on the core processes and orientations that can be said to be operative in other fields.
- While the *religious* dimension of RG leads to including in the profile of the RG dimensions that are not part of the common definition of ordinary genius (love, altruism, humility etc.), these aspects can also be considered as fundamental to religious genius. They grow out of a recognition that consciousness and insight are grounded in the fullness of vision of reality and in the overall advancement of the person, in moral and religious terms. They also express the recognition that the various aspects that are related to perfection (love, altruism etc.) find their fullest expression through a practice of life and awareness, found primarily within religion, wherein perfection of these qualities is related to the same kind of openness to the beyond that characterizes the person of the genius. If genius involves opening up beyond yourself, the various characteristics of RG are similarly based on shifting of self, and of applying the self as vehicle for action beyond the self. This originary notion of genius would then find expression in relation to love, humility etc. If so, these qualities are not simply “add-ons” of *religious* genius to a core notion of genius, but rather core expressions of genius



in the fullest sense, that can only be realized within the practice and discipline of the religious or spiritual life.

- We have noted above that the RG shows an extraordinary capacity for loving and living for others. It would seem this is a particularity of RG, where a more total demand or achievement is envisioned, compared with other expressions of genius.
- We might go as far as considering a notion of genius of love, that is: an interpretation of the higher meaning of reality expressed through a life of love and a way of being in the world (rather than through a teaching). Amma Amritanananda Mayi, who could surely be described as a saint, may be considered in terms of religious genius, thus defined.
- A religious genius does not simply understand. He or she also does. Theoretical knowledge is put into practice, whether for others or in his or her own life. Thus, the cognitive element is complemented by the generative aspect, wherein insight finds expression in the life of the genius and in the lives of others.
- RG must be understood in relation to the goal of tradition and its attainment. Thus, with reference to theistic traditions we might ask whether only someone who has a powerful encounter with God (or reality, in the case of other traditions) would qualify for religious genius. Alternatively, the quality of the journey and its intentionality might suffice for the attribution of RG. In part, this question touches on how broadly or narrowly we construct the category. In part, it also raises the question of how to view saintly figures who struggled with the question of divine presence in their life (consider Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and consider the possibility of time bound absences of divine presence). The test case here might be the philosopher as religious genius. How much we insist on active knowledge or presence of God would determine our view of the philosopher as RG.

### **The Model - How to Construct, How to Apply**

The model presented in the concept paper may be considered the core of the paper, for here we find a suggestion concerning how RG might be recognized and what makes it unique. It is through the model that we approach the first order questions that are particular to this project.

- By means of the model we seek to attain a greater degree of understanding and precision. Application of the model allows us to identify religious genius across traditions. It also allows us to



exclude from our discussion personalities that lack essential and common attributes, and who are nevertheless held up as models, leaders or sources of influence within individual traditions.

- List of attributes. It was suggested that the list is not sufficiently comprehensive, and that we might draw forth from the lives of saints additional features that are not adequately represented in the model's first iteration. Once it is recognized that we must go beyond the initial listing of core attributes, we must remain open to further expansion of the characteristics of RG. Thus, as additional scholars and further figures are brought into dialogue with our project, we will remain open to expanding the list of attributes associated with RG. At the other extreme, scholars who are brought into the project might be able to whittle down the list of attributes.

One of the advantages of having a large set of characteristics that can be correlated is that we avoid the dangers of limiting sources of multiple traditions into the conceptual framework made available by conducting our research in English. Issues that are overlooked in the history of translation may emerge through using multiple dimensions in our model of RG.

The following characteristics were suggested in the course of our discussions as supplements to the model, bringing the number of recognized characteristics up to ten.

A. *Freedom from greed.* Considering greed a fundamental expression of desire, that in turn leads to manifold expressions of activity and that interacts with various aspects of the person, freedom from greed emerges as an important attribute of the saint. Greed includes greed for fame and power. Flawed genius is related to failure to check greed, hence corruption. Expanded awareness is also centerdness in satisfaction, hence overcoming the various forms of greed.

B. Many traditions emphasize the importance of *annihilation of the ego* for the saint. This offers us a complementary perspective to the concept paper's emphasis on humility.

C. *Excellence in the form of the discipline practiced.* Spiritual cultivation and discipline play an important role in many traditions in leading to an expanded sense of reality. In some cases this is integrated into trackable spiritual evolution, such as in various itineraries and ladders of spiritual progression. But achieving some kind of excellence, either in the process or as a consequence of having reached the goal (sainthood; RG), is very common. Forms of discipline may vary according to the type of religion practiced. In some it might be more like emptying oneself of intentions and agencies and being open to spontaneous filling (some eastern traditions). Spontaneity itself may function both as a critique of a certain kind of discipline and as a kind of discipline in and of itself (consider the Baal Shem Tov). In any event, these various forms may be considered expressions of intentionality, manifesting in a focused process and in some expression of discipline. (Note relationship between discipline and purification, already in the model; note also that the notion of gift could qualify the aspect of effort and exertion, associated with discipline). Even if the notion of grace is recognized as a factor in saint making, the application of the insight and the practice in the saint's life that follow



require some aspect of discipline. One additional way of considering excellence in the practice of religion is to refer to supererogatory behaviour.

D. Different traditions have a way of expressing a *particular quality of the saint's heart*. A saint's heart is like butter (Tulasidasa), liquid (Cure of Ars), open to others, responsive to their suffering, capable of transforming others through the quality of a heart that has transformed a natural hardness, associated with ego boundaries. The deeply cultivated heart is a nurturing presence for others.

- Studies of individual lives will allow us to determine whether all characteristics are required, as part of the profiling of a RG, or whether there are some minimal characteristics that are essential to the RG, while others may be found in relation to some saints, but not others. This will also allow us to assess the possibility of a flawed religious genius. Our discussions suggest that a figure like Martin Luther might be an appropriate case to study, in this context.
- This would lead us to consider what might be essential traits, and what might be possible traits, that in their aggregate allow us to recognize religious genius. Differences between saints, who may be quite dissimilar in character, would then be accounted for by means of family resemblance. The traits associated with saints and religious geniuses would then be broken down to fundamental traits that would be expected of any religious genius and traits that are related to various saints, using the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance.  
To speak of a family resemblance is to suggest saint-making characteristics. These are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. What puts someone into the category of a saint or a RG is that all these people together are distinguishable from those outside. Thus, no individual is necessarily distinguishable in the respect to which that individual qualifies as distinct from another. However, the group as a whole would be distinguishable from any group outside.
- To speak of family resemblance brings us to the possibility of religious genius being a group phenomenon, and not simply an individual achievement. Accordingly, we might ask what are the conditions under which a group of geniuses might emerge. External circumstances or environmental pressures could lead to the emergence of such a group, within which diversity and variety could exist, in accordance with the notion of family resemblance.
- In considering which traits are essential, love and expanded awareness may be considered common and fundamental to all. Consideration of what might be essential characteristics of RG is one of the focal points of the future project.
- With reference to love and its centrality in the model, it is important to highlight that love does not apply simply to the ingroup, but is more extensive. Following Jonathan Haidt's theory of



moral foundations, coupled with a view of axial age religions, one may argue that what the great axial age religions achieved was to relativize the markers of the ingroup. Accordingly, it must be emphasized that in using love in our model we refer to this broader sense of universal love.

- In understanding how the model works, we can think of the various traits as common, rather than essential, traits of sainthood and RG. This will allow us to consider the presence of traits across traditions, while identifying any number of combination as adequate for purposes of sainthood.
- The model thus allows us to construct what might be thought of as “the varieties of sainthood”, assuming that not all saints or religious geniuses will have all qualities, certainly not in equal force. It allows us to appreciate the greatness of those individuals who combine the different dimensions of the model.
- In looking at the model and its components, we should include the internal arguments and reasoning of traditions for why the traits of the model are virtues, that would lead us to recognize individuals as saints or religious geniuses. The traits and characteristics that make up the model allow us to consider perfection in a theoretical way that transcends legendary and hagiographical aspects, associated with figures of old.
- In thinking of the different components of the model, we should seek to understand not only the various components of the model, but also their interconnections. Therefore a longer list of characteristics will allow more potential connections and relationships between the various components to emerge. These connections could be appreciated both from traditional sources and from the insight offered by various scientific disciplines that are brought into dialogue with our project. Recognizing the patterns and relationships between the different dimensions, we could then ask scientists for their understanding of the causal relations between these dimensions.

### **General Points for Consideration**

- We ought to maintain awareness of some of the difficult, even shadow, sides, associated with saintliness, and possibly with RG. To take a noted example, St. Theresa of Avila lives her greatest ecstatic moments in periods of illness. Illness, difficulty, unusual behaviour, repulsive behaviour, can all come to expression in the lives of saints. What are associations of this with genius in general and with religious genius specifically?



- Due to some of the eccentric or difficult aspects of saints' lives, one has always sought a balance between appreciating and admiring the saints and imitating them. Saints do not serve as full blown models for imitation. Some saints, or some aspects of individual saints' lives, are not imitable. How does this carry over into RG? While the processes associated with genius cannot be imitated, the teaching aspect of genius suggests some dimension of repeatability, or carryover, into lives of others. Moreover, important aspects of the teaching delivered by religious geniuses seeks to repeat the processes of attaining insight and understanding and the practice and approach to wisdom within the framework of a community and its canon in the lives of other members of the community. Thus, testing out imitability and inimitability in the lives of saints and in the lives of candidates for "religious genius" is an important dimension of future study of individual figures.
- The imitability of religious genius is a core concern. How do we conceive of the tension between the "admiranda" and the "imitanda", those who can only be admired, as contrasted with those who can be imitated. How does this tension relate to instances of genius in other domains?
- How do we study figures taken as divine (incarnations, avatars, etc.) within their traditions? On the one hand, RG allows us to engage these figures from a broader, non faith-committed perspective. However, for their believers, these individuals are beyond the typical human categories and processes associated with genius. At the very least this would have implications for the availability of material for study and reference, inasmuch as the tradition might preserve and shape the memory of these individuals in accordance with its view of such individuals as divine, and therefore as "non-human" or "other-than-purely-human" in important ways. These figures pose a particular problem with reference to discipline, as in many instances their lives are not portrayed as the consequence of the application of discipline. Consequently, they are less imitable, inasmuch as imitability relies heavily on the disciplinary dimension of the lives of saints. They represent what we can't even aspire to become through our disciplined efforts.
- Can religious genius find group or collective expression or is it a purely an individual matter? How would this contrast with other forms of genius? As noted in Gellman's responses to the concept paper, and as noted by several people in our discussion, one may cite various historical instances of group genius, that should be considered as part of developing the notion of religious genius.

## **A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Project**



- *Integrating existing concepts into notion of RG.* Alongside concepts and categories echoing classical approaches to religion (whether articulated in the traditions or in research on the traditions), understanding RG should also incorporate tools and perspectives developed by other methodologies. Psychology offers us several helpful notions, by means of which we might approach RG:

A. Permeable or expansive ego boundaries. One way of approaching the particularity of saints and of religious genius, and possibly of other kinds of genius as well, is by reference to ego boundaries (James). Saints and religious geniuses will show a capacity for extending the boundaries of their egos in a way that suggests not only deep empathy for others, but recognition of coextensiveness with reality or significant aspects of it. Thus, the usual division between what is experienced as within yourself and what is experienced as outside yourself may not apply in the case of these individuals.

B. Somatic intelligence. The knowledge and understanding of a RG may follow different procedures, allowing the RG to feel, intuit or otherwise know things in ways that go beyond discursive intelligence. Knowing through the body and the nervous system play into alternative forms of knowing.

C. IQ would remain one of the factors to take into account, as we weigh the genius of religious genius.

D. The capacity to move from one type of intelligence to another, (intellect to body intelligence) in what might be termed, following Eugene Gendlin, “cross and dip”. Question - could this capacity be the marker of the religious genius, because RG cultivates it consciously. Does the spiritual domain allow for greater integration of the various intelligences.

- *Advancing conversation with the scientific community.*

A. The broader the interdisciplinary base from which our project is carried out, the more efficacious our project will be in terms of translating fundamental religious realities to other communities. Multiple disciplines may be considered multiple channels of translation.

B. The significance of broadening the interdisciplinary base of the project is that it provides another means of suggesting interconnectedness between the components or aspects of RG. We can consider interconnectedness historically, philosophically and possibly through the influence of one tradition on another. Different sciences may offer further corroboration for the interconnectedness of different parts of our model.

C. In talking with scientists we should not only ask for how they interpret our data, but also request their input into how they would advance the conversation. This initial conversation should take place already at this point, and the history of this conversation (as distinct from its outcomes) could point the way to how the larger project might be constructed.





D. In terms of scientific disciplines we might wish to engage, these include the range of disciplines that have been part of the science-religion conversation. We might present the project to them and ask where our research might be helped by the social and biological sciences. While we recognize there is a tradition within psychological studies that defines genius, we are not tied to it as the exclusive scientific frame of reference.

E. In terms of method, one could take our list of traits, described based on data of religious traditions, and present it to specialists in other disciplines, querying them as to the tools and theories they might have available to them to account for these phenomena. This could be carried out in dialogue with psychologists, neuro-scientists, social psychologists, sociologists and social anthropologists. Increasing interest in cognitive science might provide fruitful receptivity for our project. We might, however, be in a situation that what we describe may be beyond the tools available to some or all of these disciplines. This approach should be carried out as part of the eventual large project.

F. Finally, We need to be mindful and in dialogue with Howard Gardner's 9th category, his existential intelligence, as our project comes into dialogue with social scientists.

- *Parallel neutral identification of traits and characteristics of sainthood.* In thinking through the categories that describe what different traditions consider as appropriate to saints and RGs, we might consider conducting neutral testing, through a questionnaire, identifying what members of different traditions consider as characteristics of sainthood. This would provide us with a more neutral basis for the hypothesis that saints can be studied across traditions. A social science survey could be part of the eventual grant proposal. Our role as religious studies scholars would be to interpret the data. The model would be to turn to a large group, such as university chaplains, or other large and diverse bodies of educated religious, present them with a small number of figures they recognize and then pose the guiding question - what makes these people extraordinary. The results will tend to cluster and point to core configurations of sainthood. These can then be compared with our model, suggesting oversights and complements, ways of modifying our model and pointing to the overall usefulness of our project as a means of translating across traditions. For practical reasons it seems advisable to leave this kind of research for the larger grant, even though it would be beneficial to have its outcome inform our work already at this stage. Also, it would require great care to formulate the questionnaire in such a way that minimizes error, while maximizing the chances that the figures under discussion are known and recognized to participants.

## **Dialogue with Simonton**



Our conversations were informed by the work of Dean Keith Simonton on genius. Simonton, who had signed up to be a member of our project, had prepared background materials and discussion questions for our meeting. Unable to attend the meeting himself, and with uncertainty as to his continuing involvement with our project, we sought to nevertheless remain mindful of his work on genius and to maintain a dialogue between it and our own efforts to construct the category of “religious genius”. This dialogue took into account his contributions to our project as well as his summary work, *Genius 101* (Springer Publications, 2009).

Simonton also prepared a questionnaire that would allow us to reflect on religious genius in light of what is known about genius. Working through this questionnaire led us to conclude that indeed religious genius does have a broad common denominator with genius, but it is pitched in a different mode. Contributors to the next phase of the project will be asked to consider the subjects of their study also in relation to this questionnaire.

The following points emerged, with reference to Simonton’s work, in the course of our meeting:

- Speaking of our project in broad strokes, we may suggest that our findings are broadly congruent with his. One relevant issue is the relationship of genius and tradition. For Simonton, genius is not avataric individual enlightenment that comes without cultural and societal matrix. Our own recognition that genius is expressed from or within tradition and that it is in some way a restatement of tradition in a fresh way is fully in line with Simonton’s findings.
- Attainment of excellence of the RG involves discipline, at times asceticism. Simonton would argue that there is a 10 year learning curve for any genius to master the particular techniques and disciplines. The genius’ personality is thus a focus-oriented personality. For religious traditions, discipline consists of learning the discipline well enough to then be able to give yourself totally.
- The combination of discipline and usefulness makes for creativity. This insight may apply for RG as well as for any kind of genius, notwithstanding the fact that some religious geniuses seem to require less discipline and have a greater natural talent (these, however, may develop other forms of practice that may be recognized as a form of discipline as well). Originality is not sufficient for genius. Genius manifests creativity, that is useful for others. Community plays an important role in determining what is useful and of enduring significance. Usefulness for others opens up to the value of tradition and to the test of time, by means of which the religious genius is appreciated.
- In looking at the tension between first order and second order considerations of sainthood, that is: what it is to be a saint and how society appreciates the saint, we are aided by recognition that



genius too has a social, historiometric, perspective, complementing the personal psychometric dimension.

- Withstanding the test of time. Historiometric study assumes withstanding the test of time as a means of identifying genius. While there is some arbitrariness to this, and while it could lead to the exclusion of individuals who on other counts might be described as religious geniuses, it allows us to identify genius in a more systematic way. The same would be particularly true in the case of religious traditions, where the test of time is an important component by means of which traditions recognize genius. For our purposes, endurance plays an important role in determining the long term enrichment of a given RG to his/her tradition and to humanity.
- Our discussion of group genius has affinities with his work, that could support the notion of group genius, at least up to a limit. Simonton cites studies of small group dynamics and their impact on the generation of ideas and on what he considers to be genius. He would likely agree that hassidic study groups and sufi orders are conducive to the production of genius. Certain societies foster genius. Pluralism and diversity of opinion foster more geniuses. That is broadly in line with what we note in the field of religion.
- One important difference between the RG and genius in other aspects of life might be the moral dimension. Typically, a genius is measured in terms of success and contribution. By contrast, RG, being a paragon, a sign of excellence in the religious domain, cannot be considered independently of the moral dimension. In accounting for imperfections we may have to adopt the notion of a flawed saint or RG, but we cannot completely ignore the moral dimension and concentrate exclusively on the cognitive or creative contribution of the RG.

### **Candidates for Discussion of Religious Genius**

Discussion of the following figures informed discussions at the Boston meeting. Many of these figures are candidates for deeper study as the project advances.

Andal

Ramanuja

Vivekananda

Mose sofer

Tich Nat Hanh

Amma - Amritananda Mayima



Thomas Merton

Gandhi

Plotinus

Theresa of Avila

Mother Theresa

Bin laden (by way of contrast and exclusion)

Ramana Maharshi

Joseph Smith

Mary Baker Eddy

Mani

Martin Luther

Martin Luther King

Sabbetai Zevi

### **Next Steps - Assignments and Invitations**

- Our model will be checked in several ways:
  - A. We have a second set of characteristics (ego boundaries etc.) that scientists can engage.
  - B. Our model will be brought into comparison with 10 (or more) case studies. Authors will be asked not only how our model relates to their subject matter, but also how they might construct the model differently, and what other attributes they would put in it.
  - C. Scientists will be asked how they would design a conversation that would take this further.
  - D. For the 100 cases, or larger project, these different conversations will be integrated, possibly opening them up further.
- Identifying subject matter. We recognize that where possible, it is best to study cases where we can study the subject's own self expression, by means such as letters, poetry, diaries and autobiographical writings. Similarly, contemporary recording of conversations provides us with a good perspective on the subject.
- Possible subjects for study and suggested authors, broken down by religion. The following names have been mentioned for the project. Asterisk before the name suggests a decision has been reached concerning this author, or that this author will be approached for purposes of our project.



## Hindu

\*Shirdi Sai Baba, Carley mclean.

Extreme Anger . On Anandamayi ma, good scholarly biography.

\* Ramana maharishi. Osborne's biography. Paul brunton and arthur osborne. Recently a life of ramana. John briens, the crown jewel of advaita. Rambachan will write on him.

Ramakrishna. Narasinga silh. Written more controversial works. More humanizing. Tyagananda.

Namalvar - . Someone did a biography of archana venkatesan did on Andal.

\*Amanda Huffer - darshan in a hotel ballroom on ammachi

\* Vasu is willing to do namalvar or andal

\* Tulasi Srinivas did biography of Satya Sai Baba

## Jewish

\* Dov Schwartz on rav kook

\* Idel on Besht

\*Wolfson on the Rebbe

\* Zvi mark on r. Nachman

## Muslim

\*Robert Rosenall, wrote a book called 3 sufis of the chishti lineage in pakistan. Islamic sufism unbound.

\* Sayid Nursi as a figure, but only Cornell thus far identified to write on him. Need further consultation.

\*Imam Jazulli fits the model. Not only though his sufi influence, but also movement of liberation of morocco from portugese. Created the ideology under which kings rule the day. Also political genius. Cornell will write.

\*Rumi will be done by Carl Ernst.

\* For Al Arabi, Chitttik, Ibn farid. Emil homerin. Better yet - Jim Morris from Boston College.

## Buddhism

\* Dahwe zungao, invented koan zen. Also writes autobiographically. Levering has written about him.

\* Cheng Yen, discussed by Julia Huang in Charisma and Compassion.



Tich Nat Hahn's genius in being able to communicate to westerners. Doesn't teach vietnamese Buddhism. No one written on him.

- \* The greatest who has an autobiography. Hakuim. Studied by norman wadell, translated. Kilazawa manchi. Fits out model. Died relatively young. Devoted himself and wrote his understanding of the religious life in a way that was intensely personal and passionate and inspiring to the young people of pure land B. Founded a school to revive pure land. Would need to find someone who has worked on him.
- \* Invite reggie ray to respond to our project.!!!

Christian

- \* Amy Hollywood, editor of the new cambridge companion on xtian saints. Invite her to choose figure
  - \*John henry Newman. Ian ker at oxford.
  - \*Padre pio. Chris Stawski working on him.
  - \*Peter Brown. Invite to do Augustine. Aware of our project.
  - \*Barbara newman, kieckhefers wife, on hildegard.
  - \*Kieckhefer, on figure of his choice. Maybe revisit Catherine of Sienna in his *Unquiet Souls*.
  - \* Martin Marty, on Luther
- Bernard G. A. Evans at oxford. Autobiographical materials in the sermons.
- John mcguckin on orthodox saints. Cyril, gregory,

For dialogue and joining our project

Ann Taves, working on cognitive sciences and religious studies

John Dunne, from Emory



## Appendix A: Participants at Boston Meeting

Vincent Cornell, Emory University

Jerome Gellman, Ben Gurion University

Robert Neville, Boston University

Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University

Vasudha Narayanan, University of South Florida

Anantand Rambachan, St. Olaf's College

Miriam Leverning, University of Tennessee

Stephen Butler Murray, Endicott College

Nicholas Zanetti, Boston University

Meir Sender, Young Israel of Sharon

Carl Enrst, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Alon Goshen-Gottstein, The Elijah Interfaith Institute

## Additional Respondents to Project's lead essay

Richard Kieckhefer

Dean Keith Simonton