

Religious Genius

The Interreligious Study of Saints and its Potential for the Academy and the Community

Project Description and Conceptual Essay

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The world today needs saints, new saints, saints of genius (Simone Weil)

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1. Introduction - A History of Project to Date

Two years ago, I approached the John Templeton Foundation, seeking its support for a project geared at studying saints in world religions, with a particular emphasis on the benefits of such study for the interreligious world. In dialogue with the Templeton Foundation, we set out to explore the usefulness of a novel category - “religious genius”, for the purposes of research, study and dialogue activities that could take place with reference to outstanding individuals who are considered the ideals of their respective religions. An initial concept paper was presented to the Foundation. It was received with enthusiasm and led to a planning grant that is now in its second year. The purpose of this grant is to engage relevant stake holders - scholars, religious leaders, universities and others - in the planning of a larger grant that would feature saints across religions under the rubric of “religious genius”. About two dozen scholars (listed in Appendix 5) have taken part in this process, through papers contributed and two conferences that were held. Educational and community oriented activities have also taken part, especially in a city-wide project involving local religious communities and leadership in Oxford. The sum total of these activities has advanced the original vision significantly and has led to extensive revision of the original concept paper. What is presented in this document is a synthesis of the project to date. Maintaining key ideas from the original concept paper, it suggests new emphases, new methodological foci and a program of action, all of which could not have been imagined when I set out on this project. I am truly grateful to all those who have taken part in the project. Each one of their voices has contributed in some significant way to the present articulation of the concept and the vision.

The present iteration of the concept paper seeks to synthesize dozens of voices and papers within the framework of the original concept paper. While I think it is a fair summary of where our project has come, and while I think it gives voice to all the key ideas that emerged in the course of our planning work, I am under no illusion as to the possibility of achieving full unanimity within the framework of a group project. I therefore hasten to clarify that at the end of the day this is *my* synthesis of our group project, and ultimately it is I who bear responsibility for the ideas put forth in this concept paper. I have, nevertheless, attempted to indicate where group process has come and where my own individual perspective is expressed by distinguishing first person singular and plural voices.

That this version of the concept paper incorporates two conferences and many papers into what was originally a self-standing paper accounts for some unevenness in style. The reader is asked to excuse the fact that some parts are more heavily footnoted than others, that some use bullet point while others offer a more sustained argument and that the paper may have some minor repetitions. These are the inevitable result of the rich processes that are the background of the present iteration of the concept paper. I do believe that at least in conceptual terms we have not produced a theological or academic “camel” (i.e., a horse created by a committee).

This version of the concept paper is prepared for what is yet another round of reaching out to prospective stake holders and partners. We anticipate about 50 more readers will have the opportunity to comment on various aspects of the paper and the project. These will inform the final version of the paper, but more importantly - the eventual proposal to be submitted to the John Templeton Foundation, for a multi-year research and education project.

I would like to thank the next cycle of readers for their comments and hopefully for their buy-in to the project and look forward to the conversation advancing. I hope that I and other project members can engage them in dialogue around these issues, with the hope of establishing concrete partnerships and channels for disseminating this project and advancing its research and educational agendas.

I conclude by expressing my profound gratitude to the John Templeton Foundation, and particularly to Chris Stawski, for their open minded and engaged partnership and for their support - much more than financial - in advancing a challenging, but truly inspiring, agenda.

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2. Overview and Introduction of Project

2.1 Introducing the Area of Study

All religions recognize there are outstanding individuals, whose spiritual insight, presence and power by far surpass those of others. These individuals help create, define, drive, reform and inspire their traditions. To a large extent they are the models that provide the basis for emulation for others and they are the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestation, in the lives of humans.

Historically, most religions have tended to appreciate only those exceptional individuals who have contributed to their own traditions' formation. While on the popular level there has often been some mix of cults, in seeking blessings from individuals who belong to other traditions, the fuller appreciation of special religious individuals has been limited to members of one's own tradition.

The present project seeks to engage the topic of these special individuals from a perspective that is broader than just the individual faith perspective. In part, this is informed by the recognition that in an interreligious age, we must be open to study and to be inspired by the finest models that other traditions can provide. Without such openness, we are missing out on true appreciation of what other religious traditions are and what they have to offer. From a different perspective, the study of such individuals is important because it allows us to approach them as part of the study of the meaning of the fullness of being human and of human potential. From this perspective we are invited to consider what such unique individuals are, how they function, and what they contribute to society, in a way that cuts across the different religious traditions, and draws on them all. Thus, both for purposes of our knowledge and understanding of what it means to be human and for purposes of advancing relations between religions in today's world, the study of exceptional individuals in the field of religion holds great promise.

2.2 Revisiting "Saints", Introducing "Religious Genius"

Throughout history and throughout the literature, the individuals under discussion have been known by many names and titles, reflecting their various offices. The categories overlap and their use is usually neither exclusive nor rigorous. The names by which these individuals have been known or referred to include: prophets, founders, mystics, saints, heroes, religious virtuosos and more. Categories vary, either in accordance with a tradition's internal structures or theological conceptualization, or in accordance with the scientific theory that provides the framework for viewing these individuals. Categories are to a large degree a matter of convention, and their significance is ultimately a function of the measure to which they are helpful in enhancing understanding and advancing discussion. The present project is founded upon the creation, rather the expansion and development, of one particular category, that of "religious genius". Accordingly,

the test for its usefulness will lie in the degree to which it allows us to revisit existing issues, to offer new perspectives and to provide new approaches to problems that have not been dealt with in the past, adequately or at all.

The category of religious genius cuts across many of the categories that presently serve in the literature. Nevertheless, by far, most of the potential “inhabitants” of this category presently “occupy” the category of “saints.” Consequently, our project will impact the understanding and application of that category the most. Therefore “saints” will provide us with a starting point, by means of which to approach the topic, even as we seek to transcend and replace that category, with “religious genius”.

2.3 The Aims of the Project

The project seeks to build up the category of “religious genius” as a category that can advance conversation on issues related to extraordinary religious personalities, beyond where previous discussion of ‘saints’ has gone. It is acknowledged that “religious genius” is a category that must be constructed, and its meaning and potential will only become apparent once scholars of different faith traditions and different academic disciplines have explored its viability, usefulness and advantages. The project is presently at a stage where it offers a working definition that allows the project to move forward, while leaving room for modifications to the concept.

With the new category, new insight into these individuals may be obtained. This insight opens up appreciation and admiration of these individuals also to members of other faith traditions. It allows us to appreciate these individuals - within their traditions and between traditions - in ways that ‘saints’ might not. The project seeks to make the study and appreciation of “religious genius” available to the community at large, and to the interreligious community in particular. While highlighting what is inspiring, admirable and worthy of emulation in these individuals, it seeks to do so in a way that is founded upon rigor and academic discipline. It therefore seeks to enrich not only the public perception of these individuals but also to create a category that can enrich and inform their academic study. The following sections present, accordingly:

A. Initial perspectives on what is a religious genius.

B. The possible advantages of the use of “religious genius” compared to conventional use of “saints”.

C. A range of benefits that this project can have in the Academy and in the community.

D. The self awareness of the project, as it situates itself in a unique position between the worlds of faith and the scientifically oriented study of exceptional individuals. Differently put, the project straddles the domains of theology and religious studies, and does so consciously, attempting to be responsible to the complex challenge at hand.

2.4 What is a Religious Genius - Preliminary Pointers

- The category of “religious genius” may be considered a species of the larger genus of extraordinary religious personalities. In thinking of this category we include both the subjective aspects of spiritual excellence and interior achievements and the outward expressions of transformation and creativity within traditions.
- The category of RG is not identical to the category of saints, broadly construed. Not all saints are religious geniuses, and, depending on how the category is constructed, it may be that not all religious geniuses are saints.
- It is recognized that speaking naturally there is no such thing as “religious genius”. There is no definition that emerges unequivocally from data across religions, by means of which we could establish what religious genius is.
- Not only is “religious genius” not a natural category, it is also not one that the subjects would readily identify with. The subjects of our study might not recognize themselves in these terms. Nor does the category grow out of common uses of religious communities. This does not, however, detract from the usefulness of the category for our purposes. Theoretical language does not always reflect natural language. In fact, that we might use a category that is not indigenous to any particular religion could be considered an advantage. This is the case with other categories in the study of religion, such as “charisma”.
- Religious genius 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 a 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 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, as well as to poetry and other ways in which the religious genius has been creative. Miracles and intercessory activities typically are expressed in more stereotypical ways in the hagiographical literature, that is not of major significance for our project.
- As stated, a religious genius is not simply a great philosopher or theologian. His or her teaching is grounded in their being and in the spiritual recognition that comes from gaining access to a higher form of reality, understood variously by different traditions. Consequently, we seek a greater degree of perfection, integration and a variety of personality traits from the religious genius, more akin to the saint than to the philosopher. Even if not all religious geniuses are of a kind, we have certain expectations or assumptions in terms of the relational qualities of the RG. We tend to find the religious genius with a transformative personality, showing outstanding capacity for human relationships, in terms such as love, compassion, empathy. Thus, the RG excels in the “stuff” of religion, or alternatively stated: is a paragon of religious values. Complementing that, he or she has what to teach us.
- Differently put: 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 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, a broader construction of the category would leave room for the “flawed religious genius”.¹

¹During our meetings, various test cases were considered as suitable for the category. Given that our category has heuristic value, in teaching and approaching religion, it may not be imperative to reach

- While both “religious” and “genius” may be deconstructed in ways that highlight their problematics, they do help us address our subject matter better than saint, mystic or other categories. “Religious genius” allows us to offer an analysis that cuts across multiple categories used previously (founder, reformer etc.), thereby bringing new insight.² The individuals under discussion are known by a variety of specific categories in different traditions. Rather than identify “religious genius” with any existing category, it can function as a meta-category, an umbrella category, incorporating under it multiple categories.

The ways in which “religious genius” differs from “saints” are noted in the following section and provide further precision to our notion of religious genius.

2.5 The Advantages of “Religious Genius” over “Saints”

Discourse is often shaped by the conventions of a culture. This is true for religious as well as for academic culture. Given the prominence of Christian culture in the formation of the academic study of religion, the exceptional individuals we seek to study have been studied mainly under the rubric of “saints”. As the survey of the literature in Appendix 1 suggests, discussion of saints, even when it refers to religious figures of other traditions, is conceptually indebted to the Christian discussion of saints. Other than the standards and criteria used by the Church in proclaiming its saints, there is not in existence any typology, profile, or attempt to identify the traits and characteristics of such individuals. Such a typology should grow out of a study of the religious individuals of all traditions. Both in terms of terminology and in terms of substance, it is useful to approach the topic from a fresh perspective, that owes meaningfully to all religions, and that offsets the heavily Christian parameters of existing discourse on saints and holy people.

Our project seeks to build up the category of “religious genius” as a category that can advance conversation on issues related to extraordinary religious personalities, beyond where previous

finality on this question. One notable test case, that illustrates well the tension between the “genius” and the “perfect” component, is that of Martin Luther King Jr.

² Looking at the literature, one finds a variety of categories that have been suggested, that are not always fully useful. See Appendix 1. Thus, for Van der Leeuw we have the founder, the reformer, the teacher, the philosopher and the theologian. For Wach, we find the magician as a type. He also includes in his typology the diviner, the saint, the priest, the seer, the prophet and the religiosus. And we must not forget the example and the mediator. And we have not yet mentioned the fact that among founders you have prophets, teachers, philosophers, wise men and reformers. Clearly, there is no clear cut consensus as to what categories serve us as we describe religions, and many of the categories that have been suggested have been sufficiently useless to never leave meaningful impact. Hence the present suggestion that “religious genius” provides us a means of identifying an important core, that would cut across some of the typologies already offered.

discussion of “saints” has gone. Project members have spent considerable attention thinking through the advantages of each of the categories. While there remain many good reasons for continuing to refer to the subjects of our project as ‘saints’, there seem to be even more, and more far reaching, reasons for adopting a new category.³ The following list suggests some of the possible benefits of introducing this category and using it, rather than “saints”, as a means for discussing outstanding religious personalities.

- In focusing on “religious genius”, rather than saints, we focus on aspects that are often not at the forefront of attention where many saints are concerned. Saints are sought as sources of blessing, healing, miracles and power. Recognizing that our religious geniuses may also possess these qualities, we turn to them for understanding, teaching, inspiration and an appreciation of the novel ways of restating a religion tradition and transforming it from within, based on the internal cognition and spiritual awareness of the religious genius. Because many saints are appreciated in terms of the above benefits, the overwhelming majority of saint-studies addresses the social and historical relations between the saint and society, through the transfer of these powers. Our project makes an attempt to appreciate the interiority and subjectivity of certain individuals, or at least to consider them a significant factor in their evaluation. This shift in emphasis justifies the attempt to construct a new category. The focused attempt to reach the individual, as distinct from his or her social impact, could realign the study of ‘saints’, leading us to focus on some of the big questions, first-order theological questions, that are often cast aside, in favor of social and other concerns.

- It is worth contrasting the emphasis on sainthood with the emphasis on “religious genius”. Sainthood measures holiness, and thus a spiritual state, attained in direct relationship to God (and by extension applied in non- theistic traditions as well). “Religious genius” measures creativity, transformation, impact and ways in which the spiritual person of great standing is able to impact her community, tradition and environment.

- With reference to saints, we come across the recognition that sainthood and perfection are not identical.⁴ Below will be presented a model of religious genius, that may be viewed as a model of perfection. If so, in constructing the category of “religious genius” we may be aiming for a greater degree of perceived perfection than we might expect of most saints. The flip side of the question, as suggested above, leading to a different construction of the category, is that actually “religious genius” might tolerate more imperfection than “saints”, if the uniqueness of “religious genius” lies in the creative and transformative dimension. Can there be imperfect religious genius? Can there be partial religious genius? Could it be that a “religious genius” might trace a path, that others walk with

³Appendix 2 lists the history of the category, suggesting it is actually not a completely new category.

⁴On sainthood not being identical with moral perfection, see James Horne, *Saintliness and Moral Perfection*, *Religious Studies* 27, pp. 463-471.

greater perfection than the genius? While this question does not justify the construction of a new category, it is one of the issues we must consider as we construct it.

- The problem with existing categories is that they are both descriptive and generative. The category is part of the theological stock of a tradition and informs its worldview. Once a category exists within a religion, there is a drive to identify individuals as belonging to that category. The internal religious and sociological dynamics push the faithful not only to use categories but to inhabit them, and to identify the categories with individuals known in the past and in the present. This places great pressure on any category - saint, *avatar*, *ṣaddik*, *qutb* and more. Adopting a new category allows us to approach the study of exceptional religious individuals from a purely descriptive and non-generative platform. “religious genius” would function as a descriptive category that is not theologically charged.⁵

- Religions have a routinizing effect on the subjects of their discussion. Thus, “saints” may be routinized, often causing a watering down of “sainthood” in favor of social identification and the maintenance of social structures. “Religious genius” offers us an opportunity to revisit the study of these individuals not only from a novel perspective, but also one that can potentially resist routinization, inasmuch as in our application of “religious genius” we also look to the regenerative, novel and even subversive or revolutionary aspects of these individuals’ contribution to the transformation of their religion and community.

- Because “religious genius” is not a category that currently serves religions, nor does it carry resonances of one particular tradition, it can be informed by the perspectives of multiple traditions, as we construct and develop it. It would allow us to approach these individuals in novel ways, that are not predetermined by the notion of sanctity, implied by the term saints.⁶ The concept could be constructed with the help of perspectives coming from multiple traditions, and the process of “making it work” for each of the traditions would be different than adapting a category that is charged with the historical and theological weight associated with one of them. As one possible implication of avoidance of language of sanctity, we might consider the conceptual tension between sanctification and salvation, introduced by Jonathan Z. Smith.⁷ What is associated with exceptional

⁵On the theological awareness and “baggage” of the project, see below.

⁶Some scholars have felt that approaching these individuals in terms of sanctity already colors the discussion in ways that are not appropriate to the tradition under discussion. With reference to Islam, see the comment by Frederick Denny, *God’s Friends, Sanctity of Persons in Islam*, in Kieckhefer-Bond (eds.), *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, p. 69. See, however, the discussion by Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, p. xxix, that argues in the opposite direction.

⁷See, for instance, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, School of Oriental and African Studies and Chicago University Press, 1990, p. 133.

individuals is at times more along the lines of salvation than those of sanctification. The use of a new category could free us to recognize such dynamics as they play out across traditions.⁸

- Appeal to RG would allow us to get past the impasse, according to which some traditions claim they do not have ‘saints’, or that the role of saints in their tradition is secondary. The phenomenon of religious genius, as it shall be defined, may be identified in all religious cultures, and focusing on it, independently of its sociological and theological context, should be beyond dispute.

- An evaluation of recent Catholic application of sainthood suggests that a very great number of individuals who are being canonized attain the status of sainthood as an expression of their goodness, doing good, engaging in charitable acts to others. The emphasis we seek for religious genius is different, even if the aspect of goodness is not absent from it.

- In thinking of “religious genius”, we have in mind individuals of very great stature, whose greatness transcends their local context, making them paragons throughout their religion, and as shall be suggested below, even beyond it. Most Catholic ‘saints’ seem to have a local quality, having contributed to the life of a group, the development of a region, the advancement of a community, making them the particular instance of broader developments. In thinking of “religious genius” we seek novelty, creativity and a restatement of the meaning of a religion. A significant portion of ‘saints’ illustrate existing ideals, rather than helping recreate and redefine them.

- One major class of Christian saints are martyrs. Other religions also refer to martyrs as holy people. On the face of it, martyrs have little to do with our discussion of religious genius. If religious geniuses are creative, identifying new ways of being and providing new ways of stating the meaning of existence, martyrs are anything but that. After all, their “claim to fame” is what takes them beyond this life, rather than leading to a novel statement of the meaning of life. It is an interesting thought exercise to revisit martyrdom in light of our model of religious genius, presented below. One may raise the possibility of a martyr, through altruism, self surrender and sacrifice and offerings made in the name of love, attaining the reality known to the religious genius. Rather than making a statement of how the experience of the beyond should redefine the meaning of being here, martyrdom makes the statement of why, in light of the ultimate vision, it does not make sense to be here any longer. If martyrdom is not religious genius, it may nevertheless point to it. Still, if religious genius is understood in terms of the creative contribution to tradition, martyrs, as saints, belong to a different class of worthy religious individuals.

- It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church itself distinguishes a certain class of saints it calls “Doctors”, for their teaching and novel spiritual insight. Similarly, our project seeks to focus on

⁸With reference to exceptional individuals, one ought to actually consider whether holiness might be more descriptive than soteriological claims, associated with a given personality or type. If so, this would justify continued appeal to holiness.

aspects of teaching and redefining religion, as these are expressed through individual lives. From this perspective, it calls for something that is more specific than the broader category of ‘saints’.

- The category of “religious genius” allows us to relate more easily to non-theistic traditions, as part of a discussion of exceptional religious individuals. ‘Saints’ is inextricably bound up with God, His gifts, friends and special graces. Adopting a different category would make it easier to include in our purview religions for whom God is not an operational concept.⁹

- “religious genius” might allow us to approach some wisdom traditions in their fullness, from a purely phenomenological basis, without forcing foreign notions of sainthood on them. For example, the attempts to make the Confucian tradition fit a model of ‘sainthood’ show how forced such an attempt is, and how much juggling, or goodwill, it requires. A new conceptual platform might eliminate these difficulties.¹⁰

- “Saints” are on the decline, even, or perhaps especially, in the Christian milieu to whom we owe the category.¹¹ The decline finds its expression in terms of theology, as well as of piety. Use of a new category suggests the possibility of a new approach, leading to new appreciation, where the old category may seem worn out. “religious genius” would revitalize the appreciation of these individuals and reinvigorate their testimony.

2.6 The Benefits of the Project

The following list suggests some of the possible benefits of introducing this category and using it as a means for discussing outstanding religious personalities. It thereby spells out what we recognize as some of the project’s benefits.

- *An approach to the study of religion.* The personal approach to the study of religion provides a particular gateway to understanding religion. In many ways, it allows us to study religion through its finest exemplars. It appeals to the notion of greatness and features it as a prism for the study of religion.

- *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;

⁹See the comment by Donald Lopez, Sanctification on the Bodhisattva Path, *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. Kieckhefer - Bond, p. 207.

¹⁰The collections by Hawley and Kieckhefer-Bond both feature articles on the Confucian tradition. For the former, see Tu Wei Ming, The Confucian Sage: Exemplar of Personal Knowledge, pp. 73-86. For the latter, see Rodney Taylor, The Sage as Saint: The Confucian Tradition, pp. 218-242.

¹¹See an analysis of this decline by John Coleman, After Sainthood?, *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Hawley, pp. 205-226. See also Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints*, Harper and Row, 1980.

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 category of genius could be particularly helpful in communicating the spiritual life of these individuals to those who neither share their worldview nor appreciate the special gifts and spiritual realities of these individuals. ‘Genius’ suggests unique capacities that are not equally distributed, thereby opening the possibility for recognition that others may be endowed in ways that the observer may not.

- *Benefits for the interreligious context.* 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. Appreciation of these individuals through the lens of “religious genius” would make the testimony of these individuals stand out beyond their specific faith context and thereby allow members of other religions to hear them and be inspired by them. The study of a religious genius of another tradition provides access to another community, thereby extending respect and appreciation for its religious life.

- Religious genius can provide us with a way of sidestepping issue of religious truth. We can appreciate the spiritual greatness of individuals irrespective of the content of their beliefs. It allows us to appreciate not only ideas, but the total, transformative vision and state of being of great individuals, valuable in itself, regardless of its truth status.¹²

- *Benefits for the public view of religion.* Using the term ‘genius’ has the potential to serve as a corrective to the public image of religion. 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. Allowing us to engage core theological and religious issues, as refracted through the specific lens of “religious genius”, 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. From another perspective, the emphasis on transformation, presented below, allows us to demonstrate ways in which religion has been transformative for society.

- *Deeper appreciation of what it means to be human and religious.* The individuals to whom we refer tell us something about the fullness of living a human life. This is why saints excite us, and why their

¹²More on “religious genius” and religious truth, below, Section 7.

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 intra-religious 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. Accordingly, our project would take some of the deepest and most important expressions of the religious life outside the realm of pure faith and make them the subject of broader study, expanding the range of meaning that these individuals carry.

- *Addressing new challenges and novel realities.* “Religious genius” could provide us with criteria in light of which we would understand and evaluate phenomena that take place outside organized religion, especially in contemporary times.

- *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 class. However, for this notion to work on the introductory class level, we might have to adopt a broad and flexible approach to RG, as suggested below. The ability to critique and test individuals in light of the model and vice versa can have great appeal, allowing us to engage a broad variety of figures critically, in relation to a defined model. That RG can be problematized is part of what makes the category exciting.

- *Analytical benefits in the study of religion.* The concept, as well as the model presented below, would 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.

- *Increasing the subtlety of our approach to the study of religion.* The emphasis, suggested below, on monitoring change and transformation, through the person of the religious genius, allows us to show religion in its becoming, not only its present or later articulation. Beyond academic importance, it is also important for disseminating a more nuanced and potentially self-critical understanding within religious communities.

- *Benefits for communication.* In studying the transformative effects of the religious genius on her community, we have the opportunity to study means of communication and producing impact. These are relevant for our continuing processes of communication, including communication between religions and their adherents. Study of religious genius is also study of how new forms of contact can help unify people.

2.7 Situating Our Project - Self Awareness of its Complexity

Our project has multiple audiences. It is situated between and seeks to bridge the Academy and the community. Moreover, it does so from a perspective that suggests commitment or appreciation or positive valuation of the material. The project is not value-neutral or free of theological undertones.¹³ It is thus a project of advocacy of values and of aspects of the life of the spirit, recognized across religious traditions. While we seek to ground this project in academic method and rigor, it is nevertheless a project of advocacy for certain values that we consider are worthy of being taught and received, within and between religious traditions.

While it is not construed as a purely academic project in a narrow sense, there is room for participants in the project to contribute to it or to benefit from it even without buying into broader theological or value assumptions. As the project seeks to study individuals in their social and historical particularity, in ways that are novel also on the academic front, there is room for such study to take place independently of judgements on value or theology. At the same time, the project also allows scholars who are so disposed to engage in first order questions that concern the spiritual life, as witnessed across multiple traditions. The core approach of the project allows a view of religion and theology that does not bracket a view of ultimate reality in view of conventions that prevail in many parts of the Academy. The points below offer further elaboration on this statement:

- The primary goal of our project is to inspire. However, we attain this goal while paying close attention to the methodological concerns of applying the category and making these individuals speak beyond their traditions.
- As members of this project we may see ourselves as catalysts for taking individual figures beyond the realm of their particular tradition and making them available in some way to communities beyond.
- 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? 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.
- Our use of “religious genius” is twofold. On the one hand it is a way of recommending, advocating and highlighting what seem to us religious ideals across traditions. On the other, it is a means of engaging, discerning, opening up conversations and revisiting views and attitudes to

¹³Special note ought to be taken of Amanda Lucia’s valuable critique of the project, pointing to the fact that it is not theologically neutral. This fact should be owned and recognized. See Amanda Lucia’s comments in her case study of Amritanandamayi.

figures already studied and categories already applied. In the latter sense, our use of “religious genius” is heuristic.

The different emphases of the project would lead to different foci of study and deliverables. The community - educational aspect would lead us to focus on what we consider the finest examples of religious genius; the academic dimension explores a much broader range of personalities, as it gropes with issues of methodology and the application of criteria. A more flexible approach could also serve the educational agenda, so that different traditions and a broad range of phenomena might be addressed.

- The purely academic dimension could extend to domains that do not support the project’s axiological dimension. Specifically, is there a negative religious genius? What could serve as a control group for the group we seek to feature in the project?

3. “religious genius” - Why, Who, How, What?

References above to “religious genius” suggest the type of person our project seeks to present and her particularity, especially in relation to the broader category of ‘saints’. The present section features further theoretical specification. It will address why we consider the category to be helpful, beyond the points already made above, how we use it and what we mean by the term (as well as what we do not intend by its use).

3.1 Why “religious genius”? The Category’s Potential and How we Apply it

Recognizing there is no perfect category, we must decide on a working category, and offer our definition for it and how we intend to work with it.¹⁴ It is recognized that all categories come with some “baggage”. However, in considering the “baggage” of “religious genius”, we recognize its positive potential and way of serving our project. Therefore, we choose to adopt the category, define how we use it and proceed.

To appreciate the balance between constructing a novel category and appealing to existing associations and “baggage” of a category, we do well to consider previous uses of genius and religious genius.¹⁵ 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

¹⁴We can think of other projects where terms that were not free of problems were adopted, offering a clear definition that served the project. Example: Bruce Lawrence and Fundamentalism.

¹⁵For a review of the history of the category, see Appendix 2.

“religious genius” is therefore in some way to return to the originary meaning of the term, recognizing its religious basis. We are aware that “genius” has taken on pseudo-religious valuation as a category, highlighting inspiration. We are thus using it in ways that recall its original religious roots, while aware of its later development and its scientific and social echoes.

The fact that “religious genius” does not operate as a natural category, already used by religions, makes it more applicable to a new approach, in which we define what we mean by a term. In this way, we do not need to compete with existing definitions. Whereas “saints” already resorts to existing definitions, and whereas “genius” itself may also draw on existing psychological understandings, “religious genius” is not currently in meaningful use, and therefore may be constructed by us, while taking into account the potential “baggage” and associations that its components and related terms carry.

It is precisely with this “baggage” that “religious genius” allows us to tackle some fundamental challenges. One of the most challenging issues in addressing “religious genius” is the relationship between human effort and divine gift. Among participants and observers who have contributed to the evolution of our project we noted concerns, raised especially by Christian participants, who felt the concept emphasized human effort, rather than the gift of God. Similar concerns may be raised by traditions that see the spiritual figure as an action of God, or divine incarnation, making the use of “religious genius” not immediate. Contrary to these concerns, it was suggested that precisely the need to capture the two poles of divine initiative and human effort, training and discipline, makes “religious genius” an excellent category that can capture a broad range of phenomena. “Genius” harks back to the Roman origins of the term, suggesting inspiration and the receptivity of the genius. At the same time, the training and discipline needed are also expressed by the term’s common references to individuals who master skills and apply them. It is this dual aspect that makes the category promising not only as a means of referring to saints and mystics, but even with reference to founders of religion and individuals who received revelation. The “genius” component can operate here as an indicator of the received and revealed dimension, operating through the genius, rather than the personal talent of the individual. At the same time, the conformity of the individual to spiritual standards, making him a model for emulation by disciples and later generations, is equally captured by the term.

Furthermore, the category may be applied even to individuals who are deemed by their religious communities to be not simply saints but divine incarnations.¹⁶ While some might consider that the term “religious genius” is inadequate to capture the fullness of meaning attributed by faithful to individuals they consider divine, in fact the term has built into it the kind of complexity that could

¹⁶If “saints” is deemed inadequate to describe these individuals, “religious genius” might actually provide an approach that relates to them on a “higher” note, if one uses the term in such a way.

actually accommodate such understandings. One can readily speak of “the religious genius of Jesus”. But one might even speak of Jesus, or Hindu *avatars*, as being religious geniuses, in the sense of manifesting the divine and its inspiration, in the framework of a lived human life, with its challenges and the demands it makes on the “religious genius” to realize or manifest the divine within the framework of a human life.

Similarly, a passive or instrumental view of a founder of a religion, as transmitting a divine message, rather than exerting his own effort or presenting his own teaching, is not incompatible with the use of “religious genius”, given our working definition and the inherent richness and complexity of the category.

In view of the above, it is up to us to determine how we use the category and the meaning, or range of meanings, we ascribe to it. Given the multiple dimensions of the category - exterior inspiration and internal quality - the category may be profitably used both theologically and psychologically, pointing to the inherent qualities of the person.

3.2 What Makes a Religious Genius

We may consider the following a working definition of “religious genius”: Someone who by application of intuition, intellect and a totally engaged or integrated personality brings about new understanding of reality, grounded in awareness of a broader existential dimension, that leads to deep transformation within a religious tradition (for multiple dimensions of transformation, see below). 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 religious genius 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 wisdom of religious genius grows out of a totality of being, a total commitment, and a total view of life. Religious genius is grounded in a situation of mind and being within broader reality. The wisdom that comes of it should therefore be considered primarily as the outcome of such existential positioning. This means that the RG’s special contribution is not primarily the gaining of knowledge,

the refinement of discipline or methodology or the accumulation of facts.¹⁷ Rather, it is founded upon the ground upon which all these activities might take place, and when they do, they are colored in a completely different way than they might be without the particular existential grounding of the religious genius. If wisdom is founded upon gaining experience, the experience of the religious genius grows from the total existential grounding that characterizes the religious genius. An important expression of this positioning is the understanding of connections, the view of the whole in relation to details, and the regard of wisdom that ensues from such a view.

The wisdom of the religious genius draws heavily on intuition and inspiration. While it may, and frequently does, appeal to reason as it communicates itself and as it checks the validity of its insights and their application, its primary drive often has more to do with other means of knowledge, than with reason. It is founded upon attunement to another order of being and the attempt to convey such attunement is the root of wisdom. The intellect provides checks and controls but these often come before or after the core recognition of wisdom. Before - in the training that the religious genius undergoes as part of his formation, and that becomes an inseparable part of him. After - as a second stage, after the primary expression of revelation, inspiration or intuition has done its work.

Gaining wisdom is to be distinguished from gaining intellectual information. Wisdom is an apprehension of spiritual reality and provides deeper insight into being itself. Therefore, the constitutive elements of religious genius, to be presented below, are not simply character traits or virtues. They are ways of being, and each of them serves an epistemological function. Love is a way of knowing; love-wisdom produces a type of knowledge. Knowledge grounded in humility, in the transcendence of the self, offers perspectives unlike ego-bound knowledge. The connection of heaven and earth, the connection of individual and cosmos, the relationship of the individual to society - all these are profound realizations that produce a wisdom, or rather - that are themselves the core wisdom of religious genius. The *genius* of religious genius is how to translate these core recognitions in novel ways, how to communicate them, and how to make them acceptable and practicable, the basis for social relations and a program for daily living. The core spiritual recognition undergoes a process of translation, and herein lies the unique genius of each and every religious genius. This translation draws on his or her mental faculties, intelligence, erudition, social situation, religious training, stock of metaphors, life experience, humor and more. The core reality is similar, if not the same. The means of applying and translating it to different situations - religious, social,

¹⁷In view of the centrality of learning and erudition among figures who might be described as religious geniuses, one might ask to what extent we can identify a propensity for religious genius, as presented here, among the learned, who contribute to the literary tradition of their religion. Nevertheless, even if they do make significant contributions to the cumulative knowledge of their tradition, the contribution of the religious genius is ultimately not to enhance the knowledge of the particular religious tradition but to provide answers to the most fundamental challenges of existence.

intellectual, is where religious geniuses differ from one another, each seeking to articulate his or her vision in conformity with the tools at their disposal and the need they seek to address.

Wisdom is ultimately a statement of how to be in the world, and more particularly, how to be in the world today. Wisdom is therefore active or generative. It is not only the seemingly passive contemplation of eternal truths, but the active application of whatever may be eternal and universal into the concrete and practicable terms of the here and now. Therefore, new social strategies, forms of social organization, action and service in the “real” world, are all manifestations of wisdom. Wisdom recognizes the need and responds to it by providing an appropriate statement, often novel in its application.

Application is key in thinking of wisdom and one of the most important dimensions of applying wisdom is applying it to the lives of individuals. When people seek wisdom they seek it as it applies to their own lives. I have seen “classical” teachers, voices of their tradition, some even saintly, who are unable to apply their knowledge to the life of the individual and to the challenges the individual is having in his or her personal situation. Perhaps such teachers were never challenged themselves to bring forth wisdom into their personal life, a wisdom that would redefine and reorient their own lives.¹⁸ The teacher who is able to make his or her wisdom speak to the personal life situation of those seeking their advice is the teacher who possesses true wisdom. Adapting wisdom to a situation, collective as well as personal, is a creative act, that calls on some of the core features of the religious genius that we shall present below - the integrative capacity, the creative capacity, the intuitive understanding and the fruits of a life lived in selfless offering, transcending the limitations of the personal self. Spiritual direction is thus a fruit of religious genius.¹⁹

The wealth of the spiritual life is such that its various aspects come together in seemingly endless permutations. These are multiplied as a given religion, society and the world at large, undergo sociological and ideological changes, from one generation to the other. At every turn, the need arises to state the truths, the vision, the broader meaning once again, in fresh terms, that are suitable either for the audience or the circumstances. It may be a traditional society that works out the meaning of its philosophical challenges and debates or a postmodern society that has lost its faith in God and his saints. Whatever it may be, the religious genius is the person who can offer a new statement of meaning, from the platform of existence to which he has reached. The contribution of the religious genius may be a creative presentation of the tradition in ways not previously known, rather than the discovery of a new truth. Much of what religious genius is about is vivid realization of aspects of reality or of tradition not previously appreciated. The creativity of

¹⁸See James Horne’s suggestion, in *Saintliness and Moral Perfection*, that holiness requires the ability to read the narrative of one’s life.

¹⁹I wonder whether it would be too strong to suggest that inability to offer spiritual direction is a sign of some degree of lack of religious genius.

the religious genius often comes as a response to something problematic. The old ways lose their savor, they no longer work. Conditions change. The creativity of the religious genius 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 religious genius offers new ways of understanding. When old ways of interpretation no longer work, the religious genius may find new means of engaging tradition or the existential issues it addresses.

“Genius” is when there is a creative drive,²⁰ founded upon the spiritual cognitions of the religious genius (specified below with the help of our model) that produces a restatement of the meaning of existence, and how it should be lived in the here and now. Whether it is action, service, teaching or relations in the community, the religious genius offers a new vision to address some important contemporary challenge.²¹ And his contribution is empowered by more than the goodwill of the ordinary person. It is empowered by the fullness of life and power to which his spiritual life has brought him.

Karl Rahner, the great theologian of the second Vatican Council, says of saints:

They are the imitators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age. They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in ‘this’ way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type.²²

²⁰Some have suggested that the life of the saint is itself a creative act, the highest creative act. I resist this definition, in relation to religious genius, for it would make it impossible to distinguish the religious genius from the saint, here understood as someone who has perfected his personal life, without broader transformative implications for the tradition.

²¹It is worth considering the different types of possible novelties that a religious genius brings forth. One may characterize three types of spiritual information, that religious geniuses reveal:

1. Gnostic teachings regarding supernal worlds and the divinity.
2. Means and methods of how religious geniuses addresses contemporary challenges of the spiritual life and of today’s world.
3. “Classical” information, involving teachings on proper living, as taught by religious geniuses from all religious cultures at all times.

It is likely that the three types of information presented will exhibit different emphases in terms of novelty. The first, the Gnostic dimension, is subject to the greatest degree of originality, creativity and transmutation. It is also the least verifiable, and here one must basically rely on the authority of the religious genius. The second will exhibit some innovation, but mainly in terms of methods and means, not in terms of substance. The third is the most permanent or stable form of spiritual information, least susceptible to changes and novelty, though its practical and spiritual significance nevertheless does bear periodic restatement.

²²Karl Rahner, *The Church of the Saints*, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, Helicon, Baltimore and London, quoted by Richard Kieckhefer, *Sainthood in the Christian Tradition*, in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, p. 35.

Rahner's words are true not only of Christian saints and their significance for the Church. They capture the essence of religious genius, as we are proposing it impacts and finds expression in all world religions.

The religious genius thus identifies, suggests or models a new way of being in the world. Herein lies the genius - finding a new way of being, whether that new way relates to oneself, to God, to society or to the world. Suggesting a new way of being in the world is not so obvious, when we consider the fundamental reality of the religious genius. As will be suggested below, the religious genius lives on two planes simultaneously, or at least her horizons are readily and regularly informed by these two realities. From this dual vision, the saint draws forth a vision for humanity, for society. She announces a new way of being, for others to assume. But how can they, who do not share this dual vision, assume this vision? Is it not largely dependent on the capacity to keep this dual perspective in one's awareness? Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of religious genius. Religious genius seeks to drive humanity forward, to bring others to share the complex perspectives that the genius has attained, while these others themselves lack that perspective. In the best of cases, the genius aids others to attain self transformation and to gain the broader vision themselves. In ordinary cases, the visionary will be a teacher, taken by his word, his lessons accepted, at least inasmuch as partial vision allows for their implementation. In the worst case, and this is all too often the case, the genius becomes himself the object of appreciation, unable to communicate to others what he really sees and knows. Here the genius becomes a "saint," in the popular sense of sharing blessing, receiving adulation. The tension of the imitability and inimitability of saints, noted in the review of the literature, can ultimately be traced back to the paradox of religious genius. At its best, the novel statement leads to a new spiritual life for others. In the worst case, the genius, or saint, becomes its victim, or differently stated - offers himself in altruistic love in a manner that captures only a part, a small part, of his testimony.

The religious genius 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.

Because a religious genius addresses a problem that is viewed through a contemporary lens, there will always be some interaction between the being and contribution of the religious genius and the historical and sociological context within which he or she is being appreciated. Appreciating a religious genius involves us in both an appreciation of the person and being of the religious genius and an appreciation of the contribution, innovation and transformation the religious genius effects within her community or tradition.

We take as a working assumption, which may be revisited, that religious geniuses do not exist outside religious traditions. 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. In fact, new religious movements are a fruitful field for the study of religious genius. However, discipline seems fundamental to the life of a religious genius, and sets him or her apart from other forms of religious or spiritual personalities.

Because RG is found within tradition, we must be careful about how we present the relationship between tradition and innovation, especially considering the negative valuation of innovation in some religious contexts. In one way, what makes a religious genius a genius is the innovative approach or understanding to matters of ultimate importance in the field of religion. The religious genius offers a fresh perspective on important aspects of reality. On the other hand, 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.

3.3 How is a Religious Genius Unique or Sui Generis?

Our working definition suggests that religious genius is not like political or musical genius, which connotes someone who is a genius operating in the field of politics or music. Religion is not a field in which a genius works. Rather, “religious” is the way of being, modified by genius, suggesting the person is religious in a “genius” way. The difference in how we understand “religious genius” allows us to ask more of the religious genius than brilliant contribution of sorts in the domain of religion. With this recognition we posit significant spiritual attainment, an advanced state of interiority/being, great measure of personal integration, moral excellence and more. In fact, religious genius is a person whose entire being revolves around the highest spiritual perfection, that she either seeks to realize or has realized and is manifesting to others. Behind this definition is the recognition that the field of religion and the spiritual life are qualitatively different than other arenas in which excellence manifests, raising the possibility of the religious genius being a kind of sui generis genius.

Because “religious genius” is not understood as someone who is a genius in the field of religion, but rather a genius level of practicing religion, the religious genius’ achievements must be grounded in a great degree of seeing internally, according to a given system’s structures and worldview, or attaining a great degree of intimacy, in relation to God or other aspects towards which intimacy might be cultivated. To simply be a genius theologian does not make one a religious genius.

Reference to the practice of religion still leaves open different approaches to what makes one a religious genius. Our discussions have suggested two complementary definitions of the domain of religion, in which one excels in genial ways. One is the quest for ultimacy, wherein the religious genius is a genius in various sub-aspects of the quest for ultimacy.²³ We note, however, that philosophers also engage issues of ultimacy, hence a complementary understanding. What makes a religious genius more than a genius in the domain of philosophy is the way of life of the religious genius. Hence, we seek to minimize disjunction between the person and his/her way of life. In this sense, wholeness of personality is a determining factor of religious genius even if we do not posit a fully coherent notion of psychological integration of personality.

Considering the idea of integration as a significant dimension of the religious genius does not ignore either shortcomings or the presence of unintegrated aspects in the person of our subject. However, at a minimum these aspects are integrated in the greater quest for full conformity of the life of the individual to the divine reality or to ultimist concerns. Moreover, it is recognized that we lack a psychological theory of a fully integrated person. Consequently, the suggestion that the religious genius is appreciated in terms of integration of the different dimensions of the person imports a notion of spiritual perfection to the concept. As this does not grow out of the data, but constitutes a hypothesis or a projection of an ideal type, it should be examined and studied with greater care as the project advances. One must also bear in mind whether the given religious tradition considers integration (between deeds and being, between thought and action, between heart and mind, between different aspects of the person) a virtue. Excellence in the practice of religion must take into account the standards set forth by the individual religion.

Reference to lifestyle and discipline reminds us that 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.

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,²⁴ 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.

²³ This understanding is articulated in papers by Gellman, Neville and also Zanetti.

²⁴ See Appendix 4 with reference to Simonton.

While the *religious* dimension of religious genius leads to including in the profile of “religious genius”, as spelled out in our discussion below, dimensions that are not part of the common definition of ordinary genius (love, altruism, humility etc.), these aspects can also be considered in some way as fundamental to genius itself, and therefore support the argument that religious genius is in some ways genius par excellence. The religious genius shows an extraordinary capacity for loving and living for others. It would seem this is a particularity of religious genius, where a more total demand or achievement is envisioned, compared with other expressions of genius.²⁵ These special dimensions 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.

Thus, we realize that there is something total about a religious genius that we do not find with reference to other forms of genius. 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 religious genius in an ongoing manner. Similarly, 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.

3.4 Religious Genius in Relation to Genius in Other Fields

From the above definition of religious genius and its uniqueness we learn that our way of referencing religious genius has only partial overlap with the use of genius in other fields. We should not minimize this overlap, as it may provide pointers for future study of the relationship between genius in general and religious genius. Nevertheless, our project moves forward on the assumption

²⁵We 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, studied for our project by Amanda Lucia, provides an interesting case in point.

that we do not seek to identify in religious genius the same features of genius that scholars may find in geniuses of other fields. This has significant ramifications for the methodology and future outputs of our project. The greatest contemporary scholar of genius is Dean Keith Simonton, who was in dialogue with the project in its early stages and provided some significant methodological input. His work has informed the project and a dialogue with Simonton's work is found in Appendix 4. Some of the project's scholars have, in fact, used Simonton's work and approach as a means of investigating religious heroes and interrogating the category of religious genius. Helpful as these studies may be, and as much as we seek to keep them in the purview of the project as it unfolds, we presently develop the notion of religious genius in ways that are particular to it and that are only partially to psychological studies of genius.

The theoretical question here is what discipline most closely approximates our discussion and the practical question relates to metrics and how genius is measured. The field of contemporary science that most closely relates to genius is psychology. There are various metrics that are applied to the study of genius. Some of these are classical psychometrics, others are historiometrics, marshalled in the work of Simonton. A review of various metrics suggests the difficulties in applying them to the field of religion. Most metrics, including some metrics by means of which religiosity or spirituality is measured, are not adequate for capturing the unique spiritual realities of the individuals studied in our project. Existing metrics were created based on large scale measuring of populations, seeking to establish what is average. The population sample itself is also narrow and may not represent the full societal scale that a project such as ours draws from. These and other considerations lead us to realize that existing testing and metrics do not provide an adequate foundation for our project.

Consequently, we agree to use the term in the constructed manner, presented above, that represents our consensus and definition. As noted, this meaning harks back to the original use of genius, without attempting to adapt it to certain contemporary studies. While we do not measure religious genius using these metrics, we shall suggest below a methodology for appreciating the contribution of religious geniuses by considering their impact and transformation within religious communities and traditions. Thus, historical and sociological metrics complement the more subjective and interior perspective that is a fundamental feature of our project.

The study of art provides an appropriate analogy for how we construct the category, rather than the precision associated with psychological metrics. There, measuring change and transformation link in intimate ways the originality and contribution of the person and the canons, standards and expectations of the community. The greatness of the artist is accordingly appreciated in dialogue with perception, reception and transformation produced by the artist. This is similar to the balance we seek between the subjective (interior) greatness of the person and his impact upon tradition.

3.5 Who do we Think of as a Religious Genius, and who is Not?²⁶

In constructing the category we intend by it a very specific class of individuals, who are normally considered under the rubrics of “saints” or “founders” or “mystics”. These are individuals whose internal spiritual character is recognized to be of outstanding quality and who at the same time have been innovators, or have transformed their traditions or communities in significant ways. The dual perspectives of individual subjectivity/interiority/ excellence in spiritual achievements and the exterior transformation they bring to their traditions are the principal lenses by means of which we view these individuals as religious geniuses.

In the course of work, we noted there is a preponderance of mystics in our project. Most case studies undertaken as part of the project referred to figures who can readily be described as mystics. The next section of the paper will present the model by means of which we suggest a religious genius be viewed and in light of this model the turn to mystics makes sense. This has raised the question of whether our project ought to be kept to “mystics only”, thereby signaling its uniqueness.²⁷ While mystics will certainly constitute a large part of the group of religious geniuses in this project, we wish to not pitch the category too narrowly. Instead, we prefer to speak of individuals with intimate relations with the divine (or with the absolute, teachers, etc., for non theists). This intimacy may fall short of what some might consider to be “mysticism”, but may still correspond to some features of the model and may account for their accomplishments and contributions to the transformation of communities.

Reference to individuals whose existential awareness and inner being correspond to our model, and especially the recognition that many of these are often studied as mystics, does not mean that all

²⁶In Appendix 2, I present a history of the category that is being reinvented in the present project. Earlier definitions of “religious genius” are not helpful to present concerns, though they are surely of interest. Different authors would lead us to apply different criteria in answering the question of who is a religious genius. For James, most of the recognized saints would qualify, but so would many others not acknowledged as saints, who had contact with their subconscious in ways that were powerful. In fact, James provides us with examples drawn from the lives of various Protestant practitioners and heads of denominations, and he is quite critical of many acknowledged Catholic saints. For Swetenham, one would include in the discussion any person who had experienced a conversion or who felt born again. Alternatively, only individuals approximating stage 6 of Fowler’s typology might be included. For Sorokin, with his particular emphasis on the genius of love, it would seem that saints and those who have the genius of love are almost coextensive. Finally, Templeton’s presentation challenges us to identify where exactly religious genius might lie, as his discussion alternates between different types, all of whom have had a revolutionary effect on their traditions, but who constitute distinct religious personalities. Our project spells out its own methodology, striking a balance between the more interior approach of the earlier authors and the emphasis upon more objective impact on traditions, highlighted by Templeton.

²⁷We are aware of the fact that one further charged and complex term is being introduced into the conversation and that “mystics” may be as fraught with methodological and ideological complications as is “religious genius.”

mystics are religious geniuses. Rather, we consider how mystics can bring about transformation and innovation in their traditions. Accordingly, issues of inspiration for justice and the grounding of the ultimate vision of life in life and society remain relevant to the identification of religious geniuses. It is assumed, however, that the religious genius will ground such contributions in the dimensions of interiority and experience that are foundational to our use of the category. Differently put, we are interested not only in the access and approach to the “ground of being” but also to what is being grounded, on the basis of the religious geniuses’ interior recognition and orientation.

This question is related to the question of how broadly or narrowly we wish to construct the category. We may aim for the top “one in a billion”, the unquestionable “top 100” of human religious history, or we may consider a more flexible approach, profiling a larger range of individuals who have had transformative effects on their society, operating from a basis of a relationship with God, and the moral, social and spiritual imperatives it carries forth. The question of whom to feature in the project is itself related to the project’s multiple audiences. It seems we should not limit the project only to the greatest, and only to the mystics. Nevertheless, these do provide a frame of reference for the “best of” the project, thereby providing an index for the inclusion of others and the need to account for broadening the use of the category.

While we seek to study the great figures who brought about great innovation, our project also has room for the study of lesser geniuses. By way of parallel from art history: those individuals who have brought about transformation within schools and regional methods of art, not only those who broke new paths in the practice of art.

Our discussions have pointed to a distinction between someone to be considered “genius” and someone who would be best described as “ingenious”, such as a creative writer or someone who advances thinking and practice in a particular domain. The test case of Thomas Merton suggested this distinction, with our analysis pointing to him as a figure who is ingenious, but not a religious genius, based on our application of the term.

For a category to be meaningful, it must include, as well as exclude. Whom might we have thought ought to be a saint that is not a religious genius? Whom might we have tended to regard with great esteem, who would nevertheless not meet our criteria for religious genius? I have already suggested that the pressure to identify those in office with the highest in a given tradition would be relieved by adopting the new category. Who else might *not* be a religious genius?

For one, the imaginary sadhu who is absorbed in meditation, radiating peace and harmony to the world from the intensity of his absorption in the divine. If such a person does exist, he may be a great holy being, but not a religious genius. The same holds true for the adept, like 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. Fulfillment of the spiritual goals of the tradition should be kept distinct

from religious genius, with its dynamic and creative character. Our imaginary sadhu might validate tradition for others, but unless he or she is able to restate, update or otherwise make the traditional speak in new ways, should not be considered a religious genius. The test of literary legacy comes in handy at this point. If the imaginary sadhu really has something new, or even meaningful, to say, beyond modelling traditional ideals, we would probably know about it, through the channels of dissemination available in the tradition.

Another figure who would be excluded is the priest. The priest has an important role in maintaining the tradition, performing its rituals and providing a bridge between the community and the absolute. But priests are not geniuses. Priests model religious excellence, when they perform their duties properly. So do scholars. But neither is in and of himself a candidate for religious genius. However, religious genius can manifest through either priest or scholar. Consider Padre Pio. Consider Jean Marie Vianney, the Curé of Ars. These individuals advance their tradition by helping redefine the vocation of priests. They do not simply model good priesthood, they redefine it precisely because they bring to bear the fullness of the spiritual life. From that platform they restate what it means to be a priest, and what it means to be a Christian. Similarly, the religious genius may communicate his genius through scholarship. Examples are numerous, but let us turn to the examples of Rabbi Kook or Al-Ghazali, as models of religious genius, expressed through scholarship.²⁸ In fact, scholarship may be one of the most common expressions of religious genius. But while religious geniuses may express themselves through scholarship, most scholars, important and valuable as they are, are not religious geniuses.

Finally, 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 is the religious genius.

²⁸Both are featured in the study materials developed for the Religious Genius project. See Appendix 6.

4. A Methodology for Studying Religious Genius : Constructing a Model

The following section is in many ways the heart of the religious genius project. It seeks to establish a means of describing the internal reality of the religious genius and it does so by proposing a model of various traits and qualities that characterize a religious genius. A model is just that. It is an attempt to depict an ideal reality. While it might never fully correspond to reality, it does allow us to develop a better appreciation for what there is in reality. It allows us to identify aspects for which we might look. A model is not an attempt to create ideal reality, but a way of simplifying what are inherently complex psychological traits, by featuring key elements by means of which we can address the religious genius. It is a theoretical construct that shapes discourse and orients a vision. The following section is written with the premise that if reference to religious genius will enhance our appreciation of outstanding religious personalities it will do so to a large extent by means of exploring these individuals' lives in relation to an ideal, expressed in a model.

As core of the project, the model has been the subject of much discussion in the course of the project. The original model proposed six traits of a religious genius. Subsequent discussion pointed to an open ended list of qualities. The original concept paper assumed these traits were fundamental and necessary aspects of the internal reality of a religious genius. Subsequent discussions suggest a looser approach to these qualities and identifying relations between a larger set of characteristics as family resemblances, by means of which we can suggest relations between different saints and religious geniuses. Because this section of the concept paper has undergone considerable development, some parts of it (the earlier parts) are more developed than others, leaving room for future study and elaboration to corroborate and provide further depth and reflection for the attributes that have been added to the model along the way. I shall begin by presenting the qualities and characteristics of the model, and then move on to a discussion of how the model could be applied and understood.

4.1 Fundamental Components of a Model for Religious Genius

In what follows are presented key features, by means of which we can construct or identify religious genius. The list began with my attempt to discern and synthesize the background reading that informs the present project. The model was expanded upon by project members. In the process of rewriting the paper, I have come to the realization that the various additions to the model, suggested by project members, as well as possible additional traits of religious genius, also mentioned below, are in some way indebted to the core traits suggested at the outset of the project. This raises the possibility of constructing a “grammar” of religious genius, where originary qualities combine to produce further expressions of religious genius. Perhaps we might be able to even go as far as speaking of religious genius in essence and manifestation, where “manifestation” are not only

the social expressions of the religious genius' being but the secondary or more visible expressions of these core traits. In what follows, I therefore present the model of "religious genius" by distinguishing between an originary group of characteristics that approximate "essence" and a further or broader set of characteristics that may be spoken of as "manifestations". While the distinction between these two groups is interesting, it is not crucial to the project's methodology. As will be suggested below, all characteristics can be revisited as part of creating an open ended approach to the presentation of religious geniuses across traditions.

With regard to the six attributes of the model of religious genius, no claim of hierarchy between the attributes is made. Moreover, the different dimensions also overlap to various degrees. The model thus points to a range, a domain, wherein its different components are interrelated and dependent upon one another.

4.1.1 Love

Some of the earlier attempts to develop the image of religious genius²⁹ have already made us aware of the centrality of love to the ideal of the saint and of the religious genius. While the resources and theological framework from which this recognition was offered were Christian, I think it is appropriate to recognize love as a central defining element in any portrait of religious genius and as a common denominator that emerges from all religious traditions. Love should be understood broadly, certainly not simply as a particular emotion. Therefore, if a tradition such as Buddhism couches its primary spiritual recognition in terms of compassion, rather than in terms of love, for our purposes it falls within the broader range of spiritual attitudes and perceptions signalled by the term love.³⁰ Consequently, love is manifest as altruism, the supreme expression of love offered selflessly in service of the other. It is significant that so much of philosophical appeal to saints focuses on their altruism. It suggests how central love is to the extraordinary religious personality and confirms the recognition that love should be considered one of the primary identifying features of true religious genius. It may be superfluous to add that love is a reality, a state of being, and that therefore the question of its recipient is almost secondary. A loving heart and presence extends to God, to the fellow person, to the entire world. The more expansive the love, the higher the state of being that is manifested, the greater the expression of religious genius.

²⁹See Appendix 2.

³⁰The Dalai Lama certainly sees things this way, as he views the teachings of other religions. See his *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together*, New York, Doubleday, 2010, and my review of this book, <http://www.elijah-interfaith.org/index.php?id=1011>

4.1.2 Purity

Swetenham remarked that all geniuses can be partial; of religious genius alone we expect perfection. The best way to measure perfection is purity. Purity is the core of the struggle that is common to all who are on the spiritual path. It is born of the recognition of a tension, produced by an awareness of multiple realities in which the aspirant dwells. On the one hand is her daily life, earthly reality, bodily existence. On the other is another dimension of reality, a higher order, a divine realm, a vision of truth understood as absolute reality. These are never mere cognitions. They are ways of being, states of awareness, realms of sensitivity, sensibility and greater energetic subtlety. The aspirant is thus torn between multiple realities, multiple states of being and consciousness. What is perceived as the higher order, the ultimate, beckons and invites the individual toward greater conformity with its perspective, with its way of being. To attain that, purity is required. Without exception, all religious traditions, all saints in all religions, have and must undergo a process of purification in order to be able to enter the domain of their destiny, however it is understood in their tradition. Purity is the condition for such entry and the state that is attained, as they advance into that domain, and are increasingly transformed by it. Purity is indispensable for the spiritual life and must therefore occupy a prominent position in any description of religious genius. Religious genius thrives on, aspires to and is ultimately realized through the increase and assimilation of purity into the life of the religious genius.

James saw asceticism as a by-product of the four attributes of saintliness identified by him.³¹ That he lists it as the first characteristic practical consequences of the expanded sense of awareness suggests how central asceticism is to the spiritual path. However, I cannot concur with James on asceticism being simply the passionate transformation of self surrender into self immolation. James' discussion of asceticism shows little understanding of the dynamics of spiritual progress. It is not a whim, a fancy, a tendency grown wild. It is a method of attaining what aspirants realize is the vital precondition for achieving their goal - purity. Asceticism is almost universal and with that comes the recognition of the universality of the quest for purity as a defining feature of the spiritual life, and an indispensable feature of religious genius. Thus, anyone who lacks purity, in a meaningful and recognizable fashion, should not be considered a religious genius, according to the high benchmark here proposed. He or she may be a leader, teacher, theologian, activist or any other kind of functionary who makes a difference in people's lives. But he or she would be no different in their spiritual quality than their counterpart who engages in these same activities from a non-religious platform. The uniquely religious dimension of religious genius, regardless of the form of service or office through which it is expressed, is purity.

³¹P. 203.

The notion of purity has met with some opposition from members of our project, in particular from scholars working on Hindu figures. Purity was understood by them in light of caste restrictions and other restrictions, such as those associated with ritual purity. Accordingly, they did not see how purity could be included in a model of religious genius. It is therefore important to emphasize that purity is here intended in the sense described above, as an internal disposition of gaining greater perfection and conformity with the higher order, rather than in terms of rules and regulations that govern aspects of daily or social life. That such an understanding can also exist within an Indic context can be seen from Anantand Rambachan's reference to purity, in his presentation of Ramana Maharshi.³²

There does remain, nevertheless, a possible objection to the inclusion of purity in the portrait of religious genius. Some devotees regard their great religious figures as perfect from birth, as divine incarnations that do not require purification.³³ If we do not want to superimpose the worldview and understanding of one religious system on another, we must deal with this challenge from the resources of those traditions that might raise such objections. Here, it is helpful to realize that those same traditions also consider spiritual evolution and perfection to extend beyond one lifetime. If so, the place of purification in the process of attaining perfection, of becoming a religious genius, is the same. It is only conceived of through a different approach to time and process.³⁴

4.1.3 Humility

While purity is constituted by a variety of virtues that may each be singled out, one of those deserves special mention and is accordingly presented as a key feature of religious genius - humility. Humility may be understood as proper recognition of one's position in the great scheme of things. Such recognition is quite distinct from the ways in which the ego seeks to assert itself in order to boost one's sense of personal worth. Humility is thus closely related to decentering of the self, and its reorientation in a larger view. It is also the basis for continuing self-inspection, leading one to identify faults and to become aware of one's own imperfection. These in turn drive the quest for purity.

Humility is not to be confused with low self-esteem. It is no accident that the Bible presents Moses as the greatest prophet that ever lived and as the most humble person on the face of the

³² "Purity, in the Hindu tradition, is connected intimately with freedom from greed and there can be no description of religious genius without giving central importance to this quality" (Rambachan, p. 14). See further the discussion of purity with reference to the Buddha, in the discussion of the Buddha as religious genius, by Vanessa Sasson.

³³ See objections raised by Amanda Huffer.

³⁴ For this suggestion, see Rambachan's case study of Ramana. The possibility, always present in Hinduism, of the divine simply taking form and incarnating without having to undertake any human or earthly related process of purification or growth still remains outside our model, though Rambachan allows us to bridge gaps in understanding to a significant degree.

earth.³⁵ This reference contains within it the reply to an objection that has come up several times in the course of our discussions to the inclusion of humility in the list of traits of the religious genius. Many of the figures discussed, including for purposes of this argument also Moses, had a very developed sense of their worth, value, accomplishment and mission. Some have objected that this highly developed sense of self is incommensurate with humility. I would suggest otherwise, pointing back to the definition of humility offered above. Many traditions emphasize the importance of annihilation of the ego for the saint. This is another way of stating what is intended by reference to humility.

Humility need not exclude a highly developed sense of self-worth and mission.³⁶ Rather, it is a way of contextualizing such self-worth within a broader view of reality, leading to the recognition that it is not the ego, the limited self or its particular accomplishments that are the source of individual pride but rather the fullness of divine (or differently understood metaphysical absolute) reality that makes the person what he is. Thus, to take a current example, if the Dalai Lama is an incarnation of Avalokataishwara, this exalted claim of the tradition need not be understood as contrary to humility. On the contrary, it is the grounds for humility, recognizing that one cannot take credit or recognition for oneself. Of course, the potential for abuse or misapplication is always there. But this is precisely where true religious genius is measured, in the capacity to self identify or relate to higher reality in ways that transcend the ego and manifest genuine humility.

4.1.4 Self-Surrender

If humility situates the self in its proper place, self-surrender defines a particular attitude and relationship of the self to the higher reality that it seeks to identify with. This dimension more than any other was appreciated by James, in his portrayal of saintliness. He described this-self surrender as resulting from awareness of the friendly continuity between the ideal power and our own life. Self surrender leads to reorientation of the self. The personal ego decreases in significance, as one increasingly is identified with the greater reality or goal towards which one is making his way. Self surrender may thus be considered a systematic means of self-transcendence. It is also closely related to the capacity to serve others, as one's view of oneself is transformed, and as one increases in loving capacity.

But more is involved in self-surrender than simply transcendence of self. Self surrender assumes growing in awareness of a larger presence, or a larger reality, of which one is but a part. As

³⁵Numbers 12,3 and Deut. 34,10.

³⁶Some of the case studies showed how the model could open up new vistas and provide renewed appreciation for well known heroes. Vanessa Sasson's attempt to make sense of the Buddha in terms of humility is a case in point.

awareness shifts, the question of the true author of our actions increasingly comes to the forefront. Is it the self or the greater Self, the divine, the absolute, that is the true actor.³⁷ And what exactly is the nature of the collaboration, the synergy, between the ordinary self and the greater Self. Self surrender thus points to a fundamental shift in consciousness, wherein the self, its identity and authorship are all realigned, in view of expanded awareness. Religious genius requires just such a broad awareness. Without it, the virtues practiced are moral exercises, stages on the way to perfection. But the perfection of religious genius only comes with the shift of consciousness, wherein one's self is redefined in relation to the absolute. Systems may vary with regard to the possibility of absorption in and union with the greater reality. But the capacity to transcend the self and to live from the place to which one is able to surrender would seem to be a universal feature of religious genius.

Some traditions resort at this point to a notion of grace. It is through grace, an explicit expression of divine activity, that the actions of the person who has attained self-surrender are carried out. While not all traditions share a concept of grace, it is worth asking whether all can share in identifying a stage in which the sense of authorship of action, the definition of who is the actor, is transformed. Time and again as we studied the lives or writings of various individuals under the rubric of religious genius, we have come across self-awareness of being a vessel.³⁸ This self awareness of passivity and instrumentality may be considered a coming together of humility, self surrender and a broader view of reality, that leads to the awareness of the religious genius being an instrument. Or perhaps we should uphold a typology of traditions, or sub-traditions, according to their ability to accommodate a notion of a radically transformed self, such that no longer operates on its own, but by agency of the higher reality to which it aspires.

4.1.5 Expanded awareness of reality

Reference to self surrender already implies awareness of the broader reality to which we belong. But more needs to be said of this, and this seems to be a key element in religious genius and one of

³⁷ How to understand the relationship between the personal self and the greater reality, to which the religious genius opens up, may be a point regarding which we may find meaningful differences. Does one go to the roots of one's self, finding God there? (Compare Peter Brown's reference to finding Christ at the roots of the self, Brown, p. 13); Does one's sense of self extend to include others? (compare Flescher's notion (p. 228) of extending the self, as the basis of altruism); Does one go beyond the personal self to the true foundational Self, as Hindu philosophy would suggest? I note one wonderful phrase that emerged in the framework of a discussion of Confucianism, referring to "establishing your own self identity in terms of what you take to be the absolute" (ref.*). This captures the rich possibilities of how to understand the self and its transformations.

³⁸ See the study of Namalvar by Vasudha Narayanan; of Al Jazulli by Vincent Cornell in the collection of readings, prepared for Oxford; of Rav Kook presented by Schwartz and of Al Ghazzali studied by Gianotti.

the main features that distinguishes it from ordinary piety and even from many expressions of saintliness. A religious genius lives in more than one plane of existence. He or she is simultaneously present to the physical order of life and to the alternative order, to which he or she is increasingly drawn. The latter redefines one's way of being in the physical plane. It establishes priorities, provides meaning and reorients all of one's actions. The genius of religious genius comes from the fact that all actions, engagements, teachings and all expressions of the religious life are experienced from an awareness that transcends the physical plane, even as the individual seeks to transcend his or her sense of limited personal self.

What makes religious genius unique is that it consciously and intentionally seeks to understand and experience this reality in relationship to another. Whereas other forms of wisdom might postulate what other dimensions of reality might be, religious genius is founded upon some kind of contact, exposure, and awareness of this other reality.³⁹ Such awareness may find varying expressions: some intellectual, some visionary, some mystical, some intuitive. What is common to all of them is the conscious recognition of the relationship that exists between these two dimensions of reality. Perhaps religious genius might be presented as that which aids in constructing a conscious bridge between these two dimensions of reality. Reference to expanded awareness of reality and bridging realities includes faith as a means of reaching out to such reality, even if faith may be less direct a cognition than direct experience, cognition or testimony.

Significantly, all religious traditions express their awareness of reality in terms that are dualistic - this reality, the other. Is this merely a function of how different theological or philosophical systems shape religious thought, or do we have here a fundamental expression of or experience that informs the awareness of religious genius? Does religious genius grasp something beyond, to which it seeks to make its way, subjecting all of life as experienced and understood to that quest? Is a sense of an alternate reality thus fundamental to all expressions of religious genius?⁴⁰

The most common way of describing this alternate dimension of reality is to describe it as the heavenly, supernal, world. The broader view of reality is usually expressed also in cosmological terms, situating the genius and her world within a broader scheme of existence. Such cosmological situatedness is then the foundation for deeper understanding of reality. It consequently provides either new information concerning the heavenly or celestial realm, and the heroes, usually great religious figures, associated with it, or guidance, and teaching and information for how to better live on the physical plane.

³⁹Note the definition of spiritual genius provided by author Winifred Gallagher in her book *Spiritual Genius: The Mastery of Life's Meaning*, Random House, 2001: human beings who seem to live with one foot in another plane.

⁴⁰Vedantins have objected to this statement, in view of their monistic view of reality. See Rambachan, p. 19. Still, such recognition does remain the starting point of an ignorant perspective, that is ultimately healed by the knowledge of the unitive state that cuts across this duality.

But broader awareness of reality need not be limited to the celestial sphere. If we consider broadening awareness horizontally, then we can consider the expansion of awareness to others, to the world's suffering, to the entire world of social relations that cries out for healing. Perhaps herein lies an important key to the altruism of saints. Their altruism is neither a mandate, nor simply an expression of love. Rather, it expresses a broader sense of their identity and their own sense of expanded awareness that includes the other, the world at large, as part of their own awareness.⁴¹ Perhaps, in today's world the broadening of awareness will find further expansion in the ecological domain, extending the sense of self from society to all of life. The increasing engagement of religious leadership in this direction and the way it harnesses traditional theological resources suggests that this too may be featured as a present or future expression of religious genius.

4.1.6 The Logic of Imitation

Awareness of higher or broader reality does not simply provide meaning and reorientation to physical existence. It leads to an inevitable dynamic wherein one seeks to conform the one reality to the standards, vision or perfection of the other. A constitutive tension ensues, wherein one not only lives in two planes of existence, in two parallel realities, but seeks to imitate the higher reality within the confines of ordinary existence. I would like to propose that this is a constitutive dimension of religious genius. As suggested, religious genius is the bridge between two realities, and the primary means of constructing this bridge is imitation.⁴²

In some traditions imitation plays a crucial role; in others it may be less dominant. However, it is worth considering whether the logic of imitation is not itself a fundamental feature of the higher religious life. The religious genius is not only in touch with a higher vision of life; he seeks to incorporate and implement it in life, or, from the other end, make life on this plane attuned to, commensurate with, harmonious with, that higher reality. Only those who are aware of the tension implied in living in multiple worlds and the suffering, struggle and continuing effort to harmonize and attune our world to another order of reality truly deserve to be called religious geniuses. Here we have a pinnacle of genius - intuiting another order of reality, seeking to ground it, transforming oneself and the entire world in a movement of totality and harmony toward that higher perceived reality. We go here way beyond faith, understood conventionally, or the practice of virtues. We enter here into a domain that is truly the reserve of the few, even if it be the hope of the many. In light of such precision of definition, religious geniuses will emerge as those individuals who are able to maintain this broader awareness and its resultant mandate to imitate, harmonize and conform different orders of reality. Such efforts both require and are made possible through the purity

⁴¹See Flescher et al, *The Altruistic Species*, p. 227.

⁴²Kant had suggested that genius implies non-imitating. However, the kind of imitation discussed here is quite distinct from the conventional sense, to which he referred.

attained, the love offered and the transcendence of self that make up the character of the religious genius. However, those virtues alone do not suffice. They produce excellent spiritually oriented characters, perhaps even saints. But religious genius requires that additional vision and orienting framework that redefines existence and its meaning, seeking to continually elevate and transform it in light of the higher realization.

Christianity provides some of the finest examples of the logic of imitation. Imitation of Christ, or of Mary, shape and redefine consciousness in view of the perceived higher reality.⁴³ But imitation is not the only way to capture this intuition. Pitirim Sorokin speaks of self identification.⁴⁴ One might also speak of assimilation, or living in the mind of another being, a great spiritual presence. These different ways of expression, all found in the literature, are different ways of capturing the same spiritual drive.

Understanding the logic of imitation might provide a key to understanding some of the tensions that specific traditions exhibit. For some traditions, the founder or key figure is in a class of his own. Thus, Muhammad is distinct from all other prophets and saints. Jesus, the son of God, is in a class of his own, unlike that of the saints. And yet, Muslim saints are constantly assimilated to the figure of Muhammad, even as Christian saints re-present Christ.⁴⁵ At times, this produces theological, as well as social and denominational tensions. The matter is further complicated when we consider that saints are also objects of emulation. It would seem that imitation and emulation are deeply ingrained in religious logic, where one order of life imitates the other, and a chain of imitation is created. Muslim saints are distinct from Muhammad, but they are homologized to him through a process of emulation. The faithful in turn draw inspiration by imitating the example before them, who in turn is

⁴³See Joachim Duyndam, *Hermeneutics of Imitation: A Philosophical Approach to Sainthood and Exemplariness*, *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, M.Poorthuis and J. Schwartz (eds.), Brill, Leiden, 2004, 7-21. Duyndam argues that imitation is translating, rather than aping or duplicating. See further Catherine Mooney, *Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae? Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters*, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, pp. 52-77. Examples of the depth of the drive for imitation may be found in Peter Brown, *The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity*, *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Hawley, pp. 3-14. Brown speaks of re-presenting the higher spiritual reality. In a Muslim context, see Chapter 7 of Cornell's *Realm of the Saint*. It is worth reflecting on how central the logic of imitation is to Judaism and what its relationship is to the rise of saints. As Robert Cohn suggests, in *Sainthood on the Periphery: the Case of Judaism*, *Saints and Virtues*, pp. 87-110, saints do not play a primary role in most of Jewish history. Is the rise in the prominence of saints related to the increase in theological possibility and experiential application of the principle of imitation. Closer examination of the rise of saints in relation to the rise of kabbalah in general and the rise in prominence of the *Shekhina* in particular might be able to provide us with an answer to this question.

⁴⁴For discussion of Sorokin, see Appendix 2. See *The Ways and Powers of Love*, p. 175.

⁴⁵See Peter Brown's essay in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Hawley.

imitating the primary religious model.⁴⁶ This suggests to us the depth of possibilities contained in the logic of imitation.

4.1.6.1 The Logic of Emulation

Responses to the original concept paper suggest that some readers have understood “The Logic of Imitation” in the previous section as referring to the process wherein the faithful follow and emulate the religious genius herself. We recall a tension with reference to saints, wherein on the one hand saints are model for our behavior, yet at the same time they also are in a class of their own, often exhibiting behavior that actually is unique to them and that ought not be imitated. This tension was characterized as the tension between the “admiranda” and the “imitanda”. In any event, there is surely an important aspect wherein saints are models for appropriate behavior. Reference above to the contemporary canonization of Catholic saints for the goodness they model illustrates the centrality of this aspect of the approach to saints.

Accordingly, we might propose a further feature of the religious genius. If the “Logic of Imitation” was a way of grasping the interior life of the religious genius, lived in relation to a higher ideal recognized within, “The Logic of Emulation” is the outward social manifestation of society’s relationship to the saint or religious genius, wherein his or her actions provide a basis for others’ behavior. This is certainly an important aspect in the dynamics of saints and their social environment. However, we should note that it does not describe the qualities or traits of the religious genius, let alone her interiority. Hence, I refer to it as a sub-aspect of “The Logic of Imitation”, mainly in order to clear up possible confusion as to what is intended by this term.

4.2 Manifestations of Religious Genius’ Core Traits

The spiritual life is complex and multifaceted, its different facets radiating upon one another. The imposition of structure, where one value or dimension of the spiritual life is considered primary and the others its consequences, is of necessity somewhat arbitrary.⁴⁷ Granted the tenuousness and arbitrariness of some of the ways in which we impose order on the spiritual life, I would like to look at some aspects of the spiritual life that seem to me important in the framework of understanding or

⁴⁶Theology may play an important role here. When a Christian imitates St. Francis, he would be aware of the degree of stature or being associated with Francis and Jesus respectively. When a Hindu imitates one or the other, he would not draw a distinction between them, seeing them on a par. Of course, the kind of imitation of which we speak here is transformative and is therefore rarely extended to someone beyond one’s tradition, making differences in theological understanding less vital.

⁴⁷ Compare our discussion of James on saints and asceticism. One man’s consequences are another’s preconditions.

identifying religious genius. These aspects bring together, draw upon or otherwise relate to the principal dimensions described above.

4.2.1 Altruism

Altruism draws together several key dimensions of religious genius. It is founded upon love. It manifests awareness of a broader sense of being, wherein the identity of the one offering love or sacrifice is expanded to include the other. It implicates one in transcending the self, and is founded on a higher sense of self surrender to a goal, a vision, a higher spiritual reality. And more often than not it also exemplifies a logic of imitation. Whether it is the imitation of Christ's supreme sacrifice or the imitation of the Bodddhisatva ideal, altruism grounds in a moment of sacrifice a higher spiritual vision.

4.2.2 Intention

Looking at the core features of our proposed model of religious genius, they are closely related to concern for intention. The life of a religious genius is not a casual life. It is a life lived with full intention, seeking to integrate all of life's manifold details into a focused drive for coherence and integration.⁴⁸ The very shift of emphasis beyond the self is an act of intention. Moving from caring for the self to caring for others requires, for the most part, some intentional shift of orientation. Reorienting all of life towards a higher vision requires a transformation of the will, and an intentional orientation toward the alternative, absolute reality. Purification is not possible without proper intention. Attention to motivation, to the quiet and hidden desires of the heart, in an attempt to purify them, requires great intentionality. Intention also defines altruism. Were it not for the orientation of intention, we would have no way of knowing whether an act is altruistic or selfish. The epitome of such orienting intention is perhaps the image of the bodhisattva, whose entire being depends on his intention to live for the sake of others.

4.2.3 Excellence in the Form of the Discipline Practiced

As further extension of this discussion of intentionality we note the following trait, relating to the spiritual path and to the practices that govern the life of the religious genius and his relationship to others. We recognize that spiritual cultivation and discipline play an important role in many traditions in leading to an expanded sense of reality. We have already noted that discipline is fundamental to all forms of genius and is a helpful dimension in appealing to "religious genius" as a constructed category. In some cases such discipline is integrated into trackable spiritual evolution, such as in various itineraries and ladders of spiritual progression. But achieving some kind of

⁴⁸See Robert Neville, *Soldier, Sage, Saint*, p. 126.

excellence, either in the process or as a consequence of having reached the goal (sainthood; religious genius), is very common.⁴⁹ 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. In any event, these various forms may be considered expressions of intentionality, manifesting in a focused process and in some expression of discipline. Even if the notion of grace or gift 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.⁵⁰

There is, however, one class of individuals in relation to whom some might object when it comes to the criterion of discipline. I refer to figures taken as divine (incarnations, *avatars*, etc.) within their traditions. While RG allows us to engage these figures from a broader, non faith-committed perspective, for their believers, these individuals are beyond the typical human categories and processes associated with genius.⁵¹ In the context of the present trait, these figures present us with a challenge, 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. The solution proposed by Rambachan, of relating discipline to the understanding of multiple successive lives may be the only way to relate these figures to the present trait.

4.2.4 The Totality of Demand, the Quest for Integration

Swetenham has reminded us that there are no part time saints.⁵² Religious genius as well cannot be thought of as a part time vocation. Religious geniuses are individuals for whom the alternative

⁴⁹ One additional way of considering excellence in the practice of religion is to refer to supererogatory behavior.

⁵⁰ The centrality of discipline is closely related to processes of purification discussed above, even though the emphasis above was on the state of purity, rather than processes of purification. The notion of discipline and effort could be very much at odds with notions of gift and grace, that are applied in several traditions to their religious heroes. Here I would wish to draw a distinction between the practice of discipline and the theory of discipline. Even if discipline and effort occupy a low position in theory, in practice they do occupy an important position, along the way or in the realized life of the religious genius. Exceptions and inversions of the rule, such as intentional violation of discipline, are best understood as mirroring the centrality of discipline.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² See Appendix 2.

reality, which they share alongside common reality, places a total claim, a claim for conforming their entire life, and reality itself, to what has become known to them. With it often comes a demand for full self-control, in the service of the larger goal. The broader consciousness of which they partake redefines life and radiates to all its expressions. Hence the radicality of the life of the religious genius. Nothing is simply permissible, optional. Things and situations either do or do not serve the claims made by the ultimate for a totally dedicated, focused, intentional and sanctified life. This total claim is a powerful unifying force. What this means is that religious genius is not simply a capacity; it is a way of being.

The consequence of totality is that everything is included. The life of religious genius is therefore a life of integration, or at least it strives to be. Swetenham spoke of the integrative power of love. I would like to suggest that one of the marks of religious genius is its integrative power. Not only their lives are integrated, bringing together their various aspects under the sign of a unifying spiritual vision; they offer a vision of integration to society. Consider the examples brought by Templeton.⁵³ The figures of whom he speaks are models of integration, integrating distinct social groups and segments of society within a total spiritual view of society and of reality. Consider the work of the saints of India, who integrate various dimensions of life, in the pursuit of advancing a spiritual vision in society - integrating languages, caste differences and cultural differences. Consider the power of such religious geniuses as Rabbi Kook, whose entire being of love leads to one moment of integration after another, integrating law and spirit, philosophy and mysticism, secular and religious, and more.

One of the project's contributors, Jerome Gellman, has highlighted the sense of integrated personality in his construction of religious genius.⁵⁴ Such integration can include integration of thoughts, actions, feelings and intentions. It does not assume that the person is always perfect, only that the deeper motivation and orientation of the religious genius' entire life is in accordance with the higher goals.

If religious genius is a way of being, rather than a set of capacities or achievements, this would also lead to a specific approach to him or her. Being radiates, and the recognition that someone's being represents another order and offers a harmonious integrative vision for life, will do more than inspire people to accept the vision. It will draw people to that individual's being, seeking his company, presence and radiation.⁵⁵

⁵³Appendix 2.

⁵⁴See also the contribution by John McGuckin.

⁵⁵John Hawley, in his introduction to *Saints and Virtues*, quotes the second Vatican Council's reference to fellowship, as one of the things we seek from saints. The phenomenon is, I believe, universal.

4.2.5 The Power of Intuition

Our working definition of religious genius refers to the application of the power of intuition. As noted, the creative drive that galvanizes the vision of the spiritual genius into a new statement of how to be in the here and now draws upon intuition and inspiration, which may take the form of revelations and prophecies, leading to the founding of a new religion or the revelation of a new scripture, or to the expression of a spiritual vision that redefines the meaning of past tradition and present day living. Here I would like to note how the power of intuition relates to the core characteristics offered in the model. Intuition and imagination are significant bridges between the religious genius' interiority and the novel outward transformative vision or contribution made by the genius.

Implementing the logic of imitation is an act of intuition. The higher reality cannot be implemented in a facile way in the physical reality. Even something seemingly straightforward like the centrality of love must undergo some translation as it is extended from the region of divine love and its tenderness to the complexities and mandates of human relationships. Such translation processes may have to be reasoned, but before they are reasoned, they are intuited. Religious geniuses are masters of higher intuition.

Closely related to intuition is the power of imagination. It is interesting to consider Huston Smith's description of religious geniuses and their capacity to shape the imagination.⁵⁶ Let us also recall how central a role the imagination has played in the lives of mystics and prophets. Purification of the imagination is part of the overall purification of the person, but its fruits in the religious genius are such that they serve as a means of revealing the higher order in everyday consciousness, that of the genius or of his community. The capacity to contemplate a higher world, as well as the ability to bring its fruits and testament to the ordinary plane of existence, involve the imagination and the intuition, as these produce creative bridges, through which religious geniuses bridge heaven and earth.

4.2.6 Freedom from Greed

Freedom is suggested as a significant aspect of the religious genius' internal orientation and freedom from greed as a primary expression of such freedom. 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 RG. 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. Thus, freedom from greed is a hallmark of the religious genius, bringing together the traits of purity and expanded awareness.

⁵⁶See Appendix 2.

4.2.7 The Quality of Heart

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. Here, an interior aspect of the saint or the religious genius' life is viewed as it interacts with others, giving external expression to the unique individual's interiority. Needless to say, the quality of heart of the saint is a direct expression of the saint's love, as well as of the impact of the broader existential situatedness captured by the model.

4.2.8 Additional Qualities that may be Included in an Open-Ended List

The case studies carried out as part of our project provided opportunities for growing the list of attributes associated with the religious genius. Unlike the points discussed above, the following points have not been discussed by project members and require further elaboration. They do, however, emerge from actual case studies of individuals studied as religious geniuses, and are therefore likely additions to our list.

A. Freedom.⁵⁷ We have already noted the aspect of freedom from greed as representative of the internal reality of the religious genius. Freedom as such, as an internal disposition, has been suggested as a feature of religious genius, bringing into manifestation the core traits of the religious genius.

B. Assuming responsibility for all. Schwartz' study of Rav Kook makes us aware of an important orientation of the religious genius, in relation to others, assuming responsibility for the wellbeing of all. Here love and a broader awareness of reality, suggesting its ultimate unity and interconnectedness combine to produce this orientation. Another way of referring to this same aspect is inclusivity, wherein the religious genius has the capacity to relate to all, without rejection or exclusion.

C. Clarity of vision and perception.⁵⁸ Clarity of vision is an expression of a broader view of reality, which provides a context for clarity of vision. It may be considered either in terms of the higher reality or in terms of day to day life and practical reality. Here the spiritual anchoring of the religious genius coupled with her own powers of understanding and cognitive faculties produce the kind of practical wisdom that is the hallmark of many saints and religious geniuses.

⁵⁷See case studies of Dahui by Miriam Levering, of Rav Kook by Schwartz and of the Buddha by Sasson.

⁵⁸See contributions by Levering and Gianotti.

D. Authenticity.⁵⁹ Here we encounter an interesting dimension that allows us to think of religious geniuses in relation to their tradition and in relation to reality. They are not imitators. Their view of reality and how their being is grounded lends them an air of authenticity. This authenticity may be the statement of reality, manifesting that which is to be anchored and imitated or the actual teaching and contribution to tradition they carry. The notion of authenticity bridges internal reality, which itself draws from the ultimately authentic reality, and the outward expressions of activity or teaching that are stamped by the authentic quality that the religious genius carries.

E. Grounding in presence. Finally, participants at the Oxford seminar of religious leaders found this a helpful way of describing the reality and unique quality of a religious genius, compared with the common teacher, philosopher or theologian. A religious genius operates from another plane that she grounds. This is already implied in the initial model.

4.2.9 Outward Expressions and the Work of the Religious Genius

As we move from “essence” to “manifestation” in generating a descriptive list by means of which we may recognize and describe religious geniuses, we must also consider descriptions that students of religious geniuses find appropriate to describing their actual work and outward creativity. Complementing the earlier attributes that spoke from a more interior perspective are some of the following descriptions of the religious genius’ activities:

F. Preserving or recovering pure or true knowledge of tradition. This is fundamental to our understanding of the actual novelty, creativity and contribution of the religious genius.⁶⁰

G. Offering new readings of the tradition.⁶¹ Again, this is fundamental to our definition of the work and creativity of the religious genius.⁶²

H. Recognizing issues and challenges and offering interpretation of the time.⁶³ Again, this has been included in our basic definition of what a religious genius is. Similarly the suggestion that the religious genius provides meaning for life and death is fundamental to the work of the religious genius.⁶⁴

I. Paradoxical behavior/ understanding and quality that transcends understanding of others. We have already recognized that the religious genius, like the saint, has aspects that are imitable and

⁵⁹See contributions by Tyagananda and Gianotti.

⁶⁰See papers by Levering and Gianotti.

⁶¹See in particular paper by Moshe Idel.

⁶²Robert Neville’s paper proposes five dimensions of creativity of the religious genius. Here we see how novel articulation of the meaning of being religious can provide us with new insight into the multiple domains in which religious geniuses can be creative.

⁶³ See contributions by Tyagananda, Gianotti, and Schwartz.

⁶⁴See paper by Neville. June McDaniel raised this point in the Oxford seminar.

those that are only admirable. However, they cannot be imitated, as they grow from the unique interior circumstances and life trajectory of the religious genius. Hence, the paradoxical or unpredictable behavior of the religious genius.⁶⁵

J. Practicality.⁶⁶ While not all religious geniuses are practical, one does note that many of them have translated their genius and creativity into structures of society or into their creative output. This requires practicality and is one of the skills that supports genius and religious genius. If we consider, as we shall below, “religious genius” as an “event”, extending beyond the individual to his or her disciples and community, then the practical dimension comes to the fore within the broader framework, even where it is not a personal quality of the religious genius herself.

4.3 How Should the Model be Used?

The model is an instrument in aiding understanding and further study. We must therefore be clear about how it has been constructed and how we envision using it in future study.

Having started with six attributes, project participants have moved to setting up the model as an open-ended list. This means future participants in the project and participating religious communities will be invited to not only evaluate figures in their tradition in light of the model but also to grow the list of attributes. There are many reasons for growing such a list, beyond the obvious possibility that it is incomplete *ab initio*.⁶⁷ A fuller list allows for multiple vantage points and perspectives to emerge. These allow us glimpses by means of which we can better appreciate the life of the religious genius and his contribution. As communities develop different languages, there is value in remaining open to new statements, new vantage points and new insights into what religious genius is. Inviting others to add to an open-ended list creates a two way communication between our project and religious communities, where we learn from them what they value most, and they, in turn, receive new perspective from us on how to approach religious geniuses, within a given tradition and across traditions. Involving religious communities and their own view of religious geniuses is a valuable exercise both in gaining better understanding of religious genius and in making religious genius more broadly understood and useful.

⁶⁵See also papers by Gellman and Schwartz. In fact, we ought to maintain awareness of some of the difficult, even shadow, sides, associated with saintliness, and possibly with religious genius. Illness, difficulty, unusual behavior, even repulsive behavior, can all come to expression in the lives of saints. Due to some of the eccentric or difficult aspects of saints’ lives, saints do not serve as full blown models for imitation. Some saints, or some aspects of individual saints’ lives, are not imitable. While the processes associated with the lives of religious geniuses cannot be imitated, the teaching aspect of genius suggests some dimension of repeatability, or carryover, into lives of others.

⁶⁶See contributions by Tyagananda and McGuckin.

⁶⁷Part of the possible incompleteness of the original list is that our research to date has been conducted in English, thereby potentially limiting our perspective.

The above presentation sought to establish a balance between featuring an ever-growing list of attributes by means of which religious genius can be described and the original insights of the concept paper and the model it presented. Examination of the new suggestions that have come to light in the course of our project suggests that most, perhaps all, suggestions are actually articulations, variations, combinations, permutations and expressions of the core traits presented in the original model. In moving forward we therefore do well to keep in mind the question of what new core traits might describe the reality of the religious genius and what traits are actually indebted or related to primary qualities, covered by the original model. Moreover, the core traits may themselves be further distilled, suggesting what might be essential requirements of a religious genius.⁶⁸

While there is philosophical value in distinguishing core characteristics (essence) from their rich expressions in the life of the individual and their outward expressions and manifestations, in terms of understanding how religious communities view their saints or religious geniuses and how we might be able to present them across traditions, the breakdown between primary and secondary qualities, or between essence and manifestations, presented above, is of lesser value. In thinking of growing a list of attributes, we consider all these attributes should be presented to future participants.

How, then, do we envision using the model?

A. 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 and to introduce figures of other traditions in such terms. In applying the model, there is room for our intuition, based on our learning. We may say that we have a “learned hunch” that such and such an individual fits the model. Study of a figure in light of our model and in the framework of our project can legitimately draw on prior knowledge and the intuition that then seeks justification in further study. The model 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.

B. In working further with 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

⁶⁸At a minimum two qualities would be required of any religious genius - love and awareness of broader reality. The latter would be the key to attaining the other qualities. A more likely distillation would include purity, humility and self surrender, or some of them, as attitudinal complements to the qualities of heart and mind contained in the minimal definition. As the qualities overlap, there are various ways of viewing their relationships, making it hard to posit only one or the other as a necessary requirement for religious genius.

model allow us to consider perfection in a theoretical way that transcends legendary and hagiographical aspects, associated with figures of old.

C. 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.

D. Studies of individual lives will allow us to determine whether there are some minimal characteristics that are essential to the religious genius, while others may be found in relation to some saints, but not others. This is one hypothesis I would like to put forth, with the core qualities of the religious genius, or their distillations, being the essential traits.⁶⁹ beyond these essential aspects, differences between saints, who may be quite dissimilar in character, would be accounted for by means of family resemblance. The traits associated with 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 religious genius is that all these people together are distinguishable from those outside.

E. The model thus allows us to construct what might be thought of as “the varieties of religious genius”, 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.

F. As will be suggested in a later section, the model’s description of the religious genius is balanced by an evaluation of the transformative impact of the religious genius on her or his community. Accordingly, we are not looking only at how individuals live up to the model fully or counting the number of qualities that a religious genius has in relation to the model. Rather, we can identify a cluster of qualities and then relate it to the geniuses’ transformative impact. If possible, we should seek to correlate the model’s features to the transformative effects, asking what dimensions of the model bring about transformation. Including in the model qualities that relate to the religious genius “in manifestation” could be helpful for understanding such processes of transformation. Looking at qualities associated with modes of reaching out and communicating could be particularly

⁶⁹This will also allow us to assess the possibility of a flawed religious genius. Does religious genius assume perfection and what aspects of the model are essential to such perfection.

helpful. In this context we need to also consider the various intelligences and how the religious genius manifests the deeper qualities captured in the model by means of these intelligences.⁷⁰

G. Having invited religious communities to join our process, our role as scholars includes directing future participants what to look for, noticing patterns in the varieties of religious genius across tradition and making observations on how the model operates and what aspects of the model generate transformation within communities. Perhaps more than anything, with the model in hand and a dialogue in place, we are in a position to point out to religious communities how they might appreciate figures in other traditions who share essential and common characteristics with religious geniuses they themselves admire.

5 Religious Genius in the Real Life of Community

The model discusses “religious genius” in the ideal. It seeks to articulate the interior qualities of the religious genius as well as his way of orienting and even manifesting his powers in the world. Yet, religious geniuses are not known to us from the perspective of ideal reality. We know them from the “real” world, in concrete social and historical settings. As we have already suggested, a religious genius’ creativity and genius are actually made known through his contribution to the community, religion and society to which he belongs. Before proceeding to offer further methodological suggestions for how to study religious genius in the framework of community, I would like to explore various dimensions that relate to the encounter or juxtaposition of the ideal of religious genius with the concrete reality of a given community in a given point in time.⁷¹

Perhaps a good place to begin is by asking whether religious geniuses can exist completely independently of community. Regarding saints, it has been claimed that saints belong to communities. Thus René Latourelle: “Heroic sanctity cannot be fully efficacious unless it appears at the top of a pyramid whose base is established in collective holiness”.⁷² Would we make a similar claim concerning the religious genius? To the extent that genius is creative, the creativity is likely to manifest in relation to the broader community, making the possibility of “eremetic genius”, so to speak, completely hypothetical. If a sense of the interconnectedness of being is fundamental to the religious genius, there may be no point in thinking of the genius as a lone individual. In any event the “genius” has to be recognized and must be transformative, hence is inextricably bound with

⁷⁰On this point, see further Gellman’s presentation of multiple intelligences in relation to religious genius.

⁷¹The term “community” is used loosely or broadly and does not assume a fully developed community. Given multiple spheres of influence, one could also speak of the receptive basin of the religious genius.

⁷²Rene Latourelle, Sanctity: A Sign of Revelation, *Theology Digest* 15, 1967, pp. 41-46, quoted in Kieckhefer, Sainthood in the Christian Tradition, p. 38.

community. The following points present us with some of the rich dynamics in the relations between the religious genius and community.

Community serves multiple functions with reference to the religious genius. It is the arena wherein the religious genius' contribution is recognized and where we track the transformation brought about by the religious genius. It is also what carries, preserves and transforms his memory. In the framework of our project it is also an important component of future research, where we seek to gain a better grasp of how religious genius may be appreciated by consulting with the communities that consider the individuals under study as their role models and ideals.

The Genius' relationship with community is not simply one of dissemination and expansion. It is often accompanied by tension, in view of novelty and transformation introduced by the religious genius. Accordingly, we can expect points of tension and friction, in association with the work of the religious genius. This, in fact, provides a methodology for tracing the evolution and impact of the religious genius, by noting points of friction and tension, as they yield transformation in the tradition, community and society.

But perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of a religious genius' relationship to community is the fact that the genius creates a religious community. One of the constructive tensions our project must address as it unfolds is how to highlight ideas, on the one hand, and community, on the other, as the products and creation of the religious genius. In one way, it may be argued that a religious genius, unlike a philosopher, creates community. In another, it may be posited that the power of ideas generated by the religious genius can speak across time and reach members of the same religious community or of other religious communities, independently of the encounter with the person and independently of his community-building efforts. Differently put, we come across different forms of transformation of community. One form highlights the immediate community of the religious genius and its creation or transformation. The other highlights the ideas and their ability to speak across time, place and religion, thereby transforming individuals and small communities, without necessarily creating or structuring entire communities. Rather than define the religious genius as one or the other, we must remain open to this tension, as we identify religious geniuses and explore further the potential of the category.⁷³

⁷³Related to this point is the consideration of the kind of message that creates or shapes community. Here we should consider the distinction between the descriptive and the prescriptive. The descriptive message describes the spiritual realm, in which the religious genius is grounded, and bridges in significant ways mysticism/philosophy/theology. The prescriptive message instructs, and gives specific direction in action for the community. Moshe Idel suggests that it is only the prescriptive dimension that can reach broadly to and form a community, as opposed to the descriptive dimension that only reaches individuals. This thesis should be tested out in future study of religious geniuses.

5.1 Introducing the “Religious Genius Event”

The quest for accessing interiority is like an amplitude, that seeks to arrive at a goal it may never fully attain. It is accordingly balanced by the more objective perspective of the community. We would like to suggest that rather than think of the genius’ interiority or outward achievements as opposites, to which we must apply an either/or attitude, we think of them in an integrated way, where both dimensions jointly contribute to what we call “the religious genius event”.

The project’s lead essay offered a model, drawn from studies of saints in world religions, by means of which it suggested a composite view of the subjective or interior aspects of the religious genius. Our meeting pointed to difficulties related to exclusive reliance on this interior model. From the perspective of phenomenology, it is impossible to truly access the interior reality of the other. From the perspective of various critical theories, we are cognizant of the fact that all we have is texts, often in translation, and while these may point to significant aspects of the interior life of the subject, they cannot be taken as accurate and complete reports or expressions of such interiority. Almost all of the religious geniuses we encounter, we meet through texts. Texts cannot mediate pure interiority, inasmuch as they are themselves means of mediation, through language, writing, editing and often the perception of the author, if it is not the religious genius herself.

Complementing the attempt to get at the subjectivity of the religious genius is, therefore, awareness of the impact and transformative power of the religious genius and the attempt to correlate them. Transformation and impact lead us to a domain that can be more readily measured. It is not suggested that the quest for the spiritual reality of the religious genius be replaced by a sociological study of the impact of the religious genius or how his image is constructed or developed over the ages. Rather, a more delicate balance is suggested, by means of which the subjectivity and the impact are correlated. We do not seek to study all those who may have contributed to or transformed religion (legalists, politicians, philosophers, historians and more). Rather, we seek to study those individuals who brought a depth dimension, grounded in their being, and transformed their communities or tradition in accordance and in resonance with the particularity of their being, in the direction and perspective of ultimate reality.

As a way of referring to the balance that is sought between the subjectivity and the measuring of transformative impact, we refer to the “religious genius event”.⁷⁴ The event is constituted both by the person and by the reception and impact within the community. The situation parallels that of art history, where essentialist and contextualist perspectives compete, in an attempt to identify wherein

⁷⁴Our use of “religious genius event” echoes Tillich’s use of “Christ event”, where the reality of Jesus required multiple interpretations in light of different biblical sources, and where Jesus is interpreted in relation to the lineage of apostles. Appeal to “event” relies further on particular philosophical streams, specifically the philosophy of the event, as expounded by some French philosophers.

lies the greatness of works of art.⁷⁵ The “religious genius event” thus allows us to strike a balance between our interest in subjectivity and the recognition that we must not depend exclusively on it for the appreciation of religious genius.

We may not be able to capture the interiority of the person, but rather get glimpses of it, and these glimpses are attained through the various aspects of the “religious genius event”. Furthermore, even if we recognize we cannot capture the interiority of the religious genius, we can speak meaningfully of his image as an expression of the person’s impression on the community. This too provides an angle on the person’s interiority.

There is a dialectic involved in identifying the locus of the religious genius - is it located in the person or in those who recognize the person. The subject’s self understanding is informed by the perception of the community, and the perception of the community is fed by the awareness, proclamation, being and actions of the subject. This dialectic points to a methodology that takes both dimensions into account.

The balance of interior and exterior dimensions is fundamental to religious genius, inasmuch as the ability to transform is conditioned on recognition of the religious genius by a community. Thus community is essential to the definition of religious genius. If the religious genius is not recognized in the here and now of their community, they may be recognized later and across place or tradition. But some dimension of recognition is fundamental to the religious genius’ ability to transform.⁷⁶

If the religious genius were appreciated exclusively in terms of interiority, her interiority might not be relevant for others, subject for admiration, not for emulation. The approach to the religious genius by means of impact and transformation on community opens up the interior reality of the religious genius to those in the community, creating a web of connections and relations that allows the religious genius to touch, transform and bring to light aspects of common existence with those who participate in the “religious genius event”.

As an illustration of the coming together of factors of interiority and exteriority let us consider whether the Buddha could have come through in Europe, or Jesus in India. While the profound contextual conditioning of their contribution must be acknowledged, it is grounded in the depths of their person, thereby pointing to the balance of interior/exterior suggested here.

Transformation often grows out of a set of historical, sociological and religious circumstances and needs that the religious genius addresses. In other instances, the religious genius identifies and creates a need, by means of his person or teaching. The totality of the “event” includes the circumstances of appearance and operation of the religious genius. Thus, we will encounter different

⁷⁵The analogy may be further extended, where the subversive aspect of the contribution of the religious genius parallels how the genius artist may subvert the canons of art.

⁷⁶Kierkegaard could serve as an example.

balances between the singular impact of the individual and the needs and circumstances of the hour, and how they come together in the “religious genius event”.⁷⁷

5.2 The “Religious Genius Event” - A Source of Transformation

The yardsticks by means of which the impact of the religious genius is measured are innovation, creativity, problem solving, but above all transformation. The great religious geniuses bring about transformation in their tradition, in light of the internal vision they bring to it, grounded in the state of consciousness and being that makes them the excellent models of religion they are. Therefore, in thinking of transformation we need to consider the various ways in which religious geniuses bring about transformation. Such transformation is, first and foremost, aligning the tradition with the higher vision that they carry.⁷⁸ While it might be transformation of social structures, laws etc., it need not be radical external transformation and may be transformation of vision, understanding and orientation. Such transformation may apply to individuals or sub-communities, and not to the tradition in its entirety. Such transformation would typically relate to teaching and understanding, in view of the predominance of the sage-mystic as the religious genius. But it may also be a transformation of heart and a new way of being that does not launch radically new teaching (though some related teaching, with a particular emphasis will always emerge).

The following points provide further elaboration on how we understand the transformative impact of the religious genius.

- We draw a distinction between reception and transformation. All religious leaders, saints and figures have reception within the community. In relating to religious genius, we relate to the ability to transform the community, in light of the particular interior spiritual life of the religious genius (as opposed to means of transformation that do not draw on such interiority).

⁷⁷We must consequently also recognize an element of luck. Precisely because the religious genius is made known through the matrix of interiority projected in outward circumstances, it could be that some individuals who might have had the power to transform did not play a major transformative role in their communities simply by force of circumstances that were not aligned in a way that would facilitate such transformation.

⁷⁸Katherine Young has presented a model of saints in relation to existing religious structures, captured in terms of order and chaos. According to her model, saints, presumably by definition, take some significant stand in relation to the structural norms of religion, either by affirming or by reforming them. Does “religious genius” play out similar dynamics and complexities in relation to religious structures? Are radicality, possibly even antinomianism, constitutive of the religious genius? Sir John Templeton seems to think that religious geniuses have precisely such a reforming/revolutionary capacity. In fact, his use of “religious genius” does not even touch on the possibility of what Young calls “norm preserving” saints. Or would religious genius find expression equally in the conservative drive and in the drive for reforming? Our discussions tend more in this direction.

- In thinking of transformation, we wish to be open to multiple dimensions of transformation-personal/internal, societal, ritual, emotional, teaching and more.

- In terms of teaching, a helpful framework has been proposed by Robert Neville.⁷⁹ Neville suggests five dimensions of genius, related to different “ultimist concerns.” These are five kinds of engagement, namely: engaging *existence*, *obligation*, *wholeness*, *others*, and *meaning*. These dimensions can be considered loci for transformation, wherein new teaching on fundamental aspects of the spiritual life are offered. The transformation of the religious genius is not simply a contribution to social organization, legal formulation or theological correctness. Rather, it is bringing about transformation in the direction of ultimacy, in these five areas, in light of the spiritual vision he holds, grounded in his person.

- Recognizing the domains of teaching and innovation of the religious genius, we acknowledge that the transformative impact of the religious genius need not lead to new metaphysical ideas or theological knowledge. It can be transformative in terms of giving voice to existing ideas. It can also be transformative in terms of religious experience, making it broadly available. Grounding existing knowledge in the depth of personal experience can be the source of bringing about transformation within the tradition, in dimensions such as development of the heart, recognizing new moral situations, or expanding love to a group previously excluded from one’s love.

- While recognizing that transformation addresses both the individual and the community or tradition at large, the means of achieving such transformation are different. For the individual, transformation occurs through contact, as long as the religious genius is alive. Broader transformation for the community takes place through teachings or through structures, including structures of succession, put in place by the religious genius.

- The transformative power of the religious genius can be conceptual - pertaining to ideas, or mimetic - relating to the behavior of the religious genius herself. The more immediate transformation, resulting from encounter with the person of the religious genius, has a stronger mimetic dimension. This is also relevant to creating community, which focuses on creating a way of life for it, while stating its unique vision and worldview.

5.3 The “Religious Genius Event” - Going Beyond the Life of the Individual

Relating to the “religious genius event” and to the transformation it generates allows us to expand the scope of the event. Some great religious geniuses may have a significant message to offer, but are not directly creators of communities. In other cases, the full fledged transformation

⁷⁹See Neville’s contribution. Note that Neville himself did not contextualize the five areas as arenas for creative and transformative contribution, but rather as a typology of religious genius. The present formulation incorporates his structure into the project, following the project’s evolution, based on group discussion.

takes place not only through the person, acts and teachings of the religious genius but through a rich network or web of personalities associated with the religious genius, as partners or disciples. The religious genius “event” may therefore be seen as the coming together of more than one type of person, and the resultant collaboration and complementarity. Consider Jesus and St. Paul, Bahauulla and the Bab, Rabbi Nachman and Rabbi Nathan of Breslav and, as we shall presently discuss, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Religious geniuses often require an intermediary, a disciple, to translate their vision to a broader audience, and in the process form a community. Considering both personalities as part of the “event” allows us to tie the religious genius to community, even if he or she are not engaged directly in creating community.

Let me illustrate how “religious genius” is made manifest in a process that extends beyond the genius himself by appeal to specific cases. Let us begin by contrasting Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. In terms of spiritual height, saintliness, grounding of presence in an alternative order of being, in short, in terms of all the qualities suggested as defining “religious genius”, Ramakrishna would emerge as a prime candidate.⁸⁰ Ramakrhishna surely has something novel to teach us, especially as we consider the spiritual life in an interreligious context. But let us also consider the possibility that Vivekananda too manifests religious genius. His genius is grounded in the same vision of reality as that of his master, and in the sincere attempts of his own person to live to the fullest the qualities and characteristics that we have suggested are proper to a “religious genius”. But in terms of genius, Vivekananda may have different or complementary aspects of genius. He has the ability to restate the meaning of his tradition for his day. He has the ability to be creative in teaching and in delivering a message. His creativity finds expression in the realization that structures need to be created, in order to ensure the continuity of the message, and in his ability to successfully create such structures. He is thus a founder of sorts, even if in terms of the rarefied vision and personal spiritual standing, he himself would acknowledge how much more advanced his own master is. That one is viewed as an avatar while the other is viewed as a founding Swami sums the point up adequately. Once we consider the “religious genius” as an event, integrating the person and the societal context in which he functions, we may be able to include both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda within one perspective, provided by “the religious genius event”. Indeed, while resorting to different language, and while extending the “event” to include Ramakrishna’s wife, Sarada Devi, this is in effect the movement’s theology.

This dynamic may be recognized in other religious movements. Let us take Breslav hassidism as a case in point. Rabbi Nachman of Breslav is a foremost religious genius.⁸¹ He meets all the criteria described above. He brings forth new teachings, new spiritual information, if you will. He speaks

⁸⁰Ramakrishna is the subject of one of the case studies, contributed by Swami Tyagananda.

⁸¹A case study by Zvi Mark and Biti Roi is included in our case studies.

from the exalted heights of his mystical attainment, while addressing a community in the here and now. He is succeeded in leadership by Rabbi Nathan of Breslav/Nemirov. The latter is his Boswell. He engages in the most brilliant literary activity, drawing forth the implications for daily life of the mystical insights of Rabbi Nachman. He provides structure to the movement, laying foundations for its long term survival. He so deeply identifies with the message and teaching of Rabbi Nachman that he is able to assimilate it, digest it, and bring it forth in a new manner, creative in all respects. Yet, Rabbi Nathan does not seem to enjoy the same kind of direct experience of the other world that Rabbi Nachman did. It remains an orienting framework for him, but his own emulation is largely that of Rabbi Nachman, and by assimilating his teachings he is constantly oriented in light of our model. How much of the model he has actually attained in his own personal consciousness, we cannot tell; likely much less than the master himself. He is surely a religious leader; he may be the de facto founder of the movement, he may even be considered saintly, perhaps even a saint. What of religious genius? The present line of argumentation would not only see in Rabbi Nathan another modality of religious genius, but would suggest going beyond this question by integrating both figures into the “religious genius event”.⁸²

This leads to a very charged question, also related to the following discussion of religious genius and power, in the following section: Is “religious genius” transferable? Can it be the subject of dynastic continuity? The question provides us with an interesting case of “routinization of charisma.” We intuitively think of the religious genius as a lone individual, much as we think of the saint in similar terms. The history of religious institutions shows us, however, that with regard to saints, or outstanding religious leaders, some of them are contextually identified within dynasties, that transfer status, and along with it power, knowledge and possibly piety and perhaps even genius, from one generation to another. Religions that do not have monastic traditions develop hereditary lineages, where father transfers to son the mantle of a spiritual life and a form of leadership that could be a contender not only for sainthood but also for religious genius. Consider the Sikh gurus. Consider the Sufi lineages that are hereditary and produce Sufi masters in successive generations. Consider some of the Hasidic dynasties, who have produced towering spiritual figures, generation after generation. Is their greatness only in the eyes of the beholder, their own flock, or is there some greatness or genius that is sown from generation to generation? How, then, are we to think of such phenomena? There are two trajectories that must be considered. The first relates to the present focus on the “religious genius event”. Perhaps we should think of schools and dynasties in such terms, recognizing the core or root of the religious genius, as well as its later expansions,

⁸²It would be interesting to consider the two figures in terms of power. Does the one type of religious genius manifest more power, either transformative or miraculous, than the other? Does power provide an index by means of which we can further nuance our references to degrees or modalities of religious genius? See the discussion in the following section of the paper.

articulations and even variations as part of a related event.⁸³ Another trajectory that should be considered is the question of religious genius and its cultivation. If we are able to recognize religious genius meaningfully within dynasties, this suggests it can be cultivated and grown.⁸⁴ This has huge consequences for the social and educational implications of reference to religious genius.

This leads to a final consideration of the scope and manifestation of what we call the “religious genius event”.⁸⁵ Might we consider “religious genius” to be a group phenomenon, and not simply an individual achievement?⁸⁶ The analogy to art history is once again helpful when we recall transformative moments of genius carried out by a group of genius artists, rather than by a lone artistic genius. Might we consider “religious genius” to be 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, and this point deserves further study.

5.4 The “power” of Religious Genius

The transformation brought about through the “religious genius event” leads us to consider some of the less obvious, or harder to account for, aspects of the life and work of the religious genius. It may be suggested that transformation is effected through power. Power can be the power of learning, social power, the power of ideas, but also an elusive dimension of power that characterizes saints and religious geniuses, to which we presently turn.

Because religious genius is understood by us not as a “genius in the domain of religion” but as someone who has attained excellence in himself by achieving the vision and goal of the religion, the person of the religious genius plays a crucial role, in ways that other kinds of geniuses need not. In this he is like the saint, who is appreciated in his person, rather than only through intellectual or social achievements. Therefore, transformation achieved by the religious genius draws on his person, and not only on his ideas. His ability to transform while alive is heavily indebted to his person and hence achieved through contact with the religious genius. While broader transformation of the

⁸³This is not to say that all links in a future chain of disciples or children will be seen as exhibiting the same kind of genius or belonging to the originary event. Their inclusion must be founded on some perceived greatness that stands in relation to the original religious genius, even if it is not considered on a par with it.

⁸⁴Barring, of course, a purely metaphysical view of dynasties, that relies on providence, reincarnation or some other explanation, that supplants the “nurture” dimension of cultivating genius.

⁸⁵The starting point for the following thought is scholarship on the book of the Zohar that argues that the Zohar was composed by a group of authors, rather than a single author, or even an earlier work that was later expanded.

⁸⁶Once we recognize that a genius stands in relation to community, some dimension of this is inescapable. But the question is framed from the perspective of group creativity and not the reciprocal relations of the genius and community.

community, as well as continuing transformative work following his death, do occur primarily through teaching, they also remain indebted to his person, whose memory is captured in the testimony of narratives or even in the ideals of hagiography.⁸⁷

The religious genius' life itself is transformed through his or her spiritual process, but no less significantly, so is the life of those who come into contact with them. Some of the transformation occurs through the example and the extension of the dynamics of imitation to the religious genius himself, who is in turn emulated by his followers and community. But there is a dimension of transformation that is beholden to the very being of the great spiritual person, rather than to the teaching or example. It is the experience of followers of all traditions that often the very being in the company of an outstanding spiritual personality is transformative. It allows the partaker to touch a reality that is otherwise not available to her and motivates long term changes, in the direction to which one aspires. The power of the religious genius is transformative. It is a purifying power, extending the reality of purity and love that are essential features of the religious genius. One dimension of creativity of the genius is his or her capacity to recreate, reshape, purify and transform those who attach themselves to him.⁸⁸ Hence, the company of such individuals is sought and the relationship with them becomes far deeper than simply reading their books and benefiting from their teachings. If the religious figure is passive as far as imitation goes, simply providing the model for others to follow, he or she is active in generating some form of power or presence that impacts the lives of others and aids them in their personal transformation.

How do we understand the transformative power that such religious figures manifest? Nothing in the model above necessarily leads to it. And yet, it is a given of religious life and an incontestable fact that can be documented in all traditions.⁸⁹ One could of course simply resort to the language of gift, suggesting that what the saint or genius brings to others is his gift. But such language, while not

⁸⁷In thinking of the dimensions of transformation and how they draw on aspects of the religious genius, we realize that the encounter and how it transforms individuals is by necessity limited to the lifetime and personal encounters of the religious genius. The long term transformation of the tradition is only possible if there is a message, coupled with a way of life that is particular or related to the message. Example - many may have followed Jesus because of his healing and miracles, but in the long term these became stories that were inseparable from a message and a way of life associated with him.

⁸⁸In the typology of religious genius vs. saint, this would be true for the saint as well.

⁸⁹There is certainly room to reflect on whether all traditions, and sub-traditions, manifest this transformative, presence-based, aspect equally. While it is found in all religions, it may be concentrated in some more than others. This calls for an explanation, that could be the subject of further reflection. Are the roots theological? Are they related to the expectations that a system generates? For example, does Christianity place less of an emphasis on this aspect of the saints, than, say, Hinduism? Would it be related to the recognition of other agents of transformation (the sacraments?), or to how saints are configured in terms of intercession and the importance of dead saints, as Van der Leeuw has observed?

specifically theological, does not really have any explanatory power. What we require is to understand this power of transformation as the science of the saint, not simply as her gift.⁹⁰

Indeed, the question of power provides a far deeper challenge than understanding the dynamics of transformation. It leads us to a topic that is almost completely avoided in serious theological and contemporary philosophical discussion of saints, one that is almost an embarrassment to contemporary sensibilities or to contemporary norms of academic or philosophic discourse. I refer to the special powers associated with people who are often classified as saints and many of whom would fit our own description of religious genius. Such individuals often have special powers that are considered miraculous, whether they be powers of healing, exorcism, producing changes in nature or defying various rules of nature. As far as I can tell, academic discourse on saints relegates these phenomena to the realm of the sociological/anthropological descriptive work. One describes the faith of others in miracles, while distancing oneself from it, in the act of description. There is rarely an attempt to take seriously the miraculous element, associated with the saints.⁹¹ And yet, this is a major aspect of the lives of saints and we cannot overlook it when we set out to describe religious genius. It is this dimension of power that makes saints more than philosophers or religious social workers.

For traditional theological understanding, the special powers are signs of a special relation with God or a sign of accumulated merit. But special powers are manifest also in exceptional individuals who belong to non-theistic traditions.⁹² In talking of “religious genius” we seek to identify a way to describe the phenomena *without* appeal to internal theological understanding. At the very least, we ought to be able to state that the religious genius has tapped into some other order of being or reality and that the supernatural is in some way indicative of this attainment. But this minimal statement does not really advance our understanding of how this might occur.

Manifestation of special powers is probably one major difference between religious genius and any other kind of genius - religious genius is often accompanied by signs of power that exceed the manifestations of creativity and inspiration found in other domains. One way of tackling this difference might be to point to ways in which religious genius is applied and practiced differently

⁹⁰It may be that at this point our project must open up to theological possibilities suggested by its subject matter, going beyond what phenomenologically based research can teach us. We have already acknowledge that our project, while carrying out a research agenda, is also theologically informed.

⁹¹For a case of willingness to confront this dimension, see Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, p. xliii.

⁹²The only tradition that seems to lack descriptions of such special powers is the Confucian tradition. See Rodney Taylor, 'The Sage as Saint', in Kieckhefer - Bond (eds.), *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*. Taylor claims this is because there is no theological superstructure to justify such powers, but that itself begs the question: Why was there no need for such a superstructure to develop and what does this tell us about Confucianism as a religion?

than other forms of genius. It is cultivated in an *intentional* way as part of broader religious training.⁹³ It is *total* in its demand and in how it implicates the life of the religious genius; it approaches the spiritual life in a *systematic* way, both in terms of the training offered and in terms of its extensivity. And it consciously focuses attention on a realm beyond, however it may be theologically understood. These differences may yield results that are far reaching.

The power dimension of religious genius seems to suggest something about human potential and its relation to something beyond the human or natural order. Some of the capacities that religious geniuses and saints manifest are not simply *more or enhanced* human capacities, such as one normally thinks of genius, but *other* than human capacities, inasmuch as they go against and transcend ordinary limits of human power and ability, as well as the natural order.

Transcending the self might provide a key to understanding how one accesses power, and it may be indeed that religious genius is the only one that intentionally and consciously seeks to go beyond the self. This would lead us to future reflections on the self and beyond, whether in theistic, cosmic or other terms.

As a step in dealing with these issues, I suggest we ought to examine the various theories offered within the traditions for how power is attained by special religious individuals. Beyond that, future development of the model of religious genius ought to keep this issue in mind, in providing possible ways of addressing the nexus of religious genius and special powers.

One possible element with which one might work, and that appears in many traditional accounts of the special powers associated with special religious individuals, is energetic. The three authors who developed the notion of religious genius - James, Swetenham and Sorokin - all appeal to energetic language at some point in their discussion. Contemporary authors continue to employ such language.⁹⁴ If we could identify a way of establishing the correlates of levels of existence, either in terms of metaphysics or in terms of consciousness, and their related energy states, we might be able to advance our understanding of how and why religious geniuses manifest special power. Recognizing the energetic dimension of whatever spiritual state a religious genius has attained also provides the key to why their presence is transformative and sought after by believers. These seek to be in their energetic field, and not only to benefit from their teachings. That Hindus seek the darshan of the saint and that followers of Zaddikim understand they have an obligation to attach themselves to their masters suggest that being, presence and fellowship may be best understood not simply as important values, but as occurrences that involve an energetic contact or transfer between the saint/genius and his or her community.

⁹³I believe it is fair to present Sorokin as concluding that while genius manifests in various ways, the only systematic and intentional training that leads to the domain of genius and its fruits is in religion.

⁹⁴See for instances Lawrence Babb's discussion of Sathya Sai Baba, in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Hawley.

5.5 Religious Genius and Religio - Cultural Contexts: the Limits of Transformation

Community is not only the arena to which the religious genius contributes. It is also what provides the language, context and boundaries for the operations of the religious genius and these could, potentially hamper or limit the scope of the genius' vision or its depth. While outstanding religious geniuses surely have the capacity to take their community beyond its present boundaries, in view of the ideal reality they live, it may be that certain individuals might be described as religious geniuses, while remaining bound by certain conventions that are less than the full realization of the potentialities of our model. The ideal of religious genius may not manifest itself equally, or freely, under all circumstances, and the tensions between specific religious realities and the ideal model could prove to be a challenge in our ability to recognize religious genius. Let me illustrate this with reference to Judaism. I have suggested that love is constitutive of religious genius. Not surprisingly, love as the domain of the saints was highlighted by Christian authors, but certainly the ideal of love, and of sacrificial love, can be identified in all religions. When considering love, we would not wish to limit it to love of the ingroup, but rather view love as more extensive.⁹⁵ What happens when the broad mandate to love is constrained by cultural or historical circumstances? This question arises, for instance, in the case of Judaism. Judaism has produced some great masters of love. One of those is Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a Hasidic master of the 18/19th century.⁹⁶ He was famous for his loving capacities. A look at his teachings, however, reveals something disturbing.⁹⁷ When it comes to non-Jews, the love-talk is often replaced by its opposite. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak is not alone in this. The greater part of Jewish mystics, and the greater part of manifestations of literary and spiritual genius of the mystical movements, are quite selective in their worldview, in ways that do not conform with the expansive vision that Fowler ascribes to Stage 6, the highest stage of personal religious evolution.⁹⁸ This fact is quite disturbing to contemporary students of Jewish mysticism, who seek at the same time to maintain an open perspective towards the "other". But in the present context it constitutes a challenge to the notion that religious genius is characterized by universal love. There are clearly cultural, ideological and historical constraints, that do not allow the model to

⁹⁵Following 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.

⁹⁶One might object that R. Levi Yitzchak was a saint and a great master, but not a religious genius in the sense used by us, namely bringing transformation to tradition. This might indeed be an answer to the question raised here. However, the problem of the mystically based view of non-Jews and how it limits the potentiality of love applies to many teachers, some of whom would readily be described as religious geniuses.

⁹⁷The tensions are discussed in a forthcoming contribution of Rabbi Or Rose to the Jewish theology of religions database of the Elijah Institute.

⁹⁸See Appendix 2.

be expressed in its fullness. Does this mean that these individuals are not religious geniuses, or that religious genius ought to be appreciated while taking into account various contemporary factors and constraints.⁹⁹ Perhaps we might distinguish between religious genius that manifests within cultural pressures and norms and such that manifests beyond them. A qualitative distinction between them would allow us to consider differing degrees of religious genius, corresponding to how close the specific case is to the ideal. If so, the contrast between Rav Kook's universal love and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's love of Israel could be construed as a contrast between pure religious genius and religious genius that comes through the limitations and confines of a particular religious culture.

Another illustration of the problem, again taken from Judaism. Religious genius, it has been suggested, has a dimension of novelty, rearticulation and restatement of ultimate truths in new ways, suitable to the times. It is noteworthy that the greater part of those who from a spiritual perspective, i.e. in terms of conformity to our model, would have been considered religious geniuses, have done little by way of advancing a reform or a restatement of Judaism in contemporary terms. The reasons are historical. Reform was undertaken by figures who would not at all qualify, based on our model, as religious geniuses, thereby pushing those whom we would tend to identify as either saints or religious geniuses, into a reactionary historical stance. Their contribution to contemporary posturing has been one of preserving the old, rather than offering fresh articulations to their core spiritual vision. Does that mean that Judaism has, to a large extent, lost the capacity to produce religious geniuses, due to the historical and cultural factors shaping its history for the past century and more? Perhaps. Alternatively, we would have to take these circumstances into account and to seek to identify more limited expressions of religious genius within these constraints.

⁹⁹Need I raise the mirror image challenge of recognizing the spiritual genius of some great Christian mystics who shared contemporary hostile attitudes to Jews?

6. Religious Genius and Interreligious Reality

The present project grows out of an interest in exploring how saints might provide a site for interreligious conversation and how “religious genius” might allow us to advance our understanding of saints and exceptional religious personalities, in other traditions as well as in our own. From the outset, the category of religious genius was approached with the hope of identifying a category that is not colored by one particular religion, that could therefore speak across traditions. Thus, if the thesis of the present paper is accepted, we have in “religious genius” a category that allows us to speak uniformly and a little more objectively about outstanding religious personalities, as we encounter them across religious traditions. If addressing outstanding religious individuals through the category of religious genius can advance our ability to draw inspiration from such individuals across religious traditions, then it will have justified the development of this category. In what follows, I shall offer further reflections concerning the potential this project has for advancing interreligious understanding.

6.1 Religious genius as an inspiration for other traditions

We begin this section with a brief quote from Sir John Templeton on religious geniuses:

In addition to the geniuses given more-than-human minds, god also creates saints and prophets gifted with more-than-human souls. A prophet is a pioneer in the vast uncharted regions of the spirit. For spiritual progress to flourish, do we need to cultivate interest and humility to listen carefully and learn from such people, recognizing their important gifts?¹⁰⁰

The challenge to listen and learn from geniuses of the spirit involves more than simply opening “our” minds. For people who come from religious traditions, it involves going beyond the bounds of their tradition, in order to listen deeply to a message that was articulated within the framework of another tradition. This, as history teaches us, is not always easy. It is something that must be cultivated and justified. It is a domain where, for the most part, our religions provide us with very little precedent and at times they even make such listening impossible, either by directly forbidding it, or by creating conditions that are unfavorable to such listening. The present challenge is therefore how to develop an attitude, a theory, a culture of listening to the wisdom of saints, of religious geniuses from other traditions. If we can achieve this, then we have opened the door to significant advances in relations between religions and created wonderful opportunities for spiritual growth for their followers. This then is our task, to try to apply “religious genius” not only as a means of understanding or respecting the other, but as a path that might lead to greater sharing, inspiration and shared growth between the religions.

¹⁰⁰For the full quote from Templeton, see Appendix 2.

It is worth noting that saints have always provided some kind of common ground between traditions. This is particularly true on the level of popular saint worship, though it may be argued that very often the elites too were quite open to receiving influence from others. On the level of popular piety we encounter time and again the phenomenon of common saint worship. Muslims and Hindus share saint shrines in India; Jews and Muslims do so in Morocco and elsewhere; Christians share saint shrines in the various localities in which Christianity has taken hold, in short everywhere. When one seeks blessing and requires intercession, why stop with saints of your own tradition? But when it comes to drawing inspiration or teaching, the situation becomes more complex.

Let us then consider in what way religious geniuses could allow us to receive from another tradition. Lawrence Cunningham has spoken of the saint as a parable, by means of which we are called to the spiritual life.¹⁰¹ This notion is particularly helpful in an interreligious context. The religious genius of one tradition can serve as a parable for the faithful of another. The parable need not be followed in and of itself, but it recalls something for us, that which hides behind the parable. What it recalls is the higher realm of reality of which the religious genius partakes. And this realm is common to all. Consequently, the faithful of one tradition can be reminded by means of the parable offered by the genius of the other tradition of that which is common to all, the ultimate quest to position oneself in relation to the highest aspects of reality. The religious genius takes one beyond the tradition-specific teaching, through the invitation to imitate and conform to a higher reality, making its transformative power available.¹⁰²

The question of whether it is possible to draw inspiration from saints of another tradition was explored by Flescher et al., in their discussion of altruism.¹⁰³ They argued that it is possible to follow the example and the teaching of saints of one tradition, without belonging to that tradition.¹⁰⁴ As they note, increasingly teachers are offering just that kind of teaching. Teachers like the Dalai Lama and many of the teachers coming out of India are offering teachings that are geared not only to their own members, but to the world at large, including followers of other religions.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹*The Meaning of Saints*, p. 79.

¹⁰² For clarity's sake it should be stated that the invitation is not to imitate the particularity of what the given religious genius is imitating, but the existential posture of imitation of the higher realm. Thus, if a Christian saint or genius makes Jesus the focus of his imitation, the personal face of the higher reality, this may not translate readily to the experience of someone who cannot relate to the person of Jesus. Still, the structure of imitation and the existential position that comes from it can.

¹⁰³ See Appendix 2.

¹⁰⁴ See Flescher et al., Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁵ I am hardpressed to think of "abrahamic" saints or geniuses of whom the same may be said. Perhaps the late Menahem Mendel Schneerson, possibly Judaism's last religious genius, might qualify. We might consider John Paul the II, soon to be canonized, in a similar light, in view of the global message he offered. And isn't the message of Mother Theresa, independently of her iconic status, itself an interreligious message? Whether these cases are really parallel to teachings

If one considers not the specifically moral teaching, as did Flescher, but the overall message of the religious genius or saint, one would have to draw a distinction between witnessing and sharing faith. With members of his own faith community, the genius shares his faith. To members of other communities, he offers a testimony of what it means to be religious, what it is like to be planted in two worlds simultaneously,¹⁰⁶ how the perfection of the qualities associated with religious genius can lead to another way of being. He thereby inspires seekers of other traditions to identify how, within their own traditions, they might attain similar heights.

6.2 Reaching Across Traditions as a Yardstick for Religious Genius

Let us take the argument one step further. Having suggested that religious geniuses *can* inspire across traditions, we would like to propose that the capacity to inspire across traditions be considered a feature of religious genius. As we construct the category, we would like to suggest that the capacity to inspire across traditions be incorporated in our definition of what religious genius is and thereby serve as a significant filter when considering which individuals might be thought of as religious geniuses. Recognizing the transformative power of religious genius and given our interest in applying the category in a cross-religious context, we recommend for consideration the following framework (not definition) for appreciating the religious genius: *A person whose religious persona and religious transformative contributions to a tradition are of such magnitude to have the potential to reach beyond the home tradition to make him or her enduringly inspiring across religious traditions.*¹⁰⁷

Various nuances and implications emerge from closer scrutiny of this formulation and its subject matter, and these are listed below:

- If our project has a dimension of advocacy to it, then we would be advocating not simply for the existence of religious geniuses or for the category as a means of appreciating them, but for the ability of religious geniuses to inspire across traditions as a fundamental aspect, associated with the individuals or with our ability to appreciate them.
- We note the reference to persona, rather than personality, by means of which we indicate that the persona as it has developed beyond the historical personality is not without interest to the continuing evolution of the image of the religious genius. This points once again to the dynamics of the individual and the community that preserves and recasts his memory.

offered by teachers of Eastern religions deserves further thinking.

¹⁰⁶Or for a monistic worldview: what it is like to recognize the fundamental unity of being, beyond apparent diversity.

¹⁰⁷Our group is indebted to Jerome Gellman who put forth successive iterations of this formulation, each of which was debated and further refined through group discussion. This idea is also echoed in case studies by Carl Ernst, Moshe Idel and Miriam Levering.

- We note the dual emphasis on religious persona and on transformative contributions, each of which can serve as a basis for inspiration for other traditions.
- While the actual innovation or transformation within tradition cannot be translated across traditions, the interplay between the qualities of the religious genius and the transformation she effects can serve as a lesson that can be implemented across cultures, religions and time periods.
- It is recognized that the religious genius' impact within the community is of a different magnitude than beyond his community. Within the community, the religious genius creates community and shapes it. Beyond his community, the religious genius is a source of inspiration, a model, a teacher. But he will rarely, if ever, recreate a community, beyond the interest of those, often only individuals, who draw inspiration from the example of his person, accomplishments and deeds.
- Transformation requires a shared religious language with the community, based upon which transformation can be effected. Finding such common language across traditions is harder. Consequently, the inspiration of the religious genius across traditions will be largely in the domain of ideas that resonate against a common conceptual background.
- The capacity to speak across traditions is related to the religious genius' attitude to tradition itself. Typically, or commonly, the religious genius brings to tradition broader spiritual or visionary horizons that in some way either relativize or contextualize the tradition in ways that allow it to speak beyond its native community.
- In presenting religious geniuses across traditions we would readily present those dimensions of the religious genius that are translatable, hence germane to our understanding of religious genius. At the same time, it is also important to preserve and present those aspects that are unique and not readily translatable. We seek to avoid a reduction of religious genius to broad commonalities. Even if the model of the religious genius does assume such broad commonalities of spiritual experience, nevertheless the traditions transformed by the religious genius and the genius' contribution to them do bear marks of uniqueness and untranslatability.
- In referring to the capacity to inspire beyond traditions, we must consider the complex factors of the person, teaching, and changing circumstances and opportunities, that make such learning and inspiration possible. Awareness of these multiple dimensions will orient future study of these individuals and their potential impact across traditions.
- Awareness of the interreligious potential of religious geniuses raises the question of what are the most useful materials to be studied and presented to broader audiences. Narrowly legal or particularistic theological emphases would likely not capture the genius quality in ways that another community can appreciate. Poetry or narrative of a life have greater likelihood of being appreciated across traditions.
- One might consider what the medium by means of which the religious genius impacted her own community is, as a basis for suggesting what media might communicate best across traditions.

Without excluding theological expressions of religious genius, one recognizes that many religious geniuses also had the ability to communicate to broader publics, in less theological or technical ways, thereby allowing such communication to extend beyond their original community or traditions. This might hold the key to understanding what can translate or reverberate beyond the narrowness or particularity of a tradition.

6.3 Interreligious geniuses

Let us now move from theory to precedent or example. The notion of interreligious geniuses is not as novel as it might seem. The tradition that is most comfortable with drawing from the testimony and experience of other traditions is the Sikh tradition. Its scriptures are thus constructed, drawing on saints of other traditions, and apparently taking great pride in the fact.

Some have suggested that the model for a modern paradigm of being inspired by saints of other traditions is Gandhi. Interestingly, many have considered Gandhi himself a saint, though Indians have resisted this, possibly accepting Gandhi's own protestations on the matter.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Gandhi might be an interesting test case for our thesis of religious genius. Even if one has trouble calling him "Saint Gandhi", as some might have liked, would he qualify as a religious genius?¹⁰⁹ But Gandhi is even more important in the fact that within his own spiritual universe he constructed an international saintly community. It includes such figures as Jesus, St. Francis and Tolstoy. Gandhi's approach to saints was eclectic, and his eclecticism puts him in the company of many saints, whose mission is to break through some of the boundaries and structures of everyday existence. What drives them is the drive to integration, of which we spoke above. If so, then what more powerful vision of integration than the integration of the saints of different religions into a universal family of saints, a "communion of saints", if you will. In this, Gandhi may be truly modern, pointing to one of the great challenges, and promises, that faces us.

Sainthood is in crisis.¹¹⁰ Few appeal to it; few think seriously in terms of sainthood. It is thus of particular note that those saints that have captured the global mind have done so precisely by going beyond the boundaries of their own tradition. Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day, Gandhi, some might add the Dalai Lama or Pope John Paul, are all figures who bore a testimony of significance that went

¹⁰⁸See Mark Jurgensmeyer, Saint Gandhi, *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Hawley, pp. 187-204.

¹⁰⁹Gandhi was discussed by our scholars as a test case for religious genius. While some advocated considering him a religious genius, the majority opinion seems to have been that his genius was not in the specifically religious field. While drawing on religious resources, Gandhi did not meet the criteria we have posited for religious genius, in terms of bringing transformation to a religious tradition and possibly in terms of the more subjective or interior aspects of our model. Thus, the argument for "Saint Gandhi" might actually work better than the argument for Gandhi the religious genius.

¹¹⁰See John Coleman, After Sainthood?, *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Hawley, pp. 205-226.

beyond the confines of their own religious community. With the obvious popularity they enjoyed in the media, they became global saints, interreligious saints.

There is an even more far reaching phenomenon when it comes to interreligious saints. There may be more to the notion of an “interreligious saint” or religious genius than the capacity of inspiring across traditions. Some contemporary spiritual teachers, especially in the Hindu context, seem to be redefining or restating the meaning, teaching and practices of their religion so that it is not defined in a narrow way, specific to the religious roots of the tradition, but in a more global and universal way, that can speak beyond the tradition, and to other traditions as well. Our discussions have suggested that some contemporary religious leaders, while drawing from their traditions and in some way maintaining continuity with it, also offer their teachings in a new global context in ways that are detached from those roots. If we recognize such individuals as religious geniuses,¹¹¹ their reaching across religious traditions is built into the construction of a teaching or a religious movement. Contemporary examples are Satya Sai Baba and Amrtanandamayi. Universalizing a religious tradition thus emerges as one possible significant innovation of religious geniuses.

6.4 Legitimizing Otherness, Confronting the Challenge of Truth

One of the biggest challenges in contemporary thought is the status of the other. This challenge informs much of contemporary reflection on interreligious relations. Saints and religious geniuses have a contribution to make here. Edith Wyschogrod sums up her argument in *Saints and Postmodernism* as follows:

I have argued that desire for the Other imposes a responsibility for the Other that is especially strong in the lives of saints. I maintained (with Levinas) that the face is the an-iconic material expression of the Other that provides the warranty for language and that saints’ lives, far more than others, respond to the impingement of alterity.¹¹²

If saints respond to alterity, does that not lead us to seek those saints and to cultivate the very notion of sainthood for our days so that it addresses directly the greatest challenge of otherness that pertains directly to the realm of the saint - the otherness of the other religion and its saints. Religious genius, then, must be able to contain religious otherness as a feature of the times. Whatever historical, political and social circumstances may have prevented saints of the past from affording full recognition to the saints of the other, the religious genius of today must practice the depth of

¹¹¹The question of proximity in time and the need for historical distance in evaluating a person’s lasting contribution to a tradition and his genius status is one of the methodological challenges of our project.

¹¹²p. 223.

universal love and union in such a way that it includes the greatest alterity, the religious other, within the sphere of the one integrated reality of which he is a symbol.¹¹³

Accommodating alterity is a two way street. It is not only the religious genius who must accommodate, address and in some way transcend or incorporate alterity. It is also the receiving tradition, the one that is inspired by the religious genius, that must find ways of justifying and legitimating its openness to and capacity to be inspired by the saints and geniuses of another tradition. The idea of deriving inspiration from saints and geniuses of another tradition requires establishing or identifying theological mechanisms, by means of which such inspiration might be justified. Some traditions will find this an easier task than others, but all will have to affirm why it is possible, permissible and recommended to draw inspiration from the geniuses of another tradition. This is one of the practical challenges that the field of ‘theology of religions’ must tackle and I believe it can tackle it successfully.

A “religious genius”, as we know, presents a statement of spiritual reality and spells out its implications for a tradition. How can such a statement be appreciated while bracketing the implied truth-claims of the knowledge shared? One strategy has already been suggested - appreciation of the spiritual and existential posture, while bracketing engagement with its truth-content. Such bracketing could rely on a theory of revelation that is contextual, relevant to its specific addressees and therefore neutral in terms of its truth-demands on members of other religious communities. Such a strategy opens the door to appreciation and in turn to respect for the other. Accordingly, we could ascertain that someone belongs to the category of religious genius, having identified significant presence of the various markers and criteria by which religious genius is recognized or defined. Following such recognition, we would be led to recognize in a body of teaching or a revelation a genuine expression of religious genius. This does mean we will necessarily adopt it or accept its content as “truth”, at least not for ourselves. But if, say, we concluded that the Book of Mormon was an expression of religious genius, this would certainly change our attitude to the Mormon religion, enhancing respect for it, while leaving open the question of truth. Thus, knowledge of the instrument of the revelation and recognition of those attributes by means of which we recognize religious genius would lead to attitudinal change. At the very least it would allow us to recognize in the Book of Mormon an expression of religious genius. This would be more objective than the claim

¹¹³Another observation concerning saints and otherness. Coleman draws our attention to the fact that saints are not democratic; they represent and uphold a hierarchical view of reality. Shifting our reference from saints to religious genius does not change the implied hierarchy; in fact it strengthens it by appeal to the category of genius and the implication of unevenly distributed gifts. (Compare John Templeton, *Possibilities*, p. 44). Hierarchy, argues Coleman, suggests otherness. It allows us to come to terms with something that often goes against the grain of our egalitarian ethos. It seems to me that if saints legitimate otherness, they thereby open up to all levels of difference and otherness, paving the way to acceptance of otherness between religions as well.

that it is a revealed book, which is purely a faith claim. If the instrument of revelation could be presented in terms of the lifestyle, moral attainment and overall degree of human caliber that could provide a framework for the activation of intuition and vision, yielding a new religious expression, legitimacy of that revelation would be enhanced. The fruits of such recognition would surely be greater respect. Conversely, agents that do not manifest the characteristics of religious genius would be more readily considered as having produced works of their own imagination.

In pitching the category of “religious genius” we intentionally sidestep the thorny question of religious truth. We assume that one can draw a distinction between the being of the person and even the validity of messages received and the truth claims on others that might result from such revelation and restatements of the meaning of a tradition or the meaning of existence itself. A closer look at what religious geniuses teach might allow us to take an additional step. We do well to recall the different kinds of information and teaching for which the religious genius is an agent. These include teachings concerning the supernal world and metaphysical reality, means of addressing contemporary challenges and affirmation of classical teachings of the correct way of living. The challenge of truth differs in relation to each of these forms of knowledge or wisdom. It seems least likely to bridge metaphysical discrepancies, including soteriological differences. It seems easiest to accommodate classical teachings. Thus, opening ourselves up to the inspiration of religious geniuses of another tradition and the challenges it presents should be considered separately for each of the bodies of knowledge related by the religious genius. Certainly, recognition of the “religious genius” status of an individual makes it easier to open up and to receive inspiration and even to accept as true the second and third type of knowledge. This itself is no small achievement.

7. Moving Forward - Developing a Methodology, Articulating a Program

The theoretical presentation of our understanding of “religious genius” is meant to provide a foundation for future research and educational activities. These are geared at two audiences - the scholarly community and the community at large. Our overall goals as the project unfolds are:

1. Advocating for religious geniuses as individuals who can be recommended and appreciated across traditions.
2. Advocating for the category as a meaningful way to conduct research and as a means for gaining better understanding of the individuals we study.
3. Advancing research on religious genius, using a variety of methodologies.
4. Creating resources for appreciation of religious geniuses.
5. Raising consciousness for the project, its methods and its subject matter, through multiple channels of communication and outreach.

Points 1 and 2, the core aspirations of the project, are achieved through activities that come under points 3-5. Accordingly, in the following section I shall suggest methodological guidelines that can inform future study (mainly point 3) and describe activities that could be helpful to making the category work in the Academy and in the community at large (points 3 and 4).

7.1 Methodologies for Future Research

A. Studying religious genius in light of our model. The case studies that have been undertaken thus far provide a first attempt at studying religious genius in light of our model. As the list of characteristics associated with the religious genius has grown, further nuance may be brought to the study of these individuals. At the very least, studying individuals in light of our model provides a “grammar” by means of which we can view these individuals and consider how they can be appreciated across traditions.

B. Having recognized the dual poles of the individual and her transformative impact, we must develop methodology/ies that capture the rich dynamics between the religious genius and community. Rather than simply state that religious geniuses bring about transformation, we would seek to correlate *what* aspects of the religious genius bring about such transformation. Here the model is particularly useful, in that it offers precision with regard to the interior and some of the functional aspects of the religious genius. In the ideal, we would like to identify complete correspondence between the intensity and fullness of the interior life of the religious genius and the depth and impact of his transformation. The bar of being and the bar of innovation should, ideally, correspond. We realize, however, that we may not know enough about one of the two aspects,

leading us to lower the bar, in terms of our knowledge or even in terms of perceived attainment, on one of the two aspects.

C. Adapting methodology to the subject matter. Because of the existence of different types of religious genius, we must rely on multiple methodologies. For those whose genius is expressed through theological contribution, we require a more theological or philosophical approach, complementing an appreciation of their person. For those who transform mimetically, through personal encounter, we will rely on narrative, anecdotes, and appreciation of means of communication and outreach.

D. Recognizing and monitoring transformation is an important dimension of presenting the contribution of religious geniuses to their society and tradition. Observing patterns and modes of transformation allows us to recognize how religious genius operates. Thus, while we begin with certain premises and orientation of what we are looking for, the observation of patterns of transformation holds the key to identifying dynamics of person, community, reception and transformation. Identifying and cataloguing multiple options could be part of a future research agenda.

In studying means of effecting transformation we also pay attention to means of communication. Given the range of impact and transformation generated by the religious genius, we need to consider whether certain modes of communication and expression are more effective in bringing about transformation. Such study will impact the choice of what materials our project wishes to share as it presents religious geniuses to a broader public, across religious boundaries. Possibilities: verbal vs. non verbal materials; philosophical and theological vs. simpler forms such as stories and parables; poetry vs. narrative or law; doctrinal materials vs. materials that engage the imagination and leave room for participant interpretation. To be clear, we are not assuming that only some forms will inform our project and provide the basis for further dissemination. We assume all forms are to be studied. What we should note are the dynamics of transformation and their possible relationship to certain forms of expression and communication.

In considering transformation we can think of the tradition, a community or individuals. Focus on individuals allows us to listen to stories of individual transformation. These are typically based on encounter, even more than on teaching. The encounter is itself the “event” for the engaged individual. This would lead to the development of a method of identifying “moments of encounter” and studying their dynamics in terms of communication, method, impact and long term transformation.

With reference to the tradition itself, we may seek to identify turning points in the tradition, brought about by candidates for the category of religious genius. Similarly, identifying controversies at crucial turning points suggests we are at turning points, points of transformation, effected by the religious genius. Viewing resistance to the religious genius is telling of her contribution to and transformation of tradition.

E. Drawing on psychological theories. Our project is open to and eager to be in dialogue with practitioners of psychology. How our project relates to the work of Dean Keith Simonton is related in Appendix 4. The dialogue with his work may continue and may shape future studies of individual figures in light of his prior work.¹¹⁴ There are other psychological tools that can be brought into conversation with our project.

Our project has begun to touch on different intelligences as means of addressing how the religious genius brings about transformation. The social, cognitive and other aspects of intelligence of the religious genius are accordingly bridges between the religious genius' subjective reality and communicating the message and reality that are to become transformative for tradition. Multiple intelligences have been treated thus far only in the work of Gellman. They provide an additional aspect of measurability, complementing the socially oriented measure of transformation.

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?

In our discussion the notion of integrated personality came up repeatedly. This notion requires further elaboration. Does it appeal to a particular psychological view of the person? What are the parameters for disjunction and deviation from such integration? Is it to be understood from the vantage point of the later stages of the person, or from the view along the path, expressing a movement towards greater integration? Does intention and quest for integration suffice, or do we posit a degree of attainment in the life of the religious genius?

Psychology offers us several additional helpful notions, by means of which we might approach religious genius:

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.

¹¹⁴It is, nevertheless, important to restate that our way of constructing the category and our agreed upon usage of "religious genius" do not correspond to his approach, that would seek to study "religious genius" along the lines of "political genius", "military genius", etc.

c. 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.

F. Advancing conversation with the scientific community. Our project seeks to broaden the interdisciplinary base from which research is carried out. In a future conversation 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. What aspects of the model can generate research by various scientists and what accounts could they give for our constructed model? 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. Thus, 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.

G. Comparative study of religious genius. One of the possible methodologies for future study could be the comparative study of figures. This may be more appropriate for a research setting than a classroom setting, even though there are distinct pedagogical benefits to the latter. As our method has become more complex, seeking to address the saint's interiority and her impact within society, it might allow us to engage in comparative study with greater nuance, taking into account both the multiple factors of the model, the family resemblances they yield and the measurable impacts and means of transformation that religious geniuses bring to their tradition.

H. There has been some discussion of how sainthood has been constructed in terms of gender, leading to feminist critique of saints, mainly Christian.¹¹⁵ Does "religious genius" allow us to address this challenge in a new way? Does it provide a fresh beginning? Going beyond a particular tradition and its social constructs (typically: Christianity) might make feminist concerns less pressing. The possibility to construct a novel model might also allow us to identify distinctly feminine dimensions of religious genius.

I. Not all great religious figures can be successfully studied as part of our project. One of the serious methodological challenges is identifying what figures can profitably be included within the

¹¹⁵Elizabeth Stuart, *Spitting at Dragons: Towards a Feminist Theology of Sainthood*, Mowbray, New York, 1996; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, Continuum, New York, 2006; *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Tinear Szell, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991; *Gendered Voices, Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine Mooney, Penn University Press, Philadelphia, 1999; *Women Saints in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma, SUNY Press, Albany, 2000.

scope of the project. Having a reliable knowledge base concerning the individual seems like a prerequisite. Hence, figures whose historicity or concerning whom facts cannot be established with certainty are not successful candidates. The application of the category to them remains an interesting exercise in viewing them from a new angle, as Vanessa Sasson's paper on the Buddha suggests. Still, we lack foundations for full application of our method. At the other extreme, contemporary figures might qualify, but they lack the historical perspective by means of which we can appreciate their enduring contribution to their tradition or society. Between these two extremes, we navigate, seeking a balance between historical study and the quest for inspiration. Accordingly, we must be prepared for full and partial analysis. Partial analysis will be interesting, suggestive, heuristic, but we can't really apply a full methodology in relation to many figures.

The tension between "person" - what we can know of the person in historical terms, and the "persona" what tradition has come to attach to the person, is a constitutive tension, of which we must be aware. "Persona" may be construed as an extension of person, or we may wish to keep our study strictly to the study of "person". But can we study "persona" only, in such cases where there is no person, telling us about how traditions imagined their heroes and geniuses? The backbone of our project are "persons", and we seek to ground our knowledge of their interiority and transformation on the foundations of their writings and what is known of them. By extension, this methodology may be secondarily applied to individuals whom we only know as "personae". Instances in which we can relate to both the "person" and "persona" (Israel Baal Shem Tov, to take one example) are interesting, inasmuch as they allow us to study the relationship between the two and how the memory of the "person" might be captured by and generate his "persona". Given our interest in the "religious genius event" it is interesting to address the evolving image of the religious genius in the community. Examples that have informed our discussion include images of St. Paul in the New Testament and the evolution of the image of Namalvar.¹¹⁶

7.2 Teaching Religious Genius

From the outset, we have identified "religious genius" as a promising area for the classroom context. Many of the research possibilities listed above can inform the classroom situation.

A teaching context is the ideal place for recommending geniuses of another tradition. It serves the needs of religious literacy, comparative study, introduction to religion and various aspects of critical study of religion. We imagine "religious genius" can be taught in a variety of classroom settings of different levels. Its function will vary according to the level at which it is taught. As a general guideline, we would distinguish between the use of "religious genius" to recommend and advocate for the importance of certain figures and the use of "religious genius" as a heuristic, by

¹¹⁶See case study by Vasudha Narayanan.

means of which classroom conversation can be deepened. In the latter case, it is less important to agree upon whether a certain figure is or is not a “religious genius” than to engage the process of reasoning, by means of which this figure is approached from a fresh vantage point. Such a heuristic approach may revisit some of the constitutive tensions or issues that have informed our project, as it addresses individual figures. These could include: saints vs. religious genius; perceived perfection vs. flawed; admirable vs. imitable; comprehensible vs. incomprehensible; affecting in-group vs. capacity to reach beyond it; operating at one’s initiative vs. sense of instrumentality, etc.

One of the key questions that has informed our project from the outset is whether we are relating to a small club, or to a more open ended and flexible category. According to the first option, we would be deciding who is “in” and who is “out”. According to the second option, we would be using the category as a heuristic, and would remain open to various shades, nuances and aspects of genius. The first option would lead us to recommend the “top 100” religious geniuses for study and appreciation in an educational context. In identifying these we could rely not only on expertise within our group but on a survey of scholars and teachers of religion who would suggest who they think would be the best candidates across religions. (The forthcoming presentation of our project at the AAR is a good moment to undertake such initial polling). The second option would allow us a broader exploration of the meaning of “religious genius” and lead to a looser and more flexible application of the category, with specific educational and research benefits in mind. Our overall recommendation is to maintain a balance between these two perspectives, and to apply each as appropriate to a given context, while maintaining awareness of our own application of the category - stricter or more flexible.

In thinking of how to present these religious geniuses we would wish to feature the various aspects that inform our project. These include: the story of the life, relating to the model, expressions of transformation brought to the religion, key teachings (with emphasis on transformation), individual encounters, contributions to institutions and lasting legacy, literary works. The presentation should capture the type of person being described (beyond standard generalities), with emphasis on the twofold dimensions of the model, as a means of approaching the person, and studying transformation, as a means of appreciating her contribution to the religion and to the community.

For purposes of education we can envision a dual process. The project will engage in a twofold effort - encouraging teachers to develop their own educational materials and making available fully developed educational resources. The first option is an open ended process, where each teacher will construct her own syllabus of religious genius, with our project providing resources and guidelines, but with much leeway for teachers to further develop methodology and test cases, thereby enhancing our own efforts. The other option is to script much more well defined courses, with clearly identified readings and syllabi, and to engage in broader teacher training, by means of which

our project can gain traction in educational settings. The two methods do not exclude one another. The former has a more research angle and is appropriate for students whose training might lead them in that direction. The latter is for a more basic and popular educational setting, including community colleges and maybe even higher grades of secondary school.

7.3 Outreach to the Community

Community is germane to the construction of “religious genius”. It is therefore appropriate that in thinking of the project’s deliverables and audiences, we consider the broader religious community, drawing on its appreciation of religious geniuses and its being the classical repository for maintaining their memory and receiving their transformative impact. We consider this project has great significance for religious communities, and seek to maintain an ongoing dialogue between scholarship and its potential impact on the community. Our pilot project has shown that this is beneficial. Having conducted seminars for scholars and for religious communities, we can suggest that there is a two way enrichment between these groups. This enrichment should be maintained.

We imagine community being involved on multiple levels. In terms of research, we consider it is important to give religious communities a voice in our project. It is appropriate to involve community in the definition and recognition of religious geniuses and their attributes (the model). Accordingly, we think it is of value that the model be expanded by the community. This can take multiple forms.

A. Religious communities may be asked in the abstract what qualities they consider would define a “religious genius”, thereby drawing on their intuitive recognition of the term. This would take the form of a survey, among religious communities. In this way the list of attributes can be grown. An additional means of surveying in order to understand what different traditions consider as appropriate to saints and religious geniuses could 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 and religious genius. 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.

B. Religious communities may be asked to evaluate religious geniuses of their own tradition, and review them in light of our model. This might help us learn what makes certain religious geniuses successful and what communities consider to be the most important aspects in the profile of a religious genius.

C. Similarly, though on a more limited scale, communities can be asked to evaluate outstanding figures of another tradition, provided they have sufficient familiarity with those figures. This would allow us to learn what qualities have the potential to inspire across religious traditions.

Religious communities can be involved in our project directly, but also through the instrumentality of their leadership. We consider “religious genius” is a subject that has great potential to inform and deepen exchanges between religious leaders. The Oxford meeting has confirmed this. If so, the whole concept may gain further traction, by bringing it to the attention of high profile religious leaders, as well as local religious leadership.

Combining the interest in reaching to communities and the specifically educational interests of the project could be a process of linking communities in study, across distances if need be, so that two or more communities at a time are engaged in the study of religious genius. In this way, the random classroom student body composition is replaced with a more dedicated group of participants, who represent religious communities. This is a means of giving religious communities a voice in our project as well as extending our project to inform their interreligious program.

7.4 Types of materials to be created

The following materials can serve the community and teaching contexts of the project. They can also help inform its research component and can, in turn, benefit from it.

A. Printed collections of profiles of individual religious geniuses, presented in light of the project’s goals. These would have a more popular impact, while following our project’s academic guidelines.

B. Thematic collections illustrating aspects of the model and the qualities associated with religious geniuses, drawn from their teachings and life stories.

C. A series of educational videos featuring individual geniuses and their possible relationship, as they are brought into rapport with one another.

D. A strong website, dedicated to religious genius, as a teaching resource. Test cases, key texts, videos, impressions from members of other religions - all these can be part of such a website.

E. More academic publications will be featured in dedicated publications.

Appendix 1: Studying “Saints” - an overview of methods and approaches to the study of saints

8.1 Purpose of review of literature

As suggested in the body of the paper, the individuals we seek to study through this project are most commonly referred to in research literature as saints. Consequently, identifying how they have been approached in the past and where future discussion might go involves us in a review of scholarly approaches to “saints”. The following appendix seeks to identify the principal methods, achievements and challenges in the study of saints, especially in an interreligious context. The following review has been helpful in the evolution of this project in helping us to recognize the state of present knowledge, to draw on existing insights, and to synthesize present knowledge as a basis for taking the study of these individuals to the next level, as the present project seeks to do.

8.2 Overall Characteristics of Literature on Saints

It is worth beginning by presenting data, that gives us a glimpse of the big picture of the study of saints. The following are impressions, formed in the course of reviewing the literature. More specifically, a list of over one thousand titles, available at Harvard University’s Widener Library, and indexed under saints, was consulted.¹¹⁷ What follows is impressionistic and does not reflect careful statistical quantification and analysis. For purposes of obtaining a very broad picture of the scope and interests of the literature, it seems sufficient to lean on impression, allowing for a certain degree of imprecision, that should not upset the overall accuracy of what follows.

Most of what has been written on “saints” refers to saints of the Christian tradition. Most of that, in turn, is concerned with lives of saints and with their hagiography. These are read mainly with an eye to history, be it concern for the historical report, its veracity and authenticity or its historical impact within Christian society. Thus, in terms of method, history defines the larger part of all studies classified as “saints”, and history here refers largely to Christian history. I am of the impression that more than half of what has been written on saints falls within this category. As an extension of historical interest in the saint, we find interest in the saint’s cult and its social and historical impact. Saints are thus seen for the most part either in terms of interest in their own personal history/biography/hagiography or in terms of interest in the historical impact they had on society at a given period.

¹¹⁷Due to the enormous size of this listing, it is not attached to this concept paper or to the proposal. It is available upon request.

While these emphases are strongest in the study of Christian saints, they get transferred to the study of saints in other religions. It is my impression that the twofold emphasis on the life of the saint and his/her impact on society drives upwards of 90% of research on saints in all world religions.

The range of concerns regarding how saints and society interact with each other is obviously of interest, but does not lie at the heart of the present project. What the present project seeks to understand is primarily the spiritual reality of those extraordinary individuals that are frequently referred to as saints. Precisely the fact that so much attention has been showered on the historical and social manifestations of their lives makes it all the more necessary to pose the question of whether there might be some means or method through which we can advance a conversation that touches more closely on their inner being, awareness, sense of purpose and existential orientation. And might we do so in a way that cuts across the different traditions, allowing us to project an archetype or a model of “the saint”, or however we may chose to refer to him or her? This is the challenge of the present project.

Let me illustrate this orientation, through a lovely incident recounted in Vincent Cornell’s *The Realm of the Saint*.¹¹⁸ Cornell reports the incident of a venerable mystic being told by his companion of Cornell’s project of writing a book about Imam al-Jazuli. The mystic replied: “Yes, but what can he *say* about him?”¹¹⁹ Clearly, the mystic felt that not much could be said about the Imam himself, that could be of any value. As Carl Ernst puts it, in introducing Islamic sainthood and what could be said of it:

Sainthood in itself is a subject that resists analysis, since according to many accounts it is the result of the self effacement of the individual in the divine qualities. For us it is easier to approach the subject through its effects, miraculous or ordinary, which are primarily recorded in ritual, song, narrative and history. Nonetheless, sainthood, “remains masked by its manifestations and its signs”. Although the intimate experiences of sainthood may be beyond our access, the general concept of humans who are close to God has had an extraordinary role in the history of Islam. This volume will elucidate ways in which saints have influenced the religious and social life of Islam.¹²⁰

Avoiding reference to the reality of the extraordinary individual and focusing instead on what is accessible, his or her impact on society, is characteristic of the greater majority of studies of saints in

¹¹⁸Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1998.

¹¹⁹P. xliii.

¹²⁰Carl Ernst, *Manifestations of Sainthood in Islam*, ed. Grace Smith, The Isiss Press, Istanbul, 1993, p. xi. Ernst himself has gone beyond speaking only of manifestations of sainthood in some of his other works. See Carl Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: mysticism and the rhetoric of sainthood in Persian Sufism*, Curzon Press, 1996.

all religions. Nevertheless, saints - some saints - do provide for us a means to see beyond the manifestation into their spiritual life and into what drives the outward expressions of their lives. As Cornell replied to the story of the Sufi Sheikh: “one must say something!”, hence his quest to make the “inside” view of Moroccan sainthood intelligible to outsiders. The present project is in fact an attempt to touch the “inside” dimension of sainthood, and it is informed by the premise that a portrait of the “inside” of the reality of the saint may be drawn up. And if the social impact of the saint is almost always specific to the one tradition within which he or she emerges, we may begin our inquiry with the hypothesis that the “inside” dimension may be constructed, or reconstructed, through appeal to multiple religious traditions.

I would like to move now beyond these initial observations concerning the literature and what it contains. In reviewing the literature, I would like to divide it into three sections. The first involves broad surveys of the religious life, that include some meaningful reference to saints and their lives. The second are philosophical discussions that appeal to or draw from the reality or example of saints. The third are phenomenological portraits that emerge from the attempt to portray what sainthood is. Significantly, these take place in a broader comparative, or interreligious, context, thereby reflecting concerns similar to those that inform the present project.

8.3 Saints in General Surveys: Van der Leeuw, Wach and James

Two broad survey works dedicate some attention to saints. The one is Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*.¹²¹ The other is Joachim Wach's *Sociology of Religion*.¹²² Wach makes authority the main axis of his presentation; Van der Leeuw power. For the former it is because of how religions as social systems operate that authority is central; for the latter it is because the sacred is communicated as power. Wach's work recalls and draws upon the earlier work of Max Weber and his concern for leadership, viewed in terms of charisma and its routinization. For both, saints are primarily appreciated in terms of their special powers. This perspective is important, but it tells us more about the manifestation of the saint and his or her impact as perceived by the community than about the internal awareness, mission and orientation of saints. Van der Leeuw's claim that saints are more significant dead than alive drives the point home. As Van der Leeuw pointedly states: “The world has no use for living saints; they are dead persons, or still better: the potency of the dead”.¹²³

¹²¹ Gloucester, 1967.

¹²² Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1944.

¹²³ p. 238.

By far the most important broader work that features saints is William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.¹²⁴ This is in many ways also the most important work to date on the subject of saints. This work was written by one of the earliest pioneers of the study of religion, who approached the topic from a psychological perspective. In many ways, the kind of study that concerns us in the present project has not advanced much in the more than the century that has elapsed since James. James' is not only the oldest study of saints but also the one that in many ways is closest to the concerns of the present project. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* seeks to spell out the subjective reality of saints. Many of the authors who have discussed sainthood, especially in terms of its contemporary religious significance in the context of changing theological moods, have drawn on James' work. In my view, the most inspiring quotes on the theme of saints that authors in the past century have offered all go back to James' seminal work. Let me share some of James' statements on saints:

Like the single drops which sparkle in the sun as they are flung far ahead of the advancing edge of a water-crest or of a flood, they show the way and are forerunners. The world is not yet with them, so they often seem in the midst of the world's affairs preposterous. Yet they are impregnators of the world, vivifiers and animators of potentialities of goodness which but for them would lie forever dormant. It is not possible to be quite as mean as we naturally are, when they have passed before us. One fire kindles another; and without that over-trust in human worth which they show, the rest of us would lie in spiritual stagnancy.¹²⁵

Such quotes can be multiplied. James certainly found saints an inspiration and much that has been written during the course of the twentieth century on saints did not consider inspiration a major asset, for which to turn to the saints.

James is important not only for being the earliest, and in some ways still the best, theoretical presentation of saints. He is also the earliest author to have appealed to the notion of religious genius. Whereas many others have gone on to study various aspects related to the saints, there has been little to no advance on the subject of religious genius since James. James thus provides us with an intersection of religious genius and saintliness and a frame of reference through which to address our own concerns of dealing with exceptional religious individuals through the dual lenses of saints and religious genius. In important ways, the present project may be presented as continuing a

¹²⁴The original edition came out in 1902, and there are numerous reprints. I will be quoting from the 2008 edition, published by Arc Manor, Rockville MD. This edition is fully searchable on google books, thereby allowing greater ability to study the book in depth. See <http://books.google.com/books?id=2AezbiYHssC&q=genius#v=onepage&q&f=false> James' discussion of saints is found in lectures 11-15, which are grouped under two chapter headings: "saintliness" and "the value of saintliness".

¹²⁵p. 263.

conversation that has for the most part not advanced in the more than a hundred years since William James.

In assessing James's contribution to an understanding of saints, two major factors come to mind. The first concerns the strongly emotional orientation of his discussion. According to James, saints are people with a high degree of emotional excitation. His vocabulary includes emotional excitation, a genius for certain emotions, and so on. The saint draws his or her reality from an intensification of the affective life, that makes them aware of a higher order of life, a Presence, around which they construct their lives. One is struck by how affective the process, as described by James, is.

Emphasis on the emotional dimension is closely related to another thesis of James', concerning the close association that James recognizes between saints and mental problems. Focusing on the internal life of saints brings James, as a psychologist, to a dimension that can be understood, thereby presenting saints as operating on the same scale that all humans do, only with greater intensity. This continuum is important also for his notion of religious genius, to which we shall turn in a later section. But it is precisely this continuum and seeing the lives of saints as more intense forms of the emotional life of others that also places them within the range of psychological as well as pathological analysis. One further expression of this continuity is the very fact that James speaks of saintliness as a quality. As a quality it is part of broader human nature and can therefore be cultivated by all. James is conscious in inviting his audience to partake of saintliness as a value, or better yet as an aspect of character and of human experience. Even if they do not reach the heights of some of the saints known in history, the example of these constitutes an invitation to present day readers to cultivate a quality they share in common.

The second factor that emerges from James' presentation is his attempt to capture that which is unique or special about saints. Here James offers four points, through which we learn what James considers essential to saints. Let me quote James at length, since the following is probably the gist of his entire thinking on saints.

The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character is Saintliness. The saintly character is the character for which emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy; and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions, of which the features can easily be traced.

They are these:-

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power. In Christian saintliness this power is always personified as God; but abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner versions of holiness or right may also be felt as the true lords and enlargers of our life...
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and willing self surrender to its control.

3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards “yes” “yes” ,and away from “no”, where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.¹²⁶

Note the reference to saintliness, rather than saints. Saintliness is a quality of character and can therefore be realized by anyone who applies herself to cultivating the needed virtues. Once again, emotions are at the forefront, and serve as the defining ground of saintliness. Note James’ reference to the “center of personal energy”. We shall encounter the move to language of “energy” time and again, as various authors grasp to express what saints are about.

James’ project is the same as our own, or rather the reverse - drawing a composite picture of saints, based on the evidence of all religions. However, I find James’ picture lacking. Perhaps the strong accent placed on feeling and emotions is the cause for what seems to me an insufficient portrait. Looking more closely at James’ four points, one realizes that in fact we have here not four distinct points, but rather one particular feature, that is expressed in different ways. The feature is expansiveness of being and awareness. The character of the saint is singled out for the *feeling* of being part of a wider life. This, I think, sums up what James found most important about saints. The rest are secondary manifestations of this realization. The sense of contact with the Ideal Power is a sense of inner certitude, nor merely mental conviction. This expansion is experienced as friendly, leading to internal self surrender. As my own model of religious genius will suggest, I consider self surrender an important aspect of religious genius and the lives of saints. For James this seems to be less of a defining feature and more of a consequence of the awareness of the breadth and continuity of being. The subjective dimension of friendliness, leading to surrender, is continued in the third point, where the subjective feelings associated with the awareness of expanded being - elation and freedom - are listed. Further emotional consequences are found in the fourth item - a shifting of the emotional center away from selfishness. All four points express one related complex and all four highlight the shift away from selfishness and into a broader life in terms of emotions and their expanded application.

In positive terms, James has introduced the notion of expansion of awareness and the changed attitudes that flow from it - surrender to God and availability to others. This one principle seems to summarize for James what saintliness, or saints, in *all* religions are about, one single simple principle. Everything else in the spiritual life of extraordinary individuals is seen as a consequence of this one principal. Consequently, James proceeds to discuss the *characteristic practical consequences* of this fundamental inner condition. The following are all subsumed under practical consequences:

¹²⁶pp. 202-3.

asceticism, strength of soul, purity and charity. These are all seen as expressions of this fundamental existential orientation, rather than conditions for it, or dimensions of saintliness that should be considered as complementary to the core definition. That James can thus capture the essence of saintliness, and present all other aspects of the lives of saints as its secondary expressions, allows him to pass judgement on the lives of saints, as these have been reported. What follows this fourfold description of the inner orientation of the lives of saints is at one and the same time a presentation of some great moments of inspiration, deriving from the lives of saints, and a criticism of those very lives, judged by James' own cultural sensibilities. Because these are secondary manifestations of what seems to James to be the essence of saintliness, James allows himself to sit in judgement on his subject matter in a way that is neither fitting scholarly presentation nor appropriate as a spiritual perspective of others' spiritual lives.

It would be too time consuming to describe James' handling of the lives of actual saints in detail. I will refer to only one example, and a shocking one at that - James' treatment of Theresa of Avila. James addresses his audience and is himself conscious of his own liberal Protestant orientation. He is, however, unable to position himself beyond his own religious orientation, as we would nowadays expect from a scholar of religion. Accordingly, he feels free to judge the lives of saints of history, according to the yardsticks of his own liberal Protestant identity. When viewing Theresa of Avila, James writes:

Her religious ideals were so paltry, that I confess that my only feeling in reading her has been pity that so much vitality of soul should have found such poor employment. In spite of the sufferings which she endured, there is a curious flavor of superficiality about her genius.¹²⁷

I spare the reader the following page, that might be considered one of the most shocking and offensive moments in the history of the modern study of mysticism or of religion. It shows us how much James considers himself a judge of the true religious life of others. It also shows us the inadequacy of his use of religious genius - to speak of the superficiality of Theresa's genius suggests a different usage than the one that informs the present project. But above all, it shows us how badly a frame of reference is needed from within which to assess the data provided by the lives of saints, independently of our own bias. Whether our bias is that of one denomination to another or of one religion to another, we ought to operate within a conceptual framework that can accommodate a broad range of phenomena, making sense of their larger purpose, beyond theological and creedal differences. James would have liked to provide that. However, his frame of reference is too rudimentary and too Protestant. His ideas were formulated at the end of the nineteenth century.

¹²⁷See p. 266. On James' Protestant context and its limitations, in the framework of *Varieties*, see David Hollinger, "Damned for God's Glory: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture, *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 9-30.

While in some ways they remain the most thoughtful statements on the interior life of the saints, they also point to where discussion must advance. Given the dearth of discussions, the present project seeks in important ways to revisit James and to pick up where he left off, fully cognizant of his foundational contribution, as well as of his limitations. James' empirical approach to the study of saints, and his recognition that they must be studied across traditions provides a fundamental method to be followed. Surprisingly, few have attempted to pick up where James left off.¹²⁸ James did not really study saints; he studied saintliness. An empirical study of historical saints, of all traditions, may be the way to revisit James' project, driving us to formulate new understandings of the exceptional individuals whose lives James studied.

8.4 Philosophical discussions of saints and sainthood - Wyschogrod, Grant, Flescher, Neville

Philosophical discussions that relate to saints can be divided into two. Most approach the subject of saints in the framework of moral philosophy. Saints are brought as types of moral perfection, or of perfection in virtue. The guiding question is what is the import of saints for others: To what extent can others be like saints? Can saints serve as models and exemplars for others? Overall, this philosophical framework tends to see saints as exemplary of virtues that belong to all, and that therefore can be applied and practiced by others. Typically, philosophically oriented discussions ignore some of the more "spiritual" aspects of the lives of saints, while highlighting virtue and how the saints can inspire others to action. It is telling that often in this kind of discussion "saints" are placed in quotation marks; often "saints" and "saintly" are confounded.

At the head of a contemporary trajectory that explores the significance of saints for moral philosophy we may place Edith Wyschogrod. Her *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*¹²⁹ appeals to saints of all religions, even though most of the examples she draws from are taken from within Christianity. Wyschogrod's concern is how to build up moral philosophy in a postmodern age. She meets this challenge by turning to saints. A saint is defined by her as a radical altruist, who is dedicated to alleviation of the suffering of others, irrespective of cost to himself.¹³⁰ Wyschogrod finds the sensibilities captured in relation to saints appropriate to postmodern sensibilities. She identifies four ways in which saints are suitable for postmodern sensibilities: they are communicated in and as texts; the narrative of a saint's life is in itself a locus for reflection and action; lives are often concerned with the body and the need to control and transform it; the lives of the saints are grounded in reality and hence they 'read the reader' and challenge her.

¹²⁸Even more surprising is the fact that James is always quoted approvingly, as an important spokesman on saints and their meaning. I have not seen any critical assessment of his discussion of saints, that notes the problems associated with his presentation.

¹²⁹Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

¹³⁰P. 58. For a slightly longer definition, compare p. 34.

Further exploration of the meaning of saints for altruism is found in Andrew Michael Flescher, Daniel L. Worthen, Daniel Worthen's *The Altruistic Species: Scientific, Philosophical, and Religious Perspectives of Human Benevolence*.¹³¹ The authors explore altruism by appealing to the example of saints. Most of their appeal is to saints as a category, at times appearing within brackets. They raise the question of whether the example of saints is relevant only for people within their own tradition or whether it can be abstracted from their tradition. This is an important question that is significant also to the present project: can the message or meaning of sainthood in a given tradition be extracted beyond the tradition, in the service of broader goals. The authors examine a variety of figures such as Dorothy Day, Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King. They claim that the message can be carried out beyond the confines of a specific religion. This is understood as part of the message of the saints themselves, that their altruistic message is not confined to the environment in which it originates.¹³² Altruism can thus be learned from the saints, all saints of all religions, by all people, as part of the fuller meaning of being human.¹³³

Another discussion on altruism is Colin Grant's *Altruism and Christian Ethics*.¹³⁴ Grant adopts the opposite view of saints than that found in the previous two works. While constructing an argument for the importance and possibility of altruism, Grant resists the possibility of seeing the saints as playing a major role in advocating and appealing to altruism, or to virtues as a whole.¹³⁵ Some have turned saints into "moral saints". Figuring saints in this way is actually the basis upon which they have been criticized. But saints are not primarily about being moral. Here Grant offers a powerful quote from Victor Frankl: "I think that even the saints did not care for anything other than simply to serve God, and I doubt that they ever had it in mind to become saints. If that were the case, they would have become only perfectionists rather than saints".¹³⁶ Grant continues: "Saints may not be morally perfect, but that does not really detract from their sainthood. What makes them saints is not their moral perfection, but the larger vision out of which they live".¹³⁷ As he states on the same

¹³¹Templeton Foundation Press, West Conshohocken, 2007. See especially Chapter 6. Much of the line of reasoning is already worked out in an earlier book by Flescher, *Heroes, Saints, and Ordinary Morality*, Georgetown University Press, 2003.

¹³²p. 228.

¹³³See p. 238.

¹³⁴Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 2001.

¹³⁵See his discussion, pp. 237-242. Grant does not deny that saints provide examples of altruism. But he considers that casting saints in terms of altruism, or moral perfection, is detrimental to the fullness of what saints are about, and reduces them to a social and humanistic vision.

¹³⁶Quoted from Viktor Frankl, *Mans' Search for Meaning*, New York, Washington Square Press, 1968, p. 158.

¹³⁷P. 241. See also the statement by Pitirim Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors and Techniques of Moral Transformation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1954, p. 18: "even many saints aspired directly not for altruistic love but for union with God".

page: “A saint is one who marches to a different drummer. This is why a moral portrayal is far too prosaic to capture what is most distinctive about the saint”.¹³⁸ Thus, Grant points us away from the direction of identifying saints as agents of moral perfection in general and altruism in particular, and towards a broader vision of what saints are about.

A completely different philosophical tack is taken by Robert Neville in his *Soldier, Sage, Saint*.¹³⁹ Neville too is informed by multiple religious traditions. Unlike Wyschogrod, or even Flescher et al., who quote and provide examples of specific saints, Neville does next to no referencing or quoting of specific saints, of any religion. Rather, he internalizes, in ways that are purely his own, the combined impact and testimony of saints into a synthetic whole. This whole is projected as three models, ideal types, through whom idealistic concerns are applied. The three ideal types are the soldier, the sage and the saint, corresponding to perfection of the will, the mind and the heart. For Neville, this is an abstraction, by means of which he explores these three dimensions. Neville never intended for the types to be distinct from one another, and their distinction is made for purely heuristic purposes.¹⁴⁰ For purposes of our discussion, all three types constitute aspects of the lives of saints and have implications for the notion of religious genius. The distinction between will, mind and heart is undone in the actual lives of saints.¹⁴¹ One of the main features of saints, in the ideal, is that they lead integrated lives and that these dimensions come together through their spiritual strivings. Neville’s discussion is a very important theoretical exploration of the possibilities associated with sainthood. Rather than explore how saints can serve a known goal, such as altruism, he constructs a theoretical model by means of which one might approach the phenomenon of special individuals, as these have been known in the history of religions. His approach provides important inspiration for the present project. It too seeks to construct a theoretical model, based upon the testimony of multiple religions, by means of which to understand the particularities and defining features of exceptional spiritual individuals.

¹³⁸For a philosophical undermining of the notion of moral saints, see also James Horne, *Saintliness and Moral Perfection*, *Religious Studies* 27, pp. 463-471.

¹³⁹Fordham University Press, New York, 1978.

¹⁴⁰See pp. 5-6.

¹⁴¹I am unconvinced by how Robert Cohn, *Sainthood*, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 13, p. 5, applies Neville’s typology, turning it into a phenomenology of saints, by presenting three paths to sainthood. Other than the three works discussed in the section on comparative studies, Cohn’s is the only attempt I am familiar with to present a composite image of saints in world religions. Cohn’s work informs that of Katherine Young. Cohn contributed an essay, the same essay, to the two collections, by Kieckhefer-Bond and Hawley. Other than this one essay, Cohn does not seem to have worked on the issue of saints extensively, and this comes across in his encyclopedia article. Even though he would like to draw a composite picture of saints in world religions, he does not advance the discussion in a meaningful way, other than turning Neville’s heuristic model into theoretical paths for perfection.

8.5 Comparative Studies - Hawley, Kieckhefer and Bond, Young

As stated, nearly all studies of saints and sainthood are tradition-specific. I have been able to identify only three attempts to approach the topic of sainthood from a comparative multi religious perspective. All three resort to the same methodology, convening scholars from different traditions, inviting them to reflect on aspects of sainthood. The three works in this category are John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Saints and Virtues*,¹⁴² Richard Kieckhefer and George Bond (eds.), *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*,¹⁴³ and Arvind Sharma, *Women Saints in World Religions*.¹⁴⁴ All three volumes have been very helpful in inspiring my own thinking. Looking at all three as a whole, one notices just how deeply indebted they are to the Christian model of saints. Time and again authors draw their conceptual matrix from Christian resources and then seek to address the phenomenon across the traditions. Clearly, Christianity has done more sustained thinking on this topic than the other religions. Thus, Hawley's introduction takes its categories directly from Second Vatican Council documents, and seeks to apply their threefold structure to other religions. Various essays explore the subject of saints in other religions by comparing the subject of their studies to the canons of Christian saintmaking. Reading through these essays, one realizes how deeply indebted saint studies are to the Christian heritage and how this debt is both a blessing and a potential shackle, that must be overcome.

The three works make modest contributions to a synthetic view of sainthood. They are content, in the main, to let the reader judge the testimony of the different traditions, without attempting to force uniform definitions or understandings on saints across traditions. Kieckhefer and Bond point out common dynamics that characterize saints in the different traditions - the tension between the imitability and inimitability of the saint. This ends up functioning as one of the major theses and organizing principles of their work. The sum of individual insights into the nature of sainthood, through the various past and present expressions studied in this collection, is of greater significance than the attempt to draw a broader portrait. Similarly, Hawley shuns from an attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of saints in world religions. Kieckhefer and Bond do offer us some minimal observations, suggesting that a combination of contemplative, ascetic and service provides the basic mix of ingredients, that then gives different shades and nuances to saints in the different religions.¹⁴⁵

Katherine Young offers the synthetic and conceptual framework for Sharma's volume on Women saints in world religions.¹⁴⁶ Her summary covers some of the standard encyclopedic

¹⁴²Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

¹⁴³Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.

¹⁴⁴Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000.

¹⁴⁵P. 246.

¹⁴⁶Curiously, Sharma himself has no contribution in this volume. Young's "Introduction" is pp. 1-38.

statements on sainthood, before moving on to her own original contribution. She frames her own contribution in terms of chaos and order, and the role that saints play in relating to these two dimensions of life, as these play out in institutional history. Accordingly, she suggests the fourfold typology of saints as norm discoverer, norm preserver, routine norm destroyer and virtuoso norm destroyer.¹⁴⁷ I personally find Young's synthesis less helpful than the synthetic observations found in other works. It tells us less about saints than about how they interact with and contribute to social organizations. In so doing, she ends up approaching saints, inadvertently it seems to me, sociologically rather than religiously. As a consequence, I find little novel insight as to the nature of sainthood in her introduction. The same is true for the volume itself, which does however have an important feature, in that it offers original translations of works by its heroines.

Considering the three comparative interreligious volumes as a whole, it seems there is still much room for discussion and reflection on the nature of sainthood and on the lives and realities of the individuals who are featured in these volumes and their likes. The volumes do not seek to articulate what sainthood is, to understand the nature of being of a saint, or to articulate a theory or model by means of which one might advance the study of saints as a phenomenon, drawing its implications for the religion under study, other religions and broader reaches of society. The three volumes, very helpful as they are, seem content to illustrate a broad phenomenon, as a common feature of diverse religions. Overall, the greatest contribution of these volumes lies in the very opening up of the topic of sainthood to comparative discussion.

The present proposal is much indebted to these earlier efforts. It shares their interest in exploring this area of human and religious life and in doing so from a perspective that is informed by the testimony of all religions. In terms of method it might be described as a crossover between the methodology adopted by Neville and that adopted by the authors of these collections of essays. It seeks to elaborate its categories in novel ways, even avoiding the term saints. It seeks to do so by drawing on the examples of saints from world religions, allowing them to provide the testimony, conceptual framework and parameters from which we might engage in new reflection. Based on the review of the literature it seems the time is ripe for a fresh conceptual approach to the subject. Going beyond historical and sociological studies and building on the insights gained by the comparative studies described above, the present proposal is governed by the quest for understanding the spiritual reality represented by the saint and its potential impact for others.

¹⁴⁷p. 29.

Appendix 2 - Religious Genius - History of a Category

Religious Genius is a category that has never been fully developed. However, it has been on the edges of academic consciousness in ways that we ought to recall. The category is more than a century old, though for most of that period, that is: for most of the history of the modern study of religion, it has lain dormant.¹⁴⁸ As we seek to develop the category, we do well to recall the early pioneers who would have readily resonated with the present project.

9.1 William James

I begin with a light touch. If one searches for “genius” in the index to *The varieties of the Religious Experience*,¹⁴⁹ one encounters: “see religious leaders”. If that were not enough for us, under religious leaders, the index records only two subheadings “often nervously unstable” and “their loneliness”. While this may be taken humorously, it does say something about James’ understanding of religious genius and its relationship to personality dynamics, including personal instability.¹⁵⁰ Religious genius is a category that is seen along with a series of other phenomena to manifest exceptional mental states. James’ interest in genius goes back as early as 1880. In his 1896 Lowell lectures on exceptional mental states, James discusses dreams and hypnosis, automatism, hysteria, multiple personality, demoniacal possession, witchcraft, degeneration and genius.¹⁵¹ All these phenomena manifest the workings of the subconscious within the person, and herein lies the key to understanding religious geniuses and the religious life itself. These are understood as reaching to and being inspired by the subconscious, and such contact is closely related to states of great emotional excitability, as already noted above. Such excitability carries with it both the potential for great creativity and some of the difficulties associated with sensitive and excitable personalities. Thus, for James, genius may be recast as the genius of emotions, and their openness to the subconscious. “When a superior intellect and a psychopathic character coalesce...in the same individual, we have the best possible condition for...effective genius.”¹⁵² James’ psychological theory draws on contemporary theories of the subliminal consciousness as the source of both pathology and

¹⁴⁸Needless to say, “religious genius” takes us back to the original Roman use of genius, that referred to personal divine inspiration. From that perspective “religious genius” is a tautology.

¹⁴⁹Here I rely on the edition of Triumph Books, 1991.

¹⁵⁰See also Lawrence Foster, The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of New Religious Movements, *The Dialogue Journal*, http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V26N04_19.pdf

¹⁵¹See Eugene Taylor, William James and Depth Psychology, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*, ed. Michael Ferrari, Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2002, p. 26.

¹⁵²P. 26.

genius.¹⁵³ How contemporary James' reference to genius is can be seen from a perusal of the footnotes, where we encounter numerous discussions of and references to genius as a formative category in the study of various individuals, including religious individuals. James' reliance on the category of genius to describe his religious heroes is thus very much a sign of the times, and is conditioned by contemporary discourse on genius. If we witness a century of nearly total silence concerning "religious genius" it is therefore not because the category itself has been critiqued or dropped. Rather, discourse on genius has itself shifted, as has, to a large extent, psychological discourse. Conventions of discourse have thus simply moved away from where they were during James' times, making the category almost irrelevant.

James relies heavily on the notion of genius. While the term "religious genius" appears rarely in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, it is deeply embedded in his thought structure.¹⁵⁴ Given that James' focus is to study religious experience rather than the institutional history of religions, the emphasis on experience is implicitly an engagement with genius, as understood by James. One might argue that for James religious genius is the epitome of the phenomenon of genius. Note the following wording: "Even perhaps more than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations. Invariably they have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility."¹⁵⁵ This captures the essence of religious genius. All genius involves contact with the subconscious, and is closely related to great emotional intensity. But religious genius even more than other kinds of genius involves the carrier, here called religious leader, in regular contact with these dimensions of the self, and their outward manifestations. One may see religious genius as deeper, more intense but most importantly - more productive and transformative, than processes that are based on similar psychic processes. Because of the depth of its impact, religious genius alone has the capacity to bear fruit that is life transforming, like none other.¹⁵⁶ Thus, James does not offer a definition or usage that would set religious genius apart from other forms of genius. Rather, drawing on current notions of genius, understood in particular psychological terms, James offers his readers a way of understanding the religious life as the culmination of genius. This genius is manifest in the

¹⁵³See Ann Taves, *The Fragmentation of Consciousness and The Varieties of Religious Experience: William James' Contribution to a Theory of Religion*, *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p. 60.

¹⁵⁴P. 14 - "religious geniuses" is the sole occurrence.

¹⁵⁵P. 14.

¹⁵⁶The term "fruits for life" is a recurring concept in *The Varieties*. It offers us the criteria by means of which to judge the value of psychic and emotional states. Given how close the religious life, religious genius, is to chaotic psychic states, its ultimate value can only be tested through the fruits for life.

lives of saints and mystics. The central place that mystics play in James' presentation of saintliness is understood in light of the appeal to a psychology that sees genius manifest in these individuals.¹⁵⁷

9.2 Religious Genius by S.L (L.Swetenham)

Just how contemporary the concern for genius was in James' day can be seen from the very publication of a book titled "Religious Genius" in 1905, only three years after the first publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹⁵⁸ This contemporaneous work provides one further indication for "genius" being part of the *zeitgeist* of the turn of the twentieth century. It is the only volume or study dedicated to religious genius, and it suggests how easily broader concern for genius might translate itself into the religious realm.

The work is clearly a sign of its time and it draws on some of the sources that inspired the work of James.¹⁵⁹ Like James, his work is very inspiring. I found myself deeply moved time and again by the spiritual vision put forth by this almost completely unknown author.¹⁶⁰ There seem to be, however, fundamental differences between the two. James seeks to be scientific, conforming to the psychological standards of his time. Swetenham offers a purely religious message. Both assume a continuity between different forms of genius and see religious genius as one particular manifestation of a broader phenomenon. But this phenomenon is explained differently by both. James speaks of

¹⁵⁷Alongside the discussions described above, we find constant reference to genius as a quality of greatness, originality or creativity. Thus, Renan is a literary genius (p. 35), Molinos is a spiritual genius (p. 102), and Augustine is noted for his psychological genius (p. 131). The infuriating quote concerning Theresa of Avila states "there is a curious flavor of superficiality about her genius" (p. 255).

¹⁵⁸The author is listed by his initials, but further search reveals his full name. The book was published in London by Hodder and Stoughton. I have been unsuccessful in learning anything about the author, other than the fact that he lived in India and the obvious fact that he was Christian, of Protestant persuasion. Judging by the typology of the work and by his identification of evangelical Christianity with religious genius, it is likely he himself was an evangelical (see p. 11). His references to Jesus as "The Master" might suggest some additional spiritual influences, either Indian or theosophical. His attempt at concealing his identity and biography, signalled by publishing the book only by his initials, seems to have been successful. The same author published in 1908 another work, titled *Conquering Prayer; Or, the Power of Personality*, London, J. Clarke Publications. The same religious typology that informs *Religious Genius* is here translated into a typology of two basic forms of prayer. Reprints of *Religious Genius* may be ordered on the internet. An online version may be found at <http://www.archive.org/stream/religiousgenius00lsgoog#page/n9/mode/2up>

¹⁵⁹See his reference to F.W.H.Myers, referred to extensively in *The Varieties*, on p. 54. On Myers' impact on James, see also Taves, above n. 44.

¹⁶⁰The only reference to this work I have found in the literature is a notice/review of the book by David Philips in *The International Journal of Ethics* 16,3, 1906, pp. 397-8. The book offers a powerful spiritual vision, even if it is couched in Christian theological language. In terms of its vision and message it strikes very similar chords to those of Pitirim Sorokin, whom I shall review next. While the work is not scientific, but religious, in nature, it seems to me it deserves to be better known.

the unconscious as the root of genius, and consequently struggles with issues of psychopathology and the complex character of geniuses, religious and otherwise. Swetenham speaks of God and spirit, and sees the various expressions of genius as drawing from the same divine source of inspiration. Judging from the perspective of a century later, one wonders whether James' "scientific" perspective really possess stronger explanatory power than the more naive or straightforward faith-based appeal to God. In any event, introducing the subconscious into the psychological dynamics of religious experience is not part of a reductionary strategy on behalf of James, and at the end of the day both authors will agree that God is the ultimate inspiration for genius and that genius is mediated through the depths or interiority of the individual. Nomenclature thus seems secondary to what may in fact be a common vision. The differences may be more a result of the audience, context and the discourse these impose, than of significant theoretical differences between the authors.

Let us begin by examining Swetenham's notion of religious genius:

Religious genius, then, let us describe as *intuitive* power to grasp the things of God, in a superhuman and miraculous way, as distinguished from the slow and plodding human methods of reaching up to the Divine life and light.

Men of the world, together with religious men who have no key in their own experience to this phenomenon, - while admitting the reality of every other kind of genius, even though they cannot understand how the inspiration is received, nor how it works, - are, with a strange inconsistency, often inclined to deny to religious genius the belief they unhesitatingly accord to the same miracle in spheres of poetry, science and art.¹⁶¹

Intuition and inspiration are primary concepts throughout this work. In fact, most chapter titles refer to the "religiously inspired" and only two to "religious genius". For the author the two are identical. Religious genius is the capacity to receive inspiration in the field of religion. The author is fully aware that inspiration is obtained in a variety of fields of life.¹⁶² This actually provides him with a means of presenting and legitimating religious genius to an audience that is not otherwise sympathetic to such concerns. We will recall that this was one of the possible advantages, suggested above for use of the category of religious genius.

The intuitive grasp is better understood when we consider the typology of religious personalities that informs this work. The chapter titled "Religious Genius and Religious Talent" spells this out:¹⁶³

One of the laws governing the birth of genius, especially of great genius, in every sphere, we notice to be, with a few rare exceptions this: There are strivings, aspirations, honest, earnest

¹⁶¹P. 5.

¹⁶²P. 7 - "we cannot but pause to notice how similar, almost to monotony, is the same experience in every realm of genius. Wagner wakes up one day to find himself a musician...the miracle was wrought and he knew not how."

¹⁶³Chapter 2, pp. 19-34.

endeavors, cheered by occasional premonitions of coming power, and yet the goal seems very far away until the supreme moment arrives; and then suddenly the soul is there! Caught up and carried in a chariot of fire over ground that the tired feet had so long tried to cover, and into the realms that seemed so inaccessible.

In the religious world, as in the literary world, the scientific and the commercial world, there are two classes of people - the inspired and the uninspired....there are souls carried on the wings of inspiration over mountains of difficulty in the religious life, which other souls, just as worthy, are laboriously climbing. There is a passion for things spiritual and Divine miraculously implanted, living and growing in some, whilst others are painfully striving merely to remove the hindrances to the Godward movement of their hearts. Some are rejoicing in the *gift* of faith, of open spiritual vision, of God-consciousness and realization, whilst their brethren grope in the twilight of human reasoning.¹⁶⁴

S. L goes on to identify these experiences with conversion, receiving a new heart, being born again in the spirit and related expressions that suggest a natural, spontaneous Godward movement has occurred from within. The spontaneity of the spiritual process is a recurring motive. The keywords that characterize the state of religious genius and inspiration are spontaneity, enthusiasm, illumination, intuitive perception and power.¹⁶⁵ The basic typology distinguishes between a religious life based on exertion and effort, and one that takes place spontaneously, through the workings of the spirit. The latter is identified with religious genius. Swetenham does not denigrate the exertion-based spiritual life; but he does construct his fundamental typology around the axis of exertion and spontaneous gift.

With regards to these two kinds of religious life, which for the sake of convenience let us designate the life of religious genius and the life of religious effort, we see that both are seeking to reach God, but by different roads; both are recognized and loved by Him, both are blessed by Him - the one with illumination and inspiration the other with..."the ennobling spirit of struggle." Both methods of the Divine working are producing character, but of a totally different type. These two types may be described as being, in the one case, that of spiritual insight, or faith, resulting in a strange uplift and elation that gives wings to the soul, and carries it easily and quickly to its goal. In the other case, the chief characteristic is strength of will and purpose, unremitting effort, perseverance, toil, by which the earnest soul marches slowly but surely towards God...

These two types of religious character are so perfectly the complement of the other that the one is incomplete without the other; nor can we fail to notice that those men who have had

¹⁶⁴p. 7-9.

¹⁶⁵See his introduction, unnumbered page.

the advantage of training in both schools are the most symmetrical and perfect, combining spiritual insight and intuition with force of will and strenuousness of effort.¹⁶⁶ We may be confident that the purpose of the Divine mind is eventually to bring these two separate halves together and weld them into a glorious whole, wedding religious intuition and inspiration to religious effort and discipline....The result of the union will be grand symmetrical character, rapid progress in holiness and power, the appearance among us of a new and diviner order of prophets, teachers, leaders, and the dawning of our high hopes for humanity.¹⁶⁷

Religious genius is not religious perfection. Time and again the author refers to the possibility of imperfection and inferiority of character of religious geniuses. Geniuses, by this view, can be great or little. Genius is the capacity to receive spontaneously the gifts of God, through intuition, resulting in effortless spiritual movement. But religious genius can falter and fail, if it is not cultivated into a complete life, and its perfection involves a disciplined spiritual life. In some ways this construction recalls the model created by Neville, who distinguishes between perfection of the will - the soldier, and perfection of the heart - the saint. Here perfection of the heart is understood as something involving less effort and growing spontaneously from one's interiority. But just as for Neville, the ideal does not lie in any of his ideal types but in their integration, so for Swetenham the future of spiritual growth goes beyond the inspiration of genius to the fullness of a spiritual life. In fact, Neville's threefold model, relating to the sage, as well as to the soldier and saint, is also prefigured by our author. Swetenham contrasts the spontaneity of the religious genius with the work characteristic of the group that has "religious talent".

The preaching and teaching of the Religiously Talented is on another plane entirely. It is studied and thought out, rather than natural, eloquence. Marvelously effective, logical, interesting; but its excellence is that of the head, rather than the heart; and its appeals are also to the heads, rather than to the heart. It produces a religion which, like itself, is the result of studied and disciplined action of the mind and will, rather than the spontaneous outflowing from an inner spring of life.

Of this kind of a religion we cannot speak too highly; the religion of genius needs to be supplemented by it. There is as Phillips Brooks points out "*a mind's* love for God" as well as the heart's....This type of religion is indispensable but it is not primary; it should follow, but not precede, the religion of the heart. In so doing it would find its highest perfection and power. In the foregoing chapter we dwelt upon the wonderful results ensuing from the

¹⁶⁶Here Swetenham mentions two examples, an evangelical preacher - Robertson of Brighton, and Phillips Brooks, an Episcopalian Bishop. We are left guessing what his own denominational affiliation was, but given his way of thinking, this may be the wrong question to ask.

¹⁶⁷pp. 12-15.

insight and natural energy of genius with the efforts of the will and conscience; but when there is added to these the special mental ability and resource which we call “talent” the result may well be incalculable! The fact is that just as genius and “an infinite capacity for taking pains” are the complement of each other, so also genius and talent - the one pertaining to the heart and the other to the head, the one producing natural spontaneous life, the other disciplined mental activity - are also the complement of each other; and perfection only is attained when each adds to itself the other.¹⁶⁸

It is significant that religious genius is not identified with perfection. James might have readily agreed with this, especially considering how some of the people designated as possessing such genius were treated by him. However, it seems to me that the contrast is more pronounced for Swetenham, precisely because religious genius is built into a typology that by definition recognizes another pole of the religious life, ultimately requiring integration with it for its own perfection. In fact, as we have just seen, Swetenham recognizes two complementary poles, corresponding to the will and to the mind. Religious genius provides the spiritual drive for perfection, but it requires a total spiritual life and an integrated character for its own fulfillment.

And here we come to saints. Just as James related religious genius and saints, so does Swetenham. If for James saints provided natural expressions of religious genius, for Swetenham the perfection of saints really exceeds religious genius, because of the totality of life involved and the multiple paths to perfection undertaken by the saints.

It is interesting, for our purposes, that such fullness is identified with the Saints. It is the saints who take religious genius, wedded to the disciplined spiritual life, and bring them to their combined perfection.

Sainthood is the highest calling of man, the noblest type of human life: it is genius on the most exalted plane. No wonder, then, that the demand that the world makes on the saint should be enormous! There is an intuitive justice in the intolerance shown towards the imperfections in him that are passed over in others....Of saints Emerson says, “This class is the aim of creation, the other classes are admitted to the feast of being only in the train of this.” The ultimate destiny of mankind is sainthood, and towards this all other gifts and callings converge. The world shall one day be full of poet-saints, soldier-saints, scientist-saints, artisan-saints - but it is sainthood that is the goal of all...it is the primary object, and every other calling is secondary...

The chief feature [of the saint’s character] we find to be *holiness*, and by this holiness is meant *wholeness*, soundness, symmetry....the poet, the artist, the musician, are permitted to be specialists, but the Religious Genius must be a holy - that is a *whole* man. Others may be

¹⁶⁸Pp. 27-29.

partial, fragmentary, one-side; but of the saint we require wholeness and symmetry. This universal and instinctive ideal of sainthood, however obscured by tradition, or stifled by disappointments, or supplanted by lower standards, is still always lurking in the human heart and prompting its attitude towards the saint....

This universal attitude of the human heart towards sainthood has its roots in the divinely inspired and original idea of a saint which conceives of him as a complete, or perfect, man, healthily developed on every side of his nature, keenly alive and related to all the life around him, touching it at all points by means of a large and universal sympathy and the intuitive knowledge that comes from such sympathy...

One grace [the saint] must have and that is love - a great, deep, far-reaching, all including love for God and His universe, a love that forges links and chains binding him to everything around him, making him feel that he is part of it and it of him, a love which is the bond of perfectness. *In spirit* at least the saint must be world-wide in his relatedness...his *heart* must be universal in its sympathies and interests, discerning the innumerable mysterious ties that bind God's creation into one, and knit the hearts and lives of men...his spirit must be free to go out to all, and large enough to take in all. ¹⁶⁹

Sainthood is identified with religious genius. In fact, now we find the term in capital letters - Religious Genius. It seems that our author uses the term in two senses. The first designates an aspect of the spiritual life, characterized by spontaneity, intuition and inspiration. Clearly, this aspect of the religious life is the one he most values, at least when contrasted with the other aspects of discipline and study. However, perfection, hence sainthood, hence true Religious Genius, consists in the synthetic integration of all these aspects. Saints are the fulfillment of religious genius, when it has been integrated with the other spiritual paths.

We are also offered a clear distinction between religious genius and other forms of genius. While the processes of inspiration may be the same, the path that follows from them is different. The religious path is not exhausted by receiving inspiration. Inspiration provides the foundation, driving the person to build a total and integrated character and religious life. Only religious genius has this drive for totality and therefore the expectations made of saints are of another order than those made of other kinds of geniuses. Lowercase "religious genius" is similar to other forms of genius, in terms of the subjective processes by means of which inspiration is received. Uppercase "Religious Genius" is qualitatively different. It involves wholeness and integration. The holiness, implied by the notion of sainthood, is cast in terms of wholeness, suggesting that this is the one and only kind of genius of which such wholeness is expected.

The wholeness is ultimately a wholeness of love. Indeed, the concluding chapter of Swetenham's book is titled "Love - the Crown of Religious Genius". The reasoning behind it is that love is a

¹⁶⁹Pp. 98-101.

unifying principle. Because it has this integrative capacity, it is the highest perfection. This integration takes place in the heart and heart-love is the wonder working power of the world, to which one aspires, as humanity looks to its future. The integrative capacity of the saint relates to himself and to others. In himself, he integrates the various paths and aspects into a wholeness of being. In others, he offers an integrative approach to life and to reality, by extending love to all. Heart-love is the common denominator that defines the true essence of the saint, the true mark of Religious Genius.

It seems that the uses of “heart” in Swetenham’s work also offer a key to the lowercase and uppercase uses of religious genius. Religious genius was earlier distinguished as involving the heart, while other paths involved the mind. However, in the earlier stages, man is reached through the heart, and the spontaneity of revelation of the heart provides the path through which he is to approach God. In this sense it is already an expression of religious genius and an ideal. However, the perfection of the heart and its capacity to truly integrate all within the power of love only occur when one has advanced on the spiritual path, integrating different paths of growth into a sustained whole, that marks the saint and defines perfection. It is the heart that continues to provide definition for religious genius, but now the fullness and wholeness of heart, rather than simply the movement of, or movement through the heart. Far from using the term in an incoherent way, Swetenham actually traces a path of spiritual evolution, using “religious genius” as the key concept, that points to the heart and to the journey of spiritual perfection that is accomplished through the heart, till it is perfected in a movement of total synthesis. Significantly, Swetenham sees in Jesus the perfection of the path traced by him.¹⁷⁰ This suggests that not only did he not consider the language of religious genius to compromise the unique position of his master; rather, he found it a useful and appropriate category that allows us to talk of all levels of spiritual life, from Jesus, through the saints, and down to the every day aspirant who has had a conversion experience. For him, the universality of the term makes it an apt way to describe religious reality, independent of precedent or theological concerns.

Reading Swetenham’s description of the Saint and his synthetic and all encompassing love brings to mind James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*.¹⁷¹ For Fowler, the highest stage of faith, that he calls stage 6, is universalizing faith. This faith goes beyond borders of religion, community and ethnicity. As Fowler states, Stage 6 is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it have left faith compositions in which they give expression to their felt sense of an ultimate energy inclusive of all beings. They have become incarnators and actors for a spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community. They live with felt participation in a power that unifies the world. Such people are ready

¹⁷⁰ See pp. 119; 218 and more. Note the repeated reference to Jesus as “The Master”.

¹⁷¹ *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Harper San Francisco, 1995.

for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages of faith or of other faith traditions.¹⁷² Fowler's portrait resembles that of Swetenham's true Religious Genius. It recognizes its rarity, its capacity to go beyond boundaries and the sense of inclusiveness of being that is fundamental to it. Swetenham did not live in an interreligious age; Fowler does. It is thus significant, for the present project, that the type of rare individual classed either as a saint, a Religious Genius, or just as "plane old Stage 6" should also exhibit the capacity to find fellowship with members of other faith traditions.

Swetenham's work is a work of religious inspiration. One imagines it draws on his own personal life and spiritual experience, even though we are told nothing of the author and his circumstances. In presenting Swetenham I assumed that we should not devalue his application of "religious genius," because it is couched in religious, rather than scientific language. At the end of the day, we have here an author who is willing to construct a model of religious genius, and this model has many important features to recommend it. It introduces us to notions of intuition and inspiration. It highlights the centrality of the heart in religious genius. It creates a religious typology, within which religious genius is presented as well as a religious ideal, that is captured through the notion of Religious Genius. It assumes genius as a common element of human nature, and locates religious genius as an expression of the broader phenomenon of genius. It also assumes religious genius is a universal feature of the human person and that one can therefore educate to it and help it to grow. But it also recognizes that true religious genius is rare, and that fulfilled religious genius is a matter of perfection reserved for the few. And it offers some important criteria for recognition of Religious Genius, in the uppcase - the synthetic wholeness of paths that come together, of a life that is complete and of a love that integrates the person and extends to all, without limitation. This is a highly valuable way of constructing the notion of religious genius. It brings into the picture some important dimensions to which we shall have recourse in our own attempt to construct the category. Above all, it is important because it is the only work of religion, and of inspiration, that seeks to elaborate a coherent vision of religious genius. I hope that the singular contribution of this almost unknown author justifies the length to which I have gone in presenting his spiritual vision.

9.3 Pitirim Sorokin

The nexus of religious genius, saints and love, so fully developed by Swetenham does not have much of an echo in the decades that follow. For that matter, nor does the constellation of religious genius, saints and emotions, suggested by James.¹⁷³ Genius seems to have stopped functioning as a

¹⁷²Pp. 200-201.

¹⁷³It is interesting to note how little James makes of love as a defining feature of saints or religious genius. His own emphasis on the unconscious and states of high emotional excitation seems to preclude concentration on love as a defining feature of sainthood. Indeed, in his discussion brotherly love is but a consequence of the feeling of expansion, that he deems the essence of the saint's experience. And absorption in the love of God, that Swetenham would have readily

category in the study of religion. This is the case for half a century, until the publication in 1954 of Pitirim Sorokin's *The Ways and Power of Love*.¹⁷⁴ Much like his predecessor at Harvard, William James, Sorokin set out to explore positive aspects of the psyche, against prevailing trends of the day. Sorokin is familiar with James, but shows no awareness of Swetenham. Nevertheless, in terms of types or ideal positions, one may present Sorokin as a midway position, or a synthesis of the methodologies and positions of James and Swetenham. First and foremost, Sorokin is comfortable talking of God, much more so than James. Note how James described saintliness in terms of Ideal Power, almost grudgingly admitting that in Christian saintliness it is personified as God, but he immediately backtracks, affording abstract moral ideas the same status. The frequent quotes from his sources concerning God may obscure the point, but James himself makes precious little appeal to God as an organizing principal of his psychological or religious worldview. Only as he reaches his conclusions, he admits, again in a seemingly grudging manner: "God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality, so I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God."¹⁷⁵ By contrast, Sorokin is not only comfortable talking of God, but seems to make the divine reality a centerpoint of his construction of a theory of love. Thus, both in terms of love and in terms of God - and perhaps precisely because of the interconnectedness of the two, Sorokin is much closer to Swetenham than to James. In other aspects, though, we may recognize greater continuity with James. For one, his method is scholarly, relying on research, statistics and the testimony of sages and saints of all religions. While primarily indebted to Christianity, he seeks to construct his argument in a more objective fashion, using Christianity as the test case, rather than the theological framework. In conceptual terms as well, we note a closeness that is manifest through an important distinction. For James, the roots of genius and therefore of the religious life lie in the relation to the subconscious. Sorokin too relies on a well defined notion of personal subjectivity, much more robust than the simple appeal to interiority and the interior life that informs Swetenham's work. Sorokin presents his own personality structure, and it betrays his entire orientation. Sorokin considers a fourfold mental structure that he expresses also in energetic terms. The fourfold structure is: unconscious, bioconscious, socioconscious and supraconscious.¹⁷⁶ The key difference with James is that the religious life and religious genius are related, in his scheme, to the supraconscious. After dismissing Freudian notions of the person as products of the phantasmagoric

recognized as a fundamental feature of religious genius, is looked down upon as childish absorption, a sign of a feeble intellect and a distraction from more important practical interests. See *Varieties*, p. 253.

¹⁷⁴*The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors and Techniques of Moral Transformation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1954. Due to its importance, the book was republished by the Templeton Press with a new introduction in 2002.

¹⁷⁵p. 374.

¹⁷⁶These are discussed in Chapter 5.

imagination, Sorokin offers an initial description of the supraconscious, one upon which he will expand in several chapters of his book. His brief presentation is telling:

Finally, there is a still higher level in the mental structure of man, a still higher form of energies and activities...the supraconscious level of energies and activities. These constitute the fourth and highest stratum of man's personality, energies and activities. They are frequently designated as "the divine in man", "the manifestations of Godhead", "the sublimest energy of truth, goodness and beauty", "the highest creative genius" and so on. The supraconscious manifests itself in the greatest creative victories of man in the fields of truth, beauty and goodness.¹⁷⁷

We note the ease with which Sorokin incorporates God-talk in his description of the human person. This is indeed the case throughout his work, devoted to the study of love and its cultivation. Throughout his work, as for Swetenham, intuition plays an important role in understanding the workings of supraconscious.¹⁷⁸ We also note in this quote that "creative genius" is related to the same conceptual framework as the more explicitly theological notions, such as "divine in man" and other related notions. This provides us with the lead to Sorokin's view of genius. Like James, and unlike Swetenham, Sorokin barely refers to "religious genius" as a self standing concept.¹⁷⁹ The most frequent collocations are "creative genius", as in the quote above, and "supraconscious genius", in various places. The novelty of Sorokin is to refer to "altruistic genius"¹⁸⁰ or more broadly to a "genius in the field of love."¹⁸¹ This goes to the heart of Sorokin's concerns. Sorokin seeks to demonstrate how love can be cultivated and grown. The dual notions of genius and the supraconscious provide him with the conceptual framework for developing a theory and model through which love and altruism can be understood and made into focal points of specific educational platforms.

It is at this point that saints come in. Though God does occupy a place of importance in Sorokin's work, his book seeks to cultivate love, and its highest form, altruistic love, not saintliness, as the other works we have covered so far did. Saints are not the goal of Sorokin's project; they are the proof of its viability and they provide the method to achieve the goal. An earlier work of Sorokin's featured the saints as an object of study with reference to altruistic love.¹⁸² The present

¹⁷⁷p. 97.

¹⁷⁸For James, intuition seems to play almost no role. It occurs in quotes from other authors, and is never integrated into James' own conceptual framework.

¹⁷⁹Only in one place does he come close to using the term. On p. 113 he contrasts the philosophical form of genius, that Plato or Aristotle had, with its religious form, exemplified by Buddha, Confucius and Jesus. This does not suggest a robust notion of religious genius and rather sees genius as a broader phenomenon, that can manifest in the religious life as well.

¹⁸⁰p. 144, referred to as a mystery; p. 191.

¹⁸¹p. 171; 308.

¹⁸²*Altruistic Love: A Study of American Good Neighbors and Christian Saints*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1950.

work uses saints in two ways. The first is as a body of data, from which Sorokin draws some principled conclusions regarding love and the formation of character traits. Family circumstances, circumstances of conversion and longevity are all related to the effects and benefits of love. Taken as a whole, the saints of the Orthodox and Catholic church provide him with a body of data, through which to consider the developmental processes related to love. They also allow him to study it where altruism is most prevalent.

There is one move that Sorokin does not seem to make. Unlike some of the philosophers we studied above, Sorokin never suggests that saints should serve as models or examples of altruism. Saints prove it is *possible*, but the way to realizing love and altruism does not pass through imitation. Rather, it passes through following their path. For this reason, part four of Sorokin's work is devoted to techniques for altruistic transformation. Sorokin takes seriously the lessons of the Christian tradition, particularly the monastic tradition, and of all serious religious practitioners. He realizes that love and altruism cannot be willed; they express spiritual growth, an entry into relationship with God, cultivation of the supraconscious. Saints are not simply proofs, they are teachers. They provide a stock of methods and techniques, that Sorokin makes available in the interest of cultivating the genius of love.

This is a daring and highly original perspective, that combines a religious and a sociological worldview. It seeks to suggest paths for transformation, even as it develops novel theories of the self and its transformation. In all this genius and religion coalesce around the notion of love. Entry into the higher domains of love is the accomplishment and testimony of saints and the purpose of religion. Unlike James and Swetenham, Sorokin does not invite his readers to become saints. He invites them to grow their altruistic capacity, following the techniques taught by the saints.

Does Sorokin, then, help us to develop a notion of religious genius? Yes and no. Sorokin does not set out to develop that notion, but as he develops his notions of genius of love and altruistic genius he does make us realize the centrality that love should have in any attempt to construct a model of religious genius. Sorokin takes love beyond the faith-based declarations of Swetenham, and tries to ground it in a broader theory, that is itself related to an understanding of the human person, the psyche and personal growth. These are all related to the workings of genius, and hence relevant to our own concerns. Most importantly, the use of genius does not preclude the relevance of the lessons learnt from the genius for others. Sorokin's use of genius and his appeal to the precedent and methods of the saints assume that the qualities of genius, as it manifests in the religious life, can be learned, transmitted and cultivated. This is the core of his project.

9.4 Huston Smith

It is fair to say, that with the three figures studied in depth, we have exhausted the testimony of an entire century concerning the meaning and the viability of the category of “religious genius.”¹⁸³ While all of it has been interesting, possibly also inspiring, it is clear that as we approach our topic, we do so without an adequate foundation, provided by our predecessors. Their usage may inspire us to include various dimensions in a future model of religious genius, but does not present us with any established, accepted or even sufficiently worked out notion of religious genius. For purposes of developing a new category and a new discourse this might constitute a distinct advantage.

Prior to exploring suggestions for the future, I would like to briefly note a passage by Huston Smith, quoted by Sir John Templeton.¹⁸⁴ While the reference provided is clearly wrong,¹⁸⁵ the quote rings true:

The average man is no more capable of forming his imagination in ways that resolve his feelings nobly than he is capable of being his own scientist. Both tasks require genius. Geniuses in the art of shaping man’s imaginings are artists, philosophers, prophets, and seers. Over time their creations coalesce and distill into cultures. As the religious forms of traditional Judaism and Christianity are losing their powers to inform the contemporary mind, humanity desperately needs religious geniuses who can create new imaginable forms, convincing to the contemporary mind which consummate man’s needs for home, vocation, and transcendence.

Smith seems to use genius here in ways that are not casual.¹⁸⁶ Genius is a category that cuts across different domains. Prophets and seers provide expressions of genius, and are indeed called religious geniuses. The task of religious genius seems to be closely related to the faculty of the imagination. This is an interesting nuance, distinct from reference to the intuition that we encountered with other authors. Geniuses form imagination in ways that resolve feelings and that -----

¹⁸³I do not refer to casual uses of genius, such as the following quote, taken from Mircea Eliade’s blurb for a translation of the Bhagavad Gita: “Mr. Sargeant must be congratulated on his 'labor of love.' One of the masterpieces of Indian—and human—religious genius has been made accessible in all its splendid and profound complexity.” Such uses do not carry with them the baggage of genius-studies, that informed earlier discourse, or a coherent theory of personality, as in the case of Sorokin. “Genius” in most contemporary use simply means: that which is original, unique particular or even inspired.

¹⁸⁴*Possibilities for Over Hundredfold More Spiritual Information*, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 2000, p. 44.

¹⁸⁵The reference is given as Huston Smith, *Empiricism: Scientific and Religious*, 1964, with no page number. Such a title does not exist, by any author, and I was unable to locate an article by that name, by Huston Smith.

¹⁸⁶This is also true of his use of religious geniuses in *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology*, Albany, SUNY University Press, 1989, p. 77.

appeal to the mind, providing it meaning on a variety of levels. Genius seems to wear down and the genius of yesteryear is losing its power, as traditional religious forms no longer inspire the imagination, failing to convince the contemporary mind. Genius gives birth to culture and to religion, and as these advance and lose their power, there is need for new genius. Genius seems to function here much in the same way that charisma and its routinization did for Max Weber. While not providing a full blown theory of genius, as our previous authors did, Smith certainly exhibits a robust understanding of genius. It seems, based on how this quote is positioned in the work of Sir John Templeton, that this brief quote played an important role in inspiring Sir John's own thinking on the issue of religious genius. He may even owe the category to Huston Smith. This provides us with a lead into the thought of Templeton on religious genius, the final item in this conceptual review.

9.5 Sir John Templeton

The above passage attributed to Huston Smith is taken from a longer discussion in chapter 4 of *Possibilities for Over Hundredfold More Spiritual Information*, titled: creation through change. In order to appreciate Templeton's thought on the issue of religious genius, I would like to first quote some extended passages from that chapter.

1. Increasing evidence indicates that creation is just beginning. Are humans just starting to understand that we may have been given creative talents possibly so we can become helpers in a divine accelerating creative process? Are the old ways of structuring and ordering institutional religions adequate for future progress? Can concepts or rituals sometimes be too rigid, too traditional? Can new, freer, more entrepreneurial and adaptable concepts be helpful supplements to ancient revelations so that man's god-given mind may help spiritual information to increase over 100 fold?
6. Throughout history has religion developed and progressed often by the work of those who were first regarded as heretics? The Pharisees were learned, deeply devoted and sincerely holy men, but most of them seemed to have regarded Jesus as a heretic. Others once called heretics were Buddha, Paul, Zoroaster, Muhammad, Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Fox, Smith, Emerson, Bahauallah and Eddy. Christians believe god was incarnated into the world as a human. However, note that Jesus was not a traditionalist urging restudy of Abraham and Moses. Rather, he was an innovator who proclaimed and taught new revelation. Rarely does a historian or conservative become a hero of later history. Many of history's most creative people have been untraditional, far reaching thinkers who seek to improve accepted customs of their time. Often such people have been called radicals.

8. For humanity to progress, should we be eagerly interested to welcome whomever might be the new Columbus, the new Galileo, the new Copernicus? Can creative geniuses enlarge our global vision and help us to comprehend how tiny and temporary we are and how little we have yet discovered?

11. Perhaps only about one child in a million is born with talents which seem almost superhuman in one or more ways. Why does god's process of evolution produce these rare geniuses on earth? Is it the divine plan that they should help all people to progress? The one in a million who contributes a new idea to humanity can be a blessing to billions, which helps god's creation continue to progress.

12. In addition to the geniuses given more-than-human minds, god also creates saints and prophets gifted with more-than-human souls. A prophet is a pioneer in the vast uncharted regions of the spirit. For spiritual progress to flourish, do we need to cultivate interest and humility to listen carefully and learn from such people, recognizing their important gifts? If no two persons are equal or identical in body or mind, is it probable that no two persons are equal in spiritual insight? However much we may yearn for equality, it does not seem to be part of the divine plan.

13. Søren Kierkegaard taught that the human race advances on the backs of those rare geniuses who venture into realms of which most of us are afraid. Did Arend van Leeuwen exaggerate by saying, "Ninety-nine percent of people, irrespective of race, play a passive as opposed to a creative role; and even the creative section are passive with regard to ninety-nine percent of their civilization"? And Huston Smith, the masterful chronicler of world religious thought and practice, wrote: And here follows the passage from Smith, quoted above.

15. In our own times have we witnessed several brave religious pioneers who have marched into old areas of religious endeavor with a new bold spirit and program? Brother Roger Schutz, the founder of the Taizé community in France, has answered one of the greatest spiritual needs in the postwar world. His quiet monastic community attracts architects, painters, theologians, lawyers and countless professional people who, after submitting themselves to his program of prayer and reflection, return to the world to pursue their careers more fully committed to creating a more fruitful world of love and joy. His efforts to organize the worldwide Council of Youth in 1970 inspired thousands of young people to go to Taizé and then return to their own countries to work for religious renewal.

16. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, often called by people of many faiths a living saint, demonstrated to the world yet another way that divine creativity can be helped through human (or in her case superhuman) effort. Mother Teresa formed a new order of religious women who have lived among and helped the poorest of the poor in India and many other

nations to develop fruitful joyful lives through divine love. Public as well as private charitable organizations could follow her example and methods for providing human services and love to the outcasts of our age. Malcolm Muggeridge said about Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity:

When I think of them in Calcutta, as I often do, it is not the bare house in a dark slum that is conjured up in my mind, but a light shining and a joy abounding. I see them diligently and cheerfully constructing something beautiful for God out of the human misery and affliction that lies around them.

17. Another pioneering woman in the struggle for spiritual renewal in the world is Chiara Lubich. Her Focolare, or Fireside Movement, begun in Italy in 1943, has become a successful international means of providing spiritual community to people for whom the church as a system and institution is not enough. Living in lay communities structured as families and imbued with the loving ethos of family life, architects, doctors, engineers, nurses, carpenters, secretaries and others find a sense of spiritual belonging that run-of-the-mill society does not provide. Her innovative program, now adopted by thousands of people the world over, infuses vigorous inspiration into volunteers who seek to reanimate the world in the spirit of love. Her New Family, New Humanity and New Parishes movements are all creative additions to the traditional concept of church organization.

18. Through spiritual pioneers like Brother Roger, Mother Teresa and Chiara Lubich, can new blessings flow? Should freedom be given to people like these three who take seriously the challenge to be humble co-creators with god? Should their messages be studied worldwide? The next stage of human help in spiritual progress may have much to do with the examples and creativity of dedicated men and women, geniuses of the spirit, who will blaze trails for the rest of us to follow. (To encourage progress of this kind Templeton Foundation Prizes for Progress in Religion were established in 1972. A list of awardees is included at the end of this book, in Appendix Five.)

25. Schilling claims that matter and most likely all other manifestations of reality are fundamentally developmental. He suggests reality is a continuing creative process in an unmistakable direction, “from the simple to the complex, from the small to the large, from the isolated individual entities to combinations and integrated systems, and to community.”¹⁸⁷

The numbers in the above quote represent different sections of the chapter. The numbering is not consecutive, indicating my having only taken from the broader discussion those elements that could be relevant to our discussion of religious genius. This discussion itself is grounded in broader

¹⁸⁷Selective quotes from *Possibilities*, pp. 40-49.

concerns for the advance of religion and for growth in our knowledge of God and spiritual reality in view of changes in humanity and advances in scientific thinking. The chapter opens with the notion that humanity's creative talents could help to accelerate divine creativity. We recall from our reading of Sorokin how close genius and creativity are, and indeed a discussion of human creativity is the framework within which Templeton's own reflections on genius are couched. We notice also the explicitly theological framework: human creativity takes place in close association with divine creativity. Templeton appeals to a particular theological notion, that of co-creativity. The governing notions in this passage are novelty, progress and the adaptation of religion to future progress. Interestingly, the argument is less about the possible rigidity or incompatibility of religion to the present, but rather to the tasks and challenges of the future. The problem of the inadequacy of the structures of old and the ongoing need for reform or advancement of religion is not simply a contemporary problem. It seems to be fundamental to the nature of religion. As in the view implicit in the above quote from Smith, traditional religious systems require time and again the power of radical reform, that takes the form of a new revelation, an innovation. Creativity, the key term in this discussion, is associated in the view of contemporaries of the creative mind, with heresy. But what is important is the creative drive, that is only appreciated in retrospect.

Templeton's list in paragraph 6 of radicals-in-their-day is a veritable who's who of religious geniuses. The names noted by Templeton almost all appear as examples of genius or saintliness in one of the authors surveyed above, especially James. It is interesting that Templeton himself does not refer to them as religious geniuses, even though this is where his own discussion is headed. Judging by this list, it would seem that the notions of religious genius, or genius of the soul, and those of religious radicals and reformers are quite close, if not identical. This recognition will be important to recall, as we attempt to construct a working model of religious genius. Religious geniuses, in this view, are not simply individuals who have attained the perfect subjectivity of the experience of the divine, or the fullness of love. They are radicals who make a difference in their time, leading their religion and their society through major changes.

Sections 8 and 11 bring us back to the notion of creative genius, though not specifically in the religious field. Columbus, Copernicus and Galileo are the creative geniuses who enlarge our global vision. "Enlarging our global vision" may well sum up the core of Templeton's vision for genius and for creative growth in knowledge and spiritual understanding. It provides a common ground for the two distinct dimensions that are brought together in this chapter as complementary parts of one broader discussion - genius and religious genius. The scientists enlarge our global vision in the field of science and our knowledge of the physical world. Religious geniuses have the charge of broadening our vision in other dimensions - society, relationships, understanding how to live our lives in today's world.

Geniuses are there to help humanity progress. Section 11 suggests a one-in-a-million ratio of geniuses with superhuman talents. The lack of equality that emerges from recognition of uneven distribution of talent or genius is recognized, at the end of section 12, as part of the divine plan. It is justified because it brings benefits to all of humanity, not millions but billions.

The move from section 11 to section 12 is particularly relevant to our concerns. Templeton moves from geniuses given more than human minds to saints and prophets gifted with more than human souls. The mind-heart distinction we saw in Swetenham receives a different twist here. We have clearly moved from the scientific to the religious domain here. Has the numerical ratio remained the same? Is there significance to the fact that Templeton offers an assessment of the ratio in relation to geniuses of the mind but not in relation to geniuses of the spirit? If the overall goal is to enlarge our vision, then prophets and saints do so in relation to the “uncharted regions of the spirit”. How interesting: in relation to the geniuses of the mind no demand is made of “us”. The blessings and benefits to the billions would seem to be obvious, the fruit of the innovation of these geniuses. By contrast, the contribution of the geniuses of the spirit requires our listening. Interest, humility and the ability to listen seem to be understood as preconditions for the success of the work of these individuals. Cultivating the capacity to understand, appreciate and imbibe the message of the geniuses of the spirit is thus recognized as a task that “we” must confront, if they are to be successful in their God-given mission of aiding humanity to advance on the spiritual path.

In section 13 Kierkegaard and Huston Smith are both quoted as precedents for the need and importance of genius, genius of the spirit and religious genius. As we saw in the above quote from Smith, the task of geniuses is to appeal to the human mind, drawing upon convincing ways of shaping imagination. It would seem from these descriptions that the task is mainly theological-imaginal, in other words a task to be carried out in the realm of the mind and spirit, by means of which our global vision may be enlarged. Against this expectation it is quite surprising, perhaps enriching, to see where Templeton takes the reader next. Following these declarations of the importance of genius, and recalling the list of great teachers, mentioned in section 6 as radicals in their time, Templeton proceeds to introduce us to three contemporary figures, recognized by him through the Templeton prize as individuals who did indeed help further the cause of advancing our spiritual understanding.¹⁸⁸

Beginning with paragraph 15, we encounter individuals who are religious pioneers, who have a bold spirit and program. One does wonder whether the boldness of program really captures the depth of the intuition required of new religious geniuses in order to make religion work for us today.

¹⁸⁸It is worth noting that these prizes to contemporary saints or religious geniuses were given during the earlier years when the prize was distributed. In later years, the prize was awarded to people who contributed to the science-religion interface. This change in policy is interesting, and may reflect the difficulties in implementing Sir John’s vision of religious genius as a cause of the foundation.

Does the combined testimony of Brother Roger, Mother Theresa and Chiara Lubich amount to the new imagination that society requires today of its religious geniuses to make religion once again convincing, as Smith demanded? They are certainly inspiring, deeply inspiring. Given the numbers of Christians (even Catholics) they also fall within the one-in-a-million framework. But if we take them as examples of religious genius, and not only as examples of a contemporary application of religion carried out in a spirit of boldness, then we are led to a very important conclusion concerning religious genius. Religious genius is not, as we would have thought, only or primarily about revealing truths, shaping imaginations and discovering uncharted areas of the spirit. It is, and judging by these examples perhaps above all, a matter of how religion is lived in the world.¹⁸⁹ The identification of new forms of religious life, the capacity to adapt our religious vision to changing social needs and circumstances, is itself a major expression of genius of the spirit. Whether what we see here are different dimensions of Sir John's thought, that should not be too readily harmonized, or an application of the broader principles in terms of contemporary social reality is a generative question worth revisiting. It certainly makes us aware of the possibility that "enlarging our global vision" is not only a speculative matter, but a matter of living. Our vision is enlarged when we are able to generate spiritual renewal through encounter with an inspiring community of monks, when we help the poor develop joyful lives through divine love, and when we identify new structures to enhance the meaning of community in the world. Templeton recognizes in these expressions of innovation and creativity. Creativity is understood as co-creativity, collaboration with God, and ultimately as an expression of a religious genius suitable for our times, leading people to renewal and to finding new ways of living their spiritual lives in today's world.

Section 18 challenges us once again to state the relationship of creativity, being co-creators and being geniuses of the spirit. Is the understanding here expressed that all acts of creativity, or at least such creativity that brings about meaningful transformation in the lives of multitudes, are also acts of co-creativity. And is this itself a sign of genius of the spirit? Or has the discussion, with the help of the notion of co-creativity, shifted from religious genius, to religious pioneering, only to return once again to the hope of future geniuses of the spirit, impregnating humanity with a new spirit. The sequence of Templeton's presentation runs from religious heretics and radicals to geniuses, one-in-a-million, to geniuses of the spirit to bold pioneers who bring about religious renewal, and thereby co-create with God. Reading the sequence of these ideas as they unfold challenges us to think through the implications of these sequences. Do criteria, goals, expectations and achievements change at every turn of the discussion? Is there a broader stream of innovation and co-creativity that ties the discussion together, even though the actual subject matter and the kind of vision and contribution it

¹⁸⁹See also section 25: "Do links between people, between churches and between nations need to be forged as a Mother Teresa or a Brother Roger or a Chiara Lubich would forge them?"

entails changes along the way? Or should we read all these expressions as coextensive, pointing to the same level of innovation, genius and creativity? As a reader of midrashic texts, I find the logic and texture of Sir John's text rich in possibilities, and open to multiple interpretations. It is a generative text that can continue to inspire reflection, because of the bumps and open ends it contains. At the very least, it constitutes a call to further reflection on what religious genius might mean and how the category might be constructed with care, attention and rigor. The challenges and possibilities contained in this unfolding of ideas will inform my own construction of a model of religious genius.

Having taken the reader through detailed presentation of several key statements regarding religious genius, I shall move on, in the next section, to offer my own model of religious genius. While it does not reflect an attempt to simply translate, one to one, the various - at times conflicting - insights that we have encountered in this review of a hundred years of use of "religious genius", it does owe much to these earlier discussions. At every point they have both challenged and inspired me. My own synthesis is indebted to the thinking of all those who preceded me. Their categories, tensions and struggles have exposed important aspects and potentialities of the category of "religious genius". It is time to draw these insights together, in my own personal way, by introducing my own working model of religious genius.

Appendix 3 - Saints and Religious Geniuses as Inspiration for Character Formation

Saints have figured long in discussions that are relevant to the concerns of character formation. As exemplars of virtue, they have provided an example that invites emulation. As we have seen, this dimension of the saints' lives has led to reflection on the tension between imitability and inimitability in relation to saints. This was the major contribution of the collection of essays, edited by Kieckhefer and Bond.¹⁹⁰ Most discussions have highlighted the fact that saints do things that others would not and should not wish to do. They are extravagant, out of order and not appropriate subjects for emulation. Take St. Francis' public stripping in the market place in Assisi and you have a perfect example of the inimitability of the saint.

Authors who participated in the Kieckhefer - Bond project all sought to demonstrate similar tensions within their traditions, and doubtless similar tensions can be identified. However, as I have read and reflected on various sources featuring the saints and how they function in different traditions, a suspicion has grown in me as to the centrality of example and imitation in the first place, as a means of capturing the import and function of the saint in traditions other than Christianity. As one who is actually quite close to the strands of Judaism that venerate holy people,¹⁹¹ I realize that I have never considered the import of *zaddikim* in terms of emulation or moral example. My impression is that the same is true for Hinduism and Islam. Highlighting example along with fellowship and intercession may be a particularly Christian balance.¹⁹² Fellowship and intercession I certainly do recognize from my encounters with other religions. Emulation may play an important role as well, but it does not necessarily follow from the notion of model or example. And here we come to the challenge of articulating the implication of religious genius for character formation. Given the suspicion that in traditions other than Christianity, example is not the main thrust of the saint's contribution to character formation, I would like to propose another way of understanding the genius' contribution to character formation.

Let us also say a word here regarding the notion of moral perfection. As already noted, we find in the literature some discussion as to whether saints should be considered morally perfect. If they are not perfect morally, they have attained some other kind of perfection, by means of which they are recognized as saints. This is usually related to their relationship to God, rather than to morality. Broadening this discussion to religious genius, one might ask whether we assume that a religious genius is morally perfect. We have already raised the notion of the "flawed religious genius" in our

¹⁹⁰The tension was already noted by James, *Varieties*, p. 125.

¹⁹¹Cohn in his contribution in the Kieckhefer volume claims that for most of Judaism, the notion of holy man is foreign. He acknowledges some divergences from this principal.

¹⁹²See John Hawley's introduction to *Saints and Virtues*.

discussion and made room for him, at least in the second row of religious geniuses. But whether or not moral perfection is even possible, it seems to me that what is of utmost importance is the *being* of the religious genius, not his or her moral achievements.

If so, what is the testimony that the religious genius provides for others? If she is not primarily about providing an example, is there any relevance to the religious genius, in terms of character formation? I believe the answer should be positive. The religious genius offers us a testimony of what it means to be human. She points to a fullness of humanity, of human potential, that is achieved in relation to a higher order of being. The religious genius thus provides a *model of being*. What is to be emulated are not virtues, actions or qualities, but the very orientation of being in relation to absolute, the larger whole, both horizontal and vertical. But this would seem even more impossible and inimitable than the imitation of actions and virtues. What has been gained by shifting the focus of attention from the genius' manifestation to the core of his existential orientation?

It is here that the logic of imitation, fundamental to religious genius, finds its significance. As suggested, imitation happens in successive stages, wherein one level imitates the other, each looking to the next level ahead, and the entire chain looking beyond. A religious genius, much like the zaddik or guru, is a model of being, a reminder of a different way of orientating oneself in the world. His overall being is a call to emulate, on a lower level, the composite nature of being that he represents. Clearly, the tension of imitability and inimitability could lead to failure to take the genius as a reminder of a higher way of being, turning to him for other purposes instead. As suggested, the tension may be grounded in the existential paradox of imitating a higher order of being. But from another perspective, imitation is possible. The structures and fundamental orientations can be preserved, as one degree of life opens to another, making some kind of imitation possible. Thus, built into the reality of the religious genius is the possibility of evoking the memory or the aspiration for a higher way of being. Much as the religious genius turns towards the ideal reality and seeks to capture it in this world, the follower has the possibility of turning to the religious genius and deriving inspiration for how to be. The religious genius' contribution to character formation thus touches the very foundational challenge of how to be in the world.¹⁹³

What the religious genius can provide for character formation is the orientating framework for being, in light of which questions of priority, meaning and values of life are determined. These provide a framework for the very viewing of one's life and its purpose. Purpose thus emerges as a key term designating what the religious genius can provide in the life of others - a reorientation of

¹⁹³It is worth repeating here the observations of Joachim Duyndam, *Hermeneutics of Imitation: A Philosophical Approach to Sainthood and Exemplariness*, noted above, concerning the importance of imitation for educational purposes, or what we here call character formation. In a world that increasingly imitates the models put up by commercial forces, recognition of this fundamental dynamic, that enables imitation of being on a higher level, is a much needed corrective.

being, in light of his own example, that enables the follower to redefine, reorient and awaken the sense of purpose of his or her being. A narrower approach to saints centers on virtues. The broader approach to religious geniuses and saints provides one with the deep sense of purpose, in light of which to orient life.

Appendix 4 - Dialogue with Simonton

The following section focuses on how our project might relate to the work of one specialist, who has dealt with genius extensively, from the perspective of psychology, Dean Keith Simonton. References to Simonton's work were based on several responses and papers that he had prepared for 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.

Appendix 5 - Scholars who have contributed to the Religious Genius Project

Rev. Charlotte Bannister - Parker, St. Mary's, Oxford
Paul Monroe Butler, Psychiatric Hospital, Boston
Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University
Vincent Cornell, Emory University
Carl Ernst, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
Jerome Gellman, Ben Gurion University
Timothy Gianotti, American Islamic College, Chicago
Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America
Amanda Lucia Huffer, University of California, Riverside
Moshe Idel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern University
Miriam Levering, University of Tennessee
Zvi Mark, Bar Ilan University
John McGuckin, Union Theological Seminary
Stephen Butler Murray, Endicott College
Vasudha Narayanan, University of South Florida
Robert Neville, Boston University
Christian Onofrei, Boston
Anantand Rambachan, St. Olaf's College
John Renard, St. Louis University
Biti Roi, Shalom Hartman, Institute
Vanessa Sasson, McGill University
Dov Schwartz, Bar Ilan University
Meir Sender, Young Israel of Sharon
Dean Keith Simonton, University of California, Davis
Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna Mission, Boston
Nicholas Zane, Boston University

Appendix 6 - Papers and products of the project for further Consultation

1. Religious Genius - Project lead essay by Alon Goshen-Gottstein (ver. 1)

2. Religious Genius and the Interreligious Study of Saints, Participant Response Papers Relating to the Concept Paper by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, with contributions by

Robert Neville

Richard Kieckhefer

Miriam Levering

Meir Sendor

Anantanand Rambachan

Carl Ernst

Yehuda Gellman

Vincent J. Cornell

Vasudha Narayanan

Nikolas Zanetti

Francis X. Clooney

Dean Keith Simonton

3. Additional responses to concept paper by Christian Onofrei and Paul Monroe Butler.

4. Theoretical papers, exploring “religious genius”

Robert Neville, Religious Genius and Ultimate Realities

Jerome Gellman, Religious Genius - A Conceptual Framework

Nikolas Zanetti, Defining Religious Genius

4. Case studies of individual figures

John McGuckin, St. Gregory the Great

Vasudha Narayanan, Namalvar

Carl Ernst, Rumi

Anantand Rambachan, Ramana Maharshi

Dov Schwartz, Rav Kook

Zvi Mark and Biti Roi, Rabbi Nachman of Breslav

Moshe Idel, Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov

Amanda Lucia Huffer, Amritanandamayī

Miriam Leverin, Dahui

Vanessa Sasson, the Buddha

Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna
Timothy Gianotti, Al Ghazali

5. Materials prepared for community study as part of Oxford project of religious leaders and communities

Collection of Inspirational Studies (portraits and collections of 13 figures, from different traditions)

Thematic Studies (drawn from collection of 13 authors)

In addition to figures above, this collection also includes Imam al Jazuli, presented by Vincent Cornell and Thomas Merton, with selections by Sidney Griffith

Religious Genius - abridged version of project lead essay

6. Report on course taught by John Renard at St. Louis University

7. Reports on meetings of Religious Genius Project

Boston, June 2012

Boston, June 2013h