



Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2013. 787 pp.

This weighty volume by the famous medievalist Robert Bartlett sets out to answer the question posed by church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) concerning the power of saints to work miracles. Bartlett’s encyclopaedic book gives us in over 600 pages of text detailed information on who the saints were and how they were venerated but it does not really answer the psychological reasons or theological justifications of believing in the power of saints. Bartlett’s book, however, offers a magnificent synthesis of what is known of the cult of saints from its emergence with the veneration of the martyrs of the early Church until the reformation. Although Bartlett deals mainly with the Middle Ages, the topic is pertinent even today since the cult of the saints is far from extinct and the pope canonizes new saints every now and then.

The book begins with hardly any introduction, going straight into the topic in Part I ‘Development’, which offers a chronological overview of the evolution of the cult of the saints. Part I is less than 100 pages long and most of the book is devoted to Part II ‘Dynamics’, which discusses chapter by chapter different aspects of the cult of the saints, such as types of saints, relics and shrines, miracles, pilgrimage and hagiography. In Part I, Bartlett maps the development and central features of the cult of the saints but also points out some specific regional features. Bartlett’s approach here is rather to sum up what is known than to offer any new interpretations.

At the beginning of Part II, Bartlett states that (p. 95) ‘A saint was not a person of a particular type but a person who was treated in a particular way’. He further defines saints as (p. 137) ‘people who are treated as saints’. Bartlett’s approach to sainthood is in line with these definitions since his focus is clearly on the various manifestations of the cult of saints, that is, on the ways in which saints were managed and treated by their worshippers. As an example of this

approach, one can mention the interesting detailed look into the implications of the celebration of the feast days of saints for local communities regarding their identities and organisation of time and work. Since Bartlett's definition of saints is based on the existence of the formal features of the cult, such as feast-day, dedications and pilgrimage sites, it follows that also some angels fall into his category of saints. Bartlett therefore includes also a short discussion of the cult of the angels as an example of the flexibility of the cult of the saints.

Bartlett's focus is mainly on Western Christendom, but he also looks at Byzantine evidence once in a while to complement and to contrast and especially when discussing the images of saints. He does not, however, deal systematically with differences in the veneration of saints between different times and parts of Europe but rather offers a recapitulation of the typical features of the cult of the saints with plenty of examples and anecdotes drawn from sources. At places, he nevertheless makes interesting observations regarding chronological and geographical patterns in the profusion of sanctity and the forms of veneration. Bartlett's use of examples from the sources is illuminating and makes the text livelier to read, but occasionally, it makes the reader wonder whether ten different examples of a specific type of a saint or a miracle are really necessary to make the point. Most of the stories of saints told by Bartlett, however, are very entertaining and include such gems as a miracle-tale involving torn-out testicles used as footballs. Moreover, Bartlett's range of examples originating from different parts of Europe and within the timespan of over 1000 years is very impressive and helps him to build a convincing overall image of Christian sainthood.

The book also includes ten colour plates as a separate section and a scattering of black-and-white pictures here and there. As one chapter is devoted to images of saints and another to relics, most of the pictorial representations of saints and the physical manifestations of the cult are described only in words with no accompanying illustration. This is understandable from the point of view of the cost of printing the book but, nevertheless, makes the reader lament the lack of images at places. For example, the detailed discussion of two contrasted representations of St Edmund (d. 869) from the twelfth and fifteenth centuries on p. 494 would have benefited from accompanying images.

Part II of Bartlett's book is organised under the following chapter-headings: 'The nature of the cult', 'Saints' Days', 'Types of Saints', 'Relics and Shrines', 'Miracles', 'Pilgrimage', 'Dedications and Naming', 'Images of the Saints', 'The Literature of Sanctity', 'Doubt and Dissent', and 'Reflections'. Despite the huge size of the book, there still are some aspects of the veneration of saints that do not get much attention, such as the role of saints in lay spirituality (or so-called 'folk-religion') although the topic crops up here and there, as for example in the context of private devotion to saints. Another topic that would have merited more explicit treatment is female sainthood which is

mostly discussed in connection with the categories of virgins and royal saints. These are mostly treated by giving lots of examples of saints belonging to these categories but a more extensive discussion of the theological and spiritual meanings given to virginity, for example, would have been welcome because it would have explained why virginity was so important for sanctity. The discussion on lay saints moreover is mostly focused on royal saints with only a few examples of saints arising from among the common people. In this context the (mostly female) saints with backgrounds in the tertiary penitent movement of the high Middle Ages, for example, could have been mentioned.

On the other hand, Bartlett's book offers a very interesting look into some aspects of sainthood which do not usually get so much attention in general studies of the topic, such as the practical side of managing a saint's cult, including the ordering of reliquaries, the running of a shrine, and the recording the miracles happening there. For the most part, Bartlett focuses on the description of the cult of the saints without engaging in discussion over interpretations with other scholars. There are, however, some exceptions as, for example, the discussion of the gruesome tales of (often sexual) violence inflicted upon martyrs. These stories are often explained by sexual voyeurism, but Bartlett suggests that they should be understood as a part of the internal logic of the stories where 'the threat to the virgin martyr's sexual integrity has to be sexual in nature' (p. 539), furthermore pointing out that it is difficult to identify the sexual tastes of people living hundreds of years ago.

The book ends with a chapter entitled 'Reflections' which offers a comparative view of sainthood setting the Christian cult of saints into the context of other religious traditions, such as the pre-Christian worship of gods and of sacred natural places, the Jewish and Islamic cults of the dead and worship at tomb-shrines, and the cult of ancestors found in various religions. This approach highlights the aspects shared by different religions on one hand, and the unique features of the Christian veneration of the saints on the other.

With this monumental book Robert Bartlett returns to the theme of the cult of the saints which he touched upon in one of his earlier books, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (2005), in which he studied testimonies given by the witnesses of the resurrection of a hanged criminal as part of the canonization process of Thomas de Cantilupe (ca. 1218–1282). With *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* Bartlett provides a birds-eye view of sainthood, discussing saints in plural instead of focusing on the particularities of a specific cult. The book is an excellent summary of what is known of the cult of saints and, at the same time, despite its enormous size, it is very easy to approach and entertaining to read. Bartlett's book highlights an important aspect of the medieval world and would be suitable to anyone interested in learning who the saints were and how they were venerated.

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