BECOMING HOLY WOMEN 
AND HOLY MEN IN THE 
NEW TESTAMENT

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The phenomenon of a holy woman and/or holy man is found in nearly every culture. The phrase (holy woman/man) is a technical term that is roughly equivalent to "shaman." Purists quibble about using the term shaman for anyone other than the Siberian holy men whom it originally designated. However, the term is common coin in anthropological literature, so it is appropriate to retain it. In general, the term designates a personality type that is open to the realm of the divine. There are two characteristics of a holy woman/man: s/he is experiential in touch with the spirit world; and s/he becomes a mediator or broker of power from that world to this, especially in deeds of healing.

I. Holy Woman/Man

Though Greco-Roman antiquity knew many holy men of many different patterns, the Israelite tradition distinguished two: the saddiq and the hastid. The saddiq describes the ideal average person who strove to keep the commandments and to avoid sin. The word hastid relates to hesed, that is, kindness or generosity rooted in and driven by a kinship-based relationship. The word hastid describes a person who
went beyond the basic requirements. The *hasid*’s behavior was rooted in kindness and generosity which s/he owed to kin. Therefore, the *hasid* strove to be absolutely perfect and completely devoted to kinsperson—God and other kin of God, namely fellow human beings. Jesus was viewed as a *hasid* (Luke 20:21). Indeed, this is the very first title by which Jesus is recognized in the Markan record: “I know who you are,” says the unclean spirit, “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24).

According to rabbinic tradition, early *hasidim* included Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Esther, and the Gentile Job. David, too, is a *hasid* (Ps 16:10, 86:2; etc). Considering what we know of the life of these figures (Adam disobeyed God, Jacob deceived his father and outwitted his brother, etc.), Hillel’s opinion is understandable. “The *am ha’aretz* is not [apt to be] a *hasid*” (m. Aboth 6.1). Nevertheless, rabbinic literature reports that *hasidim* came from all sectors of society: women and men, poor and rich, farmers and townsmen, lay people and priests, *am ha’aretz* and scholars. In Jesus’ teaching the vocation to be a holy person was open to all: “You [pl.] must be perfect [or holy] as your [pl.] heavenly father is perfect [or holy; recall Lev 11:45].”

II. Experiential Contact with the Spirit World

How did God communicate with our ancestors in the faith? The Deuteronomistic Historian tells us quite plainly. “And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision” (1 Sam 3:1). From the perspective of cultural anthropology and contemporary cognitive neuroscience, a “vision” is just one of twenty different states of consciousness of which human beings are capable. According to the biblical record, God communicates with human beings through a variety of altered states of consciousness (vision, 1 Sam 3:1; dream, Matt 1:29; trance, Acts 10:10; etc.). Another word for consciousness is awareness, so an altered state of consciousness is a different state of awareness.

Altered states of consciousness are a pan-human experience. Ethnographic data in Yale University’s Human Relations Area Files
indicate that as many as 90% of human societies routinely have such experiences, often without intentionally inducing them. Cognitive neuroscience explains that consciousness can be changed “from the bottom up” or “from the top down.” A shift of consciousness “from the bottom up” originates in the autonomic nervous system. By overstimulating the senses, a shift of consciousness can occur “from the bottom up.” Hand-clapping, drumming, rattling and the like stimulate the sympathetic or arousal branch of the autonomic nervous system and can induce this shift of consciousness. Quieting the senses stimulates the parasympathetic or quiescent branch of the autonomic nervous system and similarly induces a shift of consciousness. Either of these processes can produce a brief but very intense experience of altered state of consciousness. Since the young boy Samuel was trying to fall asleep (1 Sam 3), it is plausible to consider that by quieting the senses, he was preparing himself for an encounter with God in vision. The actual encounter reported was indeed brief and intense.

A shift in consciousness or awareness can also be instituted in the nervous system “from the top down.” Such a shift originates in the cortex of the brain and then moves down into the autonomic nervous system, just as the “bottom up” shift of consciousness originates in the nervous system and moves to the brain. Meditation or intense concentration is a popular strategy for seeking to initiate such a shift in awareness. In positive meditation, a person seeks to focus on a single idea to the exclusion of all others. The classic spiritual masters in the Catholic tradition often promoted this form of meditation. In negative meditation, a person seeks to remove all ideas from consciousness. The result is a trance state that is less intense but of longer duration.

III. Jesus, a Holy Man

A. Characteristics of a Holy Person

Cultural anthropologists have identified eight characteristics of a holy person (woman/man; shaman) in all cultures.
1. A holy person makes direct contact or has direct communication with spirits. In general, across cultures, spirits can be sentient beings (animal or human-like spirits), forces of nature, or transcendent energy. A holy person will usually have one or more special helping spirits for assistance and protection. Clearly in his baptism (Mark 1:9-11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8), Jesus manifests direct contact and communication with God. His loyalty to the father is tested by spirits (Matt 4:1-11//Luke 4:1-13).

2. A holy person controls the spirits and not vice versa. When his loyalty to the father is tested by a hostile spirit, Jesus wins at each turn. He rebukes an unclean spirit, and it immediately leaves the man who had been possessed by it (Mark 1:23-28). He further demonstrates control over spirits when he frees Peter’s mother in law from a spirit named Fever (Luke 4:38-39, interpreted as an illness). Moreover, he stills a storm on the Sea of Galilee by rebuking the wind that stirred it (using the same word to rebuke spirits; Luke 8:26). In Greek, one and the same word means spirit, wind, breath.

3. The holy person also controls the altered state of consciousness or level of awareness at which he makes contact with the spirit world. True, if a spirit is unwilling, there will be no contact. But ethnographic data indicates that controlling the imagery of one’s altered state of consciousness is a key element of a holy man’s technique. All visionaries control the imagery of their trance. “At least in some measure, people see what they expect to see.” Thus, the disciples present at Jesus’ vision experience, in which his appearance was transformed, see Moses and Elijah conversing with Jesus. It is hardly likely they would have seen Buddha or Confucius.

Experts have identified twenty kinds of awareness or consciousness: dreaming, sleeping, hypnagogic (drowsiness before sleep), hypnopompic (semi-consciousness preceding waking), hyper-

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alert, lethargic, rapture, hysterical, fragmentation, regressive, meditative, trance, reverie, daydreaming, internal scanning, stupor, coma, stored memory, expanded consciousness and "normal." In many of these states, a person is able to control the imagery.

4. The altered state of consciousness experience of a holy person manifests a "this worldly" focus on the material world. Two chief results of altered states of consciousness experiences are the discovery of a solution to a problem, or learning of a new direction one ought to take in life. Either one of these would well describe the result of Joseph's dream in which he learns he should marry rather than divorce Mary. Further, a holy person uses his or her abilities for the benefit of individuals or the community, and not for personal aggrandizement in any way. A comparison of Jesus' altered states experiences (e.g., Matt 11:25-30) stand in contrast to what Simon Magus envisioned for himself if Peter would share that gift with him (Acts 8:9-13, 18-24).

5. Holy persons travel to and through the spirit world by taking "sky journeys" (called "soul flight" in anthropological literature). The holy person can travel in the spirit world while both feet are planted solidly on the ground. Often a tutelary spirit of "familiar" helps in this journey. Similar events would include "astral projection," and out-of-the-body, near death or clinical death experiences. The astral prophet John, who recorded the content of his altered states of consciousness experiences in the book of Revelation (Rev 1:10), explicitly admits he took such journeys (Rev 4:2, 17:3, 21:20).

These five characteristics are central to the identity and function of a holy person. There are three others which are related.

6. In the encounter with spirits, the holy person can interact without fear of them possessing him. In some cultures, holy persons do become possessed by spirits, but this does not seem to be the case in biblical culture.

7. The holy person remembers at least some aspects of the altered state of consciousness. The prophets are continually reminded to
"write this down" or "write the vision down" (Jer 30:2, 36:2,28; Hab 2:2).

8. Healing is a major focus of a holy person's activity. One of the characteristics of a person entering an altered state of consciousness is that her/his gaze becomes fixed as if in a "gaze" or a "stare." This verb occurs in such a context in Acts of the Apostles (1:10, 7:55, 10:4, 11:6). When used in the context of healing, it is plausible to conclude that a person with healing ability induces a trance for the express purpose of healing (Peter in Acts 3:4, Paul in Acts 14:9).

B. CALL AND INITIATION

A holy person (woman or man) is called to this status and needs to be initiated into it. Again, anthropologists identify six elements of the call and initiation. As we search Scripture for indications of the process by which Jesus was called and initiated into his status as a holy man, take a moment to reflect upon personal signs of the call and opportunities for initiations.

1. The spirit contacts the holy person with the intention of adopting or possessing him. (The notion of possession here is "positive," that is, the spirit elects to use this human person for good deeds. In some cultures, the possession can be viewed as "negative," that is, the spirit intends to harm or destroy this person.) At the baptism of Jesus, the sky is torn open and a voice announces: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). In the Gospel story line, this is the first reported contact of the spirit world with Jesus. (When, where, and how does the spirit world contact the contemporary believer?)

2. The adopting or possessing spirit identifies itself. At Jesus' baptism, if the spirit from the sky (alternate reality) calls Jesus "son," this spirit stands in relationship to Jesus as father. Since, however, the status of father requires a physical bodily organ that spirits do not possess, the relationship is analogous to the human experience of father and son. This identification implies that the one adopted is in some way familiar with the adopting spirit. (How does the
contemporary believer become familiar with the spirit world [or alternate reality] to recognize its inhabitants: God, spirits, beloved departed and others?)

3. The holy person needs to acquire basic, necessary ritual skills. The word “ritual” is important because anthropological data and statistical research indicate that the overwhelming majority of societies engage in trance behavior during religious rituals. Thus, holy persons should be the most adept at this behavior in the context of religious ritual, which means they would need to learn and hone basic ritual skills. These skills would include strategies for inducing religious trance, as well as additional skills requisite during the trance.

Again in the Gospel story line, immediately after receiving an honorific title from the voice in the sky at his baptism, Jesus is driven into the desert where his loyalty to the adopting spirit is tested (Mark 1:12-13). Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13) spell out details of the test in terms which Mediterranean cultural specialists recognize as a “challenge and riposte” activity. In agonistic Mediterranean culture, people are always testing each other’s honor. The challenge is to defend it successfully. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus clearly demonstrates his mastery of this necessary ritual skill. (What ritual skills do modern believers require that would assist them in their quest for holiness?)

4. The holy person requires tutelage by both a spirit and a real life teacher. The adopting spirit familiarizes the holy person with the spirit world and its inhabitants, while a real-life teacher/holy person shares valuable personal experience in developing the life of holiness. Mark (1:13) indicates that while Jesus was in the desert, angels ministered—which would include tutoring—to him, indeed preparing him for successful contest with an unclean spirit. John (3:22-23) explicitly states that Jesus became a disciple of the Baptist after his own baptism and baptized others in the baptism of John. Along with John’s other disciples, Jesus was tutored by him in pursuing a life of holiness pleasing to God. (What patron saint or spirit would be helpful to modern believers in their pursuit of holiness? Where can one find model holy persons to serve as tutors in this call?)
5. The holy person becomes increasingly familiar with the adopting or possessing spirit. Jesus and select followers each separately experience an altered state of consciousness of the spirit in what tradition labels as the “transfiguration” (Mark 9:2-10 // Matt 17:1-9 // Luke 9:28-36). Jesus experience which is not described; the evangelists tell us what the disciples saw. It is possible that Jesus was indeed speaking with the two identified figures (Moses and Elijah) from alternate reality. In any case, at the end of this event, Jesus feels assured that his mission—which has generated many powerful enemies—is the one God has selected for him. The disciples, in their turn, are assured that this Jesus is indeed pleasing to God and worthy to be followed and supported: “this is my beloved son, listen to him [more so than to Moses and Elijah].” (In what ways can modern believers develop increasing familiarity with the holy spirit that has called and continues to initiate them into a life of holiness?)

6. The holy person continues to have religious trance experiences after the initial revelation. Jesus tells his disciples that the father reveals things to him (Matt 1:25-27); he is certain that God hears him always (John 11:41-42). Indeed, Jesus communicates with God often (John 12:27-30). As noted earlier, altered states of consciousness are God’s customary way of communicating with human beings (1 Sam 3:1). (What can modern believers do to insure an ongoing intimate relationship with God?)

IV. Filipino Culture

In the very brief time that I spent in the Philippines (just eight weeks), I chose to concentrate on learning the culture. Through intense reading and research, I became familiar with key scholars such as Dr. Mary Racelis and the late Fr. Frank Lynch, S.J. One scholar in particular, Fr. Jaime Bulatao, S.J., offered some very pertinent information about altered states of consciousness experiences in Filipino culture.

The case with which the Filipino can allow himself to enter the mystic world is remarkable when compared with Westerners, who
find it difficult to "let go." The same ease is found among Indonesians and Malaysians, as anyone who has watched the trance dances of Java or Bali or the Malaysia bomo (the equivalent of our *mangku-kulam*) can testify.²

Fr. Bulatao has precisely identified a key to this experience, namely the ability to let go. Western culture since the enlightenment has developed a meta-self which polices personal experience and does not allow loss of control. To have genuine altered states of consciousness experiences, one must freely plunge into the totality of human life without restriction. Fortunate are those cultures that still permit this. Bulatao offers a caution as he also further affirms this cultural potential among Filipinos:

Filipinos are rich in possessing a tremendous mental power, which is the ability to shift easily their state of consciousness. Unfortunately they are not always aware of this power and as a result have created theologies involving spirits, devils, *kulam*, visions, etc., mostly under the guise of some form of religion. It is time that the Filipino came to realize his/her own ability, that what s/he has is not a mysterious paranormal, supernatural, unmanageable something but a real power—controllable, researchable, normal.³

V. Holy Persons and Spirituality

Spirituality is a way of life based on an experience of God and shaped in response to that experience. The experience of God is critical. Indeed, it is central to developing a spiritual life. For those uneasy with "God," one can substitute "transcendence." I have met many agnostics who are at the same time deeply spiritual people, sometimes to a degree that would embarrass a believer.


³Ibid., 90.
The definition of spirituality is drawn from Richard McBrien’s *Catholicism*, though many upon hearing it claim it smacks of modernism because of its emphasis on experience. The *Dictionary of Theology* offers a good response: “To this day ‘Modernism’ unfortunately remains a term used for spiteful invective by arrogant people in the Church who have no idea how difficult faith is for men of our time.” Indeed, Bulatao observes that St. Ignatius intended the meditations of the Spiritual Exercises (or at least some of them) to bring out union with God through an altered state of consciousness. He further believed that *The Composition of Place* is a visual “mantra” calculated to induce an altered state of consciousness that would lead to an experience of God.

In my own life, I creatively joined biblical insight with Franciscan tradition and integrated Polish culture to create “wellness spirituality,” one way of making sense out of life rooted in one’s experience of God. Since all human experience is culturally conditioned, the experience of God is, too. Rather than seek to strip this away, it makes sense to integrate its best elements into one’s personal spirituality. This seems to me what Bulatao says of the Filipinos and what I have written about Polish spirituality. The challenge for us today is to “go and do in like manner” but not necessarily the same thing.

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VI. Conclusion

The privileged place for Christians to experience God is the liturgy. This would be a communal experience such as Pentecost (Acts 1), or the more than 500 brothers who saw the Risen Jesus (1 Cor 15). In one’s daily personal experience, one’s individual spiritual or mystical life would be the privileged place. In every case, modern believers are invited to creatively reshape the Christian heritage and tradition to various contemporary cultures.