

Introduction

In the hectic days following Filippo Neri's death, in 1595, a seven-year-old boy named Angelo fell into a coma. His desperate mother called several doctors, all of whom proved unsuccessful at awakening the boy. Angelo's brother decided to visit the church in which Neri's body lay exposed, taking some rose petals from Neri's casket. Back home, he scattered the petals on Angelo, who suddenly woke up and began playing. The second miracle occurred in 1603 when Felicia Sebastiani, a pregnant woman, fell ill as a consequence of a mosquito bite. She remained in bed for four days before her concerned relatives secured some of Neri's relics from one of his followers. Sebastiani ate some of the relics in a broth. The next day, she began bleeding and spat blood from her mouth. Though she lost her child, she survived (*Il primo processo*).

The emotional power of the first story makes it resemble more closely what readers today would consider a miracle. But it was the second story that the church approved as a true miracle, while it rejected the first (*Relationes Super Vitae et Sanctitate*). The difference lies in who provided the relics: in the first case it was one of Neri's acolytes who brought the relics that saved Sebastiani; no acolytes were involved in the second case. The Catholic Church's approval of the acolyte-assisted event as a miracle, despite the greater apparent impact of the event that involved no acolytes, is what we would expect if the Church were interested in strong, structured mobilizations above all. The Church did have this interest during the seventeenth century.

The key to understanding this outcome lies in the procedures that the Catholic Church had crafted at that time in an effort to distinguish true miracles from false and in how local religious activists acted and reacted

in light of those procedures. In the aftermath of the Protestant Schism (1517), the central officials of the Church, organized into a special commission charged with investigating candidates for sainthood, and local religious activists, organized around the charismatic religious leaders who became candidates, discovered a common interest in producing true miracles.

This convergence of interests was one of many changes born of the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century. For centuries prior to that, Roman authorities had been, at worst, suspicious and, at best, dismissive of local manifestations of religious fervor. At the same time, local religious activists ignored Rome's religious laws, except when they were promulgated by the sword of an army or the Inquisition. Each set of actors had its own operational definition of *miracle*; each recognized its own saints as capable of performing such miracles. In a geographically, socially, and culturally segmented world, the two groups could ignore each other for the most part. The shape of sainthood before the Protestant Schism exemplified two of the problems of the Medieval Church: its lack of control over local organizations, and thus a constant threat of schismatic movements, and a general disinterest in people's lives that allowed a diffuse ignorance among ostensible believers about even the most basic tenets of Christianity.

The Protestant Schism, which threatened the unity of the Church, and the invention of the printing press, which made heterodox ideas much more widely and readily available, changed the relationship between central officials and local religious activists. Gutenberg's invention vastly increased the circulation of ideas (Ginzburg 1970; Moran 1973; Thomas 1983; Israel 1999), creating a social world at once more integrated and more heterogeneous than the one it had replaced (Durkheim 1997). The diffusion of heterodox religious ideas occurred throughout Europe, though it was stronger in the economic and cultural capitals of the continent: in Northern and Central Italy, Mediterranean Spain and France, and the Netherlands (Braudel 1992).

In this increasingly heterogeneous and increasingly integrated context, answering the Protestant challenge required the Church to regain legitimacy among ordinary people and assume control over local religious activism. Taking control too firmly could alienate ordinary people, who could then follow the example of the schismatics if they so chose, but allowing too much local autonomy would undermine the Church's authority, which was already under threat from the Protestant challenge. Some of the Church's more confrontational tools in its bid for control,

such as the Inquisition, are familiar, but this book examines the less familiar, cooperative side of the process – how the Church adjusted its rules to incorporate and shape local religious activism, and what local activists had to gain in establishing a positive relationship with Roman authorities.

I call this process the rationalization of miracles in order to stress its connection to Max Weber's thesis about the rationalization of religion in northern Europe and to highlight what was unique about the process as it happened in southern Europe. For Weber, Puritanism represented the conclusion of the process of rationalization, but this research suggests that Puritanism was only one of the paths taken by the spirit of rationalization in Europe. The other path is the one that the Catholic Church followed in southern Europe and that developed from the legal tradition of Roman law (Gauthier 1996). The aim of this book, therefore, is to show that the rules for adjudicating miracles established by the Church during this period, along with the actions of local religious activists, reorganized magic rather than expelled it, and that this reorganization was part of the rationalization impulse that swept Europe during the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the reorganization of magic was the rational process by which the Church regained its lost legitimacy among ordinary people and established control over local activists.

With respect to canonization procedures, rationalization meant that the content of a supernatural event ceased to be the criterion by which it was declared (or denied) to be a miracle, and by which its performer could be labeled a saint. Acolytes – a candidate's early followers – went from house to house performing miracles on behalf of their leader after his death, thereby keeping his memory alive throughout his canonization trial, which by Church law could not begin until after the candidate was deceased.¹ What mattered instead of the miracles' content was their social form: true miracles knit together believers of different kinship groups and social statuses. Paradoxically, miracles deemed true were no longer those that imitated the acts of Jesus, as in the Middle Ages, but those that addressed the needs of local audiences within an inclusive form. A true miracle united people of different walks of life, turning the saint into someone capable of creating a mobilization that overcame the social cleavages dividing local communities. This form was beneficial to the Church, which needed to reestablish its legitimacy and authority with

¹ This book refers to candidates for sainthood using the masculine. This is because the large majority of candidates in the period of analysis that this book covers were men.

a socially broad audience, as well as for the potential saint's followers, who needed the approval of Rome to establish his legitimacy and authority locally. By the second half of the seventeenth century, once local religious activists learned the form that true miracles were supposed to have, candidates for sainthood began performing fewer wonders, albeit all of the correct type. The social form of these few miracles was uniformly inclusive.

Keeping all of this in mind, it may now be less surprising that the miscarriage described earlier was deemed a true miracle and the resuscitation deemed a false one. The key difference is that the miscarriage involved one of Neri's acolytes, who brought in the relic that healed the woman, while the resurrection did not involve Neri's acolytes. Acolytes, in creating and nurturing a local social movement in support of the canonization effort, created the social conditions for the occurrence of miracles after the candidate's death. Rome used acolytes to gauge the amount of local mobilization. For the central officials in Rome and for the local activists, true miracles united diverse people into a social movement. Acolytes had an interest in building mobilization in order to attract Rome's approval, as this would institutionalize their leader's message – and likely result in prominent positions for the acolytes in the religious order that their leader had founded. Therefore, the new institutional environment of modern sainthood thus constructed was not the result of a fight between central officials and local activists, but rather of rules that created greater integration between their interests.²

² Throughout the book I treat a candidate for sainthood as a social movement and acolytes as activists. This breaks in important points with contemporary scholarship. All of the main approaches to collective action – collective behavior, resource mobilization, political process, and new social movements – share one common, albeit unstated, denominator: social movements are features of modernity (Della Porta and Diani 1999). Before modernity, discontent meant two things – violence and repression – not social movements. Without citizens and states, without individuals and rights, subjects made revolutions, crowds assaulted royal palaces, and soldiers plundered the countryside; they did not organize themselves into a movement. Steven Buechler argues that sociology as a discipline and social movements as part of sociology require modernity as precondition (1998). Historically, this is true – sociology as a discipline developed during the later part of the nineteenth century, and with it came sociologists that studied social movements. But this need not imply that sociological phenomena did not exist before the discipline of sociology emerged. During the fifteenth century, people in Florence toppled the Medici under the leadership of Savonarola and organized themselves into a republic before there were scholars of social movements studying them. Yet, a straight application of the theoretical principles of social movements to premodern societies is nevertheless not possible. The organization of the social, political, and economic spheres allowed little room for people to express publicly their grievances and discontent; in most of the times and in the

A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL EXCHANGE

The events covered in this book occurred during a crucial period of European history, from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, when the balance of economic, political, and military powers significantly shifted toward northern Europe. It was during this period that the Europeans forged the links with different parts of the world that would become the basis for a system of global trade (Erikson and Bearman 2006). At the same time, commerce between European countries grew exponentially. The emergence of global trade drove an expansion of the division of labor as well as dramatic increases in industrial production. For the first time in history, better living standards increased life expectancy for millions of people.³

This material growth, sustained by increased productivity, differed in important respects from the economic expansions that occurred earlier in other parts of Europe. The occasional burst of economic activity up until the seventeenth century had been part of a cycle of prosperity that either could not keep up with population growth or could not continue after a catastrophe (such as a plague), which was followed by food scarcity, famine, and underdevelopment, before prosperity resumed. These cycles left a territory with almost no lasting progress (De Vries 1974; Mols 1979). But from the seventeenth century onward, economic progress sustained its gains to produce a lasting effect. As a consequence, the population of London increased tenfold during this period. Paris, with a population of

majority of the cases, people remained subjects rather than citizens. This implies that generalizing a social movement perspective to candidates outside of the sample considered in the book will continue to require a case-by-case examination despite the findings this book uncovers. I am thankful to Doug McAdam for forcing me to clarify my interpretation of the social movement scholarship.

³ The rise was especially pronounced in the Dutch provinces. Due to a good drainage system and efficient labor, Dutch peasants produced a vast range of commercial products – tobacco, cheese, milk, hemp, flax, turnips, etc. – that yielded larger profits on the market than traditional grain. Activities that were ancillary to the development of agriculture grew, funded by the profits of a new class of independent farmers, who now required people to build dykes and polders, perform metallurgy and smith work, and so on. These activities employed the nonfarming members of the rural population (De Vries 1974). By the mid-seventeenth century, foreign grain supplied more than half of the million inhabitants of Holland. “Imported grain,” write Rich and Wilson, “not only fed people and supplied raw materials of the intensive brewing and distilling industries of the Republic: it released capital, land and resources ... [that] could thus be more intensively employed” (1977, 24).

two hundred thousand, had been about the size of Naples in 1598; the city had doubled in size by 1656 (Mols 1979).

The sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries were also a period of intense religious turmoil. The Roman Catholic Church came under attack in 1517 with the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, in 1534 with Henry VIII's *Act of Supremacy*, and in 1536 with John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Helped by the printing press, the ideas of the "protesters" quickly diffused throughout the continent. Their wide publication neutralized the traditional means – force and mass conversions – that the Roman Curia (the government of the Church) and the popes had used to deal with heresies during the thousand years prior. At the dawn of modernity, the Church had to cope with questions and doubts springing up all over Europe, or else risk being displaced, just as local languages were when the army of the Roman Empire carried out the first integration of the Western world (MacMullen 1984). The containment and repression of heresies were no longer options for Rome now that it could not control the diffusion of ideas, and the circulation of goods and people had taken on a truly global scale.

The cults of the saints played a significant role in the controversies among believers. Definitional discrepancies over the concepts of "saint" and "miracle" became obvious to large swathes of European society as never before, straining the Church's credibility on a major doctrinal issue. Believers became skeptical of the authenticity of relics and of the stories that surrounded pilgrimage places such as the Holy House of the Virgin in Central Italy. According to tradition, angels brought the Holy House from Palestine during the thirteenth century for fear of the invading Turks. Along the way from Palestine to Italy, the angels carrying the house stopped, presumably to rest, for a few years in Croatia, where miracles occurred as a result of the presence of the angels and the house. The plausibility of this narrative and of many similar ones came under question. For Rome, maintaining religious legitimacy – or in some cases, such as in northern France, gaining religious legitimacy – meant not only eliminating discrepancies in the definition of saints and miracles but also, most importantly, developing a way to evaluate supernatural events.

The focus of this book is a subset of the supernatural events that occurred during this period – the miracles that charismatic religious leaders performed while alive and after their deaths. Thus crying icons of the Virgin Mary or moving holy statues are not part of my analysis. The development of Rome's method for evaluating miracles was a process of refining evidence and consolidating rules. The by-product of this process

was the channeling of religious mobilization into the core of the Church. That is, by establishing new procedures for adjudicating miracles and saints, Rome not only rationalized the miracles at the core of sainthood, but it also produced a positive interaction with local religious activists that enhanced Rome's control over the religious environment and the legitimacy of the Church in the eyes of its believers.

The key to understanding how this process took place is to focus on the work of the *Congregatio Sacrorum Rituum*, a special commission created in 1588 with the goal of investigating the people who died with a reputation for being a saint and the miracles that they were believed to have performed. This commission transformed sainthood from a dichotomous outcome – somebody is either a saint or is not a saint – into a multistage legal process in which sainthood was only the last step. As I detail later in the book, the *Congregatio* stipulated that reaching sainthood required moving from the state of venerable to that of blessed to that of saint. These “career moves” are still in use today. The *Congregatio* made similar procedural reforms to the evaluation of supernatural events, classifying them on a scale of three degrees that followed the suggestions of Saint Augustine as refined by Prospero Lambertini, a member of the *Congregatio* during the second half of the sixteenth century and later Pope Benedict XIV.

Producing a more rational sainthood served not only the interests of the Church but also those of local religious activists – for different reasons. In an environment lacking the many taken-for-granted beliefs that characterized the preceding centuries, and in which established religious practices were under attack, religious activists and their charismatic leaders began competing for community attention and resources. The countryside of Catholic countries and the streets of many urban centers were dense with religious movements of all types. A large number of candidates for sainthood during this period started new religious movements, and securing the institutionalization of these orders became the fundamental problem for the candidates' acolytes after the passing of their leaders. Because miracles had attracted donations and generated support for more than a millennium, supernatural events were the ground on which a candidate's acolytes competed locally against other activists.

Finding a way to certify that the miracles their leader performed benefited acolytes not only because Rome's approval would certify their leader's miracles as true and thus generate more support, but also because this support could be used to institutionalize the leader's message. To use Weber's concept, approval from Rome helped routinize the charisma that

tied the leader to his staff. This book presents evidence that acolytes used miracles to knit believers into networks that supported the candidacy for sainthood of their deceased leader and that these networks were heterogeneous with respect to gender, status, and kinship affiliation. In the context of highly segmented local societies, the heterogeneity of these mobilizing networks indicates that miracles did not occur randomly in the social fabric but instead resulted from the skilled activism of the acolytes.

Though local activists and Rome had their own reasons for supporting the creation of a mechanism to certify true miracles, they shared a refusal to accept the Protestant claim that miracles, the cults of the saints, and miracle-induced social mobilization were by-products of superstition and trickery. At the individual level, a miracle was a mental frame that reduced uncertainty – something inexplicable occurred, and a miracle explained why. A miracle was the ultimate testimony that nothing happened by chance, or as Albert Einstein would put it a few centuries later, that God does not play dice with the universe.⁴ In this light, I define a miracle to be a mental frame, à la Goffman, for explaining unusual events. Empirically, this means that every event that witnesses reported during canonization trials to be a miracle was recorded as such. True miracles were a subset of all the miracles that I collected.

The fact that the canonization rules and procedures that emerged during this period served the common interests of Church officials and local religious activists can lead to the temptation to explain events from their conclusions. One must avoid that trap in order to turn the historical scenario into an analytical case relevant to scholars interested in how organizations can interact positively with activists. This book documents in great detail how the Church and local activists interacted and what were the results of these interactions. There was much happenstance in the creation and enforcement of rules for adjudicating miracles. Factions of cardinals fought for control of the Congregatio during the first part of the seventeenth century. During much of the same period, there was considerable uncertainty as to what a true miracle should look like. However, once the interests of both parties aligned – and to a certain extent that alignment was due to a key change in the larger environment of Europe, a change that was independent of the microinteractions scrutinized here – they locked together to create the field of modern sainthood.

⁴ From a letter that Albert Einstein wrote to Max Born, David A. Shiang, 2008. *God Does Not Play Dice*. Lexington, MA: Open Sesame Productions.

This institutional arrangement lasted for almost half a millennium, until Pope John Paul II altered canonization procedures during the 1980s.

A NEW INSTITUTIONAL FIELD

Modern sainthood originated during the period that this book covers. Its main characteristics are known to causal observers and experts alike. A person dies with a reputation of being a saint, what the Church used to call the *fama sanctitatis* (fame of holiness), and his acolytes petition Rome to open an investigation of this reputation (Papa 2001). Eventually, canonization trials begin, focusing on two aspects of the holy person's behavior: (1) his virtues as a Catholic believer and Christian while he was alive and (2) his supernatural capacities now that, having left this world, he is able to intercede for us with God in the other world. Until the reforms of Pope John Paul II, the number of miracles required for canonization remained the number that was established a few years after the creation of the Congregatio – five at the most, depending on the type of witnesses, as I document in Chapter 1. The required virtues received their coding during the same period. These virtues were faith, hope, charity toward God, charity toward spiritual life, charity toward temporal life, prudence, justice, patience (but during the seventeenth century this was only for French candidates!), and strength, plus the virtue of religious life if the candidate belonged to a religious order.

Throughout the four hundred years that this framework existed, it allowed the Church to incorporate many new religious movements and built enough flexibility into Catholicism to make it capable of penetrating foreign lands such South America, Africa, and Asia. Little historical doubt exists that, since the Schism, the Roman Church has been more successful overall than any particular Protestant sect in amassing believers and support, plotting a trajectory that stands in sharp contrast to the Protestant world's continuous splintering into sects. To think that this success has its roots mostly in the use of repression tools such as the Inquisition is not only wrong, but also it denies the organizational skills of the Church and of its leaders. Scholars of organizations, for example, seem to have ignored a very basic fact for a long time – the Roman Church is the longest-lasting organization in the Western world. This book contends that understanding its extraordinary capacity to adapt and to change its environment can yield fruitful results for other organizations. The process of setting rules for adjudicating miracles is a perfect example by which to

analyze the Church's capacity to adapt to and, ultimately, to alter its own environment.

Although organizational scholars have been biased toward underestimating the organizational skills of the Church, it would be an equally grave sin to overestimate the leadership capacities of the people who created the framework for judging miracles and saints. Without question, some were clear thinkers and powerful reformers. Pope Sixtus V, for instance, created the special commission at the center of this book and also masterminded the largest reorganization of the Church before the twentieth century. But also without question, the main characteristics of modern sainthood emerged in large part through a laborious, often-interrupted process of refinement. Equally important, acolytes had trouble understanding the constant stream of changes that characterized the work of the Congregatio from 1588 to 1642.

It took time not just to develop the form that a true miracle had to have, but also for knowledge of that form to become available to religious activists operating in the urban centers of southern Europe and in the countryside. A striking confirmation of this lies in the fact that despite the requirement – adopted early in the process and never changed, that candidates need perform just a handful of postmortem miracles, all of the candidates and their acolytes active during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries performed hundreds of miracles, while alive (*in vitam*) and postmortem. The number of miracles began to fall to the minimum only after 1642, when a significant consolidation of procedures occurred. By that time, acolytes had learned the form that true miracles had to have in order to mobilize a community and win the approval of Rome. As a result, they began producing fewer miracles but all of the right form.

The new institutional field of modern sainthood emerged from non-contentious interactions between central officials of the Church and local religious activists. The noncontentious nature of the relationship is an anomaly with respect to current theories of how social movements and organizations interact. Organization scholars have outlined two routes to the creation of a new institutional environment. One route starts with the absence of taken-for-granted beliefs and passes through conflict; the other starts with exogenous regulation that reorganizes taken-for-granted beliefs to produce new ideologies. The first approach emphasizes conflict and considers an institutional environment to be the result of a struggle between competing logics (Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002; Lounsbury 2007). Established organizations are at a disadvantage in this struggle because their investment in the status quo becomes a competency