



---

# The Holy Fools Symposium

Munich 2015

Abstracts



Andrew John Thomas, University College Østfold, Halden, Norway

The city became a desert:  
forcing the first holy fools into a context

If the first holy fools are to be understood as anything other than odd laywomen and men, then their relationship to asceticism must be clarified. Most interpreters agree that some kind of ostracism is central to their activity, and the same is true of early Christian asceticism. So this paper will sketch out a matrix for understanding ascetic self-ostracism, and then apply it to a few early holy foolery stories, identifying how they differ from non-foolish parallels. Specifically, it is claimed that early ascetics mark their distance from secular society by their renunciation of the world's vainglory and clothing, and by their obedience and regimen. The hypothesis is that the first holy fools made use of the same techniques, but without constructing new community, so that they can be described as true solitaries, profane rather than secular.

Derek Krueger, University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
and the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies

From comedy to martyrdom: the shifting theology of the holy  
fool from Symeon of Emesa to Andrew

In the tenth-century *Life of Basil the Younger*, the author recounts his vision of the entry of various classes of holy people into the Heavenly Jerusalem. Among their number are a small group of holy fools who, according to the text, were "loathed

[έβδελύχθησαν], spat upon [ένεπτύσθυσαν], slapped [έκολαφίσθησαν], mocked [κατεγελάσθησαν], dishonored [ήτιμάσθησαν], scorned [έξουδενώθησαν], persecuted [έδιώχθησαν], and endured every evil and tribulation for the sake of the kingdom of the heavens." All of this vocabulary occurs in the Bible either describing the sufferings that Christ endured during his passion or in the passages read as predictions of the suffering messiah in Isaiah and the Psalms. Very little of this language can be found in the seventh-century *Life of Symeon the Fool* by Leontios of Neapolis. Although Symeon's antics recall events in the Gospels, Leontios's typology works as a comic inversion of the biblical narrative and does not emphasize the fool's suffering.

By contrast the tenth-century *Life of Andrew the Fool*, which shares a number of thematic relationships with the *Life of Basil the Younger*, employs much of this vocabulary to characterize Andrew as replicating the humiliation of Christ. Although Rydén thought that there was little Christological interest in the *Life of Andrew*, these words point toward a rereading of holy folly, assimilating it toward a norm for comparing saints to Christ. We can thus chart a shift in the theology of holy folly from late antiquity to the middle Byzantine period. This may reflect changes in the phenomenology or practice of holy folly, as identified by Ivanov, but also shows a new trend to read holy folly not so much as comedy but as a kind of ongoing martyrdom. Given that in the Gospels and especially in Byzantine Christian understanding, Jews were the primary perpetrators of offenses against Christ, the abusers of holy fools come increasingly to resemble the Gospels' Jews. Significantly, Leontios and the authors of both tenth-century texts also concerned themselves with Jews and Judaism's perceived challenges to Christian doctrine and practice. The new theology of folly may correlate with new ideas about Jews and Judaism in middle Byzantine society.

Sergey Ivanov, National Research University  
"Higher School of Economics", Moscow

## Holy foolery as an ambiguous sanctity by Nikon of the Black Mount

The holy fool as a type of saint (*salos*) entered Byzantine hagiography in the 5th century. He was growing in importance until the 7th, then disappeared for a while, reemerged in the 9th and practically disappeared after the 10th. Several Byzantine authors left their commentaries concerning the ambiguity of holy foolery in gene-

ral: the secular moralist Kekaumenos warns of the danger of conversing with a *salos*; Patriarch Balsamon admits the impossibility to distinguish a real saintly fool from a false one; the historian Nicetas Choniates describes the charlatan playing the fool in front of the emperor etc., but the only voice in this chorus which belongs to an hagiographer, is that of Nikon of the Black Mount.

Nikon was a monk, canonist and prolific writer of the second half of the 11th century who was born and began his monastic vow in Constantinople, but later moved to the Middle East and spent dozens of years in the monasteries around Antioch. He composed a huge collection of letters, memoirs and treatises on different subjects, entitled *Taktikon*, which was finally published in the Greek original with the parallel Old Slavic translation in 2014 by Christian Hannick. We learn from this source that in the 1050s Nikon began to play the *salos* at his monastery but was discouraged from doing this by his spiritual adviser Lucas, Metropolitan of Anazarbos, who admitted that he himself had tried to practice holy foolery many years before but eventually refused.

Later, Nikon wrote a whole book of the lives of saintly people whom he personally knew. Yet, in the final outcome, after long hesitation, the author burnt his book. Several decades later, he inserted parts of his recollections about these people in his *Taktikon*; we can surmise what material the author had to cope with. Many of his candidates for sanctity could have been called holy fools. Nikon also deliberates on what sanctity is, whether holy people may commit misdemeanors and whether it is possible at all for a contemporary to be a saint.

Nikon's thoughts and examples give us a unique opportunity to look at the process of saint-making in Byzantium in general and at the paradoxical nature of a holy fool as a person and literary persona in particular.

Vincent Déroche, Collège de France, Paris

## Les saints fous de l'époque mésobyzantine et tardobyzantin: archaïsme délibéré ou tradition vivante?

The present paper tries to dwell on a paradox of the *saloi* in the middle et late Byzantine periods: on the one hand, it is clear that many hagiographical texts of this time (Andrew Salos, Leontios of Jerusalem, etc.) repeat early Byzantine literary models rather than contemporary reality, and on the other hand, in the line of Paul Magdalino's seminal paper on the Byzantine saint in the 12th century, sources (mainly non-hagiographical ones, some of them very critical about *saloi*) attest the

real existence of *saloi* and of forms of veneration addressed to them. There seems to be a dialectical tension between the acceptable figures of *saloi* in texts and the real holy men, more or less *salos*-like, of the period; beyond the hypothesis of a form of censorship (which would neatly explain the apparent chronological discontinuity), one can suppose that authors of hagiographical texts and real holy men had both to strike a delicate balance between the authority of past and the seduction of the present; some texts like the Life of Basil the Younger and especially the Life of St Sabas the Younger will be examined in that perspective. By comparison, the revival of stylitism in the middle Byzantine period and its disparition in late Byzantium point to another set of causal factors, which by difference may illuminate the case of the *saloi*.

Isabella Gagliardi, University of Florence

### Holy fools in Medieval Western Europe: from practice to theory (XIII–XVI century)

The Latin West during the Middle Ages knew the “Holy madness” in practice and in theory. Here the holy madness is declined in according to the pattern of Egyptian cenobitic experiences, not in according to the Syriac *anacoresis*. The memory of the eastern holy fools experiences arrived in the West with the *Vitas Patrum*, including the *Historia Lausiaca*, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the famous text of Johannes Moscos. In all these writings appear only two lives of men *saloi* (the life of Serapion the sidonita and of Marco of Alexandria) and one of woman *salé* (the nun of Tabennis) but there were many *dicta* or short *exempla* about the madness for Christ. All this material are collected – although partially-in the Fourth Book of the *Dialogues* of Gregorius Magnus, a real “best seller” of the Medieval Age. But the most important success of the “holy fool’s pattern” arrived thanks to the Mendicant Friars, when they extended the spiritual themes of monasticism to the entire society: then the laicity familiarized itself with very complicated spiritual concepts. During such extraordinary spell the myth of the *ecclesiae primitivae forma* found an excellent culture medium, generating new forms of consecration to God, of mystical dedication to Lord.

Therefore the theme of holy madness became the theme of *insania amoris* and found a new fortune. It was not randomly if after the holy madness of Robert of Arbrissel and of the monk Heimrad the Latin West knew the new saints as Francis of Assisi, his more ancient companions, as Jacopone da Todi, as Pietro Crisci from

Foligno, as Giovanni Colombini from Siena and then as Christina *mirabilis* (Christina of St. Trond). All them were especially prone to indulge at the excesses caused by love for Christ (*excessus mentis*). With Christina appear several other women and men fools for Christ's sake, let us remember only Beatrice of Nazareth, who wanted to shape itself "in the manner of insanity or madness" and who wrote the book *Seven Manieren van Minnen* (1237–1238 post) in which she spoke about *orewoet – insania amoris*. Similar was the experience of Ida of Louvain, or that of Christina of Stommeln. In the autobiography of Margery Kempe are firmly connected between their Holiness and Madness.

Other interesting traces of madness of love for Christ emerge from *Vitae* and writings of Saints lived in the Italian area; the most notably was Angela of Foligno, but we must remember also *frater* Juniper, follower of Francis of Assisi, or other ascetics in love with poverty. The practice came to the theoretical reflection: Thomas Aquinas distinguished the foolishness for Christ.

It was very different from the disease or the demonic possession, thus providing a valuable support for those who are called to exercise the *discretio spirituum* in such sensitive situations. The *magistra animarum*, Catherine of Siena was building a spiritual *iter in Deum* marked by incessant references to the madness of love for Christ. In essence, many of evoked experiences were translated in theory and becomes the leitmotif of theological reflection: the madness for Christ depends and descends from the desire to follow the *via dolorosa dominica*, to follow the holy cross or, using the lexicon of mystical theology, to take the unitive way with Christ crucified. The theoretical effort is intensified during the early Modern Age (there are many sections of *Libelli* or *Tractati* talking about *insania amoris*), but it is accompanied by a strong decrease of the practice of folly for Christ, what is explained in the light of the progressive regulation of society operated by Catholic Church.

Alexandra Bergholm, University of Edinburgh

## Saints and fools in early medieval Ireland

This paper examines the pervasive association between madness and sanctity in the early Irish literary corpus, focusing in particular on the special relationship between saints and fools. Writing in 1947, the Celticist Robin Flower remarked that in the early Christian period practically every Irish saint seemed to have lived 'in an intimate converse with people of troubled wits', whose obscure poetic

utterances were often used to express ideals of ascetic life. The discussion will consider the traditions relating to two of these ‘inspired madmen’ – Suibhne Geilt, the protégé of Saint Moling, and Comgán Mac Dá Cherda, the companion of Saint Cummíne Fota – in order to evaluate to what extent these figures could be viewed as examples of the paradigm of holy foolery.

Ashk Dahlén, Uppsala

## The Holy Fool in Persian Literature: The *qalandariyyāt* genre

– *vacat* –

June McDaniel, College of Charleston

## Divine Madness and Holy Fools in India: the Bengali tradition of *Paglami* and its relationship to the Love of God

In West Bengal, India, there is a historical tradition of holy fools, who are understood to be in the state of *divyonmada* or *divine madness*. This paper will go over ideas of divine madness in religious literature, and discuss data from field interviews with practitioners who are understood as *pagals* for God.

In the modern situation, such figures must generally prove themselves as holy people, or they are dismissed as insane. There are a variety of ways by which *pagals* prove their sanctity to others. There tends to be a life pattern of childhood visions, accusations of illness or madness (with exorcists or Ayurvedic physicians called in), wandering and isolation, transforming visions, return to the community, demonstration of holiness and closeness to the god, and adoption of the role of guru. This is a quite ancient pattern that still continues today; India has a greater tolerance for non-traditional forms of religiosity than many other countries in the world. Once the *pagal* has proved religious devotion, he or she may be accepted as a *siddha* or perfected person, whose outlook and actions are beyond the understanding of ordinary people.

Religious experience is central for *pagals*, and it is part of their appeal to other devotees. While modern scholars have criticized the privileging of religious experience as a recent Western tendency, we see the value of such experiences emphasized in the medieval devotional or *bhakti* movements of India. In West Bengal, *bhakti* became especially popular in the fifteenth century. This paper will

discuss the role of religious experiences among Bengali divine madmen, of both Vaishnava and Shakta *bhakti* traditions, and show the ways that the madness of the saints is the sign of their authenticity.

Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

## Holy fools in Tibet and the Himalayas

The phenomenon of Sainly Madmen or Mad Yogins is well-attested in the oral and literary traditions of Tibet and the Himalayas. Their principal attributes can be subsumed as a generalized rejection of customary behaviour, an inclination towards bizarre modes of dress, a professed disdain for scholasticism, and the use of popular poetical forms or obscene and vulgar speech. The most famous yogins of Tibet and the Himalayas who were called “Madmen” (*smyon pa*) and acted as such lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and are known as gTsang-smyon Sangs-rgyas rgyal-mtshan (1452–1507), 'Brug-smyon Kun-dga' legs-pa (1455–1529) and dBus-smyon Kun-dga' bzang-po (1458–1532). Their sphere of activities were the regions of Tsang and Ü in Central Tibet and the Himalayan country of the “Dragon Land” (*'brug yul*), i.e. present-day Bhutan.

The lives and extraordinary religious and cultural deeds of these Buddhist masters have been described in biographical works and their figures are known from depictions in xylograph editions of their writings or from modern-day drawings accompanying Westerns translations of the life-stories. The “crazy siddha” (*grub smyon*) can still be met in Tibetan religious circles also in later times and one could mention, for example, Khams-smyon Dharma seng-ge (d. 1890), known – like his predecessors – for his songs of spiritual experience.

The contribution will present available sources on these Holy Fools and try to locate issues which characterize and evaluate their behaviour within the context of Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Tihana Maravić, Bologna

## Theatrical and performative elements in the phenomenon of the holy fool

The paper will illustrate the religious figure of a fool for Christ's sake – as appeared in Eastern Christianity, in Byzantium (IV–XIV cent.) and in Russia (XI–XVII cent.) –

from a theatrical point of view. It will be shown how tools and methodologies of theatre studies (in particular the semiology and the anthropology of theatre) may be functional in analyzing a hagiographic character of a saint, revitalizing it as a historical figure and discovering it as a theatre performer. Following a historical and geographical collocation of the phenomenon and a theological portrait of this bizarre figure, the paper will focus on the principal performative techniques, features and modalities which a holy fool operates in his experience: feigning foolishness, *imitatio Christi*, liminality and iconic theatre (*via negativa, kenosis*). The presentation will be accompanied with some cinematographic material, which can help in better understanding the issue of a holy fool as a performer.

Mario Rodríguez Polo, Palacký University of Olomouc

### Recent manifestations of yurodstvo

Through the centuries *yurodstvo* has proved to be an extremely malleable component of the Russian imaginary. One of the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon is its paradoxical condition of being object but at the same time subject of the memory. The *yurodivye* are not only formed by their life experiences but also through a subjective process of memory construction. Presented work analyzes recent manifestations of *yurodstvo* confronting the historical complexity of 20<sup>th</sup> c. Recent forms of *yurodstvo* will be contextualized in the ongoing process of recreation of the phenomenon and questions about the *yurodstvo* to come will also be open.

Albrecht Berger, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

### Holy fools in Modern Greece

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning 21<sup>st</sup> century a number of *saloi* lived in Greece. Most of them belonged to or sympathised with the Old Calendarists or so-called True Orthodox Christians, an extremely conservative group at the margins of the Greek church which fights for the preservation of traditional orthodoxy and is today organised in a number of competing sects.

The first holy fools of modern Greece were monks or hermits on Mount Athos. Later *saloi* either lived as hermits in the countryside, or went around as itinerant preachers in villages and towns. Probably the most popular of them was Tarasia



Zagoraïou, called Tarso (1910–1989) who spent almost forty years as a hermit near the convent of Keratea in Attica. As other *saloï*, she was venerated both by the True Orthodox Christians and by members of the official church, and posthumously claimed as a saint by both parties.

Most modern *saloï* are historical persons whose life is well documented by biographies, newspaper articles and internet sites with photographs, and whose relics are venerated by their followers. The very last of them, however, Trelo-Giannis (Crazy John) of Athens who allegedly died in 2000, is an entirely fictional character. According to his hagiographical *Life*, Trelo-Giannis lived in a run-down neighbourhood of Athens doing charitable works and bringing the people back to Christ. With this literary figure, holy foolery finally returns to its origins, that is, to an urban setting.