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## IGNORANT MUSINGS ABOUT SAINTS

This evening I was thinking about saints. As a protestant I know very little about them, and how the institution works. That makes me admirably suited to make some ignorant remarks on the subject.

What sparked my interest was the question of whether there was a patron saint of *cats*. There seems to be a popular idea around that it is an obscure lady named Gertrude of Nivelles. But ... it seems to be a confection of time and imagination and the internet. In fact I wonder if the cult of various saints might arise in a rather similar way, by popular tradition, invention, imagination. Certainly the saints' lives in medieval literature arise in this way – they are a form of folkstory, like the ballads of Robin Hood, not history. So the creation of a cult by a gradual process is not a modern thing.

So... is it valid? What does it mean, if it just appears over time? One could say that perhaps this is an example of the work of God, to reveal an idea to the people. But does anybody say that?

This led me to think about saints that actually probably never existed. Their cult grew up over time, in a more or less popular, or even superstitious way. But then in modern times the investigations by people like the Bollandists reveal that Saint Rastus – or whoever – never actually lived. We could say this of St George; if he lived, he certainly was not responsible for a line of the various hagiographic stories, which themselves were condemned as “silly” in the *Decretum Gelasianum* in late antiquity.

St George is a good example of another phenomenon. He gets adopted as the patron saint of England during the crusades. So ... how does this work? How does anybody know that the saint, if he existed, and is in heaven, has the slightest interest in England? How is this real? Can patron saints just be created? Or is it the case that, in reality, the distinction is an earthly one: that any saint may be prayed to about anything, but that for convenience the church, official or otherwise, suggests that people pray to this saint or that for specific things?

I have no answers on this, but suggestions of things to read would be welcomed. It is, after all, rather embarrassing to produce material about the saints while having so little understanding of the subject!

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