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Review

The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint, by Karline McLain. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016. xiv + 262 pp., $55 (hb), $30 (pb). ISBN 978-0-29599-551-9 (hb), 978-0-29574-433-9 (pb).

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Recent studies of gurus have investigated how discrete religious communities have become institutionally established by considering the gurus themselves as the primary agents of processes such as construction and innovation in a modern, global religious market. Sai Baba of Shirdi, however, had significantly more in common with his largely cross-denominational and anti-structural medieval predecessors, the *sants* of northern and central India, than the 'modern gurus' who came after him. So how does a local tradition centred around this figure become a pan-Indian—and later global—living phenomenon over the century after his passing? In *The Afterlife of Sai Baba*, Karline McLain shifts attention away from the historical person of Sai Baba himself and concentrates on some of his major Hindu devotees who subsequently interpreted his messages and promoted devotion to him in their distinctive ways, thereby spreading his name throughout India and the world.

Sai Baba left his 'earthly body' in 1918, after having spent almost 70 years in the relatively unknown village of Shirdi, in present day Maharashtra. Although his fame had drawn people from far to Shirdi, it was only after his demise that a more substantial and recognizable tradition formed around him, complete with hagiographical literature, temple-construction, visual materials, and functioning institutions. While McLain acknowledges the role played by the well-known Meher Baba and (perhaps more famous) Sathya Sai Baba, who both identified Shirdi Sai Baba as part of their lineage, she pays particular attention to figures who have been instrumental in executing the aforementioned processes that have exalted the 'original' Sai Baba in his afterlife. In doing so, the author seeks to complicate earlier scholarly characterizations of these processes as unilinear instances of 'Hinduization'. Through deep engagement with each of the afterlife interpretations, McLain scrutinizes the appeal of Sai Baba both to the major interlocutors and to the

millions of lay devotees who have turned to him over the past century. In turn, by utilizing Sai Baba's legacy, McLain explores the ideas of modern Hinduism in devotees—again, both major and lay— by reflecting on religious ambiguity in a globalized world.

The first chapter starts by dealing with two key texts related to Sai Baba. *Shri Sai Satcharita*, a hagiography written immediately after Sai Baba's demise by his Hindu devotee Govind Rao Dabholkar, who claimed to be his guru's medium, has become '*the* authoritative scripture' for most devotees. However, the diary of Abdul Baba, Sai Baba's Sufi Muslim personal attendant, has significantly not received such reverence. The former, with its prominent Hindu hues, was accepted, published, and disseminated widely by the Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust, an institution formed four years after Sai Baba's death, while the latter was stored away in their archives. McLain explores the organization further through ethnographic fieldwork at Shirdi where the Trust constructed a temple, established rituals, and developed an expansive pilgrimage site; she contends that while there exists a constant universalist rhetoric directed towards members of all religions, the Trust's vision is practically much more appealing to Hindus.

From the second chapter onward, there is a shift from exploring the internal dynamics of the devotional tradition to considering the social-historical contexts within which his interpreters were operating. Das Ganu Maharaj was highly successful in spreading Sai Baba's name in the surrounding regions of what is today Maharashtra; his poetry is still ritually recited by devotees. Drawing on diverging biographies of Das Ganu's life, McLain demonstrates how he maintained a balance of sorts between his own Hindu Brahmin identity, on the one hand, and being a Sai Baba *bhakta*, on the other. Das Ganu's interpretation of his guru functioned as a distinctive critique of caste hierarchies (in a socio-political context where the notions and practices of caste were being heavily challenged) without, however, going as far as supporting the radical stance of their abolition.

For B. V. Naramsimhaswami, the subject of the third chapter, it was, in fact, Das Ganu's 'prejudice as an orthodox Brahmin' (p. 85) that prevented him from developing full faith in Sai Baba. Though Naramsimhaswami became a devotee almost two decades after Sai Baba's passing, he was 'arguably the most influential person behind the explosive growth of Sai Baba devotion in the twentieth century' (p. 91), authoring several books and establishing an organization dedicated to the *prachar* (propagation) of his devotion. While McLain accepts that Narasimhaswami's pluralist rhetoric was distinctively Hindu at the core, she also shows how he presented devotion to Sai Baba as the spiritual foundation of a nationalism across and beyond religious affiliations: Sai Baba was to be the future of India.

The richly descriptive fourth chapter discusses two popular films related to Sai Baba which were released in 1977, concluding, in a similar vein, that whereas Sai Baba was shown to be *the* saint for all Indians, a Hindu

normativity was at play in the background. Chapter five traces Sai Baba's global presence through two temples in USA where Sai Baba is very much represented and worshipped as a Hindu guru. However, McLain notes that the founders of these temples are quick to play down the importance of traditional Hindu ritual, instead putting forward an ecumenical agenda and thus seeking to 'liberalize Hinduism through the worship of Shirdi Sai Baba' (p. 211).

McLain successfully contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature over the past few decades that emphasizes the importance of charismatic individuals and their legacies for the composite cultures of some Indian religious landscapes. In focusing on Sai Baba's afterlife, McLain takes us on a journey through the past century, expertly revealing the particularities of each interlocutor's hermeneutic reconfiguration of Sai Baba and, in turn, their 'vision for modern Hinduism and for religious pluralism' (p. 14). By the end, the book is very effective in encouraging the reader to think through the varying grades of religious ambiguity inherent in each of the interpretations of Sai Baba and how these are reflective of, or instructive for the 'larger ambivalence about what it means to be Hindu today, both in India and throughout the global Hindu diaspora' (p. 18).

The Afterlife of Sai Baba is sophisticated in its methodology and rich in its content, and thus the present reviewer has only two minor points of criticism. While it is accepted that Sai Baba's devotees have significantly grown in number since his demise, a lack of approximate figures for 'active' followers makes it harder to appreciate the exact nature of this expansion. Secondly, though this theme may fall outside McLain's scope in this publication, having appreciated the largely Hindu afterlife of Sai Baba, the reader is left wondering about the current status of Sai Baba as a Muslim figure in patterns of Indian and global Islam.

Lucidly written, McLain's work will be accessible to undergraduates while also providing intellectual fodder for the graduate student. The larger questions it raises, combined with McLain's delicate balance of narrative and theory, make this book a valuable resource for scholars interested in guru traditions, modern Hinduism, and the dynamic intersections between globalization and religion.