Christian excellence in history. From heroic saints to educated experts (1500–1800)

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Abstract
The article deals with the understanding of religious talent or religious excellence in the Early Modern Period. Three subtypes are identified as follows: (1) Political Heroism and the Sacred, (2) Countercultural Moral Excellence, (3) Extraordinary Emotions. It is further argued that these subtypes are to a great extent replaced with the idea of an educated expert in the modern period. In the end, the study of emotional intelligence is mentioned as a hypothetically fruitful way to understand these phenomena in behavioral sciences.

Keywords
emotions, heroism, modernity, saints

Talented people have left traces in Christian cultural history in different ways. They have contributed poems, novels, treatises, music, paintings and other works of art. Through their works and personal influence, they have radiated their talent to their students and followers. Western intellectual history has also preserved explanations about what being gifted is like. The present paper is primarily interested in such explanations and reasons given to understand giftedness. I will focus on the descriptions of religious talent, asking how the historical sources treat this phenomenon between 1500 and 1800.

In this era, heroes and saints were the characters who were considered to be gifted. While both concepts stem from ancient times, the early modern period was the golden age of heroes and saints. Monarchy and absolutism was the prevailing form of early modern state, and the royal power was typically conceived in terms of religious heroism in which the monarch participates. In this period, the Roman Catholic Church started to draft fixed
rules for the canonization of saints. The hero and the saint were to some extent over-
lapping concepts. (Götz, 2021; Niedermeier, 2019).

In finding and interpreting relevant sources, I rely on a German open-access database, Compendium heroicum. Following Pierre Bourdieu, the compendium defines heroism as a subjective social construction of an individual habitus that can be imitated by others. (Asch et al., 2019, §1) This habitus typically means a political and cultural leadership position. At the same time, the definition also allows for a counter-cultural habitus that opposes rulers and provides a moral alternative for future followers. The religious examples of the compendium make also visible a third alternative, an extraordinary emotional habitus that influences others through its affective strength.

While all instances of religious talent cannot be interpreted in terms of heroism, there is a remarkable amount of historical evidence that prefers this explanation. From the early modern period until today it is required in the Roman Catholic Church that the candidate for religious sainthood displays heroic virtue. This concept stems from Aristotle’s Politics and Ethics and it is widely employed in the so-called “mirrors for the prince”, a genre of educational literature in late medieval and early modern period (Niedermeier, 2019; Saarinen, 2019).

In contemporary empirical and psychological research, giftedness may appear in some very different ways, for instance, as sensitivity or capability, which need not contain anything “heroic”. The early modern sources provide a certain set of concepts and ideas, which need not determine our current understanding. Around 1800, the old paradigm of heroism becomes replaced with the modern paradigm of education. I will use Friedrich Schleiermacher’s On Religion (orig. 1799; Schleiermacher, 1996) as a source manifesting this change.

In the following, three different variants of religious talent are discussed. First, this talent can be conceived as the property of a hero who is extraordinary in all other respects as well. Religious capability thus supports the social and political power of the hero. Second, religious talent can be understood as a countercultural feature that provides a contrast to strength and prevailing powers. This feature is typically constructed as extraordinary altruism or other ethical excellence. Martyrdom is also connected with it. Third, religious giftedness may appear as burning love that transforms all ordinary emotions and experiences. All three historical variants may today appear as premodern or even strange. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s view marks the paradigm change to modernity. My concluding discussion evaluates the historical variants to find connections with our current understanding of giftedness.

**Political heroism and the sacred**

Well-known characters are typically understood as “open” figures in the sense that new properties can become attached to them in different times. The figure can also evolve in the course of time. Kings, leaders and even entire groups and nations can first appear as exemplary, then as heroic and, finally, as sacred. The sacralization of a person is an aspect of his or her elevation in the ladder of heroism. It is important to keep this kind of
sacralization distinct from the regulated canonization process of the saints. (Heinzer et al., 2019).

Augustine argues in his De civitate Dei (1950, ch. X, 21) that Christian martyrs are better heroes than the pagan warriors of the Greco-Roman world. In this manner, Christian saints both continue the ancient paradigm of heroism and offer an alternative to it. Saints and heroes display virtues in exemplary and extraordinary fashion. Virtues are human capabilities that emerge through training. Heroic virtue, on the other hand, is since Aristotle labeled as divine, meaning that it also participates in the higher realm. (Niedermeier, 2019)

From Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, the ancient concept of virtue continues to be adapted to the new framework of Christianity. As result, the so-called theological virtues, namely, faith, hope, and charity, are considered to be divinely infused gifts. They are also virtues in the sense that they appear as capabilities that steer human conduct. At the same time, they are gifts in the sense that they are divinely given. While faith, hope, and charity are not heroic virtues as such, they also connect the human being with divine realm and can sometimes grow to heroic proportions. (Pope, 2002)

The saints need not be very different from ancient heroes. Warriors and kings who have promoted the cause of Christianity may also become canonized saints. An example of this kind is St. Olaf, the patron saint of Norway. In the process of sacralization, this Viking warrior became hero and the saint who made Norway a Christian country. In historical research, the processes of sacralization have been understood as the marking of proper boundaries. In addition, the heroic person is considered to radiate power, fear and fascination, properties that resemble the realm of the sacred as something that both terrifies and fascinates. (Heinzer et al., 2019).

Because of such resemblances, the monarchs of Christian regions have often been considered as persons who radiate both political and religious power. An extraordinary power creates a benefit to the religious character of the ruler. This religious capability can be regarded as a special duty or task, but it is often accompanied with the idea of a certain talent, which an extraordinary person possesses in this regard. At the same time, the idea of religious hero is highly ambivalent. An extraordinary person can also easily become considered as demonic. As saints, heroes and martyrs define boundaries, their own position remains connected with the liminal and the ambivalent. (Götz, 2021).

The early modern period from 1500 to 1700 was an era in which kingship and absolutism were frequently praised. One of the standard textbooks of this period, Francesco Piccolomini’s Universa philosophia de moribus, discusses heroic virtue with the help of 23 different questions. (Piccolomini, 1594, 529–646). For Piccolomini, the heroic virtue is political rather than religious or intellectual virtue. The heroic ruler is nevertheless compared to God in three different ways. First, the vast competence of the hero approaches divine omnipotence. Second, the creative achievements of the hero resemble God the Creator. Third, the hero can rule over all others in the manner of God who rules the world. Contemporary Italian princes count for Piccolomini as examples of heroic virtue.

Women can count as examples of political heroic virtue. The dissertation of Johan Wassenius in Finnish Turku in 1649 pays attention to North European queens as follows:
In earlier times as well as today many women count as examples of the heroic virtue. They include Judith, Semiramis … Margareta of Denmark and Elizabeth of England. And nobody can deny that our own people have also manifested amazonic heroic virtue. We have a living example in our own excellent and powerful Queen Christina. From her the heroic virtue radiates to all world. (Wassenius, 1649, n.p.).

An influential model for Wassenius and many other Protestant textbooks was the *Philosophiae moralis systema* of Wolfgang Heider. Heider says that the heroic virtue is a gift of God and a divine inspiration. He also teaches that Christians can display this kind of heroism more clearly than the heathens. For Heider, the phenomenon of heroism is broader than for Piccolomini, as Heider also says that intellectual excellence can count as heroic. (Heider 1628, 405–406, 410–411). The primary model of heroism for all these early modern authors is the virtue of the monarch. Religious excellence appears as one aspect of this political virtue. (Saarinen, 2017).

**Countercultural moral excellence**

Augustine’s view of the martyrs as alternative to ancient heroes may be best understood as pertaining to such exemplary and extraordinary behavior, which is not directly linked with political power. Poverty, charity and different forms of neighborly love are probably the most typical outstanding features of Christian saints. The “heroic virtue” which such saints display may be manifested as the healing of others, the help achieved in direct contact with the person or, later, through intercessory prayer.

Abstinence from worldly pleasures and neighborly love are typically moral virtues in the sense that they aim at fulfilling ethical duties and alleviating suffering. The countercultural attitude can be displayed in various ways. Mendicant orders, for instance, resist the power of money and property. Care for the sick and the poor aims at appreciating the personal value of people who do not possess the status, which many others have in the society. Missionaries leave the security of their home region in order to spread the good news in new surroundings.

Typical examples of this kind were the early modern founders of hospitals and organized care for the sick. Camillus of Lellis rescued sick people from the flooding Tiber in Rome in 1598. He established the order of Camillians and was canonized in the 18th century. While he was no martyr in the ordinary sense, Camillus was called “a martyr of charity”. Vincent de Paul dedicated his life to the service for the poor and was canonized in 1737. The order of Vincentians continues his work. (Niedermeier, 2019, §4). These examples underline the saintly character of ethical duty in a manner that differs from political excellence.

Martyrdom is a particularly ambivalent countercultural phenomenon. Martyrs are typically depicted as resisting evil political and societal rulers. As this description is relative to the general evaluation of the situation at stake, the definition of proper and heroic martyrdom is very challenging. In Christian theology, martyrs are non-violent victims. While they are not considered to have committed suicide, they often make a conscious decision to die in the hands of the perpetrator.
When the Catholic Church started to apply clear criteria in the process of canonization of saints in the 17th century, the concept of martyrdom was also internalized. The heroic virtue of martyrs was considered to pertain to their conduct in the very process of suffering and death. The calm endurance of bodily suffering emerged as a distinctive trait of the martyr. Another new development of the 17th century was a certain secularization of martyrdom. People who died for a political cause could also become regarded as martyrs (Asch, 2018).

From the perspective of giftedness, martyrdom is very ambivalent as it can appear without any extraordinary talent. A martyr can be unlearned or even a child. He or she can display a strong conviction even without any learning or other excellence. In some sense, the martyr’s death compensates for all other imperfections of character. The process of canonization aims at proving that “a heroic virtue” rather than some other motif has moved the martyr to this deed, but giving such proof is notoriously difficult.

What finally counts, therefore, is the strong will of the martyr rather than any other kind of talent or virtue. Obviously, the strong will needs to be connected with a good cause. Given this, however, the “heroic” aspect is related to the will rather than to any extraordinary understanding or skill.

Extraordinary emotions

Perhaps the strangest features of Christian saints are concerned with extraordinary emotions. Love in particular is conceived both as a divinely infused virtue or talent and as a zealous emotion that pervades both body and soul. In a very literal sense, the fire of love burns in these saints, causing the purification from sin. In descriptions of such love in the 16th and 17th century, the saints must often reduce their clothing because the fire is heating the body excessively.

In Bernini’s famous sculpture (1647–1652) of the ecstasy of Teresa of Avila, a seraphic figure throws a burning arrow through Teresa’s body. Reports of her life tell that Teresa needed to have her hair cut in order to bear the heat of her body. Levitation, continuous flow of tears, stigmas and other wounds were also symptoms of loving ecstasy. The aim of such love was a transformation in which the lover unites with the beloved and in some sense becomes the beloved. (Niedermeier, 2019, §5).

In his Heroic Enthusiasts (orig.1585; Bruno, 2012), Giordano Bruno compares the unification in love to the ancient myth of Actaeon. In the myth, the hunter Actaeon goes after a stag that represents the beloved. He is aided by his mastiffs and greyhounds that represent his will and intellect. When Actaeon encounters the goddess Diana, he is stupefied and becomes transformed into the stag that he had been hunting. The dogs continue their hunt and devour the stag. (Bruno, 2012, ch. IV). In this manner, the unification in love finally means that the lover is consumed by his own intellect and will. The heroic transformation is thus also a self-sacrifice in love.

The ecstasy of Teresa of Avila follows a similar pattern. Her ardent love heats her body. A burning arrow harms her like the dogs that devour Actaeon. At the same time, she becomes one with the object of her love. In Bernini’s sculpture in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Teresa is presented as supernaturally beautiful. Her robe appears together
with a cloud on which she levitates, defying the gravity of the marble. The arrow is a special gift that enables and causes her ecstatic state. (Niedermeier, 2019, §5).

Such burning emotion is very ambivalent and liminal. It highlights suffering and death as the outcome of spiritual-emotional discovery. It also means a complete loss of self-control for the sake of being carried away with the emotion. In some sense, this emotional heroism goes against both the political and the moral examples of extraordinary virtue. While political and moral examples underline utmost self-control, emotional giftedness highlights an openness that can give up everything for the sake of extreme higher love.

The three models of extraordinary Christian talent - political, moral, and emotional - are all in some sense premodern. Since the Enlightenment, talent and excellence begin to be seen as a fusion of education and personal capabilities. In contrast to this fusion, the premodern models operate in charismatic and heroic manner.

**Schleiermacher: Religion**

To highlight the transition from premodern to modern paradigm, I will shortly outline the argument that Friedrich Schleiermacher makes in his third speech on religion (1799; Schleiermacher, 1996). These speeches made Schleiermacher famous as the theologian of romanticism and emerging German modernity.

Schleiermacher discusses people who look inward to perceive infinity in religion. This introspection tends to remain fragmentary. Overly introspective people may have “outbursts of religion” but no steady and permanent relationship with infinity. Schleiermacher then discusses people who look “boldly outward” to see the different manifestations of religion. This way also remains imperfect, as the manifestations are so manifold and inconsistent. Schleiermacher (1996, 65) concludes that no representatives of religion can be acknowledged by the whole world, as our perceptions remain so fragmented.

Somewhat nostalgically, Schleiermacher (1996, 66–67) continues by stating that in former times it was possible to see “the heroes of religion, the holy souls” who made deep impression to everyone. He claims that the “sensibility” to perceive religious depth is lacking in his modern world. Different ways of religious piety are required in our days.

In order to reach a “freedom of sensibility”, which enables deeper insight, one should today practice self-limitation and formation “to become something definite”. On the one hand, a “universality of sense” needs to be affirmed to understand reality. Given this, the person “can then resolve to do further some individual thing for its own sake with all his power”. Instead of trying to understand everything, the modern person needs to focus his attention. As this individual strive is nevertheless accompanied with the idea of universality, the person can appreciate a similar strive in others. Due to his self-limitation, he can then also realize “that the object of his choice is nothing without the rest”. (Schleiermacher, 1996, 67).

Schleiermacher wants to gain access to the sensibility for the universe, which was allegedly possible for the heroes of religion in earlier times. Today, the fragmented world no longer offers any easy or general access to such freedom of sensibility. The universe can nowadays only be accessed through self-limitation and education that focuses on very
specific expertise. This expertise should not be narrow-minded but the scholar understands that the knowledge of others is likewise needed. The self-limitation and self-denial of the scholar is rewarded in the insight that the infinite is approached in this manner.

Schleiermacher (1996, 68) summarizes his argument as follows: “Detach all that is not yourself, always proceed with ever-sharper sense, and the more you fade from yourself, the clearer will the universe stand forth before you, the more splendidly will you be recompensed for the horror of self-annihilation through the feeling of the infinite in you”. This summary is on the one hand meant to describe the work of an educated expert. At the same time, Schleiermacher thinks that the work of such specialist contains something quasi-religious, “a feeling of the infinite in you”.

In this visionary description of modern expert, a kind of resemblance to the “holy souls” of former times emerges. The educated experts may be able to encounter the infinite through their self-limitation in a manner that resembles the virtuosos and heroes of premodern times. Schleiermacher is well aware of mystical traditions and their ideas of self-denial. In Giordano Bruno and Teresa of Avila, loving sensibility finally destroys the bodily person. Schleiermacher’s self-annihilation is not as final or dramatic, but it nevertheless employs the mystical idea. In order to reveal your full talent, you must restrict your life and detach it from all other elements up to the point of self-annihilation.

For Schleiermacher (1996, 68–69), this deep “sensibility” can be reached in religion as well as in specialized education and arts. What is different in modern times is the individuality of modern person. Infinity and higher truths can no longer simply be observed in other persons and objects, as reality is fragmented and cannot offer universal objectivity. At the same time, individual training and education offers the way to perceive infinity. While this modern talent differs from premodern heroism in its subjective outlook, it also continues the premodern tradition of emotional involvement.

Like other philosophers and artists of his generation, Schleiermacher highlights the idea of sensibility. The so-called sentimentalist thinkers held that a deeper understanding of other individuals is only possible when the emphatic attitude is both rational and emotional. Sensibility involves a transfer of emotions. Religious emotion is sensibility for the infinite.

In the third speech on religion, this sensibility appears in the context of modern education that requires a considerable self-limitation. The modern world is fragmented and manifold and can only become understood by means of focusing on “something definite”. An architype of modern talent is therefore the educated scholar. His very particular own findings can be accompanied with the sensibility that the broader universe or the infinite is accessible.

At the same time, the modern paradigm differs from the premodern era in which the “holy soul” could achieve a complete understanding and become recognized by all others. A specialist can have the sensibility to recognize the achievement of others in their particular areas of expertise, but no single mind can grasp the universe in its totality. The difference between premodern and modern talent is thus found in the difference between the collective and the individual.
Schleiermacher: University education

Schleiermacher was also influential in the renewal of university education. He is known as the collaborator of Wilhelm von Humboldt in the establishment of the University of Berlin. Schleiermacher drafted some of the founding documents of this new university in 1808–1810. He also outlined the place and tasks of the Faculty of Theology in the Humboldtian university (Schmid, 2017, 220–222).

In his programmatic work Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn (orig. 1808; Schleiermacher, 1998) Schleiermacher pleads for the autonomy of the university. The academy is not primarily an institution of the state but a community of scholars who strive after knowledge. On the one hand, this academic spirit promotes individual talent and freedom. At the same time, university needs to be understood as a community in which the individuals can only achieve new knowledge as members of the entire community (Schmid, 2017, 212–215).

While such strive after new knowledge does not manifest emotion in the same sense as religious sensitivity, Schleiermacher’s university writings emphasize the primacy and equality of individuals and their need for community in the manner of his theological works. Instead of repetitive learning, university education should cultivate the idea of knowledge that is approached and broadened by the student’s own research capabilities, supported by the wider academic community (Schleiermacher, 1998, 33, 34; Schmid, 2017, 214).

While the premodern hero or saint operated within social hierarchy, Schleiermacher’s expert is active in a community of equals. The difference between premodern heroism and modern educated expert can be summarized with the distinction between homo hierarchicus and homo aequalis. According to Louis Dumont (1977), the human person exists in all premodern societies as a member of the hierarchical order. While saints and martyrs may transcend their own social standing, they nevertheless make their appearance within the generally accepted order. This hierarchical whole is primary and the individuals appear within its framework, manifesting homo hierarchicus. In the French and British Enlightenment of the 18th century, however, a new kind of primacy is ascribed to individuals and they start to appear as equal to one another, without pre-established hierarchy.

Due to this development, the modern world begins to replace the old homo hierarchicus with a new ideal of homo aequalis, an individual and a relatively free spirit who can find out the truth in an autonomous fashion. Friedrich Schleiermacher and the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 instantiate the emergence of homo aequalis in a paradigmatic fashion.

As the ideals of Christianity were for 1700 years operative within the framework of homo hierarchicus, this change to modernity continues to create problems for religious people until the present day. It is easier to be a saint, hero, or martyr in the framework of hierarchical social order, especially when the hierarchical world can also display the so-called “vertical solidarity” (Assmann, 1990). Within the framework of vertical solidarity, the exceptional and counter-cultural talents can be positively affirmed.
Schleiermacher wrestles with the place of religion in the modern world in which *homo aequalis* is affirmed. On the one hand, this new view creates opportunities for individuality and freedom. On the other, extraordinary talents are only recognized when the broader community can perceive and affirm them in terms of horizontal solidarity. Within the university, outstanding expertise is a character trait that fulfills this condition. It is nevertheless a talent that differs from the mystical visions of premodern saints. Academic achievement is needs to be verified by others within the community of equal experts.

With his concepts like “feeling of the infinite”, “freedom of sensibility” and “self-limitation”, Schleiermacher argues that religion can also participate in the modern paradigm. In the community of equals, such concepts and capabilities point rather towards educational expertise than to strong religious conviction. In order to convince other equal members of the community, the religious person of the modern era needs education and expertise.

Schleiermacher’s reflections manifest both the romantic currents of his own times and the impact of the European Enlightenment. His view of the premodern heroes and saints nevertheless resembles our current knowledge regarding *homo hierarchicus*. When the premodern hero or saint is connected with God with the help of extraordinary talent, he or she possesses all virtues. This is particularly evident in the political hero, but the strong-willed martyrs and exceptionally devoted lovers also display a certain totality of their person. A modern specialist, however, may excel in one area but remain mediocre in other respects.

**Conclusion: Current value of historical paradigms**

Can this history shed any light to our contemporary understanding of talent in general or religious giftedness in particular? The premodern variants proceed from the basic assumption that religious talent simply means an excessive amount of faith or religiosity. The hierarchic frame supports this kind of excellence. Schleiermacher’s emphasis on sensibility and pluralism, on the other hand, makes a distinction between being simply religious and having a perspective in which to understand matters of religion. The latter may also be a talent, but it requires hard training and appreciation of other expertise. It assumes the framework of *homo aequalis*.

The modern distinction between conviction and expertise is important in many ways. Theological faculties do not hire the most religious people as their professors. Instead, they require expertise and powers of discernment. While musically talented people can be argued also to understand music particularly well, very religious people may not be the best ones to exercise discernment in religious matters. At the same time, the distinction between religious zeal and religious sensitivity is complex. Schleiermacher, for instance, does not advocate a merely intellectual understanding of religion. He pleads for an individual sensitivity for the infinite, a property that can be labeled as religious talent rather than purely academic skill.

While the three premodern forms or Christian excellence may appear as outdated and strange, they may also manifest some noteworthy aspects of religious life. The Christian God is depicted in the New Testament in monarchical terms. God is the Lord who rules over
his Kingdom. It is thus easily understandable that earthly monarchs are associated with
this God and that divine powers are ascribed to them. The Bible remains strongly
connected with the idea of *homo hierarchicus*.

The countercultural and ethical ideals of altruistic saints and strong-willed martyrs are
one paradigm of excessive religious conviction. This paradigm may be related to political
will, but it also finds expression as non-political charity or as keeping one’s conviction at
all costs. This strength of will may appear as talent, for instance, in a person like Mother
Teresa. It may, however, also appear as mere stubbornness that lacks all sensibility. For a
modern person, this variant looks ambivalent. Being ambivalent and liminal is never-
theless a constituent of sainthood, as ambivalence works in both directions.

Excessively emotional religion is likewise an ambivalent phenomenon. It may ap-
proach trance and shamanist states, but it may also express openness and sensibility. As a
state of surrendering oneself, emotional excess is the opposite of strong-willed control. In
the early modern sources, the paradigm of becoming one with the beloved is prominent.
This paradigm approaches autoerotic and even self-destructive states in strange ways.
Catholic women saints display this paradigm astonishingly often.

For a modern person, it is challenging to conceive such autoerotic oneness in terms of
giftedness or talent. Other anthropological and psychological explanations of this be-
havior are easier understandable. The emotional potential of Christianity may never-
theless contain some hidden resources that continue to inspire people. Current popularity
of charismatic movements underlines the importance of this phenomenon. Giordano
Bruno elaborates the myth of Actaeon in great detail, for instance, as follows:

Actaeon hunted by his own dogs - pursued by his own thoughts - runs and directs these
novel paths, invigorated so as to proceed divinely and ‘more easily’, that is with greater
facility and with refreshed vigour ‘towards the denser places’, to the deserts and the region
of things incomprehensible. From being such as he first was, a common ordinary man, he
becomes rare and heroic, his habits and ideas are strange, and he leads an unusual life.
Here his great dogs ‘give him death’ and thus ends his life according to the mad, sensual,
blind, and fantastic world, and he begins to live intellectually; he lives the life of the gods,
fed on ambrosia and drunk with nectar.

Bruno here (2012, ch. IV, 18) considers Actaeon as an explorer who wants to discover a
new world. As such, Actaeon becomes a heroic person who proceeds to divine paths.
While others may see him tragically devoured by his own dogs, he lives a truly intellectual
life in his own emotional universe. Actaeon thus resembles people who practice extreme
sports or excessive bodily training. They are ready to give up everything for the sake of
unique experience. This kind of nectar is considered to be available in the life of the gods.
While modern individualists need and embrace equality, they may simultaneously seek a
hierarchic ascent with the help of “unusual life”.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/
or publication of this article.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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