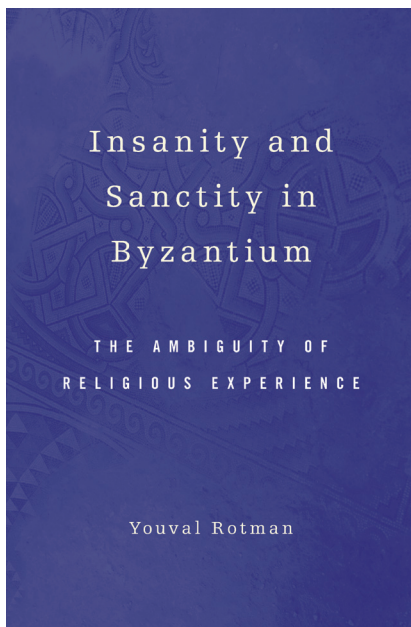


Insanity and  
Sanctity in  
Byzantium

THE AMBIGUITY OF  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Youval Rotman



cloth • \$39.95  
ISBN 9780674057616  
272 pages

# *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium*

*The Ambiguity of Religious Experience*

**Youval Rotman**

*“Rotman’s approach and interpretation are bold and novel—Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium gives a central and decisive role to psychology in interpreting the historical phenomenon of holy fools. This is an intriguing and inspiring book that will have a profound impact.”*

—Kostis Smyrlis, New York University

In the Roman and Byzantine Near East, the holy fool emerged in Christianity as a way of describing individuals whose apparent madness allowed them to achieve a higher level of spirituality. *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium* examines how the figure of the mad saint or mystic was used as a means of individual and collective transformation in the period between the birth of Christianity and the rise of Islam. It presents a novel interpretation in revealing the central role that psychology plays in social and historical development.

Early Christians looked to figures who embodied extremes of behavior—like the holy fool, the ascetic, the martyr—to redefine their social, cultural, and mental settings by reading new values in abnormal behavior. Comparing such forms of extreme behavior in early Christian, pagan, and Jewish societies, and drawing on theories of relational psychoanalysis, anthropology, and sociology of religion, Youval Rotman explains how the sanctification of figures of extreme behavior makes their abnormality socially and psychologically functional. The sanctification of abnormal mad behavior created a sphere of ambiguity in the ambit of religious experience for early Christians, which brought about a deep psychological shift, necessary for the transition from paganism to Christianity.

A developing society leaves porous the border between what is normal and abnormal, between sanity and insanity, in order to use this ambiguity as a means of change. Rotman emphasizes the role of religion in maintaining this ambiguity to effect a social and psychological transformation.

**Youval Rotman** is a Byzantinist and Associate Professor of History at Tel Aviv University.

# *Insanity and Sanctity: The Ambiguity of Religious Experience*

by Youval Rotman

Harvard University Press, 2016, ISBN 9780674057616

Link to Books-google:

[https://books.google.com/books?id=16kzDQAAQBAJ&source=gbs\\_book\\_other\\_versions&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com/books?id=16kzDQAAQBAJ&source=gbs_book_other_versions&redir_esc=y)

Links to reviews:

History: <http://www.europenowjournal.org/2017/04/03/insanity-and-sanctity-in-byzantium-the-ambiguity-of-religious-experience-by-youval-rotman/>

Psychoanalysis: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0003065117712698>

## *A Short Description*

The phenomenon of the Byzantine holy man has been widely studied. One unique type of Byzantine religiosity has attracted particular attention: the holy fool, the person who feigned madness to challenge society and its norms. The holiness of such a person is hidden under the cover of madness and must remain so, since it is dependent on being concealed from society around. This reveals a basic paradox which characterizes this particular type of sanctity since society cannot identify the holy fool as a saint, and more importantly, his surroundings cannot differentiate him from non-holy madmen. Such questions underline the social tension which is central to this figure, and make Byzantium an ideal framework to study the relation between sanctity and insanity. The book takes this framework as case study to examine more broadly the relation between psychology and history.

Considered to be one of the first Byzantine holy fools, Symeon was an historical figure of the sixth century. His *Life* was written in the seventh century by Leontius the bishop of Neapolis. After twenty-nine years in the Judean desert Symeon decides to leave the monastic life in order to become a fool for Christ in the city of Emesa. His feigned madness makes him a centre of attention and enables him to challenge the social and cultural norms and to stimulate the religious life of the city. To get his plan enacted he must keep it concealed. His simulated madness remains undiscovered until his death. The *Life* contains a vivid description of his intentional acts of madness that challenge every social aspect of the city life. In the tenth century the

*Life of Symeon* was taken as a model for a hagiographic work on Saint Andrew the Fool. Although Andrew was likely a fictional figure, his *Life*, set in the street of Constantinople, is an excellent example of the popularity that the holy fool model attained in Byzantine culture. This is also evident from hagiographies of other fools (Mark the Fool, Onesima, Paul of Corinth, among others). In all of these examples the protagonists cannot be recognized as saints because society marks them as madmen. However, once the holy fool exists as a cultural phenomenon, any madman can, potentially at least, be a saint in disguise. This situation underlines the ambiguity which is central to this figure. It presents a paradox to society. The fact that the holiness depends on concealment means that it can be sought and found in every madman and in any abnormal behaviour. This paradox derives from the ambiguous character of this figure, which is taken here as an example of the ambiguity which the author detects in the religious experience.

The book studies this ambiguity, its rationale and its consequences for the definition of insanity and abnormal behaviour. Holiness in the guise of madness affects the perception and definition of the borderline between sanity and insanity, and does not permit its definite and clear demarcation. The borderline between sanity and insanity remains unmarked because of the ambiguous holiness of such figures, and not only in Byzantium. Once the social phenomenon of holy folly exists, it changes the definition of sanity and insanity by adding a third element: sanctity, and does not enable the borderline between sanity and insanity to be fully marked. This is precisely the role that the holy fool was set up to play. Furthermore, the paradox embedded in this phenomenon is double-faced, and acts on both the historical and historiographical levels. The historian working on such phenomena can never be sure whether fools for Christ existed, or whether real madmen were defined by society as saints. The development of the phenomenon of the holy fool cannot therefore be identified and explained by a standard historical analysis of the textual evidence, because the textual evidence was constructed to leave the paradox of the holy man unresolved.

By overlooking this paradox, historical research has either failed to explain the existence of the phenomenon of the holy fool, or ignored its main challenge to our analysis of religious societies. This paradox is at the center of this study which proposes a different way to address it, moving along both a historical and psychological axes. It explains the central role of the phenomenon of the holy fool in Byzantine religious experience by analyzing the problems that its different interpretations pose for the modern reader. This results in a new reading of the complexity of figures of ambiguity and the central social role they play in the socio-psychological dimension. In Byzantium such figures had a liminal social position. It is the position of the holy fool on the *limen* of sanity that makes him a figure of ambiguity.

Liminality in the religious sphere has been exhaustively dealt with. The holy men of early Christianity correspond very well to such criteria. Their holiness derives from their social position outside the social order, normally on the fringe of society, where their religious zeal manifests itself. This, in turn, makes them magnetic religious phenomena, and provides them with means to become central and influential within the

religious system. However, their recognition and adoption by the religious authorities means the end of their liminality, because their acceptance marks their integration into the religious center and ends their marginality. Holiness, once achieved, could not remain liminal. This marks the important role of the liminal figure to enable a process of movement within the religious mechanism. The particularity of the Byzantine holy fool stands out much more clearly against the background of this religious dynamic. His social recognition is not possible, since this would mean the disclosure of his holiness. The holy fool, therefore, must remain a figure of ambiguity until his death, whereupon his concealed holiness is revealed. During his life the question of this ambiguity, whether the madman is holy or not, generates a social and religious tension. This tension, which cannot be resolved, enables the holy fool to be socially effective.

The Byzantine holy fool is not the only religious figure who acts on the borderline of sanity. The same is also true for the prophet, the mystic, the visionary, the ascetic, the martyr. The Sufi plays a similar role in early Islam. Such “religious virtuosi”, to employ Max Weber’s terminology, provide a direct link to the divine. This link derives from the ability of such figures to connect to the divine via an abnormal mental state. This is manifested in a complex of psychological and emotional states which is out of reach in “normal” situations and for “normal” religious figures. The importance of this abnormal mental state, which marks such figures insane (or not fully sane), lies in the fact that it makes their ambiguity permanent, and thus does not enable their integration into the religious structure. Being marked as insane, they can and must keep their abnormality. Their function in the religious structure is therefore to keep one of its borderlines – the one between sanity and insanity – open.

However, the existence of such figures of ambiguity endangers the social definition of madness and thus disturbs the social order. Since Foucault’s monumental study, the concept of madness as a social construction has been left unchallenged. Scholars have either agreed or disagreed with Foucault. Others have demonstrated his work defective in many respects. But in both cases modern scholarship and historical research in particular did not move beyond the point that he left. In fact, historians could not move beyond this point. Once madness is defined as a social construct, the boundary between sanity and insanity would always appear to be a consequence of the social and cultural norms and ideals of a particular community. This is precisely what makes the phenomenon of the Byzantine holy fool so productive for this discussion, since it is a phenomenon that does not allow this definition to be fully reached. The main question that this study addresses is therefore why a society should leave one of its most important boundaries – the one between sanity and insanity – open. According to the Foucauldian model, madness is defined according to cultural and social norms. A religious figure who behaves abnormally, on the other hand, demonstrates that this relation is not one-sided. In other words, the definition of madness is not only a product of social process, but can also affect the norms of society and the definition of its boundaries. By keeping this boundary open via the holy fool, society itself, as well as its cultural norms, stays, the book argues, not fully defined. And this is the role of ambiguity in a religious environment particularly perceptible in Byzantium.

The fact that the phenomenon of the holy fool was developed in the Byzantine Near East is significant. This was a time when Byzantine society was looking for new definitions of cultural and social boundaries. The phenomenon of the holy fool was developed against the background of religious instability. More than other medieval societies, Byzantine society kept a cultural and social tension that originated with the rise of early Christianity. This became apparent in the crises of the great religious controversies and in the period of Iconoclasm. These crises were about religious definitions, but also about the place of the Christian religion in the Byzantine social and political life. The constant battles over religious definitions manifest a state of religious uncertainty. In 692 the Quinisextum ecumenical council in Constantinople excommunicated believers who feigned demon possession. The boundary between what is a “true” and a “false” religious experience became unclear because Byzantine society was in a state of a religious flux. This is what makes Byzantium an ideal case study to analyze the phenomenon of the holy fool. Holy folly existed elsewhere, but in no other ancient or medieval society its cult became so central and acquired such an importance to the religious experience as in Byzantium. This goes beyond the simple contention that Byzantium was a society in constant flux. It was a society whose borders and definitions were in constant flux. And such movement necessitated the creation of symbols to represent this tension. The Byzantine holy fools symbolized the tension embedded in the society which created them. Holy fools should not be studied therefore merely a religious phenomenon, since the ambiguity that they portray has a clear social function. What is its function is the main question that this study aims to uncover. This study examines phenomena of ambiguities in religious societies in order to challenge the Foucauldian model. The importance of religious figures of ambiguity to modern research lies precisely in the fact that they portray a social phenomenon that does not enable a full definition to be reached for insanity, and consequently sanity. The importance of this phenomenon exceeds the realm of the historical research of one particular culture in time. It provides a unique case study to examine the ways in which the definition of insanity and sanity affects and determines social norms.

From a historiographic perspective, the study of the phenomenon of the holy fool can reveal the ways in which modern research approaches and analyzes phenomena of ambiguity, in particular the ambiguities between sanity and insanity. Foucault described a society in which such ambiguity is not possible. He showed the process of this development and examined its context. This book focuses on the reverse situation: a society that not only accepts ambiguity, but also sets it as its cultural model. The book studies this ambiguity along with the ways in which it was dealt with by modern scholarship. This analysis reveals the problems in the approach of modern scholarship to dealing with phenomena of ambiguity. Drawing extensively on modern theories of relational psychology, interpersonal psychology and literary criticism the book develops a new interdisciplinary approach that goes in between the three fields of history, psychology and religious studies, and presents a fresh and new theory to explain how the psychology of abnormal behaviour of individuals can affect and transform the social fabric.