



*religions*

# Comparative Hagiology

## Issues in Theory and Method

---

Edited by

Massimo Rondolino

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Religions*

# Comparative Hagiology



# Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method

Special Issue Editor

**Massimo Rondolino**

MDPI • Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Manchester • Tokyo • Cluj • Tianjin



*Special Issue Editor*  
Massimo Rondolino  
Carroll University  
USA

*Editorial Office*  
MDPI  
St. Alban-Anlage 66  
4052 Basel, Switzerland

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Religions* (ISSN 2077-1444) (available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special.issues/comparativehagiology>).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. <i>Journal Name</i> <b>Year</b> , Article Number, Page Range.
---

**ISBN 978-3-03936-404-6 (Hbk)**

**ISBN 978-3-03936-405-3 (PDF)**

Cover image courtesy Vinicius "amnx" Amano on Unsplash.com.

© 2020 by the authors. Articles in this book are Open Access and distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license, which allows users to download, copy and build upon published articles, as long as the author and publisher are properly credited, which ensures maximum dissemination and a wider impact of our publications.

The book as a whole is distributed by MDPI under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND.

# Contents

<b>About the Special Issue Editor</b> . . . . .	<b>vii</b>
<b>Massimo A. Rondolino</b> Introduction: Comparative Hagiology, Issues in Theory and Method Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2020, 11, 158, doi:10.3390/rel11040158 . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>Massimo A. Rondolino</b> Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for <i>Hagiography</i> Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 538, doi:10.3390/rel10100538 . . . . .	<b>5</b>
<b>David M. DiValerio</b> A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 585, doi:10.3390/rel10100585 . . . . .	<b>15</b>
<b>Sara Ritchey</b> Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 569, doi:10.3390/rel10100569 . . . . .	<b>21</b>
<b>Todd E. French</b> Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 577, doi:10.3390/rel10100577 . . . . .	<b>29</b>
<b>Jon Keune</b> Comparative vs. Hagiology: Two Variant Approaches to the Field Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 575, doi:10.3390/rel10100575 . . . . .	<b>37</b>
<b>R. Brian Siebeking</b> Dare to Compare: Reflections on Experimenting with Comparative Hagiology Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 663, doi:10.3390/rel10120663 . . . . .	<b>43</b>
<b>Barbara Zimbalist</b> Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 604, doi:10.3390/rel10110604 . . . . .	<b>49</b>
<b>Scott Harrower</b> The Ethics of Doing Comparative Hagiology Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2019, 10, 660, doi:10.3390/rel10120660 . . . . .	<b>57</b>
<b>Nikolas O. Hoel</b> Comparison as a Provisional Activity Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2020, 11, 36, doi:10.3390/rel11010036 . . . . .	<b>67</b>
<b>Aaron T. Hollander</b> Comparison as Collaboration: Notes on the Contemporary Craft of Hagiology Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2020, 11, 31, doi:10.3390/rel11010031 . . . . .	<b>73</b>
<b>Kevin Guilfooy</b> Is Comparison Based on Translatable Formal Concepts? Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2020, 11, 163, doi:10.3390/rel11040163 . . . . .	<b>83</b>



## About the Special Issue Editor

**Massimo Rondolino** (PhD) studied Philosophy and History of Science at the University of Pavia, Italy, and later studied Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Bristol, UK, where he also obtained a PhD in Religious Studies. He is the author of *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies* (Routledge, 2017), which was the winner of the 2019 Frederick J. Streng Book Award for Excellence in Buddhist-Christian Studies. In the book, he offers the first cross-cultural study of the hagiographic traditions of the medieval Christian St. Francis of Assisi and the Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa, which serve as case studies for the analysis of religious communities' dynamics of legitimation, from a global perspective. Among his other current projects are an edited volume on "hagiography and patronage" with Amsterdam University Press, an international collaborative editorial project on "monastic identity and hagiographic narratives" with ARC-Humanities, and, with Aaron Hollander, the section on "holy persons" for Bloomsbury Medieval. He is currently the Director of the Honors Center at Carroll University in Wisconsin, USA, where he also teaches Philosophy and Religious Studies.





Editorial

# Introduction: Comparative Hagiology, Issues in Theory and Method

Massimo A. Rondolino

Department of English, Modern Languages and Philosophy, Carroll University, 100 N East Ave, Waukesha, WI 53186, USA; mrondoli@carrollu.edu

Received: 16 March 2020; Accepted: 25 March 2020; Published: 30 March 2020

This special issue has a dual intent. First and foremost, it engages with a core theoretical question: how can the comparative, cross-cultural study of hagiographical sources be carried out in a way that is meaningful and productive? In so doing, it offers a scientific discussion of questions about taxonomy, and multi- and cross-disciplinary approaches. Its intent is to develop a critical comparative approach to most effectively engage with emic discourses on and about individuals recognized as perfected by a given community or tradition—however this perfection may be understood in its original cultural and social context.

Secondly, it also cultivates a methodological goal, exploring strategies to conduct dynamic scholarly collaboration in Religious Studies. If we are to produce thoroughly comparative studies of religious phenomena in general, and of hagiographical practices and productions in particular, it is advisable that we involve people who bring diverse specializations to the conversation. This includes a diversity of disciplinary training (e.g., history, sociology, philosophy), focus area (e.g., historical, geographical, cultural), religious traditions studied (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Islam), competencies (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, philosophical), identity (e.g., gender, race, geographic origin), and status (e.g., tenured, untenured, graduate student). This raises at least two further questions: how to foster and enact collaboration when doing research; and how to share the ensuing findings in a way that foregrounds the collaborative effort.<sup>1</sup>

In the past thirty years, critiques of Europe-centric, Christian-rooted, colonial taxonomies have frequently challenged the use of *hagiography* as a valid and valuable category for the apprehension of historiographical sources (e.g., Lifshitz 1994; Heffernan 1988). This scholarly attitude reflects a general rejection of comparative cross-cultural and religious endeavors, especially as exemplified in the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.

In recent years, though, the comparative study of religious phenomena, on a variety of scales and with greater reflexivity, has seen a resurgence. This has been the case within essentialist, phenomenological, and theological projects (Rose 2016; Voss Roberts 2016; Clooney and von Stosch 2017), which historically were at the center of most post-modern critique. In the past two decades, though, there has also been a growing effort to maintain the primacy of comparison, especially when empirically grounded, as an invaluable means to apprehend “the other” (most recently: Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring 2016; van de Veer 2016; Freiberger 2018; Freiberger 2019). Parallel to

---

<sup>1</sup> The contributors to this special issue volunteered to work on these essays from a much larger group of keen collaborators that gathered, rather organically, over the course of three years at different scholarly venues. We are mindful that our group could be more heterogeneous, as could also the pool of representatives who were able to commit to work on the articles published here. As organizer of most of these collaborative events, I feel that more intentional and targeted recruiting could have yielded broader representation and a greater variety of perspectives. I nevertheless felt that, as a way to challenge established practices of doing scholarship in Religious Studies towards the cultivation of a collaborative framework it was preferable, at least at this early stage, to rely primarily on individual inclinations and willingness to step outside one’s academic comfort zone. It is my hope that our readers will be inspired by our experiment to join us in a second, more heterogeneous phase of collaborative development.

this shift in methodological approach, scholars of religion and cultural historians began to display a renewed interest in the critical study of *hagiography*, broadly defined, in comparative and cross-cultural perspectives (e.g., Monge et al. 2016; Ownby et al. 2016; Rondolino 2017).

In light of this new shift towards comparison, the post-modernist critiques of comparison, and the complex history of the category *hagiography*, we find ourselves at a most apt moment to re-envision comparative hagiology as a worthwhile collaborative exercise in the academic study of religions. The expression *comparative hagiology*, meaning the scholarly, scientific cross-cultural comparative study of hagiographic sources, first appeared in anglophone academia in 1908 (MacCulloch 1908). More recently, the term *hagiology*, referring to the scientific study of sanctity and the writings about it, features in the title of an ambitious francophone academic series, published by Brepols, on the study of Western Christian saints and their cult: “Hagiologia: Études sur la Sainteté et l’Hagiographie.”<sup>2</sup> Here, we adopt the expression “comparative hagiology” in the sense of a scientific study of phenomena, discourses and processes on, about, and for the production, distribution, and consumption of *hagiography* in global perspectives. This necessarily requires us to first (re)define what is meant by *hagiography*, and how we might use the category.

The essays in this special issue represent a first attempt at formalizing, in a publicly accessible written format, some of the outcomes from a series of conversations that took place over the past three years about theorizing *hagiography* and *hagiology* cross-culturally.<sup>3</sup> Of these, two pre-conference workshops at the 2017 and 2018 conferences of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) provided the core questions and themes that the contributors to this special issue develop. Participants to these workshops explored the notion of comparative hagiology in loosely oriented, free-form, small and large scale group discussions. Everyone was asked to draw extensively on their own scholarly expertise, research, and experience, but also to bring an open mind and willingness to bridge disciplinary and cultural divides, as they engaged with a diverse group of scholars of religions. As we engaged with questions of theory, method, and taxonomy, underscored by ethical concerns that echo post-colonial, post-modern, and feminist critiques of academia, we eventually came to a practical question. How do we balance our desire for innovative and collaborative approaches to humanistic scholarship with the professional realities of the contemporary academic work environment (particularly in North America)? For example, how can we reach beyond our individual areas of expertise while also accounting for the institutional structures and metrics for promotion and tenure that tend to be based almost exclusively on single authorial ownership and recognition? The present special issue is our experiment with one such alternative mode of collaborative thinking and writing that also acknowledges the need to guarantee, especially for junior academics, an explicit and exclusive authorial recognition.

Consequently, we decided to structure the 2018 AAR pre-conference workshop around the discussion of five core individual reflections on “Comparative Hagiology,” written by the contributors to the 2017 AAR panel “Recentering Sacred Biography”—Todd French (Rollins College), David DiValerio (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee), Jon Keune (Michigan State University), Sara Ritchey (University of Tennessee, Knoxville), and myself, Massimo Rondolino (Carroll University).<sup>4</sup> Their task

---

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=HAG>. For an analogous use of the term, see also (Grégoire 1996). For a critical reflection on the term in the context of its historical development within the Bollandist project, see (Philippart 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Unless explicitly stated, I was the event organizer. 2016 International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo MI: paper panel “Comparative Perspectives in Hagiology.” 2017 conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Boston MA: pre-conference workshop “Comparative Hagiology;” paper panel “Recentering Sacred Biography: Hagiography as a Category of Analysis for Comparative Sanctities” (organized by Sara Ritchey). 2018 AAR conference in Denver, CO: pre-conference workshop “Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method;” paper panel “Saints and Their Miracles: Comparing Miracle Stories in Christian and Hindu Hagiography” (organized by Patton Burchett); paper panel “The Ethics of the Saints: Re-Reading and Re-Writing Hagiographical Texts” (organized by Brian Siebeking); paper panel “Hagiography and Patronage.”

<sup>4</sup> DiValerio’s contribution is in lieu of Gloria I-Ling Chien’s (Gonzaga University), who was one of the panelists of “Recentering Sacred Biography” but was unable to contribute to the 2018 workshop and the current special issue.

was to draft a concise self-reflection on whether and how to do comparative, cross-cultural studies on hagiographical sources, drawing from their respective disciplinary training, areas of expertise, competencies, and past research. Each one was also asked to do so concisely, and with a focus on theory and method, with the ultimate goal of fostering a dynamic discussion on second-order hagiological analysis. In light of the conversations at the workshop, we then reworked our contributions into the five concise and highly focused essays that begin this special issue, which we then shared virtually among all contributors for further comments, feedback and exchange.<sup>5</sup> All other participants in the 2018 workshop were also invited to respond to any number of the five core papers they wished to engage with, to whichever extent (depth and breadth) most closely resonated with their sensitivities as well as personal and professional experiences (as scholars, as area specialists, as comparativists, as hagiologists, as teachers, etc.), further explicitly addressing our group's collaborative model in its entirety. Six participants have contributed responses to this special issue: Kevin Guilfooy (Carroll University), Scott Harrower (Ridley College), Nikolas Hoel (Northeastern Illinois University), Aaron Hollander (Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute), Brian Siebeking (Gonzaga University), and Barbara Zimbalist (University of Texas, El Paso).

I anticipate that this combination of structured reflection and free-form discussion will puzzle some readers. I am also confident, though, that the dynamism that this format engendered among the contributors (in person and virtually) generated insights into aspects none of us would have otherwise identified—and certainly not in the manner in which they appear in this special issue. The plurality of views and opinions presented here necessarily reflects our individual sensitivities, scholarly trainings, and research agendas, and these may resonate more with some readers and less with others. The overarching concern that all essays share is the need to identify common tools for an interdisciplinary, comparative, and intentional study of religious and hagiographical phenomena, tools that should prove of interest to all scholars of religions, regardless of disciplinary training and focus area. It is our hope that, in reading the product of our collaborative efforts, more will join our ongoing conversation, with the understanding that agreement is less important than commitment to engage constructively in mutual self-reflection.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** Not all participants to our panels and workshops were able to contribute to this special issue. Nevertheless, the essays we present here owe much to the exchanges we collectively engaged in during the 2017 and 2018 AAR pre-conference workshops. Here, I would like to recognize all the workshop members who do not feature in this special issue, and who, sharing with all of us their knowledge, views, and expertise, have nevertheless made it possible: Travis Ables, Dean Accardi, Wendy Love Anderson, Joel Bordeaux, Daniel Burton-Rose, Gloria I-Ling Chien, Jennifer Eichman, Pascale Engelmajer, Tyler Feezell, Seokyung Han, Hans Harmakaputra, Ayesha Irani, Chloe Martinez, Richard McGregor, Verena Meyer, Margaret Anne Moore, Joshua Mugler, Aaron Reich, Roberta Sabbath, Tim Sanders, Charles Talar, Anna Taylor, Michael VanZandt Collins, and Stefan Wheelock. A particular thanks to Charles Talar for his English translation of Guy Philippart's 1994 essay "Hagiographes et Hagiographie, Hagiologes et Hagiologie: Des Mots et des Concepts", which was circulated among the participants in both workshops.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Clooney, Francis X., and Klaus von Stosch, eds. 2017. *How to Do Comparative Theology*. Bronx: Fortress Press.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38.

[CrossRef]

---

<sup>5</sup> Jon Keune has drawn my attention to how the collaborative process that we have adopted here is particularly similar in mode and scope to the Public Philosophy Journal's practice of formative peer review: "a structured form of peer engagement rooted in trust and a shared commitment to improving the work through candid and collegial feedback [ ... ] asks all interlocutors to enter into dialogue with one another as colleagues" (here, the use of the term "colleague", particularly in its etymological Latin acceptance, *colléga*, is highly significant; see <https://publicphilosophyjournal.org/about/review/>).

- Freiberger, Oliver. 2019. *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grégoire, Réginald. 1996. *Manuale di Agiologia: Introduzione alla Letteratura Agiografica*, 2nd ed. Fabriano: Monastero San Silvestro Abate.
- Heffernan, Thomas. 1988. *Sacred Biography. Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 1994. Beyond Positivism and Genre: "Hagiographical" Texts as Historical Narrative. *Viator* 25: 95–114. [CrossRef]
- MacCulloch, Canon. 1908. Sainly Miracles, a Study in Comparative Hagiology. *The Expository Times* 19: 403–9. [CrossRef]
- Monge, Rico, Kerry P. C. San Chirico, and Rachel J. Smith, eds. 2016. *Hagiography and Religious Studies: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Ownby, David, Vincent Gossaert, and Ji Zhe. 2016. *Making Saints in Modern China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Philippart, Guy. 2012. Le Riche et Encombrant Héritage de Jean Bolland (1643) et le Fantôme Hagiologique. In *Hagiographie, Idéologie et Politique au Moyen Âge en Occident*. Edited by Edina Bozóky. Turnhout: Editions Brepols, pp. 9–36.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.
- Rose, Kenneth. 2016. *Yoga, Meditation, and Mysticism: Contemplative Universals and Meditative Landmarks*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Schmidt-Leukel, Perry, and Andreas Nehring, eds. 2016. *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- van de Veer, Peter. 2016. *The Value of Comparison*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Voss Roberts, Michelle. 2016. *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*. Bronx: Fordham University Press.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for *Hagiography*

Massimo A. Rondolino

Department of English, Modern Languages and Philosophy, Carroll University, 100 N East Ave, Waukesha, WI 53186, USA; mrondoli@carrollu.edu

Received: 27 August 2019; Accepted: 18 September 2019; Published: 20 September 2019

**Abstract:** Since its now notorious mid-1800s historiographical positivist critiques, the term *hagiography* was often contested as a valid and valuable category for the comparative study of religious phenomena. This essay argues for the perpetuation and careful use of the term *hagiography* and its cognates in comparative contexts. Drawing from my work on the narrative traditions of the medieval Christian Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and the Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa (c. 1052–1135), I offer a revised definition of *hagiography* that reflects the nexus of behaviors, practice, beliefs, and productions through which a community constructs the memory of a human being it considers to have embodied religious perfection. I then suggest that the category, so redefined, allows us to more readily and accurately characterize these kinds of narratives. Consequently, we can easily apprehend them as emic historiographical creations that situate a given community between past and future in light of a given theory of truth, embodied in the literary *saintly* figure. This, eventually, orients individuals and communities, doctrines, and practices within a historical timeframe.

**Keywords:** comparative religions; definition; disciplinary innovation; hagiography; hagiology; religious studies; sacred biography; sainthood; theory and method in religious studies; taxonomy

---

Textual, visual, performative, and archeological sources, as well as practices and behaviors, about *saints* are instrumental for the academic study of the cultural history of religious communities.<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the 1900s, scholars of early and medieval Christendom exquisitely demonstrated this by examining the manners and modes in which devotees and practitioners crafted, communicated, and lived their notion and memory of individuals who were seen as exemplars of Christian virtue (see, most notably, [Graus 1965](#); [Brown 1981](#); [Vauchez 1981](#); [Bynum 1987](#); [Heffernan 1988](#); [Head 1990](#)). Crucially, these studies are also all necessarily comparative; they examine a plurality of phenomena (illuminating one specific instance in light of others or contrasting some phenomena against others) as a way to discern, among other factors, how these were generated, by which people, against which others, or to whose benefit.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, with an understanding of sainthood as a constructed notion, reflective of discrete historical, geographic, social, and cultural factors ([Delooz 1962, 1969](#)), within a scholarly historiographical discourse, the question is no longer about who the person-saint might have actually been. Instead, it is about the functions that might be fulfilled in making that individual a *saint* and how these relate to an individual's or a group's worldview and activity.

In the context of the study of the Franciscan question, for example, the comparative examination of sources on the life of Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) allowed scholars to move beyond determining

---

<sup>1</sup> Mindful of its historical and theological Christian connotations, the term *saint* and its cognates are here adopted more broadly as a heuristic device to readily and intuitively refer to individuals that a particular tradition, group, or individual recognizes as perfected in light of a given theory of truth and an eventual related soteriology (see, for example, [Hawley 1987](#); [Kieckhefer and Bond 1988](#); [Ray 1993](#)).

<sup>2</sup> On the modes of comparative analysis, see ([Freidenreich 2004](#); [Freiberger 2018, 2019](#)).

which was the most historically accurate and, in a positivist sense, “true” (Sabatier 1894). Eventually, this shift led to an appreciation of the competing ideological interpretations and agendas (theological and political) of each author and their social realities (Frugoni 1993; Dalarun 1996; Manselli 2002; Pellegrini 2004; Vauchez 2009).<sup>3</sup> This crucial focal shift in the scholarly study of narratives on *saints* is not unique to works about the history of the Christian world (whether in late antiquity, the greater middle ages, or early modernity). In Buddhist studies at large, for example, scholars showed that similar compositional dynamics also take place in the context of the construction of the narratives of fully enlightened beings, whether monks in the Theravāda tradition (Schober 1997), one among Tibet’s most renowned Buddhist tertön (Tibetan *gter ston*, a visionary discoverer of esoterically hidden teachings) (Gyatso 1998),<sup>4</sup> the first patriarch of the Chan lineage of Chinese Buddhism (Jorgensen 2005), or the most famous Tibetan Buddhist lay ascetic (Quintman 2014).

It is already possible to discern a correspondence of the ways in which individuals and communities codified the lives of beings seen as perfected across cultures, religious traditions, historical periods, and geographical areas. This similarity in the phenomena and their dynamics is further complemented by a similarity in the way in which they were studied from the second half of the 1900s onward. It is at this time, in the history of western academia, in fact, that, even if only in relation to a distinct historic-cultural context, scholars compared sources in light of the ideological, doctrinal, social, and political contexts in which they were produced and received. Notably, this shift necessarily also forces us to compare, contrast, cross-examine, and differentiate all relevant hagiographical data in light of the respective discourses that inform the construction of the notion of their portrayed subject as *saint*.

Here, I wish to contribute to this ongoing conversation toward establishing a shared vocabulary for the comparative study of hagiographical sources, whether inter- or cross-culturally. In particular, I argue that we should adopt the concept of *hagiography* as an analytical category for the taxonomy of sources that contribute to construct and promote the recognition of a given individual as a perfected being in the context of a particular religious theory of truth—note that I here consistently italicize the term as a way to readily problematize the very nature of the category. As such, then, comparative hagiology designates an academic, scientific approach to the study of particular religious phenomena, which is understood as a discursive inquiry into historiographical sources (whether textual, visual, performative, or archeological).<sup>5</sup> Crucially, the data apprehended are here not to be taken to do historiography in the sense that they “write/develop history” in a (manifestly prejudiced) positivist sense. Rather, they are historiographical because they contribute to the construction of their own makers’ sense of historical identity. In this respect, such sources enact a past that informs and provides meaning to their authors’ present, often also prefiguring a possible future ((Lifshitz 1994; Turner Camp 2015; Rondolino 2017); on historical narratives and the construction of identity, see also (Cassinari 2011)).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the “Franciscan question”, see, most notably, (Minocchi 1902; Manselli 1974, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Gyatso’s work also raises stimulating questions about the relationship between author and subject when the person who is being narrated as perfected is also the one who is narrating, a dynamic that Claudio Leonardi, reflecting on Augustine’s *Confessions*, aptly categorized “auto hagiography” (Leonardi [2000] 2011). On the relationship between author and subject in the context of religious autobiographical writings, see also (Martinez 2018).

<sup>5</sup> On the academic study of “religions”, particularly as a secular project, see, among others, (McCutcheon 1999; Geertz 2000; McCutcheon 2003, 2014; Ramey 2015). See also the activity of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (<https://naasr.com/>) and its publications: Brill’s *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (<https://brill.com/view/journals/mts/mts-overview.xml>) and Equinox Publishing’s series “Concepts in the Study of Religion” (<https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/concepts-in-the-study-of-religion/>).

<sup>6</sup> Drawing from Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of the historiographical fallacy (Nietzsche 2010, 2014), Ludwig Wittgenstein’s claim that all seeing is always a seeing *as* (Wittgenstein 1977) and Willard Van Orman Quine’s argument that truth is fundamentally relative to theory (van Orman Quine 1969, 1992), I contend that this is what scientific historiography also does and so do we, scholars of religions, when studying and writing about our subjects. If, ultimately, we are bound by our mental formations and categorical lenses for the apprehension of phenomena, then our reflections and writings necessarily communicate more about our historically, culturally, and socially contingent theoretical frameworks (but also, anxieties, aspirations, fears, and hopes), than the objective “truth” of the objects we are studying. In this perspective, I see the social-scientific self-awareness advocated, among others, by Jonathan Z. Smith and Oliver Freiberger (Smith 2000; Freiberger 2019) as a critical method to empower us toward engaging, with increasing sophistication, with the one object of

Thus, hagiographical sources engage with and contribute to the development of their social group's historiographical discourse. Studying their works and activities, therefore, also forces us to reconsider and challenge established scholarly categories, for the enactment of critical taxonomical and theoretical revisions and redefinitions (Keune 2019).<sup>7</sup>

I contend that the notion of *hagiography*, at its core, is a heuristic device that serves a taxonomical function for the following:<sup>8</sup> (1) the identification of a given datum; (2) its classification within a group of similar and already known phenomena; and (3) its study and interpretation in light of the web of relationships and characteristics proper to that group. As noted, the scholarly enterprise is also a discourse, much like the hagiographical cultural contexts it studies. Adopting the category *hagiography*, therefore, should also entail a critical assessment of the rhetorical processes and discourses out of which it grew and within which it was used. Thus, engaging in this kind of assessment would also further our cultivation of a self-reflective, scientific approach to doing religious studies.<sup>9</sup> If *hagiography* is the comparative categorical lens through which we can identify, apprehend, and study phenomena, discourses, and processes on, about, and for the construction and promotion of embodied perfected ideals of *religious* truth, then it also needs to be fluid and revisable. This, as Jon Keune argues, further necessarily requires us to engage with the (re)definition of the category *religion* and its applicability (Keune 2019). In light of these considerations, then, a fourth step needs to be added to the three already outlined above: (4) re-assess and rectify the analytical category in light of the data examined.

Before I suggest my working re-definition of *hagiography*, based on my own experience with the cross-cultural identification, classification, and study of materials on and about *saintly* figures, some further considerations on the category under discussion are warranted. Firstly, in the context of a scholarly social–scientific study of religious phenomena, the term *hagiography* does not refer to any essence or substance possessed by the object studied and arguably shared by all the other objects thus apprehended. In other words, considering the etymology of the term, it does not posit a *hagios*, “holy” or “sacred”, in the sources that we apprehend as *hagiography*. Similarly, *hagiography* does not translate any emic term into our etic scholarly, formal vocabulary. For example, as I show in my work on the narrative traditions about the medieval Christian St. Francis of Assisi and the Tibetan Buddhist yogin Milarepa (c. 1052–1135), we may refer to their respective *vitae* and *legendae*, or *namthar* (Tibetan *rnam thar*) as *hagiography*. Yet, the original classifiers fulfil stylistic and taxonomical functions proper to the cultural world and doctrinal traditions that produced, used, and preserved them. These, in turn, may or may not map completely (if at all) onto our scholarly use of *hagiography*, which is and remains a formal category adopted within a scientific academic discourse.

Incidentally, both *vita* and *namthar* loosely do, as the two terms imply the telling of a life-story framed within the doctrinal confines of a particular soteriology. The Latin *vita*, meaning “life” and employed in the title of writings about St. Francis of Assisi, as in the *Vita Beati Francisci* by Thomas of Celano (1185–1260), explicitly refers to the telling of the life and deeds of the titular person. Notably, in Celano's text, Francis is manifestly identified as perfected by the Latin term *beatus* (literally “blessed”), whose discursive meaning is dependent on a particular theology and a very specific doctrinal reading of its soteriology. Similarly, *namthar* is conventionally used in Tibetan Buddhist titles to identify

---

inquiry over which we ought to have the greatest degree of control: our own, often implicit, formal models and theoretical biases. On this, see also Sara Ritchey's essay in this special issue.

<sup>7</sup> The categorical tension between “history” and “fiction” was famously addressed in (Lifshitz 1994) (see also, more recently, Monge et al. 2016). Recently, as part of a critical analysis of Buddhist literature as philosophy and Buddhist philosophy as literature, led by Rafal Stepień (Stepień 2020), I offer a critical discussion of the cross-cultural validity and applicability of antithetical categorizations, such as “philosophy vs. literature vs. hagiography” (Rondolino 2020). On *hagiography* as a fluid category, see also Todd French's notion of “hagiography's polyphonic structure” (French 2016) and Guy Philippart's discussion of “*historia* vs. *fabula*” and of *hagiography* as “transgenre” (Philippart 2020).

<sup>8</sup> For a broad discussion of *hagiography* in the context of its European Christian development, see (Aigrain 1953; Dubois and Lemaire 1993; Grégoire 1996). For a concise, yet exhaustive, genealogy of the term, see (Philippart 1994). For a further problematization of the term and a proposal for its redefinition, see also (Philippart 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, (Smith 2000; Freiburger 2019).



writings about the life, deeds, and teachings of an enlightened teacher. The term is an abridgement of the expression *nampartharpa* (Tibetan *rnam par thar pa*), which translates the Sanskrit *vimokṣa*, which, in turn, literally refers to the Buddhist complete liberation from the cycle of existence (Sanskrit *saṃsāra*). By extension, then, in the context of its use as a literary title, the Tibetan *namthar* defines “a narrative of the complete liberation of an individual”. As such, much like Thomas of Celano’s work on St. Francis in relation to Christian theological interpretations, Milarepa’s *namthar* is necessarily dependent upon the interpretations of a Buddhist theory of truth and of its practice. Regardless, the eventual taxonomical overlap between the emic *vita* and *namthar* and the scholarly etic *hagiography* remains heuristic and, therefore, it does not reflect an underlying substantive commonality, nor does it betray any essential cross-cultural or inter-religious trait.

Similarly, *hagiography* is not a genre—understood here as a datum defined in terms of its formal qualities. The category does not refer to, nor implies, specific compositional rules, modes of expression, or formats in style. At one level, in as much as hagiographical sources are often apprehended as literary genres, this particular issue would eventually lead us to engage in the critical assessment of another fundamentally European taxonomy, that of *literature*, which is beyond the scope of this reflection.<sup>10</sup> At another level, however, it also forces us to acknowledge the complexities and sophistication of literary contexts beyond modern European cultural and intellectual traditions—something that, notably, can only occur when we contemplate phenomena comparatively, particularly cross-culturally and on a global scale. For example, *vitae* of St. Francis of Assisi were written in prose (for example, Thomas of Celano’s *Memoriale Desiderio Animae de Gestis et Verbis Sanctissimi Patris Nostri Francisci*, c. 1244–1247; or Bonaventure of Bagnoregio’s *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, 1263), in verse (Henry d’Avranches’s *Legenda Sancti Francisci Versificata*, c. 1232–1235), and in music (Thomas of Celano’s *Legenda ad Usam Chori*, 1230; and Julian of Speyer’s *Officium Rhythmicum Sancti Francisci*, c. 1232–1239). Similarly, looking even just at the one example of the best known *namthar* about the Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa, *The Life of Milarepa* (Tibetan *Mi la ras pa’i rnam thar*, 1488) by Tsangnyön Heruka (Tibetan *gTsang smyon Heruka*, 1452–1507, literally “the madman of Tsang”), one will find it to be composed of both prose and poetry. Apprehending any of these works as belonging to a unified notion of “hagiographic genre” would not only result in a cross-cultural fallacy, but also risk mapping etic formal distinctions in genre onto emic ones or, conversely, uncritically accepting emic categorizations into the scholarly discourse—or even exporting differentiations in genre from one given socio-cultural context into another.

Similar considerations necessarily force the scholar-observers to be ever mindful of their own taxonomy and to negotiate persistently the validity, viability, and applicability of the categories adopted. It is in this spirit that post-modern scholars often argue against the cross-cultural study of religious phenomena and cross-cultural taxonomies, and for neologisms in the redefinition of analytical categories—see, for example, the use of *sacred biography* to replace the “loaded” term *hagiography* (Heffernan 1988). Notably, this approach is also frequently in reaction to the cross-cultural projections intrinsic of past phenomenological and essentialist comparative projects, with those by Mircea Eliade now seen as paradigmatic of how *not* to do comparison in religious studies.<sup>11</sup>

I argue, then, that the term *hagiography* always necessarily and exclusively refers to culturally, historically, and ideologically contingent features. These, in turn, are arbitrarily classified by way of the same heuristic device (*hagiography*) as part of a scientific scholarly project. This heuristic taxonomical process eventually provides us, scholars working on hagiographical sources, to apprehend them better in a comparative (possibly cross-cultural) perspective, toward a more nuanced understanding of human behavior and religious phenomena. Indeed, as noted, over the past roughly 150 years,

<sup>10</sup> For a concise, yet historically grounded, theoretical assessment of “literature” as an analytical category, see (Williams 1977). For critical theorizations of the category in global, postcolonial perspectives, see (Bhabha 1994; Gikandi 1996; Damrosch 2003; Spivak 2003).

<sup>11</sup> For a critique of similar comparative projects, see, most famously, (Smith 1982a, 1982b, 1990). See also, more recently, (Hughes 2017).

*hagiography* acquired a rather controversial connotation. The concept was famously first criticized by positivist historians as an example of historical fallacy and as antithetical to *biography*. More recently, post-modern critiques of cultural bias further problematized *hagiography* as fundamentally rooted in a Christian worldview and as a term that reproduces hegemonic Europe-centric biases.<sup>12</sup> I argue, however, that if we are to engage in a comparative, cross-cultural study of religious phenomena<sup>13</sup> and, in this context, study the narratives of individuals deemed “perfected” by those people who created the works and practices we now observe, we should retain the use of *hagiography* as the category for their apprehension. Furthermore, I advocate this not in spite of the category’s loaded history, but exactly because of it. On the one hand, electing to discard or replace the term necessarily obscures, rather than resolves, the complex history of the category and, with it, the possibility of a historical awareness of the field of comparative hagiology. On the other hand, if, as scholars, we are to cultivate and practice self-awareness, then we ought to ceaselessly revise and re-envision our theoretical frameworks and, in so doing, we need to be ever-mindful of their past and present uses and abuses. In my view, in the context of the study of religious phenomena, at large, and of discourses on and about *saints*, in particular, retaining and revising *hagiography* would allow us to do so most effectively.

Thus, drawing from the history of the category, from the emic perspective of our scholarly tradition rooted in modern European and Christian history and the related adoption of the concept by scholars of religions (particularly in the study of Christian traditions), I want to suggest here a new working re-definition of *hagiography*.

*The complex web of behaviors, practices, beliefs, and productions (literary, visual, acoustic, etc.) in and by which a given community constructs the memory of individuals who are recognized as the embodied perfection of the religious ideal promoted by the community’s tradition and socio-cultural context.*

In light of the insights provided by Sofia Boesch Gajano on the construction and promotion of conceptions of sainthood (Boesch Gajano 1999) and by Flavio Cassinari on historical and mythical narratives as means to legitimize a given community’s present (Cassinari 2011), I also want to suggest that such a re-definition of *hagiography* would allow us to apprehend more effectively the dynamics of legitimation of religious communities across cultures. If, across fields of inquiry and disciplines, scholars were to consistently categorize textual, visual, performative, and archeological sources, as well as practices and behaviors, about *saints* as *hagiography*, we may then be able to approach effectively and collectively the study of hagiographical sources as a means to discern the processes adopted by religious communities for the (re)construction of their past and the prefiguration of their future. Thus, because of their central role in their communities’ conscious constructions of historical memory, hagiographical phenomena represent unique forms of historiographical productions, as their narratives also simultaneously contain the worldview, the theory of truth that underscores and informs the historiographical reading of phenomena communicated by the hagiographical production itself.

In my study of the histories of the narrative traditions of St. Francis of Assisi and Milarepa, up to and including their standard versions by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274) and Tsangnyön Heruka, respectively, I show how each author offered a portrayal of the *saintly* figure in light of their personal doctrinal reading of the religious tradition they identified with and whose origins were traced to (or through) the narrated figure (Rondolino 2017). Thus, all life narratives of St. Francis and Milarepa offered a legitimation of the author’s present and his community in light of a reconstruction of their past, while also simultaneously communicating a project for their future development. In this respect, hagiographical sources represent conscious constructions of a historical memory that read the past in light of a given interpretation of the present.

---

<sup>12</sup> On the “use and abuse” of *hagiography*, see (Monge 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Also, I contend that, in our globalized world, ever more gripped by nationalistic polarizing tensions, we ought to.

It is in light of such evidence that I argue for the possibility of identifying in religious phenomena pertaining to distinct cultural contexts a web of analogous identity conferring properties which may ultimately allow us to apprehend the observed data collectively as hagiographical. The use of the adjectival form, over the noun *hagiography*, is intentional—as is the consistent adoption of italics in using the category. Both, in fact, serve the purpose of intuitively highlighting that, as noted above, the category is part of a scholarly taxonomy and, as such, it serves exclusively a heuristic function. Similarly, both also act as reminders that the properties identified as analogous across the phenomena compared (be it two *vitae* on St. Francis by different authors, or one of his *vitae* and a *namthar* on Milarepa) are seen, as such, by a scholarly observer in light of formal scholarly categories and do not reflect any essential, universal trait in the objects thus apprehended.

Identifying phenomena, such as the *vitae* and *legendae* on St. Francis or the *namthar* on Milarepa as hagiographical, then, necessarily brings us to place at the forefront the religious character of any reflection on the evidence. It further forces us to underscore the defining doctrinal (theological) framework that shaped the hagiographers' work—what I elsewhere termed the “hagiographical process” (Rondolino 2017).<sup>14</sup> Doing so eventually also allows us to study any datum so categorized within its constitutive discursive context: (1) the given communal setting in which it was created, (2) for which it was intended, and (3) by which it was circulated and received. As works that aspire to inform and shape individuals' and communities' attitudes (devotional acts, writings, performances, offerings, pilgrimages, etc.) in light of the (re)constructed embodiment of a perfected ideal, hagiographical productions strive to shape the world around their authors, themselves promoters of a given ideal of perfection, which is in turn represented as an embodied formal model by the portrayed *saint*. Comparing hagiographical processes in this manner, whether inter- or cross-culturally, is also effectively an act of “discourse comparison”, the critical comparative method advocated by Oliver Freiberger (Freiberger 2019).

In light of these considerations, as Clifford Geertz aptly noted about *religion* in general, it is possible to see how hagiographical productions offer us a “model of” and a “model for” given realities, as envisaged by their authors (Geertz 1973).<sup>15</sup> Yet, categorizing religious phenomena as hagiographical also necessarily brings us to emphasize their discursive dimension. There can be no *saint*, no being that is understood as embodying perfection, without a community that recognizes them as such, in light of a given interpretation of particular doctrines and theories of truth, which construct and preserve their memory and promote their cult and way of life.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** This essay is a reworking of a paper originally delivered at the 2017 conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Boston MA, as part of the panel “Recentering Sacred Biography: Hagiography as a Category of Analysis for Comparative Sanctities” organized by Sara Ritchey. A first revised version was then pre-circulated for, and discussed at, the pre-conference workshop “Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method” at the 2018 AAR conference, in Denver CO. Its present form is much the fruit of my own work as of the invaluable conversations and discussions that took place at those venues and of the critical feedback some of the attendees kindly shared with me. In particular, I would like here to thank explicitly Gloria I-Ling Chien, David DiValerio, Pascale Engelmajer, Oliver Freiberger, Todd French, Scott Harrower, Nikolas Hoel, Aaron Hollander, Jon Keune, David Mozina, Sara Richey, and Brian Siebeking.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

Aigrain, René. 1953. *L'Hagiographie: Ses Sources, ses Méthodes, son Histoire*. Paris: Bloud & Gay.

---

<sup>14</sup> See also the alternative, commensurable approach advocated by Aaron Hollander and his theorization of *hagiography* as “multi-mediation of holiness” (Hollander 2018, particularly pp. 24–26 and pp. 31–38).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of criticisms of Geertz's definition of *religions* in terms of both a “model for” and “model of” reality, see (Schilbrack 2005).

- Bhabha, Homi Jehangir. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Boesch Gajano, Sofia. 1999. *La Santità*. Bari: Laterza.
- Brown, Peter. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bynum, Caroline. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cassinari, Flavio. 2011. *Dynamics of Legitimation: History, Myth and the Construction of Identity*. English translated by Giacomo Donis and Anna Morselli. Aurora: The Davies Group.
- Dalarun, Jacques. 1996. *La Malavventura di Francesco d'Assisi*. Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana.
- Damrosch, David. 2003. *What is the World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Delooz, Pierre. 1962. Pour une Étude Sociologique de la Sainteté Canonisée dans l'Eglise Catholique. *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 13: 17–43. [CrossRef]
- Delooze, Pierre. 1969. *Sociologie et Canonisations*. Liège: Faculté de Droit de l'Université de Liège.
- Dubois, Jacques, and Jean-Loup Lemaître. 1993. *Sources et Méthodes de l'Hagiographie Médiévale*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2019. *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Freidenreich, David M. 2004. Comparison in the History of Religions: Reflections and Critiques. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16: 80–101.
- French, Todd E. 2016. Many Truths, One Story: John of Ephesus's "Lives of the Eastern Saints". In *Hagiography and Religious Studies: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. Edited by Rico Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 151–67.
- Frugoni, Chiara. 1993. *Francesco e l'Invenzione delle Stigmate: Una Storia per Parole e Immagini fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, Armin, ed. 2000. *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gikandi, Simon. 1996. *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Graus, Frantisek. 1965. *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studeien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit*. Prague: Nakladatelství Československé Akademie Věd.
- Grégoire, Réginald. 1996. *Manuale di Agiologia: Introduzione alla Letteratura Agiografica. Seconda Edizione*. Fabriano: Monastero San Silvestro Abate.
- Gyatso, Janet. 1998. *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hawley, John Stratton, ed. 1987. *Saints and Virtues*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Head, Thomas. 1990. *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints. The Diocese of Orléans, 800–1200*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heffernan, Thomas. 1988. *Sacred Biography. Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hollander, Aaron Thomas. 2018. The Multimediation of Holiness: Hagiography as Resistance in Greek Orthodox Theological Culture. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago, Divinity School, Chicago, IL, USA.
- Hughes, Aaron. 2017. *Comparison: A Critical Primer*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing.
- Jorgensen, John. 2005. *Inventing Hui-Neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch'an*. Leiden: Brill.
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. Submitted to *Religions*.
- Kieckhefer, Richard, and George Bond, eds. 1988. *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leonardi, Claudio. 2011. Agiografia e Autoagiografia di Agostino. In *Agiografie Medievali*. Edited by Antonella Degl'Innocenti and Francesco Santi. Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, pp. 265–72. First published 2000.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 1994. Beyond Positivism and Genre: "Hagiographical" Texts as Historical Narrative. *Viator* 25: 95–114. [CrossRef]
- Manselli, Raul. 1974. Paul Sabatier e la "Questione Francescana". La "Questione francescana" dal Sabatier ad Oggi, *Atti del I Convegno Internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani* 18: 271–336.
- Manselli, Raul. 1980. *Nos qui cum eo fuimus: Contributo alla Questione Francescana*. Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini.

- Manselli, Raul. 2002. *San Francesco d'Assisi, Editio Maior*. Milan: San Paolo.
- Martinez, Chloe. 2018. The Autobiographical Pose: Life Narrative and Religious Transformation in the Mirabai Tradition. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41: 418–34. [CrossRef]
- McCutcheon, Russell, ed. 1999. *Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: Controversies in the Study of Religion*. New York: Cassell.
- McCutcheon, Russell. 2003. *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*. New York: Routledge.
- McCutcheon, Russell. 2014. *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion*. Bristol: Equinox.
- Minocchi, Salvatore. 1902. La Questione Francescana. *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 39: 293–326.
- Monge, Rico G. 2016. Saints, Truth and the "Use and Abuse" of Hagiography. In *Hagiography and Religious Studies: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. Edited by Rico Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Monge, Rico, Kerry P. C. San Chirico, and Rachel J. Smith, eds. 2016. *Hagiography and Religious Studies: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 7–22.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2010. The Anti-Christ. In *The Anti-Christ; Ecce Homo; Twilight of the Idols; and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley. English translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2014. *Untimely Meditations*. Edited by Daniel Breazeale. English translated by Reginald Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pellegrini, Luigi. 2004. *Frate Francesco e i suoi Agiografi*. Assisi: Porziuncola.
- Philippart, Guy. 1994. Hagiographes et Hagiographie, Hagiologes et Hagiologie: Des Mots et des Concepts. *Hagiographica* 1: 1–16.
- Philippart, Guy. 2006. L'Hagiographie, Histoire Sainte des "Amis de Dieu". In *Hagiographies: Histoire Internationale de la Littérature Hagiographique Latine et Vernaculaire en Occident des Origines à 1550*. Edited by Guy Philippart. Turnhout: Editions Brepols, vol. 4, pp. 13–40.
- Philippart, Guy. 2020. L'Hagiographie entre Croyance et Dérision. In *Understanding Hagiography and its Textual Tradition. The Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period (6th–11th Century)*. Edited by Paolo Chiesa, Monique Goulet and Paulo Farmhouse Alberto. Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, forthcoming.
- Quintman, Andrew. 2014. *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ramey, Steven W., ed. 2015. *Writing Religion: The Case for the Critical Study of Religion*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Ray, Reginald. 1993. *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2020. The Repa and the Chan Devotee: Hagiography, Polemic and the Taxonomies of Philosophical Literature. In *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*. Edited by Rafal Stepień. Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming.
- Sabatier, Paul. 1894. *Vie de S. François d'Assise*. Paris: Fischbacher.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2005. Religion, Models of and Reality: Are We Through with Geertz? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73: 429–52. [CrossRef]
- Schober, Juliana, ed. 1997. *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions in South and Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982a. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982b. *Map Is Not Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1990. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2000. The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberly C. Patton. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 237–41.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2003. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stepień, Rafal, ed. 2020. *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*. Albany: SUNY, forthcoming.
- Turner Camp, Cynthia. 2015. *Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives as History Writing in Late Medieval England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

- van Orman Quine, Willard. 1969. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- van Orman Quine, Willard. 1992. *Pursuit of Truth*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vauchez, André. 1981. *La Sainteté en Occident aux Derniers Siècles du Moyen Âge d'après les Procès de Canonisation et les Documents Hagiographiques*. Rome: École française de Rome.
- Vauchez, André. 2009. *François d'Assise*. Paris: Fayard.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1977. *Philosophical Investigations*, 5th ed. Oxford: Phaidon.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Article

# A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts

David M. DiValerio

Department of History, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA; divaleri@uwm.edu

Received: 16 September 2019; Accepted: 6 October 2019; Published: 18 October 2019

**Abstract:** As a genre defined by its content rather than by its form, the extreme diversity of the kinds of texts that can be considered “hagiographic” often proves an impediment to the progress of comparative hagiology. This essay offers some suggestions for the creation of a controlled vocabulary for the formal description of hagiographic texts, demonstrating how having a more highly developed shared language at our disposal will facilitate both the systematic analysis and the comparative discussion of hagiography.

**Keywords:** comparative religions; controlled vocabulary; disciplinary innovation; hagiography; hagiology; sacred biography; sainthood; religious studies

---

The other core essays in this volume are dedicated to such important concerns as helping us to arrive at a more precise definition of hagiography; to be more reflective concerning the nature and the ethics of comparison; to re-center our understanding of the exemplary figure of the hagiographical representation; and to think about authorship and reception. The goal of this essay is to offer something more foundational and basic: to initiate a process of developing a controlled vocabulary that will foster the systematic description, analysis, and comparative academic discussion of hagiographic texts.

The working definition of hagiography that has been arrived at by this ongoing collaborative workshop—a text about the life of a figure regarded as holy by some subset of a population—while reasonable and seemingly innocuously-specific enough, in actuality designates a remarkably wide range of types of texts. As a genre defined by its content rather than by its form, there are no limits to what a hagiographic text may look like. (As has been noted elsewhere in this volume, the hagiographic text need not even be a literary text: Our working definition of hagiography by no means precludes oral text such as a song or an epic, a dramatic performance, or a non-textual work of art, such as a painting, statue, or a representation of some other sort entirely. For the purposes of this essay, I shall be referring specifically to literary texts, although what I herein propose could certainly be adapted to advance discussions of these other kinds of representations as well.) In the current state of the fields of Religious Studies, History, Medieval Studies, or what have you, when a scholar refers to the *Life* of an individual, his audience has no way of knowing, for example, whether this is a partially autobiographical text or something composed entirely by someone who lived centuries after the saintly figure in question; whether the text depicts only the saintly figure’s moment of ascension, or the entire arc of her life; whether it is an emotive five-page sketch, or a three hundred page chronicle. These are distinctions that I believe impinge, at times quite profoundly, upon the kinds of issues raised in the other articles included in this volume.

Presently, the lack of a shared vocabulary for how to describe the formal features of hagiographic texts hinders us in our ability to study and make scholarly use of those texts: Scholars who are new to working with hagiography are often uncertain about how a particular text may fit into the broader landscape of hagiography; for those better-versed in the genre, we lack an efficient way to describe a particular text to one another, which impedes cross-tradition and comparative-minded conversation. To further our collaborative project, a practical taxonomy of hagiographic texts, with a well-developed



vocabulary for describing it, should be developed. Employing such a controlled vocabulary would allow us to more efficiently specify what kind of thing we are in fact referring to when we mention a *vita*, a *namtar* (Tibetan: *rnam thar*), a *vimokṣa*, a Passion, a *Life*.

The following might serve as the germ for such an endeavor, based on my experience of reading, translating, researching with, and writing and teaching about hagiographic texts, deriving from a wide range of historical periods and religious traditions. This quasi-taxonomical controlled vocabulary has been developed in part through conversations that have taken place during the workshop “Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method,” which met during the 2018 and 2019 meetings of the AAR. My goal here is to demonstrate the utility of a clear and durable taxonomic vocabulary for describing the formal features of hagiographic texts, the collaborative development of which—drawing on the expertise of scholars working on the full gamut of hagiographic texts—may be a possible future direction for this project.

Sara Ritchey’s piece in this same volume displays an intent comparable to my own (Ritchey 2019). While I am here limiting myself to addressing formal aspects of hagiographic texts (I make a motion towards addressing the perhaps more fraught question of the *content* of these texts toward the end of this essay), the terms of Sara’s index direct our attention to a series of important themes that cut across all the different layers in which all hagiographic production is embedded—touching upon formal qualities of a hagiographic text, but also its contents, its reception, its importance religiously, socially, and historically.

Part of the inspiration for developing this controlled vocabulary comes from Aviad Kleinberg’s *Prophets in their Own Country* (1992). In that book, Kleinberg (1992) develops some very useful labels for referring to the different kinds of saintliness that have been exemplified by saintly figures over time, specifically concerning the different patterns of community interaction that historically figured into an individual’s transformation from mundane being into a Christian saint: “the detached type,” “the cooperative type,” and so forth. I have found Kleinberg’s taxonomy extremely useful in helping to progress my own thinking, writing, and teaching about sainthood, and believe that the study of hagiography (whether comparative or otherwise) could similarly benefit from having a basic vocabulary and taxonomy for describing and referring to these texts.

After the presentation of this partial and tentative controlled vocabulary—the elements of which are given in **bold**—I show some examples of how texts may be described using this vocabulary, then discuss possible further avenues for this project to explore.

It is crucial to note that many hagiographic texts will be found to not fit neatly into these categorizations, or to fall into different opposing categorizations simultaneously. Such is the nature of hagiography, a genre that veers naturally toward palimpsestic productions. Although upon close examination, texts will often be found not to conform to these categories, the controlled vocabulary may still provide a useful heuristic. As will be seen, the discussion of how a text does not fit into one of these categories may be just as illuminating as a discussion of how one does.

A reader may harbor the expectation that a hagiographic text should, with whatever degree of specificity, tell the story of its subject’s entire life—from birth to rise to holiness to death. But by no means do all or even most hagiographic texts conform to this, as they in some cases pick up in, say, early adulthood (as in Leontius’s *Life of Symeon the Fool*); or address only select moments of the subject’s life, or even only a key turning point that then stands in for the whole life (as in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*) (Tilley 2000). Thus a particular hagiographic narrative might be described as **birth-to-death**, **episodic**, or **partial**. Buddhism provides us with examples of hagiographies that in fact span **multiple lifetimes**.

A foremost consideration for beginning to make sense of or describe a hagiographic text is who wrote it, and on what authority. On these questions, we see a remarkably wide range of possibilities. Hagiographies have commonly been written shortly after the lifetime of the saint; sometimes long after the lifetime of the saint; and only rarely during the life of the saint. Primary authorship can be by the hand of someone who never knew or encountered the saint, or by an associate of the

saint, often a devotee or a disciple. In some cases, the saintly figure has been directly involved in some aspect of the creation of the text, perhaps giving a retelling of her life to a particular witness, which then provides some of the material for the hagiographic text. Many hagiographic texts will be found to be partially **auto-hagiographical** (or **pseudo-auto-hagiographical**, as the case may be). Completely auto-hagiographical accounts include Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda 1998), and the *Life* of the Tibetan yogin, Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) (Ricard 2001). In the majority of cases, the text in question is determined to display a combination of these possibilities: The text perhaps contains quotations or narrative elements related by the saintly subject; descriptions or mentions of things observed and/or heard by individuals close to the saint, or members of her broader contemporary public. These fragments will be woven together by an author who comes later (or much later). Thus, hagiographic texts are almost always polyvocalic. To describe the composition of a hagiographic text, we might make use of such terms as: **antemortem**, **posthumous**, or **belated**; **witness-derived**, **witness-absent**; **disciple-derived**; **saintly subject-derived**, **subject-absent**. We might add a further sub-designation for saintly subject-derived hagiographies: those in which the saint is quoted (**subject-quoted**). The French *Life* of the Iroquois Jesuit saint Catherine Tekakwitha was written in 1717 by Pierre Cholenec, who had been her confessor, making him a particularly intimate witness to her story. The text would be witness-derived, but as Cholenec knew of Catherine's life based in large part on what she herself told him, the *Life* may also be considered saintly subject-derived (Greer 2003). This raises the question, suitable for further study and reflection, of what particular issues may be raised when a hagiography is written by its subject's confessor.

Closely related to the above, while in some instances it may be that a hagiographic text can be determined to have been an entirely original composition, it will much more commonly be found to be a reworking of earlier materials—whether from narrative fragments or from a complete text, or multiple complete texts (or a complete text, plus other source material; or multiple complete texts, plus other source material; and on and on). In some cases it is clearly apparent which prior sources provided which content in the later hagiography, while in others that material may be reworked quite drastically, rendering the influence of that earlier source material invisible to anyone who has not closely researched the materials in question. In some cases it may prove impossible to make a determination, with the seams between the different potential source materials rendered invisible to us. It can be observed that in recent decades, much of the scholarship about hagiography has been focused specifically on what can be made of those seams when they do become visible. All of these considerations become vastly more complicated when the source material in question is not written text but oral (or of any non-written medium). To describe the basic substance of a hagiographic text in relation to prior texts, we might refer to it as an **original composition**, derived from **reworked** material, or **drastically reworked**. It may be worth adding another designation for when a hagiographic text draws directly from pre-existing hagiographical sources, but those that are about a different saint entirely. Here we can cite the example of how, in writing his (first) *Life* of Francis of Assisi, Thomas of Celano (c. 1185–c. 1265) characterized Francis in ways that drew directly and quite obviously from Sulpicius Severus's (c. 363–c. 420) *Life* of Martin of Tours (Regis et al. 2004; Hoare 1995). In this way, any hagiographic text existing within a tradition may influence, directly or indirectly, those that follow. When this phenomenon is clearly on display, we might refer to a given text as **hagiographic canon-derived**. (A complication to this is the fact that hagiographies of Buddhist and Christian saintly figures almost always bear distinctive markings of the lives—and *Lives*—of the respective founders of those traditions. The degree to which they do so, however, varies widely, a consideration that those widely read within these respective traditions will likely develop a keen sense for.)

A hagiographic text might be composed with the expectation that it will circulate on its own, independently, as a stand-alone text. Alternatively, a hagiographic text may be composed for and then circulated as part of a compendium (such as the compendia of Chinese and Korean Buddhist biographies often referred to as *The Lives of Eminent Monks*, or the Taoist collections *Traditions of Exemplary Transcendents*). In these cases, it may be found that non-negligible elements of the text's

meaning are derived from either its mere placement within such a collection, or from the actual specific contents of the texts amongst which it is placed. Many hagiographic texts that once circulated independently are at a later point in time placed within a compendium. The repackaging of a once-independent text can be a significant moment in the making of meaning. The original text may thus be described as **stand-alone**, or **compendium-dependent**. As a variation on this, the earliest, fragmentary *Lives* of the Tibetan saint Milarepa (1028/40/52–1111/23) were written to accompany a body of advanced and highly secret tantric teachings, such that the biographical text circulated as attached to another body of literature (Quintman 2014). We might describe such a hagiographical text as having been written and/or circulating in an **appendixial** manner.

We might also include the simplistic but significant designations of *Lives* in **prose**, **verse**, or **prosimetrum** (alternating prose and verse)—a style encountered in hagiographic texts with a surprising frequency, across languages and religious traditions. Within the latter category, we may encounter texts that are essentially in verse, with sections of prose, or, more often, texts that are essentially prose, with sections of verse (most often at the beginnings and/or ends of chapters, or the beginning and/or end of the text itself). These and other basic formal features (like whether or not the work has sections or chapters) are worth taking note of in describing a hagiographic text.

As an example of this controlled vocabulary's being put to use, if I were to give a conference presentation that focused on the *Life* of the Tibetan yogin Kunga Zangpo, better known as the Madman of Ü (1458–1532), I might describe it as a **birth-to-death** chronicle, with chapters, in a **prosimetrum** form (DiValerio 2016). From the time of its first printing, it traditionally circulated as a **stand-alone** text (despite having been republished as part of a collection of religious biographies in 1972). The *Life* is partially **antemortem** (the longer Part I of the text having been written and block-printed when its subject was only thirty-six) and partially **posthumous** (the shorter Part II having been written five years after its subject's death). It is **witness-derived**, **disciple-derived**, and **saintly subject-derived**, and indeed **subject-quoted**. It is best thought of as an **original composition** but may also to a limited extent be understood as a **reworked** text, as it draws in parts from an earlier account, in the form of notes taken by the saintly subject's nephew.

We can compare this text with the account of another “mad” saint: the *Life of Symeon the Fool* by Leontius. Written around the middle of the seventh century, between fifty and a hundred years after its subject's death, this is a **posthumous**, **partial** account, written as a **stand-alone** text (Krueger 1996). A consideration of how best to categorize the text in terms of the source material used by Leontius brings to light some important issues for the genesis of this text: Although portions of the text are presented as having been related by Symeon, Leontius does not claim to have himself witnessed Symeon but to have written the *Life* based on someone else's written eyewitness account (a claim that scholars broadly accept as a falsehood, most likely reflecting authorial conventions of Leontius' day). More likely is that the brief tales of Symeon's exploits that make up the second part of the text are gathered from oral traditions (which may make the text in part **witness-derived**), while the first half of the text seems to be an **original composition** by Leontius, while parts are (simultaneously) ostensibly **saintly subject-derived** (including many direct quotations). Regardless of whether or not we ultimately accept this material as having originated from the saint, for comparative purposes, the fact that the text *claims* to relate what the saint himself said is significant.

The brief biography of the Taoist “transcendent” (*xian*) Xiang Mandu, related within a polemical essay by Ge Hong (283–343 CE) (contained within the collection *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: Inner Chapters; Baopuzi neipian*), is an **partial** hagiography, telling only of its subject's miraculous journey through the heavens, having flown there on a dragon from his mountain retreat (Campany 2009, pp. 136–137, 251–252). The story having been in circulation for hundreds of years before Ge Hong's time, this particular version of the story was written **belatedly**, derived from **reworked material**. The text may be best considered **compendium-dependent** (having been transmitted in various different compendia before Ge Hong's). The majority of the text is presented as Xiang Mandu's own first-hand account of his experience, making it (ostensibly) **saintly subject-derived**,

**subject-quoted**, and ostensibly **autohagiographical**. The fact that this account is provided amidst Ge Hong's making an argument about Xiang Mandu's being a charlatan further complicates the matter.

The account of the saintly Caḍayya provided in Harihara's thirteenth-century Kannada-language *Śivaśaraṇara Raḡaleḡaḡu* ("Poems in the *Raḡale* Meter for Śiva's Saints") is an **episodic** hagiography, telling only a small part of the story of his life: a handful of specific tales of his enacting an extreme devotion to Śiva, and Śiva's eventually welcoming him into his divine abode of Kailāsa. The text is an **original composition** and is **compendium-dependent**. We do not know when Caḍayya may have lived, or what relationship Harihara may have had with him—or indeed, whether or not he existed at all—leaving considerations of the relationship between the author and its subject indeterminate (Ben-Herut 2018, pp. 79–81).

As becomes clear from these four examples, hagiographic texts very frequently do not fit easily into the categories offered by this controlled vocabulary or will be indeterminate. But to discuss how a text may not fit into a particular category, or why that may be indeterminate, can be highly edifying about the text, and about the hagiographic process generally.

From the mere fact of writing this piece and thinking about this controlled vocabulary, a number of questions for future consideration have arisen. What can be made of the notable tendency toward prosimetrum in hagiographic compositions, across religious traditions and cultural and linguistic contexts? Does Buddhism strongly favor birth-to-death narratives over partial or episodic ones, while for other religions, different predilections can be observed? What are the contexts in which compendium-dependent hagiographical productions seem to be preferred? How might our understanding of a text like the *Legends of the Eighty-Four Mahāsiddhas* of tantric Buddhism change in consideration of the fact of there being such a strong tradition of hagiographical compendia produced by the Hindu *bhakti* tradition? As mentioned above: What particular issues may be raised when the author of a hagiography has served as confessor to its subject? And the thorny and perpetual issue: How to deal with the multilayered, polyvocalic nature of hagiographic texts that so often represent many distinct moments of accreted material?

This essay has begun the task of developing a controlled vocabulary for referring to the formal features of a hagiographic text (pending a broader concerted collaborative effort). We may in the future expand this project by taking up the task of developing a controlled vocabulary for describing features pertaining more to the intent and the reception of a hagiographic text, addressing more of the text's contents. For example, we may consider what vocabulary may be used to address to what extent the saintly subject emerges as a **distinct individual** or adheres to a **pre-existing model of saintliness**. Is the subject presented as a **perfected being**, or as **possessing human faults** and failings? To what extent does the text rely on accounts of the **miraculous**? Is the saintly subject portrayed in a way that **encourages imitation**, and/or **devotion**, or not? Is the text intended for a **broad public readership** or a **delimited** one? Does the text assume a particular **prior knowledge** among its hearers or readers? Does it appeal to a **specific elite**? Does the author signal an intention of creating a **definitive historical record** of the saint's life, or to appeal to the reader on a more emotional level? Having a controlled vocabulary would foster a systematic consideration of any of these questions.

Hagiographic texts tend strongly toward being complicated, difficult to describe. This is because of the elasticity of the genre as currently defined, but also because of these texts' typically polyvocalic and palimpsestic nature. Having a shared vocabulary will allow us to better locate individual texts within this diversity, and to more efficiently articulate questions and findings that arise from both inter- and intra-traditional comparison.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Ben-Herut, Gil. 2018. *Śiva's Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada According to Harihara's Ragaḷeḡaḷu*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Company, Robert Ford. 2009. *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- DiValerio, David. 2016. *The Life of the Madman of Ü*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greer, Allan. 2003. Iroquois Virgin: The Story of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France and New Spain. In *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500–1800*. Edited by Allan Greer and Jodi Blinkoff. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 235–50.
- Hoare, F. R. 1995. The Life of Saint Martin of Tours. In *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Edited by Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 1–29.
- Kleinberg, Aviad. 1992. *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Krueger, Derek. 1996. *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Quintman, Andrew. 2014. *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Regis, J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds. 2004. The Life of Saint Francis (1228–1229). In *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano*. New York: New City Press, pp. 11–137.
- Ricard, Matthieu. 2001. *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Tilley, Maureen A. 2000. The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity. In *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*. Edited by Richard Valantasis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 387–97.
- Yogananda, Paramahansa. 1998. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship. First published 1946.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity

Sara Ritchey

Department of History, University of Tennessee, 6th Floor, Dunford Hall, 915 Volunteer Blvd., Knoxville, TN 37996, USA; sritchey@utk.edu

Received: 16 September 2019; Accepted: 5 October 2019; Published: 12 October 2019

**Abstract:** This reflection derives from a discussion that took place at the 2018 “Comparative Hagiology” pre-conference workshop of the American Academy of Religion. The goal during that meeting was to articulate points of dialogue for the comparison of exemplary figures in various historic, geographic, and faith traditions. Here, I offer an open-ended descriptive index as a heuristic device for beginning a comparative study, whether collaborative or single-authored. After positioning my inquiry from within my own field of study, medieval European Christianity, I offer a brief “test case” for the portability of the index by using its terms to think through a text that is widely-regarded within my subfield as deeply complicated and difficult to interpret, the *Life of Christina Mirabilis*. I conclude by re-describing some of the terms of the index and by inviting further re-description.

**Keywords:** comparative religions; disciplinary innovation hagiography; hagiology; medieval Christianity; religious studies; theory and method in religious studies

---

## 1. Introduction

“Comparative hagiology” offers a method of productively destabilizing the assumptions and expectations that we, scholars working within specific intellectual, geographic, or confessional traditions, bring to our sources.<sup>1</sup> This destabilization has the potential to make meaning across differences, and in the process, to generate new insights and understandings in our own areas of specialization. Undertaken with a genuine sense of humility and a will to listen and revise, the comparative approach to hagiography as we have outlined it in this collaborative undertaking is an ethical endeavor at heart. It insists on conversation, learning, and entering into relationships with other scholars, other faith traditions, and other ways of being in the world. Comparison can enable scholars to develop and encourage methods that help to take us out of cultural isolation and self-containment; at the same time, comparison can enhance intra-cultural perspectives, deepening our understanding of authorship and hagiographical function through recognitions of difference.

As many scholars have noted (Freiberger 2018; Rondolino 2017), the presumption to compare continues to smack of its colonizing origins, displayed most prominently among the grand comparative enterprises of mid twentieth-century phenomenologists of religion (Eliade 1958; Heiler 1961). The comparative approach in Religious Studies (in addition to the disciplinary genesis itself) is rooted in the efforts of the Euro–American academy to clarify distinctions, and to bring into being discrete “world” religions as objects of study (Asad 1993; McClymond 2018). Even after J.Z. Smith’s

---

<sup>1</sup> As I explain below in greater detail, I use the term ‘hagiography’ in this essay in a rather expansive manner to include products other than written texts. I appreciate the term ‘hagiology’ because it shifts attention from writing about sanctity to its logos. I chose to use the term “hagiography” in this essay, however, because my focus remains fairly fixed on methods of analyzing culturally-embedded artifacts, as opposed to concerns in the philosophy of religion. While these two endeavors are by no means exclusive, and both are absolutely necessary for the comparative project, the former term offers greater precision for the issues I address in this essay.

1982 “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” and its remarkable quarter-century reassessment in Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray’s *A Magic Still Dwells* (2000), those who might engage in comparison still feel the need to offer *apologias* such as this one.<sup>2</sup> Defenses of the comparative enterprise are still necessary to acknowledge the continuing distortions wrought by colonizing taxonomies and the violence born of their implicit hierarchies (Mahmood 2016). This distortion bears a legacy that reverberates in broad cultural perceptions of religious difference. Recent efforts at comparison bear this legacy in mind, while seeking to negotiate basic terms and methods for comparison (Van de Veer 2016; Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring 2016).

Hagiography is one of those terms. As I use it, hagiography is an expansive heuristic designation under which many additional related phenomena fall: relics, images, miracles, sacred biographies or *Lives*, pilgrimages, shrines, prayers, liturgies, commemorations, feasts, and more. Unlike scriptural analysis, which demands a complicated hermeneutic for handling the simultaneity of human writing and divine revelation, in hagiography even the textual referent itself is indeterminate. Guy Philippart has noted with respect to writing about saints that the term “hagiographia” (literally ‘the holy scriptures’) was originally defined in fifth-century Greek Christianity as the final portion of the Hebrew scriptures (writings such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Lamentations) (Philippart 1994). The term remained yoked to that connotation until the late nineteenth century when, as Felice Lifshitz has shown, it began to refer instead to writing about saints as a means of distinguishing historical texts as “true” and verifiable (Lifshitz 1994). Even if postmodern critique has enabled us to regard all writing as mediated, there remains an ambiguity in how we use the term “hagiography.” We can analyze texts, objects, performances, rituals, and bodies as part of a “hagiographical process,” that is, as vestiges of remembrance of certain holy or otherwise venerable figures, sometimes known as “saints.”<sup>3</sup> The hagiographical process refers to “the creation and circulation of saintly narratives as they can be historically and philologically discerned in distinct religious, cultural, geographical, and historical contexts.”<sup>4</sup> The hagiographical process has enveloped virtuous humans, but also animals, objects, and individuals that were decidedly unvirtuous, posing further inquiries into what even is a “saint,” “holy figure,” “eminent one,” or “sage.”<sup>5</sup> Are “saint” and “jinn,” for example, interchangeable terms? Certainly not. So the fundamental first step in comparison is an appreciation of context, of how these terms signify and function in their native traditions. In other words, there is openness and uncertainty about the referent of “hagio” in the term “hagiography” (Keune 2019). That the subjects of the hagiographic process defy neat categorization or identification means that we have more opportunity to compare and refine our meanings, searching for common patterns.

In an effort to broaden possibilities for the subjects included within the hagiographic process, in this reflection I will eschew the term “saint” or “holy figure” for *exemplar* (Brown 1983; Hawley 1987).<sup>6</sup> I use this term with the intention of clearing analytical space for multiple participants, so that further terminological refinements and subjective inclusions can evolve through the comparative process. For the purposes of the following reflection, “hagiography” refers to texts about exemplars, when texts include objects, non-verbal images, and ritual actions (procession, votive offering, pilgrimage).

<sup>2</sup> (Smith 1982; Patton and Ray 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The word “saint” has no meaning in many global faith traditions, so presents some tensions in an effort to establish a comparative process; however, as the other contributors to this volume note, and as many other scholars have suggested, it is vital to adopt some comparative terminology. Like “hagiography”, the word “saint” is a heuristic device (albeit one informed historically and theologically by Christian tradition) that acknowledges a process of perfection within a faith tradition. See (Rondolino 2019; Hawley 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Rondolino 2017, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> The choice of “hagiographical” as opposed to “hagiographic” when modifying “process” stems from a consideration of the construction and social negotiation of the process itself. Stylistically speaking, “hagiographic” strikes me as more fixed. I lean toward “hagiographical” in an effort to grasp at the fluidity of the many agents involved in producing an exemplary figure.

<sup>6</sup> As I discuss later in this essay, ‘exemplar’ is also imperfect since many figures who undergo the hagiographical process were not regarded as models for imitation. On the phenomenon of urging admiration rather than imitation in late medieval sanctity, see (Cazelles 1982).

Hagiographic texts commemorate a member of a community in a way that affirms a set of shared values (Rondolino 2017). Stories of individual exemplarity suggest various ways in which communities throughout time have perceived virtue working in their world, how they constructed models of human behavior deemed particularly virtuous, and how they sought to access holiness in the world. The hagiographical process elevates the exemplar above the rest of the community, or at least consolidates their elevation. One node in the hagiographical process that is especially malleable depending on tradition (as Jon Keune’s article points out with reference to figures like Confucius, Karl Marx, Shivaji Bhosale, and Mao Zedong—a list that calls into question both the role of the state and of gender in the hagiographical process) is the role of “religion” itself, or more particularly of the relationship of the exemplar to notions of divinity. Must the exemplar who undergoes the hagiographic process be qualitatively different from a hero, idol, founder, or celebrity? In the Latin Christian tradition, exemplars are distinguished from more quotidian heroes by their proximity to divinity. Indeed, in that tradition, it is the hagiographical process itself that renders the exemplar into an intermediary or quasi-transcendent figure, a channel or vessel that comforts or signifies beyond the ordinary or this-worldly. In this case, exemplars signify the presence of an “other than” in the world. The *graphia* or text-production of the hagiographical process concentrates the *hagio* of the exemplary figure, making their capacity for grace or holiness or wisdom essential and supra normal. The hagiographical process, then, transforms exemplary figures into vectors; they are points of contact that bring individuals into relation with one another, with the ultimate other, and with themselves.

Comparison involves conversation or “dialogue as method” (Eck 2000). Dialogue as method strives to articulate the other’s context and practice and thereby to come to a mutuality of understanding and shared imaginative tools. As Jon Keune discusses in this issue, comparison as method enables self-awareness and new depths of innovation in our scholarship (Keune 2019). By entering into dialogue, we acknowledge that each interlocutor represents only partial knowledge of the subject at hand; a piece or an angle on the phenomenon under investigation. As a supplemental pathway for supporting forms of scholarly dialogue in comparative hagiology, I offer an exercise in selecting imaginative tools for the comparative methods outlined by Jonathan Z. Smith: description, comparison, re-description, and rectification.<sup>7</sup> Such an exercise might best be undertaken in the collaborative workshop setting for which I first proposed this descriptive index, at the 2018 American Academy of Religion Comparative Hagiologies Workshop in Denver, Colorado. During that conversation, students and scholars of the Abrahamic religions as well as Tibetan Buddhism, the Confucian tradition, and South Asian bhakti traditions came together with a common commitment to negotiate terminology that would enable us to share our work, to learn from one another, and to compare. The terms of the index I offer are informed by that conversation. I pose these terms as part of a fluid toolbox. They are not intended to be fixed, but rather to initiate their own reformulation and revision in the process of conversation. As I show at the end of this brief essay, they are subject to re-description even when employed in a single historic faith tradition; in my case, late medieval European Christianity and its production of living saints.

## 2. A Descriptive Index

The index I elaborate here aims to establish a repertoire or lexicon for comparative hagiology. It serves as a vehicle for comparative reflection. One might use this analytical index in concert with David DiValerio’s proposed vocabulary for comparing formal aspects of hagiographic texts (DiValerio 2019). The goal here is to begin a comparative conversation with local, portable components of the hagiographical process. Each aspect or node in the index offers a frame for describing and measuring the presence and “work” performed by the hagiographical process. Such an index aims to provide a common vocabulary for imagining varied worlds inhabited by exemplary figures,

---

<sup>7</sup> (Smith 2004); for an updated version of this five-part process, see Freiburger 2018.



for articulating the meaning of their presence in the varied traditions. This proposed index is by no means exhaustive, only indicative. It offers a set of questions as a means *into* comparison. It is a heuristic, a method for thinking and imaging comparisons in the hagiographical process. The questions are the beginning of a conversation, not its conclusion. Their meanings should be in flux, available to renegotiation and refinement in particular contexts. Not only are the following terms provisional but, as I show in the final section of this essay, they invite re-description even for a sample hagiographical text in my own field. That is to say: they cannot possibly exhaust the hagiographical process, but only suggest inclusive points of dialogue as method.

Are there clear generic distinctions among the array of texts that celebrate the exemplary figure? Do these modes of representation affirm or undercut one another in any way? Do they reference one another, offer corrections or purport more complete or accurate versions? How can we consider these texts as both authorial productions and representations of historical figures and events?

### 2.1. *The Extra-Ordinary*

To what degree is the extra-ordinary involved in the hagiographic process of the exemplary figure? The terrain of the extra-ordinary encompasses miracle, wonder, stupefaction, and amazement. How do exemplary figures establish their extra-ordinary qualities (or how do their texts establish it)? What are the degrees of astonishment: when does an astonishing event become a miracle (and when does it fail to become one)? How do the extra-ordinary stories perpetuated about exemplary figures serve to affirm social, political, or theological agendas? What is the role of the extra-ordinary story in the construction of the community who shares that story?

### 2.2. *Mediation*

The hagiographical process creates media about exemplars, but exemplars are also mediators or go-betweens. In what ways are exemplary figures mediated? Many of the terms in the index mediate the exemplary figure: for example, “vestige,” “performance,” “text.” How does the conglomeration of mediation establish a landscape for contact with and commemoration of the figure? At the same time, these mediations not only re-present, they present or make present the exemplary figure. How is presence and contact established? How does the exemplary figure mediate beyond themselves, making present the “other than” or divinity? Which mediations have greater authority? Are some mediations more effective than others at making present the exemplary figure?

### 2.3. *Embodiment and Vestige*

What is the place in the hagiographic process of the body of the saint, both in life and after death? In what material does their body inhere? Is it accessible; if so, how? How is the figure’s material body marked as distinct, as exemplary? What physical markings make them apparent or signify them as exemplary? How do they come by those markings—from birth? Or gained through experience? Are they self-inflicted? How do those markings signify deeper truths about the status of the exemplary figure? How are they represented long after their bodily death?

What are the materials left behind after the exemplary figure has departed? Do they provide access to the supernatural or otherworldly? That is, do they serve as a vector of divinity or the supernatural in the material of the world? How are these vestiges stored and displayed? Who controls access to them? How are they remembered or revered; that is, what are the stories attached to them?

### 2.4. *Intercession/Transformation*

What are the categories of experience articulated in the hagiographic sources from each tradition? How does the saint’s presence offer an opportunity for transformation? What does the experience of their reading, performance, and use “do” on the personal and communal level? How does the exemplary figure interact with their community, either in life or after death? What is the vehicle for

this interaction? What kinds of goods does contact with the exemplary figure promise to deliver (i.e., wisdom, healing, retribution, salvation)? How does a patron or client request intercession?

### 2.5. Performance

How does the exemplary figure enact their exemplarity? What behaviors belong to the performance of exemplarity, or how do lived behaviors accrue the status of an exemplary performance? Who is the audience of the performance?

### 2.6. Virtue

How does this aspect of the hagiographic process ground virtue? What behaviors are considered virtuous and why? Are there certain behaviors, violence, for example, that seem puzzling or problematic?

### 2.7. Gender

In what ways are the behaviors of exemplary figures constricted by or freed from gender roles? How does the lens of gender inflect distinctions in access to the holy? Does the disembodied exemplary figure retain their gendered embodiment after death? How does gender reflect divergent pathways to exemplarity? Does the figure transgress assigned gender roles, and if so, what is the social significance of their transgression? How does it relate to the hagiographical process?

### 2.8. Authorization/Legitimacy

How does the exemplary figure accrue authority? What are the modes of authorization of exemplarity, both formal and informal? Is there a legitimizing process through which the figure gradually gains authoritative status? What is the figure's relationship to institutional authority? Is their exemplarity locally or communally conferred or contested?

### 2.9. Economies of Exemplarity

Finally, a few general questions that might pertain to each aspect or the index as a whole. For each aspect of this index, how much hagiographic weight is this aspect given in the larger economy of exemplarity? When considering religious boundaries and distinctions, what aspects of the exemplary figure or their cult speak to a cultural specificity? How is this figure particular to their cultural tradition? Do they affirm orthodoxy or orthopraxy? Or are they beloved as peculiarities, as aberrant? In which case, does their aberration or boundary crossing serve to strengthen the tradition's specificities (or boundaries)?

## 3. Re-Description

My own training and research are in late medieval European Christianity; this index stems from problems and phenomena that are clearly marked in the scholarship of that tradition, and thus, necessarily requires expansion, critique, and re-description through conversation with representatives of other traditions. Even within the medieval European Christian tradition, each local instance of exemplarity retains distinct characteristics, and changes profoundly over time. The canonization process, for example, or the formal and legal process of saint-making in Christianity, only began to develop among the highest levels of ecclesiastical authority in the eleventh century CE, with procedural refinements that would continue through the sixteenth century when it was considered to be a prerogative of the Pope alone.<sup>8</sup> By the later Middle Ages, authorizing texts included canonization

---

<sup>8</sup> On the development of the canonization process in the medieval Church see, most recently, (Prudlo 2015); see also (Katajala-Peltomaa 2010; Vauchez 1989).

inquests, but long before that period, *lives*, liturgical feasts, and miracle collections conferred an exemplary figure with authority. Informal conferences of authority proliferated as well, in the form of personal prayers, visions, devotional images, and accounts of pilgrimage to a local shrine.

These designations, “formal” and “informal,” overlap and inform one another, building multi-medial hagiographic accretions, and thus point to the ways that the exemplary figure represents both normative forms of a tradition as well as its local instantiations. Take the example of a late medieval European Christian exemplar known as Christina *Mirabilis* (c. 1150–1224 CE). Christina, who oversaw herds at pasture in the village of Brustem (modern-day Belgium), was said to have died and been bodily resurrected three times, to have thrown herself into icy waters, crawled into burning ovens, and tortured herself on the rack.<sup>9</sup> Although her devotional behavior struck her contemporaries as positively aberrant—at one point she is described as climbing into treetops to pray while rolling herself into a ball like a hedgehog (*ericee*)—Christina was clearly revered by her contemporaries. But Christina garnered enough of a reputation for true holiness (in the medieval Christian tradition, this reputation is often called *fama*) that people told stories about her capacity for divine visions, her skill in prophecy, her miraculous body that endured pain on behalf of the sins of others, and her ability to intercede for the dying. She took refuge in a Benedictine women’s abbey and a local count considered her as his most soothing source of spiritual counsel. Christina even appears in the *Sefer Hasidim* (“The Book of the Pious”), a thirteenth-century halakhic (legal), moral, and narrative composition written by three German Jewish pietists (Hasidei Ashkenaz), where she informs her Jewish neighbors about what she saw while dead, including those among them who were in the Garden of Eden.<sup>10</sup> Although she was never canonized, Christina’s bones were relocated to a place of veneration after her third and final death in 1224 CE, and at least one miracle was recorded testifying to her continuing presence among Christians in her region. Christina’s life story was recorded shortly after her death by a cleric, the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1200–1265/70 CE). Originally composed in Latin, her *Life* was later translated into vernacular languages and disseminated outside of the southern Low Countries in which she lived. In short, this strange woman who bucked social convention—she was neither a nun nor a wife—managed to emerge as a spiritually authoritative figure. How did the hagiographical process work to render this enigmatic shepherd into a transregional “saint”?

This brief glimpse into the *Life* of Christina *Mirabilis* compels me to further refine some of the terms posed above and to add others, destabilizing my understanding of the key aspects of exemplarity. For example, the “extra-ordinary,” “embodiment,” and “performance” (perhaps even “intercession”) are all simultaneous in the case of Christina, seemingly impervious to disentanglement for analytical purposes. Her “extra-ordinary” qualities were mediated through embodied performance, that is, her intense displays of public asceticism that, we are told, benefitted the inhabitants of her town. Furthermore, the notion of “reputation,” I see now, might be included to gather a sense of the chatter around an exemplary figure, which might differ from their official or authorized image. We might also consider adding to this hagiographic index a term such as “discernment” that would capture the community’s questioning of the motives and inspiration of an exemplary figure, to determine if their extra-ordinary qualities stemmed from an ultimately healthful or harmful source, or if they were altogether feigned. The case of Christina *Mirabilis* also raises questions about imitation or emulation. Surely, this exemplary figure was *not* intended for imitation, as her hagiographer insisted. How then, did she function and serve the community in which she was embedded and the devotees who told her astonishing story? Christina’s status among the local Jewish population also suggests that we might introduce a term, such as “itineracy” or “portability,” for reverence of the exemplary figure in multiple traditions. Finally, her location—in treetops, the bedroom of a count, near mills and wells shared by

<sup>9</sup> (Thomas of Cantimpré 2008). An edition of the Life of Christina *Mirabilis* can be found in the *Acta sanctorum* July vol. V (1868), pp. 650–56.

<sup>10</sup> (Baumgarten 2008). Baumgarten makes it clear that the woman described in the text is very much like Christina in the circumstances of her death, resurrection, and post resurrection visions, if she was not actually Christina herself.

the Jewish population, and in a monastery—compels me to render a term like “built environment” or “frame” to imagine the setting through which the exemplar becomes visible as exemplary, as different.

#### 4. Conclusions

By entering into dialogue and committing to listening and to refining our terms for analysis, we can, and I believe, *should* engage comparative methods to re-center hagiography as a global phenomenon. This effort will require collaboration to identify the key dynamics through which communities selected and promoted their exemplary figures. The process of collaboration will also point to the terms that simply do not apply to a particular tradition or context, suggesting further refinement. Comparative efforts can find commonality and also preserve particularity when they are undertaken with mutual dialogue and a genuine spirit of understanding.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### References

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Baumgarten, Elisheva. 2008. A Separate People: Some Directions for Comparative Research on Medieval Women. *Journal of Medieval History* 34: 212–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Brown, Peter. 1983. The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity. *Representations* 2: 1–25. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cazelles, Brigitte. 1982. *Le Corps de Sanctité D'après Jean Bouche d'Or, Jehan Paulus et Quelques Vies des XIIe et XIIIe Siècles*. Geneva: Droz.
- DiValerio, David. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10. Forthcoming.
- Eck, Diane. 2000. Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1958. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hawley, John Stratton, ed. 1987. *Saints and Virtues*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heiler, Friedrich. 1961. *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Katajala-Peltomaa, Sari. 2010. Recent Trends in the Study of Medieval Canonizations. *History Compass* 8/9: 1083–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10. Forthcoming.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 1994. Beyond Positivism and Genre: Hagiographic Texts as Historical Narrative. *Viator* 25: 95–114. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mahmood, Saba. 2016. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McClymond, Kathryn. 2018. Comparison as Conversation and Craft. *Religions* 9: 39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Patton, Kimberley, and Benjamin Ray, eds. 2000. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in a Postmodern Age*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Philippart, Guy. 1994. Hagiographes et Hagiographie, Hagiologes et Hagiologie: Des Mots et des Concepts. *Hagiographica* 1: 1–16.
- Prudlo, Donald. 2015. *Certain Sanctity: Canonization and the Origins of Papal Infallibility*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for Hagiography. *Religions* 10: 538. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Thomas of Cantimpré. 2008. The Life of Christina the Astonishing. In *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*. Edited by Barbara Newman. Translated by Margot King, and Barbara Newman. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 127–60.
- Schmidt-Leukel, Perry, and Andreas Nehring, eds. 2016. *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. In Comparison a Magic Dwells. In *Imagining Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 19–35.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van de Veer, Peter. 2016. *The Value of Comparison*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Vauchez, André. 1989. *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks

Todd E. French

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Rollins College, 1000 Holt Ave., Winter Park, FL 32789, USA; tfrench@rollins.edu

Received: 19 September 2019; Accepted: 11 October 2019; Published: 16 October 2019

**Abstract:** This paper offers a nascent attempt at best practices for the comparative method in a conference setting. Exploring the value in transcendence of traditions and specialization, it traces the preparation and outcome of a recent comparative hagiology panel and develops a list of possible steps for facilitating meaningful interchange between scholars. Building on Freiberger’s methodology for Comparative Religions, it applies a method specifically to hagiographical studies.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative method; Comparative Religions; disciplinary innovation hagiography; hagiology; Religious Studies; Sainthood; sacred biography

## 1. Introduction

A recent, popular text by David Epstein, titled *Range*, argues for the necessity of rethinking our current models of specialization.<sup>1</sup> In it Epstein explores numerous areas that have benefited from the hand of a generalist, or at least someone who could see beyond their tightly-focused specialization. It seems that the interest in breadth, as well as depth, is returning to favor in the popular and scholarly contexts. Building on the work of Oliver Freiberger and his notion of the “illuminative” nature of comparative work, this paper will explore some areas of growth that are available specifically to the scholars willing to transcend their traditional boundaries. From there, it will apply Freiberger’s methodology for comparative studies to a more specific framework of *hagiography*, in the context of a 2018 conference panel.<sup>2</sup> From my perspective, Hagiology, and indeed the study of Religion has experienced stunted growth due to its own reliance on specialization. While exceptions are proliferating, there are compelling reasons for this historically being the case.<sup>3</sup> Few scholars who master Sanskrit go on to add Syriac, or Armenian, or any other combination of fundamental languages to particular traditions. How could one, whose expertise lies elsewhere, hope to speak definitively on a subject, while relying on translations and their own dilettantish curiosities? It is my suspicion that our particular scholarly communities, Religious Studies, and its partners in History and Literature, are ill-practiced at, and perhaps ill-equipped for, crossing over traditions in the interest of interdisciplinary perspectives and compelling theories that might expand our ways of knowing. Given that the fields of History and Religion have historically relied on specializations in particular languages and time periods, any hope of transcending discipline-oriented impediments renders collaborative work imperative. This paper

<sup>1</sup> (Epstein 2019).

<sup>2</sup> I agree with Massimo Rondolino’s view of *hagiography* as a metalinguistic category of analysis, useful for pursuing “more sophisticated understanding of religious phenomena as human expressions within given historical and cultural realities” (Rondolino 2017, p. 6). See also (Freiberger 2018, p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> Some recent, and notable, comparative work includes: (Hawley 2018; Rondolino 2017; Cuffel et al. 2018).

responds to this question of how a scholar might effectively traverse the high walls of one's discipline, especially in the realm of hagiology.

Hagiology is a particularly interesting locus of disciplinary interchange. Sainly figures and their stories abound in many religious traditions. The stories often approximate each other with minor changes in framing details or underlying theologies. It came as somewhat of a surprise to me after graduate school to realize that my colleagues, who had specialized in different languages and traditions, were working with saintly materials that could be considered strikingly similar to my own on a number of levels. Why had we never discussed our texts? Was there really nothing we could hope to learn from each other because the narratives were housed in different languages and cultures? Although, the movement towards area studies departments offers one possibility, it can also create competing loyalties and further artificial boundaries. I am not interested in making an argument that "religious" behavior transcends cultural boundaries in some categorizable form, but certainly there is some value in exploring the common ground and diversity that exist amidst these silos of particular religious traditions, history, and literature.

I remember well a dialogue between two leading scholars at a premiere university, who happened to study monasticism in their respective fields. Both had studied the other's tradition at some point in their scholarly journeys, and one scholar pointed out the numerous similarities between the traditions in the way monastic practice was conducted. Nodding along, the other scholar made nice, and later circled back to me to explain that there was almost nothing that could be considered similar about monasticism in the two traditions.

This highlights the historical terrain of Religious Studies and the resulting paradigms that we now see in the academic study of comparative religions.<sup>4</sup> The history of comparative study, and its subsequent distrust, serves to preclude us from useful paradigms of study in, and outside, our fields of interest.<sup>5</sup> Returning to our initial question of how we push past the siloed nature of thinking in academic disciplines, I propose comparative study as the most useful academic tool when skillfully employed. A recent example from my own liberal arts college emerged when a working group, focused on assessing undergraduate composition, attempted to compare best practices for writing in various fields (Humanities, Sciences, Arts, Social-Sciences). Scholars were jarred by the variation in requirements and what that indicated about the styles of scholarship. For instance, many were surprised to realize that few Scientific articles would venture to quote a phrase from another scholar as the study of Humanities regularly does. Others found remarkable the simple notion that the date of an article is more prominent in APA style than it is in Chicago. These details tell us something about what we value as scholars and ignite our curiosities about why we value it.

What, if any, are the values of a comparative theory or methodology in the study of the saints across traditions? Does a category's meaning develop when considered outside of their regular or received context, i.e., panegyric, devotional material, compilation, theological treatise, training manual? How do we push past the siloed nature of thinking in academic disciplines and fields of study? For example, how might one's reading of a text be affected by awareness of other modes of

---

<sup>4</sup> For a concise history of this tension, see Sara Ritchey's contribution to this special issue (Ritchey 2019).

<sup>5</sup> There are exceptions, of course. One worth noting occurred between my field of late antique Christian studies and the fields of anthropology and social theory. A seminal text in the study of Christian saints, Peter Brown's 1971 article in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," cites in his first footnote Mary Douglas as an inspiration toward his work. Brown's later work on asceticism, *The Body and Society*, cites the influence of Michel Foucault in his introduction. I raise these instances because I think Brown embodies the best version of collaboration with fields of study and theories that may, at first, appear to have little impact on the late ancient world of Christianity. Peter Brown leads as a generalist as much as a specialist; his seminars regularly included a wide variety of material that, at first glance, seemed only tangentially related to the topic. In my graduate program, I was delighted to hear from a colleague of mine, studying South Asian saints, that he found Brown's work to be influential and enlightening in his own field of study. This detail is useful for framing the style of comparative studies that may prove most generative. See (Brown 1971, 2008, p. xvii).

writing/reading/reception/function?<sup>6</sup> I argue that similar realizations occur when scholars of *hagiography* explore the worlds of saintly material outside their traditions and time periods. Perhaps most difficult in this enterprise is to allow oneself to go down the road of basic comparison, acknowledging that initial results will sometimes appear simple and uninspiring—much like that aforementioned professor anticipated. One worries, at times, that there will be scant results, barely surpassing the enthusiastic claims of, “My tradition has a saint that sounds almost identical to that!” I want to propose, however, that pushing the comparison a few different directions might yield more considerable outcomes.

In order to organize these questions into ways we might read texts in conversation and collaboration with other scholars and traditions, I offer here a nascent attempt at best practices for comparative hagiology in a conference setting.

## 2. Best Practices in Comparative Hagiology

Freiberger has insightfully argued that “Much of what is regarded as problematic about comparison in the study of religion (decontextualization, essentialization, undue generalization) should be discussed, in my view, not only in theoretical but also in methodological terms.”<sup>7</sup> Working with his open-ended and excellent methodology, this section explores how this might function in a conference panel setting, oriented toward comparative hagiology. This model represents my reworking of the incisive ideas of Sara Ritchey, Jon Keune, and Patton Burchett, who experimented in how to best organize a panel for a joint session of the 2018 AAR sponsored by the Hinduism unit, and precipitated by the Hagiographical Society’s working group.

### 2.1. *Expand the Range of Meaning Beyond Genres*

The first aspect of comparative work, that I want to consider, is the widening scope of interpretation that is gaining momentum in some scholarly circles.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the notion of saints’ lives as literature, it is interesting to consider how the concept of genre has worked, in the words of Sara Ritchey, to “overdetermine interpretations of sacred biography.” Should all hagiography be read in the same way? Was it received in its original contexts in the ways we conceive of it today? I find this framing apparatus works in a number of western, Christian interpretive contexts. When we hear someone call something, “gospel” or “scripture” or “panegyric” or “poetry” we gain a facility with these texts. At the same time, we start to lose possibilities of interpretation and understanding. Similarly, the compilation, to use one hagiographical style, is readily embraced as another attempt at encyclopedic knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Reading compilations as attempts at universal knowledge is certainly enlightening, but it does not encompass the possibilities that lie within these enigmatic collections. In order to start considering the potential of reading beyond particular categories, it is useful to inquire as to whether the category exists in other historical contexts. The simple act of exploring a category in a parallel world gets one thinking

---

<sup>6</sup> Not limiting the saintly material to text is an important step in expanding the discussion beyond the written word, in order to include varieties of material culture. Here see Jon Keune’s essay that favors the term “hagiology” over “hagiography” (Keune 2019).

<sup>7</sup> (Freiberger 2018, p. 11).

<sup>8</sup> I would point out a forthcoming volume, *Constructed Sainthood*, in *Vigiliae Christianae Supplements*, edited by Christa Gray (Univ. Reading) and James Corke-Webster (Kings College London), that is the outcome of a British Academy Leverhulme project. In it a series of scholars explore the various ways hagiography has been utilized by its authors and readers, and in what ways it can be investigated by contemporary scholars. My work in this volume begins with the question of whether, and how, the compilatory framework—both the impetus to compile multiple saints’ lives and the subsequent reception history—grew as a uniquely advantageous style in the hands of late antique authors.

<sup>9</sup> Similar to what Hildegard of Bingen attempted in her *Physica: Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum* and *Causae et Curae*, or Hugh of Saint-Victor with his treatment of the arts in *Didascalicon*. Several excellent bibliographies relating to encyclopaedism are readily available online. See the “Medieval Encyclopedias, Bestiaries, Lapidaries, and Herbals” entry from ARC Humanities Press; the online journal, *Spicae*, *Cahiers de l’Atelier Vincent de Beauvais*; and the *Atelier Vincent de Beauvais*: “Bibliographie sur les encyclopédies médiévales. See also (Hildegard 2003, 2010; Hugues de Saint-Victor 1997).



about the category itself, and how it might benefit from further definition or critical investigation.<sup>10</sup> What drove the author to compile, and was it the same everywhere? Whether this question is answered or not, the historian has already opened the possibility of interpretation beyond the normative methods and theories of their field.

Beginning with this framework, it is fascinating to think about the ways that we might be reading a text incongruously with its intended purpose—of course, this style of inquiry has always been the privilege of the historian. Using a brief example from my own work, I would cite the collection of John of Ephesus in the sixth-century, Byzantine context. John is championed as the Miaphysite bishop who worked closely with the Emperor Justinian (Chalcedonian) and Empress Theodora (Miaphysite). I think it is tempting to read John's work as a piece of history or theology, without paying attention to the enormously influential political terrain of his day.<sup>11</sup> Individual lives can easily be plucked from John's work to render several different narratives of the saints in the Syrian context. Possibilities multiply as the number of included saints grows. How does a story change when it is coupled with other stories? Moreover, what might be the aims of someone engaging in the compiling process? Might a text be read against itself, or in remembrance of a movement or doctrine that it openly denounces? In all of these questions, we see the possibilities of reading texts in less constricted ways for wider fields of meaning.

Did all hagiographers intend their saintly literature to be read in the same ways? We must be missing out on some social contexts, or jokes, or literary styles and traditions that would make as little sense to us today as the choice to write a saint's life in the first place. Indeed, the entire enterprise of drafting saintly material can be foreign to the modern scholar and requires a rethinking of our own position vis-à-vis the text. In conclusion of this point, the category of "hagiography", as some static repository, is in need of continual complication. Coming together initially with an interest in expanding beyond the range of regular meanings is an ideal first step in allowing the comparative process to excel. This leads to a second aspect: How to settle on common territory.

## 2.2. Begin with a Theme

This step is the most complicated, as it ponders the question of whether and how to let go of that which got us here. I want to first cite Freiburger's assertion that the selection of the comparands prior to the act of the comparison "presupposes a prior act of comparison."<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, it becomes important to consider the possibility that a theme, or *tertium comparationis*, over which the comparands might be selected and brought into conversation, could be an important first step in holding open a space that is less encumbered by predispositions and vectors of interest. This may not be possible in every field, but within the context of hagiology, it appears not only feasible but advantageous. Within the framework of hagiology, analogous themes abound, often unhindered by theologies or *Sitz im Leben*.<sup>13</sup>

This raises the question of the definitional problems of hagiology that Rondolino, Keune, and Ritchey explore in their papers for this volume.<sup>14</sup> How would one know they are engaging with the same "stuff" unless agreed upon signifiers can be placed? One option, which aligns with Rondolino's "heuristic" form is to delimit by choosing particular themes that are oriented toward saintly behavior and its retelling, such as: Miraculous, holiness, otherworldliness, asceticism, and subsequent

---

<sup>10</sup> See Rondolino's piece in this volume that argues hagiography functions as a heuristic device, rather than a specific genre (Rondolino 2019).

<sup>11</sup> We might render this broader view a historically-conceived "thick description" of John's work. See (Geertz 1973).

<sup>12</sup> (Freiburger 2018, p. 8).

<sup>13</sup> This notion is worthy of significant further study.

<sup>14</sup> Rondolino argues for *hagiography* as a "heuristic device that serves a taxonomical function for: (1) the identification of a given datum; (2) its classification within a group of similar and already known phenomena; and (3) its study and interpretation in light of the web of relationships and characteristics proper to that group" (Rondolino 2019).

subjectivities, or monastic—and their approximate counterparts in translation.<sup>15</sup> Once scholars assent to these signifiers, a range of topics emerge as possibilities for the *tertium comparationis*: Material artifacts, comeuppance or retribution, forgiveness, healing, challenges to authority, political leaders, reception, production, promulgation, devotion, city/country, compilation, literary aspects, economics (both money and modes of exchange), social justice, death, community, politics, the author, plot, asceticism, subjectivities, love, sexuality, violence, and the heretical.<sup>16</sup> Focusing on a single theme keeps the conversation centralized and increases the chances of attaining some depth.

The job of this first aspect is to arbitrarily narrow the field of interest to a manageable locus, based on the personal interest of the involved scholars. Given the wide variety of saintly material in any tradition, and multiplying that across disciplines, the creation of a third space, in which comparative partners can *play* with ideas becomes necessary.<sup>17</sup> I would cite the recent development in the Hagiographical Society's AAR working group that has attempted to partner scholars from varying traditions in the exploration of particular themes.<sup>18</sup> As an example: The theme for 2018 was the concept of the "miraculous." Scholars were allowed to choose a text or figure to explore from this viewpoint and formulate their own theories on the topic in their traditions and areas of expertise. One important outcome of this first step is that it limits the tendency to look for simple analogues across traditions and then orient them toward a basic *tertium comparationis*. Beginning with a theme, and then exploring the way that theme emerges in a context, yields richer and more complicated findings, e.g., not "My saint also levitates," but "How and why does the supernatural manifest in a given context?"

### 2.3. Choose Initial Frameworks for Reading the Theme from Various Traditions

Within the comparative group, scholars may choose different ways of thinking about the theme. As in step one (above) this can feel somewhat arbitrary as it is based on the preference of the scholar. In our 2018 panel, themes were proposed by the individual scholars: Transgressive actions reinterpreted; objects, agency, and transmission; conflicts and competition in community and teaching; and retribution and agency. Scholars identified these starting points based on their own interests and initial ways of reading, which helped other participants to think with these notions as they explored their own topics. In other words, beginning with a foreign framework, or hearing the kinds of questions different scholars apply to their sources, allows the scholar to read their own texts in new light, before even hearing others' findings. This also increases the possibility of overlapping insights. Rather than each scholar reading their material with their favorite lenses, this step gives a foreshadowing of what other ways of reading might be applied to the project.

### 2.4. Share Unfinished Papers for Commentary

When scholars are asked to share their papers before they are complete—a truly daunting practice for any scholar—the possibility of cohesion emerges. Rather than the stagnant conference paper, or edited volume with a few retro-fitted citations from other chapters to make it look cohesive, the scholar has a chance to really think about how their texts might change in the new light of other research styles and traditions. Having attended national conferences for well over a decade, I can attest to the strong tradition of failed attempts at drawing together panels with a moderator or respondent, who reads the papers a few days before they are presented. This step leaves room

---

<sup>15</sup> The problem of language in translation is significant. Does miracle mean the same in translation? This is another rich field of possibility for exploration in the comparative framework. On Asceticism creating new subjectivities. See (Valantasis 2002, p. 548).

<sup>16</sup> This list is obviously not comprehensive, but gives a sense of the variety of topics that are widely available in different traditions.

<sup>17</sup> See Keune's argument that focusing on the basic methodologies serves to foreground "playful, creative, and open-ended conversations among the collaborators, rather than the disparities and differences that will inevitably arise when diverse specialists come together" (Keune 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Sara Ritchey has been particularly instrumental in facilitating these dialogues.

for early communication, pivoting in ideas, and exploration of new styles of interpretation: all the things we regularly tout as tantamount to the scholarly process, but rarely leave time for in our own conference work.

### *2.5. Leave Room for Rounds of Communication*

Comparison takes time. As scholars we are accustomed to acting as the authority on a subject and what we find is often publishable and well-received as definitive. Building in the extra steps of communicating what frameworks (step 3) the scholar sees as directly applicable to their own work, as well as what new ideas were sparked by way of the initial sharing of papers is an essential step in the comparative process. This cross-fertilization can obviously take many forms such as: Commentary on each other's papers, a colloquium (if funding permits), round-robin summarization of each other's papers, a word cloud approach at prominent themes, or a short comparative paper in which one uses another scholar's methodology on their topic, or looks for points of crossover and difference, with an attempt to explain why these occur.

### *2.6. Generate a Core Body of Interest*

As any scholar of hagiology will concur, one can find almost anything in the storehouse of saintly material. In order to deepen the conversation on a given topic, the comparative group needs to focus on a particular core of issues they want to further examine. A succinct way of doing this is having each participant make a "top five list" of bullet points that they see as the most promising ways forward. There will inevitably be consensus on some issues or ideas, which make for excellent nodes of connection and serve to decrease the time scholars must invest to engage with each other's ideas. What is perhaps most intriguing in this step, however, is the reflection on what areas do not overlap and why they do not. In this step, each participant should consider why certain ideas stand out as valuable points of interest in their own work, but are absent in another tradition or historical setting.

### *2.7. Return to Your Work with New Perspectives*

After these initial steps of collaboration, it is very intriguing to re-encounter your initial paper with the breadth of ideas and interpretations of the theme that has been generated in the comparative work. Far from looking for consensus, or simple comparisons, the scholar is able to re-invigorate their initial ideas with the range of possibilities emerging from their collaborative partners.

### *2.8. Add the Voice of an Outside Respondent*

As a final perspective, the collaborators might include the voice of an outside scholar, who could take the overarching view and discuss themes and styles that might be useful to the participants. The process of going deep in comparison on the ground will regularly benefit from a return to the overarching perspective, that can bring themes together and reinvigorate dialogue in finely tuned directions.

## **3. A Few Brief Personal Observations on the Process**

Although I anticipated the final round of work to be most insightful, I was surprised to find one of the most useful aspects of this process was the initial paper writing in conversation with the others' proposed frameworks. In knowing the concepts that the other scholars would pursue on our theme, I found myself addressing the material in unique ways. Instead of quickly skimming over the preliminary narrative of my saint, I was attuned to new ways of reading. For example, I began to question whether my saint's violent retribution, the death of children from uncooperative parents, should be considered a miracle at all, and how it might have been interpreted in that community. Moreover, I began to think about the narrative in light of the framework of "competition in community" and realized my text needed far more contextual inquiry, since it only gives one side of a very

contentious story. I could reconsider my own proclivities toward the theme of retribution in the saints and put the text in conversation with my comparative group's chosen frameworks: Concepts of agency, and transmission; transgressive actions reinterpreted; conflicts and competition in community and teaching. New insights in my own work emerged and old connections were highlighted in vivid relief.

This process awoke new, curious aspects of my own work, because I researched my saints knowing that it would be read by scholars from different traditions. I am reasonably familiar with some of the South Asian traditions and found the reading of my own texts and subsequent writing about them was imbued with a new sense of possibility and range of understanding. As a quick example, the oblation or eucharistic practice and the economy of divine power surrounding it, took on new meaning in thinking about various Hindu rites. As I read, several new interpretations emerged. I was reminded of the power of the eucharist for early Christians, who saw in it a type of direct exchange with the divine. I had never considered this power dynamic in my particular story. A colleague's exploration of interpretation of transgressive action and how they were interpreted by the community, in which it occurred, as well as later readers was particularly insightful for my own work on retribution, making me aware of a layer I had missed in my work. The collaboration moved several of us to think more deeply about what constitutes a "miracle" in our own context and beyond.

I recognize that we naturally read our texts with lenses that are most accessible and foundational to our intellectual heritage—that which our *Doktormütter* and *-väter* trained us to examine. When I pick up a text, I am immediately drawn to envisioning what it looked like on the ground, what the theological problems were, and how these get worked out socially. Although a great model, it leaves a significant swath of possible interpretive options untouched. In conversation with other traditions, we think more deeply about the possibilities of writing and reading in our own context.

I am drawn to a method of comparative work that acknowledges one's own position within the tradition and seeks to disrupt these normative readings as much as possible. If one begins with a shared theme, the inclination to look for simple similarities is quickly traversed, opening the way for sustained contemplation on the ways of reading that do not come naturally. The outcome of these is then to read alongside, and in conversation, with one's own field for wider possibilities of interpretation.

Comparative work is not easy. In order to successfully achieve an outcome that rises above simple similarities, numerous steps, additional time, and increased communication are required. There is a naturally destabilizing effect that occurs when one subjects the well-worn paths of their intellectual heritage and like-minded research communities to the scrutiny of outsiders. In effect, this project is akin to comparison of, not only texts and themes, but also the comparison of academic enclaves. What are the underlying proclivities of a field that we as scholars are reluctant to lay bare? What inherited styles might we be unaware of in our scholarship? This internal scrutiny is the most significant outcome of the comparative project.

In conclusion, the comparative paradigm serves not to find some common ground for a grand narrative about the baseline of religions, nor for finding links that prove primacy or mimicry, but rather a catalyst for seeing again one's own field with clarity, drawing on the wealth of fresh perspectives and awareness. If I may liken this to the claims of Martha Nussbaum in her early work on cosmopolitanism, we might see that we can only accurately learn about ourselves in the context of others.<sup>19</sup> Or, in this case, we may better understand our own histories and traditions of inquiry if we can parse out our own predilections and blind-spots. The comparative project is uniquely useful in helping one to achieve this perspective. It leaves me wondering how those two scholars of monasticism might have benefited from a more open and deliberate conversation about their shared intellectual spaces.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

---

<sup>19</sup> (Nussbaum and Cohen 2002, pp. 11–12).

## References

- Brown, Peter. 1971. The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61: 80–101. [CrossRef]
- Brown, Peter. 2008. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia Classics in Religion. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cuffel, Alexandra, Ana Echevarría, and Georgios T. Halkias. 2018. *Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality*. London: Routledge.
- Epstein, David. 2019. *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hawley, John Stratton. 2018. The Four Churches of the Reformation. *Modern Asian Studies* 52: 1457–85. [CrossRef]
- Hildegard, Saint. 2003. *Beate Hildegardis Cause et Cure*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Hildegard, Saint. 2010. *Physica: Liber Subtilitatum Diversarum Naturarum Creaturarum: Textkritische Ausgabe*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Hugues de Saint-Victor. 1997. *Didascalicon de Studio Legendi = Studienbuch*. New York: Herder.
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575.
- Nussbaum, Martha, and Joshua Cohen. 2002. *For Love of Country?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10. Forthcoming. [CrossRef]
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for *Hagiography*. *Religions* 10: 538. [CrossRef]
- Valantasis, Richard. 2002. A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism. In *Asceticism*. Edited by Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 544–52.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# Comparative vs. Hagiology: Two Variant Approaches to the Field

Jon Keune

Religious Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA; keunejon@msu.edu

Received: 19 September 2019; Accepted: 7 October 2019; Published: 15 October 2019

**Abstract:** There is a basic tension within the idea of Comparative Hagiology, because the two terms that constitute its name are incongruous. To formulate a comparative hagiological project, we must choose at the outset which term will take priority. Prioritizing the *comparative* in comparative hagiology orients us to focus more on the basic disciplinary approaches to gather compare-able data, leaving *hagiology* as a placeholder whose content will be defined by the results of the comparison. Prioritizing *hagiology* requires first defining *hagio*- and reckoning with the European and Christian baggage that it brings to cross-cultural and inter-religious comparison. Holding that definition in mind, we then locate examples to compare by whatever approach seems fruitful in that case. Different choices of priorities lead to potentially different results. I argue that a path that prioritizes *comparative* is more likely to inspire experimental and innovative groupings, unconventional definitions of hagiology, and new perspectives in the cross-cultural study of religion. An approach that prioritizes *hagiology* runs a greater risk of repeating the same provincial and conceptual biases that doomed much of 20th-century comparative religion scholarship.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative method; comparative religions; definition; disciplinary innovation; hagiography; hagiology; religious studies; theory and method in religious studies

---

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper grew out of participating in the two Comparative Hagiology Workshops that took place in 2017 and 2018. In the first workshop, as we pondered what “comparative hagiology” could be, group discussion gravitated toward what seemed like a primary problem that needed resolving before anything else would be possible. How shall we define our key terms—saint, saintliness, or even religion? How is meaningful comparison even possible without first clarifying the criteria by which scholars selected items to be compared? These questions prompted concerns about using traditionally Christian words from European contexts to mistranslate phenomena from non-Christian and non-western worlds. Unsurprisingly, we reached no consensus on basic definitions, and some of us left the workshop frustrated with that line of inquiry, if still optimistic about the possibilities. The next year, Sara Ritchey and David DiValerio addressed this problem by proposing neutral, carefully selected terms that we might deploy cross-culturally to move comparison forward. We see the excellent fruits of their intellectual labor here, in their articles in this issue of *Religions* (Ritchey) and (DiValerio).

I pursue a quite different line of inquiry. I want to take a step back and reconsider whether it truly is the case that we must clearly define our key terms *before* proceeding with comparison. As we envision what comparative hagiology could be, I argue that a broader range of methodological possibilities opens up if we resist emphasizing initial definitions. Essentially, I think the problem lies in the fact

---

<sup>1</sup> I am especially grateful to Massimo Rondolino for gathering an inspiring set of diverse scholars in the Comparative Hagiology workshops, and to Barbara Zimbalist for her insightful comments on a draft of this paper at the 2018 workshop.

that the term “comparative hagiology” contains a vital cognitive tension. This tension would not substantially change if we were to rearrange the terms and call it hagiological comparison. The two words in the name are basically incongruous and do not play together nicely. Comparative hagiology is not a single, unified thing but rather a dynamic conflict: *comparative* versus *hagiology*.

Now, I do agree with Thomas Tweed that it is a best practice for scholars to provide “stipulative definitions” of key terms as a way of indicating the scope of their observation and analysis.<sup>2</sup> However, when it comes to overtly comparative projects, I think that Tweed’s point applies not so much at the beginning of research (as Tweed assumes) but rather in the final stages, when one presents one’s findings to an audience who is unfamiliar with the whole research journey. In this respect, a helpful point of reference is the five-fold comparative process proposed by Oliver Freiberger (building on J. Z. Smith): selection, description, juxtaposition, re-description, and rectification or theory formation.<sup>3</sup> Freiberger points out that these five operations are not necessarily sequential, and some projects may omit one or more processes. My argument is that formulating too precise a definition (description, in Freiberger’s list) at the outset confines the entire comparative process. At the earliest stage of a project, during which one selects items to compare, declaring stipulative definitions is less urgent and can even be a hindrance. A deeper understanding of the tension between *comparative* and *hagiology* may be helpful for keeping in check the temptation to define key terms first.

At the risk of appearing to contradict myself, I want to clarify how I use the word *hagiology* as opposed to *hagiography*. I understand hagiology in a very broad sense: the study of *hagio-*, however we define that word (traditionally, saints or sanctity). To this end, hagiology may draw on a wide range of source materials for its data. In the past century, when scholars have studied saints in an academic, non-confessional way, they typically relied on sources that were in the form of written text—literally, hagiography. Now, some scholars (including most of my colleagues in this special issue of *Religions*) define hagiography much more expansively than I do, going well beyond written texts and even encompassing what I call hagiology. For my argument, however, it is essential that we distinguish among different media, their distinct modes of communication, and the disciplinary approaches that developed for analyzing them. I think that the word hagiography cannot but prioritize textuality in its restricted sense of written documents, even for those who intend to use it expansively. After all, written documents have been the vast majority of source materials for studying saints in the 20th century, and that continues to be true today. In any case, such difference in word usage is nothing new or deficient. Over the past 1500 years, several terms that begin with *hagio-* have borne diverse and inconsistent meanings.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Comparative vs. Hagiology: A Provocative Oversimplification

How ought one begin conceiving a project in comparative hagiology? I suggest that two main options exist, derived from the tension between *comparative* and *hagiology*. In effect, they present scholars with a fork in the methodological road. Immediately but not necessarily consciously, the scholar must choose a path that prioritizes one of the two terms over the other. For *comparative* and *hagiology* are rooted in a different set of considerations and disciplinary lenses.

Prioritizing the “comparative” of comparative hagiology foregrounds the analytic *and often creative* act of apprehending multiple items together. Of course, all theorization relies on comparison to some degree, in order to reach a level of abstraction, but I focus here on examples that consciously aim to be comparative. Oliver Freiberger has helpfully described comparison as a second-order method that depends on other, first-order methods.<sup>5</sup> Whatever and however one compares, some kind of

---

<sup>2</sup> (Tweed 2006, p. 34).

<sup>3</sup> (Freiberger 2018, pp. 8–11).

<sup>4</sup> (Philippart 1994). I am grateful to Charles Talar for translating this article into English after the Comparative Hagiology workshop in 2017.

<sup>5</sup> (Freiberger 2018, p. 2).

research and knowledge gathering must have occurred in order to apprehend the items (*comparands*) that one is comparing at all. This basic research is carried out through disciplinary methods that scholars mostly agree are able to yield reliable knowledge. Such first-order methods are grounded in academic disciplines that have no necessary relation to religion: literary criticism, art history, sociology, psychology, political science, and so on. These pre-comparative methods are crucial in apprehending items as comparable. The methods are a core part of the *tertium comparationis*—the “third” thing, with reference to which the items are compared. It is the method that positions each item logically in relation to the *tertium*.

In essence, prioritizing the *comparative* in comparative hagiology grants importance to the first-order method that the scholar used in their pre-comparative study. Most religious studies scholars in the 20th century followed methodologies for interpreting texts, beliefs, and history, sometimes seasoned by theoretical concerns from sociology, theology, psychology, discourse analysis, and the like. Since that time, approaches that analyze bodies, space, ritual, and visual dimensions have become more common. None of these approaches are religious, in and of themselves.

Prioritizing the *comparative* in comparative hagiology does not require one to define initially what constitutes a *hagio-*, saint, or religion. Doing so may even hinder the comparative process, as assumptions embedded within the definition unnecessarily narrow the field of possible candidates for comparison. Creativity is involved in apprehending items as comparable, analogous, oppositional, or held together in some way within the same scope of attention. Because of this, it suffices initially to regard *hagiology* as a placeholder that gestures in the direction of something like religion, ideology, venerated figures, or extraordinary people. After research is carried out and the project nears completion, the scholar may wish to articulate a definition to clarify what is “hagiological” (or not) about the project. This is especially important for the sake of communicating one’s findings to people.

Prioritizing *hagiology* at the start of a comparative hagiological project prompts the scholar to articulate what constitutes *hagio-*, to stipulate what meaningfully compare-able items might look like when the scholar starts searching for them. In English and most European languages, this would usually involve carefully redefining the word “saint” so that it is not too Christian, or it involves adopting a term (like Ritchey’s “exemplary figures” and Rondolino’s “perfected beings”) that avoids the word “saint.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, with all of these terms, the weight of semantic precedent and tradition makes it difficult to define such terms without reference to “religion.” And if *hagio-* is hard to define in a cross-culturally sensitive way, religion is even more notoriously difficult. Since a logic like that of Parson Thwackum (“When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England”)<sup>7</sup> cannot suffice for comparative scholars, they may choose to adopt or refine a definition from the variety of famous options: Spiro’s “interaction with supernatural beings,” Tillich’s “ultimate concern,” Tweed’s “confluences of cultural-organic flows,” and so on. Or one could follow Max Weber and regard “saint” as an ideal type, as many scholars do in practice if not explicitly, when they view saints cross-culturally as people who exemplify virtues or hold religious/charismatic authority. Yet this “definition” involves resorting to a deeply sociological method. As an ideal type, “saint” effectively is situated between a hard definition and a flexible method.

It seems to me that those scholars who are most comfortable prioritizing *hagiology* in comparative hagiology are used to focusing on Christian and western traditions, since *hagio-* and its affiliates are emic to their study and directly meaningful for them, even if they attempt to reflect critically on that language. Scholars of non-western traditions who speak or teach in European languages constantly reckon with more extreme linguistic and conceptual translation in their research and publications. They may be more reluctant to concede yet again to defining a basic term in English, Latin, or Greek,

<sup>6</sup> See (Ritchey; Rondolino 2019).

<sup>7</sup> From Henry Fielding’s 1749 novel *A History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, quoted in (Nye 2008, p. 9).



for the sake of engaging in comparative hagiology with colleagues who are not demanded to make the same concession. Although we may treat *hagio-*, for academic purposes, as merely a heuristic device, there is no getting away from the fact that it will feel more familiar and comfortable to some people than to others.

In his article in this special issue, Massimo Rondolino points out that a benefit of retaining *hagio-* is that it allows us to trace the historical questions and debates over the term's applicability.<sup>8</sup> A neologism, in contrast, would be no less informed by these debates but would render them invisible. In theory, this is valuable for remembering how the field arose. But I fear that it may further strengthen the gravity of European and Christian studies, making it even harder for scholars of other regions and traditions to do anything except continue orbiting around that center. For many, this would be a very unappealing prospect, and comparative hagiology would find fewer conversation partners among those who work outside the West and Christianity.

An alternative route we could take when prioritizing *hagiology* at the outset would be to commit to experiments that demonstrate a willingness to escape the Euro-Christian gravity well. A group of collaborators could agree to exchange *hagio-* or saint with a term that originates somewhere else, grounded in a very different world of thought and practice. Instead of focusing on saints, one could make the central concept something like *sādhu*, *guru*, *sant* (an Indic false friend of saint), *imām*, *junzi*, or *shengren*. If hagiology is to be a truly global and cross-cultural field of study and not just an extension of a provincial and confessional paradigm, then such swapping out terms like this should not be controversial. Scholars of Christianity could be challenged to wrap their minds around studying someone like Thomas Aquinas through the lens of comparative *junzi*-ology or theorizing hagiology through the conceptual categories of *guru-śāstra* (a neologism for the “systematic study of *gurus*”). Of course, Thomas Aquinas does not fit comfortably in the boxes of *junzi* or *guru*, but those terms would certainly shine a different light on him. Or, yet another alternative route would be to regard “comparative hagiology” very explicitly as merely provisional—an English placeholder concept that introduces non-specialists to what comparative hagiology scholars do, but one that newcomers would be quickly forced to replace with something more relevant and meaningful to specific comparative projects.

In summary, I think it is helpful to acknowledge that *comparative* and *hagiology* pull in two different directions. The comparative operation depends on first-order disciplinary methods, which construe the items of comparison (such as saints) as things that can be meaningfully understood within non-religious disciplinary paradigms. Religion is not an essential component of these methods, and the analysis that is performed through them may even have the effect of “secularizing” or disenchanting the items it compares. So, prioritizing the *comparative* activity and the disciplinary methods that feed into it could lead a scholar to select items for comparison that fit the methods well, but the results of the comparison may greatly push the envelope of what constitutes *hagio-* and religion. Prioritizing *hagiology* would steer away from those more experimental comparisons, unless scholars were to define *hagio-* very expansively, well beyond the traditional meanings of *hagio-*, saint, saintliness, and religion. It seems to me that prioritizing the *hagiology* of comparative hagiology at the start of a project cannot but obligate a scholar to explain the relation of *hagio-* to religion generally (what differentiates a saint from a non-saint?). And this would end up reinforcing and favoring, even if unintentionally, the default Euro-Christian paradigm from which the comparative activity is trying to break free. In theory, one could use the *hagiology*-prioritized approach and define *hagiology* initially in a way that pushes intentionally against Christian terminology, by adopting non-Christian terms as the placeholders and maybe even replacing the word *hagiology* with a Chinese or Sanskrit term that shifts the center of attention away from Europe and Christianity. However, given the gravity and depth of hagiography studies of medieval Europe, I think this practically quite unlikely.

---

<sup>8</sup> (Rondolino 2019).

### 3. Concluding Reflections

Throughout this article, I have kept referring to the *initial* stage of a project being the crucial point at which one must choose to prioritize either *comparative* or *hagiology*. In the introduction, I demurred from Thomas Tweed's call for scholars to provide stipulative definitions at the beginning of their work, on the grounds that, in an explicitly comparative project, defining terms is most productive at the conclusion, when one communicates one's results. Sequence is crucial. In terms of Freiberger's five-fold process of comparison (selection, description, juxtaposition, re-description, and rectification or theory formation), I am interested mainly in *selection* and the role that definitions play in it. Freiberger notes that the selection of items to compare is "extremely complex" and "the least transparent of the five operations" because so many variables figure into what may—even unconsciously—capture one's attention.<sup>9</sup> In arguing that we should prioritize the *comparative* of comparative hagiology, I am pointing to the energy or inspiration that leads to selection. Whereas prioritizing *comparative* broadens our horizon of possible selections, prioritizing *hagiology* narrows it down. Although Freiberger notes that the five processes need not occur in the order that he presents them, I am arguing that for comparative hagiology to be truly cross-cultural, selection ought to precede definition/description. Those who feel the need to define *hagio-* before deciding on what to compare, effectively put definition/description before selection. This may not necessarily be putting the cart before the horse, but it is at least hitching the cart to a horse that is strongly inclined to stay on a familiar path.

Because the selection process is elusive and difficult to explain, Freiberger insists that "transparency is paramount," so that we may recognize what agendas may have guided our choices unconsciously. I agree. But along with being lucid about the selection process, I argue that we should be *ludic* as well. Not to make light of the colonial and hegemonic effects of past comparative projects, I nonetheless think that creativity and even playfulness can be quite valuable in selecting items to compare, because those are the qualities that lead to new ways of thinking and seeing the world. This would also bring some levity to the endeavor, so that people are not intimidated or frightened of comparison. After all, comparison inevitably requires us to move at least partially outside our comfort zones and areas of expertise. Focusing on the basic methodologies that feed into comparative hagiology rather than preparing to fight over the definition of *hagio-* opens up greater freedom for that vital creativity and play. This would be especially helpful in collaborative research, to foreground playful, creative, and open-ended conversations among the collaborators rather than the disparities and differences that will inevitably arise when diverse specialists come together.

Let us consider an example. In *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies*, Massimo Rondolino proposed a methodology that I think holds great potential for comparative hagiology.<sup>10</sup> It also can help illustrate what I have been trying to argue in this article. Although he observes sets of hagiographical sources in different traditions (Francis of Assisi and the Tibetan Buddhist *yogin* Milarepa), his main concern is not the figures themselves but the "hagiographical process"—the literary patterns and competing ideological forces that standardized the ways in which later generations remembered them. Although Rondolino may have initially selected these two examples based on a fairly traditional idea of sainthood, he approaches them by focusing on function, behavior, context, and change in the discourse of these texts. He calls this the "hagiographical process," but his method is a combination of discourse analysis, historiography, and close readings of texts. In essence, his project emphasizes the *comparative* rather than the *hagiology* of comparative hagiology. The word "hagiographical" derives from the fact that he analyzes texts that people conventionally regard as hagiography, because they are about individual people conventionally remembered as extraordinary religious figures.

To take this one ludic step further, this same approach that observed the "hagiographical process" could be applied equally well to figures who are liminal to the broadly conceived category of "saint,"

<sup>9</sup> (Freiberger 2018, pp. 8–9).

<sup>10</sup> (Rondolino 2017).

such as Confucius, Martin Luther, Charles VIII, Shivaji Bhosale, George Washington, Karl Marx, Elvis Presley, or Kim Jong-il. Do the same concerns and forces that define the hagiographical process of Francis and Milarepa also shape the cultural memory of these figures? If not, then what accounts for the difference? If so, what might this suggest about the distinctiveness of the *hagio-* in hagiology? By prioritizing the *comparative* in comparative hagiology and delaying the definition of hagiology, creative and playful comparative projects like these could go in some very interesting directions. They may even lead to developing new concepts that illuminate areas of research that were previously inconceivable, such as Robert Bellah's notion of civil religion.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, theories and definitions are human attempts to reckon with a messy world; we should expect the world to frequently overspill the boundaries that we imagine.

As we imagine what comparative hagiology could look like, I urge us to envision a field that is as broad and inclusive as possible. Prioritizing the comparative process and the methods that feed it hold the greatest potential for innovative and cross-culturally sensitive research. Of course, some people will inevitably object, after witnessing some of the experimental comparisons that arise out of this approach, "But that's not religion, and those aren't saints." To this, I would respond that the real problem is not that the scope for comparison is too broad, but that the definitions of religion and saints are too small.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- DiValerio, David. Forthcoming. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 1–14. [CrossRef]
- Nye, Malory. 2008. *Religion: The Basics*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Philippart, Guy. 1994. Hagiographes Et Hagiographie, Hagiologes Et Hagiologie: Des Mots Et Des Concepts. *Hagiographie* 1: 1–16. (In French).
- Ritchey, Sara. Forthcoming. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10. [CrossRef]
- Rondolino, Massimo. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. New York: Routledge.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for Hagiography. *Religions* 10: 538. [CrossRef]
- Tweed, Thomas. 2006. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

<sup>11</sup> Freiberger (following J. Z. Smith) calls this process of creating new categories "rectification"—the ultimate stage in the comparative process for some projects (Freiberger 2018, p. 11).

Article

# Dare to Compare: Reflections on Experimenting with Comparative Hagiology

R. Brian Siebeking

Department of Religious Studies, Gonzaga University, 502 East Boone Avenue, Spokane, WA 99258, USA; siebeking@gonzaga.edu

Received: 7 November 2019; Accepted: 4 December 2019; Published: 6 December 2019

**Abstract:** In this response essay, I consider Jon Keune’s proposal to prioritize the act of comparison over definitional agreement when beginning an exercise in comparative hagiology. Reflecting on my own experience as the respondent for a panel at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which saw me comparing two very different “hagiographical texts,” I argue in support of Keune’s approach by stressing its advantage in pushing conceptual creativity and collaborative inclusivity. In the process, I accept Massimo Rondolino’s invitation to consider his working re-definition of “hagiography”, which I take as a starting point for thinking through some of the questions my panel’s unconventional primary texts raise and how they might recommend revisiting our categories. In the end, I advocate for a capacious view of potential comparanda as one of the best ways to foster a process of continuous self-reflection and scholarly development.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative religions; comparative method; ethics; hagiology; hagiography; religious studies; sainthood; theory and method in religious studies

## 1. Introduction

At the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), I was asked to be the respondent for a panel entitled “The Ethics of the Saints: Re-Reading and Re-Writing Hagiographical Texts.” The two papers to which I responded were substantive and thought-provoking. They were also wildly different. Besides the fact that, as the panel’s title suggests, one involved the scholarly act of re-reading a text while the other analyzed the creative act of re-writing them, the authors’ use (or non-use) of key terms, such as “ethics,” “saint,” or “hagiography” indicated little ready overlap. What is more, the studies diverged in the periodization of their sources (medieval vs. modern), religion of focus (Islam vs. Christianity), and academic discipline (religious studies vs. theology). Despite the dialogical challenge posed by these layers of difference, I found the panel to be methodologically helpful. In what follows, I will reflect on this “experiment” in comparative hagiology in conversation with the core essays in this issue of *Religions*, especially those of Jon Keune and Massimo Rondolino, whose complementary contributions serve as the backdrop for my own thinking. In brief, a lack of common ground with respect to the *hagio*, the *graphē*, as well as the theories and methods employed by the papers to which I responded spurred me to test out a version of Keune’s approach—that is, to *initially* prioritize the comparative analysis over proposing hagiological definitions. Far from undercutting the comparative utility of “hagiography” as “a heuristic device that serves a taxonomical function” for like data (Rondolino 2019), I found this compare-first approach well suited for rethinking “the hagiographical” in expansive and (I hope) productive ways.

Now, before I proceed any further, allow me a few preliminary remarks. First, I have introduced several terms that require some fleshing out. These clarifications are especially important given their varying usage by the other contributors in this special issue. Like Rondolino, Ritchey, and Hollander, but unlike Keune, I assign “hagiography” a wide descriptive range, referring not only to texts but

all sorts of things which are “read” in relation to the *hagio*, including artistic productions, practices, and behaviors. In the course of my essay, it will become clear why I adopt such a broad understanding. As for “the hagiographical,” a phrase that I seditiously deploy as a noun, this is a nod toward Rondolino’s “hagiographical process” (Rondolino 2017, p. 2), specifically as it underlines the creative and receptive dynamics of hagiography. And, with respect to the view that there is no *hagio* without the *graphē* that defines him/her/it, I employ “hagiology” and “hagiological” to denote the study of hagiographical media, study of the hagiographical process, or discourse about theories and methods in the study of hagiographies. (Cf. Rondolino 2019; Ritchey 2019; Keune 2019; Hollander 2019; Zimbalist 2019).<sup>1</sup> Second, like so many of the other essayists here, my thinking has been shaped by participation in the on-going AAR-sponsored Comparative Hagiology Workshop, organized by Massimo Rondolino. The lively theoretical and methodological discussions of this collaborative forum’s 2018 session, the fruit of which can be found throughout this issue, have been particularly decisive in the following reflection.

## 2. Approach

Keune’s essay is given to exposing and interrogating a basic, if often unnoticed, tension in the structure of “comparative hagiology.” In terms of how the scholar *devises* her study, it is a question of prioritizing one over the other. Either one starts by describing the *hagio*<sup>2</sup> and then moves on to her comparison, or one proceeds directly to the comparative act (and the pre-comparative “first-order” methods that enable it)<sup>3</sup>, and afterward (re)considers what may (or may not) be hagiographical (or hagiological) about the comparanda based on the results. Keune advocates for the latter approach on the grounds that, as it expands the field of possible comparanda far beyond what are conventionally deemed in the Western academy as “hagiographies,” it is more likely to escape the gravitational pull of the Euro-Christian paradigm and its attending colonial baggage. Indeed, one should expect this compare-first approach to facilitate highly creative even playful experiments, in turn leading to new and unexpected ways of thinking about our objects of study, including “religion” itself. All in all, I find that Jon Keune makes a compelling case, not only with the accuracy and lucidity of how he describes the task of comparative hagiology but also with his capacious vision of what that work could be. Yes, to prioritize comparison is to take a risk—one may be judged provocative, reckless, or, worst of all, wrong!—but the potential rewards are great.

Understandably, Keune assumes that the comparativist has complete freedom to decide which approach to take up—compare-first vs. define-first<sup>4</sup>. In my case, however, I was constrained by the respondent’s task, which is, as I understand it, to bring the research and results of other scholars into conversation with one another on the agreed upon theme, or *tertium comparationis*. In retrospect, this conventional limitation was a benefit. Having the compare-first approach set before me at the outset helped to forestall overdetermining my analysis according to how I saw and used the operative terms in my own field. Still, I admit to finding it easier to proceed with a sense of ambiguity when it came to what we meant by “ethics” and “saints” than by “hagiography.” This impulse saw my preliminary thinking vacillate between leaving “hagiography” as a placeholder (per Keune’s proposal) and trying to arrive at agreement on a serviceable definition (per Rondolino’s proposal).<sup>5</sup> Now, let me be clear: I believe that the latter project (or something like it) is ultimately indispensable, especially

<sup>1</sup> On the historical complexity of these and related terms, see (Philippart 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that I accepted to gloss *hagio* as “saint” for my AAR panel, I prefer not to do so here. Being an Islamicist by training, my hesitation comes not from the term’s Christian connotations but from its automatic association in my field with Sufism. Thus, adopting “saint” in the context of Islamic hagiology risks excluding all kinds of other *hagios*, such as prophets, caliphs, scholars, etc.

<sup>3</sup> On comparison as a second-order method depending on prior first-order methods, see (Freiberger 2018; cf. Keune 2019).

<sup>4</sup> “In arguing that we should prioritize the *comparative* of comparative hagiology, I am pointing to the energy or inspiration that leads to selection” (Keune 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I played with a more restrictive variation of Rondolino’s definition (see Rondolino 2019).

for those concerned with communicating and collaborating outside of their fields of specialization.<sup>6</sup> However, for the participants *in the context of this AAR panel*—myself included—it quickly became apparent that getting on with the comparison rather than negotiating hagiological terms was going to be the more effective and practical approach. So, in order to get the dialogue off the ground, the panel agreed that the texts under discussion were “hagiographies” and moved on.

### 3. Comparison

Setting aside “hagiography” as a placeholder to enable our conversation prompted me to attend more carefully to the distinctive ways in which the panel contributors described their texts, methods, and conclusions, as well as how these descriptions might connect to our joint theme. In the process, I found their functionalist concerns to suggest new avenues of comparative inquiry that I would have missed had I insisted upon a prior hagiological consensus. To elucidate what I mean, let me begin by concisely describing the two scholarly papers. In the first, Stephanie Yep scrutinizes one of the most beloved devotional biographies of Muhammad, *al-Shifā’* of Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 1149). Using concepts and methods from discourse analysis and emotion theory, she convincingly shows how the text educates its reader on the proper “ethico-emotional comportment” one should have in relation to the Islamic prophet<sup>7</sup>. The second paper, by Min-Ah Cho, adopts a feminist literary and theological approach to explore *Dictee*, the avant-garde, quasi-autobiographical experiment of Korean-American author and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982). Her analysis persuasively argues that Cha’s “re-writing” and interweaving of the lives of three Catholic women (two saints; the other, anonymous and abused by her husband) in the work’s fifth chapter, “ERATO/LOVE POETRY,” is not only an individual act of resistance to a patriarchal church but one that, as it invites its reader to locate her own voice in the narratives, seeks to recover women’s experiences and agency more broadly.<sup>8</sup> Again, both are very well-conceived and insightful papers. But what do they suggest by way of hagiological comparison within the designated *tertium comparationis* of “ethics”?

It seemed to me then—as it still does now—that both studies revolve around the same locus of analysis: it is not so much the text (the *graphē*) or the subject of the text (the *hagio*) but the reader (or, in the case of the second paper, the writer as well as the reader). More specifically, Yep and Cho are concerned with demonstrating how the texts they examine inform certain practices of “reading” hagiography.<sup>9</sup> These practices could be called “ethics”—in line with our theme—to the extent that they seek to cultivate in their readers a particular relationality with the *hagio*. Of course, what this relationality is to look like varies considerably between the texts in question. Thus, according to Yep, *al-Shifā’* demands a particular sort of “emotional work” with respect to the veneration of Muhammad, whereas, in Cho’s analysis, the *Dictee* invites its women readers to develop a bond with the *hagios* by adding their own voices to the “concentric circle” of stories. But while they are certainly different, I would argue that it is precisely in the light of these differences that we can observe the texts’ basic hagiographical link, namely, how they both prescribe reading practices meant to develop a personal, affective, and participatory relationship between their readers and *hagio*-subjects. Although we cannot say in this case that the reader’s relation with the *hagio* is circumscribed by an ethic of exemplarity (cf. Ritchey 2019)<sup>10</sup>, there is an expectation that one is changed by the encounter.

<sup>6</sup> For a thought-provoking reflection on why and how to challenge our siloed thinking, see (French 2019).

<sup>7</sup> This paper is drawn from the author’s doctoral dissertation (Yep 2019). For the primary text, see (Ibn Mūsā 2014).

<sup>8</sup> This paper is an excerpt from the author’s forthcoming book chapter, see (Cho 2019). For the primary text, see (Cha 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Here I use “reading” broadly, to include reading *of something* as well as reading *into something*. It is in the latter sense that I locate Cha’s act of “re-writing” within this rubric.

<sup>10</sup> I should point out that Ritchey only glosses *hagio* as “exemplar” heuristically, “with the intention of clearing analytical space for multiple participants,” especially for those who might be put off by the term “saint.” (Ritchey 2019). All the same, it is difficult to imagine how that space might welcome non-exemplary *hagios*.

#### 4. Discussion

Following Keune's approach, it is in the wake of such a comparative exercise—brief though it may have been—that one is best positioned to proffer “stipulative definitions”<sup>11</sup> of the placeholder terms. Accordingly, here I would like to return to our central category of analysis, asking: If *al-Shifā'* and *Dictee* are “hagiographies,” do they signal alternative ways of thinking about the hagiographical? If so, how? First, as I have noted above, the respective analyses of Yep and Cho cooperate to amplify reorienting our attention from *text to practice*, from literary *subject* to transformative *experience*. This phenomenological perspective strikes me as all too often “the road not taken” (or at least less taken) in hagiological studies.<sup>12</sup> Second, rethinking the hagiographical in terms of media that promotes a set of reading practices (and here I do not mean “reading” in the strictly textual sense) which are meant to cultivate an active relationality with the *hagio*, suggests the need to consider the fundamental role of *reception* (individual and communal) in the definition of hagiography. In fact, one could argue that, irrespective of authorial intent, a text or other production is not a “hagiography” until it is received *hagiographically*, that is, received by its reader(s) as a medium of relating to the *hagio*.<sup>13</sup>

Now, if we accept that the hagiographical is, or at least *can be*, characterized by a dynamic of active relationality between the reader and the *hagio*, how would this influence our interpretation of “hagiography” as an analytical category for apprehending like data? In order to think this through, I would like to accept Rondolino's invitation to consider his working re-definition:

[Hagiography is] the complex web of behaviors, practices, beliefs and productions (literary, visual, acoustic, etc.) in and by which a given community constructs the memory of individuals who are recognized as the embodied perfection of the “religious” ideal promoted by the community's tradition and socio-cultural context (Rondolino 2019).

Here we have a remarkably well-developed proposal, which, on the basis of Rondolino's supporting examples, I find quite persuasive. But how well does it correspond with our data, with Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *vade mecum* of Muḥammadan devotion and Cha's artistic weaving of the stories of Catholic saints and non-saints? On the one hand, Rondolino's generous construal of the *graphē* to include behaviors and practices appears to welcome attention to the very sort of relational reading practices that define the above works. On the other hand, there is the question of whether viewing hagiography only through the lens of community memory might lead one to ignore considerations of the contemporary readers' experience of the *hagio* (through *graphē*) as a personal reality that impacts their present lives<sup>14</sup>.

But an even more significant question arises when we consider the latter part of the definition. Drawing on his expertise in the study of Buddhism and medieval, Western Christianity, Rondolino articulates the *hagio* as the “embodied perfection of the ‘religious’ ideal.” This is a carefully considered phrasing that, it would seem to me, has broad transferability. But does it have currency in the present case? In reference to Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's depiction of Muḥammad, it might, so long as the Prophet's example of perfection is perceived as an *illustration of* and not as a *model for*.<sup>15</sup> (Sure, Muḥammad is the Muslim exemplar *par excellence*, but not in all aspects, and certainly not with respect to his prophetic status and miracles, which are Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's chief concerns.) Now, as for the idea of perfection in Cha's work, there is no need for such equivocation. Her “concentric circle” experiment is purposely built upon the imperfect, the incomplete, a state of perpetual potentiality, welcoming more voices, more stories. Lastly, we should ask something about that delightfully ambiguous modifier “religious.” Should one

<sup>11</sup> Here I am referencing Keune's redirection of Thomas Tweed (Keune 2019; cf. Tweed 2006, p. 34).

<sup>12</sup> However, see Sara Ritchey's list of questions under the heading “Intercession/Transformation” (Ritchey 2019).

<sup>13</sup> I understand Hollander to be getting at something similar in his discussion of “hagiographical *consumption*” see (Hollander 2019).

<sup>14</sup> For a study that attends to the latter specifically, see Hollander's psychosocial analysis of hagiography as *acts* of mediation that inscribe understandings and experiences of the *hagio* in the context of modern Cyprus (Hollander 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For this distinction of the hagiographical “example,” see (Hawley 1987, p. xiii).

take it to indicate that the hagiographical ideal has been sanctioned by the community's "religious" authorities, or that it reflects their "religious" beliefs and practices, or that it takes up their "religious" subjects, or . . . ? Whatever the case may be, the unorthodox *Dictee* would again seem to challenge this stricture.

## 5. Conclusions

Given how Qādī 'Iyād's *al-Shifā'* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* might challenge our notion of "hagiography," perhaps the simplest solution would be to just write them off as "non-hagiographical." I imagine that some of my readers have already arrived at this conclusion, especially with regard to the latter work. But that is not the more curious or courageous response, nor the one I see advocated by my colleagues in this special issue. Each and every one of them, in his or her own way, suggests the possibility, if not the outright necessity, of critically revisiting and (when appropriate) revising our conceptual categories in the course of the comparative process<sup>16</sup>. In the end, undertaking sustained, interdisciplinary comparative projects in a collaborative way<sup>17</sup> will necessitate finding some common ground—perhaps in a heuristic definition (Rondolino 2019), "controlled vocabulary" (DiValerio 2019), or "descriptive index" (Ritchey 2019)—and I am immensely grateful to my colleagues who have begun thinking in this direction. If my modest reflections have contributed something to those conversations, it is simply, in echo of Jon Keune, to encourage prioritizing the comparative exercise with boldness and creativity, continuously making space for the "other" as a way of productively destabilizing our conceptual models—especially when that "other" is at first perceived as unusual, liminal, and perhaps even non-religious.<sup>18</sup> If, as Todd French avers, the comparative paradigm is ultimately "a catalyst for seeing again one's own field with clarity, drawing on the wealth of fresh perspectives and awareness" (French 2019), I can think of few better ways to push forward this critical self-reflection and enhance our scholarly contributions than by expanding the range of comparanda in dialogue with diverse and, most importantly, generous interlocutors.<sup>19</sup>

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### List of Contributors:

DiValerio, David M. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. doi:10.3390/rel10100585.

French, Todd E. 2019. Saints Across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. doi:10.3390/rel10100577.

Harrower, Scott. 2019. The Ethics of Doing Comparative Hagiography. *Religions* 10. Forthcoming

Hollander, Aaron T. 2019. Comparison as Collaboration: Notes on the Contemporary Craft of Hagiology. *Religions* 10. Forthcoming

Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. doi:10.3390/rel10100575.

Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue as Destablization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. doi:10.3390/rel10100569.

Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for Hagiography. *Religions* 10: 538. doi:10.3390/rel10100538.

---

<sup>16</sup> Here the insights of Jonathan Z. Smith and, more recently, Oliver Freiberger loom large (see, for example, Smith 1982; Smith 2000; and Smith 2004; Freiberger 2018 and Freiberger 2019).

<sup>17</sup> On why a collaborative approach to comparison is not only beneficial but often "imperative," see (French 2019; Hollander 2019). And for an important reflection on the ethics of collaboration, see (Harrower 2019).

<sup>18</sup> On the potential analytical utility of *hagiography* as a category for apprehending "transreligious" data, see (Hollander 2019; cf. Keune 2019).

<sup>19</sup> I am especially grateful for (and in awe of) the indefatigable efforts of Massimo Rondolino in creating spaces for my colleagues and I to think together on these questions.



Zimbalist, Barbara. 2019. Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality. *Religions* 10: 604. doi:10.3390/rel10110604.

## References

- Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. 1981. *Dictée*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Cho, Min-Ah. 2019. Writing with the Dead: Women's Practice of Rewriting the Stories of the Saints. In *Holy Writing by the People of God*. Edited by Susan Abraham. Los Angeles: Marymount Institute Press, forthcoming.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2019. *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hawley, John Stratton, ed. 1987. *Saints and Virtues*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hollander, Aaron T. 2018. The Multimediation of Holiness: Hagiography as Resistance in Greek Orthodox Theological Culture. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago, Divinity School, Chicago.
- Ibn Mūsá, 'Iyāq. 2014. *Kitāb al-shifā' bi-ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-muṣṭafā'* [The Book of Healing by Acknowledging the Rights of the Chosen One]. Edited by 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Amīn. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah.
- Philippart, Guy. 1994. Hagiographes et Hagiographie, Hagiologes et Hagiologie: Des Mots et des Concepts. *Hagiographica* 1: 1–16.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2000. The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberly C. Patton. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 237–41.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tweed, Thomas A. 2006. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Yep, Stephanie. 2019. "Calm Yourself": Inviting Emotion Management in Early Medieval Sīra. Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality

Barbara Zimbalist

Department of English, The University of Texas at El Paso, 500 University Ave, El Paso, TX 79968-0526, USA; bezimbalist@utep.edu

Received: 11 October 2019; Accepted: 28 October 2019; Published: 31 October 2019

**Abstract:** Although the academic study of hagiography continues to flourish, the role of comparative methods within the study of sanctity and the saints remains underutilized. Similarly, while much valuable work on saints and sanctity relies on materialist methodologies, issues of critical bibliography particular to the study of hagiography have not received the theoretical attention they deserve. This essay takes up these two underattended approaches to argue for a comparative materialist approach to hagiography. Through a short case study of the Latin *Vita* of Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246) written by the Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1200–1270), I suggest that comparative material research into the textual history of hagiographic literature can provide us with a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the production of any specific holy figure, as well as the evolving discourses of sanctity and holiness in general. While this suggestion emerges from my own work on medieval hagiography from the Christian Latin West, it resonates with recent arguments by Sara Ritchey and David DiValerio to call for a materially comparative approach to narratives of holy lives in any religious tradition in any time period. Furthermore, I suggest that medieval studies, and in particular medieval manuscript studies, may have much to offer to scholars of sanctity working in later periods and other settings. Offering a view of material textual scholarship as intrinsically comparative, we may expand our theoretical definitions of the comparative and its possibilities within the study of sanctity.

**Keywords:** comparative literature; comparative method; comparative religions; critical bibliography; hagiography; hagiology; manuscript studies; medieval Christianity; religious studies; sainthood

---

In the century between Canon MacCulloch’s proposal of “comparative hagiology” as a discrete field of study and Massimo Rondolino’s call for its serious reconsideration, the study of hagiography has developed into an academic discipline on its own terms.<sup>1</sup> Countless serious and theoretically ambitious studies now provide more scholarly bibliography than any single graduate seminar could include.<sup>2</sup> Book series from American and European publishers encourage new theoretical approaches to hagiography while calling for expanded attention to global traditions of sanctity.<sup>3</sup> Yet the role and force of the comparative within the study of hagiography remains—with a few exceptions—curiously undertheorized, despite the flourishing fields of comparative religions, comparative literatures, and their attendant professional organizations.<sup>4</sup> Many possible reasons for this particular lacuna exist,

---

<sup>1</sup> See (MacCulloch 1908; Rondolino 2017).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, (Brown 1981; Vauchez 1981; Heffernan 1988; Head 1990; Kleinberg 1992, 2008; Bartlett 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For new book series, see Amsterdam University Press’ *Hagiography beyond Tradition* and Routledge’s *Sanctity in Global Perspective*.

<sup>4</sup> For comparative studies in religion see, for example, (Clooney 2010; Clooney and Stosch 2018; Freiburger 2018, 2019; Freidenreich 2004); and in general the “Comparative Religion” series from Oxford University Press; see as well the Comparative Studies in Religion Unit of the American Academy of Religion. For studies in literature, see the rise in

from the place of hagiographic scholarship within studies in religion and literature, more broadly to the difficulties inherent in academic approaches to the sacred. Yet, as Todd French notes in this issue, while the disciplinary restrictions inherent to academic specialization create a difficult terrain for comparative approaches to religious topics, they nevertheless “render collaborative work imperative.”<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I want to focus on a specialized but nevertheless crucial facet of hagiography: the unique challenges inherent within the critical bibliography of hagiographic literature.<sup>6</sup> I am mindful as well, here, of the historical, conceptual, and disciplinary issues raised by the term “hagiography”, long used as a generic classification with colonialist, patriarchal, and Christo-centric associations.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to use the term “hagiography” in the discussion that follows—with some caution—because I focus specifically on a methodology for approaching the literature of sanctity: the textual record of the life stories of holy men and women.<sup>8</sup> In this relatively narrow terminological usage I depart from Sara Ritchey’s and Massimo Rondolino’s use of the term, explained elsewhere in this issue, to describe a much wider range of medial and conceptual records of the sacred imaginary, which variously combine in the production of holy identity and reputation. I agree with my co-contributors that hagiography in and of itself exceeds the textual, and I am mindful in particular of Jon Keune’s caution here, that we give careful nuance to the various media expressing sanctity, since “the word hagiography cannot but prioritize textuality in its very restricted sense of written documents.”<sup>9</sup> However, for the purposes of this essay focused on materialist approaches to the literature of sanctity, I have chosen to use the older term hagiography for this very reason, because, in Ritchey’s formulation, “the *graphia* or text-production of the hagiographical process concentrates the *hagio* of the exemplary figure”. The material history of hagiographic texts—the various texts that lie behind the official or canonical versions of any saint’s life story in any tradition—demand rigorous and context-specific approaches to the oral and written narratives of their sanctity because it is those narratives that preserve and even—through the multiple configurations charted here by David DiValerio—create sanctity itself.<sup>10</sup> A materialist approach to those narratives thus necessitates the technical methodology of manuscript studies and book history.

While the study of any particular saint, hagiography, or hagiographic tradition may at first glance appear singular, monolingual, or culturally isolated, in actual fact, the differences in cultural context between literary and spiritual traditions demands nuanced scholarly engagement with the complex balances of religious, political, and social forces that generate the cultural milieu of holiness.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Massimo Rondolino argues elsewhere in this issue, the term “hagiography” itself signifies “an analytical category for the taxonomy of sources that contribute to construct and promote the recognition of a given individual as a perfected being in the context of a particular religious theory of truth.”<sup>12</sup> The textual history of any single hagiographic text often encompasses a long and complicated history of narrative negotiation among speakers, languages, and versions of a life story, more often than not resulting in the type of generic diversity of sources discussed here by DiValerio, and able

---

comparative literature departments in American universities since the 1990s, journals such as *Comparative Literature* (Duke University Press), book series such as Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature (Harvard University Press), and the ongoing work of the American Comparative Literature Association.

<sup>5</sup> French explains, “our particular scholarly communities . . . are ill-practiced at—and perhaps ill-equipped for—crossing over traditions in the interest of interdisciplinary perspectives and compelling theories that might expand our ways of knowing.” (French 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For foundational theoretical discussion of critical bibliography see (Chartier 1994; Feuvre and Martin 1976; among others); for introduction to medieval manuscript studies see (Clemens and Graham 2007; Johnston and Dussen 2015); for examples of influential materialist readings of texts in manuscript that offer new views of a particular subject, author, corpus, or reading culture, see (Dagenais 1994; Bahr 2013; Lifshitz 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See in particular the essays by Keune, Ritchey, DiValerio, and Rondolino in this issue.

<sup>8</sup> (Ritchey 2019; Rondolino 2019).

<sup>9</sup> (Keune 2019).

<sup>10</sup> For excellent studies of hagiographic manuscript culture see (Kuefler 2014; Bcheiry 2018).

<sup>11</sup> For sanctity and holiness as communally constructed, see the essential work of (Brown 1981; Deloos 1962; Heffernan 1988; Kleinberg 1992); see also Rondolino in this issue.

<sup>12</sup> (Rondolino 2019).

to reveal a holy imaginary along more indexical axes, as Ritchey suggests, than we might expect.<sup>13</sup> I suggest further that attention to the material history of the literature of sanctity—to the religious literature that Western scholarship has long termed hagiography—allows us to ask questions that reveal a comparative approach to hagiography from the inside out. What is the role of material history, manuscript studies, and print history in comparative studies in religious literature, and in particular in studies of hagiography? Can questions of critical bibliography be comparative? Or, to ask in another way, can such questions be anything *but* comparative? Self-reflective interrogation of the material history of hagiographic literature may be closer to Keune’s “comparative-prioritized” method than we realize, able to “disrupt normative readings” as French recommends, precisely because our narratives of the textual, material history of hagiographic literature remain largely unexamined—and unquestioned.<sup>14</sup> Only through a comparative approach to the material record can we begin to ask such questions and work toward a more nuanced understanding of the literature of sanctity.

In what follows, I offer one set of perspectives on these issues by way of reflections on a brief case study. The text I will discuss—the *Vita* of Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246 CE), written in the mid-thirteenth century by the Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré (1200–1270 CE)—appears to exemplify the authoritative textual singularity attributed to high-medieval Latin hagiography in the Western Christian tradition.<sup>5</sup> This singularity, often imagined as textual, linguistic, and authorial, receives reinforcement through inclusion within the official canon of the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum*, which offers a definitive, authoritative text of a saint’s life. As David DiValerio and Jon Keune observe in their essays here, comparative methodology appears to cohere uneasily with the apparently singular normativity of the textual, materialist orientation of hagiographic literature: the holy life story of a saintly person, assumed to be written by an authoritative, male, clerical author, most likely in service of canonization efforts.<sup>16</sup> The textual history of Lutgard’s *Vita*, however, tells an entirely different story of narrative collaboration, textual variants, differing translations, and ongoing editorial intervention. It reveals this apparently singular *Vita* to be the product of multiple, sometimes competing forces, and demonstrates that only a comprehensive, *comparative* view of this diverse plurality can begin to show us the history of Lutgard, her sanctity, and her *Vita*. In its particulars, Lutgard’s *Vita* demonstrates one of the main reasons that comparative methodologies have had such small purchase in what otherwise remains the flourishing scholarly field of hagiography. Simply put, the official, printed version of Lutgard’s *Vita* in the *Acta Sanctorum* canonizes the text at the same time that it obscures its own varied and diverse material history.<sup>17</sup> Through a comparative approach to the narratives and manuscripts of Lutgard’s *Vita*, however, we might not only recover some of that history and gain new perspective on the diverse influences that collude in the production of sanctity, but we can also trace the contours of a materialist methodology that argues for a more internally comparative approach to hagiography.<sup>18</sup> Although comparative scholarship remains most frequently conceptualized as comparative *across* or *between* traditions, languages, and cultures, comparison *within* any apparently singular tradition of religious literature—comparison of the various literary, conceptual, and ideological forces that collude in the production of sanctity—offers valuable new insight both into the production of the hagiographic text as well as the production of sanctity itself.<sup>19</sup> While approaches such as Ritchey’s analytical index or DiValerio’s formal vocabulary reveal narrative plurality within perceived

<sup>13</sup> (DiValerio 2019; Ritchey 2019).

<sup>14</sup> (Keune 2019; French 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Lutgard’s *Vita* has been edited and published in Latin by the Bollandists (Bolland 1897) and in English translation as part of Thomas of Cantimpré’s *oeuvre* (Newman 2008).

<sup>16</sup> On hagiographic scholarship as essentially comparative, see (Rondolino 2017, 2019). In Rondolino’s estimation hagiography not only essentially functions comparatively but also invites—even necessitates—reflection on that methodological quality.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see DiValerio’s discussion of how the reworking of hagiographic materials renders earlier sources invisible (DiValerio 2019).

<sup>18</sup> See note 14.

<sup>19</sup> See note 11.

textual singularity, comparison of the different actors (human and/or object) within the material history of a single text further reveal the multiplicity inherent within apparently singular traditions. The act of comparison, when considered as a fundamental aspect of a materialist approach to holy lives, thus invites theoretical reflection on the comparative possibilities inherent within studies of hagiography writ large: as method, concept, and discipline.

As I explain above, my choice to discuss Lutgard's *Vita* stems from the vast differences between the canonical version of her *Vita* as recorded in the *Acta Sanctorum* and the material record of that text before its "official" Bollandist printing. I am inspired in this textual focus by Sara Ritchey's work on late-medieval hagiographic manuscripts, particularly her observation that "the fundamental mobility of medieval texts . . . signified in ever-changing ways during the process of transmission."<sup>20</sup> Precisely because of its material variety and variance, that is, medieval hagiography often offers a particularly rich opportunity for a comparative material approach.<sup>21</sup> A Cistercian prioress and mystic, Lutgard remains somewhat well known within circles of Catholic devotion as the patroness of the blind and disabled, a founding figure of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and an unofficial patron saint of Flanders. Her *Vita* is thought to have been composed within two years after her death by her spiritual friend and confessor Thomas of Cantimpré, a Dominican friar who had previously written *vitae* of Marie d'Oignies, Christina Mirabilis, and Margaret d'Ypres.<sup>22</sup> While the *Vita* was very likely intended to promote Lutgard's canonization, she was never formally canonized; she remained popular locally, however, and a cult in her honor flourished for centuries after her death. While now little studied, Lutgard's *Vita* was much admired, often translated, and frequently recopied by medieval copyists and compilers, who saw her as one of the *mulieres religiosae* of high medieval Liège whose spirituality offered new modes of devotion and piety to high medieval women.<sup>23</sup>

Lutgard's Latin *Vita* circulated in ten manuscripts, one of them (Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek 7919) significantly shorter than the other nine. Dutch scholars have long debated the relationship between different manuscript versions of the Latin *Vita*. Guido Hendrix has termed the shorter version of the *Vita* the "primitive *vita*" or *Vita Antiqua*.<sup>24</sup> He argued that the Bollandists who had first edited the text had erroneously rejected the shorter version for invalid reasons—which included, in his view, a mistaken view of the shorter *Vita* as an abridgment rather than an original or early draft of the *Vita*. His comparative reading raised serious questions about the *Vita*'s authorship and reception. If the shorter version was indeed a true *Vita Antiqua*, he argued, then Thomas of Cantimpré must either have composed the *Vita* in parts over time; or the longer version of the *Vita* represented a collection of material written by a later author. This may not seem like a dramatic claim; yet when considered through the lens of generic scholarship, the argument takes on more urgent force. Lutgard's *Vita* has long been regarded as Thomas of Cantimpré's masterpiece. To accept Hendrix's argument would mean accepting the possibility that Thomas' final and greatest work might not have been either of those things; and more profoundly, it would mean accepting a view of hagiographic authorship as collaborative and communal. As many scholars have long argued, sanctity is essentially a communal construct, yet extending this communal impulse to the act of authorship remains a less enthusiastically embraced approach to the material history of hagiography.<sup>25</sup> A comparative reading of a single *vita*'s versions, however, suggests a communal mode of authorship more accurately reflecting the ways in which hagiography constructs its subject over time.

Since Hendrix's argument, however, scholarship continued to treat the *Vita* as the product of a single author; finally, in 1996 Jean-Baptiste Le Febvre published a rebuttal of Hendrix, claiming that

---

<sup>20</sup> (Ritchey 2017, p. 1103).

<sup>21</sup> I share Ritchey's view of medieval textual transmission grounded in Paul Zumthor's concept of *mouvance* and Bernard Cerquiglini's concept of *variance* (Zumthor 1989; Cerquiglini 1999).

<sup>22</sup> For Thomas' complete *oeuvre*, see (Newman 2008); for recent analysis of his work as a whole see (Smith 2019).

<sup>23</sup> For discussion of Lutgard's piety see (Bynum 1987; Smith 2019).

<sup>24</sup> (Hendrix 1978).

<sup>25</sup> (Kleinberg 1992; Vauchez 1981; Heffernan 1988).

the *Vita Antiqua* was not in fact an early draft but rather a later abridgment—as the Bollandists had long ago supposed.<sup>26</sup> Hendrix’s challenge to the Bollandists’ editorial practices was clearly unpopular, and Dutch scholarship has uniformly accepted the *Acta Sanctorum* version of the text and referenced Lefebvre as the authority on the manuscripts (not Hendrix). As a result, the canonical force of the *Acta Sanctorum*’s editorial apparatus resists attempts at reexamination of the material history behind it. While on some level canonical persistence fuels the most fundamental goals of the Bollandist project in that it perpetuates a “stable” sanctity, that stability comes at the cost of a more nuanced understanding of the manuscript tradition of the *vitae*, of a clear view of the communal nature of that sanctity, and of precisely what *Vitae* such as Lutgard’s continue to represent in academic settings. When we place the material history of the Latin *Vita* alongside a comparative reading of its vernacular translations, moreover, new possibilities for understanding the text and its authorship emerge.

Lutgard’s *Vita* also circulated in manuscript in Dutch poetry, Dutch prose, and French prose. Each of these versions differs not only linguistically but formally from the canonical Latin *Vita*. The Dutch verse translation, the *Leven Van Lutgart*, preserved in Copenhagen Royal Library G.K.S. 168, consists of over 20,000 lines of poetry divided into stanzas of varying length, and an in-text dedication dates its composition before 1274. For centuries, scholars attributed this translation to William van Affligem, though within the last fifty years this authorial attribution has become more contested.<sup>27</sup> The thirteenth century manuscript translates only the second and third sections of the Latin *Vita*. Based on later references within the text to a lost first part, there is general consensus within Dutch scholarship that part one existed in verse translation at some point, though now lost, which makes the Copenhagen manuscript necessarily a copy of an earlier translated version of the *Vita*. The relatively early date suggests that translation of Lutgard’s *Vita* was taken up almost immediately after her Latin *Vita* began to circulate, which has intriguing ramifications for the relationship of the two different Latin versions to each other. The two different prose translations support this view of temporal contiguity and complex Latin textual evolution.

The prose Dutch translation, preserved in a late fifteenth century manuscript at the Brussels Library of the Bollandists, consists only of the first fifteen chapters of the Latin *Vita*. In these details, the prose Dutch translation is most similar to the shorter version of the Latin *Vita*—the version Hendrix argued for as the *Vita Antiqua*. In a series of articles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hendrix claimed that the existence of the prose translation confirmed his suspicions that the shorter version of the *Vita* preceded the longer version, and thus that Thomas of Cantimpré composed Lutgard’s life over a much longer period of time than generally accepted. The existence of this prose Dutch translation thus raises the possibility of an extended Latin translation informed by intermediate vernacular translation. This intriguing suggestion has yet to be taken up as a serious subject of study; furthermore, no earlier manuscript containing the prose translation is known to exist, which makes definitive knowledge of the relationship between the Latin *Vita* and the prose translation impossible. The same cannot be said, however, for the French prose translation, which represents a very early translation effort internally dated before 1248.<sup>28</sup> Like the prose Dutch translation, it does not include the full *Vita*; like the verse Dutch translation, however, it does include material from the long *Vita*. Hendrix and Josef Van Mierlo suggested that it may represent a lost, intermediate Latin version of the *Vita* by Thomas, and thus provide evidence of a longer process of hagiographic authorship that may have incorporated originally vernacular material.<sup>29</sup> This view of the vernacular translations, as potential contributors to the canonical Latin version of Lutgard’s *Vita*, specifically challenges long-held views of Lutgard’s

<sup>26</sup> (Le Fébvre 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Currently, the dbnl considers the question of authorship “zeer onzeker”, despite Erwin Mantingh’s attempts to definitively prove William’s authorship (Mantingh 2000).

<sup>28</sup> The manuscript is preserved in a sixteenth century manuscript in the Leuven library of the faculty of Divinity; the prologue dedicates the text to Abbess Hadewijch of Aywières, who died in 1248.

<sup>29</sup> (Hendrix 1978; Van Mierlo 1936).

*Vita* as Thomas' magnum opus, and demonstrates the scholarly benefits of a comparative approach to material textual history.

I hope that the previous paragraphs have demonstrated in small part the revelatory power of a comparative approach to material history, by making visible how pervasive assumptions about Latin's anteriority and textual singularity might be usefully interrogated through a comparative, materialist approach. By accepting that vernacular translation may have played some role in the ongoing composition of Lutgard's canonical Latin *Vita*, we might take a new look at authorship as a communal venture that incorporated many more authorial participants than current scholarship allows. This type of materialist comparison, further, might combine productively with the analytical methods outlined here by DiValerio and Ritchey. Intersecting methodologies—and, often by extension, collaborative work, such as the work that inspired the essays in this issue—thus emerges as a valuable approach to the study of sanctity, despite its relative paucity in the critical record. In attempting to understand the pressures of canon and the workings of genre, we must always look to the material histories that sometimes obscure, sometimes reveal, but always shape those larger ideologies through which we encounter a text—ideologies which, as Rondolino and Keune point out, inform not just our approach to hagiographic subject but our very conception of hagiology, hagiography, and sanctity itself. Though I have focused here on a fairly conventional example of Western medieval Christian hagiography, I hope that these observations may inspire further reflection on any sanctity tradition, and on the academic discipline of hagiographic studies more broadly. Comparative investigation of the material history of hagiography—along with the collaborative, intersectional methodologies such investigation might inspire—can only augment our ideas about sanctity, authorship, and textuality, and allow us to chart new paths forward in our understanding of these discourses.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** This essay grew out of the presentations and workshops I attended at Trinity University in 2015, "European Religious Cultures Symposium" and 2017, "OLD BOOKS/ New Approaches", both organized by Andrew Kraebel; the 2016 Renaissance Society of America conference panel, "Religious Connectivity in Urban Communities (1400-1600)", organized by Sara Ritchey; and the "Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method" workshop at the 2019 American Academy of Religion meeting, organized by Massimo Rondolino. I would like to thank Andrew, Sara, and Massimo, as well as the participants in those gatherings whose comments and insights inspired this continued work, including Alison Frazier, Mary Kate Hurley, Nancy Bradley Warren, Suzan Folkerts, and Jon Keune.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## References

- Bahr, Arthur. 2013. *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bartlett, Robert. 2013. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bcheiry, Iskandar. 2018. *The Account of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Yūhanun bar Say Allah (1483–1492): The Syriac Manuscript of Cambridge: DD.3.8(1)*. *Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies* 34. Piscataway: Gorgias Press.
- Bolland, Jean. Ed. 1897. *Vita Lutgardis Virgine in Aquiriae Brabantia*. In *Acta Sanctorum*. Paris: Palmé, pp. 189–210.
- Brown, Peter. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bynum, Caroline. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cerquiglini, Bernard. 1999. *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*. Translated by Betsey Wing. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chartier, Roger. 1994. *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Clemens, Raymond, and Timothy Graham. 2007. *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Clooney, Francis X. 2010. *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Clooney, Francis X., and Klaus Von Stosch, eds. 2018. *How to Do Comparative Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Dagenais, John. 1994. *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the "Libro de Buen Amor"*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Delooz, Pierre. 1962. Pour une Étude Sociologique de la Sainteté Canonisée dans l'Église Catholique. *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 13: 17–43. [CrossRef]
- DiValerio, David. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. [CrossRef]
- Febvre, Lucien, and Henri-Jean Martin. 1976. *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450–1800*. Translated by David Gerard. New York: Verso.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2019. *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Freidenreich, David M. 2004. Comparison in the History of Religions: Reflections and Critiques. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16: 80–101.
- French, Todd. 2019. Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. [CrossRef]
- Head, Thomas. 1990. *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints. The Diocese of Orléans, 800–1200*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heffernan, Thomas. 1988. *Sacred Biography. Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hendrix, Guido. 1978. Primitive versions of Thomas of Cantimpré's *Vita Lutgardis*. *Cîteaux* 29: 153–206.
- Johnston, Michael, and Michael Van Dussen, eds. 2015. *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. [CrossRef]
- Kleinberg, Aviad. 1992. *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kleinberg, Aviad. 2008. *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kuefler, Matthew. 2014. *The Making and Unmaking of a Saint: Hagiography and Memory in the Cult of Gerald of Aurillac*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Le Fébvre, Jean-Baptiste. 1996. Sainte Lutgarde d'Aywières en son temps (1182–1246). *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 58: 277–335.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 2014. *Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture*. The Bronx: Fordham University.
- MacCulloch, Canon. 1908. Sainly Miracles: A Study in Comparative Hagiology. *The Expository Times* 19: 403–9. [CrossRef]
- Maniñgh, Erwin. 2000. *Een monnik met een rol: Willem van Affligem, het Kopenhaagse Leven van Lutgard en de fictie van een meerdaagse voorlezing*. Hilversum: Verloren.
- Newman, Barbara, trans. and ed. 2008. *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Christina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2017. Saints' Lives as Efficacious Texts: Cistercian Monks, Religious Women, and Curative Reading, c. 1250–1330. *Speculum* 92: 1101–43. [CrossRef]
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. [CrossRef]
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.



- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for *Hagiography*. *Religions* 10: 538. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Smith, Rachel. 2019. *Excessive Saints: Gender, Narrative, and Theological Invention in Thomas of Cantimpré's Mystical Hagiographies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Mierlo, Josef. 1936. Het leven van Sinte Lutgart oorspronkelijk Limburgsch? In *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal-en-Letterkunde*. Gent: Drukkerij Erasmus, pp. 627–44.
- Vauchez, André. 1981. *La Sainteté en Occident aux Derniers Siècles du Moyen Âge d'après les Procès de Canonisation et les Documents Hagiographiques*. Rome: École française de Rome.
- Zumthor, Paul. 1989. *Essai de poésie médiévale*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Article

# The Ethics of Doing Comparative Hagiology

Scott Harrower

Department of History, Theology and Ethics, Ridley College, Melbourne, VIC 3052, Australia; harrower.scott@gmail.com

Received: 7 November 2019; Accepted: 2 December 2019; Published: 4 December 2019

**Abstract:** This paper argues that a virtue-informed methodology is foundational to best practice in scholarly, collaborative, and comparative hagiological work. Following a discussion of how this resonates with Todd French’s work in this volume, I then draw from my experience as an educator to outline how a virtue-based approach might play out in pedagogy. Finally, I offer two metaphors for an “other-person centered” collaborative–comparativist mindset. Both of these are taken from my lived, and conversational “apprenticeship” in comparative hagiology on the Argentine–Brazilian border. Reflection on these metaphors, as well as their generative experiences, demonstrates the need for holistic self-reflection in the comparative study of religions, and of “hagiography” in particular.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative method; comparative religions; disciplinary innovation; ethics; hagiography; hagiology; justice; pedagogy; religious studies

---

## 1. The Pressing Issue

One of the most pressing issues in comparative hagiology is how to carry it out when we often do so in a highly charged context, whether this is in the arenas of academic collaboration, pedagogical settings, or lived religion. The potential for misunderstanding each other’s assumptions, biases, intentions, and conclusions means that, unfortunately, the spectre of unintentionally causing offence hovers over the entire enterprise. This may have the effect of eroding and discouraging productive relationships and projects. This concern is further heightened by our recognition that it is not possible to be an expert in a number of scholarly fields, which in practice means that very often we will carry out our comparative work as non-experts looking “over the fence” into someone else’s scholarly domain, which is often heavily guarded. Such guardedness about our work and scholarly expertise needs to be acknowledged, because it is a reality that stems from complex processes that are entrenched within individuals and academic groups.<sup>1</sup> These include, but are not limited to: the desire to be respected as a significant researcher, insecurities about our competence, the psychology of merit associated with the risk-taking inherent to higher education, professional silos of expertise, and fear of public shaming. These interdependent issues contribute to the scholarly and relational maze through which we must find our way if we are going to work well together. In what follows, I argue that virtues such as justice and wisdom help mitigate a number of the hazards that accompany comparative hagiology. I trust that this essay will generate a conversation about the need for group self-reflection for the benefit of collaborative scholarship and comparative hagiology.

## 2. Virtues as the Moral Basis of Collaborative and Comparative Hagiology

If we begin our discussion from the perspective that persons and flourishing relationships are valuable fundamental realities, then we can claim that collaborative and comparative hagiological

---

<sup>1</sup> Todd French deals with this issue in his essay in this special issue. He promotes the importance of the work of scholarly “generalists” who may shed light on a range of academic disciplines and their methodological cultures (French 2019, pp. 1–2).

work requires respect and justice for one another including for different religious traditions and methodologies. Respect and justice may work to the end of generating candid interpersonal interest and openness in comparative hagiographical work.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on collaboration applies to all comparative work, because we are necessarily dealing with other people's past work and often collaborating with live people in the process of comparison, too. Respect means treating each other with justice. In practice, justice means relating to each other in such a way as to uphold the demands for fair treatment that intrinsically belong to each human being and their work.<sup>3</sup> A concern for justice is accompanied by the other virtues of wisdom, restraint and courage. Justice, restraint, wisdom, and courage are explicitly and implicitly built into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the American Academy of Religion code of conduct.<sup>4</sup> A secular Western society and the AAR are our primary working contexts, so they can be reasonably taken as an informative common basis for our work in hagiology, because a human rights approach to our work assumes and expects justice with respect to all areas of a person's life, including their religious views and the practices related to them.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these reasons, there are personal experiential motivations for this claim, which I discuss at the end of this essay in recognition that our scholarly work stems holistically from whom we have become and are becoming in culture, relationships, and time. The interconnected scholarly and personal dimensions of what I discuss result in the belief that those involved in comparative hagiology will act and think justly with respect to all religiosities, and in return, the work of comparative scholars will be treated with justice too.<sup>6</sup> This moral aspect of the comparative study of religions has been recently pointed out by Kathryn McClymond, who argues that it is necessary in view of the correctives that have been offered to comparative studies. "Looking forward", McClymond states, "I believe comparative work has to be more cognizant of its moral component."<sup>7</sup> McClymond's moral stance is especially necessary to comparative work across religious studies.

In what follows I firstly discuss how Todd French's essay resonates with the idea of a virtue-based culture as the necessary foundation for comparative and collaborative hagiography.<sup>8</sup> I demonstrate

<sup>2</sup> Here I align my views with others in this special issue. For example, DiValerio's proposal of a controlled vocabulary for our shared enterprise is an instrument that allows for shared values and language in order to facilitate best academic practice (DiValerio 2019). Rondolino's social-scientific proposal is another example of setting the rules in order to allow for clear communication within an agreed framework that, at the same time, includes some aspirations and not others (Rondolino 2019). Sara Ritchey also addresses these issues (Ritchey 2019).

<sup>3</sup> (MacDonald 2018, p. 13); and (Twiss 2013, p. 2456).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. For AAR see <https://www.aarweb.org/aar-annual-meeting-policies>. For illustrative purposes, it is worth noting that their Professional Conduct Statement (2017 draft) includes the following on respect, which is a foundational value to my own work. "As a scholarly and professional value, respect manifests itself in mutual accountability—of AAR members to one another and to the organization's stated commitments. Respect as a scholarly and professional value requires that AAR members recognize the inherent worth of each member of the organization." (American Academy of Religion Professional Conduct Task Force 2017, p. 2). "Transparency" is another key value in the AAR policy, and is related to my use of justice and respect for collaborative work. It reads: "As a key value of our learned society, transparency promotes a culture of openness, accountability, reflexivity, integrity, and honesty." (American Academy of Religion Professional Conduct Task Force 2017, p. 3). An expanded version of this work could deal more fully with the rationale for normatively (not merely informatively) drawing from these documents, with some examples of how to implement the virtues they promote in comparative hagiology with both past and living interlocutors.

<sup>5</sup> This is a coherent worldview argument made within the documents themselves (Bradley 2013, p. 2770). A related philosophical argument for why we cannot compartmentalize our lives, especially our mindset and perspectives, is made by Rondolino (Rondolino 2019). I would add fundamental psychological and social reasons for this.

<sup>6</sup> (Twiss 2013, p. 2456). The AAR states the following on its value of "diversity": "Within a context of free inquiry and critical examination, the AAR welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion. This outlook includes two different components: one has to do with the methodological variety of our inquiries, and the other with the diversity of the persons who undertake these inquiries. At many points in our history we have underscored the importance of diversity in teaching, research, and service. Equally important is the diversity of scholars who represent different cultures, social locations, perspectives, professional standings, and experiences. These enrich and enlarge our understanding of ourselves and our community." (American Academy of Religion Professional Conduct Task Force 2017, p. 2)

<sup>7</sup> (McClymond 2018, p. 4).

<sup>8</sup> I focus on French's work because I was part of the discussion group that focused on his paper during the 2018 workshop. I am not arguing that he alone pursues this avenue of thought, rather in this paper I am also trying to convey the way in which collaboration occurs shapes our perspectives. My views would have been slightly different, and with different emphases as well as concerns, had I been a participant in another group.

this approach with examples from my lecture room practices. A discussion of two metaphors that drive my practices—“deliberate border crossing” and “modulating our accents”—shows that we carry out our work based on experiences as much as anything else. Therefore, we need to be cognizant of the need for holistic self-reflection, because we will be clearer and more open with others when we appreciate who we are, whom we are becoming, and how this shapes our approach to other scholars and sources for our work.

### 2.1. Formal Scholarly Collaboration: Some Thoughts on Best Practice

There is a shared sentiment across the contributors to this special issue that collaboration in cross-disciplinary and cross-tradition hagiological efforts is the way forward for this task. The benefits of this will be academic as well as ecumenical.<sup>9</sup> The academic benefits revolve around bringing to light unrecognized dimensions in both the original sources for study and also in the comparanda.<sup>10</sup> Ecumenical outcomes include a deeper understanding of our conversation partners across traditions, as well as real-world improved relationships and harmony.<sup>11</sup> This may have tremendous social and personal benefits in local and global community relationships that are often fractured by religious misunderstandings. We cannot argue for scholarly “social engagement” and “outreach” whilst ignoring the benefits of well-intended and well-informed scholarly engagement with real issues from a range of perspectives.

The challenge moving forward is that we need to create a scholarly language and culture in which comparative and collaborative hagiological work can breathe anew and in fresh ways. If this pioneering work is successful, then it may contribute as a template for other comparative projects. Examples of this include Rondolino and DiValerio, who are leading the way in terms of developing a new vocabulary for the enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

The first step for the new directions in comparative hagiology is the pursuit of a productive intellectual ethos, or culture (where ethos refers to ethical values and culture refers to their implemented practices in situ), within which anything that carries meaning can be explored comparatively. Such a culture is dependent upon a scholarly, permission-giving framework for an open-minded as well as rigorous scholarly methodological process. A quest for a new hagiological culture is implicit in the work of a number of contributors to this volume. For example, French calls for, “the creation of a third space in which comparative partners can *play* with ideas ...”<sup>13</sup> A new space, or culture, for comparative hagiology, enlarges the possibilities for the discipline by avoiding the common problem of allowing shallow comparative work to *precede* the selection of the theme, or *tertium comparationis*. Methodologically, scholars must deliberately create comparative cultures within which the entire sequence of our procedure is based upon a conceptually narrow, early, and preliminary point of comparison. Freedom to bring a number of approaches to bear on a *tertium comparationis* will surely allow for more productive and surprising comparative hagiological insights.

A crippling destabilization of hagiological questions can be restrained when appropriate attention is paid to the documentary pre-history within its native context, while simultaneously being controlled by present day scholarly interests and their leading interpreters. On the other hand, locating

---

<sup>9</sup> (Hollander 2019).

<sup>10</sup> French wonders: “How do we push past the siloed nature of thinking in academic disciplines and fields of study? e.g., how might one’s reading of a text be affected by awareness of other modes of writing/reading/reception/function?” (French 2019, pp. 2–3).

<sup>11</sup> We can hope for “substantial and empathetic immersion in a tradition other than one’s own, followed by patient comparison of how some matter of importance is engaged in in this other and in one’s own tradition, *for the sake of* collaborative articulation of some new understanding and ultimately more productive relations between communities” (Hollander 2019).

<sup>12</sup> “I wish to initiate a conversation to establish a shared vocabulary for the comparative study of hagiographical sources, whether inter- or cross-cultural” (Rondolino 2019, p. 2). See also (DiValerio 2019). On collaboration see (O’Rourke et al. 2013).

<sup>13</sup> (French 2019, p. 5).

“hagiography” in both the past as well as in the present enables hagiologists to overcome the biases that pertain to both the hagio- and the comparative dimensions of comparative hagiology.<sup>14</sup>

A “culture of life” for hagiological studies always keeps its moorings securely grounded in the empirical world: if we allow both the historical past and the scholarly present to breathe their insights into a new hagiological culture, then we have a framework that allows for creativity within reasonable bounds. This is precisely what French suggests is the first step in the comparative method: “interest in expanding beyond the range of regular meanings.”<sup>15</sup> This naturally cascades onto finding and agreeing upon “common territory” for discussion. We therefore have a sequence that looks like moving from a permission-giving culture, to an interest in new meaning, and subsequently to common territory. The upshot of this is the “playful third space” that contemporary and productive hagiological study requires. Once in place, and if it is structured well, such a culture would continue to be an exciting, yet grounded framework for handling the insights that will follow on from its use.

A “third space” ethos could potentially allow Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu sources to be brought into new conversations with one another. It is important to note that these conversations would trade on collaborative consultation with scholars from other traditions, in order to make sure that we work in a scientific and scholarly manner when we “look over the (hagiological) fence.” Collaboration of this kind would allow us to re-examine or rectify our hermeneutics from “a foreign framework,” offering up new results from seeing our “own texts in a new light, before even hearing others’ findings.” At this point, the importance of virtues became glaringly obvious. To cite one example alone, justice and wisdom require that when we are working with another scholar’s hermeneutical lenses, we do so in constant consultation, in order to make sure we are being fair to their scholarship as well as informed about our sources. In practice, French’s suggestion that we share unfinished work amongst scholars gives each other permission to actively ensure the justice of each other’s work and results. By means of ongoing conversation and cross-checking, we could become a community that habitually encourages the organic development of virtues in ourselves and others. Justice therefore grounds the scholarship that functions as a communal form of quality control on comparative work.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, this special issue is the result of a collaborative and cross-checking process, which has deepened my understanding and reception of key ideas from the past two years’ worth of workshops.

It is worth noting that this collaborative methodology is consistent with the DNA that Rondolino has tried to build into the network of scholars studying “hagiography” who participate in his workshops. Conversational and open scholarship needs to be cultivated. This means naming assumed group values in scholarship. These are often assumed and enjoyed without being explicitly stated. For example, one reason for the ease with which a collaborative approach appears to be viable in the minds of this journal’s contributors has to do with scholarly trust and friendship, as much as other factors. A number of us know and respect each other from past work in “hagiography” and from events such as the 2017 AAR hagiology pre-conference workshop in Boston. In practice, this meant that some of our group members (myself included) were very comfortable with one another due to a pre-existing baseline level of trust and non-defensiveness. In other words, we appear to have been biased towards a hermeneutic of trust rather than suspicion. This is an important point to make, for in the same way that at times superficial, curiosity-driven comparison precedes the selection of the theme, trust and friendship seem to precede the positive uptake and implementation of methodological ideas. Virtues such as justice ensure the initial possibility, and ongoing potential, of a fair and respectful collaborative culture.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> “How ought one begin conceiving a project in comparative hagiology? I suggest that two main options exist, derived from the tension between *comparative* and *hagiology*. They present scholars with a fork in the methodological road. Immediately but not necessarily consciously, the scholar must choose a path that prioritizes one of the two terms over the other. For *comparative* and *hagiology* each is rooted in a different set of considerations and disciplinary lenses” (Keune 2019, p. 2).

<sup>15</sup> (French 2019, p. 4).

<sup>16</sup> (Freiberger 2019, pp. 99–110).

<sup>17</sup> In this Section, I draw from the experience at AAR 2018 to develop French’s argument and propose some initial thoughts on the ethics of an aspirational “code of best practice.”

Following French, I believe that concrete examples of ongoing sharing and collaboration should be taken deliberately in order to demonstrate the plausibility of a “playful third space”, and to provide the structures that it requires.<sup>18</sup> Collaborative outputs from these cross-fertilizing efforts are also important to this process; examples of these could include special journal issues and dedicated podcasts. The collaborative nature of these could be disruptive of some of the vices of academia, such as individualistic pride and greed. In addition, a new approach, such as multi-authored papers, which is common in the sciences, could enable longer-term conversations without professional penalties.

Perhaps one of the most helpful aspects of French’s work is his emphasis on the ongoing value of working in groups. This pushes us to consider virtues at a corporate level rather than merely on the register of the individual. French’s work presumes a vital community in which select issues are deliberately pursued in a group context over the medium term. If comparative hagiologists as a group are known for working in wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage, then we will be more likely to resist the reflex to make simplistic and safe comparisons, whilst avoiding substantive areas of difference. In fact, because our self-understanding is deepened in conversation with others, it seems that best practice *in life* as well as hagiology would entail embracing the virtue-based ethos described above.<sup>19</sup> Assuming that we flourish together when we act ethically and consistently across all aspects of our existence, there will be powerful connections between our scholarship and pedagogy, as I note below.

## 2.2. Pedagogy: The University Classroom

The pedagogical implications of renewing the culture of comparative hagiology have not been explored at length in scholarship.<sup>20</sup> In the classroom I promote insights into justice, modes of expression, and conversation with the hope that my students will deploy these in order to serve our societal good in a multicultural context. My experience is that I have been able to generate classroom cultures that support collaborative comparative hagiological work. I begin with the assumption that I am “apprenticing” students into the discipline of comparative hagiology as part of the larger formal study of religion.<sup>21</sup> At my college, we carry out comparative work in a number of classes, including history and ethics. Texts with hagiographic features from Roman, Maccabean, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu sources may be considered.

Because I know we are going to engage with these texts and traditions, I prepare the students in a number of ways. In particular, I provide a foundation on the classical Roman virtues during the first three hour class:<sup>22</sup> the accent on justice promotes responsibility, the emphasis on wisdom asks us to consider which is the best way forward, temperance restrains rash judgment, and courage locates our task at the mean between academic cowardice and recklessness. I also add the virtues of hope, trust, and care.<sup>23</sup> The benefits of these three are critical. By carrying out our work in hope we may avoid cynicism as we aim for the best outcomes despite the tension in the task at hand. In fact, hope has been an important sustaining element as I experienced the AAR workshops, which at times have felt like a “two steps forward and one step backwards” experience.<sup>24</sup> Trust in those who collaborate with us, and our own trustworthiness, is the basis for collaboration. I promote trust in the classroom by

---

<sup>18</sup> (French 2019, p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> In French’s words, “we can only accurately learn about ourselves in the context of others” (French 2019, p. 7). French draws from (Nussbaum and Cohen 2002, pp. 11–12)

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Hollander is attentive to this issue in his essay (Hollander 2019).

<sup>21</sup> This echoes McClymond’s notion of comparison as a craft (McClymond 2018).

<sup>22</sup> The cultural make-up of the class is diverse, however, the historical context for most of my classroom sources is Ancient Rome and Late Antiquity, therefore, I use Rebecca Langlands’s 2018 *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*.

<sup>23</sup> This is an academic rephrasing of the virtues of hope, faith, and love, which are heavily used in first and second century CE Mediterranean Christian ethics.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Hollander writes: “Recognizing the need for such metatheoretical reflection has led the comparative hagiology workshops into a kind of two-steps-forward-one-step-back rhythm, as every apparent agreement has been accompanied by the recognition that the agreement obscures differences in our working definitions of core problems and holds a tenuous common ground between different frameworks of scholarly sense-making” (Hollander 2019, pp. 3–4).

gradually sharing experiences (beginning with short spontaneous personal reflections on *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*). This “scaffolds” the experience of collaboration by starting small yet building to larger collaborative and open presentations during the semester. Finally, care, defined as active work towards the other’s flourishing, locates collaborative comparative hagiology within relationships, in which the task serves the good of those with whom we work. The seven virtues I mention have a norming, an authoritative, shaping influence over our work together. Consequently, they promote scholarly and relational habits that I hope will shape the future of academic research in religious studies, including comparative and hagiological studies. I operate as somewhat of a referee in the early stages of the semester, “throwing flags” or “showing yellow cards”, for those who are not just, wise, temperate, courageous, hopeful, trusting and trustworthy, or caring. I try to do this in a fair manner and explain my actions when I do show a yellow card. I encourage the work and attitudes of those who learn and enact these virtues.

Naturally, the virtues relate to content. I circulate Smith’s, Freiburger’s, and Rondolino’s work on comparison for student reading in preparation for a subsequent classroom discussion on method, followed by carefully phrasing and parsing out our interaction with the “lives” that we read. I also discuss Rondolino’s work in reading groups or individual meetings with students who are particularly interested in comparative hagiology, with a view to them carrying out their final research projects in this area. The procedure outlined above may go some way to resolving the tensions between the hagiological (to do with saintliness and the holy) as well as the comparative tasks at hand, which are outlined in this volume by Jon Keune.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Models of Practice from Informal Comparative Conversations and Lived Religion

I would like to close this essay with two “models of practice” that I believe help shape a virtuous and collaborative mindset for our purposes.<sup>26</sup>

#### 3.1. Deliberate Border Crossing

The first is the idea of “deliberate border crossing”. The context in which I learnt to justly and respectfully engage with multiple religious expressions was Argentina. I grew up in Argentina and also worked there as an adult. Crossing the border to Brazil was a semi-regular occurrence that strongly generated my interest in comparative studies. As we drove over the bridge from one country to another, we moved into another religious imagination and way of life. Animistic and Roman Catholic Argentina gradually gave way to Brazil’s Umbanda and Candomblé, as well as their influences on Roman Catholicism. Even as a child I understood that “crossing the border” was a literal border crossing into Brazil, but it also functioned as a metaphor for moving into a slightly different, yet somewhat familiar religious worldview. There was overlap in belief between Argentina and Brazil in terms of shared heroes of faith, including Gauchito Gil (a Robin Hood-like figure) and his red coloured shrines. Yet, there are strong differences in song, dress, and focus with respect to the majority of other shrines dedicated to divine, spiritual, and living dead beings. If we are cognizant of deliberate border crossings in the task of comparative hagiology, we are less likely to make mistakes “looking over the fence”, *because we are already over the fence*. A border crossing makes more likely the empathetic comparative work that Hollander and Clooney advocate.<sup>27</sup> As Kathryn McClymond understands it, comparative hagiology is a descriptive conversational craft.<sup>28</sup> It is also a craft into which we are

---

<sup>25</sup> (Keune 2019).

<sup>26</sup> This article is intended to raise some of the neglected ethical dimensions that comparativists and hagiographers often face. Due to essay length constraints, I cannot propose an ethically sound and constructive model that responds to the challenges I have outlined. However, my hope is to work with other scholars on a collaborative volume that explicitly outlines an ethical model framework for comparative hagiography.

<sup>27</sup> (Clooney 2018, pp. 206–7; Hollander 2019).

<sup>28</sup> (McClymond 2018).

apprenticed by social groups and individuals.<sup>29</sup> This apprenticeship requires an openness to being shaped by those we meet over the border: those we meet “looking over the fence”. Comparative hagiology is a conversation in which the only way to understand the stories of importance and their meaning for any given sub-culture, is via engagement on the other’s home turf.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2. Modulating Our Accent

The craft of communicating respect across the Argentina–Brazil border required time and hard work to develop, and I think could serve here as a good illustration of how comparativists may have to overcome unforeseen and unintended behaviours within their own mindset and method. I can illustrate this from my own experience. When, in Brazil, I engaged with local lived religions and the stories of people’s “great ones”, my only points for comparison were Argentine religions. In practice this meant that I was restricted to asking curious comparative questions from an Argentine point of view. As a child I assumed the Argentine perspectives were correct and the Brazilian ones were odd. However, as I matured, I became aware that the comparative questions I had asked as a child needed far more nuance. After an awkward conversation at a saint’s shrine, to my shame, I realized that the manner and mode of comparison mattered at least as much as how our interactions are interpreted by conversation partners. It was not primarily a question of knowledge, it struck me that *how I asked the question* also determined *how I came across* when I asked it, and hence how the conversation developed (or stalled!). I had to learn that the degree to which people were willing to share with me and then engage in comparative conversations was driven by whether or not they perceived that I would treat them with respect and justice. In a way that parallels the dangers of contemporary comparison across historically conflicted religious groups, it is important to note that, given my cultural location, this was particularly awkward and had inbuilt challenges.

Let me explain. I grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina’s capital. Her native residents are known throughout Latin America as *Porteños*. This means that our Spanish has a very particular accent with its own series of inflections, a lot of unique slang, and the inclusion of a number of Italian words. It is also spoken in what non-Porteños oftentimes take to be an arrogant or harsh tone; questions sound like interrogations for the sake of information only. Consequently, *Porteños* are not often liked very much outside of Buenos Aires. The significance of this for comparative religious conversations began to dawn on me as a teenager. I began to realise that conversations about a local spiritual figure across the geographical and religious border would go better *if I modified my accent*. That is, if I spoke in a more generally Argentine (so not *Porteño*) manner, and in a more classically formal manner, then people behaved more warmly to me, and this included cross-religious dialogues. In other words, if I communicated as a respectful Argentine rather than “a certain kind” of Argentine, then a constructive religious conversation was more likely, whether it be at a bus stop at a shrine or a candle shop. This softening of my accent, and using a more formal manner with others, required a significant change to my Spanish. I even had to reorder words, for example. So, how questions were asked changed: they were asked in a gentler manner, in a more open-minded tone, and addressed the other person more politely. My questions hopefully did not come across as rude *Porteño* demands, which is how *Porteño* “questioning” can often come across. My modification in how the question was asked, hopefully shaped how the question came across, and how I came across.

In a way that is suggestive for the academic task of comparison, I learnt that awareness of tone shifted the prospects for the whole enterprise. It applies to our basic disposition to other scholars,

---

<sup>29</sup> “Ours is an apprenticeship profession [ . . . ] If we are lucky, we get to train with master craftsmen and craftswomen, watching over their shoulders [ . . . ] to see how they select the material they will work with, how they play with it, and how they bring the tools they have been trained to use to bear upon the “stuff” of religion. There is no single, correct method, although certain practices are common” (McKlymond 2018, p. 5).

<sup>30</sup> I understand that when we are dealing with many cultures in the distant past our conversations will be indirect, mediated through material culture, literary products, and interpreters of these traditions, including scholars.



our willingness to shift from one perceptive framework to another, to listen for new tones over and above familiar ones, and to place ourselves in a posture of collaboration rather than competition.

#### 4. Conclusions: Recognizing Virtues as Intrinsic to Successful Comparative Relationships

A new culture for comparative and collaborative hagiology is under development, and it will greatly benefit from a holistic view of its practitioners. To accomplish this, we need to grapple with who we are as scholars and as an emerging guild of specialists who comparatively and collaboratively work on hagiographical materials. We must be mindful of the fact that our lived experience will be expressed in our ongoing work towards developing “models” of best practice. Therefore, the best we can be and can do for each other at this early turn of a fresh movement in comparative studies is to encourage self-reflection on how our experiences shape and inform our work as researchers and educators. In so doing, we need to deliberately consider also how, vice versa, our work as researchers and educators shapes who we are *becoming* as whole persons. I hope we will be more able to skilfully and deliberately “move across borders”, as well as “shift our accents” in order to promote productive, collaborative, and comparative hagiographical work.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**List of Contributions:** DiValerio, David. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. doi:10.3390/rel10100585. French, Todd. 2019. Saints across traditions and time periods: Methods for increasing range and reading in comparative frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. doi:10.3390/rel10100577. Hollander, Aaron. 2019. Comparison as Collaboration: Notes on the Contemporary Craft of Hagiology. Submit to *Religions*. Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology: Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. doi:10.3390/rel10100575. Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. doi:10.3390/rel10100569. Rondolino, Massimo. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for Hagiography. *Religions* 10: 538. doi:10.3390/rel10100538.

#### References

- American Academy of Religion Professional Conduct Task Force. 2017. Draft Professional Conduct Statement. November 8. Available online: <https://www.aarweb.org/aar-annual-meeting-policies> (accessed on 4 August 2019).
- Bradley, Ben. 2013. Intrinsic Value. In *The International Encyclopaedia of Ethics*. Vol. V. Edited by Hugh LaFollette. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 2770–79.
- Clooney, Francis. 2018. Difficult Reminders: Seeking Comparative Theology’s Really Difficult Other. In *How to do Comparative Theology*. Edited by Francis Clooney and Klaus von Stosch. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 206–28.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2019. *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacDonald, Paul. 2018. Grounding Human Dignity and Rights: A Thomistic Reply to Wolterstorff. *The Thomist* 82: 1–37. [CrossRef]
- McKlymond, Kathryn. 2018. Comparison as Conversation and Craft. *Religions* 9: 39. [CrossRef]
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven, and Joshua Cohen. 2002. *For Love of Country?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- O’Rourke, Michael, Stephen Crowley, Sanford D. Eigenbrode, and J. D. Wulfhorst, eds. 2013. *Enhancing Communication and Collaboration in Interdisciplinary Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Twiss, Sumner. 2013. Human Rights and Religion. In *The International Encyclopaedia of Ethics*. Vol. IV. Edited by Hugh LaFollette. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 2455–65.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Article

## Comparison as a Provisional Activity

Nikolas O. Hoel

Department of History, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL 60625, USA; n-hoel@neu.edu

Received: 17 December 2019; Accepted: 3 January 2020; Published: 8 January 2020

**Abstract:** The careers of many scholars in various disciplines have been focused on the study of hagiography, including that of the author. Yet, as those scholars have uncovered new knowledge and employed new interpretations of the materials at hand, the very notions of “hagiography” and “hagiology” have become deeply problematized. The issues become more complex as multiple religious traditions are examined. The scholarly work that forms the basis of the essays in this volume has explored the effects of taking a comparative and collaborative approach to “hagiography”. This piece responds to the core essays by showing first how personal the study of such sources and act of comparison can be, and then exploring how knowledge changes through the processes of comparison and collaboration. In the end, this response argues that comparison is by its very nature a provisional activity in that the knowledge it creates constantly changes as comparative methods and theories are re-applied again and again over time. This process is only aided by collaborative efforts which make the act of comparison even more effective and productive.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative method; comparative religions; hagiography; hagiology; religious studies; sacred biography; sainthood; theory and method in religious studies

---

No man ever steps in the same river twice,  
for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

—Heraclites

Heraclites may be a strange place to start the discussion of comparison, and we will get back to him in a little while. Seemingly more germane, I think, is the fact that many scholars come to the idea and methods of comparison from strange places. For me, comparison started with a Gibbon-esque moment. Edward Gibbon claimed that he conceived of writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as he sat in Rome, writing that the idea came to him almost as a revelation. I had a similar experience, as a young graduate student pursuing my MA at the University of Colorado-Boulder, I stumbled across a Buddhist text which seemed very similar to the Latin saints' lives I had been studying. The book, which was entitled *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, contained the story of the eminent monk Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India from China in the seventh century (Li 1996). The wheels began to turn as I began to think that what I thought of as “hagiographic” texts might exist in multiple traditions and during many time periods. As I looked at the mountains that surrounded the campus, I came up with the idea that would become my dissertation. I compared Latin, Byzantine Greek, and Tang Chinese Buddhist vitae or their equivalent from the seventh through ninth century. My thinking about the topic was in its formative state and I have since become very aware of the problematic nature of calling the texts written about venerated individuals in non-Christian contexts “hagiography”.

At the time, I thought I was the only one doing this work, and there were very few of us that were. Thankfully that number has been increasing over the last decade or so, which led the pre-conference workshops on comparative hagiology that have taken place at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting the last few years. Many scholars seem to acknowledge the importance of comparison

in the fields of history and religious studies. Chris Wickham has even gone so far as to call it essential (Wickham 2009). For Wickham, although there are challenges to employing comparison, by using it we can avoid solipsism, which prevents a single culture or tradition from becoming seen as normative. Yet the challenges to doing comparative work make the enterprise of comparing “hagiographies” across cultures daunting, if for no other reason than there is a lack of a universal vocabulary across cultures (Keune 2019) and the risk of decontextualization, essentialization and generalization clearly exists (Freiberger 2018).

The papers in this special issue are part of an effort to explore what “comparison” and “hagiology” are. They also serve to conceptualize what “comparative hagiology” is. At the AAR workshop in 2018, where the five core papers were originally discussed, I had the fortune to be a part of the group that discussed the one written by Jon Keune. The foundations he set for the discussion were beyond solid and we were off and running almost immediately. Most of that discussion, which centered on the issue of key terms, is reflected in Keune’s paper in this volume. We talked about translation and metalinguistics. The group tried to grapple with the difference between “hagiology” and “hagiography”. Then, a thought came to me and I wrote down in my notes a simple phrase: “any comparison is provisional”.

Just as Wickham believes that comparison is essential, he also claims that it is hard (Wickham 2009). This, I believe, is where method comes into play, because, as Freiberger has argued, one must discuss what is problematic about comparison in both theoretical and methodological terms (Freiberger 2018). The method I used in my dissertation is that of Jonathan Z. Smith. In many ways reading Smith introduced me to the excitement of comparison and to its potential as a tool for furthering scholarly knowledge. He remarked that “comparison provides the means by which we ‘re-vision’ phenomena as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems” (Smith 1990, p. 52). I was attracted to the concept that to Smith comparison is an active, playful exercise, one that deconstructs and reconstitutes (Smith 1990). The thought that a method could be “playful” appealed to me, who had gone to graduate school with the excitement of being able to play with ideas in the company of others who cared about them. The ideas were all well and good, but by what method was I to play with them? Smith provided that answer as well. I was introduced to his method in an essay entitled “The Bible and Religion,” which I found in *Relating Religion* (Smith 2004). The essay was originally published in 2000. Smith’s method consisted of four parts: description, comparison, re-description and rectification. Although Smith’s method has been expounded upon by scholars such as Burton Mack (Mack 1996) and Oliver Freiberger (Freiberger 2018), the idea behind it has proven very useful. I employed this method, and an example of how I used it may be useful in understanding its potential. I looked at asceticism in multiple traditions. I **described** the rejection of certain foods and sex as a model for behavior in “hagiographies” produced in the Latin West, Greek Byzantium, and Tang Buddhist China in the seventh through ninth century. When I **compared** the behaviors of venerated persons in those traditions, they seemed to be doing very similar things. Yet, I looked deeper and **re-described** the actions of Buddhists, in particular those individuals who participated in self-immolation. In the sources that I considered, there are no examples of Christians who set themselves on fire. When I **rectified** this difference, I argued that Buddhists could set themselves on fire and Christians could not because of different theologies of the body: to Buddhists, the body did not exist, whereas to Christians the body was the image of God and thus ought not be destroyed by the human. In some ways, this conclusion was an example of essentializing the traditions, and I have come to realize in the time since writing the dissertation the problematic nature of this generalization.

For my dissertation, the method worked. Yet, in and of itself, it lends itself to adaptation. The knowledge the method produces is provisional, in that the knowledge changes as more studies are done. The more re-description one does, the finer the tuning of the ideas becomes. As more sources are considered, and hence the more data collected, the more rectification is needed. The results of comparison are thus provisional because further comparison may well lead to differing interpretations of the past and of different traditions. Even the methods of comparison can be changed. For example,

in this special issue, Todd French describes the method of comparison used by the members of a session at the 2018 American Academic of Religion conference, which adapted previously established methods to create a better understanding of the phenomena the panelists wished to discuss (French 2019). In essence, French is describing one possible set of best practices in comparative studies of religion, yet he describes it as a “nascent attempt at best practices” (French 2019). These methods will most likely be supplanted as new ways of comparing texts and phenomena are determined to work better. Further as methods change, knowledge too will be refined.

The issue of language plays into the provisionality of comparison as well. Every paper in this special issue, in one way or another, deals with the issue of language and each author hints at the discomfort with the idea that the terms which described phenomena in one tradition could or should be used to describe those in another. In other words, at a fundamental level, does the word “saint” as conceived in the Christian tradition, reflect any lived experience in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any other tradition? The issue of language is Jon Keune’s main focus here. He states that he agrees with Thomas Tweed that stipulative definitions are important but thinks that they should be applied at the end of the research process and not at the beginning (Keune 2019). He works to better define the difference between “hagiography” and “hagiology”. David DiValerio notes the concern in the core essays with arriving at a precise definition of “hagiography” and argues that the lack of a shared vocabulary to describe the formal features of hagiographic texts is hindering our ability to study them (DiValerio 2019). Barbara Zimbalist, in her response here, notes that the authors of the core essays do not in all cases even agree on what constitutes the genre of “hagiography” or if it is a “genre” at all (Zimbalist 2019). The issue is complicated by Kevin Guilfooy who examines whether any of the terms we use and the concepts they represent can be translated from tradition to tradition or across time and space (Guilfooy forthcoming). As an outsider to the study of “comparative hagiology,” he worries whether the enterprise is even possible because the concepts we are examining are socially constructed and historically situated, hence possibly within an epistemic tradition (Guilfooy forthcoming). We should certainly heed this warning, consider its implications, but not necessarily be dissuaded by it. Understanding how we use the terminology of our own fields and then working to collaborate to see how our colleagues understand their words will facilitate comparison and understanding in the end; a point Guilfooy seems to see as possible by the end of his essay. Thus, as a result of the work of all the authors here, language becomes problematized, yet at the same time remains critical to the enterprise of comparison.

I believe that however terms end up being defined, language itself is a critical piece of the provisional nature of comparison. Language is in constant flux; it changes regularly and irregularly at the same time. Language is in and of itself provisional and since it is used to describe phenomena, the descriptions are provisional as well. For example, in his essay in this volume, Massimo Rondolino proposes a new working definition of “hagiography” (Rondolino 2019). Three things are worth noting. First, his definition is the result of years of study and thought, and reflects a change, even if subtle, from the way he thought about “hagiography” while he was writing his book on the comparative study of hagiographical sources (Rondolino 2017). Second, he describes it as a working definition, implying the he thinks it is not static and needs redefining. Finally, his definition is already being considered by other authors in this volume (DiValerio 2019; Guilfooy forthcoming; Keune 2019). These three factors point to the reality that definitions are a work in progress, subject to change, and by nature provisional. As the language used to define categories of analysis change, so too does the understanding of them. This is particularly true in the case of comparison, which Freiburger has posited is a second-order method, which relies on first-order methods such as language analysis (Freiberger 2018). Thus, the effect of language on comparison is that as scholars further define terms and explore the intricacies of words and how they are used, comparison will be further clarified, and knowledge will be advanced. Keune’s concluding sentence in this volume may well reinforce my thinking here as he suggests that “the real problem is not that the scope of comparison is too broad, but that the definitions of religion and saints are too small” (Keune 2019). When we continue to develop our understanding of what a “saint” is

or is not, our comparisons have the potential to be deeper and more meaningful. Guilfooy, of course, problematizes this idea as he rightly points out that the term “saint” carries much cultural created value for Christians (Guilfooy forthcoming). Yet, even if the terms, like “saint,” are not translatable across traditions, phenomena and discourses can be compared to create a more appropriate vocabulary and as a result further knowledge. Thus, as language changes, the fruits of comparison will change as further evidence that comparison is indeed provisional.

What then is the role of collaboration in the effort of comparison? If “comparative hagiology” is worthwhile, what is the best way to do it? The answer, for me, is that we continue to collaborate. While most of us will continue to produce single-author studies, we should also continue to work together. Collaboration in its purest form is the activity of bringing together many people with many ideas. Coming together as scholars has the potential to have value on a greater level. Scott Harrower remarks in the volume that comparison helps with our own individual self-reflection, it may also be a virtue-based approach, which introduces an element of social justice to what we are doing in this collaborative project (Harrower 2019). Harrower’s suggestions surrounding the possible greater meaning of our work is certainly worth further exploration. In the immediate, although perhaps related, when new ideas are presented and considered, phenomena can be viewed in different ways. In essence, re-description occurs. Collaboration facilitates re-description. Re-description leads to new ways of reconciling diverse information and leads to new understanding of religious behavior, models, and belief. The mere act of working together increases the chances that new understandings will be achieved. In the end, we, as scholars, attempt to increase collective knowledge and memory. Further, by collaborating we can play with ideas that are otherwise unavailable, we walk along the path that would have been otherwise unavailable but is lined with, at least for me, excitement, intellectual questioning, and joy. It can be fun. The path may well be endless because it, like the fruits of comparison, are provisional. Knowledge and understanding will change as we work together.

What I argue here is that comparison is truly provisional. Through comparison, Massimo Rondolino has furthered the understanding of St. Francis and Milarepa (Rondolino 2017). In this volume, Sara Ritchey has argued that “‘comparative hagiology’ offers a method of productively destabilizing the assumptions and expectations that we, scholars working within specific intellectual, geographic, or confessional traditions, bring to our sources. This destabilization has the potential to make meaning across differences and, in the process, to generate new insights and understandings in our own areas of specialization” (Ritchey 2019). Through comparison, Jon Keune envision a broader and more inclusive field than exists today (Keune 2019). In the end, what we know about “hagiography” or “hagiology” today has the potential to be vastly different from what we will know in the future because of comparison. That comparison will be facilitated through collaborative efforts because more information will be available as each individual brings their knowledge to the collective table. Knowledge and understanding will change, and that is what I mean by provisional; comparison is only what it is at a specific moment: this one. At this point, I will come full circle, or perhaps more appropriately, down the river. Like Heraclites’ river, knowledge is never the same as it is always moving. Comparison, then, as the current to the river’s water, is that force that keeps knowledge in constant flux.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** Here I want to articulate my gratitude to Leonora Neville, my advisor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who encouraged me to write a very unorthodox dissertation and pushed me along even when it was not entirely certain it would yield fruitful results.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## List of Contributions

DiValerio, David. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. doi:10.3390/rel10100585.

- French, Todd. 2019. Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. doi:10.3390/rel10100577.
- Guilfoy, Kevin. Forthcoming. Is Comparison Based on Translatable Formal Concepts? *Religions*.
- Harrower, Scott. 2019. The Ethics of doing Comparative Hagiology. *Religions* 10: 660. doi:10.3390/rel10120660
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology. Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. doi:10.3390/rel10100575.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. doi:10.3390/rel10100569
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for *Hagiography*. *Religions* 10: 538. doi:10.3390/rel10100538
- Zimbalist, Barbara. 2019. Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality. *Religions* 10: 604. doi:10.3390/rel10110604

## References

- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Li, Rongxi. 1996. *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. BDK English Tripiṭaka, 79. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Mack, Burton. 1996. On Redescribing Christian Origins. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religions* 8: 247–69. [CrossRef]
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1990. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004. "Bible and Religion". In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago, pp. 197–214.
- Wickham, Chris. 2009. Problems in Doing Comparative History. In *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*. Edited by Patricia Skinner. Tourhout: Brepols, pp. 5–28.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).





Article

# Comparison as Collaboration: Notes on the Contemporary Craft of Hagiology

Aaron T. Hollander

Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, New York, NY 10115, USA; ahollander@geii.org

Received: 17 December 2019; Accepted: 3 January 2020; Published: 7 January 2020

**Abstract:** A workshop on “comparative hagiology” over the course of three years at the American Academy of Religion has yielded not only a series of articles but an experimental methodology by which scholars hailing from different disciplines and working in different fields might collaborate in threshing out commonalities and entanglements in their respective treatments of holy figures. This article’s response to the workshop identifies three pillars of general consensus among the participants that serve as promising footholds for aligned innovation in our respective fields: That hagiography (1) is constituted not only in verbal texts but in a wide array of media, both material and ephemeral; (2) is best interpreted by attending substantially to the “processes” of thought, life, and society in which it is rendered; and (3) opens possibilities of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparison by way of the many family resemblances in how saints (or more broadly, religious and even para-religious exemplars) are rendered in transmittable media and mobilized for a particular group’s benefit. The article concludes by suggesting vectors for further development on these grounds, indicating how the category of “hagiography” affords a resource for interpreting unauthorized and apparently irreligious phenomena akin to sanctification, and calling for a professional and pedagogical ethic of collaboration that extends beyond any particular scholarly fruits of hagiological comparison.

**Keywords:** collaborative scholarship; comparative method; comparative religions; disciplinary innovation; hagiography; hagiology; sainthood; theory and method in religious studies

---

## 1. Comparison and Collaboration

A roundtable on “comparative hagiology,” at which questions of theory and method in the study of holy figures (broadly construed and continually contested) are in the foreground, is an outstanding opportunity not only to compare the materials and methods with which a group of scholars spends its time but also to consider more generally what role comparison plays in one’s larger scholarly objectives. What are the prerequisites of productive comparison, and for what is it a condition of possibility? For my part, I would locate comparison as bound up with (both fueled by and allowing for) two other modes of scholarly activity. Before comparison is possible there must be a degree of *comprehension*: considerable enough expertise in the subjects under consideration to be able to assess not only their differences but also the significance of those differences.<sup>1</sup> In addition, while comparison can stand as a proximate end in itself (as in a publication providing edifying conclusions as to the nature or

---

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Freiberger therefore recommends describing comparison as a “second-order method,” on the grounds that “comparing two or more items can be productive only if those items are being seriously studied” (Freiberger 2018, p. 2). However, it must also be said that the deliberate engagement with difference implied by comparison is indispensable to adequate comprehension of a phenomenon in the first place, so we are dealing with a positive feedback process rather than a neat succession of analytical stages. J. Z. Smith describes this as a continual interplay between “description” and “redescription,” where comparison “rectifies” the initial understanding of that which is being compared and which was (only partially) comprehended beforehand—see (Smith 2000, p. 239; Ritchey 2019, p. 3). On difference being the ground and fuel of productive comparison, see (Smith 1987, pp. 13–14; McClymond 2018, p. 2).

significance of some difference), I would commend the craft of comparison as a means of facilitating the wider and more open-ended tasks of *collaboration*: public scholarly itineraries determined not primarily by the individual interests of those walking them but by mutually articulated needs in the academy and/or society.<sup>2</sup> Such an interplay of comprehension, comparison, and collaboration is certainly of meaningful utility in the two primary fields in which I locate myself and to the flourishing of which I dedicate my hagiological research—interreligious studies and ecumenical theology.<sup>3</sup>

It is in light of this general sense of the function of comparison in my own work that I can examine and evaluate the AAR workshop on comparative hagiology that has led to this collection of essays. At the outset I would note that in none of the phases of this project—the original papers circulated by five participants, the interlocking conversations on site at the AAR in Denver (in 2018), and the subsequent production and exchange of response essays by the workshop’s other participants—has the sense of “comparative hagiology” been limited (or even primarily dedicated) to comparing the varied hagiographical media on which we work. Rather, we have embraced the opportunity to bring into the foreground a comparison of our methodologies and orientations, contextualized as these are by different disciplines, fields, and institutions. Accordingly, I would like to reflect, first, on my sense of some shared hagiological commitments that seem to have emerged in the core papers and our conversations around them, so as, second, to highlight what I take to be some lingering tensions and promising directions for future deliberation.

It seems appropriate at this point to pause and make explicit, as other contributors have done, what I take as my working distinction between “hagiology” and “hagiography”—terms which I use frequently and together, but not interchangeably. I describe the materials on which I work as “hagiographical media,” that is, media that inscribe and transmit human understandings and experiences of holiness (and that include but are not limited to verbal inscriptions such as texts and prayers), and the discursive work of interpreting them as “hagiology,” that is, the *study* of how holiness (or its analogues) is construed and of the media in which it is purported to be manifest. In this framework, hagiography and hagiology are not mutually exclusive: Hagiological discourse, scholarly or otherwise, might well itself become a means of hagiographical mediation, depending on its context and participants.<sup>4</sup> However, I am in no way eager to insist that this working distinction is valid for everybody. (Philippart 1994) established the wide historical variability of both terms’ use in European scholarship and ecclesiastical use more broadly, and, in my own context of study (Greek Orthodox Christianity), it is important to recognize that the two terms have an emic utility of distinguishing between verbal and visual representations of holiness (with *agiographia* referring today mainly to icons and freschi—*images* of saints—and *agiologia* mainly to texts such as *Lives*, passion accounts, hymns, etc.—*words* about saints). Both terms, then, are worth retaining in scholarly analysis—in this position I

---

<sup>2</sup> I am not at all suggesting that the worth of scholarship is directly proportional to the number of scholars that it animates. Rather, this collaborative pursuit is only one of multiple valuable ways of scholarship, one which foregrounds public significance and attempts to build a bridge between the efforts of individual scholars and the multidisciplinary mutualism of groups of such scholars willing to be challenged, reoriented, and strengthened by one another’s work.

<sup>3</sup> The burgeoning scholarship on interreligious studies has insisted on thorough comprehension of the traditions and phenomena that are entangled (a rather more robust sense of connectivity than is typical for comparative work) at any interreligious interface, which in turn necessitates scholarly collaboration between experts in different traditions in order adequately to account for the multiple horizons and deep roots of a given interreligious texture. So too, the older framework of ecumenical theology has benefitted from a similar (indeed more linear) methodological integrity of comprehension, comparison, and collaboration: substantial and empathetic immersion in a tradition other than one’s own, followed by patient comparison of how some matter of importance is engaged in this other and in one’s own tradition, *for the sake of* collaborative articulation of some new understanding and ultimately more productive relations between communities.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, it is no challenge to recognize the hagiographical force of Kallistos Ware’s or G.K. Chesterton’s literary/theological interpretations of the lives of the saints—or indeed, as I will discuss below, if we recognize the hagiographical productivity of the varied and unpredictable *uses* of media depicting the saints, there is no reason that a scholarly article intended as nonreligious analysis could not be appropriated as hagiographically edifying by a devotee of the saintly figure in question.

differ from most, but not all, of the core essays of this special issue, which tend to prioritize (explicitly or implicitly) one term as more adequate than the other for the task at hand.<sup>5</sup>

Our emphasis on comparing methods for scholarship pertaining to holiness, saints, and their representation (and on comparing the possible definitions and taxonomies of such key terminology)<sup>6</sup> has meant that a kind of fruitful frustration has prevailed in our conversations. As Jon Keune poses the question: “How is meaningful comparison even possible without first clarifying the criteria by which scholars selected items to be compared?” (Keune 2019, p. 1). Recognizing the need for such metatheoretical reflection has led the comparative hagiology workshops into a kind of two-steps-forward-one-step-back rhythm, as every apparent agreement has been accompanied by the recognition that the agreement obscures differences in our working definitions of core problems and holds a tenuous common ground between different frameworks of scholarly sense-making. However, it is my sense that these delaying detours, sending us back through the weeds of suppositions we had not yet worked to explicate, can be counted as features rather than as liabilities of comparison. We are all the better off for having reckoned with approaches that we do not share and the challenges leveled by those approaches’ differences, whether or not we come (or even want to come) to consensus on particular elements of them.

That said, it is heartening to see the degree of agreement around some key, yet more or less novel, parameters of hagiological scholarship. I would identify three of these matters in which participants (myself included) were generally convinced, and which seem to me to be representative of what can be identified as a contemporary approach to hagiographical sources. These areas of alignment provide initial frames for collaborative sense-making even in the absence of shared material or scholarly goals.

## 2. Common Grounds

Hagiography, whether understood as “a text about the life of a figure regarded as holy by some subset of a population” (DiValerio 2019, p. 1), “texts about exemplars, when texts include objects, non-verbal images, and ritual actions (procession, votive offering, pilgrimage)” (Ritchey 2019, pp. 2–3), or, most capaciously, “the complex web of behaviors, practices, beliefs, and productions

<sup>5</sup> DiValerio does not draw an explicit distinction—he uses “hagiology” in his abstract and does not examine the term further (DiValerio 2019, p. 1). French does not explore the distinction in his own analysis but makes note of other contributors’ preference of one rather than the other (French 2019, note 6). Ritchey prefers *hagiography* and notes that “hagiology” “shifts attention from writing about sanctity to its logos”—more appropriate for the philosophy of religion than for material-cultural analysis of the sort that she deems most fruitful in her work (Ritchey 2019, note 1). Keune prefers *hagiology* and provides an explicit justification for his use of the term rather than hagiography on the (debatable) grounds that hagiography implies a fixation on “written documents” (Keune 2019, p. 2). Only Rondolino seems to maintain both terms side by side, designating hagiography as “an analytical category for the taxonomy of sources that contribute to construct and promote the recognition of a given individual as a perfected being” and hagiology as “an academic, scientific approach to the study of particular religious phenomena” (Rondolino 2019, p. 2; see also his Introduction to this special issue)—our approaches are aligned insofar as hagiology designates the academic project and hagiography designates the web of products and processes analyzed by it, although the *partial mutual inclusivity* between these two goes unnoted in Rondolino’s piece (as it is barely noted here—it is a topic owed more substantial consideration elsewhere).

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that not only the choice of “hagiology” or “hagiography” but also the content and most appropriate English designation of the “*hagio-*” itself were unresolved questions in our workshop and scholarly exchange. Keune explains this with particular sensitivity: “Prioritizing *hagiology* at the start of a comparative hagiological project prompts the scholar to articulate what constitutes *hagio-*, to stipulate what meaningfully compare-able items might look like when the scholar starts searching for them. In English and most European languages, this would usually involve carefully redefining the word ‘saint’ so that it is not too Christian, or it involves adopting a term (like Ritchey’s ‘exemplary figures’ and Rondolino’s ‘perfected beings’) that resolutely avoids the word ‘saint.’ Yet, with all of these terms, the weight of semantic precedent and tradition would make it difficult to define such terms without reference to ‘religion.’ And if *hagio-* is hard to define in a cross-culturally sensitive way, religion is even more notoriously difficult” (Keune 2019, p. 3). Although my work does focus on Christian saints (Greek saints, *hagioi*, no less) and so I have not been especially obligated to worry about the applicability of the Greek-Christian vocabulary, I would suggest for the sake of the comparative project that we can never completely sanitize our vocabulary of associations and debts to particular traditions—the best we can do is cultivate hermeneutical rigor and reflexivity toward these entanglements. With this expectation, I am comfortable with any of the proposed terms of the roundtable—“holy figures,” “exemplary figures,” “perfected beings,” and indeed “saints” (given the etymological root in the *process* of human beings’ sanctifying or setting-apart a person, object, place, or the like, for veneration or emulation—a Roman term which, after all, does not originate in or belong to Christianity). I address this issue further below.

(literary, visual, acoustic, etc.) in and by which a given community constructs the memory of an individual who is recognized as the embodied perfection of the ‘religious’ ideal promoted by the community’s tradition and socio-cultural context” (Rondolino 2019, p. 5, presupposing the longer discussion in Rondolino (2017, pp. 35–40)), is an analytical category more capacious than the literary productions that have typically exhausted it. Already in 1994, Felice Lifshitz demonstrated how the notion of hagiography as a distinct “genre” of religious literature is problematic in light of this definition’s reliance on obsolete historiographical suppositions about the opposition of history and fiction.<sup>7</sup> However, much of the hagiographical scholarship in the years since has remained invested in construing hagiography as essentially literary or verbal: for instance, as “a variety of literary forms” in which special individuals are glorified (Rapp 1999, pp. 64–65), or as “a set of discursive strategies for presenting sainthood” (Miller 2009, p. 118). By contrast, the papers under consideration at the recent comparative hagiology workshop, and the contributions of the other participants in conversation, have for the most part embraced the subsequent move of classifying as hagiographical non-verbal or trans-verbal “texts” (such as images, objects, apparitions, buildings, processions, festivals, etc.).<sup>8</sup> While this move should not be made merely for convenience and should be robustly theorized (a project in which I am engaged as well), I take it as promising that “hagiography” is recognized to be a heuristic tool rather than a stable and single set of data. This allows for the interpretation of family resemblances and integrated functions between a vast array of media that, as enough of us have found, work together and amplify one another’s interventions in the life-worlds of their consumers.<sup>9</sup>

So too, there seems to be an encouraging level of (at least provisional) agreement with Rondolino’s proposal that hagiography be considered not only in terms of the “productions” in which the sanctity of some person is constructed but also in terms of the “behaviors, practices, beliefs,” and other ways of life of which those material productions are but one manifestation (Rondolino 2019, p. 5). Rondolino describes this overall theoretical thrust as being concerned with “hagiographical process” (Rondolino 2017, 2019, throughout)—a formulation that sparked excitement and recognition among other participants, myself included. My doctoral dissertation, to take the example with which I am most familiar, interpreted the relationship between the (multiple and interlocking) material textures and the (public and private) political functions of the hagiography of St. George in modern Cyprus. In that work, I developed a framework for interpreting hagiography as “the multimедiation of holiness,” that is, as designating not solely the media themselves but also and more fundamentally the psychosocial processes that generate and mobilize these constructions of holiness for a wide array of purposes in the world. I was delighted to find that this framework was at home in the comparative hagiology workshop, and it was evident that the other primary contributions besides Rondolino’s were resonant with the “hagiographical process” approach as well.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> (Lifshitz 1994; Rondolino 2019; French 2019) further explore the dysfunction of genre-based definitions of hagiography and suggest promising alternatives—as do I in forthcoming work.

<sup>8</sup> Keune’s dissent on this point is significant, but not disruptive of the shared orientation. He argues that the term hagiography “cannot but prioritize textuality in its very restricted sense of written documents” (Keune 2019, p. 2) which worries him precisely because the *hagio*- (however this ends up being construed in a given tradition or context) is *not* inscribed solely in such written documents—exactly the case that I and others make in favor of an expanded definition of hagiography, inclusive of the many forms of “inscription” (*graphē*) besides verbal texts. Here, the (reasonable, though I do not think determinative) disagreement is over the scholarly lexicon rather than with the object of analysis. Likewise, although Zimbalist concentrates her methodological attention on “the literature of sanctity,” she acknowledges that “hagiography in and of itself exceeds the textual” (Zimbalist 2019, p. 2).

<sup>9</sup> Such a recognition of “hagiographical” qualities and functions beyond written texts does not, of course, dispel the reasonable concerns with the implications of extending the tools of textual hermeneutics beyond the verbal realm. Such a hegemony of the text has been capably critiqued, for instance, in (Sullivan 1990; Asad 1993; Gell 1998; Malafouris 2013). Negotiating the merits versus the liabilities of a hermeneutical approach to non-verbal “texts” remains part of the ongoing task of theoretical and methodological reflexivity.

<sup>10</sup> See (Hollander 2018, pp. 21–45; cf. Ritchey 2019; Keune 2019; DiValerio 2019). Siebeking also offers the resonant notion of “the hagiographical” (Siebeking 2019, pp. 1–2) along the lines of Mark L. Taylor’s “the theological” and “the political,” as an emphasis on the “creative and receptive dynamics of hagiography” unbound by institutional or historical norms.

Finally, although there was not as much consensus (indeed there was some heated dispute) as to whether “hagiology” and “hagiography” could be useful categories of analysis in the context of religious traditions that either do not use the terms (or analogous terms) or that do not frame phenomena as “saints” or “holiness,” etc.,<sup>11</sup> there *was* a sense that all of our many approaches to dealing with many incommensurable materials *have something to do with one another*, even if the act of intellection around our commonalities (particularly where we are using terms derived from Greek or Latin and regularly associated with Christianity) sounds all the usual alarm bells. After all, there we all were, taking the time and effort to participate in a shared workshop, able to build upon one another’s contributions and conceive of a collaborative future even when we could not agree on the definition or specific utility of the terms we were working with. It may be my ecumenical disposition speaking, but I take this to be enormously promising: The comparative hagiology project is constrained, unsurprisingly, by all the challenges of comparative work in religious studies more generally, but it is also fueled by the recognition that hospitality to one another’s contributions across our wide range of hagiological construals and analytic suppositions is worthwhile even without the ability to translate perfectly and without a lockstep commitment to the same intellectual goals. This is, of course, the norm of human communication more broadly—we can never understand other people (or other languages, or other traditions, or other disciplines) exactly as they understand themselves, yet communication, translation, and multilingualism are not only possible, they are overwhelmingly the norm. As Keune points out, we may not need conclusively (or even preemptively) come to consensus on our terms before we begin the collaborative work of comparative hagiology.<sup>12</sup> Thinking together, including about these differences and disagreements, is transformative—we will not see our own material and our own methods the same way when we can accompany others glean insights from their own.<sup>13</sup>

I will conclude these reflections with an indication of where my own approach, while wholly aligned with the above areas of general agreement, would try to massage through some lingering knots in our enterprise of comparative hagiological interpretation.

### 3. Where Next?

First, insofar as we are asking about the processes of thought and life that give rise to hagiographical media (by which, in Rondolino’s terms, “the embodied perfection of the ‘religious’ ideal” (Rondolino 2019, p. 5) is constructed in publicly-available forms), we ought to consider within the field of view not only those processes of hagiographical *production* but also those of what I would call hagiographical *consumption*. The many authorized and unauthorized uses to which hagiographical media are put in people’s lives are indispensable to the continued construction and circulation of the ideals of which these media are representative. Indeed, an object that plays a hagiographical role in the life of a community need not even be deliberately “produced” to be hagiologically significant. To take an example from my own material: Across the island of Cyprus there are shrines that have developed around stones bearing the hoofprints (*ta pathkia*) of St. George’s horse; such shrines may eventually be formalized through recognition by the institutional church, but well before this point they have coalesced as sites of holy significance and power through the procedures by which people interact with them. Whether at such informal sites as this or in the established churches, practices of veneration may be ephemeral but still constitute part of the status and indeed the very form of the holiness that is there represented. Hagiographical consumers become part of the mediating field for one another, their devotions being publicly perceptible, and the offerings that are frequently left behind (wax or

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the various discussions of these thorny issues in Keune (2019) and Rondolino (2019) (drawing on Monge 2016); and see again note 6 in this article.

<sup>12</sup> See (Keune 2019, pp. 1–2). It is, moreover, worth remembering that using the same term—for instance the mere presence of a concept of “saints” in multiple traditions—is by no means a guarantee that the ideas and images communicated by these terms are aligned or even commensurable.

<sup>13</sup> French suggests much the same and expands on the merits of this approach (French 2019, pp. 2–3, 6–7).

tin votives, photos of loved ones, candles, coins, crutches, etc.) remain as a cumulative precipitation from acts of consumption that amplifies the content and power of the media in question. In Michel de Certeau's formulation, such consumption is itself a co-production, not only of a site's significance but even of that which is available to signify in the first place. It is important not to let an allergy to over-broadening our categories foreclose on including such phenomena in our hagiological analyses.<sup>14</sup>

Second, while I am in agreement that the analytical use of "hagiography" as a category is broader than those religious traditions in which the term has emic significance, I would also suggest that this breadth extends past religious studies as a discipline, or perhaps better, offers a point at which religious studies may contribute to broader questions in cultural and political studies. The study of saints has already made room for this recognition (for instance in Lawrence Jasud's short but significant piece, "St. Elvis," (Jasud 2011)), yet the opportunity exists for more thoroughgoing theoretical attention to how such transreligious hagiographical phenomena are related to those that are more familiar to scholars of religion.<sup>15</sup> Such an applicability at the margins of religious studies was, unsurprisingly, a point of tension in our conversation (around the reasonable but, I think, ultimately untenable worry that once everything is hagiography, nothing will be), yet I would suggest that Rondolino's definition of hagiography may in fact remain rather too narrow. As Keune puts it "But that's not religion, and those aren't saints" (Keune 2019, p. 6) is a gatekeeping move that, though well-intentioned to keep a firm grip on the reins of interpretation, will impede some of the most interesting analyses that comparative hagiology may engender—for instance around sanctifying representations (verbal and otherwise) of politicians, soldiers, celebrities, or animals.<sup>16</sup>

Third, I would like to encourage those of us committed to pursuing comparative hagiology not to view the insights available in this comparative key as self-sufficient. I mean this not only in the sense that sound comparative work can and should open the door to collaborative scholarship that mobilizes diverse strengths in shared projects, but also in the sense that comparative methods risk giving a pass to obsolete parameters for examining religious traditions, practices, or texts "individually," as it were, as if such phenomena were discrete entities that could be set next to one another as non-overlapping spheres.<sup>17</sup> Where hagiographical production and consumption are concerned, however, a community's dealings with holy figures are often if not usually preconditioned by a history of *interreligious* interaction, in which the community's own understandings and behaviors are oriented in no small part by what they have witnessed on the part of religious others, whose presence and activity have contributed to their repertoire of self-understanding. In this respect, I would offer the methodological resources of interreligious studies—in its early days as a formal academic apparatus but earning ample recognition and enthusiasm from practitioners across a range of disciplines—as valuable assets for the project of

<sup>14</sup> See (de Certeau 1984, pp. xi–xxi); cf. (Siebeking 2019) on hagiographical "reception".

<sup>15</sup> I have tried to deliver on this suggestion in my forthcoming article, "The Heromartyrs of Cyprus" (Hollander 2020), in which I interpret a museum dedicated to the memory of the Greek Cypriot "national struggle" against British colonial rule, suggesting that the museum functions as an apparatus of hagiographical mediation insofar as it renders for local and international publics an aura of sanctity around the dead anticolonial fighters.

<sup>16</sup> It is on these grounds that Keune proposes his methodology of "prioritizing the comparative" (Keune 2019, p. 6) in comparative hagiology, whereby the specific taxonomical boundaries of holiness, saints, religion, etc., are allowed to remain fluid until the comparanda in question are posed to one another with a maximum of openness to possible resonances and resemblances. Brian Siebeking helpfully tests this approach, in his contribution to this special issue, finding that the avoidance of early definitional overdetermination not only allows for more interesting comparative insights in which the rewards are potentially greater than the risks, but also for more effective and dexterous *collaborative* support for one another's projects (Siebeking 2019).

<sup>17</sup> As Laurie Patton puts it, drawing on David Eckel, "modernist myths are broken [in contemporary comparative methods], but they do not go away . . . they coexist instead with the rediscovery of traditional patterns of life and thought that were considered long since out of date" (Patton 2000, pp. 193–94). Moreover, as McClymond observes (McClymond 2018, p. 3), the scholarly work of comparison is itself *creating* (or at least intervening in) relationships between the phenomena to which it attends, relationships bound up with power dynamics between the human representatives, agents, or addressees of these phenomena.

comparative hagiology, useful as they are for illuminating and accounting for the entanglement of even apparently distinct religious phenomena.<sup>18</sup>

Where we go from here is as wide open as the breadth of imagination on the part of participants in this series of workshops and of those in our own networks and beyond who are inspired by the work. The collaborative commitment on the part of those involved is encouraging indeed, in light of an academic profession that will not easily survive (or at least, will not easily flourish again) in the absence of such collaboration. In a way, the fact of *how* such a contemporary hagiology is being pursued—a circulation of drafts, an in-person negotiation of parallels and divergences, a collaborative editing process, and a shared publication in a setting that amplifies each scholar's contribution in light of its resonance with the others—is as significant as the content of any of its scholarly accomplishments. This experiment, whatever its quantifiable products, has *moral implications* not only for our responsibility to steward the profession sustainably for the next generation, but also for our pedagogy as teachers of students who will need to navigate a world of religious difference and will do so for better or worse. The collaborative comparison in which we are engaged is—if we apply it thus—of substantial value in the classroom, as we work to equip our students to think differently, and more precisely to think *with others*, decoupling their commitments and horizons from a sense of self-evidence and offering these destabilizing comparisons as opportunities to practice intellectual empathy and hospitality.<sup>19</sup> If the collaborative enterprise that has led to this collection can help cultivate the recognition that individual excellence is not a sufficient end toward which to dedicate our scholarship, then our students, our professional networks, and our interlocking publics will be much better for it.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### List of Contributions

- DiValerio, David M. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. doi:10.3390/rel10100585.
- French, Todd E. 2019. Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. doi:10.3390/rel10100577.
- Harrower, Scott. 2019. Comparative Hagiography Based upon Justice and Respect. *Religions* 10: 660. doi:10.3390/rel10120660.
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology: Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. doi:10.3390/rel10100575.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. doi:10.3390/rel10100569.

---

<sup>18</sup> For an early and influential articulation of the priorities and methods of interreligious studies, see (Leirvik 2014). A more recent and diverse set of perspectives can be found in (Patel et al. 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Scott Harrower expands on the pedagogical implications of the comparative hagiology project (Harrower 2019, p. 9), offering valuable metapedagogical reflections along with some specific examples of how his classes cultivate and mobilize comparative methodology with reference to hagiography in particular. In the spirit of our comparative inquiry, I can add that certain of my own classes—"Classical Mythology and its Afterlives" and "Literature and the Sacred: Writing Saints" in particular—have likewise relied on methodological elements of comparative hagiology in order to provide students with a toolbox to pose questions and perceive attributes they might not otherwise have done in new materials. Thus, we study (for instance), the exhortation to refashion oneself in the model of one's heroes found in *The Amazing Spider-Man* in light of Pericles' *Funeral Oration* and the saint's-day homilies of John Chrysostom, or we attend to James Baldwin's and Malcolm X's critiques of white supremacy in terms of the language of demonic possession that they employ—after and in conversation with our study of the *Lives and Sayings* of the Desert Fathers, whose own diagnosis of the demonically-warped perception of other human beings is, for students, productively similar. In each case, the hagiological framework allows us to pose consistent questions without becoming mired in trying to nail down what is or is not proper hagiography: "What is the picture of holiness presented here?" and "In what way might this text be considered or promoted as cultivating that holiness in its audience?"



- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for *Hagiography*. *Religions* 10: 538. doi:10.3390/rel110100538.
- Siebeking, Brian. 2019. Dare to Compare: Reflections on Experimenting with Comparative Hagiology. *Religions* 10: 663. doi:10.3390/rel110120663.
- Zimbalist, Barbara. 2019. Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality. *Religions* 10: 604. doi:10/3390/rel110110604.

## References

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California.
- Freiberger, Oliver. 2018. Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 9: 38. [CrossRef]
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hollander, Aaron T. 2018. The Multimmediation of Holiness. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA.
- Hollander, Aaron T. 2020. The Heromartyrs of Cyprus: National Museums as Greek Orthodox Hagiographical Media. *Material Religion*.
- Jasud, Lawrence. 2011. St. Elvis. In *Saints: Faith Without Borders*. Edited by Françoise Meltzer and Jaś Elsner. Chicago: University of Chicago, pp. 35–44.
- Leirvik, Oddbjørn. 2014. *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 1994. Beyond Positivism and Genre: ‘Hagiographical’ Texts as Historical Narrative. *Viator* 25: 95–113. [CrossRef]
- Malafouris, Lambros. 2013. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. Cambridge: MIT.
- McClymond, Kathryn. 2018. Comparison as Conversation and Craft. *Religions* 9: 39. [CrossRef]
- Miller, Patricia Cox. 2009. *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Monge, Rico G. 2016. Saints, Truth and the ‘Use and Abuse’ of Hagiography. In *Hagiography and Religious Studies: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. Edited by Rico Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 7–22.
- Patel, Eboo, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds. 2018. *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*. Boston: Beacon.
- Patton, Laurie L. 2000. The Magic in Miniature: Etymological Links in Comparative Religions. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. Berkeley: University of California, pp. 193–205.
- Philippart, Guy. 1994. Hagiographes et Hagiographie, Hagiologes et Hagiologie: Des Mots et des Concepts [Hagiographers and hagiography, hagiologists and hagiology: on the words and the concepts]. *Hagiographica* 1: 1–16.
- Rapp, Claudia. 1999. ‘For Next to God, You Are My Salvation’: Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity. In *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Edited by James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward. Oxford: Oxford University, pp. 63–81.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2017. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Standard Lives of St. Francis and Milarepa*. Milton: Taylor and Francis.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2000. The ‘End’ of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. Berkeley: University of California, pp. 237–41.

Sullivan, Lawrence E. 1990. Seeking an End to the Primary Text, or Putting an End to the Text as Primary. In *Beyond the Classics: Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*. Edited by Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl L. Burkhalter. Atlanta: Scholars Press, pp. 41–59.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Article

# Is Comparison Based on Translatable Formal Concepts?

Kevin Guilfooy

Philosophy Department, Carroll University, Waukesha, WI 53186, USA; kguilfooy@carrollu.edu

Received: 17 December 2019; Accepted: 11 March 2020; Published: 1 April 2020

**Abstract:** Fully realized ethical and metaphysical concepts have intension and extension only within an historically situated epistemic tradition. Only people who live the epistemic tradition fully understand the concept and can accurately identify items that satisfy the concept. Such concepts are only fully understood by those whose lives are shaped from within the epistemic tradition. This makes comparison of ethical and metaphysical concepts across epistemic traditions difficult if not impossible. Comparative hagiology employs theological concepts that may function differently from ethical and metaphysical concepts. The articles in this volume seem to suggest that some theological concepts may function as formal concepts. A formal concept is defined by rules or form, rather than by its intensional or extensional content. Thus, formal concepts may be translatable across epistemic traditions. Because the rules do not fully determine intension or extension, a formal concept can apply to otherwise diverse individuals. Theological concepts may be formal concepts that could provide the basis for comparison of the untranslatable concepts that give meaning and value to the lived experience of people in epistemic traditions. The articles in this volume suggest several candidates for such formal concepts.

**Keywords:** comparative method; comparative religions; formal concepts; hagiography; hagiology; sainthood; theory and method in religious studies; translation

---

I have read the articles in this volume as an outsider. I am not a member of any religious tradition or community, nor am I steeped in the scholarly community of comparative hagiology. While this makes me reticent to offer commentary, Todd French argues that the inclusion of outside scholarly perspectives can aid the discussion (French 2019). My recent work has been on the translation of ethical concepts between traditions, not the comparison of concepts across traditions. Translation in the context in which I work means taking the concept epistemic tradition and claiming that there is a fully synonymous concept in another. In my work, I have argued that ethical and metaphysical concepts are historically situated, socially constructed, and are only meaningful within an epistemic tradition (Guilfooy 2018). The concept of “saint” cannot be carried over into a non-Christian tradition or applied in a non-Christian tradition. The concept of saint only has meaning and content as culturally and historically situated within the Christian epistemic tradition. Such a tradition defines the world and what exists in it, sets the standards for epistemic practice, and provides a framework of meaning and value for people’s lived experience. There literally cannot be a saint outside the tradition in which the concept is defined, because the epistemic tradition defines the concept for that tradition from within that tradition. This is not a conclusion I am happy with. One scholar has argued that as a result, there

can be no meaningful cross-cultural conversations.<sup>1</sup> Translation between traditions may be impossible. The articles in this volume and the conference workshop have given me hope that comparison is not.

An example from my own college experience illustrates both what I mean by translation and the difference I see between translation and comparison. My experience in comparative religion ended in the 1980s when a professor asserted that the Great Spirit was like the Judeo-Christian God, just less fully developed and understood by Native Americans. This seemed absurd and more than a little racist. Thus, this college freshman never took another religious studies class.

My professor attempted translation not comparison. She attempted to apply, without modification, the ethical, theological and metaphysical concepts of one tradition into another. My professor looked at a different tradition to find an analogue for a key concept in her own. Finding something similar enough, she declared the differences to be the result of *their* inadequate understanding of *her* concept. At best, translation creates a shallow and trivial grasp of cultures and traditions.<sup>2</sup> At worst, it is imperialistic. The discomfort authors in this Special Issue have with cross-cultural application of the concept “saint” shows that it is an historically situated and culturally defined concept that cannot be translated into non-Christian traditions.<sup>3</sup> I worry that I am doing the same thing in this comment. In what follows, I suggest that the underlying problem can be understood as a philosophical problem—a problem of conceptual translation. With all the arrogance of a philosopher, I suggest that the philosophical concept of a formal concept might help religious studies scholars to better understand their own project.

The argument that translation is impossible is simple enough to outline. The versions I’m most familiar with were developed from the logic and philosophy of science in the last century.<sup>4</sup> Quine argued that kind terms naming physical objects are not translatable between cultures. When a German points at an object and says “katze,” there is no guarantee that the German’s ontology includes cats as I understand cats. In the strongest form of Quine’s argument, even concepts that apply by ostension to items we can experience via the senses cannot be translated between epistemic communities (Quine 1969). The German’s ontology can be radically different from my own but phenomenologically indistinguishable. She may literally be pointing at a different object from the one I see. Ontology is relative to epistemic tradition. Ethical, theological, and metaphysical concepts are not reducible to shared sensory experience. Their meanings are socially constructed and historically situated. The conceptual frame form for identifying an object that satisfies an ethical or metaphysical concept is more complex and, because it is evaluative, cannot be reduced to sensory experience. “Saint” is such a concept. It is not merely an evaluative ethical concept, it is a concept that also includes a vast amount of culturally created value and meaning that shapes the lived experience of those in the Christian tradition. Saints literally do not exist in other epistemic traditions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rowe (2016), develops and defends this concept of translation. See especially chapter 7 and 8. I doubt I apply the concept with the same intension as he does. Like all excellent philosophical arguments, Rowe leads one through a series of reasonable and well-argued steps to a counter intuitive and controversial conclusion: it is not possible to have meaningful ethical discussions across traditions. Translation by analogy, or connotation, or vagueness, may be possible, but this is beyond the scope of this reply. Rowe cites Alastair MacIntyre as providing a potential model for one tradition to compare and learn from another (MacIntyre 1990). Comparison is possible when an individual in one culture learns another as a “second Language.” However, comparison, as Rowe describes it, is the evaluative, even judgmental comparison that is ethically problematic (Rowe 2016).

<sup>2</sup> There are advantages to trivial understanding (see Stout 1988). Ineffable metaphysical issue spawn irresolvable disputes. Many have died over an iota of difference. Acknowledging superficial similarities and ignoring unanswerable disputes about metaphysics can encourage tolerance. On the other hand, it is precisely those ineffable metaphysical issues that give meaning and value to people’s lives.

<sup>3</sup> Many in this volume have responded favorably to Keune’s use of “hagio-” rather than “saint-” “Hagio-” is a likely candidate as a formal concept, one that can allow for cross cultural comparison (Keune 2019). I believe this is why Keune’s suggestion has been favorably received. In order to focus on the problems using untranslatable concepts, I will continue to use “saint” and its variants.

<sup>4</sup> There are other versions that developed in political theory (Hayek 2011; Gaus 2016) and in the post-modern tradition.

I find something comparable to this line of thought in all the articles in this volume. Of course, as an outsider, I cannot be sure that any of the authors understand the project as I do.<sup>5</sup> Each of the authors attempts to avoid the pitfalls of translation. French describes a method of collaborative checks to insure that one is not translating concepts between cultures (French 2019). This collaborative model could produce an understanding of how ethical, theological, and metaphysical concepts function in different cultures. If we are careful, perhaps, we can compare the forms and function of patronage and veneration exhibited by particular individuals in different epistemic traditions and thus, better understand the many forms of patronage and veneration. There are limits. We cannot know the meaning and value of what we label veneration and patronage in the lived experience of the people engaged in the practices we compare. There is also the risk that a group of scholars actively engaged to insure that ethical, metaphysical, and evaluative terms are not misapplied from one culture to another, find themselves with literally nothing to talk about.

The other contributions to this volume point towards a reliance on formal concepts as a way to ground meaningful cross-cultural comparison. A formal concept is a concept defined by rules or form, rather than by its intensional or extensional content. Formal concepts are not uncommon. “Good” may seem like an untranslatable ethical concept. What is identified as “good” varies radically across epistemic traditions. The precise intensional and extensional content of one tradition’s concept of “good” cannot be translated into a different cultural and epistemic context. Nonetheless, we are quite comfortable treating “good” as a formal concept. X is understood as good in one tradition. Y is understood to be good in another. We can delineate a set of observable “behaviors, practices, beliefs and productions” that allow us to identify different conceptions of the good in other epistemic traditions (Rondolino 2019). We can observe and compare the way a fully realized concept “good” functions in different traditions.

To explain my point, I am going to focus on Rondolino’s contribution. Yet, the other contributors are equally suggestive. Keune questions the value of fully stipulative definitions and suggests that we “step back and reconsider whether it truly is the case that we must clearly define our key terms before proceeding with comparison” (Keune 2019). Ritchey’s list of concepts contains several that could be formal concepts (Ritchey 2019). There is a way of constructing taxonomies with formal concepts in the subaltern categories. DeValerio’s taxonomy could be developed as a nominalist tree of porphyry (DiValerio 2019). That is, with rules that determine several distinct sets of individuals that satisfy the formal concept “perfected.” There would be compassionate, sacrificial, and spiritual, species of “perfected” but not simply perfected beings.<sup>6</sup>

In Rondolino’s argument *hagiography* could easily be a formal concept. (Rondolino 2019). Rondolino suggests we jettison the concept “saint” as too culturally specific, and adopt a definition of *hagiography* that rests on an embedded concept of “perfection.”<sup>7</sup> In the spirit of DiValerio’s argument, I suggest that he could build a formal taxonomy of perfection. There are multiple fully realized concepts of who is perfected in different traditions. Each tradition will have its own metaphysical beliefs about what a person is, flaws or shortcomings, the path to fixing those flaws, and ultimately, what a person would look like flawless. Each fully realized concept of perfection is only meaningful within a tradition. A saint is a person who has achieved perfection as understood in the Christian tradition. The perfected Hindu would not have the qualities, actions, etc., that define value and provide meaning to a person

---

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for demonstrating that translation itself is an untranslatable concept between various academic disciplines. I hope I have presented my discipline’s version of the concept clearly. The word “translation” is the same across disciplines. However, the concept signified by the word is quite different. Thus, the items identified as satisfying that concept within one discipline may not be identified as satisfying the concept within another. At best, there are confusing usages of the word “translate” to indicate analogous concepts.

<sup>6</sup> In a nominalist tree of Porphyry, only the lowest level of the taxonomy specifies individuals. There are foxes, rats, and ants, but strictly speaking, no animals. A fox satisfies the rules for being called an animal, but is only fully realized as a fox. To paraphrase Peter Abelard, only discreet individuals exist, but there are rules governing where they fall into categories.

<sup>7</sup> One of the rules governing the application of the formal concept *hagiography* is that the individual who satisfies the concept be “perfected.”

in the Christian tradition. A person perfected in the Hindu tradition would not satisfy the concept “saint.” By clarifying the rules that allow us to identify individuals recognized as perfected, we can do comparative hagiology. However, is “perfection” a formal concept that would allow comparison?

“Perfection” is clearly central to Rondolino’s re-definition of *hagiography*: “The complex web of behaviors, practices, beliefs and productions (literary, visual, acoustic, etc.) in and by which a given community constructs the memory of individuals who are recognized as the embodied perfection of the “religious” ideal promoted by the community’s tradition and socio-cultural context” (Rondolino 2019).

Rondolino’s perfection is questionable. Does the concept of “perfection” have rules and a form sufficient to be satisfied in radically different, perhaps mutually exclusive ways in different traditions? Is there a cross-culturally identifiable form, function, or structure of “perfection” that can identify (most of) the radically different individuals identified in different traditions as perfect?

The first clause of Rondolino’s definition describes observable behavior, (provided we take reports of beliefs as behavior.) The problem is in identifying any set of behaviors as constructing the memory of individuals recognized as embodied perfection. “Good” works as a formal concept because the behaviors indicative that something has satisfied the rules for applying the concept are fairly clear and universal.<sup>8</sup> The concept of “Perfection” and the behaviors that would indicate a response to perfection seem more complex and irreducibly culturally situated. Only those living an epistemic and ethical culture can truly understand what perfection is, why it is perfection, what is being perfected, etc. The behavioral responses to “perfection” can only arise in a tradition that has a well-developed concept of the perfect. The observable behaviors people engage in to construct the memory of the perfected individual are themselves socially constructed. The meaning of the behaviors is established within the lived experience of those whose lives are shaped by the tradition. I doubt there is a way to identify a culture’s behavioral responses to perfection without translating our concept perfection into that culture. “Perfection” may be an untranslatable concept.

Ritchey’s example of Christina makes me think these are more than just academic worries. “Although her (Christina’s) devotional behavior struck her contemporaries as positively aberrant—at one point, she is described as climbing into treetops to pray while rolling herself into a ball like a hedgehog (ericei)—Christina was clearly revered by her contemporaries” (Ritchey 2019). Christina may have been revered, but she was also viewed as “aberrant” and “not to be imitated.” I do not see a set of rules governing a formal concept of “perfection” that would be satisfied by Christina and Francis. It seems that any observable behavior can be identified as a culturally created response to a perfected individual. We have not left medieval Europe yet.

Ritchey’s suggestion of “extra-ordinary” is promising for two reasons. “Extra-ordinary” does not have potentially untranslatable concepts embedded in its definition. Each epistemic tradition will have different understanding of what is ordinary and what is extra-ordinary. This binary is much more fundamental to basic issues of ethics and metaphysics than “perfection.” It should be easier to identify what an epistemic tradition deems ordinary and extra-ordinary than it would be to identify what it deems perfect.<sup>9</sup>

“Extra-ordinary” may be too genic for the discipline of comparative hagiology. Rondolino’s definition of *hagiography* also includes the embedded concept of “religion.” This seems perfectly reasonable in the context. But untranslatable. There is an ongoing controversy in philosophy. Is Buddhism philosophy or religion?<sup>10</sup> As I see it, the question involves a category mistake. The concepts “philosophy” and “religion” are historically situated concepts that provided meaning in a certain

---

<sup>8</sup> I noted above that we are comfortable treating “good” as a formal concept. Largely, this is because we can track fairly basic human behaviors, attraction and aversion, etc. Attraction and aversion responses are indicative of what a person will judge to be good and bad. This does not give us a very deep understanding of different conceptions of the good, only a way to identify them. This analysis starts with Hobbes, but is also the basis of Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt 2012).

<sup>9</sup> I must admit I am imagining a sort of universal look of confusion as the primary indication of the “extra-ordinary.”

<sup>10</sup> The battle is usually joined between departments that don’t want responsibility for teaching material outside their cultural comfort zone.

epistemic tradition. The question translates the concepts into a tradition where they cannot possibly apply. “Extra-ordinary” as a formal concept avoids this issue. This makes “extra-ordinary” much more useful as a formal concept, but runs the risk remove the intellectual core of comparative hagiology.

I am worried that, at best, this brief comment has simply illustrated the problems of applying the conceptual scheme and epistemic process from one discipline to another. I have suggested that the concept of a formal concept may be translatable across epistemic traditions. Such formal concepts could provide the basis for comparison of the richer, more fully developed, and untranslatable concepts that give meaning and value to the lived experience of people in epistemic traditions. I am also keenly aware that I may have just repeated the error of my only religious studies professor and demonstrated all the complexities inherent in comparative and interdisciplinary work. I have employed *my* limited understanding of *your* project. *You* seem to be engaged in a form of analysis *I* can understand from within my own discipline. With all the arrogance of a philosopher, *I* have suggested a way *you* can meet the standards of *my* field. This makes me deeply uncomfortable. There are many fields where the response to such an incursion would be unprintable. This discomfort may be necessary. The authors in this volume have suggested several procedures and guidelines for ethical comparative hagiology. Regardless of how good the procedures and guidelines are, success depends on humility, openness, respect, and above all good will among the contributors to the discussion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## List of Contributions

- DiValerio, David M. 2019. A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts. *Religions* 10: 585. doi:10.3390/rel10100585.
- French, Todd E. 2019. Saints across Traditions and Time Periods: Methods for Increasing Range and Reading in Comparative Frameworks. *Religions* 10: 577. doi:10.3390/rel10100577.
- Keune, Jon. 2019. Comparative vs. Hagiology: Two Variant Approaches to the Field. *Religions* 10: 575. doi:10.3390/rel10100575.
- Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. doi:10.3390/rel10100569.
- Rondolino, Massimo A. 2019. Some Foundational Considerations on Taxonomy: A Case for Hagiography. *Religions* 10: 538. doi:10.3390/rel10100538.

## References

- Gaus, Gerald. 2016. *The Tyranny of the Ideal*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Guilfof, Kevin. 2018. Peter Abelard’s Dialogues: Negotiation is not Translation. *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45: 443–56.
- Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind*. New York: Random House.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. 2011. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Notre Dame Indiana: Notre Dame University Press.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1969. *Ontological Relativity & Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University.
- Rowe, C. Kavin. 2016. *One True Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stout, Jeffery. 1988. *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*. Boston: Beacon.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).





MDPI  
St. Alban-Anlage 66  
4052 Basel  
Switzerland  
Tel. +41 61 683 77 34  
Fax +41 61 302 89 18  
[www.mdpi.com](http://www.mdpi.com)

*Religions* Editorial Office  
E-mail: [religions@mdpi.com](mailto:religions@mdpi.com)  
[www.mdpi.com/journal/religions](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions)





MDPI  
St. Alban-Anlage 66  
4052 Basel  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 61 683 77 34  
Fax: +41 61 302 89 18

[www.mdpi.com](http://www.mdpi.com)



ISBN 978-3-03936-405-3