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The Oneiro- and the Hagio-: Teaching about Dreams from the Standpoint of Comparative Hagiology

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Abstract: This paper explores the potentially fruitful interplay between a set of practical and theoretical approaches developed to teach post-secondary students about accounts of dreams and of exemplars, in cases where these phenomena have been deemed significant by specific religious discourse communities. Incorporating insights from his participation in the Comparative Hagiology group, the author suggests—in particular—that the expanded perspective on hagiography proposed by Rondolino, Hollander, and others can serve as a fruitful vantage from which to survey both of these phenomena in the classroom, revealing some intriguing correspondences between them. The author concludes by proposing some ways that the comparative hagiological classroom could be a particularly productive learning environment, and one that directly addresses some of the challenges of contemporary post-secondary education (from both the instructors' and students' perspectives).

Keywords: post-secondary pedagogy; hagiology; oneirology; hagiography

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Citation: Jensen, Christopher. 2024. The Oneiro- and the Hagio-: Teaching about Dreams from the Standpoint of Comparative Hagiology. *Religions* 15: 332. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030332

Academic Editor: Massimo A. Rondolino

Received: 22 January 2024
Revised: 5 March 2024
Accepted: 7 March 2024
Published: 11 March 2024

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In thinking about the ways that the "comparative" and the "hagiological" inform my own classroom teaching practice, I realized that both themes figure into my approach to the religious aspects of dreams and dreaming: a topic that has consumed a measure of my scholarly attention for around a decade now. Most saliently, back in 2017, as I was deep in the weeds of dissertation writing, I had the opportunity to offer a course related to my research topic (dreams in medieval Chinese Buddhist hagiography). Rather than focus on my own material, however, I instead opted to imagine this course as a synoptic overview of the topic, portentously naming it "Sleep, Dreams and the Boundaries of Reality in Contemporary Religious Studies". Drawing on the lessons that I learned over the subsequent five years of teaching, as well as by participating in both the AAR Comparative Studies group and the Comparative Hagiology project, this paper will outline the ways that my theoretical engagement with this constellation of topics has changed since 2017. These reflections will be interspersed with thoughts on the practical ways that these renewed understandings would inform my approach to teaching a similar course in the future.

To foreshadow the results of these reflections, I would suggest that many similar cultural dynamics inform both dream-telling and hagiographical practice in religious communities, especially when one approaches hagiography as a *process* (as do Rondolino 2017, 2019 and Hollander 2021 [see below]). Moreover, given that exemplary individuals are often associated with acts of exemplary sleeping (whether via narratives of miraculous dream encounters or, obversely, stories of religiously-mandated insomnia), the gradually expanding toolbox of comparative hagiology—which members of our collective have been assembling and refining for more than five years—prove useful for addressing both. In addition, given that dreams are just one example of a psychosomatic process that is frequently narrativized in religious contexts (other examples include visionary experiences, accounts of ritual participation, records of meditative achievements), I would suggest that the reflections presented below might also be of interest to scholars committed to exploring these other types of experience in the comparative hagiological classroom.

1. Thinking (and Teaching) about Dreams from the Standpoint of Comparative Hagiology

While I reject the postmodern critics' characterization of comparison as an impossible act of intellectual hubris, inevitably distorting the local and particular, I am convinced by their general call for an increase in scholarly reflexivity: a posture not coincidentally shared with all theoretically robust contemporary approaches to comparison in Religious Studies.[1] Indeed, well-meaning attempts to avoid terms with problematic etymologies or usage histories, as identified by these critiques, often fall victim to their own unquestioned assumptions, as Rondolino (2017) notes in the introduction to *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Hagiographical Strategies*:

> Unless we maintain that it is possible for us to identify neologisms that are and will remain free of cultural bias, thus effectively essentializing the neologism's reference, we are bound, as soon as the neologism has itself been revealed to be culturally charged, to have to replace it with a new one. Thus, the solution would seem to rest not on the neologism itself, but on the critically and culturally self-aware use we make of it. In other words, it rests on the approach and method we adopt in applying a given metalinguistic category to our study of human phenomena (p. 4).[2]

Taking such cautions seriously, the first thing I noticed when reviewing my erstwhile course's syllabus were some issues with my use of second-order terminology related to the subject matter. On the plus side, I *did* begin the course by exploring sleep as a culturally-situated activity: for one example, I remember how astonished many students were by the extent to which our contemporary Western sleep culture departs from various historical examples, where practices such as familial co-sleeping and biphasic sleeping were the norm.[3] Thinking about such examples, and how such practices could be normalized and provide opportunities for dream telling and dream consolidation, helpfully highlighted the ways that our own sleep culture tends to do the opposite, reinforcing the image of dreams as evanescent, purely subjective experiences.

In contrast, I failed to problematize the notion of "dream" itself similarly. While I did highlight the extent to which dreams occur at the intersection of body/mind and culture, I nonetheless introduced the topic by spending two three-hour seminar sessions (i.e., a sixth of our total class time) on contemporary Western psychological and psychiatric approaches. While any scholar investigating this subject matter should have at least a baseline familiarity with contemporary psychological research on the neural and somatic mechanisms of dreaming, I am not convinced that this is necessary background for an undergraduate Religious Studies class, especially given that this framing inevitably imposed a psychologistic interpretive lens on the subject: a viewpoint that would seem profoundly alien to the inhabitants of virtually any premodern cultural period (as well as to many contemporary people).[4] Approaching the topic with a clearly articulated comparative framework (as proposed below) would have impelled me to recognize this weakness.

I also erred on the side of excessive breadth in constructing my syllabus. In addition to the extensive coverage of the 20th and 21st c. psychology of dreaming, I also tried to provide a broadly synoptic overview of religious dreaming, including weeks on Indigenous religions, the Ancient Near East, Christianity, Hinduism, and historical China. Not only did this result in a class whose weekly reading obligations were, in retrospect, unreasonable, it also had the downside of inadvertently slipping into the "encyclopedic" mode of comparison so rightly critiqued by Jonathan Z. Smith and others (see, for example, Gill 2020, pp. 40–43; Freiberger 2019, pp. 117–18). Even though dreams have the advantage of somatic *givenness*—meaning that their basic contours as comparands can be fairly clearly specified—this wide-ranging approach meant that the examples selected were, by necessity, somewhat impressionistically linked. A more focused selection of comparands (and a clearly defined comparative tertium) would have helped rectify this issue.

In teaching this class again, I would dispense with the undertheorized encyclopedic comparison and reframe it as a semester-long taxonomic one, spending the first week

introducing students to contemporary theories of comparison and encouraging them to begin thinking about the contingency of our academic categories (including, in this case, "religious" and "dreams"). Thereafter, I would then introduce the two comparands: dreams in medieval Christian and Buddhist monasticisms. Constructing the class in this way would be facilitated by the recent publication of various sources that deal with the oneiric worlds of these two religious contexts.[5] Having the freedom to spend multiple weeks on these two constrained subjects would allow the class to delve much more substantively into the emic contexts of oneiric practices and their narrativization. For instance, rather than attempting to cover an entire religion's oneiric culture in a single week, this approach would allow for students to develop an initial background familiarity with both contexts, from which we could then delve into specific case studies of such topics as doctrinal perspectives on dreams, rituals related to oneiric visions, technologies and practices of dream interpretation, and the characterization(s) of dreams in hagiographical literature. On this final point, it would be vital for my students to consider the extent to which we see in both cultural contexts a variety of sources (from oneirocritical manuals to doctrinal treatises) that stress the contingent and often disreputable quality of dreams; this of course implies that any given dream account that *was* recorded must have been seen as sufficiently credible, important, or both to be worthy of transmission. As a side note, if my gentle reader has noted a striking parallel between my description of the cultural dynamics of dream interpretation/telling and hagiography, this was intentional. I will be addressing this purported parallel in more detail below.

In discussing oneiric practice, I would assign Kimberley Patton's brilliant article "A Great and Strange Correction", which provides an excellent case study of how thoughtful, comparative analysis of clearly chosen, cross-cultural and transhistorical examples can be used to rectify our academic terminology (in this case, the notion of "dream incubation", which she argues had been in danger of losing any analytical utility due to uncritical, undertheorized application) (Patton 2004). This "comparison-forward" approach would then continue into the assignment design and evaluation, with the students' final projects being conceptualized as either illuminative comparisons (highlighting particular features of a given comparand) or taxonomic ones (furthering the dialogical process of rectification and theory formation that we will have been engaging with throughout the semester).

2. Oneiro in Hagio/Oneiro as Hagio

While the preceding section highlights the ways I would reimagine this class to center the comparative, what of the hagiological? While it may perhaps seem odd to include this paper in a journal issue about comparative hagiology in the classroom, I suggest that dreams and dream interpretation are relevant for two reasons, as summarized in the heading to this section.

In the first case, and least controversially, when we begin with the most typical (narrow) definition of "hagiography" as narratives about a given religious community's exemplars,[6] we are immediately struck by the sheer number of dream accounts preserved within this corpus, at least when examining the life accounts of exemplary medieval Buddhists and Christians. Without relapsing into a sort of uncritical Tylorianism,[7] it is somewhat intuitively understandable that the hagiographical record often contains reported dream experiences: if a certain subset of the population is imagined to have a closer, more immediate connection to the *hagio* (defined broadly to include deities, extrahuman beings, exemplary modes of conduct, etc.), it is plausible that meaningful, communicative dreams would be preferentially ascribed to them. Moreover, given that many religious contexts (including medieval Christianity and Buddhism) actively treated dreaming as a communicative modality, with associated ritual technologies and hermeneutical strategies, it is quite likely that some of those hagiographical narratives reflect actual oneiric practice (regardless of whether, or the extent to which, their contents evolved in the telling and retelling). This phenomenon, narrowly defined as it is, would itself be worthy of investigation in the comparative hagiological classroom, as it would give students the opportunity

to consider a variety of issues in a cross-cultural perspective: how are dreams represented? Whose dreams are preserved? Is there a standard structure to dream narratives? What sorts of waking actions do individuals carry out due to their oneiric experiences? Engaging with such questions would provide students with valuable, direct experience of the sort of reciprocal illumination that can occur when engaging in a focused comparison of hagiographic sources.

In terms of the second, more provocative, assertion (re. the "Oneiro as Hagio"), I am not making the facile claim that dreams and hagiographies are homologous categories. That said, it *is* striking how many of the interpretive strategies proposed by Hollander as part of an "unbound" hagiology also apply to the academic study of religious dreaming. To begin with, Hollander—following Rondolino (2017, 2019) and others—focuses on hagiography as a *process*, as opposed to a textual genre. In this way, he decenters the hagiographical *object*, opting instead to focus on the historically, culturally, and politically inflected contexts in which people *do things* (narratively, ritually, experientially) with their exemplars.[8] This refiguration dovetails nicely with Ritchey's observation that hagiography transforms exemplars into vectors, i.e., "points of contact that bring individuals into relation with one another, with the ultimate other, and with themselves" (Ritchey 2019, p. 3). Hollander's approach thus highlights the critical role of the *consumers* of hagiographical media, offering provocative thought experiments and historical examples to make this case: whether discussing a hoofprint-shaped mark in a stone roadway, an outline resembling a bearded human burned into a slice of toast, or a narrative about an exemplar written as part of a scribal exercise, the original causes of these phenomena vanish into interpretive inconsequentiality. What matters (for comparative hagiological inquiry) is the way that meanings are subsequently ascribed to them and how they are thereafter deployed and contested (narratively, ritually, imaginatively) by members of a community. This same methodological orientation is required for any sort of disciplined oneirological inquiry; any specific dream experience is, by nature, ontologically inaccessible to the researcher. Even lab-based studies that involve waking subjects at intervals cannot bridge this gulf, as even in this case, what one is ultimately exploring is not the dream itself but a verbal representation of it, as articulated retrospectively by the waking mind. Considering these two phenomena (the *oneiro-* and the *hagio-*) in tandem would provide an excellent opportunity to encourage students to think critically about the complex processes whereby meaning is ascribed to such phenomena. Moreover, doing so would provide two analogous contexts for thinking about the importance of bracketing, as it is entirely possible to offer meaningful conclusions about hagiographical and oneirological data without wading into the dangerous waters of adjudicating religious truth claims.[9]

Hollander's "unbound" hagiology allows us to deepen our engagement with such phenomena by theorizing about various specific features of the hagiographical process, subdividing it into three discrete but connected activities: imagination, representation, and appropriation. **Imagination** represents the linkage between received religious culture (such as narrative and iconographic tropes) and personal experience (whether biographical, imaginative, visionary, or any combination of the above), highlighting the ways that such mental interactions with "holy media" are both constrained by traditional forms and also potentially creative (Hollander 2021, p. 89). **Representation** refers to the concretization of imagined exemplars, whether through the creation of physical forms (such as painted icons or statues) or via bodily mimesis (Hollander 2021, pp. 87–88). Finally, **appropriation** refers to the active consumption of holy media: a process that involves reinscribing the media into the consumer's life (via a change in goals, worldview, practice, or self-conception). When individuals ascribe such personal value to holy media, and especially when they do so publicly or in print, Hollander notes that they are thereby also implicated in "producing the social facticity of the media themselves: their reach, their impact, their very existence as mediating phenomena" (Hollander 2021, p. 93). Such appropriation could then manifest itself in further acts of imagination and representation (e.g., by encouraging an individual to sponsor the creation of religious icons or scriptures).

To demonstrate the resonances of "unbound" hagiography with the study of religious dreams, consider the following overview of oneiric practice, as seen in the medieval Chinese Buddhist context. Therein, we have various accounts of individuals becoming devotees of specific texts or buddhas, and subsequently developing personal relationships with these beings through oneiric encounters (**imagination**). These oneiric encounters encourage the individuals to sponsor the creation of additional images (**representation**), often based on the specifics of the dream visions, as well as redoubling their waking commitment to specific religious practices (**appropriation**). Moreover, stories about dream encounters that are accessible to contemporary scholars survive precisely because they were included in historical hagiographies. Given that these texts were widely circulated at the time, reading such stories could (and did) reinitiate these oreiro-hagiological processes (**imagination** + **representation** + **appropriation**).[10] As such, some religious dreams (and, in particular, stories about dreams) can be analyzed as "holy media" (in Hollander's terms). Providing students with a robust model of how hagiography works in practice, and allowing them to explore how, whether, or the extent to which it applies in a new cultural context seems like a valuable exercise, and an opportunity for critical reflection and discovery.

While I generally find myself both convinced by Hollander's perspicuous engagement with theoretical materials, I think that he may have unduly written off a potentially valuable contribution from Ann Taves, who is mentioned only tangentially in a discussion of the pitfalls of attempting to avoid "emically loaded first-order terms" (Hollander 2021, p. 96). Though an apt critique, it downplays a significant point of intersection between Taves' approach and Hollander's own: namely, a fundamental concern with *process*. Reimagining scholarly approaches to "religious experience" and to avoid the potential essentialism of such a project, Taves opts to focus on the ways that individuals and communities invest specific experiences with "specialness" (i.e., the process of attribution) (Taves 2009, pp. 13–15, 22–48). An advantage of this approach, and another point of intersection with Hollander's, is that it highlights the non-binary character of such determinations. While something labeled "religious" is generally placed into a discrete mental category (ontologically, socially, even legally [at least in countries with constitutionally mandated protections for religious communities and practices]), it is much easier to recognize that degrees of "specialness" can be placed on a continuum. Taves' theorized continuum is, of course, entirely of a piece with Hollander's suggestion that an "unbound" hagiological method could be productively applied to phenomena outside the traditional scope of religious studies.[11] As such, I would begin the course by assigning her chapter on "Deeming Things Religious" alongside the Hollander article within the first two weeks of class, in order to encourage students to think critically about their sources and the ways that these historical discourse communities engaged with them.

3. Concluding Reflections: On Teaching and Hagiological Comparison

In thinking about a redesign of my dreaming course, I was struck by the ways that my pedagogy has changed over the last five years, and—specifically—how various external events have prompted it to evolve (e.g., economic/climate uncertainties, the pandemic, various social justice movements, and the precipitous rise of AI systems). In these concluding remarks, I will reflect on some of these developments, as refracted through the prism of the proposed course.

First, I have moved toward a focus on process over product, in response to pedagogical scholarship stressing the importance of second-order reflection upon learning outcomes, as well as to an online teaching/learning climate in which the first-order products of our educational systems (e.g., papers, tests) can be easily sourced online or even spontaneously generated via AI systems. In this context, I suggest that hagiological comparison is a perfect example of the sort of complex, iteratively improvable skill that benefits students, both in terms of their critical thinking/writing, and their mastery of given subject areas. Though a given undergraduate student will almost invariably lack the language skills and historical context to write a publishable comparison, this does not mean that such

an exercise is without value. Instead, such a project provides a perfect opportunity for reflexivity: to encourage students to think critically about the choices of comparands, of the scale/scope/mode of comparison (skills outlined in Freiberger (2019), pp. 115–49), of the skills/areas of expertise that would need to be developed or of the specific collaborations that would allow them to engage with the topic more deeply. The fact that these sorts of situated, reflective questions are precisely the type of writing prompts that (to date) provide the biggest stumbling blocks for AI chatbots is obviously a side benefit.[12]

Relatedly, the fact that any given comparison requires the marshaling of such a breadth of historical knowledge and linguistic skills highlights the importance of collaboration as well as the partiality and contingency of any given conclusions. This, too, is a valuable lesson. Various contributors to the *Religions* issue on Comparative Hagiology made this point, with Hoel's paper providing an excellent summary:

> 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. (Hoel 2020, p. 4)

Such an approach radically undercuts the "sage on the stage" image of the university professor: an increasingly counterproductive framing in an era of instantly accessible information. What we provide our students, ultimately, is guidance and mentorship, not specific "content". Ideally, the course that I described above would be team-taught, as doing so would allow the teaching team to model the process of collaborative knowledge creation and dissemination, in both its intellectual and social dimensions.

Finally, this proposed course would provide students "multiple means of engagement" with the subject matter (as per the principles of Universal Design for Learning), given the general applicability of these methods (https://udlguidelines.cast.org/, accessed on 3 March 2024). This is particularly true if one heeds Hollander's call to "unbind" hagiography: by encouraging students to consider not only "religious" dreams, but rather those embedded in broadly defined hagiographical processes, students would be freed to employ the skills they developed in class to make sense of a wide variety of data. This parallels the sort of academic work carried out by Kathryn Lofton in *Consuming Religion* (Lofton 2017). Whether one is convinced by the propriety of employing the disciplinary toolkit of religious studies to investigate corporate cultures, internet fandoms, or industrial design, it is undeniable that this sort of scholarship serves the valuable function of meeting students where they are. Immersing students in a comparative hagiological classroom, and giving them the freedom to employ these ideas and techniques to make sense of their worlds, seems like an empowering possibility.

In closing, I see tremendous value in providing students with intellectual resources with which to make meaningful comparisons, to engage productively in culturally heterogeneous environments, and to critique and refine their thinking on complex topics. For the reasons outlined above, I believe that a disciplined, comparative hagiological classroom provides such benefits, and, more specifically, that attending to the productive analogies between accounts of religious dreams and religious exemplars could deepen their understanding of both.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: All new data are contained within the article. I am happy to discuss any of the claims made herein; please contact me via the supplied email address.

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

Notes

1 I would argue that comparative religion's historical excesses (c.f., Frazer, Eliade) has caused its contemporary practitioners to be especially sensitive to such issues. In contrast, some of the scholars engaging in postmodern critique fail to recognize the extent to which their continental philosophy-derived toolkits (Foucault, Freud, Deleuze, Derrida, etc.) are also culturally situated and can also be used to perpetrate epistemic violence when applied outside of their contexts of composition. For a discussion, see Ogunnaike (2022).

2 Hollander makes a similar point (Hollander 2021, p. 96).

3 See the discussions in, for example, Ekirch (2005); Wehr (1992); Arnulf et al. (2011); Richter (2004).

4 The introduction to Robert Ford Campany's *The Chinese Dreamscape* offers a thoughtful, reflexive exploration of his assumptions (clearly informed by his secular, "disenchanted" academic context), realizing in the process that such views would not only have been alien in early/medieval China, but to the majority of contemporary people cross-culturally (Campany 2020, pp. 7–13). Emma Cohen considers similar issues with regard to spirit possession (Cohen 2007, pp. 59–98).

5 See, for example, Keskiaho (2015); Campany (2020, 2023). On the comparative front, Rondolino discusses dreams associated with Saint Francis and Milarepa in (Rondolino 2017, pp. 97–98, 118–19).

6 On the cross-cultural applicability of "exemplar" in comparative hagiology, see Ritchey (2019). I also take as my starting point Rondolino's provisional redefinition of hagiography as a "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, p. 5).

7 See, in particular, Tylor's lengthy argument about dreams as one of the origins of "soul belief": a pillar of his (now oft-derided) theory of animism (Tylor [1871] 1920, pp. 440–46).

8 Hollander (2020, 2021). These perspectives thoughtfully engage with and extend Rondolino's (Rondolino 2017).

9 As per Hollander:

> "The ambiguity that persists as to whether hagiography constructs holiness (making something holy for someone, making holiness as a social fact), or whether it provides access to the "really real" (Orsi 2011, p. 85) holiness of a saintly or divine figure, does not need to be adjudicated by (this) theory. Holiness is "a made thing" (Orsi 2011, p. 98), whether or not it exists independently of the media and mediating practices by which it is rendered".
>
> (Hollander 2021, pp. 79–80)

A failure to employ bracketing appropriately is one of my issues with much contemporary academic oneirology, wherein theories from contemporary psychology (or, worse, Freudian analysis) are often uncritically applied to source materials. Recognizing that "holiness is a made thing" and that interpretations of oneiric experiences are one vector whereby such holiness can be generated means that questions about the veridical quality of a given dream experience (and its origins, whether interpreted theologically or psychologically) are fundamentally off-topic. This is another way that a hagiological perspective enriches the study of dreams as religious phenomena.

10 See discussions in (Campany 2012; Jensen 2023; Wang 2016). On the specific process of dream-telling, see Jensen (2018, pp. 69–99). On the circulation of these hagiographies, see Kieschnick (1997).

11 Hollander: "It would not be a stretch to plumb such cultural arenas as professional sports, children's literature, reality television, or indeed partisan politics for their degrees of involvement with hagiographical imagination, representation, and appropriation" (Hollander 2021, p. 95).

12 See, for example, Morrison (2023) for a lively exploration of (and practical experiment with) the distinctions between AI- and human-generated prose, as well as some pedagogical reflections; Hutson and Plate (2023) note that assignments that refer specifically to classroom content/readings and that are scaffolded (requiring reassessment and revision) are particularly incompatible with AI text-generation, p. 332. The sort of iterative, reflexive work described above fits this mold perfectly.

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