Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity

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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

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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.[1] 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

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[1] 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.

discrete "world" religions as objects of study (Asad 1993; McClymond 2018). Even after J.Z. Smith's 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.[2] 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."[3] 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."[4] 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."[5] 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).[6] 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

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[2]　(Smith 1982; Patton and Ray 2000).

[3]　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 in a faith tradition. See (Rondolino 2019; Hawley 1987).

[4]　Rondolino 2017, p. 2.

[5]　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.

[6]　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).

include objects, non-verbal images, and ritual actions (procession, votive offering, pilgrimage). 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.[7] 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

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[7] (Smith 2004); for an updated version of this five-part process, see Freiberger 2018.

to provide a common vocabulary for imagining varied worlds inhabited by exemplary figures, 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.[8] By the later Middle Ages, authorizing texts included canonization

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[8]   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.[9] 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 (*ericei*)—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.[10] 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

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[9] (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.

[10] (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.

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