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

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.[1] 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.[2] 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

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[1] 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).

[2] 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).[3] 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),[4] 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).[5] 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)).[6]

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[3] On the "Franciscan question", see, most notably, (Minocchi 1902; Manselli 1974, 1980).

[4] 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).

[5] 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/mtsr/mtsr-overview.xml) and Equinox Publishing's series "Concepts in the Study of Religion" (https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/concepts-in-the-study-of-religion/).

[6] 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).[7]

I contend that the notion of *hagiography*, at its core, is a heuristic device that serves a taxonomical function for the following:[8] (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.[9] 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

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[7] 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.

[7] 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 Stepien (Stepien 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).

[8] For a broad discussion of *hagiography* in the context of its European Christian development, see (Aigrain 1953; Dubois and Lemaitre 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).

[9] See, for example, (Smith 2000; Freiberger 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.[10] 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 Usum 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.[11]

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,

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[10] 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).

[11] 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.[12] I argue, however, that if we are to engage in a comparative, cross-cultural study of religious phenomena[13] 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.

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[12]   On the "use and abuse" of *hagiography*, see (Monge 2016).
[13]   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).[14] 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).[15] 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.

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14　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).

15　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).

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