

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

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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. Introduction¹

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

¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ Whatever and however one compares, some kind of

² (Tweed 2006, p. 34).

³ (Freiberger 2018, pp. 8–11).

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

⁵ (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.”⁶ 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”)⁷ 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,

⁶ See (Ritchey; Rondolino 2019).

⁷ 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.⁸ 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-sāstra* (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.

⁸ (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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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,"

⁹ (Freiberger 2018, pp. 8–9).

¹⁰ (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.¹¹ 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.

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¹¹ 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).