

# Introduction: Comparative Hagiology, Issues in Theory and Method

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

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

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

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

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

Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring 2016; van de Veer 2016; Freiburger 2018; Freiburger 2019). Parallel to this shift in methodological approach, scholars of religion and cultural historians began to display a renewed interest in the critical study of *hagiography*, broadly defined, in comparative and cross-cultural perspectives (e.g., Monge et al. 2016; Ownby et al. 2016; Rondolino 2017).

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

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

Consequently, we decided to structure the 2018 AAR pre-conference workshop around the discussion of five core individual reflections on “Comparative Hagiology,” written by the contributors to the 2017 AAR panel “Recentring Sacred Biography”—Todd French (Rollins College), David DiValerio (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee), Jon Keune (Michigan State University), Sara Ritchey

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

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

(University of Tennessee, Knoxville), and myself, Massimo Rondolino (Carroll University).<sup>4</sup> Their task was to draft a concise self-reflection on whether and how to do comparative, cross-cultural studies on hagiographical sources, drawing from their respective disciplinary training, areas of expertise, competencies, and past research. Each one was also asked to do so concisely, and with a focus on theory and method, with the ultimate goal of fostering a dynamic discussion on second-order hagiological analysis. In light of the conversations at the workshop, we then reworked our contributions into the five concise and highly focused essays that begin this special issue, which we then shared virtually among all contributors for further comments, feedback and exchange.<sup>5</sup> All other participants in the 2018 workshop were also invited to respond to any number of the five core papers they wished to engage with, to whichever extent (depth and breadth) most closely resonated with their sensitivities as well as personal and professional experiences (as scholars, as area specialists, as comparativists, as hagiologists, as teachers, etc.), further explicitly addressing our group's collaborative model in its entirety. Six participants have contributed responses to this special issue: Kevin Guilfooy (Carroll University), Scott Harrower (Ridley College), Nikolas Hoel (Northeastern Illinois University), Aaron Hollander (Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute), Brian Siebeking (Gonzaga University), and Barbara Zimbalist (University of Texas, El Paso).

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

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

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

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