Dare to Compare: Reflections on Experimenting with Comparative Hagiology

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Abstract: In this response essay, I consider Jon Keune's proposal to prioritize the act of comparison over definitional agreement when beginning an exercise in comparative hagiology. Reflecting on my own experience as the respondent for a panel at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which saw me comparing two very different "hagiographical texts," I argue in support of Keune's approach by stressing its advantage in pushing conceptual creativity and collaborative inclusivity. In the process, I accept Massimo Rondolino's invitation to consider his working re-definition of "hagiography", which I take as a starting point for thinking through some of the questions my panel's unconventional primary texts raise and how they might recommend revisiting our categories. In the end, I advocate for a capacious view of potential comparanda as one of the best ways to foster a process of continuous self-reflection and scholarly development.

1. Introduction

At the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), I was asked to be the respondent for a panel entitled "The Ethics of the Saints: Re-Reading and Re-Writing Hagiographical Texts." The two papers to which I responded were substantive and thought-provoking. They were also wildly different. Besides the fact that, as the panel's title suggests, one involved the scholarly act of re-reading a text while the other analyzed the creative act of re-writing them, the authors' use (or non-use) of key terms, such as "ethics," "saint," or "hagiography" indicated little ready overlap. What is more, the studies diverged in the periodization of their sources (medieval vs. modern), religion of focus (Islam vs. Christianity), and academic discipline (religious studies vs. theology). Despite the dialogical challenge posed by these layers of difference, I found the panel to be methodologically helpful. In what follows, I will reflect on this "experiment" in comparative hagiology in conversation with the core essays in this issue of *Religions*, especially those of Jon Keune and Massimo Rondolino, whose complementary contributions serve as the backdrop for my own thinking. In brief, a lack of common ground with respect to the *hagio*, the *graphē*, as well as the theories and methods employed by the papers to which I responded spurred me to test out a version of Keune's approach—that is, to *initially* prioritize the comparative analysis over proposing hagiological definitions. Far from undercutting the comparative utility of "hagiography" as "a heuristic device that serves a taxonomical function" for like data (Rondolino 2019), I found this compare-first approach well suited for rethinking "the hagiographical" in expansive and (I hope) productive ways.

Now, before I proceed any further, allow me a few preliminary remarks. First, I have introduced several terms that require some fleshing out. These clarifications are especially important given their varying usage by the other contributors in this special issue. Like Rondolino, Ritchey, and Hollander, but unlike Keune, I assign "hagiography" a wide descriptive range, referring not only to texts but

all sorts of things which are "read" in relation to the *hagio*, including artistic productions, practices, and behaviors. In the course of my essay, it will become clear why I adopt such a broad understanding. As for "the hagiographical," a phrase that I seditiously deploy as a noun, this is a nod toward Rondolino's "hagiographical process" (Rondolino 2017, p. 2), specifically as it underlines the creative and receptive dynamics of hagiography. And, with respect to the view that there is no *hagio* without the *graphē* that defines him/her/it, I employ "hagiology" and "hagiological" to denote the study of hagiographical media, study of the hagiographical process, or discourse about theories and methods in the study of hagiographies. (Cf. Rondolino 2019; Ritchey 2019; Keune 2019; Hollander 2019; Zimbalist 2019).[1] Second, like so many of the other essayists here, my thinking has been shaped by participation in the on-going AAR-sponsored Comparative Hagiology Workshop, organized by Massimo Rondolino. The lively theoretical and methodological discussions of this collaborative forum's 2018 session, the fruit of which can be found throughout this issue, have been particularly decisive in the following reflection.

2. Approach

Keune's essay is given to exposing and interrogating a basic, if often unnoticed, tension in the structure of "comparative hagiology." In terms of how the scholar *devises* her study, it is a question of prioritizing one over the other. Either one starts by describing the *hagio*[2] and then moves on to her comparison, or one proceeds directly to the comparative act (and the pre-comparative "first-order" methods that enable it)[3], and afterward (re)considers what may (or may not) be hagiographical (or hagiological) about the comparanda based on the results. Keune advocates for the latter approach on the grounds that, as it expands the field of possible comparanda far beyond what are conventionally deemed in the Western academy as "hagiographies," it is more likely to escape the gravitational pull of the Euro-Christian paradigm and its attending colonial baggage. Indeed, one should expect this compare-first approach to facilitate highly creative even playful experiments, in turn leading to new and unexpected ways of thinking about our objects of study, including "religion" itself. All in all, I find that Jon Keune makes a compelling case, not only with the accuracy and lucidity of how he describes the task of comparative hagiology but also with his capacious vision of what that work could be. Yes, to prioritize comparison is to take a risk—one may be judged provocative, reckless, or, worst of all, wrong!—but the potential rewards are great.

Understandably, Keune assumes that the comparativist has complete freedom to decide which approach to take up—compare-first vs. define-first[4]. In my case, however, I was constrained by the respondent's task, which is, as I understand it, to bring the research and results of other scholars into conversation with one another on the agreed upon theme, or *tertium comparationis*. In retrospect, this conventional limitation was a benefit. Having the compare-first approach set before me at the outset helped to forestall overdetermining my analysis according to how I saw and used the operative terms in my own field. Still, I admit to finding it easier to proceed with a sense of ambiguity when it came to what we meant by "ethics" and "saints" than by "hagiography." This impulse saw my preliminary thinking vacillate between leaving "hagiography" as a placeholder (per Keune's proposal) and trying to arrive at agreement on a serviceable definition (per Rondolino's proposal).[5] Now, let me be clear: I believe that the latter project (or something like it) is ultimately indispensable, especially

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1　On the historical complexity of these and related terms, see (Philippart 1994).

2　Despite the fact that I accepted to gloss *hagio* as "saint" for my AAR panel, I prefer not to do so here. Being an Islamicist by training, my hesitation comes not from the term's Christian connotations but from its automatic association in my field with Sufism. Thus, adopting "saint" in the context of Islamic hagiology risks excluding all kinds of other *hagio*s, such as prophets, caliphs, scholars, etc.

3　On comparison as a second-order method depending on prior first-order methods, see (Freiberger 2018; cf. Keune 2019).

4　"In arguing that we should prioritize the *comparative* of comparative hagiology, I am pointing to the energy or inspiration that leads to selection" (Keune 2019).

5　Specifically, I played with a more restrictive variation of Rondolino's definition (see Rondolino 2019).

for those concerned with communicating and collaborating outside of their fields of specialization.[6] However, for the participants *in the context of this AAR panel*—myself included—it quickly became apparent that getting on with the comparison rather than negotiating hagiological terms was going to be the more effective and practical approach. So, in order to get the dialogue off the ground, the panel agreed that the texts under discussion were "hagiographies" and moved on.

3. Comparison

Setting aside "hagiography" as a placeholder to enable our conversation prompted me to attend more carefully to the distinctive ways in which the panel contributors described their texts, methods, and conclusions, as well as how these descriptions might connect to our joint theme. In the process, I found their functionalist concerns to suggest new avenues of comparative inquiry that I would have missed had I insisted upon a prior hagiological consensus. To elucidate what I mean, let me begin by concisely describing the two scholarly papers. In the first, Stephanie Yep scrutinizes one of the most beloved devotional biographies of Muhammad, *al-Shifā'* of Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ (d. 1149). Using concepts and methods from discourse analysis and emotion theory, she convincingly shows how the text educates its reader on the proper "ethico-emotional comportment" one should have in relation to the Islamic prophet[7]. The second paper, by Min-Ah Cho, adopts a feminist literary and theological approach to explore *Dictee*, the avant-garde, quasi-autobiographical experiment of Korean-American author and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982). Her analysis persuasively argues that Cha's "re-writing" and interweaving of the lives of three Catholic women (two saints; the other, anonymous and abused by her husband) in the work's fifth chapter, "ERATO/LOVE POETRY," is not only an individual act of resistance to a patriarchal church but one that, as it invites its reader to locate her own voice in the narratives, seeks to recover women's experiences and agency more broadly.[8] Again, both are very well-conceived and insightful papers. But what do they suggest by way of hagiological comparison within the designated *tertium comparationis* of "ethics"?

It seemed to me then—as it still does now—that both studies revolve around the same locus of analysis: it is not so much the text (the *graphē*) or the subject of the text (the *hagio*) but the reader (or, in the case of the second paper, the writer as well as the reader). More specifically, Yep and Cho are concerned with demonstrating how the texts they examine inform certain practices of "reading" hagiography.[9] These practices could be called "ethics"—in line with our theme—to the extent that they seek to cultivate in their readers a particular relationality with the *hagio*. Of course, what this relationality is to look like varies considerably between the texts in question. Thus, according to Yep, *al-Shifā'* demands a particular sort of "emotional work" with respect to the veneration of Muhammad, whereas, in Cho's analysis, the *Dictee* invites its women readers to develop a bond with the *hagio*s by adding their own voices to the "concentric circle" of stories. But while they are certainly different, I would argue that it is precisely in the light of these differences that we can observe the texts' basic hagiographical link, namely, how they both prescribe reading practices meant to develop a personal, affective, and participatory relationship between their readers and *hagio*-subjects. Although we cannot say in this case that the reader's relation with the *hagio* is circumscribed by an ethic of exemplarity (cf. Ritchey 2019)[10], there is an expectation that one is changed by the encounter.

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[6]   For a thought-provoking reflection on why and how to challenge our siloed thinking, see (French 2019).

[7]   This paper is drawn from the author's doctoral dissertation (Yep 2019). For the primary text, see (Ibn Mūsá 2014).

[8]   This paper is an excerpt from the author's forthcoming book chapter, see (Cho 2019). For the primary text, see (Cha 1981).

[9]   Here I use "reading" broadly, to include reading *of something* as well as reading *into something*. It is in the latter sense that I locate Cha's act of "re-writing" within this rubric.

[10]   I should point out that Ritchey only glosses *hagio* as "exemplar" heuristically, "with the intention of clearing analytical space for multiple participants," especially for those who might be put off by the term "saint." (Ritchey 2019). All the same, it is difficult to imagine how that space might welcome non-exemplary *hagio*s.

4. Discussion

Following Keune's approach, it is in the wake of such a comparative exercise—brief though it may have been—that one is best positioned to proffer "stipulative definitions"[11] of the placeholder terms. Accordingly, here I would like to return to our central category of analysis, asking: If *al-Shifā'* and *Dictee* are "hagiographies," do they signal alternative ways of thinking about the hagiographical? If so, how? First, as I have noted above, the respective analyses of Yep and Cho cooperate to amplify reorienting our attention from *text* to *practice*, from literary *subject* to transformative *experience*. This phenomenological perspective strikes me as all too often "the road not taken" (or at least less taken) in hagiological studies.[12] Second, rethinking the hagiographical in terms of media that promotes a set of reading practices (and here I do not mean "reading" in the strictly textual sense) which are meant to cultivate an active relationality with the *hagio*, suggests the need to consider the fundamental role of *reception* (individual and communal) in the definition of hagiography. In fact, one could argue that, irrespective of authorial intent, a text or other production is not a "hagiography" until it is received *hagiographically*, that is, received by its reader(s) as a medium of relating to the *hagio*.[13]

Now, if we accept that the hagiographical is, or at least *can be*, characterized by a dynamic of active relationality between the reader and the *hagio*, how would this influence our interpretation of "hagiography" as an analytical category for apprehending like data? In order to think this through, I would like to accept Rondolino's invitation to consider his working re-definition:

> [Hagiography is] 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 (Rondolino 2019).

Here we have a remarkably well-developed proposal, which, on the basis of Rondolino's supporting examples, I find quite persuasive. But how well does it correspond with our data, with Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *vade mecum* of Muḥammadan devotion and Cha's artistic weaving of the stories of Catholic saints and non-saints? On the one hand, Rondolino's generous construal of the *graphē* to include behaviors and practices appears to welcome attention to the very sort of relational reading practices that define the above works. On the other hand, there is the question of whether viewing hagiography only through the lens of community memory might lead one to ignore considerations of the contemporary readers' experience of the *hagio* (through *graphē*) as a personal reality that impacts their present lives[14].

But an even more significant question arises when we consider the latter part of the definition. Drawing on his expertise in the study of Buddhism and medieval, Western Christianity, Rondolino articulates the *hagio* as the "embodied perfection of the 'religious' ideal." This is a carefully considered phrasing that, it would seem to me, has broad transferability. But does it have currency in the present case? In reference to Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's depiction of Muḥammad, it might, so long as the Prophet's example of perfection is perceived as an *illustration of* and not as a *model for*.[15] (Sure, Muḥammad is the Muslim exemplar *par excellence*, but not in all aspects, and certainly not with respect to his prophetical status and miracles, which are Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's chief concerns.) Now, as for the idea of perfection in Cha's work, there is no need for such equivocation. Her "concentric circle" experiment is purposely built upon the imperfect, the incomplete, a state of perpetual potentiality, welcoming more voices, more stories. Lastly, we should ask something about that delightfully ambiguous modifier "religious." Should one

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11   Here I am referencing Keune's redirection of Thomas Tweed (Keune 2019; cf. Tweed 2006, p. 34).

12   However, see Sara Ritchey's list of questions under the heading "Intercession/Transformation" (Ritchey 2019).

13   I understand Hollander to be getting at something similar in his discussion of "hagiographical *consumption*" see (Hollander 2019).

14   For a study that attends to the latter specifically, see Hollander's psychosocial analysis of hagiography as *acts* of mediation that inscribe understandings and experiences of the *hagio* in the context of modern Cyprus (Hollander 2018).

15   For this distinction of the hagiographical "example," see (Hawley 1987, p. xiii).

take it to indicate that the hagiographical ideal has been sanctioned by the community's "religious" authorities, or that it reflects their "religious" beliefs and practices, or that it takes up their "religious" subjects, or . . . ? Whatever the case may be, the unorthodox *Dictee* would again seem to challenge this stricture.

5. Conclusions

Given how Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *al-Shifā'* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* might challenge our notion of "hagiography," perhaps the simplest solution would be to just write them off as "non-hagiographical." I imagine that some of my readers have already arrived at this conclusion, especially with regard to the latter work. But that is not the more curious or courageous response, nor the one I see advocated by my colleagues in this special issue. Each and every one of them, in his or her own way, suggests the possibility, if not the outright necessity, of critically revisiting and (when appropriate) revising our conceptual categories in the course of the comparative process[16]. In the end, undertaking sustained, interdisciplinary comparative projects in a collaborative way[17] will necessitate finding some common ground—perhaps in a heuristic definition (Rondolino 2019), "controlled vocabulary" (DiValerio 2019), or "descriptive index" (Ritchey 2019)—and I am immensely grateful to my colleagues who have begun thinking in this direction. If my modest reflections have contributed something to those conversations, it is simply, in echo of Jon Keune, to encourage prioritizing the comparative exercise with boldness and creativity, continuously making space for the "other" as a way of productively destabilizing our conceptual models—especially when that "other" is at first perceived as unusual, liminal, and perhaps even non-religious.[18] If, as Todd French avers, the comparative paradigm is ultimately "a catalyst for seeing again one's own field with clarity, drawing on the wealth of fresh perspectives and awareness" (French 2019), I can think of few better ways to push forward this critical self-reflection and enhance our scholarly contributions than by expanding the range of comparanda in dialogue with diverse and, most importantly, generous interlocutors.[19]

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[16] Here the insights of Jonathan Z. Smith and, more recently, Oliver Freiberger loom large (see, for example, Smith 1982; Smith 2000; and Smith 2004; Freiberger 2018 and Freiberger 2019).

[17] On why a collaborative approach to comparison is not only beneficial but often "imperative," see (French 2019; Hollander 2019). And for an important reflection on the ethics of collaboration, see (Harrower 2019).

[18] On the potential analytical utility of *hagiography* as a category for apprehending "transreligious" data, see (Hollander 2019; cf. Keune 2019).

[19] I am especially grateful for (and in awe of) the indefatigable efforts of Massimo Rondolino in creating spaces for my colleagues and I to think together on these questions.

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