

BOOK REVIEW

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Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions. Rico G. Mong, Kerry P.C. San Chirico & Rachel J. Smith (eds.). London: Bloomsbury, 2016. P.p. 265. ISBN 978-1-4742-3577-8.

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In many respects this important collection of essays urges us as academics to once again reflect upon our approaches to the study of religions. All too often scholars in a number of related fields fail to take in to consideration the everyday lived experience of the religious and often resort to employing modern historiographical methods in order to make sense of people's religions and or their religious lives, especially in relation to the hagiographies that greatly inform and shape these lives. The message that this edition clearly promotes is, as Rico Monge following Robert Orsi's lead suggests, that we need to allow the discourse on hagiography to exceed the limitations of modern historiography and to allow hagiographies themselves to speak truths on their own terms (20). This cross cultural and inter-religious comparison of the lives of religious figures, saints and gurus, their icons and images and the devotional practices that they have inspired attempts to do exactly that and provides a fascinating insight in to how hagiographies can speak religious truths on many different levels and articulate ethical, philosophical and practical conceptions of lived religion beyond the snap frozen context of their initial creation.

Rico Monge sets the tone of this volume in chapter one which considers a number of approaches to understanding hagiography and the sometimes yawning gap between the official and the lived, taking apart as he does, the traditional Eurocentric, Christocentric framework within which religious narrative has often been located. Here he maps a trajectory that progresses from a discussion of modern historical method. Monge critically examines Nietzsche and White before allowing the voices of Chakrabarty, Orsi and Ricoeur to inform the debate and provide us with some fresh perspectives concerning the nature of religious truth, experience and the transformative role that the world of text plays in the lived religious lives of millions around the world. What did seem to be somewhat absent in the next two chapters

concerning methodological considerations in relation to hagiography was the mention of dharmic traditions, and whilst some of that which was discussed could be considered in a wider context, the complexities of examining Indic and Dharmic text and hagiography, especially in the contemporary and diasporic context, were mostly left untouched.

Whilst all of the chapters in the next two sections were academically enriching and made for very interesting reading, certain contributions deserve more focused comment. Mark McLaughlin's 'Turning Tomb to Temple' (70-88) was an especially insightful exploration of the concept of Samadhi, a process that involves the renunciation of the physical body whereby the form becomes formless, which has characterised a number of parochial Hindu narratives whereby the guru becomes the absolute God head, narratives that sometimes then go on to inform the religious lives of those far beyond the geographical and historical confines of the place where they were first written or recited. Furthermore, Joel Gruber's exploration of re-enactment in Tantric narrative (89-106) shed some considerable academic light onto the often misinterpreted and complex religious Tantric world and one of the main characters that informed the development of the Tantric traditions in Medieval India, Vilamamitra. This account speaks of multiple emanation, the introduction of Tantra in Tibet and examines the ways in which religious text can be expanded and embellished over time to establish both identity and authority in multiple time contexts. What I found particularly interesting in this chapter was Gruber's exploration of the way in which certain hagiographical themes seem to emerge in multiple contexts and that by thinking outside the rigid historiographical framework one might discern a continuity of tradition from ancient text to modern popular literary genres, in this case the American superhero, something that the folklorists among us might find interesting.

When it comes to the Abrahamic hagiographical section of the edition, Todd French opens a door that leads us in to the extraordinary world of sectarian complexity and tension in the first century Mediterranean Christianity (151-165). Once again there is a careful breakdown of methodological concerns in the light of modern historiography and hagiography but French allows the vibrance and wide-ranging capabilities of hagiography to profoundly affect the social, political and theological issues of the time, as well as promoting the work and personality of significant religious figures of the era, in this case John of Ephesus. Finally, for the purposes of this short review I would like to highlight Kerry P.C. San Chirico's examination of the cross religious culture of the Krist Bhaktas in Banaras, India. Issues that have characterised India's, social, political and religious landscape in recent years are all bound up with identity and worship in respect of this unique Indian form of Roman Catholicism and its foundational hagiographies which have emerged from the fertile but complex religio-cultural encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. Furthermore, by drawing on substantial ethnographic evidence, San Chirico takes up and expands upon Orsi's original suggestion in terms of abundance and provides the potential to examine abundant space as a means of further understanding the relationship between hagiography, practice and religious experience.

Overall, the structure of the book is progressive in terms of methodological approaches and the afterword by Francis X. Clooney brings together need to consider hagiography as a serious means to gain more than just an anthropological insight in to the lived experiences of people across the Abrahamic Dharmic spectrum, and the need to examine alternative religious truths as central when it comes to how such experiences are greatly enriched by hagiography. I would then finish this review by carefully considering Clooney's advice when he suggests, "The door is open to a richer reception, if readers are ready to read through the hagiographies in to the theological and spiritual truths still alive within them (203)" as a way of understanding how such text profoundly affect and influence the lives of believers both in their places of origin and further in to any number of diasporic contexts. In this respect the one area of research that I would have liked to have seen more focus upon is how hagiography informs and underpins the contemporary religious lives of those who find themselves away from the historical and geographical context from which the hagiography emerged in the first place. Other than that, I would recommend this book to academics concerned with widening the ethnographic, and to an extent phenomenological, pursuits in the study of religion.