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# JR | RELIGION & CULTURE

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***Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in Dharmic and Abrahamic Traditions.*** Edited by Rico G. Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico, and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. 288 pages. \$80CDN (Kindle); \$90.99CDN (Hardcover).

Edited volumes will always be, to put it colloquially, a mixed bag. The nature of volumes assembled through many disparate parts necessitates that there will be missing spaces, underdeveloped angles, and inclusions which seem at odds with the rest of the work. From experience, stronger volumes tend to qualify their limitations through carefully-crafted (and worded) introductions, and whose editors seek to make no illusions about their grandeur; while weaker volumes fail to acknowledge these challenges, and attempt to mask them behind a central conceit, not easily spotted by the casual reader, but one which can be quite glaring for the rest of us in the field. *Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*, unfortunately, leans more towards the latter than the former. This is not to say that the volume is academically unsound, but rather that is undermined by a faulty central framing device and lack of a convincing “raison d'être”.

The volume is divided into four sections along with a preliminary introduction. The first section focuses on outlining methodological and theoretical considerations; the following two are devoted to case studies in Dharmic and Abrahamic traditions; and lastly are three essays focusing on comparative hagiography. Though methodologically-linked, discovering a volume where both Dharmic and Abrahamic religions share a subtitle and ostensibly equal content is enough to pique one's curiosity. Though, of course, works should be judged on their merits and not on their promise, and the individual case studies prove to be rather insightful and well-researched – even if the disparate sections come across more as a pastiche than a portrait of hagiography and “religious truth”. Nevertheless, the larger issue with this volume, along with its limitations, arises unexpectedly in the introduction and then continues in the section devoted to theoretical considerations.

The volume begins with the invocation that “for too long, hagiographies have been read as mere myth or legend, or, alternatively, as literal accounts of ‘what really happened’” (p. 1). While it is certainly a recurring trope for annotated volumes to outline a vacancy or gap in recent scholarship which they seek to fill, the ways in which this central premise is developed

and used as a framing device for the whole collection stumbles into straw-man argument territory. Our authors advocate that “this volume provides a much-needed cross-cultural comparison of sacred history, exploring the ways in which the saints’ lives, iconography, and devotional practices are articulations, in Ricoeur’s phrase, of ‘truth in manifestation,’ functioning as vehicles for prefiguring, configuring and refiguring religious, social, and cultural life” (p. 1). While reading “much-needed” and having it immediately followed by “cross-cultural comparison” caused this editor to momentarily roll his eyes, one cannot deny that the rest of the statement is more grounded and better directed towards credible inquiry. However, in a following chapter on theoretical concerns, one of the volume’s editors oddly qualifies this initial premise by referring to the “likelihood that the contemporary reader (including the academic scholar) accepts [a hagiography’s] accuracy without challenging its underlying assumptions” (p. 13).

Taking this odd statement alongside other observations in these initial essays, the picture that this volume paints of the academy is one where we are seemingly overrun with two diametrically opposing (and problematic) camps. On the first, we must apparently contend with the ongoing presence of scholars who take hagiography at face value, as non-interpreted objective historical “fact”, and who doubt that these stories could be about anything other than biography; while on the second, we have readers who are so fully absorbed in secular culture that they cannot see hagiography as anything other than uncritical (and hence, worthless) adulation. This is patently false. While readers of generations past (including within the academy) have certainly taken similar unstable and unusable stances, recent scholars have not shied from collapsing dichotomies (insider-outsider dichotomy, myth-reality, history-legend, and so forth) and many of this volume’s arguments and claims to original insights have already been well-attested in recent scholarship (see Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*, 2011; Bartlett, *How Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, 2015; to name a few focusing on Christianity).

The problem, then, with this poor framing device is necessarily not that it is a base assumption or an unfortunately ill-painted motif, but that it detracts the reader from the overall sober-minded observations and analysis presented throughout the case studies portion of the volume. In the three successive sections of the volume, the reader is gifted with several rather nuanced essays (chapters four and eight jumped out) which



constructively examine the concept of “text” as more than “written word” and the concept of “truth” as beyond verifiable/falsifiable. The reader is effectively presented with different understandings, uses, and meanings of hagiography that move well beyond the two dichotomies, so fearfully presented in the initial sections, and provide some inspiring approaches for future case studies.

Nevertheless, despite the strengths of the case studies, if this collection is to be taken as a complete, cohesive text, it is difficult to determine exactly who the intended audience is. A graduate seminar broadly examining storytelling and religious truth may find some use of this collection; while more likely, a selective reader researching the figures presented in the case studies herein, or an author in need of basic methodology for a case study of their own, will find something of interest within these pages.

Alexander Nachaj  
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***The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community.*** Jeffrey S. Gurock. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 293 pages. \$37.62 CDN (Kindle); \$44.25 CDN (Hardcover).

Jeffrey S. Gurock's latest book, *The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community*, tells the story of how the Jewish community in Harlem was created, maintained, and eventually scattered to other areas of New York City. An expansion of his previous book *When Harlem was Jewish: 1870-1930*, published in 1978, *The Jews of Harlem* explores the development of Harlem as a Jewish haven beginning in 1870, to its decline in the 1920s, and its gentrification and gradual revival in the present day. Using a variety of archival material such as census records, newspaper articles, biographies, real estate records, maps, synagogue reports, and letters, in addition to personal interviews, Gurock uses Harlem as a case study to draw attention to the grassroots efforts of “regular” Jews in the creation and maintenance of their communities in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. By highlighting some of the struggles this community faced, such as congregational disputes, lack of adequate Jewish education, low synagogue attendance, and retaining a connection