PART 4

Spiritual Communities: Texts, Sites and Interactions

Introduction: Spiritual Communities across Medieval Eurasia*

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In 1712, the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri embarked on a mission to bring Christianity to Tibet. He ended up in the capital, Lhasa, and started voraciously reading all the Buddhist treatises he was given by his caretakers. In the process, he became the first European to understand, speak, and even write Tibetan.¹

From Desideri's travelogue we get a portrait of a man who was genuinely interested in the new world around him, and who understood that he needed more than the language to communicate with the people in it.² Thus he strove to learn the rules of Tibetan monastic debate (*rtsod pa*), and he immersed himself in Buddhist teaching. At first he even found this to be fascinatingly close to Christian beliefs, equating the belief in Buddha with a form of monotheism and detecting a Pythagorean streak in ideas about reincarnation.³ Soon, however, he would come to describe Buddhism as a "hodgepodge of bizarre dogmas", and set about the conversion of its adherents in the hope that the Tibetan rejection of polytheism would at least provide an opening for his missionary successors.⁴

The almost surprisingly open-minded Desideri exhorted his readers to avoid "that malign prejudice that believes everything extraordinary must be false for the mere reason that it is extraordinary".⁵ Nevertheless, well-intentioned though he was, one of Desideri's ways of coping with such prejudices was to relate many things he experienced to European examples with which he and his audience were familiar.⁶ As such, he not only looked for classical (Hellenistic) roots for many Tibetan beliefs he encountered, but also used the vocabulary at his disposal to describe what he saw: the Great Lama, for

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1 A recent study of Desideri's travels may be found in Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World*.

2 Desideri, *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*, 4–7; trans. Zwilling/Sweet, *Mission to Tibet*.

3 Pomplun, *Jesuit*, 74–75 and 182–85.

4 Desideri, *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*, 3.1, trans. Zwilling/Sweet, p. 297.

5 Desideri, *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*, Prologue, trans. Zwilling/Sweet, p. 114. Cf. Pomplun, "Divine Grace and the Play of Opposites".

6 Cf. Kaschewsky, "The Image of Tibet", 9–13.

example, became “the pope of these people”, and when he reached Sakya (Sa skya) (in present-day Shigatse), one of the first places he considered to be large enough to mention on his journey towards the capital, he compared it to a concept very familiar to him: he called it a monastery, and compared the lama (*bla ma*) to a prince.⁷ From his point of view, this was a logical analogy—but, as Desideri himself quickly discovered, much more scrutiny was needed for such a comparison to be reliable.⁸

The contributions in this section on *Spiritual Communities* all grew out of a sense of wonder similar to that felt by Ippolito Desideri when he ascended into the Tibetan Highlands. It began with the simple observation that the cultures studied within VISCOM all hosted a plethora of religious communities that served as nodal points for the religious, intellectual, social and economic life in their respective regions. From a European point of view, the communities in question are what would commonly be referred to as monasteries: places where, as per the etymological roots of the Latin *monasterium* (itself a Greek loan word), people would be able to live alone, isolated from the temptations of the outside world in order to devote their lives to the practice of Christianity, most commonly according to a given set of rules.⁹ It is a word pregnant with meaning, not least because it evokes the long tradition attached to the concept of solitude, going back to the hermitic foundations of the so-called “Desert Fathers” of Egypt. The continuous struggle of Western monastic communities to retain this isolation in spite of (but also thanks to) operating as a collective is part and parcel of their communal identity, and plays a not inconsiderable part in the way they were represented over time. The word used to describe their Tibetan counterparts, while similar at first glance, carries subtly different connotations. Literally speaking, “*gompa*” (*dgon pa*; Skt. *aranya*) also refers to a remote or solitary place, with the seclusion here meant to enable the intense spiritual practice that was at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰ The term *gompa* still carries strong connotations of isolation, which appear to have grown as

7 Desideri, *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*, 2.5, trans. Zwilling/Sweet, p. 227. Desideri also refers to Sakya (which he called Secchia) as a “town” or “city” in some passages.

8 See the remarks by Eco, *Serendipities*, 74–75, on how misinterpretations can nonetheless lead to serendipitous discoveries.

9 The choice of monasteries mainly reflects the research interests of those involved in this working group: *madrasas* were not common in the Zaydi areas of Yemen, for example, and cathedral schools or universities only emerged in Europe in the course of the High and Late Middle Ages; on this phenomenon, see generally Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*.

10 See the contribution by Mathias Fermer in this volume for other terms for these types of community—especially the concept of the *choede* (*chos sde*), with its connotations of “religious faculty” has comparative potential as well. See also the characterization of the

these temples became more and more institutionalised; the concept of the *gompa* at its inception was one where shared religious practice was the norm, with isolation being one of the “tools” available to the practitioners residing there.¹¹ As time progressed, their importance within the Tibetan cultural landscape increased and, although the religious significance of *gompas* was never completely lost, they also took on characteristics of other types of settlement. Nonetheless, a strong sense of togetherness centred on the *gompa* seems to have been a major part of the monks’ self-understanding.¹² Both types of community, *monasterium* and *gompa*, therefore designate a similar genre, a place founded with the intention of providing people with a location where they would congregate and “devote their lives to the pursuit of an elevated state of religious dedication, which pursuit set them apart from other members of society”.¹³ Still, the basic understanding of what this meant in each region and, *mutatis mutandis*, the (self-) perception of the different communities cannot be compared in a straightforward, quantitative manner.

While *monasteria* and *gompas* can be said to have been founded upon similar ideas of worldly renunciation, the cross-regional comparison attempted in this section becomes even more complicated with the realization that there appears to be no such equivalent in the Islamic world of South Arabia. Generally, while Medieval Islam did know *madrasas*, intellectual centres focused on (religious) education, and *ribats*—buildings “to which Muslims would repair for periods of devotion”—those living there were not expected to remain there indefinitely in order to dedicate their lives to their religion.¹⁴ While centred on a mosque, these institutions were more closely comparable to the universities or cathedral schools of medieval Europe, communities where the majority of their members entered the *curriculum* with a clear understanding of the finite nature of their sojourn. Although *madrasas* only became prevalent in medieval South Arabia from around the late 12th century onwards, Zaydi Yemen did host another, rather particular type of community, which, while not founded as an institution *per se*, owed its existence to a certain religious idealism. These were the *hijras*, villages that served as centres

“*gompa* proper” by Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State*, 29–36, in his description of Kumbum Gompa.

- 11 This appreciation of seclusion continues even to the present day: Terrone, “Householders and Monks”, 87.
- 12 See for example Adams, “Production of Self”, 157.
- 13 Dey, “Bringing Chaos out of Order”, 28–29.
- 14 Kennedy, “The *Ribat* in the Early Islamic World”, 161; Pryds, “*Studia* as Royal Offices”, 95–98.

of Zaydi Islamic religious and scholarly activities in the midst of the tribal landscape of Yemen. A characteristic type of community, the “rules” concerning membership could be quite strictly defined. According to the traditions of one specific Zaydi sect, for instance, one would essentially be born into a *hijra* rather than entering such a community voluntarily, as its inhabitants would invariably claim to be descendants of the Prophet.¹⁵ This prerequisite seems to clash with the meaning of the word itself, which carries connotations of retreat or even emigration, specifically from unjust rulers—an association that makes sense given the turbulent early history of these communities. The retreat or refuge implied in *hijra* was sought in order to live according a specific version of Islam, and the name thus seems to refer to isolation from an overarching orthodoxy that was not accepted by this particular sect.

To the extent that the names used to designate the communities under scrutiny provide any indication as to their nature, it appears that *hijra*, *monastery* and *gompā* are in many ways functionally equivalent, and may thus be comparable. All three were designated sites where religious ideologies and practices collided in a way that gave meaning to the people living and interacting there. Furthermore, upon closer scrutiny, it also becomes evident that each of these communities represented entire worlds of meaning to their inhabitants and their surroundings alike.¹⁶ These were more than just villages, educational institutes, or centres of religious authority—they were firmly embedded within a larger social whole, which influenced and was influenced by everything from the practice of daily life to the myths and stories that were invented to make sense of it all.

For instance, the foundation legend of a network of religious communities around the imperial temple in Lhasa tells how these had been built at specific points in the landscape in order to pin down a “supine demoness” (*srin mo*)—her ritual subjugation by means of these auxiliary temples being essential to the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet.¹⁷ The subsequent mythology created around this network anchored these foundations in the (social) landscape of Tibet in a way that is different from the reasoning behind the geographic placement of European monasteries, which is often justified with reference to the

- 15 Eirik Hovden's contribution in this volume provides more insight into the development of the *hijra* in South Arabia. For a more general description of the context within which this happened, see Dresch, “Imams and Tribes”, esp. 264–65. It should be noted, however, that not everyone who could claim to be a descendant of the Prophet would also enter a *hijra*.
- 16 For the case of Tibet, see Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State*, 53–82; exemplary case-studies of the social importance of medieval European monasteries were undertaken by Davies, *Small Worlds* and Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter*; on the Yemeni *hijras*, see among others Puin, “Yemeni *Hijrah*”, and Madelung, “Yemenite *Hijra*”.
- 17 Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness”.

ideal of having found either a *locus amoenus*, a “pleasant place”, that marked the monastery out as a reflection of paradise on Earth, or a *locus heremus*, an uninhabited wilderness that needed to be “tamed” by the establishment of a monastic presence.¹⁸ In a more practical sense, the role played by Cistercian foundations in the cultivation of arable lands throughout Europe—fuelled by the Benedictine ideal of *ora et labora*, but also by the aristocracy’s inclination to grant these new foundations property that they considered to be wasteland—is in marked contrast to the way the more intellectually inclined *hijras* and *madradas* of the Muslim world ingrained themselves in their societal surroundings, or, for that matter, the observation that *ribats* originated as fortifications rather than spiritual retreats.¹⁹ In each case, there was a large overlap between the “spiritual” and more down-to-earth concerns that were, at various times and by various observers, considered their main *raison d’être*. Such concerns need to be taken into account in order to achieve a fully realised comparison between these areas. The development of a spiritual community helped shape the self-understanding and sense of belonging of its members, which in turn affects the different ways the sources at our disposal represent the communities from which they sprang.²⁰ This, then, leads to an interesting epistemological challenge. When comparison is attempted solely with a view towards shedding more light on the subject of one’s own research interests, the initial inclination may be to treat the communities encountered on such an intercultural endeavour as mere foils to one’s own frame of reference.²¹ This is a viable comparative goal in its own right, but the moment the different approaches to the concept of community in the relevant regions themselves become an object of study, then the many forms and levels of community that come together in these nodal points have to be taken into account.

As is pointed out throughout this volume, community formation is a processual, dynamic phenomenon, a series of perpetually evolving interactions that each result from a specific combination of individual needs and external factors.²² On the other hand, given communities would also affect individual

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- 18 Mills, “Re-Assessing the Supine Demoness”; Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, 23–24.
 - 19 Berkley, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 6–8; for a brief description of the impact of Cistercian monasteries on the landscape of the Low Countries, see Mills, “Counts, Cities and Clerics”, 45–46. On *ribats*, see Masarwa, “The Mediterranean as a Frontier”.
 - 20 Dey, “Bringing Chaos out of Order”, 24–25.
 - 21 For a study of how even Max Weber fell into this trap, see, for example, Turner, “Islam, Capitalism and the Weber Theses”, as well as the contributions in the volume on *Max Weber and Islam*, esp. the one by Crone, “Islamic Law”.
 - 22 See the introduction by Walter Pohl in this volume, but also Gingrich and Lutter, “Visions of Community: An Introduction”.

identities—for example, one can identify strategies of distinction and inclusion in specific texts, which may apply to a small community or to a larger social whole. The communities and the actors that form them, as well as the associated texts, ideas and practices do not operate in isolation. Instead, the concept of community as represented in a given source could be seen to function on various interconnected “levels”, which reflect the complex ideas and ideological statements visible in the sources.²³ In this model there are individual communities with a relatively clear sense of belonging, in which face-to-face communication and daily interaction are the norm. On a larger scale, there are communities that share a certain set of values that mark them out as different from their surroundings without being geographically limited. For example, these could take the form of networks bound together by common interests or by bonds of association that supersede direct contact—religious sects or prayer confraternities, for example.²⁴ Often these networks would be characterized by competition with other sects operating at the same “level”. On an even larger scale, these networks would also operate and compete for interest *en bloc*, similar to the way in which small communities would express themselves within a network. At this level we see larger polities, monastic orders, or economic interest groups, for example groups in which face-to-face interaction would be limited to all but those operating on the highest rungs of the social ladder, but where a sense of togetherness—characterized by a shared discourse—would still be palpable and help guide the actions of individual members, communities or even networks.²⁵ Superseding all others is the over-arching ideological community created by a common faith or

23 The following paragraph is partly based on ideas formulated in Mason, *Community, Solidarity and Belonging*. The articles by Hovden, Ó Riain and Fermer in this volume also engage with the various levels of community, whereas Kramer shows how understanding of the “highest” levels would impinge on self-representation with a more intra-communal focus.

24 On the various Islamic sects in the Middle East, see Khuri, *Imams and Emirs*; an overview of the various sects that developed during the second introduction of Buddhism in Tibet (1000–1200) is presented by Reat, *Buddhism*, 229–41. For the specific phenomenon of prayer confraternities in the early Christian West, see, among many others, Angenendt, “Kloster und Klosterverband”; Geuenich, “Gebetsgedenken und Gebetshilfe”.

25 These last two levels (and the difficulties of distinguishing between them) are central to the ideas behind, for example, Palme, “Political Identity versus Religious Distinction?”; Conermann, “Volk, Ethnie oder Stamm?”, esp. 330–31. See also the term “community of discourse” as proposed by Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse*, 5–19, showing how a shared discourse itself would be a catalyst in the formation of large-scale affective communities.

religion—the *umma* of the Muslim faith, the *populus Christianus* of the Christian Church, or the *nang pa* (literally “insiders”, understood to be Buddhists) in Tibet.²⁶ Contemporary actors describing society at this level were already aware that many different social groups come under this all-inclusive label—and for researchers the ideas espoused by such authors and the way this translated into everyday practice could themselves be turned into a category for comparison.²⁷

In contemporary sources, these levels were hardly ever ordered sequentially. Any contemporary depiction of small communities operating in the greater scheme of things cannot function if the intended audience is not able to comprehend how the many layers of community are interdependent—to the extent that this was even a relevant issue for the audiences in question. These issues inevitably boil over in the studies undertaken by modern researchers. For instance, the temples founded in order to pin down the Tibetan demoness mentioned earlier can only function if some concept of a Tibetan polity, supported by a network of religious orders, also exists.²⁸ Similarly, as shown by Diarmuid Ó Riain in this section, the emergence of the *Schottenklöster* in the Holy Roman Empire depended on the reputation of earlier Irish ecclesiastics—a reputation the monks themselves would propagate. Conversely, invocation of the final, over-arching community would automatically have implications for the author’s understanding of the “lower” levels: in the constant struggle to establish orthodoxy in European Christendom, any decision to brand heterodox beliefs as being heretical would essentially place people adhering to these beliefs outside the social and political system, especially once the initial idea of heterodoxy gained social traction.²⁹ Should a “heterodox” sect have enough followers, a concurrent system could even emerge, as shown by the emergence of the Mutarifiyyah network in South Arabia for example, or the endurance of Donatism in Late Antique North Africa.³⁰ Various ideals are sometimes claimed simultaneously, even if they are incoherent,

26 On the use and developement of *umma* through the ages, see the article by Rüdiger Lohker in this volume, as well as Halliday, “The Politics of the *Umma*”, esp. 24–25; on the conception of *populus* see, for example, Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 49–56.

27 Generally, see Gwynne, *World Religions in Practice*. For the case of Europe, cf. also Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 1:337–38, who comments that, according to contemporary observers: “If Europe was a ‘society’, it was a society defined by the boundaries of ideological power, Christendom”.

28 Miller, “Consolidation of Empire”.

29 Zito, “Towards a Sociology of Heresy”, 123–30.

30 See, for example, the contribution by Gerda Heydemann in this volume. Tibetan Buddhists would similarly represent themselves in opposition to “outsiders” (*phyi pa* or

ambiguous and self-contradictory. Nevertheless, such sources, the communities they represent and the world they sprang from all correspond to a certain “social logic”, as guided by a discursive process which formulated these ideas and visions.³¹

While a focus on this social logic would help harmonize the sometimes complex tensions between source and audience, representation and reception, it may also overcomplicate any comparative endeavour by its insistence first and foremost on treating the sources at our disposal as entities unto themselves. The communities under scrutiny in this section cut through all these levels, operating at an affective, face-to-face level while also presenting themselves as representative of the ideologies shared among many people beyond their immediate sphere of influence. Studying even one such medieval community thus also implies studying the contemporary sensibilities underlying their existence. The worlds, world-views and visions of community of each of the cultural settings and the periods involved would also need to be compared. In short, comparing spiritual communities across cultures requires more than a strictly source-focused methodology. As shown in an earlier article by Christina Lutter, comparison itself not only addresses specific communities and the ideologies they represented in the medieval period, but also operates on a conceptual level, where the many different theoretical and methodological approaches needed for a project of this scope are negotiated and reconciled with one another in order to make any comparison viable.³²

To begin this attempt to “compare the incomparable”, the authors of the articles that follow have started out by isolating the communities that formed the core of their own individual research: *monasteria* in Europe, *hijras* in Yemen, and *gompas* in the Tibetan Highlands—the last of these being the sites taken for monasteries by Desideri.³³ As argued in an earlier article, the model of “enclaves” was chosen as a first comparative avenue to make it possible to distinguish these communities from their surroundings without conveying a sense of full isolation. Primarily used in a more political or economic sense, the concept usually describes an entity that is separated from its wider environment spatially, temporally, and by other socially defined means and borders, while simultaneously interacting with it.³⁴ Although the communities

phyi rol pa) who adhered to non-Buddhist belief systems: Sagaster, “Identität im tibetischen Buddhismus”, 185.

31 Spiegel, “History, Historicism and the Social Logic”; Bryant, “On Sources and Narratives”.

32 Lutter, “Comparative Approaches”, 3–4.

33 Detienne, *Comparer l'Incomparable*.

34 See Kramer/Hovden, “Wondering about Comparison”, 26, where a similar definition is used and explained in greater detail.

studied by each of the authors in this section are primarily distinguished by a heavy emphasis on religious practices as their main function, the problematic nature of the Western concept of “religion” as a comparative category—exacerbated by the multifaceted nature of each of the respective religions within VISCOM—made it exceedingly challenging to use it as a point of departure.³⁵ After all, a primary goal of the authors has been to show the communities themselves in a comparative light, not the religions represented by them.

In order to facilitate this comparative endeavour, a common descriptive term for the diverse communities was arrived at, which both acknowledged their fundamental religious character as well as indicating in broad brushstrokes some of the basic aspects shared by each of them. The name chosen, *Enclaves of Learning, Religion, Ideology and Practice*, was deliberately all-embracing, a low-threshold term designed to avoid the potential pitfalls of narrow definition and therefore make it possible to reach the next level of comparative discourse. As a model it was not intended to be used as a universally acceptable typology, but rather it helped put highly disparate types of community on a comparable level for the purposes of study.³⁶ Additionally, the sense of alienation caused by the introduction of new terminology helped remind the researchers involved to take nothing for granted and regard their own object of study with the same sense of wonder they used in approaching the newly introduced material with which they were confronted. In turn, in keeping with the shorthand term that came to be used for the communities under scrutiny, namely *Enclaves of Learning*, the management, fostering and use of knowledge and learning emerged as a primary research focus of the collective, as is reflected in many of the papers published in this volume. Given the mostly “religious” contexts of knowledge production and transmission throughout the worlds of medieval Eurasia, and the fact that specific forms of knowledge would often be harnessed by those with a vested interest in maintaining an imperial *status quo*, a focus on learning allowed the researchers to distinguish the specific types of communities from their surroundings, and to make them comparable without losing sight of the questions that serve as a driving force behind VISCOM as a whole.

Nevertheless, while a helpful methodological tool, the ongoing discussion has shown that it was a challenge to use the narrower term *enclaves of learning* as anything more than a model used to catalyse comparative communication. Being an “enclave of learning” is not the sole characteristic behind the spiritual communities under scrutiny in the articles in this section. Whether or not

35 Tolan, “*Lex Alterius*”; but see also the introduction by Walter Pohl in this volume.

36 Gingrich, “Comparative Methods”, 218–19.

these enclaves can be studied as “intentional communities” is highly dependent on the sources available and used to study them, while the many different meanings of learning, knowledge and education in each culture highlight different aspects of the communities characterized as such.³⁷ Conversely, the three types of community at the core of this section are by no means the only ones that fit the description of an “enclave of learning”.³⁸ Still, the comparative dialogue engendered by initially concentrating on the learning aspect ensured that this approach proved to be a useful tool.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that “enclaves” by their very nature exist within a larger framework.³⁹ Their existence could become institutionalized as the religious movements supporting them became ever more successful;⁴⁰ conversely, if they were part of a sect that ended up being branded as “heterodox” or otherwise undesirable, new strategies of distinction and processes of “Othering” would need to be formulated in order to figure out their place in the world.⁴¹ In both cases, this applied to the community itself as well as the society surrounding it. Understanding how a community fits into a larger social whole is inextricably bound up with understanding both the community itself and its relation to the ideals it represents.⁴²

On the other hand, the type of learning going on in these enclaves would almost invariably be of a “religious”, “spiritual” or “moral” nature and would have universal aspirations in and of itself. It could be seen as a way in which these communities made sense of their own existence, for example by exerting power or sustaining tradition.⁴³ It is through understanding the deeper truths of their religion that localized, face-to-face communities could seek to present themselves as paradigmatic for their region, their state or their religion. At a more practical level, studying knowledge and its transmission generates questions both about the mechanics underlying the migration of knowledge and about the regional or imperial power structures governing it, while the simple question as to how the inhabitants of these “enclaves” were able to support their intellectual pursuits opens up avenues of research into such

37 On such intentional communities see Brown, “Introduction”, esp. 6.

38 See the response by Jonathan Lyon, in this section. The “monastic” focus reflects the research interests of the working group at the time of its inception.

39 Noted for the case of (contemporary) *hijras* by Gingrich, “Connecting and Disconnecting”, 52–54.

40 Shown for the network known as *Schottenklöster* by Ó Riain in this volume.

41 As was the case with the Zaydi network studied by Hovden in this volume.

42 See, for example, the remarks by Bartelson, *Visions of World Community*, 19–28.

43 Stafford, “Education”. For the case of the European Middle Ages, see also Jaeger, *Envy of Angels*, 325–29; Brown, “Carolingian Renaissance”, 20–21.

issues as patronage, regional economic management and (religiously motivated) taxation. Eirik Hovden, for instance, presents a model in which the religious and intellectual functions of a network of communities also served to justify their levying of taxes—which in turn made them a target for the other economic interest holders in South Arabia. Finally, the many rituals and liturgical practices that were part and parcel of the daily life of these communities brought together ideal and practice, showing how practitioners put their learning into practice, while simultaneously providing a visible representation of their religious importance for their surroundings—and thereby also adding to their legitimacy. In one of the cases presented by Rutger Kramer, a conflict within an early medieval European monastery is shown as being resolved by allowing an apparent outsider to perform an essentially liturgical, but also educational function: according to one narrative, the community is saved from falling apart through a sermon delivered by an emperor, who was teaching the monks how they should behave. Starting from the ostensibly narrower concept of “enclaves of learning” therefore allows the authors to show—through the use of texts and other types of source material—how these communities came into being and were maintained, how its members interacted, both among themselves and with the outside world, and how a sense of spiritual purpose pervaded the life of everyone living there.⁴⁴

As has been mentioned, most of the contributions in this section rely predominantly on written sources which range from idealized hagiographical narratives and rules for the common life to more “pragmatic” texts and less prescriptive forms of written evidence. Invariably, regardless of the nature of these sources, what we are left with are descriptions and representations of communities that can be glimpsed through the texts at our disposal—which requires the researchers to attempt to reconstruct the social logic of these texts together with studying the social logic of the community that caused them to be written in the first place. Methodologically, this leads to various conceptions of community, used in different ways. Christina Lutter, for example, highlights the importance of a shared, codified discipline for the formation of communal identities—and also, how the conscious choice to adhere to earlier conceptions of the *vita communis* would never cease affecting the development of newer foundations. On the other hand, Mathias Fermer and Pascale Hugon, both focusing on religious lives in a Tibetan Buddhist context, highlight the importance of “spiritual masters” and the teachings they represent. In line with their understanding of their own religious goals, the inhabitants of a *gompa* saw the intellectual legacy

44 Cf. Ferruolo, *Origins of the University*, 6.

represented by their temple and its founder as the rationale behind the formation of a community, and not so much communal living as such. The cultural contexts of each of the narratives allow for different readings of the source material, which in turn occasion disciplinary and methodological differences among the authors.

At this point, the common goal therefore cannot be to arrive at a homogeneous picture or to provide a fully balanced, systematic comparative analysis. Rather, we start from the assumption that, at each of the levels outlined above, the existence of any community was part of a process in which compromises had to be made between aspirations and possibilities, and in which those compromises had to be justified by doctrines, explained through the medium of idealized narratives, codified into pragmatic rules, laws and prescriptions, and eventually taught to subsequent generations.⁴⁵ It is the very tensions and discussions over these ideals and their implementation in communal practice that forms the object of the comparative approach attempted here, not the development of a reduced model of ideal types of communities. As the “enclaves” presented in this section function as windows into the perception of the complexities of medieval societies and the many visions of community operating simultaneously within and across them, so, on their way to developing a comparative matrix as part of the research process, the authors have highlighted many different angles from which these communities can be studied.

When Desideri embarked on his mission to Tibet, he ended up learning much more than the language or the rules of Buddhist scholarly debate.⁴⁶ In order to be able to communicate with his interlocutors, he had had to immerse himself totally in the new culture he encountered. As he endeavoured to learn, he also learnt to compare. It is an example the contributors to this section have striven to follow.

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45 For a discussion of similar issues in a contemporary context, see De Ruyter/Conroy, “The Importance of Ideals”.

46 In fact, learning how to hold a debate is an essential practice in Tibetan scholastic education, see Onoda, *Monastic Debate in Tibet*; Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 195–291.

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