Response to the Chapters in “Spiritual Communities” Section

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Comparing similar-looking institutions from different cultures across the globe can be a challenging and perilous undertaking—especially when the comparative research is being conducted by a group of Europeans. In recent decades, scholars working in the field of postcolonial studies have frequently pointed out the many dangers of allowing Eurocentric world views to shape scholarship and to privilege Western developments over non-Western ones. One need only read Edward Said on Orientalism or Dipesh Chakrabarty on the provincializing of Europe to understand that a research project based in Europe, and relying on European modes of thinking about culture, risks completely misunderstanding or misusing the history of other regions of the world.¹ Michael Mitterauer, in his book *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of its Special Path*, skirted this problem by making it clear from the beginning that his comparative approach was designed to better explain Europe, not the rest of the world. Thus, like the articles published here, his book discusses Christian, Muslim and Buddhist forms of spiritual communities—but his focus throughout remains on the distinctive characteristics of Western European monasteries.² To do a truly comparative project, one that is not designed to elevate one culture and one form of religious community over another, is a very different task—and a very challenging one as well.

The scholars writing here are therefore to be commended for working collaboratively toward a more complex, cross-cultural analysis of spiritual communities in parts of the Christian, Muslim and Buddhist worlds. Whether or not their term “enclaves of learning” is the most appropriate and most useful term to use as a starting point for examining the communities under consideration here is an open question. Regardless, it is unquestionably a good way to open the conversation, and it moves this comparative project in the right direction. Most importantly, it shifts the focus away from the term *monastery*, which carries with it too much cultural baggage for Europeans (and Americans)

¹ Said, *Orientalism* and Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

² Mitterauer, *Why Europe?* I cite the original German edition here: *Warum Europa?* 169–78.

whose societies have been permeated by Christian traditions for centuries.³ Both the terms “spiritual communities” and “enclaves of learning” subsume monasteries under broader categories that are much more flexible and more open to cross-cultural comparison.

Admittedly, it is probably impossible to find a single word or term, in any European language, that can effectively capture the essence of Christian, Muslim and Buddhist forms of spiritual community—without bringing with it a Eurocentric perspective on those communities. One might be tempted to solve this problem by taking a radically non-Western viewpoint and employing the *hijra* of Yemen or the *gompa* of the Tibetan Highlands as the frame of reference through which all this comparative work is channelled. Such an approach—Western scholars using non-Western concepts as the basis for analysing both Western and non-Western forms of spiritual communities—would undoubtedly lead to some interesting results! Nevertheless, this approach would bring cultural baggage with it as well, since *hijra* and *gompa* are also terms deeply embedded in their specific social settings—as the articles in this section have convincingly shown. Thus, employing an entirely new term like “enclaves of learning”, while not a perfect solution, seems like a necessary first step toward developing a comparative process that has the potential to treat all the cultures under investigation here on as equal a basis as possible.

If there is an obvious weakness in the term “enclaves of learning”, it is this: although the project being undertaken here is a comparison of communities across three different religious cultures, the term fails to embrace any notion of religion. The contributors’ frequent use of the phrase “spiritual communities” helps to alleviate this problem to a certain extent, but all the contributors avoid drawing comparisons and contrasts at the level of spiritual understanding. *Faith*—a word that tends to make many secularist, 21st-century Western scholars deeply uncomfortable—has no role to play here. And yet, as all these papers show in different ways, *what* was being *learned* in these different communities varied significantly across the three religious cultures for reasons relating directly to their religious traditions. A Buddhist transported to a Yemeni *hijra* or an Irish monastery in the German kingdom might have seen similarities in the *outward form* of the different institutions, but it is hard to imagine he would have agreed with the *spiritual content* of what was being learned in these various enclaves. As a result, one must be careful not to over-emphasize the *learning* aspect of these enclaves to the detriment of the underlying religious faiths that shaped their various communal identities.

3 Rutger Kramer’s Introduction to this section makes this point eloquently with its opening story about the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri.

A second concern I have with both terms used here—"enclaves of learning" and "spiritual communities"—is not necessarily a weakness: the open, flexible nature of these terms is certainly appealing, but just how broad do these contributors envision them to be? For the period under consideration in these articles, it is easy to identify other institutions in Western Europe (the region I know best) that might fit under these umbrella terms as well. For the 10th and 11th centuries, cathedral schools come to mind; beginning in the 12th century, universities—which were also very much religious institutions in the medieval period—might fit comfortably under these rubrics. Is there something distinctive about the *monasteries* of Latin Christendom that make them different from these other potential forms of "spiritual communities" and "enclaves of learning"? Are there other institutions in the Buddhist and Muslim worlds that might profitably be included under these rubrics—or whose exclusion needs to be explained?

Of course, the potential breadth of the terms "spiritual communities" and "enclaves of learning" might also be one of their greatest benefits—if they can be used to make even more expansive comparisons amongst different kinds of specialized religious and intellectual communities across human societies. This obviously takes us beyond the parameters of the VISCOM project, but an effective comparative approach should always raise broader questions and open wider avenues of research. For example, expanding the use of the terms makes it possible to think about these Christian, Muslim and Buddhist enclaves alongside the Academy founded by Plato (d. 347 BC) in ancient Athens.⁴ It was a community that comprised like-minded sophists and philosophers who talked and argued with each other—and who taught others. It lay outside the city walls of Athens, in a park with a shrine, on property purchased by Plato—perhaps with the financial assistance of a friend. And the members seem to have lived in small cabins clustered around a main building. Is this not an "enclave of learning" and "spiritual community"? And what ought we to do with the story St Augustine tells in his *Confessions* of gathering a circle of his friends to live together in a community of like-minded individuals sharing their possessions?⁵ Did this group constitute an "enclave of learning" and/or a "spiritual community"?

My aim with these examples is not to argue for antecedents, or to suggest a direct classical influence on any of the later institutions under consideration here. Rather it is to show that the terms used in this section to enable comparison of the *monasterium*, the *hijra* and the *gompa*, if defined broadly, can be

4 What follows is drawn from Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato*.

5 See Lutter's contribution to this volume for more on this point.

applied to many other past human societies. Indeed, they could even be used to argue for our species' persistent efforts throughout our long history to create places dedicated to the life of the mind and to spiritual reflection. Viewed from this perspective, we can just as easily look forward as backward with the terms "enclaves of learning" and "spiritual communities". That the modern university is so frequently referred to in the English-speaking world as the "Ivory Tower" suggests a similar vision of enclave-like communal identity to the ones discussed in these papers. The comparison with the modern university could be extended further as well, since like the earlier Christian, Muslim and Buddhist "enclaves of learning", the modern university has never been as isolated—politically, economically, socially—from the surrounding society as some of its rhetoric might suggest. Thus universities are frequently used by local leaders to promote their political agendas: the foundation of the Freie Universität in West Berlin during the Cold War to counter East German control over the Humboldt Universität is a well-known example. Moreover, modern universities are often nodes in networks of nepotism for local elites, and like some earlier "enclaves of learning", they can become entangled in drawn out legal cases about their property rights and their economic privileges.

In the United States, where private, religious universities are much more common than in Europe, I suspect even more connections could be drawn between medieval and modern "spiritual communities" and "enclaves of learning". The University of Notre Dame, for example, was founded in the 19th century in sparsely-populated Indiana by members of a Roman Catholic religious order, the Congregation of Holy Cross. Since then, the university has always had a member of that order as its president—and many members of the order have been professors as well. In the early 1960s, its president Father Theodore Hesburgh worked closely with President John F. Kennedy on civil rights, clear evidence for how the university's members have sometimes been embedded in national political networks. And today, thanks in large part to the financial support of its "patrons"—students, alumni, alumnae and their parents—it has an endowment worth approximately \$7 billion.

I could continue: it is striking, for example, that although the university is completely surrounded by the city of South Bend, it actually has its own town name and postal zip code: Notre Dame, IN 46556. Moreover, there is a crucifix in every classroom and a basilica on campus, where some faculty members and students attend Mass together on Sunday mornings. Here then, we seem to have a quintessential "enclave of learning" and "spiritual community" in the heart of the American Midwest. Indeed, we can see with this example the interplay of a complex (and one might also say contradictory) set of institutional elements that simultaneously promote both separation from the

outside world and close engagement with it. Similar trends are evident in all the papers presented here as well, where we see different visions and ideals of community interacting with each other at the level of the individual institution.

Whether or not "enclaves of learning" and "spiritual communities" are ultimately the best terms to capture this research project's main goals, I hope they continue to generate debate. What this project shows is that the *process* of discussing the advantages and disadvantages of these terms has been just as fruitful—if not more so—as the end *results* offered in the papers printed here.

In closing, however, I would like to look beyond these terms to the issues raised about Christian, Muslim and Buddhist religious centres in the VISCOM project more generally. At the level of comparison conducted by many of the contributors to this volume, it is possible to identify various ways in which aspects of all three religious cultures are similar. One noteworthy feature of all the settings discussed in the papers in this section is the challenge these communities faced in balancing internal communal identity with external connections to the surrounding society. Like the smallest figurine in a set of Russian nesting dolls, the individual "enclave of learning" within each of these societies fits inside a series of other communities, each one larger than the next. How the members of an "enclave of learning" chose to set themselves apart from (and work together with) surrounding groups differed in each case, but everywhere we find a combination of both theoretical and practical elements at work in establishing a distinctive community.

The challenge of how to balance ideals with reality when building a specialized community—religious, intellectual or otherwise—has long been recognized. More than 2000 years ago, when pondering how to create the perfect political community, Plato proposed for his ideal polity a ruling class of guardians free from traditional family attachments. According to the *Republic*, if the members of this elite shared their wives and children, it would "prevent them tearing the community apart by using the expression 'mine' to refer not to the same thing, but to various things [...] Different people call different things 'mine' when they each have their own houses into which they pull anything they can keep out of the hands of others, and when they each have their own wife and children; and this situation introduces into the community the personal pleasures and pains of private individuals".⁶

A short time later, Aristotle, in his *Politics*, countered Plato by arguing that the family is a necessary foundation of the political community because it

6 Plato, *Republic*, 464c-d, trans. Waterfield, p. 180.

fosters love and virtue, both of which are essential for the state to survive.⁷ Equally problematic for Aristotle was Plato's assumption in the *Republic* that family bonds could simply be suppressed and ignored amongst the members of the guardian class.⁸ Aristotle makes it clear in his discussion of monarchy that family relationships are not so easily cast aside: "Even supposing the principle to be maintained that kingly power is the best thing for states, how about the family of the king? Are his children to succeed him? If they are no better than anybody else, that will be mischievous. But perhaps the king, though he might, will not hand on his power to his children? That, however, is hardly to be expected, and is too much to ask of human nature".⁹

I have always been an Aristotelian when it comes to this particular point. *Proposing* an idealized vision of community free of family attachments is easy, and Plato is certainly not the only one to do it. Several centuries later, St Benedict would do so as well in his Rule for Christian monasteries. *Implementing* such a vision of community is a different story, however, and as Aristotle argues, it is not even clear that such a community would be inherently better. To my pleasant surprise, all of the papers presented here also tend to follow Aristotle in developing a pragmatic sense of how any enclave is inevitably embedded in the society around it. None of the authors falls into the trap of letting idealistic rhetoric overshadow the basic realities on the ground. Thus we learn that even the Irish monks who left their homeland to establish communities for themselves in the German kingdom were not truly isolated; they were deeply embedded in local society while also maintaining connections to Ireland and Irish culture. In short, all of these articles show that the common (European/American) understanding of the term "monastery" as a place walled off from society is misleading and unhelpful—not only when thinking about Christian monasteries but also when thinking about how other religious cultures created spaces, both physical and mental, where their own spiritual and intellectual elites could flourish. Idealistic visions of how a community ought to function can tell us much about a society's understanding of itself, but those visions only make sense when studied alongside the local realities faced by the people trying to build a functioning community.¹⁰

Successful cross-cultural comparisons should teach us that what seems clear and self-evident about a society—whether it is "our" society or "somebody else's", whether it be a past society or a present one—is never as simple as

7 Saxonhouse, "Family, Polity & Unity", 202–19.

8 Aristotle, *Politics*, 2.3.1262a, ed. Barnes, pp. 2002–03.

9 Ibid., 3.15.1286b, ed. Barnes, p. 2042.

10 See Lutter's contribution to this volume for more on this point.

it seems. These scholars, in proposing new concepts as a means of starting the process of comparing spiritual and intellectual centres across the Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist worlds, have done exactly that. I look forward to learning more from them in the future.

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