CHAPTER 19

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.
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 overemphasize the *learning* aspect of these enclaves to the detriment of the underlying religious faiths that shaped their various communal identities.

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