Entangled
Hagiographies
of the Religious Other
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Edited by
Alexandra Cuffel and Nikolas Jaspert

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INTRODUCTION

ON ENTANGLED HAGIOGRAPHIES:
PERSPECTIVES AND RESULTS

NIKOLAS JASPERT

This book is about men and women who were considered venerable or even holy by their contemporaries or by later generations, about the places where they were revered and about the stories told about them. It is also about opposition to such figures and about the way narratives were adapted or even distorted in order to fulfil very tangible purposes in very concrete historical and social circumstances. The aim of this collection is to substantiate the claim that the field of hagiography provides important evidence for studying varied processes of transcultural interaction in pre-modern times.¹

At first glance this might come as a surprise. The veneration of saints—or for that token of holy men and women in the wider sense of the word, including spiritual mentors, model individuals and charismatic masters²—might easily be seen as a practice that reifies cultural identities and

¹ This claim is not unique: Arietta Papaconstantinou, ed., Writing ‘true stories’: historians and hagiographers in the late antique and medieval Near East, Cultural encounters in the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Stanislava Kuzmová, Ana Marinković and Trpimir Vedriš, eds., Cuius Patrocinio Tota Gaudet Regio. Saints’ Cults and the Dynamics of Regional Cohesion, Bibliotheca Hagiotheca. Series Colloquia, 3 (Zagreb: Hagiotheca, 2014); Dietlind Hüchtke and Kerstin S. Jobst, eds., Heilig: transkulturelle Verehrungskulte vom Mittelalter bis in die Gegenwart (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017). Thanks to Alexandra Cuffel (Bochum) for valuable advice concerning this introduction.

creates cohesion by the forming of in and out-groups. Indeed, many cases prove that hagiography frequently fulfilled this function of a demarcational device that constructed common identities. Such processes necessarily went hand-in-hand with othering and exclusion. Stories about saints and the religious Other thus provide important indications about how societies were thought to have seen and treated each other or their religious minorities, and—vice versa—how such minorities imagined their relationships with other religious communities. Evidently, such references to inter-faith relations cannot be read at face value, and neither do they stand for any one religion in its totality. This needs to be underlined and kept in mind from the outset, as there is a tendency to apply the ultimately contested notion of “religion” as a normalizing concept to describe non-Christian traditions. Furthermore, even when using the term with all due caution,
we need to bear in mind that it cannot fully reflect but actually tends to conceal the immense diversity of practices, loyalties, beliefs, doctrinal variations and individual commitments within any one religion. Only with these caveats in mind will the term be used in this volume.

The hagiographical Others who were fashioned in order to construct identity could take on many hues. They could be those coreligionists who are less perfect than the holy man or woman, i.e., those who are not able to comply with divine rules or expectations to the degree that exceptional figures can. In much more extreme cases, the other can also be the very Devil, Demons or other diabolic creatures or powers of Evil. In other instances in contrast, members of other cultural or religious communities fulfill this function of supplying a cultural counterpart. They are often depicted in negative terms in order to highlight and boost the morale of a given group. It is here that we enter the field of transcultural relations.5

**Hagiography and Transculturation**

Transculturation, that is the transformational effects of cultural interaction over extended periods of time, is often implicitly understood to have occurred in a more or less harmonious way. The liquid metaphors of movement used to describe such processes—flows, entanglements etc.—produce associations of unhindered transfer.6 In order to extend our under-

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6 On the transcultural approach, its potentials and shortcomings see: Michael Borgolte, Juliane Schiele et al., eds., *Mittelalter im Labor: die Mediävistik testet Wege zu einer transkulturellen Europavissenschaft*, Europa im Mittelalter, 10
standing of transculturation, however, one also needs to take oppositional forms of transfer processes into account. Put in general terms: Transculturation seldom takes place in an uncontested or even harmonious manner. To fully grasp transcultural dynamics, one rather needs to understand them as complex processes of constant realignment, oscillation and negotiation. This also includes determining to which extent negative depictions of members of other religious communities transported knowledge despite their original aim of building identity through othering. Seen from this perspective, certain negative depictions of individuals or groups adhering to alien religions can even be read as examples for “entangled hagiography”. For on closer reading, some hagiographical texts show that writings aimed at contrasting the self and the other in fact might be strongly marked by the effects of mobility and transculturation. At times their authors reveal that they based their “enemy knowledge” precisely on exchange across religious divides. For example, even glaringly distorted and false depictions of Muslims, their beliefs and practices by Christian hagiographers of the high Middle Ages sometimes transport smatterings of factually correct information. Anti-hagiography, i. e. “biographical narra-


tives of individuals understood as saintly in one or more traditions, which are then told in such a way as to make the holy individual the very opposite of holiness”, can therefore be interpreted not only as a response to and as a contestation of multifaceted forms of interaction, but also as a result of these very dynamics. Such instances remind us that persistence and contestation are just as much part of transculturation as entanglements and flows.

Important as this often overlooked interrelation between contestation and transculturation is, entangled hagiography is nevertheless a much wider field of research than a focus on oppositional transfer processes might make us believe. In order to frame it comprehensively, we must first define our terminology. In this collection, we will not limit our understanding of the term hagiography to texts written about people venerated as holy. Rather, we would like to amplify our perspective, for example, by including other types of scripts portraying venerable individuals and by considering the practices of veneration or the media related to them. This is not meant to imply that a focus on hagiographic sources in the stricter sense of the word would leave us with an unsophisticated or simple field of research. For such texts show a wide typological spectrum ranging from miracle stories and biographies to more technical genres such as the translationes and elevationes of Latin Christianity. But a wider approach including poems, epics and other genres will arguably open up new questions and lines of research.

Five Fields of Hagiographic Entanglements

Seen from such an extended perspective, one can discern at least five fields of research that are particularly well equipped to provide information about the interface between hagiography and transculturation. The first of them focuses on stories which contain information on direct communication and exchange between members of different creeds. A close reading of narrative sources can reveal references—sometimes explicit, more often only in passing—to such forms of contacts across political, military or cultural borders. The famous report of the way in that Saint Mark’s body was stolen and transferred from Alexandria to Venice by

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8 See below, p.170.
Latin Christians for example is only a particularly prominent case in point: in their attempt to explain how the venerated corpse reached Venice, the hagiographers not only provided information about commercial exchange between Egyptian and Venetian merchants, but also about Christian minorities under Muslim rule. A less well known, 10th-century miracle story tells of a Calabrese official who decided to sail to a Muslim doctor in Palermo because no Christian physician could heal him. The gist of the tale is, that Saint Elia Spoleota then prayed to God, upon which the ill Calabrese, who was already en route to Muslim ruled Sicily, experienced a vision showing a pig jumping out of his belly. He quickly turned tail and sailed back to Christian territories. At first glance an account designed to demonstrate the saint’s powers, this tale in fact reveals everyday contacts between Calabrese Christians and Sicilian Muslims in the 10th century.

A second field of research has been strongly developed in recent years due to growing interest in spaces and places of worship and veneration,
doubtlessly a result of the so-called “spatial turn” in the cultural sciences. Within this area of investigation, places of joint veneration have received particular attention. Places like Saydanāyā in Syria or Santa María de la...
Ràpita in Catalonia where Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ was venerated by Muslims and Christians alike. One could add the similar case of the miraculously healing spring of Matariya close to Cairo, where the Virgin Mary is said to have washed the infant during their flight to Egypt and where both Christians and Muslims tended to bathe in search of healing. Hebron, too, which attracted Jewish, Christian and Muslim pilgrims, must be seen as an archetypical center of joint worship, not to speak of the multi-confessional nodes such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem that attracted a multitude of different Christian denominations.

Focusing on the physical dimension of hagiography, one might attempt to identify specific landscapes which are particularly prone to bringing forth shared cult sites or even shared saints. In which relation did these areas stand to other types of places, such as politically and geographically defined areas? The Mediterranean for example has been termed a “Sea of faith” because it formed a cross-road between Jewish, Muslim and Christian worshippers: the case of Saydnaya,” in De Sion exibit lex et verbum domini de Hierusalem. Essays on Medieval Law, Liturgy, and Literature in Honour of Amnon Linder, ed. Yitzhak Hen, Cultural encounters in late antiquity and the middle ages, 1 (Turnhout, 2001), 59–69; John V. Tolan, “‘Veneratio Sarracenorum’: Shared Devotion among Muslims and Christians, according to Burchard of Strasbourg, Envoy from Frederic Barbarossa to Saladin (c. 1175),” in Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages, ed. John V. Tolan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 101–112.


tian cultures. But can one relate the sea to entangled hagiographies? Was the Mediterranean a zone that united peoples of different creed who were all equally threatened by the dangers of a hostile environment? Rereading our sources and combining recent academic interest in religious transfer processes with approaches and issues raised in the wake of the spatial turn is a promising undertaking, because it might help re-configure our imaginaries of physical space, our “mental maps”. A 14th century nautical map now kept in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in Rome shows the coasts of Mediterranean Sea marked by flags depicting the respective patron saints of important towns, thus structuring the sea as a devotional space. We need to learn more about the centrality and the function of islands as nodal points within networks of religious veneration, and the same holds true for well-connected urban centers such as harbors.

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Virgin of Trapani on Sicily became a pan-Mediterranean saint who was not only venerated by Latin Christians, and Island shrines such as the cave on Lampedusa where both Mary and a Muslim saint were revered served as focal points to Muslim and Christian voyagers alike. To which extent should cults and hagiographical texts that spread along certain spatial lines and conduits of exchange be understood as expressions of a particular, hagiographic dimension of medieval “connectivity”? The dynamic relation between the worlds of faith and the maritime sphere still offers many possibilities for research—not only in the Mediterranean, but also in other seas.

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This spatial dimension of hagiography is closely related to its material side, our third field of research. Objects and artifacts related to particular venerated individuals might well have originated in cultural settings completely different from those of their later use. Avinoam Shalem and others have shown to which extent such wanderings of objects have been the fruit or—in contrast—the origin of cultural transfer processes. Indeed, recreating the “careers” or “biographies” of these objects makes us more receptive to the varying dynamics of things, both natural and man-made. These careers (object biographies, artefact biographies) can be the result of transcultural interaction from their very outset, that is: since their moment of fabrication. Containers fashioned to hold or transport venerated objects or to decorate shrines sometimes reveal uncommon artistic or cultural influences. They might be created by artisans belonging to religious minorities within any given realm or even be the result of artistic import. In other cases, their transcultural features were not related to their creator(s), but


were rather the outcome of these objects’ sometimes contingent biographies: Some items were reinterpreted and re-attributed at a later date or they were physically transferred and acquired new meaning in fresh contexts. In these cases, the forms of later reception or adaption were utterly unforeseen and generally unforeseeable at the time of their production. Islamic glass vessels used as Christian reliquaries or dismantled Christian bells that were turned into lamps for mosques are but two examples for such unforeseen careers. 29

Not only physical objects wandered, so did notions and stories: Our fourth field is the vast topic of wandering hagiographic tropes and legends. 30 Not surprisingly, different societies brought forth similar stories of holy men or women without necessarily being interconnected (a phenomenon known as polygenesis). To a certain extent, hagiography followed and still follows the rules of the open market. Holy men and women fulfilled a concrete demand at a certain period of time, which is precisely why they could experience shifting periods of popularity. The veneration of saints, of masters and spiritual mentors could be adapted to developments and diversifications within society, be it in the field of politics, economy, knowledge or technology. In this way, not only objects, but the very saints themselves could undergo careers, as they were adapted to changing societal needs. 31 A case in point is Mary—venerated within


30 For example, several articles (by A. Binggeli, J. Bray, S. Davis, N. Khalek and T. Sizgorich) in Arietta Papaconstantinou, Writing ‘true stories’ touch upon the wandering of motives and hagiographic réécriture; see also Netzwerk, Transkulturelle Verflechtungen, 183–192; Sebastian Rothe, “Konzeptualisierungen heiliger Asketen im transkulturellen Vergleich. Eine Analyse hagiographischer Lebensbeschreibungen des heiligen Antonius und des Ibrahim b. Adham,” Frühmittelalterliche Studien 50 (2016): 45–98.

31 See the typologies of sainthood in: Claudio Leonardi and Antonella Degl’Innocenti, eds., I santi patroni: Modelli di santità, culti e patronati in Occidente (Napoli: cT, 1999); Monique Goulet and Martin Heinzelmann, eds., La réécriture hagiographique dans l’Occident médiéval: transformations formelles et idéologiques, Beihefte der Francia, 58 (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2003); Alessio Geretti, ed., Il potere e la grazia: i santi patroni d’Europa (Milano: Skira, 2009); Monique Goulet, Martin Heinzelmann and Christiane Veynard-Cosme, eds., L’hagiographie mérovingienne à travers ses réécritures, Beihefte der Francia, 71 (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2010); Jan-Dirk Müller, Peter Strohschneider et al., eds., Helden und Heilige: kulturelle und literarische Integrationsfiguren des
Christianity at different times and within different contexts as mother, Queen, virgin, noble lady, lover and sufferer. Commercial and technological diversity was reflected in Christian devotion to saints, as long established cults were associated with new developments—St Barbara for example became the patron of cannoneers, and St John the Baptist the patron of printers. Such dynamics of hagiography were not caused by developments within one religious community alone, but can also be the result of interreligious contacts, be they between dominant and minority

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religions within any given society, or between subjects of different realms. In any case however, concrete social and historical contexts and very specific goals such as societal reform or moral improvement provide the ever changing settings for entangled hagiographies.34

Due to such interconnections, stories about holy individuals or objects could travel from one region or religious community to another. For example, the evolutionary transformation of the Jataka tales, the Pantachantra, Balaam and Josephat, or the Prince and the Sage, which traveled from India through Central Asia or into parts of Africa, the Middle East and finally even to Northern Europe,35 not only reveals the transfer of motifs, but also reflects the dynamics of resistance, demarcation, adoption, transformation, even expansion.36 On the western Mediterranean rim of the Muslim world, holy men were ascribed with miraculous faculties very similar to those of Christian saints, not only fulfilling the same functions as intercessors, but also integrating traits of their opposites.37 The mounted

36 These thoughts were laid down in Bochum in 2014 by Alexandra Cuffel as an introduction to the workshop giving rise to this collection of essays.
dragon-slayer for example became a venerated figure in Central Asia and the Near East as well as in Europe.38

Alone, however, such explorations tell us little about inter- or intra-religious relations. They need to be enriched by references to encounters with the religious other that traveled from one cultural or geographical area to another, and how these narratives changed as the result of cultural, religious, geographic, or chronological displacement. Why are some stories in certain cultures relatively more “friendly” toward the religious Other than others, and very condemnatory in other cultures though the story at its core is the same? How and why are certain hagiographies of encounter taken over by more than one religious community and either used as a form of resistance or simply co-opted and claimed by the new group? Such questions make us more susceptible to the forces that caused tension and persecution.

To give an example: in 1322, a Muslim by the name of Abdala Abenxando (possibly ʿAbd Allah ibn Shāhd) of Xàtiva was executed in Aragon, because he had broken the King’s law against publicly reciting the *adhān*.39 Prohibitions against fulfilling the Islamic call to prayer had been officially announced some years before. Arguably, the Muslim perpetrator knew full well that by calling the Prophet’s name he was in fact

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calling death upon himself. Was he seeking martyrdom? If he was, one might ask for the models behind such action, since within Islam, martyrdom is generally associated with and legitimised by fighting in defence of one’s faith. Abda Abenxando’s death in contrast recalls the deeds of the so-called “Franciscan Martyrs of Morocco”: Latin Christian Friars who sought for and indeed found martyrdom at the hands of Muslims by publicly vilifying the Prophet’s name. Conspicuously, the very first extensive accounts of the Franciscan martyrs’ deaths (which supposedly occurred in 1220) were written precisely in the 1320s. All this raises questions as to the relational dimension of these occurrences, as to the entanglements of hagiographic models. We need to ask to which extent ideals of meritorious religious behaviour could be picked up even across supposedly conflicting lines, and which were the discursive strategies that lay behind such transfers.

Indeed, probably the case of Abdala Abenxando even had political consequences, for the Egyptian Mamluks put the topic of Muslim minorities under Latin rule on their political agenda at this very moment in time. This leads us to our fifth and last form of entangled hagiography: diplomatic and political cross-cultural interconnections related to revered individuals. In life and even more so after their passing away, these individuals


could become objects of political negotiations across cultural borders. Saints’ relics could be used as pawns on the diplomatic chessboard or for commercial purposes, thus becoming objects of medieval “Dingpolitik.” Some Christian sovereigns in particular went to great pains in order to acquire the bodily remains of holy men or women. Muslim rulers were well aware of this and sometimes made use of the fact that Christian cult sites lay within their realms. For example, the above-mentioned Aragonese Kings of the 14th century negotiated with the Mamluk sultans for decades in order to obtain the relics of St Barbara. Time and again, the sultans played this strategic trump card in times of crisis to improve their political position vis-à-vis their Christian counterparts (without ever complying with their promises).

The five fields of entanglement delineated above—hagiographic tales of intercultural communication, shared spaces, mobile material objects, wandering typologies and negotiated saints, to which one should add a sixth field the cases of hagiographic “enemy knowledge” with which we began this paper—might be used as a framework to analyse the articles

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collected in this volume. Such an exercise is indeed helpful in order to highlight their respective focus and delineate their approach.

**Eight Approaches to Entangled Hagiographies**

An attempt to relate this volume’s papers to the six fields of entangled hagiography delineated above reveals stark imbalances: While wandering material objects of religious devotion do not figure prominently in any of the contributions, and the role of venerated individuals in political cross-cultural contact is only touched upon in Licia Di Giacinto’s paper, other forms of interconnections are more pronounced. Hagiographic references to intercultural communication can be gleaned from Şevket Küçükkhüseyin’s tales of Muslim mystics and Barbara Roggema’s study on the highly influential Legend of Sergius Bahīrā. The notion of shared spaces of devotion in turn is important to Paul Fenton’s argument that the town and region of Safed was a meeting and exchange point of Muslim and Jewish devotional practices, and it can also be identified in Gregor Rohmann’s study of contested spaces of veneration in Lucania. More significant still are the last two fields hagiographic entanglement—wandering typologies and hagiographic “enemy knowledge”. The first is dealt with extensively by Licia di Giacinto, who reveals how Confucian and Buddhist tropes were adapted to Daoist thought. Mihai Grigore’s study of the ways Buddhist and Greek orthodox narratives were picked up and modified in 16th century Central Eastern Europe is also an analysis of wandering motifs. The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā analyzed by Barbara Roggema made a career amongst several Christian confessions during the Middle Ages. Paul Fenton in contrast focuses on a different form of mobility, that of itinerant devotional practices.

Entanglements as an unintended element of oppositional, even antagonistic approaches to alien religions and their adherents are studied in depth in Alexandra Cuffel’s rendering of anti-Muslim arguments and tropes employed by Jews in their polemics against Christians. Matthew Mesley also focuses on an anti-hagiography (a defamatory life of Moḥammad), but is less interested in its non-Christian elements than in the use of older literary and cultural motifs and traditions. Barbara Roggema can demonstrate that the Legend of Sergius Bahīrā is not only a counter-history of the foundations of Islam, but in fact underlines Islam’s similarities and ties to Christianity. The anti-pagan polemics studied by Gregor Rohmann again show profound knowledge of late antique cults and religious practices on the part of their Christian detractors, whereas the anti-Christian polemics of
the Arabic Manāqīb al-ʿĀrifīn are rather more stereotype, as Şevket Küçükĥüseyin demonstrates.

Helpful as this exercise of classifying academic approaches and relating them to this volume’s articles is: neatly fitting the papers into a rigid typology and thus tucking them into academic drawers alone would ultimately do injustice to their diversity and richness. Therefore, it might also be worthwhile to briefly present each of them in order to outline their respective analytical approaches and findings.

For two reasons, Gregor Rohmann’s paper is a fundamental opening to this collection of essays: First, he provides valuable systematic reflections on the subject of religious syncretism as well as on forms of transfer and iteration. Second, he exemplifies these thoughts by analysing the discursive strategies employed in two rich hagiographic texts, the 6th-century Passio of Saint Vitus and the 9th-century Vita of Saint Potitus. Both must be read as the retrospective invention of traditions on the part of a triumphant belief system (here Christianity). On close reading, the Passio in particular reveals striking, though indirect references to pre-Christian Neoplatonism and late antique cults, particularly those of Osiris, Isis and Dionysos. They were employed in order to prove Christianity’s alleged superiority over superseded cults, generally by inversion, i.e. by using a symbol of the overcome religion as a parody. In contrast, the author of the Vita of Saint Potitus no longer saw the necessity to include anti-mythical or anti-cosmological arguments, but rather adapted elements of Vitus’s martyrdom and adjusted them to create the story of a super-martyr. Syncretistic elements in hagiographic texts are thus interpreted as specific instruments employed in particular times and circumstances.

Barbara Roggema examines the early medieval Syriac versions of a highly influential text, the so-called Legend of Sergius Bahīrā. The tale, later transferred to other languages, picks up Islamic traditions, but uses them in order to belittle the Prophet Muḥammad and depict Islam as a distorted spin-off of Christianity. Allegedly, a Christian monk named Sergius provided the Prophet with the foundation of Islam, which were later deformed by an unscrupulous Jewish convert. By retelling the history of the Other from one’s own viewpoint, the Legend of Sergius Bahīrā functions as an emblematic and significant counter-history, even an anti-hagiography. More importantly, however, it reveals how Syriac Christians under Muslim rule considered their own position in Islamic society. For Roggema’s careful reading reveals that—contrary to its apparently polemical stance—the text did not emphasise Islam’s alterity, but rather highlighted its similarities to Christianity. Despite allegedly having laid the foundations of Islam, the monk Sergius is not depicted as a renegade (as repeat-
edly claimed in academic studies), but rather as a Holy Man of God who operates under the protection of a recognised missionary, possesses prophetic and thaumaturgic abilities, advises rulers and locals alike, works miracles in life and death—in short, is imbued with important traits of a saint. By conveying a strong hagiographic message to the story, its author(s) accommodates the rise of Islam to Christian notions of time, power and divine will, thus providing explanations for the contemporary position of Christians under Muslim rule.

Moving east, Licia Di Giacinto’s paper shows, to which extent changing depictions of Laozi drew on Confucian and Buddhist ideals over time. After theorising on the varied forms of demarcation that can shape interreligious dynamics, she identifies several of these modi of self-differentiation in the renderings of Laozi’s life and actions: violent suppression, outright rejection, selective absorption of specific ideas and motifs as well as a “grammar of encompassment”, i.e. the subjugation of two different religions under a given category. The paper succinctly demonstrates how holy men can undergo a hagiographic career: by the beginning of the third century C. E., images of Laozi had evolved considerably—from those of a very old man to an immortal and later to a main God. To adequately understand such processes, we need to take the respective social contexts into account, as Di Giacinto rightfully underlines. For example, the concrete settings of royal courts at a given period in time provide an influential backdrop to these hagiographic constructions and to the changes they reflect.

A similar stand is taken by Matthew Mesley. He presents a potent anti-hagiography—the lives of Muḥammad that were written by high medieval Christian authors. In their venomous and denigrating tales about the Prophet, these writers drew upon elements found in early Islamic texts, but distorted them nearly beyond recognition. Mesley illustrates the contemporary social contexts that marked his concrete case study: the work of the 12th-century author Gerald of Wales. This archdeacon and courtier aimed at reforming fellow Christians and criticising failures within his own Church. It is therefore both significant and telling that Gerald compared Islam and its Prophet with contemporary Christian heresies such as the Patarenes. Historicising his book De instructione principum in this fashion necessarily requires identifying its inter-textual dynamics: Hugh of Fleury's Historia Ecclesiastica provided most material for Gerald’s depiction of Muḥammad, to which he added thoughts of his own that reflect contemporary issues related to the Third Crusade.

Şevket Küçükhüseyin in contrast finds it far more difficult to identify the basis for the description of non-Muslims in the Manāqib al-ʿArifin
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(Feats of the Knowers of God), a rare example of Muslim hagiography written by the Mawlawi Dervish Ahmad-i Aflaki in the middle of the 14th century. It is one of the few extant Muslim sources that provide insights into the fashioning of the religious Other in late medieval Anatolia. In fact, as a detailed analyses of three reports within this praise of Muslim mystics shows, neither are depictions of the Christians in this work particularly expressive; rather, they echo stereotypical Muslim accusations of idolatry. In one instance, however, the tale of a water spirit (“lord of the water”) can be interpreted as a distant reflection of pre-Christian cults in late medieval Anatolia.

Alexandra Cuffel’s paper focuses Northern Europe, a region traditionally considered less important for the history of anti-Islamic Jewish invective than the Mediterranean. However, the Nizzahon Yashan, written at the turn of the 13th to the 14th century by an Ashkenazi author, contains passages in which Jesus is slandered using arguments levelled by Christians against Muhammad. The text provides an unusual example of the usage of non-learned polemics, for the author arguably drew on images spread by the Chansons de Geste and the Ritterromane of his time. This case shows a triple entanglement of Jewish, Christian and Muslim polemics against the religious Other while providing proof for the intertwining of Christian and Jewish life-worlds in medieval Germany.

Narrative wanderings of a different kind a presented by Mihai Grigore’s study. It focusses on a little known rendering of two extremely momentous texts: The story of Barlaam and Josaphat is an eminent exemplar for the wandering of literary material from East to West, and the late antique Physiologus, too, experienced an impressive career due to its multiple adaptions in medieval culture. Both of these works found their way into a 16th-century Mirror of Princes probably written for his son by the Wallachian ruler Neagoe Basarab (died 1521). Grigore shows differences between Latin and Orthodox versions of Barlaam and Josaphat and reveals the traditions of Slavonic translations the supposed author could have fallen back upon. He also raises a programmatic call to extend our notion of hagiography by including texts dealing with holiness and things holy in general instead of limiting our scope to biographical works alone.

Wanderings and entanglements of religious devotional practices are the subject of Paul B. Fenton’s paper. It deals with a form of venerating and approaching holy men that can be identified both in Islam and Judaism: The notion that visualising a living or deceased saint can create a direct linkage between the devotee and his master was prominently advocated in Central Asia by the Naqshbandi order of the late Middle Ages and was also adopted by other Sufi movements. This mystical technique—often carried
out at the tomb of the deceased and based on a number of elaborate practices including breath control—can also be discerned amongst Jewish Lurianic Kabbalists of the 16th century; it was later adopted in 18th century European Ḥasidism and lives on to this very day. Fenton suggests direct linkages between these phenomena and convincingly advocates that Jewish mystics picked up Islamic traditions. This might have been the result of the spatial proximity between Muslim and Jewish devotional sites in the region of Upper Galilee around the town of Safed, where common spaces of veneration are attested and where Lurianic traditions were taken up by European Ḥasidism.

These few introductory remarks and short summaries can of course not do credit to the many stimulating ideas and findings laid out in the papers that follow. These articles impressively prove a claim expressed in the opening of this paper: A transcultural approach to holiness, saints and their veneration harbours significant heuristic and epistemological potential for cultural and religious studies—particularly, if contemporary social and historical contexts are duly taken into account. Such interrelations are an important corrective to ultimately simplified or even reified notions of religion which tend to presume that religious beliefs and structures of religious authority primarily or even exclusively defined medieval societies. Unhindered flows, contested rivalries and violent appropriation alike shaped the entangled hagiographies of Asia and Europe.