**Spiritual Exemplars**

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**Abstract**

This paper proposes that spiritual persons are an excellent focus for the study of 'living religion' and offers a methodology for doing so. By ‘spiritual persons’, I have in mind both exemplary figures – like Jesus or the Buddha – and the multitude of ‘ordinary’ spiritual persons whose lives are led in aspiration to the spiritual goods the exemplars manifest (enlightenment, say, or holiness). I start with Linda Zagzebski's recent argument that moral persuasion primarily occurs through encounters with exemplars of moral qualities, of a sort that invite admiration and emulation. A plurality of modes of spiritual exemplarity is distinguished, each reflecting a distinct form of spiritual aspiration, which will show in the lives of the members of different traditions. I develop this claim by focusing on the ways that spiritual aspirants can encounter exemplars through their depictions in spiritual narrative. It emerges that narrative encounters can activate certain forms of admiration and enable certain forms of emulation if they depict the suffering of exemplars.

**Key terms:**

* Emulation
* Exemplars
* Spiritual life
* Suffering
* Virtue
* Zagzebski, Linda

**1. Exemplars of the spiritual life**

Many commentators on contemporary philosophy of religion attend to a dialectic between models that privilege belief and practice, respectively, often with an eye to challenging the entrenchment of a belief model by advocating models more focused onto practice. Such models are not always well-defined, nor are clear examples always given of who defends or advocates them. The belief model is charged with conceptualising religion too narrowly and abstractly as essentially commitment to some set of propositional beliefs, to be appraised for their conceptual coherence and epistemic warrant. By contrast, the practice model urges us to conceive of spirituality or religious life in terms of cultures of *praxis*, shared ways of living, typically coupled to a desire to downplay the ‘doxastic freight’ of doctrine, theory, and metaphysical commitment.[[1]](#endnote-1) Some commentators, rather than taking a stand for or against these putatively rival models, instead focus on the limits of those models, or the contingency of their presuppositions – the focus on doxastic commitment, say, which may be less apt for east Asian traditions, as indicated by books with titles like *Buddhism without Beliefs* and by ones that document, for instance, the ‘existential spirituality’ of Shinto.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The dialectic between belief and practice models is more nuanced than popular perceptions might suggest. Surely no philosopher of religion seriously doubts important roles for both belief and practice, even if there is more justification for talk of the neglect of other dimensions of the spiritual life – sense and feeling, gender and the body, community and tradition, and so on. At the least, serious empirical and phenomenological sensitivity to the practical realities and lived experience of spiritual forms of life shows their complex integration of these multiple dimensions – affective, aesthetic, bodily, doxastic, ethical, practical, social, and experiential, not as isolated components of spiritual life, but as integrated dimensions of a way of being-in-the-world. Religious rituals, for instance, are aestheticized practices that can express ethical values, enable spiritual fellowship, and cultivate an acute sense of the ineffable source of the world – a convergent set of experiences, rather than a discrete set of isolated activities.[[3]](#endnote-3)

For these reasons, Manichean talk of rivalling belief and practice models ought to be abandoned, or at least softened, in favour of a more nuanced appreciation of the internal complexity of spiritual forms of life. A focus on belief rather than practice, or on the cognitive rather than the affective, should be taken as different means of approach to exploring philosophically the forms of spirituality, rather than as the sole or privileged roads to understanding. Although it may often be effective to highlight certain aspects of spiritual life, this ought not disguise or occlude the other aspects. Similar methodological themes run through feminist philosophies of religion, especially the writings of the late Pamela Sue Anderson. Underlying critical *exposé* of gendered prejudices in theistic spiritual traditions is not only a desire for justice, but also restoration of a sense of the integrity of a spiritual life – something apt to be obscured by invidious dualisms, like those between reason and emotion, or the earthly and the transcendent.[[4]](#endnote-4)

 I endorse the shared concern, among these and other writers, to direct philosophical attention to the complexity and unity of spiritual lives. Simply restoring occluded aspects on a piecemeal basis, or getting trapped in a dialectic of rival models, may not advance that concern. Instead, a better strategy for understanding the complexities, tensions, and forms of integration inherent in spiritual lives may be to start from the *explanandum* itself – from actual spiritual lives, whether of accomplished adepts or novice aspirants. These are the starting points for our philosophical enquiries, whether our interest is the epistemic status of certain beliefs, the aesthetic dimensions of certain practices, or the embodied character of spiritual values.

In this strategy, there’s an echo of a deep feature of many spiritual traditions. This is the aspiration for integration or unity with the wider order of things – a sense that our way of life can be in harmony with the way of the world, to use a favoured idiom of the Chinese and Japanese spiritual traditions.[[5]](#endnote-5) I will return to that aspiration. First, I want to propose that one promising way to approach the unity of spiritual lives, their aspects and integrity, is to seek it in the lives of *spiritual persons*. In effect, I’m endorsing Victoria Harrison’s judgment that what established spiritual traditions offer us is “an internally coherent spiritual life … structured around the embodiment of certain values.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Those ‘embodiments’ are, of course, spiritual persons.

A call to attend to spiritual persons nicely resonates with several recent and welcome developments in philosophy of religion. The belief and practice models, of course, gesture, inevitably if implicitly, to the persons whose beliefs and practices they are, but other ‘turns’ in the discipline offer further contacts with the actual lives of spiritual people. Think of the emergence of important studies that draw on phenomenology and anthropology, exploring the structures of lived experience of, and the cultural contexts that lend salience to, spiritual life.[[7]](#endnote-7) Think, too, of the ‘humanistic’ and ‘narrative’ turns that connect spiritual belief, practice, and experience with wider domains of human activity and sensibility.[[8]](#endnote-8) Uniting these diverse developments are the hundreds of millions of people who inhabit spiritual life-forms. Across these cases, we see that a main justification for focusing on spiritual persons is that they are the living loci of the plurality of aspects of religiosity in its many forms.

By ‘spiritual persons’, I have in mind both exemplary figures – like Jesus or the Buddha – and the multitude of ‘ordinary’ spiritual persons, those aspiring to what the exemplars manifest. I will therefore talk of *exemplars* and *aspirants*, duly acknowledging the fuzziness of those terms. Indeed, since aspirants typically aspire to the spiritual goods attained by the exemplar, whether those are enlightenment, holiness, or salvation, their relation must be subtly graded. In some traditions, those fundamental goods are only available to persons of exemplary moral or spiritual attainment. Certainly the aim of great spiritual traditions is to enable human beings to pursue and realise those deep goods –purification of the soul, ‘liberation’ from ‘the wheel of suffering’, and so on. As Mark Wynn explains, it is because spiritual exemplars have this special relationship to these goods that they can act as ‘an ideal of life to which other human beings should aspire’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

It’s therefore odd that there is very little discussion of aspirants and exemplars in philosophy of religion, at least if compared with theology and religious studies. Often the talk is of the ‘religious believer’ or ‘the theist’, that cousin of other abstract figures, familiar from other areas of philosophy, like ‘the moral agent’ or ‘the knower’. One need not be a feminist, Marxist, or standpoint theorist to want to give more identity and particularity to these figures, of the sort offered by phenomenologists and anthropologists, and to those informed by their researches.

A worry about this concretisation is that it offers fine-grained description at the cost of theoretical sophistication. Although that worry is unfounded, we still need a theoretical framework that lets us think about spiritual persons. In this paper, I offer one – *exemplarism* – which takes as its inspiration the recent work of Linda Zagzebski, as described and amended in sections 2 and 3. A plurality of modes of spiritual exemplarity is distinguished, each reflecting a distinct form of spiritual aspiration, which will show in the lives of the members of different traditions. The final section then develops this account of spiritual exemplarism by focusing on depictions of suffering in spiritual narratives.

**2. Exemplarism**

The proposal to focus reflection on moral and spiritual exemplars finds powerful precedent in recent work by Linda Zagzebski. In an earlier book, *Divine Motivation Theory*, she argued that moral concepts, like ‘good’, are developed through direct reference to those persons who exemplify them to an advanced or superlative degree. Such exemplars ‘model’ those moral concepts, and Zagzebski uses this to argue for a distinctively Christian form of ethics, in which God is the supreme exemplar.[[10]](#endnote-10) But it is on a more recent book, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* – based on her 2015 Gifford Lectures – where this account is generalised, that I want to focus.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Zagzbeski’s ambition is to present exemplarism as a foundational moral theory, one neutral with respect to specific spiritual or metaphysical frameworks. Its main claim is that all moral concepts – duty, right, virtue – are defined by direct references to exemplars: ‘supremely excellent’ people who embody or manifest those moral values and qualities. Zagzebski argues that an exemplarist process of moral learning has two main components.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the first place, a person has an encounter with some person who inspires in them a positive emotional response, that of *admiration*. Such admiration reflects a sense, often pre-theoretical and unreflective, that the person has some positive quality, such as compassion or kindness, often to some special degree. Admiring that person indicates that one has, oneself, at least a latent sense of the genuine moral significance of that quality. It may take careful theorising or reflection to articulate the quality and its significance, but that is a natural part of our moral practice.

The admiration of the exemplar leads to the second component of exemplarist moral learning – *emulation*. To admire someone’s moral quality – courage, say – can naturally inspire a desire to have that quality oneself, so become, oneself, admirable. This is emulation: to take another person or thing as a model for oneself, by imitating their excellent qualities. Initially, this may take crude forms, like copying their ways of speaking or acting. But emulative behaviour can, slowly, develop into more sophisticated forms. A process that began by imitating the exemplar’s outer behaviour, mannerisms, and so on, can become a sustained moral and psychological transformation of oneself.

A few comments on this sketch, brief as it is, are in order, to set up my later discussion. First, both admiration and emulation should, as Zagzebski emphasises, be *reflective*, since each admits of degenerate, corrupt forms. We can admire the wrong people, like the insouciant self-described moral nihilist. We can also admire the right people for the wrong reasons, esteeming moral heroes, not for their virtues, but for the popularity or charisma they enjoy. Likewise, emulation can degenerate into uncritical copying, dogmatic idolisation, or mindless parroting.[[13]](#endnote-13) Second, moving from admiration to emulation is not automatic and must be facilitated. One might admire an exemplar, but be too daunted or cripplingly modest to think that one could ever be like that. Or one might desire to emulate the exemplar, but lack practical guidance on how to do so effectively. For this reason, moral communities should provide effective practices of emulation, stable over time, aided by literature, ritual, and art.

A third comment on exemplarism is that there is an on-going open debate about the importance of reflective understanding to true virtue or authentic moral goodness. Some traditions built in types of exemplar – ‘holy fools’, ‘moral innocents’ – with no reflective dimension to their goodness. The persons of true virtue (*zhen ren*) in Daoist writings are rarely learned sages, but rather fisherman, butchers, and other humble people. Indeed, the *Daodejing* warns its readers to ‘cut off sageliness’ and ‘get rid of wisdom’, since they feed the ‘artifice’, egoism, and hubris that prevent appreciation of Dao.[[14]](#endnote-14) So, exemplars need not be moral philosophers, theoretical sophisticates, or masters of doctrine. Amy Olberding is therefore right to warn that confining genuine exemplarity to the intellectually adept may be to ‘risk a bias against goodness’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

As those Daoist example indicates, exemplars come in a variety of forms. Some are intimates, with whom one has a close, personal relationship, or contemporaries, available but not people with whom one is intimately acquainted. Others will be historical or legendary figures – moral heroes of distant or recent history – and others still may be fictional characters, taken from an edifying novel, perhaps. As these forms suggest, exemplars can and do change forms over time. The Buddha, for instance, was once an intimate and contemporary, then became an historical character, rendered in literature, art, and imagination.

To enable exemplarist moral learning, a mode should *activate admiration* for the exemplar and then *enable emulation* of them. I suggest that we distinguish several different *modes of encounter*. To start with, there are *personal encounters*, where one directly meets and interacts with an exemplar, either sporadically or through a sustained participation in a shared way of life. Perhaps an extended encounter with an intimate exemplar is the ideal, of the sort one sees in cases of romantic love or spiritual discipleship. A second mode is *testimonial encounters*, where one ‘meets’ some exemplar through descriptions of their character and comportment by others. Often, the effect on the testifier – who may be significantly affected by the exemplar – is part of the encounter. Closely related are *narrative encounters*, encounters with exemplars in and through narrative accounts of them, in literary or artistic forms.

Two comments on these various modes. First, personal encounters enjoy an empirical richness and affective immediacy the other modes do not. In person, we *see* the exemplar’s facial expressions, *hear* their tone of voice, *feel* the power of their presence. Such encounters often attest to an exemplar’s aesthetically inflected charisma, magnetism, or ‘moral beauty’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Obviously such close, sustained encounters are perfect for emulation, but close scrutiny of exemplars also has critical value. Seeing how an exemplar acts in different situations – formal and informal, public and private – can expose hypocrisy in a way unavailable through incidental or ‘on duty’ encounters. Critical scrutiny matters, of course: not every exemplar will retain their elevated status after closer inspection or their subjection to the various ‘tests of admiration’ sensibly proposed by Zagzebski.[[17]](#endnote-17)

A second point is that narrative encounters are subject to the contingencies of the processes through which those narratives are produced. To anticipate a later theme, spiritual texts are products of complex histories of selection, redaction, and translation that affect the exemplarist practices in those traditions. The *range* of exemplars can be artificially restricted, as when gendered biases lead to the ‘writing out’ of exemplary women from a spiritual tradition’s literature and history.[[18]](#endnote-18) Similar restrictions can be applied to the *descriptions* of exemplars. Hermeneutic or ideological considerations can expunge unacceptable features of an exemplar – their erotic sentiments, political acts, moral strife, or spiritual anxieties. Such problems can pertain to local communities or broader theological traditions, not all of which sympathise with the critical sensibilities of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. Indeed, to propose that aspirants should be appraised of the complex contingencies of narratives is itself a contentious claim.

With these remarks in place, the general form of exemplarism should be clear. Its core claim is that we learn moral qualities through a variety of modes of encounter with persons who exemplify them. To effect moral transformation, those encounters should activate our admiration and enable emulation of the exemplar. At the heart of exemplarism are aspirants – for it is their experiences of admiration, their practices of emulation, and their encounters that we are describing. To unify those aspects, I now turn to spiritual exemplars.

**3. Spiritual exemplars**

Although Zagzebski intends exemplarism as a fundamental moral theory, independent of any specific spiritual or metaphysical vision, this should not disguise the diversity evident among exemplars. She therefore sketches a typology, where each type of exemplar is defined by its special relationship to a specific, higher virtue: the Hero is the exemplar of courage, the Saint of compassion, the Sage of wisdom.

Since my aim is to locate spiritual exemplars in this taxonomy, it might seem that ‘Saint’ is the most promising type. On closer inspection, however, what Zagzebski intends is a ‘moral saint’, in the sense made famous by Susan Wolf (roughly, a person of outstanding moral achievement).[[19]](#endnote-19) Moral saints can be spiritual, but need not be, as is borne out in Zagzebski’s example of Holocaust rescuers, not all of whom were among the faithful. But there are other problems with trying to locate many paradigmatic spiritual exemplars using this typological strategy.

 For a start, many exemplars – spiritual or otherwise – seem to comfortably fit many different types. Jesus can be characterised as courageous, so a Hero, or as compassionate, hence a Saint, or a courageous Saint or a compassionate Sage, Likewise, the Buddha can be plausibly described as compassionate, hence a Saint, but also as wise, so a Sage. This will also be true for the other exemplary, if less elevated members of the traditions they inspired, as well as of other religions. The second problem, closely related, is that many spiritual traditions either reject or fail to recognise the distinctions between the virtues on which the typology depends. In Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are not two separate virtues that, as it were, just happen to arrive at the same time at the moment of enlightenment. Rather, they are intimately related aspects of enlightened comportment: wisdom necessarily manifests in compassionate treatment, which in turn requires wise insight into Noble Truths about the nature of reality.[[20]](#endnote-20)

A final problem is that what distinguishes an exemplar is arguably not any single virtue – compassion or faith, say – but the whole vision of life and the world within which that virtue has its place and significance. Although Zagzebski has clarified that she does not think exemplars are distinguished solely by some particular virtue with a dominant role in their psychology, there are still special problems posed by spiritual exemplars.[[21]](#endnote-21) Explaining the nature of spiritual exemplarity will require references to a whole matrix of experience, practice, and sensibility, to a form of life whose grounds are, ultimately, a certain vision of the world. A *bodhisattva* or Zen Master is exemplary within a complex structure constituted by the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and a vision of a world of *annica* and *dukkha*, while a Christian saint cannot be characterised without reference to a soteriological sense of the fundamentality of our relationship to God. If so, some spiritual exemplars may fit the typology, but many other paradigmatic ones do not, while others challenge its strictures.

The embeddedness of spiritual exemplars within spiritual life-forms and visions of reality is, of course, an obstacle for those who want to talk of ‘spiritual exemplars’ in general. Certainly, the complexity of such exemplars is the result of our showing attentive fidelity to the particularities of specific traditions. The Christian saint at prayer, pious and devout before God, is a different figure from the meditating Zen Buddhist, serenely mindful of the ‘emptiness’ of all things. Such exemplars differ considerably – in their habits, virtues, practices, relations to animals and natural places, metaphysical convictions, and so on – in ways that we should not ignore, dismiss, or gloss over.

At least one thing in common between the broad groups of paradigmatic, ‘self-selecting’ spiritual exemplars: the concern for the deep *grounds* of the virtues and the good life, of the aspiration to integrate or align one’s life with the wider order of reality. Consider the virtue of compassion: this may be esteemed because it was taught by Jesus, or is loved by God, or reflects enlightened insight into the lack of ‘own-being’ of creatures, or as a mark of emulation of Dao—and so on. Compassion can, of course, be given other grounds, such as respect for sentient beings, natural sentiment, or a form of virtue ethics, making ‘depth’ a placeholder term. It can’t be equated with ‘supernatural’, since the contrast term, ‘natural’, is hardly precise, and since many spiritual traditions reject distinctions between putatively natural and supernatural aspects or levels of reality. Dao, for one, does not correspond to anything in a scientific naturalistic picture of the world, but nor is it taken, by Daoists, to be distinct or separate from the world of experience. I therefore use the term broadly and with due acknowledgment of grey areas, such as modern forms of moral realism which, although not described spiritually, still invoke substantive metaphysical accounts.

Once attention turns to this variety of deep grounds, a range of different modes of spiritual exemplarity come into view. These modes reflect different ways that one can ground a set of virtues or a way of life in the wider order of reality. As a tentative start, we might distinguish three, each a realisation of the aspiration to unity or integration with a wider order of reality. In each case, the exemplar is to be admired and emulated for their success in realising, to some significant degree, that aspiration.

 The first is an *aspiration to allegiance*, where the latter term captures obedience, loyalty, or devotion to divinely commanded edicts or commandments. The exemplar is a model of such obedience. In traditions like Islam and Judaism, one sees scriptural codification of the exemplar’s teachings that give a legalistic character to their spiritual ethics. The second is an *aspiration to spontaneity*: to live in ways that enable understanding of deep truths about reality, attainment of which is morally transformative. Buddhist exemplars attain their status – in the Buddha’s case, as *arhat*, ‘awakened one’ – by virtue of their being models of enlightened insight into the Noble Truths. Such insight manifests in the spontaneous exercise of compassion and other virtues.

The third is an *aspiration to emulation*: to emulate successfully the qualities or features of what those traditions recognise as the source or grounds of the world of experience. In Daoism, a *zhen ren* emulates the effortlessness, spontaneity, and non-contending nature of Dao, which manifest in human beings as ‘profound virtue’ (*xuande*). The Stoic sages described by Marcus Aurelius are exemplary because they emulate in their own life and mind the rationality, efficiency, and purposiveness of the Logos, the Divine Fire. Daoist and Stoic sages, then, are exemplary due to their realisation in human form – as *de* or virtues – some of the excellent qualities of Dao or the Logos. In so doing, their lives attune to, and so become unified with, the deep grounds of the world.

I offer these general sorts of spiritual aspiration only tentatively to support the idea that our search ought to be for a plurality of modes of exemplarity. But it should be clear that they are genuinely distinct aspirations that mark real differences among spiritual forms of life. Many theists, for instance, will reject the idea of emulation of the divine as heretical or hubristic, if taken to mean that human beings can attain perfections available only to God – a prohibition of certain forms of ‘divinization’, reflected in varying Christian conceptions of *theosis*.[[22]](#endnote-22) By contrast, many Daoists will reject aspirations to allegiance as corrupting signs of ‘artifice’, alien to the spontaneity characteristic of Dao.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Given the range of different spiritual aspirations, it is not only exemplars that will vary in their characters and lives. So, too, will the concerns, experiences, and practices of aspirants. Indeed, this is precisely what we do find, when our attention turns to the particularities of different spiritual communities and traditions. The devout Muslim aspires to devout obedience to *sharia*, God’s divine law, as revealed to the Prophet Mohammad, and recorded in the Quran and Hadith, observing the Five Pillars of Islam, giving alms, praying, and so on. A Buddhist monk aspires to attain the enlightened insight into the Noble Truths that will extinguish the ignorance and craving that traps them in the ‘wheel of suffering’, and so meditates, studies the *sutras*, and devotes themselves to the liberation of all sentient beings. The Daoist aspires to attain to Dao by emulating its effortlessness, guarding against ‘artifice’, and attending mindfully and responding spontaneously to natural places and creatures.

In each case, the fundamental character of an aspiration transforms the particular sorts of experiences, feelings, engagements, and sensibilities judged pertinent to the spiritual life. This in turn influences the particular sorts of characters and comportments expected of spiritual exemplars. I propose, then, that there is a plurality of very general spiritual aspirations, that take particular forms within different traditions, and that manifest in different forms of spiritual exemplar. This is recapitulated in the fine details of those traditions, including the day-to-day features of the lives of aspirants. If so, Zagzebski’s account will need to be modified on two counts. First, admiration will have different objects and forms across different traditions. Should one admire unyielding obedience to divinely commanded law, even if doing so causes profound anguish of the sort Kierkegaard describes in the case of Abraham and Isaac?[[24]](#endnote-24) Should one admire those with a close contact with nature – as Buddhists, Jains, and Daoists urge – or should this be seen as a frivolous practice of dubious spiritual value?

A second modification concerns the many forms and practices of emulation. Is the ultimate object of emulation always a person – a *guru* or *yogi*, say – or could it be something else, other than a person? In many spiritual traditions, the sage should be emulated because by doing so one emulates the ultimate source of the world, that to which we naturally aspire to attain harmony. Should practices of emulation aim ‘at’ a sage or ‘through’ them to the Dao or Logos whose qualities they are exemplifying? Is obedience a quality to emulate or an obstacle to genuine spiritual edification? Must emulation involve diligent study of scriptures and spiritual laws or – quite the contrary – a ‘forgetting’ and ‘abandoning’ of wisdom of the sort apparently urged by the Daoists and those Zen Masters who would tear up scriptures and instead order disciples to sweep the monastery grounds?

Such questions can only be explored adequately through patient investigation of the details of specific traditions and spiritual life-forms. I raise them here to support the points made in this section: that there are a variety of forms of spiritual exemplarity and aspiration that significantly shape experiences and practices of both admiration and emulation. If so, then exemplarism is fulfilling its promise of giving us a way to think about spiritual persons that balances useful generality with specificity marked by attentive fidelity to their lives.

In the next section, I continue to explore that promise by asking what this form of spiritual exemplarism can tell us about spiritual narratives.

**4. Spiritual narratives and suffering**

One of the merits of exemplarism, noted by Zagzebski, is its sensitivity to *narrative* as a condition for moral development. This refers to both the activities of making and sharing stories that lend structure and meaning to our experiences and to the results of those activities – stories, diaries, biographies, and others. Such edifying narratives are integral to the world’s venerable ethical and spiritual traditions – in the form of the Gospels and Hadith and many early Buddhist *sutras* – and they remain popular today, for instance in the form of illness narratives.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The moral power of such narratives lies in many things – their roles as repositories of wisdom, say. But a main reason is their capacity to enable what I called narrative encounters with exemplars. I focus only on those narratives that are either attributed to, authored by, or centrally feature various exemplars from their respective traditions. The actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad is the theme of the Hadith. The Buddhist scriptures classified as *Udāna* and *Avadāna* record the Buddha’s inspired speech and exploits. The Gospels of the New Testament are filled with the teachings and events of the life of Jesus. We can also add the *Analects* of Confucius and Daoist writings like the books of *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*. An important aim of compiling and commentating on these texts is – to quote a commentator on the Hadith – ‘to formalise the role of exemplary practice’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

I propose that the exemplarist process of moral persuasion can be employed to explain the typical content and style of these narratives. Because those narratives have those literary features, they can activate admiration and enable emulation and so facilitate what I called narrative encounters with the exemplars they depict.

My claim is not that their editors were consciously embracing exemplarism: only that, as a theory, it has resources to explain the style, content, and persuasive power of those narratives. It will emerge that exemplarism encourages the inclusion of narrative depictions of the suffering of exemplars – their pains, frustrations, and suffering. Only if the *grittier* aspects of their character and life are included can admiration and emulation fully be realised. If so, exemplarist spiritual narratives should not gloss over or edit out the ‘dark sides’ of a life devoted to spiritual aspirations.

I start by distinguishing two different styles of moral reason: accounts of the activities and experiences pertinent to the process of moral persuasion. The styles are not rigidly distinct and can coexist easily in a narrative - the Buddhist scriptures include the *Avadāna* (that describe the exploits of the Buddha) and the *Vyākarana* (that give explanations and analyses of claims and arguments). These correspond to the two broad styles of moral reason – exemplarism and inferentialism, with the latter conceiving of moral persuasion mainly or exclusively as a matter of *argumentation*. A process of persuasion begins with a set of moral claims – established or asserted – and then infers from them, using a specified rational procedure, a set of prescriptions for conduct. Think of utilitarianism: using the principle of utility, one determines which acts or rules would maximise utility. Or think of the Kantian Categorical Imperative in its First Formulation: moral maxims that can be universalised prescribe the duties we ought to adopt.

These two styles of moral reason invite two comments. First, the relation between them – like that between belief and practice models of religion – is better understood as one of emphasis not isolation. Few, if any, moral philosophers would deny roles for argumentation, exemplarity, intuition, conviction and other aspects of moral experience and agency. Kant is celebrated for his emphasis on the priority of rational deliberation, in ways that minimise or restrain the role of affect, subjective experience, and exemplarity, but he stills recognises legitimate roles for these, albeit in appropriately moderated ways.[[27]](#endnote-27) Likewise, exemplarists make a place for inferentialist argumentation, even if they make it sequentially and conceptually secondary to encounters with exemplars. After all, even intense scrutiny of the conduct exemplars often leaves uncertainties, that it is a job of argumentation to resolve.

A second comment on inferentialist and exemplarist styles of moral reason is that the former is, arguably, much more dominant in the moral philosophy of late modernity. It is possible for both styles to be present but for one to predominate, even to the point that the status of one style as a style – one among others – can be lost. Moral philosophers still make generous use of examples, of course, but the pre-eminently exemplarist idea that they ought to be, themselves, moral exemplars nowadays seems quaint. But the entrenchment of more exclusively inferentialist styles of moral reason has had several invidious effects. For a start, moral rationality has come to be defined as a relation between the premises and conclusions of arguments, rather than the coherence of a person’s convictions and conduct. What matters is the quality of a person’s arguments, not of their life. Next, the focus on rational inference has led to a derogation of aspects of life judged to interfere with the exercise of reason. Indeed, the methods of late modern moral philosophy – such as Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’ or Kant’s universalizability test – are explicitly intended to weed out feeling, emotion, anecdote, example, and subjective experience.

A final effect of the entrenchment of inferentialism is an increasingly narrow focus on argumentation for or against particular claims, actions, and theories can and has led to an atrophy of reflection on ‘the good life’, on which ancient ethical and spiritual traditions tended to focus. That such a narrowing focus occurred is proven by the emergence, over the last fifty years, of counterbalancing movements that aimed to restore aspects of moral life that were being occluded by a hardening inferentialism. Think of the vigorous defences of the place of love, emotion and narrative in moral theory – not to mention our moral life – by Martha Nussbaum, Alice Crary, and champions of virtue ethics, such as Julia Annas, among many others.[[28]](#endnote-28)

A theme of those affirmations is that much modern moral writing tends toward a central set of implicit literary norms. As befits rational argument, the style of morally serious literature should be cool and dispassionate – ‘objective’, even ‘scientific’. The content should be premises, definitions, and replies to critics, focussed on arguing for or against actions or theories. It should be obvious that inferentialism is a poor fit for the spiritual narratives that feature exemplars. The Gospels and Hadith and those Buddhist and Daoist texts lack the philosophical and literary content and tone of inferentialist moral reason.

Indeed, the content and style of those texts is usually quite the opposite – emotional, anecdotal, episodic – which suggest they’re better read using an exemplarist style. On that style, moral persuasion occurs mainly through encounters with exemplars of a set of moral or spiritual qualities of goods – wisdom, holiness, enlightenment, and so on. If so, then narrative depictions of exemplars should be apt to activate admiration and enable emulation. Their style should be emotive and anecdotal and give a rich sense of the character of the exemplar and the manner of their life. The content should consist of dense, detailed descriptions of the exemplar’s comportment – their gestures, posture, speech, tone of voice, facial expressions. The focus should be on their experiences of and responses to the people, places, and events of their world.

The classic spiritual narratives that I am interested in have many of these literary features. If done well, they afford powerful literary encounters with exemplars. One should be *impressed* by their courage, *struck* by their faith, *awed* by their compassion. In one *sutra*, a man is spontaneously moved to ‘deep faith’ in the Buddha when witnessing his ‘serene calm’ during a violent storm.[[29]](#endnote-29) Such narratives can only do this when they are embedded in a religious form of life, replete with communities, practices, and a rich religious imagination, such that the narratives serve as starting points for moral and spiritual reflection. People were moved to follow Jesus or devote their lives to the Prophet or abandon Confucian artifice for more ‘natural’ ways of life, partly thanks to the relevant narratives, but also partly due to the existence of communities of people trying to live out their teachings and example. Such experiences do not, of course, *prove* the truth of the exemplar’s vision of life and the world. But they can secure a trust or confidence in the vision, as one able to encourage and sustain such exemplary lives – ones documented in narrative and proven, as it were, in life.

Such affectively-toned experiences can be encouraged by spiritual life-forms that structure admiration and facilitate emulation. Ritual practices, worship, dance, music, prayer, fasts, festivals, pilgrimages – all of these are part of what Victoria Harrison calls ‘the experience of living within a spiritual life-form’.[[30]](#endnote-30) But also part of developing within a life-form, from novice aspiration to consummate exemplarity. Such progress inevitably involves encountering and responding to obstacles, many involving adversity, suffering, and challenge. It is easier to surmount those obstacles – to stay on the Way, as Daoists say – if the exemplars one recognizes testify to similar experiences. If exemplars are the ‘end-stage’ of spiritual attainment, aspirants need to see the way they got there – a way they, too, will pass along, obstacles and all.

Such narratives should not focus, then, solely on the more positive or uplifting aspects of exemplars, such as their calmness, gracefulness, and wisdom amid the travails of life. Without acknowledgment of the grittiness of spiritual life, exemplars can quickly take degenerate forms. Impeccable exemplars can become daunting, stalling emulation and fuelling idolisation, becoming corrupting, creating dogmatic zealots. In response to such worries, many spiritual traditions restrict and prohibit idolatry and hagiolatry – the Islamic sin of *shirk*, for instance, or the Catholic distinction between *worship* and *veneration* of saints. Closely related to idolisation is distorting ‘polishing’ of the exemplar’s flaws, effacing their struggles and disguising their complexities. An effective way to counteract these tendencies is to depict – often graphically – the complex sufferings of exemplars.

The Jewish and Christian spiritual literature is filled with such accounts, not least those figures described by Eleonore Stump in her book, *Wandering in Darkness*. What one sees in Job’s agonies, Mary of Bethany’s heartbroken loss, and the last days of Jesus are the emotionally and spiritually agonising cases in which a person draws on what moral and spiritual resources they have to become ‘an exemplar of the greatness possible for the human spirit in extreme and crushing circumstances’.[[31]](#endnote-31) A later body of spiritual art, literature, and history adds the sufferings of other exemplars – such as saints and martyrs – but also of spiritual aspirants. Speaking of the histories of early Judaism and Christianity, John Cottingham notes that their ‘passionately spiritual’ members were beset by ‘the most terrible sufferings’ – ‘slavery, wanderings in the desert … brutal captivity, exile, ruthless suppression’. Despite their subjections, however, these people continued to reflect on and celebrate *chesed*, the ‘loving-kindness of God’.[[32]](#endnote-32)

The ubiquity of suffering in human life explains why narrative depictions of the lives of exemplars will often incorporate their experiences of and responses to suffering. It is easy to admire those who succeed in conditions of peace and plenty and to want to emulate the lives of the peacefully flourishing. Moreover, it is important for spiritual narratives to show that the lives of those who aspire to or attain spiritual goods do often afford serenity, calm, peace, and joy – something most vivid, perhaps, in Zhuangzi’s life, one evidently of cheerful detachment, amused irony, and immersed appreciation of music and nature.[[33]](#endnote-33) Otherwise, aspirants are hardly going to be motivated to aspire to those ways of life. A difficult issue for spiritual communities will therefore be to provide either sufficiently complex narratives that incorporate both ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ sides of an exemplars’ life, or a plurality of narratives, some ‘dark’ and some ‘bright’, or, perhaps, both. Similarly, there will be value in narratives that are simple and straightforwardly didactic, alongside others that broach more complex and existentially acute concerns. An exemplar needs not always be *suffering* to be exemplary, since smaller, more modest, less graphic words and deeds can be, too, such as Jesus’ ministrations to the vulnerable or the sermons of the Buddha.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The ideal may be for a plurality of narratives that acknowledge both the brighter and the darker sides of human life and document the ways that one’s experiences of and encounters of life can be restructured by spiritual commitment. Many Buddhist *sutras* attest to the radiance, calm, and wisdom of the Buddha during his travels and teachings, but much of the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta* depicts the adversities he suffered when aged and ill. We should therefore recognise different modes of admiration, some aimed at the serene peace of the exemplar, some aimed at their responses to adversities, rather than a generic category of admiration. Perhaps there is a mode of admiration of a different and perhaps deeper kind, activated when the exemplar’s life involves encounters with adversity and danger. This enhances not only our sense of their accomplishment, but also one’s sense of solidarity with them. Exemplars witness horrors, suffer trials, endure ‘dark nights of the soul’ – all of which aspirants, individually or collectively, experience, too. For their lives will also be subjected to the harms of life, so their admiration and emulation for the exemplar can be rooted in their coping with suffering. Faith despite fault, love in loss, serenity despite struggle – such accomplishments disclose the moral and spiritual complexity of spiritual exemplars and offers aspirants more, not less, to admire and emulate.

**5. Conclusions**

The study of living religion will naturally take as its focus living religious or spiritual persons and I have recommended an amended form of Zagzebski’s exemplarism as a framework. I retained the core idea that moral persuasion occurs through encounters with persons whose excellence inspires admiration and emulation. But spiritual exemplars are not a single category – there are different spiritual aspirations, manifested in different modes of exemplarity, admired and emulated in different ways. I then argued that a shared feature of these different traditions are prescriptions about the style and content that narratives whcih depictions of exemplars should have. If admiration and emulation are to be fully realised, those narratives should depict how exemplars experienced and responded to suffering. Such experiences convey the moral and psychological ardours of a spiritual life, thereby deepening our appreciation of what it means to live one.

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**Notes**

1. Examples of forms of a strong form of the belief model include Mawson, *Belief in God*, while a noted champion of a strong form of the practice model is Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*; Kasulis, *Shinto.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Spiritual Experience*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Anderson, *Re-visioning Gender in Philosophy of Religion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cooper, “Sense, Mystery, Practice.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Harrison, “Embodied Values in Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Burley, *Rebirth and the Stream of Life*; Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*; Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Virtue Theory*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Virtue Theory*, chs. 2 and 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Virtue Theory*, ch. 2, sections 5 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Daodejing*, ch. 19. Classic examples of *zhen ren* from *The Book of Zhuangzi* are Butcher Ting (ch. 3), the Bellstand Maker (ch. 17), and the Old Fisherman (ch.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the* Analects, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. On the ‘moral beauty’ of exemplars, see Kidd, “Beauty, Virtue, and Religious Exemplars.” A study of the aesthetics of exemplars in Buddhist traditions are Cooper, “Buddhism, Beauty, and Virtue” and Kidd, “Beautiful Bodhisattvas: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Exemplarity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Virtue Theory*, ch. 2, sections 5 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kidd, “Epistemic Injustice and Religion.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Wolf, “Moral Saints.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Zagzebski, in public debate, University of Genoa, 6 October 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Cooper, “Living with Mystery.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Kidd, “Exemplars, Ethics, and Illness Narratives.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Harrison, “Embodied Values and Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. O’Neill, “The Power of Example.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*; Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*; Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgement*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. The Buddha, *Sayings of the Buddha*, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Harrison, “Embodied Values and Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Stump, *Wandering in the Darkness*, 218. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cooper, *Convergence with Nature*, chs. 7-9. Møllgaard, *An Introduction to Daoist Thought*, ch.2, challenges such cheerful takes on Zhuangzi and on Daoism. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Kidd, “Adversity, Wisdom, and Exemplarism,” gives a fuller discussion of the relationship between experiences of adversity and the attainment of exemplarity. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)