

## Christina “the Astonishing” Meets the Tibetans Returning from the Beyond: A Case of Mutual Recognition?

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THE CASE OF CHRISTINA “MIRABILIS”—Christina “the Astonishing”—is, I am told, comparatively well known among students of Christian hagiography. If we can follow her Latin *Vita*, written around 1232 by the Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré in the medieval Low Countries, Christina of Saint-Trond (1150–1224) experienced what we would nowadays call a “near-death experience.” She revived just before burial. Christina described her experiences in the after-death state, and spent the rest of her life behaving bizarrely as a result. Her bizarre behavior, it is said, reflected a spiritual mission she had been given, one primarily of vicarious suffering. As I have said, Christina’s case is relatively well known among medievalists. What is not well known, on the other hand, are the parallels to her story in Tibet. And while Tibetologists know of her sisters, the *’das log*, I rather doubt that they have heard of poor, isolated, and lonely Christina. Let us therefore introduce them to each other.

### THE STRANGE CASE OF CHRISTINA “MIRABILIS”

Christina, the youngest of three orphans, liked to spend her time (we are told) in religious contemplation while ostensibly looking after the herds. Like many in the Middle Ages—and in Tibet—Christina died still young. The difference from most, however, was that she returned to life. During her requiem mass, the day after her death, while lying in her coffin in the church, she began to move. Then, to the astonishment and doubtless fear of all present she is said to have risen up “like a bird” to the rafters of the church, remaining there until the end of the now re-

dundant requiem mass. Kept there by the force of the Holy Sacrament, and induced to descend by the power of the priest, Christina is taken home and revived with food. Thomas de Cantimpré makes a great deal of her “aerial,” almost spiritual, still quasi-“disincarnate” nature after having returned from death, the Beyond. Not only does she rise up to high places, but he notes that some at the time suggested that perhaps this was connected with the fact that the “sensitivity [*subtilitas*] of her spirit was revolted by the smell of human bodies” (*horrebat enim, ut quidam autumant, subtilitas ejus spiritus, odorem corporum humanorum*).<sup>1</sup>

There is a precedent well known in the Middle Ages for someone dying and then coming back to life. This was Lazarus, brought back to life by Christ in one of His more impressive miracles (see John 11). The New Testament does not consider it an issue of interest what Lazarus actually experienced during the time he was dead, if anything at all. But later medieval literature did, and there exist works like the *Visio Lazari* describing, for example, the tortures Lazarus saw meted out to sinners in hell—soaking in icy water as a punishment for the sin of envy, for example.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of the didactic value of such descriptions narrative accounts of people dying, returning, and describing what they had seen were quite common in the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> They were useful as popular teaching devices. But what is rare is to find the case of an actual historical person, an ordinary person, a relatively poor young woman well known in the community, dying and coming back to life. That it occurred is presented by Thomas de Cantimpré as established fact. We thus need to distinguish between the use of the motif of dying and return for the purposes of religious teaching and the phenomenon of some historical figure actually (as it were) dying and returning, a historical figure who adopts eventually a teaching position within the local and sometimes the wider spiritual community. That, in medieval Europe, is most unusual. It happened to Christina “the Astonishing,” and it happens much more commonly—as we shall see—in Tibet.

When she could tell her story, what did Christina recall having seen during the time she was in “the Beyond”?<sup>4</sup> Angels—ministers of light, *ministri lucis*—took her soul to a “dark and terrible spot” (*locum quemdam tenebrosam et horridum*) where human souls were being horribly tortured. She saw there people she had known when they were still alive. But the place where they were being tortured was not hell. It was simply purgatory. The tortures purify the saved. The sinners (Christina is told) atone in that place for their sins, in order that even-

tually they can enter into the Beatific Vision of heaven.<sup>5</sup> Christina saw also hell, and again people she had known were there too. Then she was taken to *paradisum ad thronum divinae majestatis* (the throne of the Divine Majesty, in paradise). There the Lord (*dominum*) showed clearly that He was pleased with her. But, and here is the crux of the story, in the particular case of Christina He offered her a choice: She could remain there with Him forever, or return to her body and there undergo the sufferings of a soul in purgatory while still in her physical body, without her body being dramatically or disablingly harmed. In doing this, she would deliver through her vicarious sufferings the souls she had seen suffering in purgatory. She would also serve as an example to others, through her sufferings and her way of life, that might lead to their conversion. After this time on earth, returning to His presence at her eventual death, Christina would merit great rewards in heaven. This option Christina unhesitatingly accepts, and was led accordingly by the angels back into her body.

The account of her “going beyond” is by far the shortest part of the *Christina Vita*. Most of it is taken up with the astonishing things that happened afterwards, things that Thomas de Cantimpré accepts might well be doubted by many (and have been doubted by modern scholars). But Thomas is at pains to establish their historical credentials. Christina is considered by her contemporaries to be possessed by demons—that is, we might say she was considered mad.<sup>6</sup> She is chained and escapes, she lives in trees “after the manner of birds” (*avium more*), she starves herself, she climbs into ovens while they are alight and baking bread, and not surprisingly she cries out in great agony at the pain. Christina immerses herself in boiling water, jumps into freezing water, torments herself with gibbets and wheels used for torture and execution. In doing this (as Margot King points out in the notes to her translation), Christina is inflicting on herself precisely those tortures that the medieval world had come to believe happen in purgatory. And yet Christina also shows miraculous abilities of survival and of recovery. She was attacked by dogs and forced through thickets of thorns. Yet after washing her body there were no signs of injury. Her shinbone was broken, yet miraculously healed. And, particularly interestingly, while all this was going on “[h]er body was so sensitive and light that she walked on dizzy heights and, like a sparrow, hung suspended from the topmost branches of the loftiest trees.”<sup>7</sup>

Christina is considered by her fellows to be completely crazy. But eventually she convinces them that she is not crazy but rather saintly, touched by Christ. How she does this involves strange physiological occurrences that impressed medievals but would not impress us now. They need not detain us.<sup>8</sup> But having gained the status of a figure of religious significance and power in her local community, Christina devotes the rest of her public life to helping the dying—she described what the world Beyond Death is like, exhorting the dying to repentance—demonstrating a number of cases of prophecy and foretelling the future. She also acted as a spiritual advisor, exhorter, and goad to ordinary people, but also to figures like Count Louis of Looz, sharing also with Count Louis half of his purgatorial punishments after the latter had died.

Thus we are left with a woman, a medieval woman, gaining an important status in the local religious world as a result of her amazing and apparently saintly manifestations and activities. These experiences came to her through a deal she had made with “the Lord” at a time she had died and been resuscitated. I do not know of another case in the medieval world quite like this. But I do in Tibet.

#### THE 'DAS LOG

The Tibetan expression *'das log* (pronounced *day lok*, and sometimes written in Western sources as *delog* or *delok*) is formed from *log*, to reverse or return, and *'das*, to go beyond or transcend. Thus a *'das log*—properly a *'das log pa* (male) or a *'das log ma* (female)—is one who has returned from the Beyond, where “the Beyond” is death or the realm of death (the realm of the god or lord of death, the Indian god Yama). *'Das* is a term also used in Tibetan for the past time. Thus a *'das log* is one who, when their time has come (to die), has unnaturally reversed the process of time, returned from the past.<sup>9</sup>

The *'das log* is thereby a living miracle, one who has reversed the normal course of events, “touched by the gods” as it were and thereby set aside as special. In Tibetan Buddhism this is expressed in terms of the services they can render for the rest of humanity through bearing witness to the Buddhist conception of the postmortem punishments for wickedness and the results of virtue, but also through using their god-touched state in order, for example, to carry out divination and to counsel those in distress. Thus within the Tibetan world the *'das log*

is similar in some ways to another type of "holy person," the *sprul sku* (pronounced *trulku*), in this case a spiritually advanced practitioner who is thought capable of controlling his or her reincarnations and returning (it is hoped) for the benefit of his or her sorrowing flock (the Dalai Lama, for example). By far the overwhelming number of *sprul skus* are male, and they are often part of the prestigious and powerful Buddhist monastic hierarchy.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, by far the overwhelming number of *'das log* cases are of females, and these females frequently become village holy women. They have died, and prior to the disposal of the corpse (in the Tibetan world commonly through cremation or dismemberment) they have revived. These are thus women who have returned from the realm of death while remaining the person they were, or are, and not through the normal Buddhist method of reincarnation. In reincarnation—which happens to (nearly) all of us—it is thought that while the consciousness *continuum* is the same as the one who died (albeit a later stage of the continuum), reincarnation necessitates a *different person* from the one who died.<sup>11</sup>

The *'das log* has travelled to a realm usually inaccessible to the living, and they have returned. In returning a *'das log* brings beneficial messages for the living from friends and relatives who have preceded them into the realm of Yama. The messages are beneficial because they inform the living of the punishment for wickedness and the rewards for virtue. The *'das log* thus illustrates and bears witness to the Buddhist moral world in a form directly accessible to ordinary villagers. Yet while illustrating, indeed almost enforcing, the Buddhist vision, the *'das log* also expresses another phenomenon of the Central Asian world, that of the shaman. A shaman properly speaking is precisely a (usually village) specialist who seeks to benefit the community by going on a spiritual journey (normally in trance) and returning with helpful advice from the realm of gods or spirits. This is not the same phenomenon as that of possession (where the one possessed loses consciousness and is taken over by a god or spirit). Nevertheless in many cultures, including, for example, Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia, China, and Japan, possession also occurs again often as a specialty of women. In Tibet, on the other hand, possession too has been institutionalized (for example, in the State Oracle of Nechung, *gNas chung*) and frequently taken over by male monastics, monks.

The village shamanic element of the *'das log ma* has been highlighted by Françoise Pommaret, who has found in the case of some *'das log ma-s* in contemporary Bhutan that after achieving their *'das log* status they not only become village wise women but also repeat their *'das log* experiences at regular intervals, as might a shaman, bringing the villagers advice and help from the realm of the dead. Thus through becoming a *'das log* we find a model by which women can teach basic Buddhism to ordinary laypeople in a religiously noncontroversial manner, and also gain an established and respected status in the village and even in the wider Tibetan world as spiritual advisors. This is a status otherwise available to them only with considerable difficulty in Tibetan Buddhism; since the nun's ordination lineage has been lost, women are unable to become fully ordained Buddhist nuns. Women are thus unable to adopt what in institutional terms would be the most prestigious religious roles. Even if they could become fully ordained nuns, the formal religious status of a Buddhist nun would always be inferior to that of any monk.

The fact that it might be in the interest of a woman to return as a *'das log ma* from a "death" experience seems to be recognized by a *'das log* account summarized by Pommaret:

In that same year, she fell sick and thought she was dying. Her parents told her that if she wanted to come back from the netherworld, she could, as they would keep her body for fifteen days. After that, if she had not come back, they would cremate her.<sup>12</sup>

That she might also not be believed is recognized as well:

[T]he Lord of the Dead [Yama] . . . gave her a lengthy message for human beings, exhorting them to avoid bad actions and do virtuous deeds. He also forewarned her of the slanders she might encounter once she started telling her story but encouraged her not to pay any attention to them.<sup>13</sup>

The earliest cases found so far of the phenomenon of *'das log* in Tibet date from the twelfth century, interestingly the same century as Christina "Mirabilis." Pommaret points out that stories of ordinary people (as opposed to specific cases of eminent Buddhist monks) returning from the realm of death, in actual fact, invariably from hell, are not found in Indian Buddhism. They are common, however, in Chinese folk sources. Thus it is possible that these themes reach their Tibetan form through Chinese folk as well as Central Asian shamanic elements.<sup>14</sup> There could also nevertheless be influences from the

precedents in Indian Buddhism of didactic stories involving eminent Buddhist spiritual figures (such as Maudgalyāyana) entering the hells in order to save others. The existence of the *phenomenon* of even an ordinary person apparently dying, visiting the realms beyond death, and coming back to life with a mission to teach what has been seen for a moral purpose is moreover recognized in one of the great Mahayana scriptures, the *Bhaiṣajyaguru-sūtra*, the sutra of the Medicine Buddha. This sutra describes how through the power of the sutra someone can be brought back from the realms of death. They will describe what they saw in the Beyond, describe the judgments of Yama, and be morally reformed (and no doubt reform others) for the rest of their natural lives.<sup>15</sup> The existence of the phenomenon of near-death experiences, and their didactic significance, is here clearly realized and may well have been an important factor in the development of the *'das log* phenomenon in Tibet. But perhaps the most important of stories of visiting the dead from a Tibetan point of view is the Indian scripture the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. In this work the incarnation of compassion, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, enters the hells on a salvific mission. Avalokiteśvara is enormously important in Tibet, and Pommaret comments on how the *'das log* stories are associated with his cult and the recitation of his salvific mantra *oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* itself seems to be the source for this famous mantra.<sup>16</sup> The *'das logs* are popularly seen as Avalokiteśvara's “incarnation”<sup>17</sup> (more accurately, probably, his emanation), thus again associating the female *'das log mas* with a very high religious status (the Dalai Lamas are also popularly seen as the emanations of Avalokiteśvara).

The structure of a Tibetan *'das log* account is as follows:<sup>18</sup>

#### Prayer

1. Presentation of the delok [*'das log*]: name, parents' names, place of birth
2. Preamble to the journey to the netherworld  
Forewarning dream (optional; episode found only in some narratives)  
Sickness that leads to a quick and unexpected death
3. The delok becomes aware of his/her death  
Visualisation of an animal corpse (optional)

- Indifference of the family members (optional)  
Departure of the conscious principle from the body
4. First contact with the netherworld  
Entry of the conscious principle into the bardo [the intermediate state between death and rebirth]  
First encounter with the attendants of the Lord of the Dead  
Appearance of a mentor or guide (optional)  
Crossing of a large bridge (optional)
  5. Description of the netherworld  
First encounter with the Lord of the Dead (optional)  
Journey through the eighteen hells and the realm of the hungry ghosts, meeting with the damned, who explain the reasons why they are enduring such torments and who give messages for their families.  
Meeting a family member (optional)  
Scenes where the damned are freed by a *maṇi pa* [a “professional” reciter of the mantra *oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*] or a lama (optional)  
Journey into other realms of reincarnation (optional)
  6. Meeting with the Lord of the Dead  
Arrival before the Lord of the Dead  
The witnessing of several judgments  
Judgment of the delok and message of the Lord of the Dead for the living
  7. Return to earth  
Reentry of the conscious principle into the body  
Delivery of messages from the dead for their families, delivery of the message of the Lord of the Dead, and exhortation to practice religion.  
Colophon (optional)

Compare this with Thomas de Cantimpré’s hagiography of Christina “Mirabilis” (numbers correspond to the above structure of a *’das log* account).

1. There is no preceding prayer, although there is a prologue by the author justifying the hagiography. This reflects different cultural styles. On names and family, Christina’s account parallels the *’das log*



apart from the omission of interest in her parent’s names (although they were respectable [*honestis parentibus oriunda fuit*]).

2. For Christina there was no preceding dream. Pommaret notes however that at this point in the narrative the *’das log*’s previous religiosity is often mentioned, and this is exactly paralleled in the Christina hagiography, with some suggestion that it was her religious striving that led to her “death” experience.<sup>19</sup> There is no direct assertion that in Christina’s case her sickness led to “a quick and unexpected death,” but it is rather suggested.

3. All the *’das log* account §3 (“The delok becomes aware of his/her death,” etc.) is missing from the Christina. §3 directly reflects Tibetan ideas concerning what happens at death (taken probably from the *Bar do thos grol* literature, the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*). On the other hand the *Christina Vita* does give an astonishing account of the revival of her “corpse,” including her flying up to the rafters of the church (reflecting perhaps notions of the aerial nature of a soul that finds itself once more among coarse humanity). A Tibetan account includes a parallel astonishment of those who witness the revival, but lacks the element of (further) unnatural occurrence.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, as in the case of Christina the importance of feeding the *’das log* is noted after her experiences in a world where presumably food is not needed. Christina is in many ways incapable of adjusting to being back in a coarse body. This has no parallels in Tibetan accounts, perhaps due to the Tibetan lack of a clear doctrinal differentiation between existing as a spiritual soul and the embodied state (a differentiation that would be well known in the medieval Christian context from the Platonic tradition). But the Tibetan account also stresses the jealousy and doubt of some people and fervent faith of others:

Many women, full of faith, looked at me and cried. Some people were jealous and became angry. People who had good karma prostrated themselves in front of me and were circumambulating me. As for the sinners, they did not believe a word of what I was saying, and these demons said that I was not telling the truth. But all the people assembled around me begged me to relate to them what happens in the bardo.<sup>21</sup>

Actually, many Tibetans would claim to know already what happens in the *bar do*—the intermediate state between death and rebirth—from an extensive Tibetan literature and frequent teaching on the subject. To know what happens after death is thought to be important for

moral reasons, but also in the case of more advanced meditators in order to be able to manipulate the death process in the interests of spiritual development. But here is one who has actually *seen*, and lived to tell the tale. As I have suggested above, this is unnatural, and vests the 'das log ma with a "god-touched," or an empowered, status. The woman immediately becomes a teacher, a teacher not obviously threatening to religious hierarchy because she confirms orthodoxy.

4. In 'das log accounts the intermediate state between lives is depicted as a country. From there one goes to, for example, the hells, which are impermanent and considered in Buddhism not part of the intermediate state but realms of rebirth. Christina speaks just of purgatory, "a dark and terrible spot" (*locum quemdam tenebrosum et horridum*), hell, and paradise (*paradisum*). Neither of the latter is described. On the other hand, while the 'das log then meets with what are depicted as the frightening attendants of the god of death, Yama, Christina meets with angels of God (*angeli Dei*). The latter are described simply as "ministers of light" (*ministri lucis*) and are presumably not terrifying (or at least are not terrifying in the same way as Yama's attendants). This is important, because it shows that although there is a structural similarity here between the two accounts, the visions nevertheless are significantly different just as religious expectations are different. The angels act as Christina's guides (*ductores*). In the 'das log account, where a (singular) guide appears, it is described as a *yi dam* (the 'das log's tutelary deity) or a *dākinī* (a sort of female demigoddess familiar in tantric yoga). There is no mention in the Christina hagiography of crossing a large bridge, marking the border with the realm of death.

5. Pommaret notes that in 'das log accounts from the fifth stage onwards the sequence is not always the same and can vary depending on the narrative.<sup>22</sup> 'Das log accounts give detailed descriptions of the hells and their gruesome tortures, based on an elaborate Buddhist literature on the subject familiar in some degree to most Tibetans. Indeed, the descriptions of the hells might be thought to be the main narrative purpose of the 'das log accounts, and these accounts dwell in descriptive detail on the 'das log's travels around the "after-death world(s)." Descriptively, as a Tibetan Buddhist, the 'das log is quite at home there. Christina is much more coy: "The torments which I saw in that place [purgatory] were so many and so cruel that no tongue is adequate to tell of them."<sup>23</sup> Her immediate purpose in all of this appears *not* primarily to frighten people into good behavior, a point made clear by

the extensive subsequent descriptions of her altruistic self-tortures after her return to life, which appear to be the main interest of her hagiographer and absolutely lack parallel in 'das log accounts (see below). However, we should note that if those who saw her self-tortures realized that she was undergoing the punishments of purgatory while still in this life, Christina would *de facto* have given a particularly vivid impression of what it must be like to be there in purgatory—let alone to undergo the much worse tortures of hell. To that extent Christina would serve as a *living sermon*, embodying in her own flesh the need for repentance and the avoidance of sins. Moreover Christina (as in Dante's literary version) does indeed see in purgatory and hell people she had known when living. On the other hand she does not speak to them, and she is given no message by them for the living. In this, an absolutely central dimension of the 'das log accounts, fully described by them, is missing. The 'das log accounts involve those suffering in the hells exhorting the 'das log to ask their family members to engage in various acts in order to ameliorate the hell-sufferer's tortures. There is, however, a structural parallel in the Christina hagiography. There *Christina herself* is given not by those being tortured but by "the Lord" (to whom she does speak) the option of returning to life in order to undergo vicarious penances. In both case an acceptable religious reason is thus given for the astonishing return from death.

6. Christina does not, of course, meet Yama, the god of death. But she does meet "the Lord" (*Dominum*) at the "throne of Divine Majesty" (*ad thronum divinae majestatis*) in paradise, who seems to play something like the same structural role as Yama. Christina does not witness any judgments, although it can be taken that they do occur. This reflects the comparatively lesser interest of the Christina account with recompense for good and bad deeds—the so-called "law of *karman*"—which is the main teaching given by Buddhists to ordinary layfolk and is by far the most important dimension of the 'das log accounts. It is this that renders the 'das log religiously orthodox in Buddhist terms. Yama will often also tell the 'das log the reasons for her extraordinary forthcoming experience of return, both in terms of her own spiritual background in this and previous lives and also the purpose of the return.<sup>24</sup> Yama may also tell the 'das log's future. Here is an important shamanic element in the account. Contact with the gods in Tibetan and Central Asian religion is often a matter of finding out the future, and the best way to behave in the light of that. This provides a justification for the

subsequent regular repeated shamanic return of the *'das log ma* to the world of Yama in a sort of séance. Christina, on the other hand, is given a choice—to remain or to return in order to benefit others through penances on their behalf and also to serve as an example for the living.<sup>25</sup> The Lord does not, in Christina's account, give any message for the living. Perhaps there is no message to give. The living already have the Church and its teachings and need nothing more (see, for example, the story well known in the Middle Ages of Dives and Lazarus, Luke 16: 19–31). On the other hand we should note that once Christina's religious role becomes accepted in the community *she* sometimes tells the future. That is, she takes on a recognized role within Judeo-Christian theology, that of a prophet or prophetess.

7. This section of the *'das log* account, the return to earth, has been treated above. Both *'das log* accounts and the *Christina Vita* mention how quick the return to the body is, and the understandable shock of those who see the revival.

Like the *'das log*, Christina returns to the body “for the improvement of men” (that is, humanity: *ad correctionem hominum*). But apart from specifics relating to the differences between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism, the following elements of the *'das log* accounts are lacking in the Christina hagiography:

A. The *'das log* returns with specific messages for the living, often involving ritual acts they can undertake in order to help the family dead. Christina, on the other hand, has messages for the living—her own story and her own example—but for the dead it is *her own actions of penance on their behalf*, rather than actions by their relatives, that is of central importance. Relatives can repent, but it is Christina who acts directly for the dead.

B. The *'das log* messages and descriptions concentrate a great deal on what happens after death in terms of karmic recompense for good and more often bad deeds. We can take it that Christina's medieval hearers would have been quite familiar with literature, sermons, and paintings depicting the horrors of hell, the tribulations of purgatory, and the happiness of paradise. Christina does not need to elaborate.

C. The *'das log* bears witness to the truth of the teachings, and to their own contact with the Beyond, the Other. She thus gains a status in the community as a wise woman, an advisor in contact with the gods and brought into action sometimes through *repeated* shamanic visits to the Beyond. Like the oracle priest who is regularly possessed, the *'das*

*log* repeats the performance of contact with the Beyond. Christina too gains the status of a wise woman, but as a result of what has already happened to her and the power that she now exudes. She prays, she undertakes remarkable penances, but she does not need to repeat her trip to the beyond.<sup>26</sup>

Christina’s purposes and intentions are very different from those of the ‘*das log*. She seeks to undergo penances on behalf of the dead, and to convert others through her example. What is the theological basis for the former? Presumably Christ Himself, or the idea of the scapegoat. Either way, this serves to explain Christina’s astonishing and self-torturing behavior after her revival. The ‘*das log* does not engage in this sort of ascetic penance, since apart from anything else that is not the behavior expected of a village wise woman. In A–C above the ‘*das log* fully performs her function. Asceticism and bizarre behavior are well-known in Tibetan Buddhism among yogins, and bizarre behavior is found particularly among the holy “madmen” (*smyon pa*). These, in their bizarre activity, show that they are enlightened—beyond all duality—and while always compassionate they are thought to operate in ways that cannot be classified within ordinary unenlightened codes of behavior. Like Christina, it is thought they are still working for the benefit of others, but that is the only similarity between the two cases.

Thus I want to suggest that the Christina account marries two phenomena kept quite separate in the Tibetan world. The first of these two phenomena is the ‘*das log*, who returns from “death” in order to help others. This person is very often a female, and the phenomenon of the ‘*das log* provides such women with a potential spiritual status otherwise lacking in Tibetan Buddhism. The pattern is that of the shaman going on a shamanic journey, and this ‘*das log* pattern is seen quite remarkably mirrored in the *Vita* of Christina “the Astonishing.” And inasmuch as we know of many cases of this phenomenon in Tibetan and Bhutanese religious history—including modern cases<sup>27</sup>—with Thomas de Cantimpré we can take the actual historicity of Christina “*Mirabilis*,” and her status within the local community of Saint-Trond and beyond, at face value.

And secondly, we have the case of the “holy madman” (*smyon pa*; pronounced *nyön pa* or *myön pa*), the “fool for God’s sake,” who represents quite a different phenomenon in Tibet religion.<sup>28</sup> As far as I know the holy madman is invariably male, and the pattern is that of

the enlightened Indian tantric yogins. Within Tibetan Buddhism this is a fully Buddhist doctrinally “orthodox” model (although as such probably originating in India among Śaivite “Hindu” yogins).

And the reasons why Christina is engaging in this bizarre behavior—reasons of vicarious suffering for the souls tormented in purgatory, and reasons of standing before others for their conversion as an exemplar—are very different from those of the Tibetan *smyon pa*.<sup>29</sup> In marrying these different phenomena, the *'das log* account of Christina becomes a very different sort of account from those of the Tibetans. But there is no doubt that a Tibetan faced with Thomas de Cantimpré's *Vita* of Christina “Mirabilis” would have little difficulty in recognizing in at least the earlier part of it a version of a familiar *'das log* account. What our Tibetans would make of Christina's activity as a *smyon ma*, a holy madwoman, is anyone's guess.

#### A LAST POINT

I want to end with one last point for students reading this paper. I do not mean necessarily postgraduate students. This applies to undergraduates too. It has often been observed that the traditional and the pre-modern Tibetan world had a lot in common—in flavor as well as in detail—with the world of medieval Europe. Medieval studies in modern universities has been one of the great growth points of the last fifty years. What has not yet really been taken on board is the enormous significance this has for Tibetan and indeed Buddhist studies. In so many areas of what we study when we undertake Tibetan studies—I think here, for example, of the study of saint's hagiographies, or of the study of the relationships between the monastery and the secular power, or perhaps doctrinal studies of the use of reason in relationship to revelation—an enormous amount of methodological work and its application to specific cases has been done in medieval studies. Unfortunately those working in medieval studies and those working in Tibetan or in Buddhist studies do not often talk to each other. I am fortunate in being at a university where there is both a major interdisciplinary Centre for Medieval Studies and also our own much smaller-scale Centre for Buddhist Studies.

The medievalists are well ahead of us, but we can learn from their experience. I particularly want to draw your attention to the opportunity this provides for interesting comparative research topics, wheth-

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er for doctoral work or even for undergraduate dissertations. There is plenty of opportunity to say something interesting and original. The field is wide open for bringing together the study of the medieval religious world and the world of Tibet or the wider Buddhist world. No one, or almost no one, is currently doing it.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the *Christina Vita* are from *The Life of Christina the Astonishing* by Thomas de Cantimpré, trans. Margot H. King assisted by David Wiljer (Toronto: Peregrine Publications, 2000). This book also contains the Latin text.

2. See the excerpts cited by Margot King in the notes to her translation of the *Christina Vita*.

3. See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200–1350*, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*, vol. 3 (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 161. Perhaps there is some connection between this sort of didactic literature in the Middle Ages and the use of the dream most well known from *Piers Plowman*. We also see the same medieval didactic use of “going beyond” into the realm of death reaching its apogee in Dante, particularly in the *Inferno*.

4. King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 27ff.

5. The doctrine of purgatory was in the process of developing at this time and would be reinforced by the *Christina Vita* (no doubt one reason why the Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré was interested in the story). On the evolution—the “discovery”—of purgatory in the Middle Ages see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990).

6. Note, however, that medieval medicine was quite capable of distinguishing between being psychologically disturbed—that is, being mad—and being possessed by demons. The same is true of traditional Tibetan medicine. In recent scholarship Barbara Newman has given a new and sophisticated version of the “mad Christina” reading. See her “Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century,” *Speculum* 73 (1998): 733–770. Putting to one side the details of her interesting paper, which would seem to play on the conflation, at least outside medical authority, of demoniacs and madness, I still remain to be fully convinced by the suggestion that the case of Christina was simply one of madness. As we shall see, the Tibetan *’das log* cases show that near-death experiences can indeed lead to cases where women become religious teachers in their local communities. They are not thought by anyone to be mad, nor do they usually engage in unduly bizarre behavior. What makes Christina different from the *’das log* is Christina’s subsequent behavior. But once it is granted that Christina did indeed have some sort of near-death experience, and that her description of it (or her interpretation of it in tranquility) was made in all good faith—and the Tibetan cases provide justification for this reading—then Christina’s activities of vicarious suffering, that is, her bizarre behavior, can be explained on the



basis of perfectly rational conclusions derived from her understanding of the significance of her experience in "the Beyond." Such conclusions, based on her understanding of their theological context, may strike us as extreme but I would hesitate to call them "mad." Christina acted on her conclusions, but religious fervor again is not in itself a sign of madness nor of possession. That her contemporaries initially thought she was mad is irrelevant. They had not had Christina's experience, nor had they subjected it to her interpretation.

7. King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 38–39: *Corpus ejus tantae subtilitatis, et levitatis erat, ut in arduis et sublimibus ambularet, et instar passeris in subtilissimus arborum ramusculis dependeret.* McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 161 and 400 n. 34 argues that in all this Christina's body shows that it is not an ordinary body but a *resurrected* body. I am unconvinced. It seems to me that to any medieval listener or reader of the tale, Christina's body would be thought to be akin to that of Lazarus rather than that of Christ after His resurrection. Lazarus's body was a *resuscitated* body, not a resurrected body. The Church has never seen the theological status of Lazarus, or his body, after his resuscitation as the same as that of Christ after the resurrection. And according to St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15), at the resurrection of the body we shall all have resurrected bodies, like that of Christ. They will not be resuscitated bodies like that of Lazarus. Thus it seems to me there is only confusion in assimilating Christina's body to a resurrected body, and thence to the sort of body that we shall all have (it is alleged) after the resurrection of the body at the Second Coming. Christina's own attitude to her resuscitated body is ambivalent. On the one hand she appears to loathe it, rather on the model of a Christian tradition of dualism that can be traced back at least as far as Plato. But on the other hand she recognizes, in accordance with an Aristotelian understanding that eventually reaches its fullness in St. Thomas Aquinas, that the body is essential to the soul as the soul is to the body. Both will be forever united at the resurrection of the body. See King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 75–77. Perhaps we see here Thomas de Cantimpré, the early Dominican, concerned acutely at that time with the campaign against the Cathars who were characterized by their extreme dislike of the physical body. "They assert," said the Dominican Inquisitor Bernard Gui, writing in the early fourteenth century, "that the creation of everything visible and corporeal was wrought, not by God the Heavenly Father, whom they term the beneficent God, but by the devil, or Satan, the wicked God. . . . Also they deny the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ through Mary, ever virgin, declaring that He did not have a true human body or true human flesh such as other men have because of their human substance. . . . Also, they deny that there will be a resurrection of human bodies, imagining in its stead certain spiritual bodies and a sort of inner man" (Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, trans., *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* [New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1991], 379–380). The need to counter Cathar world-negation, that as we can see in its extreme form

portrays the world itself as the creation of Satan not of God, no doubt also reinforced Aquinas's enthusiasm for Aristotle (in spite of the many Platonic elements that Aquinas also was happy to adopt). See also note 18 below.

8. Christina exudes strange healing oil from her body (King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 42–43). This sign of sanctity was well known in the Middle Ages, and goes back at least as far as the eighth century (Walburga, d. 779). There is even given a name associated with it—these “saints” are *myroblytes*. Earlier, Christina had managed to feed herself when starving from her own “virginal breasts” (*ibid.*, 30–31). On all of this see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987).

9. To date very little scholarly work has been done on the *'das log* phenomenon in the Tibetan world (which includes, for example, Bhutan). By far the most academically respectable studies are those by Françoise Pommaret: *Les 'Revenants de l'au-delà' dans le monde Tibétain* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1989); “Les Revenants de l'au-delà (*'das log*) dans le monde Tibétain: sources littéraires et tradition vivante,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989* (Narita: Narita Shinshoji, 1992), 673–686; and “Returning from Hell,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 499–510. See also Lawrence Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the *'Das log*,” *Tibetan Journal* 7, no. 4 (1982): 20–85. On the more popular level, an account of a modern *'das log* is contained in Dawa Drolma Delog, *Delog: Journey to Realms beyond Death* (Junction Hill, CA: Padma Publishing, 1995).

10. On the *sprul skus* in general, and the Dalai Lama in particular, see Paul Williams, *Songs of Love, Poems of Sadness: The Erotic Verse of the Sixth Dalai Lama* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 2–23.

11. On the relationship of the dying person to the reincarnated person in Buddhism see, for example, Paul Williams, *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), chaps. 2 and 5.

12. Pommaret, “Returning from Hell,” 508.

13. *Ibid.*, 509–510.

14. Christina “*Mirabilis*” lived during the years 1150–1224. It would be nice to be able to suggest a possible Central Asian influence on the hagiography of Christina through perhaps the Mongols via Mongol contact with Islam. But alas the chronology makes this unlikely in the extreme. Kiev fell to the Mongols in the winter of 1240, to be followed by Hungary and Poland. Baghdad fell in 1258. I am unfamiliar with the Chinese cases. I would be surprised if the distinction I have made above between didactic stories and actual documented historical cases could not be applied there too.

15. See the translation of this sutra in R. Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha* (London, Melbourne, Sidney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Rider, 1979), 165. See also the discussion in Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 247–251. The sutra is significantly earlier than the earliest recording of a Tibetan *’das log*, or Christina. If this phenomenon is common in China, the existence of it so prominently in the *Bhaiṣajyaguru-sūtra* may support the hypothesis of the Central Asian or Chinese origins of this sutra. The close structural similarities of visiting the realms of the Dead and then returning with the shamanic journey might also support a Central Asian element in origins of the sutra.

16. On this sutra, and the Indian history of the mantra, see H. Alex Studholme, *On the Early History of the Om Manipadme Hūm Mantra: A Study of the Kārandavyūha Sūtra* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), originally written as a University of Bristol Ph.D. thesis.

17. Pommaret, “Returning from Hell,” 500, 502.

18. Taken verbatim from *ibid.*, 502.

19. *Ibid.*, 503; King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 24–27.

20. Pommaret, “Returning from Hell,” 507–508.

21. *Ibid.*, 508.

22. *Ibid.*, 504.

23. King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 26–27: *Tormenta, quae in ipso loco videbam, tanta et tam crudelia errant, ut nulla lingua haec loqui sufficerat.*

24. See Pommaret, “Returning from Hell,” 506–507.

25. Perhaps the idea of choosing to return may owe something here to the treatment of reincarnation in the myth of Er at the end of Plato’s *Republic*?

26. Note that at the very end of the *Vita* (King, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 80–83), on her deathbed, Christina does indeed to all intents and purposes die, and then returns briefly to give a final blessing to all assembled around her before finally heading for the paradise she had so arduously earned. The point here, however, is to emphasize Christina’s quite remarkable sanctity rather than to reinforce her claim to continue to minister to the needs of the local community through repeating her near-death experience.

27. For photographs of Bhutanese cases see Pommaret, *Revenants*.

28. On Christina as a “holy fool” see Margot H. King, “The Sacramental Witness of Christina Mirabilis: The Mystic Growth of a Fool for Christ’s Sake,” in *Peace Weavers*, ed. Sister Lillian Thomas Shank and John Nichols (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 145–164. There remains a question as to whether Christina herself can be accurately portrayed in such a way, particular-

ly with her assimilation into the confusing category of a “mystic.” But for Tibetans if she were not to be seen as simply mad—and as a *'das log ma* she could not be—it seems to me that in terms of the phenomenology of Tibetan religions it is to a “holy madwoman,” a *smyon ma*, that Christina’s bizarre behavior would be assimilated.

29. Indeed one might see the way in which Christina underlines so dramatically Catholic orthodoxy in regard to morality, life after death, and the sheer physicality of it all—the use of the body in order to teach and benefit others—an expression of Thomas’s Dominican concern to counter the definitely unorthodox and body-despising teachings of the Cathars. Perhaps this is what really explains the apparently incidental similarity of the Christina story with the shamanic *'das log*. Christina has gone beyond to a state associated with bodilessness. But she unhesitatingly returns to the embodied state, where through her very bodily tortures she can benefit others, including those who are disembodied in purgatory. The structure is one of body to disembodied, and then the return—the necessary and beneficial return, approved by the Lord (who is no body-hating Cathar *perfect!*)—to embodiment. There can be no doubt that the combating of Cathars was far and away the overriding interest of the Dominicans in their first hundred years or so, and it provided the context and reason for the origins of the Dominican order. On the Cathars see M. D. Lambert, *The Cathars* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); and M. Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). On the history of the Dominicans see William A. Hinnebusch, *The Dominicans: A Short History* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1985); and for particular details on Dominic see Vladimir Koudelka, *Dominic*, trans. and ed. Simon Tugwell (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997). That this structure is paralleled in the case of the *'das log* is not due in the latter case to any overriding need to make a point about the importance of embodiment. Rather the *'das log* is a shaman in the proper shamanic model. The *'das log* goes on a journey, and where better to go if one wishes to gain useful information for the spiritual as well as the material (divinatory) welfare of the local community than to the realm of the dead? Traveling to the realm of the dead was of course sanctioned by Buddhist doctrinal orthodoxy both in well-known Buddhist stories and also in the sutras.