

CHAPTER 11

Comparative Religion: Academic, Pedagogical, and Social Practices

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This chapter will engage, in unequal measure, three interrelated venues in which religions have been and continue to be compared. First, in academic research contexts, scholars have long argued for and against the virtues of comparing religions, which is characterized variously as rewarding or reifying, edifying or essentialist, unfair or simply inevitable. With enthusiastic comparativists finally making a strong comeback against long-prevailing detractors, arguments for both sides are worthy of consideration. Second, in pedagogical contexts, say, college textbooks and courses, comparing religions is less contested but even more frequent. And third, in broader societal contexts, at least as important though far too little discussed is the comparison of religions as a strategic social practice, undertaken perhaps most notably by adherents of a faith tradition who desire to demonstrate the superiority of their tradition over others.

COMPARING RELIGIONS AS AN ACADEMIC PRACTICE: MANY VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Not infrequently one encounters admonitions that rigorous and responsible scholars of religion ought to avoid comparison entirely in favor of examining specific persons, events, or ideas on their own terms. But more often—and much more persuasively—we are reminded that comparison is an inescapable feature of human thought. The very notion that religion is a cross-culturally applicable category emerges via comparison. As scholars of religion, our choices are, then, between one mode of comparison versus another mode or, more properly, between self-consciousness about our means of comparison versus more implicit and less cautiously examined reliance on comparison. But no serious study of religion proceeds without some form of comparison.

Acknowledgments of the inevitably comparative nature of the enterprise, whether accepted with resignation or enthusiasm, have, however, by no means led to consensus about how scholars ought to proceed. Indeed, it is intriguing that such a seemingly benign scholarly activity as comparing religions continues to generate such vigorous controversy and disagreement. By the 1990s, the interwoven threads of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism had made cross-cultural comparison triply unfashionable; then-prevailing views dismissed comparison variously as naive, impossible, inappropriate, or, in

the views of some, ethically irresponsible. At that point, it may have seemed that comparative religion had joined other antiquated methods in the dustbin of religious studies. More recently, however, one encounters abundant efforts to rehabilitate comparison and to rediscover the magic that still dwells in comparative religion. If announcements of the death of comparative religion have proven premature, celebrations of its rebirth are also somewhat hasty; but there is no question that enthusiasm for explicitly comparative approaches to the study of religion(s) is once again on the rise.

While spirited loyalties and discontents with comparison are invariably predicated on preferences for and antagonisms against some distinct variations of what is actually a plethora of different methodological procedures, the present discussion aims for a more nonpartisan and inclusive view; it provides a kind of mapping of alternatives, an inventory or comparison of comparative religions, if you will. Avoiding the oft-recited sort of genealogical discussion that locates the purported origins of this academic method in late-nineteenth-century Europe, we do nonetheless find a useful starting point in the British father of anthropology, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), among the earliest and most prominent practitioners of what was imperiously termed “*the comparative method*.” In his master work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor advocated for a version of comparative religion that was conceived as (a) a search for similarities (b) among historically unrelated cases (c) in the interest of arriving at generalized theories or principles about (d) the origins, essence, and evolution of religion. Each of the four deceptively simple phrases in that dated formulation directs attention to an important and still-debated topic with respect to comparative religion as an academic practice. And thus, relying on Tylor as a seminal benchmark, consider in turn four of the deepest fault lines that separate older approaches to comparative religion from newer ones.

ACCENTUATING SIMILARITIES VERSUS DIFFERENCES: COMMONALITIES AND CONTRASTS

First, while the obvious point that effective comparison entails acknowledgments of both similarities and differences will resurface throughout this discussion, Tylor provides a paramount exemplar of the sort of comparative undertaking that was, in very large part, a search after similarities. Contending, and then hoping to demonstrate, that humans in all contexts operate with the same sort of rational mental faculties, Tylor devoted himself to pointing out similarities among the ideas and practices of otherwise unrelated groups; and thus he, for example, assembled a host of different terms that, irrespective of the vastly different indigenous contexts from which they emerged, all, in his view, expressed essentially commensurate concepts of soul or spirit. For him, deep differences in the respective ecologies, lifestyles, and languages of native Samoans, Brazilians, Africans, and Australians were not nearly so noteworthy as the seeming similarities in their ways of thinking.

A host of major twentieth-century comparativists—including, among many, French anthropologist Emile Durkheim (1857–1917), historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), and structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)—likewise embraced some version of the essential sameness of humans in all contexts, and thus also undertook the sorts of comparative projects that were concerned primarily to foreground commonalities among the beliefs and practices of various populations. Predictably, then, among the most oft-cited criticisms of explicitly comparative studies of religion has been this one-sided preoccupation with similarities, without equal attention and respect to the differences.

Accusations that comparison plucks or wrenches examples out of context, thereby suppressing or disrespecting cultural differences, are frequent in the extreme. Beginning in the 1970s, historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith makes among the most sustained arguments for a continued embrace of explicitly and aggressive comparative studies of religions—but nonetheless insists that it is the recognition of difference, not supposed similarities, that is always more instructive for students of religion. Among countless recent examples to follow that lead, Chicana feminist scholar María Eugenia Cotera undertakes a comparative study of Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jovita González that accentuates the “similar yet distinct strategies of engagement with neocolonial forms of meaning making” undertaken by each of those women. She thereby exemplifies a growing number of scholars for whom comparison remains an exceptionally valuable tool—but in the service of accentuating differences rather than similarities.

Accordingly, one way of parsing the plethora of approaches to comparative religion is to acknowledge two plausible alternatives. The first set, like Tylor, argues or presumes, for better or worse, that the differences among the comparates (i.e., the specific cases being compared) are superficial, while it is the less obvious similarities that are most deserving of our attention; and there are, as we’ll see, numerous reasons why preoccupations with sameness among religious ideas and practices remain highly appealing in some quarters. By contrast, the alternate and much more currently vogue set of comparative procedures, like Cotera’s, argues that the undeniable similarities among persons and religions are superficial insofar as it is the differences—the local, unique, idiosyncratic, and contingent—among specific individuals and communities that are most revealing, rewarding, and worthy of respect. Though the recognition of difference seems, at present, to have won the day, both quests after commonalities and contrasts, different as those undertakings are, remain very much in play among contemporary students of religion.

SYNCHRONIC (NONHISTORICAL) VERSUS DIACHRONIC (HISTORICAL) COMPARISON

Second, Tylor’s version of the so-termed comparative method, again based on the proposition of the essential homogeneity of the human race, endorses, in principle, the comparison of historically unrelated cases from as many different historical and geographical contexts as possible. This is, in other words, a kind of synchronic or nonhistorical comparison wherein the absence of significant historical connections among the comparates is considered an asset rather than a liability.

Another way to organize the universe of comparative methods is, then, to differentiate between those approaches that are diachronic insofar as they demand attention to the historical connections between the comparates versus those versions of comparison, like Tylor’s, that are synchronic or nonhistorical insofar as they allow the pairing of cases on the basis of structural or formal parallels. The diachronic option usually involves tracking changes over time, and may entail, for instance, chronicling the similarities and differences that arise in connection with cultural borrowings between groups, ethnic migrations, or sectarian splits among different religious communities. These explicitly historical versions of comparison are, methodologically speaking, largely noncontroversial, and often not even acknowledged as comparative religion, which they certainly are.

By contrast, synchronic comparison, particularly of the widely cross-cultural sort, has been a lightning rod for criticism and derision; this is the version of comparative religion most often identified with the term. Arguably the premier instance of this alternative,

Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) hazards the sort of "morphological comparison" wherein a topic such as the symbolism of the sky, "sacred stones," or "cosmic trees" is illustrated via succinct examples from widely divergent, historically unrelated groups. Thus, for example, references to Iroquois, Maoris, Hindus, and Australian Aborigines are all enlisted in rapid succession to demonstrate a cross-culturally relevant pattern that becomes apparent only via the consideration of many discrete cases. Though this is the mode of comparison that has received the harshest assessments in recent years, Gregory Alles's *The Iliad, the Ramayana, and the Work of Religion* (1994), which pairs two foundational but historically unrelated narratives as a means of reaching broader methodological and historical conclusions, provides a more current demonstration of the continuing viability of synchronic comparison.

The outcomes of synchronic comparison are, then, as a rule, insights not available via the consideration of any single historical case; and, in that sense, those results involve generalized abstractions that may, as in Eliade's controversial case, strike some audiences as highly rewarding and illuminating. Yet, at the same time, those broadly applicable observations strike more skeptical audiences as speculative, idiosyncratic, perhaps provocative but unfounded. Synchronic comparison, in other words, risks a measure of historical certainty in favor of more venturesome and, to some, more satisfying findings—a trade-off that, in large part, accounts for its very mixed reception.

Simply note for the moment, though, that diachronic and synchronic versions of comparison constitute two quite disparate sets of alternatives, highly diverse among themselves, which tend to operate with decidedly different presuppositions and to arrive at very different sorts of results. Both are, nonetheless, plausible academic initiatives that have deep roots and present-day proponents.

GENERAL VERSUS PARTICULARISTIC COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS: UNIVERSALITY AND SPECIFICITY

Arguably, then, mixed assessments as to the merits of cross-cultural studies of religion most often entail disagreements concerning the status of the conclusions at which one arrives via synchronic, nonhistorical comparisons. Just what sort of insights and rewards can one expect from cross-cultural comparison? When, for instance, E. B. Tylor suggests that the most valuable outcome of his comparative activity is adducing a set of universally applicable "laws of intellectual movement," he directs attention to a third of the most vigorously disputed aspects of comparative religion—whether the end products of comparing ought to be generalized abstractions or more concrete and specific observations.

Tylor, in other words, instantiates what continues to strike many as the most obvious trajectory of comparative religion wherein a researcher inventories many specific cases (i.e., beliefs about death among Australians, American Indians, Hindus, and Greeks) in the interest of arriving at more generalized propositions or theories, in his case, "laws" that purportedly explain the origins of religion, the evolution of culture, and "the course of mental history" (1920). Durkheim's consideration of specific cases as a means of ascertaining the sociological roots of "religion in general," and Eliade's surveys of particular cases and contexts in order to arrive at more generalized "patterns," which "clear the ground for the final discussion on the essence of religion," likewise exemplify the widespread assumption that transcultural insights about religion are satisfying in ways that specific cases are not (1967).

Obvious as this movement from specific examples to general conclusions seems to be, it is not characteristic of all widely cross-cultural comparative projects. German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), for instance, provides among the earliest and most methodologically astute demonstrations that cross-tradition comparison need not result in generalized theories or universalized propositions. Alternatively, his extensive comparisons of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism rely on mental constructs, which he terms *ideal-types*, as a means of leading him to conclusions concerning particular historical complexes rather than generalized or universal laws, about which he himself is highly skeptical. For Weber, it is a more nuanced understanding of the concrete cases, not abstract theories, that provides the greatest payoff of cross-cultural comparison. And likewise cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), both a comparativist and a strong critic of comparison, demonstrates the prospect that comparing, for instance, Islam in Morocco and Indonesia can eventuate not simply in generalized understandings of Islam or religion, but rather in more satisfyingly thick descriptions and enhanced appreciations of the particularities of Muslim practices in each of those two contexts.

In sum, then, a third fault line is that which separates approaches like those of Tylor, Durkheim, and Eliade, which regard as the end takeaway of their comparative efforts universalistic propositions about the nature of religion in general, versus those approaches that, like Weber and Geertz, rely on cross-cultural comparison primarily in the interest of deepening one's understanding of particular historical cases. While generalizing approaches to comparative religion dominated most of the twentieth century, more particularistic modes, which answer the call for greater attentiveness to cultural differences, are far more consistent with the present critical climate of religious studies.

DESCRIPTIVE VERSUS NORMATIVE COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS: NEUTRALITY AND EVALUATION

Fourth, when Tylor describes his approach as a science of culture, and thus claims that his widely comparative studies have led him to a set of objective, evidence-based conclusions concerning the origins and evolution of religion, he opens another major debate—whether the outcomes of comparative religion are actually neutral or if instead they are evaluative, judgmental, and perhaps even hurtful to the communities they purport to describe. Tylor is particularly instructive in this regard because his claims to nonjudgmental neutrality are so obviously insupportable. Indeed, his evolutionary scheme—wherein indigenous and other non-European peoples are positioned in the lower stages of savagery and barbarism, while Europe is celebrated as the pinnacle of human progress—is among the easiest targets for those who complain that the surmises of widely cross-cultural comparisons, specifically those undertaken by Western scholars, are habitually affirming of Eurocentric religio-cultural investments and are dismissive of non-Western communities and religions.

Nonetheless, that controversy points to one more way to parse the universe of approaches to comparative religion. There are, on the one hand, those approaches that steadfastly maintain their evenhanded neutrality. Most world religions textbooks, for instance, argue for their credibility and suitability in secular university classes on the basis of a disciplined avoidance of judgment and a claim to be treating all religions in equal and parallel ways. Alternatively, many versions of comparative religion have and do proceed with openly normative and evaluative agendas. While some stress the differences among religions as a means of arguing for the unique superiority of some particular tradition, others, like the many editions of Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* (originally 1958), present the major

faith traditions in ways that explicitly make a case for the essential unity, and thus cordial coexistence, of all religions. Where Tylor's work was covertly and insidiously judgmental, these are deliberately and avowedly normative versions of comparative religion.

Likewise in the realm of normative comparison, scholars who have recognized how effectively and often cross-cultural comparisons like Tylor's have worked in the service of colonialism and empire building, have themselves capitalized on that instrumentality to explore ways in which such comparisons might also serve as a compelling counter-hegemonic strategy. Intellectual historian and postcolonial scholar Kris Manjapra, for instance, underscores this status-quo-challenging potential by noting that, while the colonialist entanglements of comparative religion are by now well documented, "subordinated elites" have also relied on comparativism as "the main intellectual weapon to undermine the nineteenth-century universalism anchored by British world power" (2011). He demonstrates, in other words, that while cross-cultural comparison is prone to tendentious evaluations and distortions, those biases are not, of necessity, irredeemably Eurocentric or Christian.

On this fourth fault line, then, while there are many works, textbooks especially, that continue to present comparative religion as a means of neutral classificatory completeness, there is a growing number of scholars who are forthright in utilizing cross-cultural comparison to advance some more normative, prescriptive, or corrective agenda. Students ought, nonetheless, to be especially on guard for those exercises of comparative religion that, like Tylor's and so many others, present themselves as part of the former group but actually belong to the latter.

At any rate, in sum with respect to this first of three arenas for the practice of comparative religion, when critically assessing comparative research, students are well advised to raise four questions: (a) Is the comparison undertaken more in the interest of ascertaining similarities or differences? (b) Are the comparates under consideration historically and geographically unrelated (as in synchronic comparison), or is there a requirement that they be historically related (as in diachronic comparison)? (c) Are the outcomes of the comparison generalized abstractions or particularistic observations? (d) Is the comparison ostensibly neutral, or does it entail normative evaluations or recommendations? If all of the many variations on the theme are, in principle, viable, they do pose very different risk and rewards.

COMPARING RELIGIONS AS A PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE: TEXTBOOKS AND CLASSROOMS

While academic research grounded in comparative methods has been hotly debated in recent decades, college classes and textbooks—explicitly pedagogical contexts—provide a second venue in which so-termed comparative religion has flourished, usually in considerably less contested ways. If expectations for scholarly rigor in classroom comparisons may seem to be somewhat less demanding than in research contexts, Jeffrey Kripal, author of an innovative teaching text entitled *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (2014), makes a persuasive case that the stakes are, in other respects, actually much higher among beginning students than seasoned scholars. Especially for students, he maintains, "there are real costs and risks involved in comparing religions."

An iconoclastic and progressive challenge to the surfeit of mainstream introductions to comparative religion, Kripal's book shifts attention from the customary focus on the content of various religious traditions onto scrutiny of just what is at issue in the comparative method itself. Moreover, by configuring the book as a kind of guide through a "tripartite initiatory process," success in comparing religions is assessed not by the viability of conclusions concerning the religions themselves, but rather by the transformative impact that the practice of comparing religions has on students. Rather than the lightweight elective course that it is often presumed to be, Kripal counters that "the critical study of religion is the most relevant, the most exciting and dangerous . . . and the most radical intellectual study presently pursued in colleges and universities of the modern world." In his view, the comparison of religions is uniquely, invariably—and productively—disconcerting and disruptive of students' taken-for-granted assumptions about religion, themselves, and the world; and thus, in an apt phrase borrowed from scholar of early Christianity Margaret Mitchell, "scholars of religion play with fire for a living."

The novelty and appeal of Kripal's proposal notwithstanding, even he acknowledges more conventional courses on comparative religion "can serve all sorts of important remedial purposes." For present purposes, I note in staccato just four variations on the theme, each of which reaffirms that so-termed comparative religion is a constellation of approaches rather than a unified method, and all of which could, in principle, be undertaken in the same course.

COMPARING ONE RELIGIOUS TRADITION TO ANOTHER

Assuredly the most timeworn version of a course on comparative religion—supported by world religions textbooks that devote respective chapters to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.—is that which undertakes the consideration of similarities and differences among a succession of religious traditions. With respect to the four tensions we've identified, courses and textbooks of this sort, which are committed to treating all of the traditions in parallel ways, are, first, far more predisposed to elicit recognitions of similarity than difference. Second, these classes and texts favor synchronic over diachronic comparisons insofar as the different religions are treated as largely closed, internally logical systems with, however, much less attention to the historical interactivity or conflict among those systems. Third, arranging all of the world religions according to the same template, like lining up different makes and models of automobiles in a neat row, tends to encourage universalistic rather than particularistic conclusions; in fact, recognitions of similarity often extend to troubling assertions that all religions are, at their respective cores, essentially the same. And with respect to the fourth tension, tradition-specific courses usually maintain their rightful place within lay institutions by endeavoring to teach about and compare various religious traditions without passing judgment on any of them; they repeat a call to "respect diversity" that is exceptionally familiar to current college students.

Highly conventional comparative religion courses of this sort—perhaps precisely because they accomplish very little of the existential disruption to which Kripal aspires—have the noncontroversial dependability that has made them standard features of undergraduate curricula for the past forty years. Such courses do ample and important work in familiarizing unfamiliar traditions so that Christian students, for instance, learn that Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists also have coherent stories of creation, conceptions of human nature and divinity, rituals, and sound guidance for daily life. Thus, while such courses might engender an appreciation of differences and conflicts among traditions, they

more frequently promote the comforting view of a global human community in which adherents to all religions have come to essentially the same set of ethical principles about honesty and fairness, generic principles to which students probably adhered before the class began. Instead of “playing with fire,” to learn again that “we are all basically alike, and thus all deserving of respect” proves quite reassuring.

But it is the recognition of difference—a kind of defamiliarizing wherein students are confronted with peculiarity and non-universality of their own religious perspectives—that precipitates the sort of destabilization that sets in motion the initiatory-like encounter with comparative religion that Kripal’s book choreographs. Strong emphases on universalized similarities, which assuredly do exist, allow students to feel good about themselves, thereby entailing fewer risks but also much more modest rewards.

COMPARING VARIOUS COMMUNITIES WITHIN A SINGLE RELIGIOUS TRADITION

While comparing one religious tradition to another persists as the old standby, nearly all the same textbooks also make some inroads toward the comparison of communities within large traditions. Intra-tradition comparisons of this sort benefit by an analogy wherein a large tradition such as Judaism is conceived to be like a big city such as Chicago, while various communities within that tradition (i.e., Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, and Conservative Judaism) are imagined as some of the exceptionally different sorts of neighborhoods that one encounters in Chicago. And while, in lots of respects, these intra-tradition comparisons resemble comparisons across traditions, they do present at least three distinct pedagogical advantages.

First, where cross-tradition comparison usually privileges similarities, the exploration of subdivisions within a larger faith tradition guarantees an appreciation of differences, usually among more than two communities. In fact, the analogy to Chicago’s drastically different neighborhoods provides a means of impressing on students just how disparate, for instance, Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Jews are; though all are participants in the larger city of Judaism, these communities constitute profoundly different interpretations of the same sacred story. Second, where world religions textbooks tend to create the impression that large traditions like Judaism and Islam are discrete and largely unified systems, intra-tradition comparisons are useful in disrupting the false impression of homogeneity, which is of course not the case for any large tradition. Such comparisons thereby force students to see each world religion, suitably enough, not as a unified outlook but as a plurality of related religious perspectives.

And third, particularly those intra-tradition comparisons that require students to consider other communities in the religious tradition to which they themselves belong can engender a healthy modesty by rattling the nonreflective confidence that one’s own interpretation of the faith is the correct and normal standard by which other interpretations must be judged. For instance, challenging suburban American Protestants to see Latin American Liberation Theology Catholics as an equally viable, but profoundly different, way of being Christian can definitely prove to be disorienting in pedagogically productive ways.

COMPARING SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA AND GENERAL THEORIES OF RELIGION

Fewer introductory textbooks and courses do an explicit and thoroughgoing job of a third version of comparative religion that entails interpreting one religious tradition or

phenomena from a variety of different theoretical perspectives. Instead, world religion texts and classes usually begin with the presentation of one way of conceptualizing religion, which is then brought to bear on many different religious traditions and phenomena. Moreover, while the phenomenological approaches that dominated the academic study of religion from the 1960s through the 1980s—most notably, the approach favored by Mircea Eliade—eventually came under serious attack, they have remained the prevailing theoretical orientation among textbooks. As a version of the hermeneutics of retrieval, this empathetic perspective operates with an assumption, after the fashion of Eliade, that different religions are, by and large, alternative—and healthy—human responses to the Sacred that bring meaning and direction to people's lives.

Commendable as that generously open-minded approach is, it gains pedagogical force when instead of being presented as *the* preferred method of comparative religion, it is complemented by other approaches that are more in the spirit of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Of several high-profile alternatives, the approach to religion of Karl Marx (1818–1883), because it entails such an acute contrast to phenomenological empathy, continues to provide a particularly apt alternate point of departure. From that theoretical frame, students are encouraged to adopt the more skeptical working assumption that different religions are humanly constructed modes of ideology that serve to reinforce the privilege of elite constituencies at the expense of less wealthy and powerful groups. Instead of tolerance and respect for diversity, here the focus is on the responsible avoidance of ideological manipulation and pulling back the veil on religion, as it were.

Where most students anticipate that a comparative religions course will require them to adopt an attitude of empathetic openness, they may be more surprised by requirements to also be skeptical about religion. For example, it is important for students to appreciate not only how Shariah law (which Muslims describe as divinely given and perfect in all its details) provides a perfect exemplification of Eliade's notion of the sanctified life but also how the Shariah is, from a Marxist frame, a quintessential exemplification of the sort of ideology that affords lower classes and women a measure of relief from alienation while ultimately serving to perpetuate the hierarchical status quo. More important than endorsing one interpretation over the other is learning how to shift back and forth between very different theoretical frames, an exercise that should help students to see theories of religions as heuristic tools rather than definitive answers about the true nature of religion.

COMPARING IDEALIZED AND LIVED EXPRESSIONS OF RELIGION

A fourth alternative mode of comparative religion—one that compares the idealized textbook conceptions of religious traditions with their messier real-world expressions—speaks to another major discrepancy between current religious studies research and pedagogical practices. On the one hand, introductory texts, of necessity, will present somewhat artificial and reified depictions of world religions, which accordingly appear more fully systematic and consistent than they actually are. Very often those materials reinforce the (mis)impression that the truest expressions of religious traditions reside in their respective sacred texts and doctrinal prescriptions. On the other hand, researchers in the field, long discontent with these idealizing distortions, have shifted the focus of scholarly attention away from the abstract doctrinal aspects of traditions to more concrete social practices and lived religion, away from the rhetoric and activities of the elite to ordinary people and everyday life. Such studies thereby provide depictions of religion that are rougher and more disheveled, but also more empirically accurate.

Accordingly, another highly promising but seldom undertaken version of comparative religion challenges students to recognize the limitations of the carefully constructed depictions of the religions that they encounter in their textbooks. To that end, along with the generalized overviews, student reading could include more specific ethnographic treatments and case studies; and then the two genres could be compared. For instance, along with the standard sort of introduction to Buddhism that presents the life of Buddha, the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, students might also read an article—or better yet watch a film—about contemporary Buddhist practice in Thailand where the integration of non-Buddhist elements and the overwhelming emphasis on merit-making will provide a startling contrast to the idealized overview. Indeed, students who observe contemporary Thai Buddhists lighting candles, making offerings of money, pounding drums, or perhaps rubbing very thin squares of gold leaf onto Buddha statues—common practices undertaken in hopes of gaining karmic merit—are likely to have more difficulties ascertaining similarities than differences between those Buddhist techniques and the message of Siddhartha Gautama that was presented in their textbook.

Likewise, where many courses include some sort of fieldtrip to local communities and places of worship, these too could be configured as explicitly comparative exercises that require students to note similarities and differences between what they observe in a local mosque versus the textbook treatment of Islam, or what they observe in a local synagogue versus the textbook treatment of Judaism. Again it is the recognition of differences—in this case between idealized descriptions and lived religion—that is the most pedagogically rewarding. At this point, teachers and students may indeed be “playing with fire” and submitting themselves to the “very real existential risks” of which Kripal writes (2014).

COMPARING RELIGIONS AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE: NAVIGATING THE REAL WORLD

This third and last set of variations on the theme addresses the practice of comparing religions in its broadest, perhaps most important, but least carefully scrutinized form. While there has been abundant debate about the relative merits of scholars undertaking comparisons and a fair amount concerning teachers’ use of comparison, there has been far too little discussion of the ways that historical communities and religious actors themselves have and do undertake comparisons, especially as a means of clarifying and improving their situation in the world. Scholars have neglected, in other words, comparative religion as a strategic social act.

As Kripal observes—and then illustrates at length via discussion of the comparative practices among ancient Greeks and Hebrews, early Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists—centuries in advance of the emergence of a professionalized field of comparative religion, “human beings, communities, and political powers [had] been ‘comparing religions’ more or less effortlessly for a very long time.”

Historian of religion and Islamic specialist Marilyn Waldman is another among the few who go past debates about the scholars’ practices of comparing religions to underscore the usually unnoticed ways in which Moses, Jesus, and especially Muhammad were themselves comparativists. She thereby forces to attention the extent to which historical religious figures as well as academic students of religion have relied deliberately and aggressively on strategies of comparison to make their cases, to plead their singularity, and thus to win some social

advantage. She demonstrates, for example, how Jewish claims to uniqueness depend upon, and are sustained by, a rhetoric of comparison; how religious leaders in Africa and elsewhere deploy comparison to legitimate their platforms of reform; and how the recasting of biblical materials in the Qur'an (i.e., the story of Joseph) supports in a comparative fashion Muslims' claims to continuity with, yet divergence from—and superiority over—other Abrahamic peoples. Her work urges us to consider that it is the strategic role of comparison in the street (i.e., in the calculated maneuvering between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, or between Muslims and other Muslims) that is, in the end, the most interesting and revealing.

THE UBIQUITY OF COMPARISON: AN INESCAPABLE FACT OF LIFE

Once comparison is recognized as an everyday social practice, the floodgates open to seemingly infinite examples. One begins to notice, for instance, that strategic comparisons are at work in the competitive marketing of products from cars to clothes to real estate; in the promotion and assessment of political candidates; in all phases of sports and sports commentaries; in selecting marital partners, employees, pets, and the programs that one watches on television; or in contexts as different as comedians' monologues, grocery shopping, and grading papers. Quickly it becomes apparent that comparison, by no means the exclusive preserve of academics or teachers, is a basic and inescapable fact of life or perhaps even, as historian of religions Lawrence Sullivan suggests, of human neurophysiology.

Appreciating this ubiquitous relevance also reveals that comparison is not simply a method of study, and nor is it one academic option among many. If comparison is a fundamental feature of human thought and decision making, then all interpretation, all organizations of knowledge, all understanding must, of necessity, pass through what Sullivan terms “the travail of comparison, conscious or not” (1990). Nevertheless, incontestable as this line of argument seems to be, current preoccupations with particularity continue to issue in admonitions that comparison is a kind of home-wrecking procedure that yanks elements away from their cultural or social contexts, and thereby disrespects the uniqueness of individual cases; that comparison is an ahistorical or even antihistorical exercise in which superficial similarities are allowed to provide the basis for expedient cataloguing and pigeonholings, which obscure crucial differences; and that comparison is an intuitive, decidedly uncritical affair that emboldens prejudices and undermines empirical rigor in ways that often perpetuate some form of self-serving social oppression and injustice.

Though none of these criticisms is entirely unwarranted, some scholars (e.g., Marilyn Waldman, Lawrence Sullivan, Jeffrey Kripal, and William Paden) persuade us that, while the prospect of studying specific historical phenomena strictly “on their own terms”—that is, ostensibly non-comparatively—might be well-intentioned, these efforts are certain to be frustrated. As Kripal puts it: “religions compare and are themselves products of comparison” (2014). To study multiple religions is, therefore, to undertake academic comparisons of native comparisons. And if religious actors cannot escape the processes of comparison, nor can scholars; even the most rigorous empirical descriptions always already presuppose comparative studies. Pleas to absolute singularity either for one's self or one's objects of study—claims that phenomena are beyond compare or utterly different—are never, in the end, sustainable. Comparison, in some fashion, is unavoidable in the routine affairs of daily living, and thus in scholarship.

In fact, the full embeddedness of comparison in daily life is signaled by the plethora of idiomatic, colloquial, and seemingly off-handed phrases about the supposed merits and liabilities of comparison, familiar but glib phrases such as “comparing apples and oranges,”

“to compare and contrast,” “comparatively speaking,” “beyond comparison,” “unfair comparison,” “same difference,” “comparing notes” and so forth. While each of these colloquialisms exposes assumptions and raises important issues about the ways in which nonscholars think about and rely upon comparison, special attention to just a few of them provides three instructive clues as to the functioning of comparative religion as a social practice.

THE (UN)FAIRNESS OF COMPARISON: IMAGINARY AND HEURISTIC JUXTAPOSITIONS

First, under that infamous rubric of complaints about comparing apples and oranges, there is a widespread, actually prevailing, tendency to imagine that some phenomena are naturally amenable to comparison, while other juxtapositions are simply impossible, infelicitous, or somehow unfair. For example, it may seem unfair or illegitimate to compare the religious formulations of unschooled persons with those that emerge from institutions of higher learning; or it may seem invalid to compare the religious art of megalithic culture with that which emerges from industrial societies; or it may seem unjustified, or at best spurious, to compare the ritualizations of a High Mass with the stylized ritual-like behavior that one observes at a college football game. And indeed, there is an obvious imbalance in each of those pairings. But in response to charges that such comparisons are unfair or unworthy, Waldman, for instance, impels us to realize that all comparisons are artificial and contrived insofar as they require the construction of a special, heuristic context in which to reflect, with special interests and perspectives, on a juxtaposition of one’s own making (2012). As Jonathan Smith similarly contends, “there is nothing ‘natural’ about the enterprise of comparison” (1990).

Comparison—whether undertaken in the grocery store to choose produce, on a football field to make a predictive judgment about which play might work best, or in hiring situations to ascertain which of several people would make the best colleague—is an act of supposition and imagination. Even children are involved constantly in comparative decision making as they imagine in advance which of their toys or friends they would most like to play with and which behaviors will lead to the outcomes they desire. Each of those cases and thousands of quotidian others, though usually without much self-consciousness, entail staging in one’s mind a kind of hypothetical weighing and evaluation of plausible and competing alternatives. And if it is, for instance, a question of shopping with very limited funds, this may well precipitate a kind of comparative juxtaposition among widely disparate cases such as gasoline, food, clothes, and rent—alternate comparates that are considerably less uniform than the supposedly incomparable apples and oranges. Moreover, in a religiously pluralistic context like contemporary America, nonacademic comparisons of different faith communities are undertaken constantly; and these unprofessional exercises in comparative religion likewise depend upon imaginative juxtapositions of countless lofty and prosaic factors, again of widely divergent sorts.

Academic comparisons of religion, though presumably undertaken with greater discipline and fuller command of the relevant empirical particulars—especially scholarly comparisons of the cross-cultural synchronic sort—also require an act of imagination wherein one mentally visualizes, for instance, a pairing of Hindu sadhus and Amazonian shamans or a conversation between eighth-century Japanese scholar Kūkai and twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, encounters that exist nowhere other than in the mental universe of the comparer. In principle, no phenomena, however seemingly unparallel

and irrelevant to one another, are intrinsically incomparable or beyond compare. In fact, in classroom contexts, as students work to select topics for a comparative religions research project, among the most familiar queries is, “If I pick thus and such . . . will that comparison work?” And always, in principle, the answer is, “Yes, that could work.” When, for instance, in a course of comparative sacred architecture, students are instructed to begin by picking two sacred sites from a list of several dozen that have been assembled solely on the basis of available research materials, they can, in an important sense, never be wrong. Yes, any pairing could work well, and indeed every combination can issue in strong and interesting results.

In sum, then, no—or perhaps, depending on your perspective, *all*—such juxtapositions are unfair comparisons insofar as they entail the relocation of discrete phenomena into some comparative arena, some heuristic comparative context, of the comparer’s own making. In the end, neither so-termed obvious similarities nor obvious differences are ever so obvious, self-evident, or natural as they might first appear.

THE PURPOSEFULNESS OF COMPARISON: STRATEGIC DEPLOYMENTS OF SIMILARITY OR DIFFERENCE

Second, the colloquial expression “idle comparison”—and thus intimations that comparative outcomes are often frivolous and idiosyncratic, of no real worth, importance, or significance—raises another even larger cluster of insights about comparison as a social practice. As noted, academic and pedagogical comparative exercises frequently legitimate themselves via claims to neutrality, which may exacerbate the impression that comparative religion is a strictly academic affair that delivers insights that are sometimes interesting but seldom world-changing. But noted also was that those claims to neutrality are nearly always assailable, and, moreover that, in several respects, comparative religion actually entails exceptionally profound existential risks and costs. And now, with a shift in attention to less scholarly, more broadly social contexts, the unfailingly purposeful, strategic, and socially constructive nature of comparison and especially of comparative religion is even more apparent. Freed of the strictures of academe, the real-world exercises in comparison undertaken by shoppers, football coaches, religious leaders, and government officials are always and obviously motivated by some interested purpose; few if any are fully disinterested, idle comparisons.

In other words, if comparison is an always contrived and imaginative procedure, it is also invariably a pragmatic, evaluative, interested social act, undertaken with express purposes (which may or may not succeed) of changing opinions, reconfiguring socioeconomic alliances, and redistributing religious and political power. A focus on the social ramifications of comparison nearly always reveals an act of self-interest or identity construction wherein some persons, institutions, and ideas benefit while others “suffer by comparison.” For example, the overwhelming majority of reform, sectarian, or so-termed new religious movements, of which there are thousands, construct their identity and *raison d’être* on comparative grounds. Time and again, one encounters negotiations of similarity and difference wherein reformers plead, on the one hand, their essential continuity with some ancient teaching or teacher, say, Jesus Christ, the Buddha, or Mahavira, but then insist with equal vehemence on their essential divergence from—and thus superiority over—other contemporary interpreters of those ancient wisdoms.

The reliance on strategic deployments of difference is unmistakable, for instance, in the tactics of early Protestant reformers who expressly construct their version of Christianity as a

contrast to Roman Catholicism, or Mahayana Buddhists who present their alternative understanding of the Buddha's message as the "Greater Vehicle" in contrast to what they term the "Lesser Vehicle" of Theravada Buddhism. Certainly these are, from the perspective of Protestants and Mahayanists, fruitful, socially constructive comparisons. Likewise American Indian scholar and activist Vine Deloria Jr. first demonstrates that the supposedly scientific characterizations of native religion as less sophisticated and more "primitive" than Western worldviews did very real socio-psychological damage to the self-images, especially of young Indians; those were, he shows, comparisons that supported colonialist interests. But then, apparently impressed by the practical potency of the comparative rhetoric, Deloria undertakes an iconoclastic comparison of his own that again accentuates the profound differences between tribal religion and Christianity, but this time in ways that argue instead for the greater sophistication, superiority, and environmental responsibility of the former over the latter. In his rendering, emphasizing the extreme differences between Indian and Christian religious perspectives becomes a resource that energizes and empowers native peoples.

By the same token, strategic deployments of similarity can also do important socio-political work. Native American Church members, for instance, when faced with the threat of sanctions against their use of peyote, strategically reconfigured elements of their tradition and integrated specifically Christian elements in ways that were expressly designed to enhance resemblances to Christianity, and thereby avail themselves of the legal protections available only if their movement was assessed as a "religion;" most notably, they insisted that peyote be conceived as a "sacrament" or "sacred medicine" rather than a drug. And even the most seemingly benign versions of comparative religion like those in standard world religions courses or in some versions of interfaith dialogue, where the differences among religions are largely drowned out by a celebration of essential sameness, serve an important sociopolitical agenda. In contexts populated by numerous different faith traditions, this rhetoric of sameness and equal viability among religions can do much to engender a commodious environment of goodwill, harmony, and peaceful coexistence; these too are strategic and purposeful rather than neutral versions of comparison. Yes, virtually all comparisons are, from some perspective or slant, "fruitful comparisons" insofar as they accrue an advantage or privilege to the parties who undertake them.

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF COMPARISON: GENERATING BRAND-NEW KNOWLEDGE

Third and finally, colloquial references to fruitful comparison also direct attention to another sense in which the supposed rewards and outcomes of comparison are far richer than is commonly appreciated. The realization that virtually all comparisons are undertaken to some particular social purpose, and thus that comparing religions is scarcely confined to academic or pedagogical contexts, points also to a recognition that comparison is, potentially anyway, far more than a means of organizing or cataloguing knowledge. The estimable and underestimated value of comparison owes to the fact that it is, in Waldman's words, "an important way of producing new knowledge" (2012).

That is to say, where comparison is usually embraced as a procedure for the discovery and arrangement of ideas or meanings that are already "out there" awaiting scholars' acts of retrieval (i.e., standard assignments that require students to find three ways that Christianity and Buddhism are similar or to identify three ways they are different), Waldman compels us to appreciate that "comparison involves the construction of *new* meanings" (2012). In fact, as scholars have become more self-critical about the processes of comparison—and more

self-conscious about the constructed status of both the comparing self and the objects of comparative inquiry—there is an increasing awareness that the contrasts and commonalities that are supposedly discovered in various religious traditions, persons, and practices are not actually inherent in those cases, waiting to be unearthed or revealed. To the contrary, as numerous postmodern thinkers help us to see, those features that are so often presented as intrinsic similarities and differences among religions are actually products of the artificial and heuristic theoretical constructions of scholars.

Comparison is not, then, simply a mode of discovering commonalities and contrasts, which are then described either accurately or inaccurately; comparison is not simply a mode of interpretation; and comparison is not simply an exercise in classification—though it is all of those things. Beyond discovering, describing, interpreting, and classifying, comparison is a means of building, a mode of generating fresh and brand-new knowledge. Comparison not only enables one to see more, it provides more to see.

In this sense, persistent complaints that comparison (especially of the cross-cultural synchronic sort) issues empirically inaccurate descriptions, lifts discrete phenomena out of their historical contexts and locates them in some artificial context, and generates abstract or imaginary categories such as sacred trees, shamanism, New Year festivals, or prophethood that actually have no concrete existence are particularly well-taken. Cross-cultural comparisons do indeed generate ideas, insights, and possibilities that had not existed before; these insights are not discovered *per se*, but are produced or manufactured anew via the processes of comparison. Consequently, comparison, whether orchestrated by academics, religious leaders, architects, ritual choreographers, politicians, journalists, or comedians, is among the most effective means for challenging and rearranging the status quo rather than merely replicating it. Comparison—and especially comparing religions—is, as Kripal contends, uniquely demanding, disruptive, and thus potentially transformative not because it just rearranges what we already know, but because comparison truly does give us more to know. The patterns, schemes, and theories that emerge from comparative religion are not simply summational or repackaged insights; they are original, new features in the scholarly landscape.

Consequently, even the oft-made affirmation that comparative frames can create new ways of perceiving and organizing the world, while correct, is an underestimation. Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray, editors of a volume explicitly devoted to “the rehabilitation of the comparative approach,” come closer to this final point about the productivity of comparison, whether in academic or broader social contexts, when they write: “Like magic, comparative religion can be an efficacious act of conjuring.... In the act of comparison, the two original components juxtaposed in scholarly discourse have the potential to produce a third thing, a magical thing, that is different from its parents” (2000). Something new comes to be! In their discerning view, “comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best understood as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art.” And that is an accurate and compelling formulation—but only if one insists that the art of comparison is an interested social act. Comparing religions is a socially strategic practice in which Muhammad participated, not simply an academic practice with which to interpret the activities of Muhammad. In short, comparison—whether undertaken in academic, pedagogical, or more broadly social contexts—is neither motivated by merely inquisitive curiosity nor is it simply reiterative and descriptive of standing insights. Comparing religions is a means of creatively and strategically generating new insights.

Summary

This discussion has inventoried issues related to the practice of comparative religion in three different arenas: the academic, pedagogical, and more broadly social. It ends as it began, by stressing that comparing religions, even as a specifically scholarly practice, is not one procedure, but rather a wide assemblage of very different approaches, undertaken on quite different premises, in order to serve different purposes, and thus resulting in widely different sorts of outcomes. Following some three decades of derision and decline, comparative approaches, if still embattled, are presently enjoying a renaissance, a resurgence based largely on the renegotiation of four tensions: (a) earlier preoccupations with similarities are complemented with more due attention to differences; (b) enthusiasms for synchronic (nonhistorical) cross-cultural comparison, long the very heart and soul of comparative religion, are challenged by calls for more historically grounded diachronic comparison; (c) zeal for general and universalistic comparative outcomes cede to more particularistic conclusions; and (d) aspirations to objective neutrality acquiesce to arguments that virtually all forms of comparative religion entail normative judgments, which ought therefore be announced in forthright ways.

Likewise in pedagogical contexts, where comparative religion continued to thrive despite its disrepute as a research methodology, there are signs of another sort of revitalization wherein highly conventional tradition-by-tradition surveys are complemented by greater attention to comparisons within religious traditions, comparisons of the viability of different theories of religion, and comparisons that put in doubt the idealized textbook descriptions of various religions by paying greater attention to their messier realities of lived religion. By contrast, the third alternative—comparing religions as an interested social act whereby people of all sorts work to make sense of the world and improve their standing within it—remains a largely undeveloped field of inquiry. Irrespective of unassailable observations about the ubiquity of comparison in daily life, and about the extent to which everyday comparisons are unfailingly purposeful, strategic, and socially constructive, the extent to which religious actors are themselves comparativists goes largely unnoticed. But with the reputation of comparative religion again on the rise, one can hope to see greater attention also to the important and fascinating ways in which nonscholars rely upon comparison, particularly the comparison of religions, as a means of navigating the so-called real world.

And yet, while there is reason for optimism with respect to all three of these arenas, there is very little reason to believe that the field is moving toward a clear consensus about the proper protocols for comparing religion. Never has it been more accurate to observe that comparative religion is not a unified method, but an excitingly diverse constellation of approaches. Happily, there will be no return to an era in which the likes of Edward B. Tylor could claim to be a practitioner of *the* comparative method.

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