

Considering comparison: a method for religious studies

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On its homepage, the journal *History of Religions* published by the University of Chicago Press proclaims to be the “first academic journal devoted exclusively to comparative religious history”.¹ Is comparison central to its selection of articles? When browsing the content of the last three years [2019–2017] of that journal, I could not find a single article doing what I would consider “comparative religious history”. With one exception, all articles stick to one religious tradition and mostly to one region and historical period, and even the one that moves across boundaries – Chris Hutt’s “A Threefold Heresy: Reassessing Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Animal Sacrifice in Late Antiquity” (HR 58/3 [2019]) – does not brand itself as “comparative” work. In 2018, however, *History of Religions* published an article by Oliver Freiberger on comparison (“Freedom for the Tertium: On Conditions and Provisions for Comparison in the Study of Religion”, HR 57/3). Hence my general impression: while relatively little actual comparative research work is published, a series of works on comparison has seen the light of the day. Apart from articles and edited volumes in languages other than English, there are now four books by prominent authors: Jeff Kripal’s textbook *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (2014; with Ata Anzali, Andrea Jain, and Erin Prophet), Aaron Hughes’s short “critical primer” on comparison (2017),² Bruce Lincoln’s “explorations in, on, and with comparison” (2018),³ and now Oliver Freiberger’s book that is the subject of this review. For our discipline, comparison is considered a problem and a promise, but not what engages the majority of scholars of religion\’s in their research.

Compared [!] to the recent books by Hughes and Lincoln, Oliver Freiberger’s book is less partial, partisan and polemical. (At this point, I should add that my own position is partisan: I am co-editing a book series with Oliver and have discussed some of his ideas on comparison with him and I agree with him on many issues.) Among these three works, Freiberger casts the widest net. While Lincoln criticizes and dismisses the comparative works of two scholars—none of whom would consider himself a historian of religions by discipline—and then proceeds to producing examples of how to get it right, Freiberger provides a broad panorama of the debates on comparison and of comparative work in the study of religion\’s. Freiberger cannot match Lincoln as a writer, but his prose is clear and readable, even though at times a bit overly didactic. His careful and balanced review of the critiques and challenges of comparison is embedded in a historical perspective that finds a decrease of a “religion-affirmative” or religion-friendly tendency among scholars of religion in the century from the 1870s to the 1960s (50). Freiberger regards decontextualization “epistemologically inevitable” (53) but thinks that essentialization and universalization can be avoided. While postmodernism and postcolonialism often tend to be portrayed as inherently comparison-unfriendly, Freiberger states: “to my knowledge, no postmodernist or postcolonialist critic has ever explicitly called for abandoning the comparative method in the study of religion.” (56)

Freiberger reminds readers that comparison “is not a single act . . . , but rather a complex, non-linear process” (81) the various aspects of which he addresses in chapter three (“Comparison in Theory: A Scholar-Centered Approach”), starting with determining comparands and the *tertium comparationis*. As the title of the chapter shows, Freiberger has taken the call for

¹ <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/journals/hr/about> (accessed March 3, 2019)

² See my review in *Numen* 65/4 (2018) 437–440.

³ See my review in *Numen* 67/1 (2020) 73–78.

reflexivity on board when he discusses the comparativist's situatedness in terms of personal, cultural, and academic factors. Rather than the scholar being merely a passive subject to these factors, "it is also important to acknowledge the researcher's agency." (103) For the *tertium comparationis*, the angle on which comparison hinges, he describes categories as "testable" concepts and makes it clear "that every comparison has an inbuilt function of rectifying categories, even if this is not the primary goal of a particular study." (107)

Freiberger has spent many years going through works that could be categorized as comparative in our field. This wide reading informs his chapter four ("Comparison in Practice: A Methodological Practice"). Here he seeks to establish comparison as a clearly devised "method". One of his most original contributions to the debate is his discussion of the "configuration" of comparative work. Here he distinguished between "modes" (or styles), "scales", and "scopes" of comparison. For modes (a term he borrows from J.Z. Smith) he not only reviews earlier suggestions by Smith, Jeffrey Carter, and David Freidenreich but also proposes to distinguish between an illuminative and a taxonomic mode; the former is meant to throw light on a particular historical case, the latter to contribute to cross-religious conceptual classification (for which he makes a helpful comparison with biology). Both modes are not mutually exclusive. By "scales", Freiberger refers to the degree of abstraction, where he distinguishes between macro, meso, and micro comparisons. While many scholars of religion would be reluctant to engage in macro scale comparisons (like studies using data from the World Value Survey), Freiberger does not dismiss these as out of hand. "Scopes" refers to the (spatio-temporal) distance between the items compared, ranging from the contextual, through the cross-cultural (often called analogical) to the trans-historical, where the latter is always combined with one of the two former scopes.

Next, Freiberger distinguishes "five operations that are potentially included in the comparative process: selection, description and analysis, juxtaposition, redescription, and rectification/theory formation." (150) The author defines "rectification" as "a revision of the definition and conceptualization of the (meta-linguistic) categories involved in the study." (159) This is an act of theorizing and therefore akin to "theory formation". Even if one agrees with Freiberger that these five operations are typically run in comparative analysis, we also find that only the operation of "juxtaposition" is specific for comparative work; even non-comparative work selects a case, which is initially described and analysed, then re-described after analysis; even single-case studies can serve to "rectify" categories—indeed this is not atypical—and contribute to theory formation. What he has to say about "juxtaposition," however, is fairly general and mainly pertains to the similarities/differences-balance. In the final section of this chapter ("Creating Comparisons in Practice") Freiberger holds that a "good comparativist is a like a good chef" and that comparison "is a craft that a person learns with time and practice, thus developing a level of intuition that enables creative and original ... work." (161) This is probably true of most great scholars, be they comparativists or not. Freiberger advocates "counterfactual question" (i.e., asking oneself what would have happened had one chosen a different methodical option) as a productive tool (164). Freiberger's review of his "five operations" provides a useful meta-analytical grid around the central comparative act of "juxtaposition"; embedding it in this grid may help to organize and execute a comparative research design, but I would hesitate to call this process a specific method.

In the final chapter of the book, Freiberger re-describes his earlier comparative study (originally published in 2009) of two bodies of textual corpora, from ancient Indian Brahmanical traditions and Egyptian Christianity respectively, dealing with forms of

asceticism in the light of the framework he develops in the present book. Instead of comparing “ascetism” he compared discourses on asceticism in these sources. For “discourse” he provides a definition inspired by the OED rather than by the extensive scholarly discourse on this concept. His approach does not follow Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, nor any of the advocates of discourse analysis in religious studies. He simply re-describes discourse as a “plurality of voices” (193f). The conclusion of the final chapter emphasizes the fundamental role of comparison “for religious studies as a discipline” (196).

This brings Freiburger full circle, as the role of comparison in religious studies (I wish he would have chosen another name) is also the theme of chapter 1, which begins with some reflections on the disciplinary status of religious studies and warns against inflationary and undigested calls for interdisciplinary work (19). Freiburger breaks comparison down to three levels of specificity: “(1) comparison as a basic and fundamental academic activity; (2) comparison, in the form of the ‘comparative gaze’, that reflects the meta-linguistic approach of religious studies perspective; (3) comparison as a discrete method for exploring particular research questions.” (21) For (2), he uses “meta-linguistic” not as a reference to meta-linguistics, i.e. the study of language in its relation to other domains of human behaviour, but in the sense of “second-order”. He sees the importance of comparison in the formation of general categories, the discipline-specific terminology or vocabulary for religious studies. By “comparative gaze” he means a discipline-specific stance that holds, “implicitly and on principle, that similar phenomena exist in the history of religions” (24). One might add: The greatest similarity-generator of them all is the (abstract, metalinguistic) category of religion. This stance is comparative not in the sense that it adopts explicit comparison, but because it considers phenomena comparable and because it aims to develop a vocabulary that transcends single cases. The regulative idea that there is not only one legitimate instance of a category—not only one religion, to begin with—is a non-negotiable core of religious studies as a discipline. Likewise, generalization goes beyond single-cases. Comparative, in this sense, means multi-case.

Freiberger’s programmatic contribution is his claim that comparison is, indeed, a discrete method in the sense “that comparative studies generally have a common structure.” (29) Above we have seen that, juxtaposition apart, this common structure is also common with other methods. Freiburger proposes to call comparison “a second-order method—in contrast to the other, first-order methods” (30), like for example philology, which are often also inherently comparative. It should be added that comparison is not unique in this; writing history, for example, is often a second-order method in this sense. For writing history often involves putting together observations from first-order methods, and its scope goes beyond those of these methods. It is, however, useful to be reminded that a comparison based on, for example, naïve and indefensible readings of sources (i.e., the incompetent use of first-order methods) threatens to invalidate the comparative exercise from the start.

Freiberger identifies two primary goals of comparison: description and classification or taxonomy, i.e., “creating, deconstructing and reconstructing, or refining and improving classifications in the study of religion.” (36) Alternatively, I think we could speak about history and systematics, or analysis and theory. Freiburger also mentions causal analysis, but subsumes that under description—even though the aims of description and causal explanations seem different enough to warrant a distinction. We could therefore also distinguish between interpretation and explanation as goals for comparison.

The first chapter ends by presenting two examples of comparative work that have emerged from other disciplines—philosophy and theology respectively. Presenting potential shortcomings of these other volumes from a religious studies perspective, Freiburger claims that comparative work in religious studies, unlike that in other disciplines, “seeks to describe and classify *religion*.” (38) This strikes me as a far shot, since comparative work in religious studies typically moves on subordinate levels to that of *religion* (for example, to pick some cases from Lincoln’s recent book, social order and hierarchy, time, future, and utopias, or classification of living beings). To my eyes, the difference seems to lie in the goals: the philosopher whose work Freiburger discusses wishes to help people to direct their attention to the compassionate attitude towards animals in different religions, and the theologian wishes to foster a different view of the nature of deity and new modes of community. Most scholars of religion, to my view, would be hesitant to engage in projects of world improvement—which also explains the discipline’s limited outreach into the public.

Even if one may agree with Freiburger that comparison is crucial for religious studies as a discipline—despite the comparative rarity of explicit comparative work, with Oliver Freiburger as one of the exceptions confirming the rule—we must be careful not to think that this distinguishes our discipline from others. In *The Rules of Sociological Method* Emile Durkheim, for example, famously stated: “Comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts.” (Durkheim, 1982, 157) So, no sociology worth its name without comparison. Similarly, social anthropologists recall E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s dictum that “the comparative method, anthropology’s only method, was impossible.” Yet, a recent monograph on *Comparison in Anthropology* proclaims: “A new wind of epistemological confidence is blowing through the discipline, and comparison is explicitly reclaimed and brandished as the distinctive anthropological method—indeed, as more than a method; as the epistemic, ethical and political heart and purpose of anthropology itself.” (Candea, 2018, 1) There is a wide range of literature on comparison in anthropology and other disciplines that it would be interesting to compare and to learn from.

References

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