CHAPTER 2

Cross-religious Comparative Research

Introduction

Comparative study of religion not merely researches various religious traditions in general, but focuses on differences and similarities between religions. In this chapter we look at some fundamental theoretical issues in cross-religious comparative research and some of the core empirical methodological problems involved. The first issue is: what makes comparison a contested issue in research into religion, specifically in disciplines like religious studies, history of religion and theology? We discuss the rules which comparative research into religion needs to observe to merit a place in the scientific study of religion (2.1). Secondly, we examine the goals of cross-religious comparative research. Why should one distinguish between different goals of comparative research? Do comparisons not all have the same goal? And if not, what are the criteria for distinguishing between the different goals (2.2)? Thirdly, we consider questions relating to the object of our comparative research: religion. What definition of religion should we use (2.3)? Fourthly, we deal with the thorniest question in comparative research: in what terms (categories, concepts, ideas) can we understand and explain the religious practices, beliefs, experiences, et cetera of other persons and communities, and to what extent is it possible to understand and explain the other (2.4)? The next issue is the selection of data. On what kind of knowledge do we want to build our research? How do we choose groups to compare? Are our findings generalizable to a given population (2.5)? Then we look at the problem of similarities and differences in comparative research. In order to compare religious traditions they should be neither totally different nor completely identical. We examine this problem from the perspective of a quantitative methodology by means of statistical surveys (2.6). Finally we look at the issue of normativeness in comparative research (2.7).

2.1 Comparison as a Contested Field in Research into Religion

Comparison has become a contested field in scientific research into religion over the past four decades, specifically in disciplines like religious studies and history of religion. As Patton and Ray (2000, 3) point out, this applies to the
extent that “with a few outstanding exceptions, comparative studies have virtually disappeared in graduate studies in favor of increasingly narrow ‘area studies’ research into specific religious texts and communities.” A landmark in this development is the seminal paper by Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, 19–35), *In comparison a magic dwells*. Most discussions about comparison in the study of religion are premised on this paper. It is sometimes interpreted as a critique of cross-religious comparative research as such. But this interpretation is incorrect: the critique applies to the way comparison has often been done in the tradition of the history of religion. In 2004 Smith outlined his own career as a scholar of religion from the late 1960s when he moved to Chicago and came under the influence of Mircea Eliade. We do not give a chronological account of his development, but use his and other publications which can be considered a response to this initial paper to discuss the dispute about comparison in religious studies (cf. Patton & Ray 2000; two special issues of *Method and theory in the study of religion* in 1996 (8–1) and 2004 (16–1)). The discussion will culminate in some general principles and guidelines to follow in cross-religious comparative research.

By settling on *In comparison a magic dwells* (Smith 1982) we also explicitly locate our discussion of cross-religious comparative research in the study of religion (or religious studies). The alternative would be to locate it in the social sciences. There is a long-standing tradition of cross-cultural comparative research in anthropology, psychology and sociology with specialized journals like the *Journal of cross-cultural psychology* (Sage), *Cross-cultural research* (Sage) and *Comparative sociology* (Brill) representing these traditions. Publications regularly focus on methodological issues (e.g. Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003; Liamputtong 2010) and mostly use functional definitions of religion when studying religious themes (e.g. Roccas 2005). Many scholars working in the humanities (German: ‘Geisteswissenschaft’) or cultural studies would not recognize the concerns, research agenda and theory building in these socio-scientific traditions. Our own research is an empirical study of religion, hence our point of reference is the state of the art in this field.¹

According to Smith (1982) comparison as practised is the result of magic rather than of a scientific method. Smith is referring to J.G. Frazer’s notion of magic. The magician’s logic is based on a confusion of a subjective (i.e. psychological) relationship with an objective (i.e. historical or material) relationship.

¹ We go beyond this state of the art, as readers will see in the rest of this chapter. Obviously empirical research into religion can also learn a lot from socio-scientific cross-cultural research. See e.g. the strict methodological rules for establishing different levels of equivalence discussed later in this chapter.
Just like a magician, the scholar of religion too often makes associations based on similarity or, more particularly, on a recollection of similarity. “The chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity. The procedure is contagion” (Smith 1982, 21; italics in original). The subjective idea of similarity between two things is projected onto an objective connection by invoking a theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing and the like. Most comparisons are not the result of systematic discovery, but are based on impressionistic similarity. With some exaggeration one could say that the development of scientific theory is not based on a method with strict guidelines for the researcher, but on the rich imagination of the scholar. Reacting to this critique, we should stress that comparative research needs strict methodological rules which are meticulously followed by the researcher. Valid theory can only be the result of correct application of these rules.

A second cardinal criticism regards the “tension between a concession to the centrality of historical processes over against a-historical constructs” (Smith 2000, 26). Smith’s critique is made in the framework of a discussion of four basic modes of comparison: ethnographic, encyclopaedic, morphological and evolutionary. Of the different approaches, Smith considers the morphological method in the history of the study of religion the most adequate mode of comparison. “Fundamentally, morphology allows the arrangement of individual items in a hierarchical series of increased organization and complexity. It is a logical, formal progression which ignores categories of space (habitat) and time” (Smith 2000, 23). An example of this logic is the dyad ‘original/corrupt’, in which a generative original element (the archetype) is compared with an individual manifestation of this element. For example, the pan-Babylonian school (e.g. Jeremias) considers the Babylonian religious system ‘original’ and the Canaanite system secondary or ‘corrupt’. “Here a seasonal, naturalistic interpretation has been given to the ‘Babylonian’ cosmic cycle: the god of sun and spring who, after his victory over winter, built (or rebuilt) the world and took charge of its destiny” (Smith 1982, 29). Historians of religion have followed two main trends in this morphological research mode. Either they study history thoroughly and continue its diffusionist programme stripped of its systematic and theoretical depth (e.g. the pan-Babylonian school) or they sever the pattern and its systematics from history (e.g. Eliade) (Smith 1982, 29).

What can we learn from this analysis about the principles of comparative research? We will redefine the relationship between history and patterns (or systematics) in cross-religious empirical research as a relationship between theory and data. Smith’s point is that the study of religion lacks a clear focus on the reason for comparison. This reason should be explicated and related to specific research of empirical data. The only possible reason for academic
empirical research is theory building. According to Smith this is manifestly missing in the field of history of religion. A second rule for comparative research which we can formulate against the background of this discussion is the need for a clear theoretical agenda in comparative research and a clear focus on theory building. There should be clarity not only about the ‘how’ (method) but also about the ‘why’ (theory building) of comparative research into religion.

A third criticism which Smith raises is the exclusive stress on similarity in comparison while ignoring difference. Smith (1982, 35) quotes Wittgenstein: “But isn’t the same at least the same? We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself... Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the one thing shows to me to the case of two things?” In comparison we are always dealing with difference and similarity. If things are completely identical, there is no need for comparison. “Comparison requires the postulation of difference as the ground of being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodological manipulation of difference, a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end” (Smith 1982, 35). Later Smith (1987, 14) reformulates this last sentence by changing “in service of some useful end” to “to achieve some stated cognitive end”. The manipulation of difference in research serves the purpose of theory building. Difference gives rise to thought, in the sense that we test whether our theory holds good in (historically, culturally, etc.) different situations. Difference should not be overlooked, but needs to be regarded as productive with a view to a theoretical agenda (cf. Smith 2004, 17). On the basis of these insights we can formulate a third rule for cross-religious comparative research: comparison needs careful manipulation of difference(s) between things (situations, beliefs, practices, feelings) while keeping other aspects constant (the same). Absolute difference is the end of comparison. That is why we define the careful manipulation of difference, so that we know in what respect a comparison is made. If our theory holds good under different conditions, we regard it as more robust (in the Popperian sense). But it is theoretically equally interesting if we need to adjust our theory in order to fit different situations.

In the 1990s the debate on comparison led Smith to reflect on its aspectual characteristic. Smith was challenged to reflect on this issue by Fitz J.P. Poole’s reaction to his 1982 paper. Poole (1986, 55) pointed out that comparison does not concern phenomena in toto but only aspects of them. In history of religion comparison based on a holistic assumption was traditionally made in terms of essence and singularity. This holistic assumption is associated with the idea that the essence is ‘given’ in the data, which is presumed in the phenomenological approach to comparison (Allen 2005). But comparison deals with
aspects rather than comprehensive realities. Comparison “gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interest and data stipulated as exemplary” (Smith 1990, 51). Smith also stresses that comparing aspects of phenomena is the result of a theoretical focus: “We ‘re-vision’ data as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems” (Smith 1990; italics in original). The selection of aspects of comparison is based on our theoretical agenda (i.e. theory building). Smith expresses this idea differently, saying that a comparative statement is never dyadic but triadic. The logic behind comparison is never “x resembles y” but “x resembles y more than z in respect to...” (Smith 2004, 23). The objects of research \((x, y, z)\) are compared in respect of their specific characteristics. A common criticism of comparative empirical research is the limitation of the observations to certain aspects. While observations can be more open when using qualitative in addition to quantitative methods, in the end all comparison is confined to a limited number of aspects of the research objects. Hence comparative research is done with regard to some aspects of the research objects that are considered relevant from a specific theoretical perspective. This theoretical perspective is the third element of the comparison.

A fourth element to be added to this state of the art is awareness that comparison is not an end in itself. In his essay *The “end” of comparison* Smith (2000) points out that comparison is a route to a re-description of the research object and a reformulation of the academic categories used in research. The goal of comparison in empirical research is to test our description of reality and to falsify our academic categories or, on a higher level, our theories. Comparison has different phases: before, during and after comparison. It starts with description of a given example in a rich texture (social, historical and cultural) and second-order categories. The second phase is comparison between different exempla from the perspective of a certain category or theory. The third phase is re-description of the exempla in light of each other and (possible) rectification of the categories used in the comparison. So if comparison is not the ‘end’, what is it? The answer is: generalization. “As with comparison, generalization brings disparate phenomena together in the space of the scholar’s intellect” (Smith 2004, 31). Comparison often evokes surprise, which calls for correction of our description and our categories. Hence we want to formulate

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2 Smith speaks about four moments (Smith 2000, p 239). The first (description) includes second-order categories, which he breaks up into two different moments after the comparison. We think it is logically more correct to keep data and categories together both before and after the empirical comparative research. Hence we speak about three phases: before, during and after comparison.
a fourth rule for cross-religious comparative research: comparison aims at generalization of our second-order categories, that is the concepts we as researchers construct in terms of a theoretical frame of reference.

The final point concerns the inclusion of normative questions in cross-religious comparative research. Smith is sometimes criticized by scholars working in a postmodern paradigm for not paying enough attention to normative issues. For example, Urban (2004) cites the political dimension of comparison and the danger of abusing or privileging some interests at the expense of others. The objection to Smith is not that he neglects normative issues in comparative research. Smith repeatedly insists that the study of religion always involves an interested perspective relating to some intellectual agenda (Smith 2000, 239). On the other hand he also insists that religious research is ‘value-free’, that is scholars of religion have no fixed normative, political or ethical position in relation to their data. This could be interpreted as implying that the scholar of religion has no normative stance. According to Urban this is not what Smith is suggesting. Time and again Smith points out that religion is an imagined category, the construction of academic scholars. “Hence we must remain relentlessly self-conscious and self-critical about how we go about imagining and deploying the particular, highly charged, and volatile academic construction” (Urban 2004, 32). 3 This leads us to infer a final rule from this debate: comparative research into religion should include critical normative discussion of the academic categories and theories in the context of a specific society.

2.2 Goals of Cross-religious Comparison

What could be the goal of cross-religious comparative research? According to Smith the general goal of all comparison should be the generalization of second-order categories. Smith stresses this goal, because in the study of religion there seems to be a strong preference for one type of research (especially descriptive research) at the expense of other types (especially explanatory research) (Jensen 2004). This almost exclusive preference for descriptive comparative research is hampering theory building in the study of religion, and therefore needs to be corrected. 4 Although we agree with Smith about the

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3 This applies a fortiori to research on religion and violence. Chapter 8 deals specifically with normative issues and the socio-political context of our research.

4 This exclusivism is often based on a *sui generis* approach which separates ‘religious things’ (practices, experiences, feelings) from nonreligious things (Taves 2009). Based on the distinc-
importance of generalization, we distinguish between four goals of cross-religious comparative research. All four are equally valid and none should be excluded. We base our distinction of four research goals on the work of the Dutch philosopher of science Kuipers (2001; 2005; 2007), who can be characterized as a neo-classical scholar in the line of Kuhn and Lakatos. Before identifying the different goals, we will argue that it is not possible to avoid comparison in research.

As mentioned already, to many scholars J.Z. Smith’s critical analyses of comparative research in his paper *In comparison a magic dwells* (Smith 1982; 2000) was reason enough to abandon cross-religious comparison altogether. But this was only one reaction. At the same time many forums and congresses were organized on the topic to try to recapture the possibilities, goals and methods of comparative research (cf. Patton & Ray 2000; Gothóni 2005). Many tried anew to legitimize comparative approaches to the study of religion. What’s more, they claimed that it is impossible to avoid comparison for at least three reasons (Jensen 2004, 50–51).

The first reason relates to the way the human mind works. According to cognitive scientists the information processing in our minds relies on complex ways of categorization. Everything is stored in memory via processes which presuppose some operation of comparison. “Comparison is the basic method underlying categorization, and categorization is the pathway for cognition or information processing” (Carter 2004, 7). There is no way to avoid comparison, because it is the way our minds work. In other words, there are no categories inherent in the phenomena which we study. Categorization by comparison is implied in the way the human mind (including the scientist’s mind) works.

The second reason relates to the socio-cultural process of comparison between groups and cultures. We cannot think about other groups and cultures without making distinctions between them and us. We cannot but make comparisons in our daily dealing with other individuals and groups. This is not a deliberate act: we do it intuitively.

Thirdly, comparison is an essential rationale implied in all scientific research. This was stressed by Smith when he said that comparison is never between two things but between two things “with respect to something else” (Smith 2004, 17; cf. Van der Ven 2010, 117). Every act of categorization uses a conceptual lens by means of which two things are seen as similar or dissimilar. As stated above, there are no distinctions, characteristics or aspects pertaining to phenomena as such. There are only categories relevant from a theoretical
perspective. Hence we conclude that no scientific thinking is possible without comparison.

Research is fundamentally an interested enterprise, that is it serves the agenda of a research programme. This idea was introduced into the philosophy of science by Kuhn and Lakatos, and since the 1980s it has become more or less accepted that science develops in encompassing units called research programmes (Kuipers 2007, 2). Scientific development does not proceed through the development of specific hypotheses and theories, but in more encompassing terms. Structural features of research programmes are:

1. **a domain** of existing or not yet existing phenomena;
2. **the goals** of solving some problem associated with it, be it finding its true description or its true theory, or the construction of an intended product or concept,
3. **a core idea**, or a set of coherent ideas couched in a certain vocabulary, about how to solve the problem, and
4. **additional ideas**, **heuristics**, suggesting how to safeguard the core idea against prima facie failures to solve the problem (Kuipers 2005, 31; 2007, 63–64).

We want to emphasize that the term ‘research programme’ does not imply a ‘strong’ rationalist concept of scientific research. A strong rationalist approach presupposes “universal, hard and fast premises, clear-cut concepts, straight and narrow theories and universal, irrefutable test results” (Van der Ven 2010, 95). The epistemological position of strong rationality implies that our scientific claims about religion can only be accepted from a position beyond the origins of our knowledge. Put differently, the principle of fallibilism demands that we need to ground a scientific theory about religion(s) not in the origins of our knowledge (context of discovery) but in the rules and norms of inquiry (context of justification). “Our claims to knowledge are legitimized not by their origins – for the origins of knowledge are diverse and fallible – but rather by the norms and rules of inquiry itself” (Bernstein 1971, 175). We cannot claim absolute knowledge; we have only fallible knowledge, that is knowledge which can stand the test of falsification. Although we want to agree with this principle of fallibilism, we think it is impossible to exclude one’s epistemic communities from scientific research into religion. “We begin our conversations by bringing our fallible views and judgments to those who traditionally make up our epistemic communities” (Van Huyssteen 1999, 265). Each judgment is made in the context of a specific community, and is based on arguments and ideas which are accepted in that community. We cannot abstract from a
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Conversational context when justifying concepts, ideas and viewpoints. ‘Weak’ rationalism demands that we should extend our individual evaluation to communal evaluation, and further to trans-communal evaluation (Van Huyssteen 1999, 265). This does not imply a demand to include all possible rational agents in our justification, regardless of time and place. If we were to stipulate that, it would be impossible to determine the validity of our justifications. Scientific truth is something that is established over time by the community of inquiry, including future generations and different contexts.

Following Kuipers (2001; 2005; 2007) we distinguish between four types of research programmes based on their different cognitive results, namely descriptions, explanations, products and concepts. Connected with these different results are different producers, namely scholars conducting fieldwork or (quasi-) experimental research, theorists, designers or engineers, and philosophers. Clearly this distinction is ideal-typical and most academic research is a mixture of two or more types, in which one type appears to dominate.

Descriptive programmes are the first type of research. They are meant “to describe a certain domain of phenomena, primarily in terms of individual facts (individual programmes) or primarily in terms of general observable factors (general or inductive programmes)” (Kuipers 2001, 6; 2007, 59). With regard to individual facts, one thinks of rituals of different ethno-religious groups. General observable factors refer to, for example, “the (quasi-) law that when people have made a decision there is active seeking out of information which is consistent with the action taken” (Kuipers 2007, 7; see also chapter 8 of this book). Descriptive programmes are also known as observation programmes: the research takes the form of more or less selective observations, and the resulting facts are couched in so-called observational terms. If these observations are fundamentally based on (quasi-)experiments, one speaks of experimental programmes. We like to stress (again) that observational terms are not given by the natural world but form the specific glasses through which researchers look at their research object. In the field of comparative religion the phenomenological approach (associated with scholars like Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade) is closely connected with this type of research programme, but the approach is not restricted to phenomenology of religion. The goal of describing a certain domain of phenomena is also characteristic of ethnological, linguistic, sociological, anthropological and other scholarly approaches to religion. But in history of religion the phenomenological approach is dominant. It sees itself as a descriptive approach allowing for direct intuiting and description of phenomena as they appear to us in immediate experience (Allen 2005, 7). A phenomenological approach presumes that we “experience a real, objective, given world of religious phenomena and
meaning; the given religious world of the other, a linguistically and culturally and historically structured world of meaningful religious phenomena, a world of religious texts, contexts and interpretations not of my creation” (Allen 2005, 23).

Explanatory research programmes have a different aim. “They are directed at the explanation and further prediction of the observable individual and general facts in a certain domain of phenomena” (Kuipers 2005, 29). An explanatory programme is (quasi-)deductive, while a descriptive programme is dominated by inductive reasoning. Explanatory programmes are always built on underlying descriptive programmes. For this reason explanatory programmes are often developed along with underlying descriptive programmes. Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, for example, forms the theoretical ground of an explanatory programme linked to a programme that describes how “when people have made a decision there is active seeking out of information which is consistent with the action taken” (Kuipers 2007, 7). The theory of cognitive dissonance explains the observation as follows: “being psychologically uncomfortable, [it] gives rise to pressures to reduce the dissonance and to achieve consonance. The strength of the pressure is a function of the magnitude of the existing dissonance” (Kuipers 2007, 6). Kuipers stresses that several explanatory programmes can arise from the same descriptive programme. The observations of religious rituals, practices, beliefs and emotions can be explained by different theories. For example, secularization theory (e.g. Wilson, Bruce) and religious market theory (e.g. Finke and Stark) both profess to explain religious decline and revival. Next, one could critically evaluate to what extent these theories indeed envisage elements of religious decline and/or revival (Aarts et al. 2008; Aarts 2010; Sterkens & Vermeer 2011). This last example illustrates that some explanatory programmes are more successful at explaining certain observations but less successful at explaining others. The principal tools in explanatory programmes are so-called “theoretical terms, denoting fundamentally new concepts, which have not yet been firmly established as observation terms” (Kuipers 2005, 30). An example is the ritual form hypothesis, which posits that participants look for signs of God’s activity in the form of a ritual (Lawson & McCauley 1990; McCauley & Lawson 2002). There are two decisive principles. The first is the principle of superhuman agency (PSA). The core question here is which ritual element primarily links God with the ritual. It could be a ritual actor (e.g. the priest) fulfilling an intermediary function between the participants and God, or a ritual element such as holy water or holy scripture. The second principle is that of superhuman immediacy (PSI). This refers to God’s primary manifestation in the form of the ritual. Rituals are persuasive because the form of the ritual activity gives participants an experi-
ence of God’s activity. The intensity of a ritual experience relates to the intensity of concomitant emotions. The ritual form hypothesis introduces new theoretical terms and principles into the study of religion, but these need to be connected with observational terms in order to research the predictions implied in this theory empirically (cf. Hermans 2009b).

Design research programmes involve the design and construction of products (Kuipers 2005, 30). The term ‘product’ should be taken broadly: the results of design programmes need not be products in a strict sense but may also be processes or their improvement. This type of research is often neglected in academia in favour of description, explanation and prediction. However, research in the field of organizations and policy is mainly design research (Van Aken et al. 2008) or policy research (Verschuren 2009). Since design programmes often use knowledge obtained in descriptive and explanatory programmes, the design process will only be considered scientific if it is not fully based on existing knowledge and techniques. That is, new theories have to be developed or new experiments have to be performed if a design programme is to be scientific (Kuipers 2005, 30). There is a long tradition of design research in education (McKenny & Reeves 2012). We have no knowledge of design research programmes in cross-religious comparative research, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist or wouldn’t be possible. One can imagine research into religious organizations which have developed a programme for religious revival. How do local communities in different contexts (regions, countries) process this programme? What factors are conducive to successful implementation in local religious organizations? Or one can imagine design research into products (instruments, tools, models) which help people to process their spiritual biography. This research programme could include the development and testing of a protocol of pastoral counselling of people in different contexts (e.g. hospital settings and religious institutions) and different religious groups (e.g. Christians, Muslims, Hindus). It could include research into the development and implementation of a programme format for television (or internet) structured according to core aspects of a spiritual biography. The knowledge acquired in such research should solve the question: under which conditions in terms of time, space and budget, communicative skills needed by presenters, sequence, interviewing style and theological content can the product achieve specific goals of creating understanding in the spiritual biography of other people and in their own biography?

Finally, explicative research programmes are directed to concept explication, that is the formal construction of simple, precise and useful concepts that are, moreover, similar to given informal concepts (Kuipers 2007, 62). The strategy of concept explication starts by deriving conditions of adequacy from the
intuitive concept to be explicated and, if relevant, from empirical findings, which the explicated concept will have to satisfy, and evident examples and counter-examples that the explicated concept has to include or exclude. Explanation may go beyond what the explicated concept has to include or exclude and beyond the explication of intuitive concepts. It may also aim at the explication of intuitive judgments, that is intuitions, including their justification, demystification or even undermining. An example of concept explication in comparative religion is J.Z. Smith’s study of the concepts of similarity and difference in comparison, and their relationship. But one can also think of critical approaches in comparative religion directed to the entanglement of religion with social and cultural power structures (Urban 2004; Sakaranaho 2005). Explicative research focused on the critical study of concepts should be strongly encouraged in comparative research because of the perennial danger of using the intuitive ideas of a specific religion as a (implicit) criterion of comparative concepts of religion in general.

2.3 Object of Cross-religious Comparison

What is the object of cross-religious comparative research into religion? The obvious answer is religion, or the religiosity of persons who belong to a particular religious tradition. But in the study of religion this answer is less self-evident than it seems. Scholars of religion strongly disagree about the definition of religion. This poses a major problem for all researchers of comparative religion when it comes to their research object. In this section we examine two major questions. The first is the question whether religion, and more specifically religious experience, is something unique (or *sui generis*). Put differently, should our definition set religion apart from everything else in life, both in human experience and in human culture? The second problem regards the kind of definition of religion we should opt for. This is related to the question of the distinctiveness of religion. Is this distinctiveness inherent in religion, a function of religion, or is it located in something outside religion?

Is religion unique or *sui generis*? The answer to this question splits the field of research into different camps: scientific study of religion and theology. The arguments pro and con in the different disciplines are basically the same, hence we see this as one debate. In historical perspective a *sui generis* approach to religion was dominant until four decades ago: for Mircea Eliade the essence of religion or religious experience was the sacred;⁵ for Rudolf Otto

⁵ Cf. Eliade (1958, xiii): “a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence
(2004/1917) it was the numinous; and for Gerhardus van der Leeuw (1963) it was divine power. For Schleiermacher (1799/2008, 46) it was the experience of something great which makes a person feel completely dependent (German: schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl). This preference for a sui generis approach has shifted dramatically in recent times in favour of counter arguments. The two main arguments in favour of such an approach are: (1) a common core model of religious experience, and (2) the need to base our knowledge of religious experience only on data provided by religious subjects (Taves 2009, 20).

The common core model refers to common features of religious experience relating to the transcendent. These common features are often connected with mysticism (see chapter 4 of this book). Arguments supporting this claim are that this type of experiences is difficult to explain in naturalistic terms (Davis 1989); strong empirical evidence of mystical experience in research (cf. Hood 2006); and reports of mystical experience that is not the subject of cultural transmission of any religion (cf. Hood et al. 2009, 375ff). The second argument stresses that religious experiences are reported by subjects and need to be treated as data for scientific research. This is the way religious subjects interpret their experiences and one cannot override their understanding. Wayne Proudfoot, a philosopher of religion, has labelled this tendency to override the understanding of the subjects themselves as descriptive reductionism. “Subjects' experiences, that which the researcher seeks to explain, must be described in a way that the subjects would recognize” (Taves 2009, 89).

What are the arguments against a sui generis approach? In the first place, research based on a sui generis approach takes for granted what needs to be ‘proven’. From the outset the researcher takes it for granted that the experience is religious (Taves 2009, 22). There is no way to falsify this claim. By the very choice of certain subjects (notably their specific experiences, practices, feelings) the research result is already known: this is a religious experience with common core characteristics. This puts the study of religion outside the scientific community, which presupposes possible falsification of any claim in empirical research.6 Secondly, a sui generis approach restricts comparison to similarity and overlooks difference. This has given the whole field of comparative religion a bad name (see critique by Smith in 2.1 above). Religious experience is not to be compared with anything else in personal or collective life. It

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6 We do not understand the principle of falsification in a ‘strong’ rationalistic way (see above). A scientific claim needs to be put to the test by epistemic communities other than our own and by researching subjects who can possibly falsify this claim.
can only be ‘compared’ with the same (if one could call this comparison at all!). A *sui generis* approach “sets the study of religion apart and protects it with taboos against comparing it with nonreligious things” (Schüssler-Fiorenza 2000; Taves 2009, 14). This implies that comparative research into religion does not include nonreligious experiences, because there is no ground for comparison. Religious experiences can only be compared with religious experiences. Thirdly, a *sui generis* approach obscures something that scholars of religion should study, namely the process whereby people constitute things as religious or not (Taves 2009, 21). They ‘essentialize’ the bond between an experience and the ascription of religious meaning to the experience. How and why subjects ascribe a specific meaning to this experience is beyond questioning. One simply assumes that this meaning is connected with this experience. Fourthly, a *sui generis* approach takes the subjects’ claims about their experience (of the transcendent, sacred, divine power) to be true in a ‘strong’ sense (Taves 2009, 89). It seeks to base scientific knowledge of religious experiences on the truth claims of subjects. In doing so, it overlooks the difference between the way subjects describe their experiences and the way researchers describe them. One can also be true to the claims of religious subjects “in a weaker sense if we take subjects’ accounts of their experience as a description of what needs to be explained, without assuming that we need to explain it in their terms” (Taves 2009, 89). A final critique of a *sui generis* approach is that religious experience is a type of experience ‘before’ beliefs and attitudes are linked to it. The assumption is that there is an immediate apprehension of the absolute or an immediate experience of mystical union, which is only later interpreted by the subjects in terms of certain beliefs or attitudes. Cognitively one cannot think of human experiences unconnected with the symbolic meaning system of subjects or their emotions. This critique does not have to be taken to the point that we recognize only culture-sensitive processing of experiences (Taves 2009, 93). There is also culture-insensitive (bottom up) processing of religious experiences, for example those studied by research programmes based on cognitive science of religion.

In line with the foregoing critique we reject a *sui generis* approach to cross-religious comparative research. We do not regard religion (especially religious experience) as something completely different from everything else in personal and societal life. Still, we need to define our research object (religion) as distinct from (although not incomparable with) other cultural phenomena. If we were unable to distinguish religion from other personal and societal phenomena, the study of religion could just as well be cultural studies. So how do we define and demarcate religion? There are three possible ways to identify this distinctiveness: by locating it in the substance of religion, in the function
of religion or in something beyond the religious. We outline each of these approaches and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

In a substantive definition the distinctiveness of religion is associated with some key internal features (experiences, practices, beliefs, emotions) which are considered religious by a specific epistemic community. “These features may be the necessary and sufficient qualities for designating a given phenomenon as ‘religious’, or they may constitute elements of a system of ‘family resemblances’ whereby no single feature is absolutely required for a phenomenon to be – more or less – religious” (Arnal 2006, 26). The feature mostly associated with substantive definitions of religion is reference to a supernatural or extra-mundane reality, for example supernatural agents like gods, ghosts, spirits, buddhas or ancestors (Pyysiäinen 2009). These supernatural realities are not necessarily essentialized or reified; they can also be identified as cultural postulates. Some ‘things’ in a culture (e.g. practices or institutions) or in individual or collective experiences (beliefs, emotions, desires, intentionality) are seen as religious if they put subjects in touch with the supernatural. This can be done in two ways: such ‘things’ are either manifestations of the supernatural, or subjects can relate to the supernatural via these ‘things’ (e.g. in prayer, contemplation, offerings). In the first case, human subjects are the patients of supernatural agents; in the second case supernatural realities are the patients of human actions (McCauley & Lawson 2002). Which features are considered religious depends on the researcher’s epistemic community (embedded in a specific research programme) and the objects (religious individuals and communities) under investigation. In a comparative research programme studying different Christian traditions a substantive definition will have more specifically Christian features. In a comparative research programme studying different religions a substantive definition will have features shared by all the religions involved.

Characteristic of a functionalist definition is that the content of ‘religion’ is arbitrary (Arnal 2006, 27). What is ‘sacred’ for one person is ‘profane’ for another: the distinction is purely formal. It is not content that defines religion, but some fixed cultural, societal, political or psychological role (cf. Arnal 2006; Platvoet 1999). A functional approach to religion focuses on the role and ef-

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7 Cobb (1990), for instance, has a clear preference for a functional definition in comparative research into religion; at the same time he stresses the need to describe religious phenomena in the cultural context in which they need to be comprehended. “There is no such thing as religion. There are only traditions, movements, communities, people, beliefs and practices that have features that are associated by many people with what they mean by religion” (Cobb 1990, 82). Also: “I see no a priori reason to assume that religion has an essence or that the great
fects of religion in personal and societal aspects that cannot (in a substantive sense) be called religious. Put differently, religion is defined exclusively in terms of its practical role or function. A well-known example in the study of religion is Durkheim’s distinction between sacred and profane. For Durkheim the sacred refers to “the feeling of effervescence” that accompanies occasions of communal solidarity. Religion is thus defined by its social function rather than by any distinctively religious content (cf. Arnal 2006, 25). According to this definition the flag of a country can be a religious object. On the other hand, magic is excluded from the category of religion because of its private character: it cannot fulfil the social functions which Durkheim has in mind in his definition of religion.

A third type is a reductionist definition. It is not always recognized, in that it is seen as a variant of the functional definition (Arnal 2006, 27). What we defined as functionalist can also be regarded as a non-reductive type of functionalist definition. Scholars using a ‘common core model’ (notably phenomenologists of religion) sometimes speak about a reductionist definition of religion if religious experience is stripped of its unique attribute of referring to a supernatural reality. This is not the same as what we call a reductionist definition of religion. A definition of religion is reductionist if religion is nothing but a social factor on a societal level or a psychological factor on a personal level (Van der Ven 2010, 97), or the result of a neurological process. Here religion is reduced to something which is not religion. For example, Marx defined religion in terms of its function of offering consolation for the afflictions of this world. Freud identified religion in terms of its role as a neurotic outlet for the social need to repress anti-social drives (Arnal 2006, 25). Some explain religion exclusively in terms of neurological brain processes.

How do we evaluate the different definitions’ usefulness for cross-religious comparative research. Both substantial and functional definitions are suitable for comparative research. A reductionist approach is less suitable, because the distinctiveness of religion evaporates into something nonreligious. The weakness of a functionalist approach is that there is no clear demarcation of the object of comparative research. Its criteria of what makes phenomena religious are too broad. The research object is clear on the basis of these criteria, but it is unclear what to exclude (Arnal 2006, 28). For this reason we prefer a

religious traditions are well understood as religions, that is, as traditions for which being religious is the central goal. I certainly see no empirical evidence in favour of this view. I see only scholarly habit and the power of language to mislead. I call for a pluralism that allows each religious tradition to define its own nature and purposes and the role of religious elements in it” (Cobb 1990, 84).
substantive definition in comparative research into religion. There is a second reason. However provisional and in need of justification by research and critical debate in ever widening epistemic communities, a substantive definition tries to capture religion by means of some features of the phenomenon that presents itself in human life as religion or the religious. This type of definition also includes (or is in the process of including) the meaning of religious ‘things’.

From a cognitive perspective one can distinguish between different aspects or dimensions on which the description and explanation of the religious can be based, namely form, function, structure and meaning (Jensen 2004, 53). For example, a (religious) ritual has a certain form, like the use of offerings, the presence of special ritual agents or the ritual element which links God with the ritual (cf. McCauley & Lawson 2002). The same ritual also has a function, like establishing communication with a supernatural agent or establishing a community of believers. The structure of the ritual refers to the arrangement underlying the form (e.g. the structure of a rite of passage in Van Gennep’s sense). Meanings are implied in the intentionality of the actors, that is what they have in mind when performing a ritual. Substantive definitions (can) include the (religious) meaning for the actors, which is excluded in functional and reductive definitions. We therefore opt for a substantive definition in our research, in which we consider differences in the religious meaning system to predict differences regarding religion and conflict. The religious meaning system contains descriptive beliefs about the self, the world and contingencies and expectations, as well as prescriptive beliefs about goals, actions and feelings connected with supernatural agents (Silberman 2005a; 2005b; see chapter 8 of this book). The content of this belief system tells us which beliefs, feelings and expectations in the minds of religious believers are associated with religious violence. We need to know the content of this meaning system, because the same religion can be a source of peace and human fulfilment and a source of the most extreme forms of violence (Juergensmeyer 2003). We cannot restrict ourselves to the person’s religious self-categorization (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.), because one cannot brand certain religious traditions as violent and others as nonviolent without further qualifications. Believers of the same religion can have both ideas which support violence and ideas which engender nonviolent attitudes. Hence we need a substantive definition of religion (with specific attention to the meanings in the minds of adherents of different religions) to define our object of cross-religious comparative research into religiously inspired conflicts.

That does not mean that a substantive definition is problem free. On the contrary: why should we assume that certain features are important to demarcate a ‘thing’ as religious? One can hardly determine what religion is without...
explaining how it works and where its origin lies. Concepts or phenomena cannot be characterized as religious in their own right: they derive this qualification from an overall framework of concepts and codes, in terms of which they are interpreted as religious. Detailed description of the meaning of religious concepts is virtually impossible if it excludes their function. But it is equally difficult to pin down religion in purely functional terms, that is in a manner totally divorced from whatever concrete form that religion assumes. We need to be aware of these questions in order to open our categories to debate in wider epistemic communities than our own.

2.4 Insider and Outsider Perspective

In what terms (categories, concepts, ideas) is it possible to understand and explain the religious (practices, beliefs, experiences, etc.), and to what extent can we understand and explain the religiosity of other persons, communities and traditions? This thorny question has divided comparative religious researchers up to this day. We classify the question under the insider-outsider perspective in cross-religious comparative research into religion. With due regard to the *emic/etic* debate in the study of religion, we clarify the insider and outsider perspectives. We argue that the two perspectives need to be interrelated in comparative research, and clear up some misunderstandings about this distinction.

The insider-outsider distinction refers to the epistemic community from which categories are derived and in which the research findings are formulated. Do terms used in the research come from insiders (e.g. participants in a religious practice or those with religious experiences) or from outsiders (i.e. academic scholars or non-adherents of the religious tradition concerned)? Every inquiry, both scientific and non-scientific, starts from knowledge that is familiar. What is known to the researcher? Scientific inquiry aims at new knowledge, but it can only do so based on existing knowledge. In section 2.1 we touched on this issue when we formulated the fourth rule of comparative research into religion, namely that the goal of comparison is generalization of our second-order categories or theories. According to Smith comparison often triggers surprise (i.e. new knowledge), leading to correction of our description and categories (i.e. existing knowledge). Smith (2004, 30) cites the following example: “[...] the theoretical second-order language appropriate to one domain (the known/ familiar) may translate the theoretical second-order language appropriate to another domain (the unknown/ the unfamiliar). Perhaps the strongest example of this procedure in the study of religion is Durkheim's
translation in *Elementary Forms* of the language appropriate to ‘religion’ (for him, in this work, the unknown) into the language appropriate to ‘society’ (for him, in this work, the known).”

*Emic* and *etic* are technical terms that Pike (1967) originally derived from the suffixes of the linguistic terms ‘phonemic’ and ‘phonetic’. Phonemic refers to any unit of significant sound in a particular language and phonetic refers to the system of cross-culturally useful notations that represent these vocal sounds. Pike (1967) used these technical terms to indicate to what extent the terminology of foreign cultures is used to describe a given tradition. In religious studies, too, this dichotomy is used to indicate to what extent the description and analysis of a tradition employs the terminology used by its actual adherents. In an emic approach a tradition is described in terms of the conceptual framework and interpretive religious codes and super-codes found in the tradition under investigation. An emic approach to religion seeks to describe religious concepts and the concomitant feelings and behaviours as closely as possible in accordance with the informant’s own description (i.e. the believer or the religious tradition in question). An etic approach seeks to organize, systematize and ultimately compare the collected data in the terminology of a conceptual framework designed by the researcher or his/her research tradition. The etic tradition is detached from the religious tradition under investigation and makes use of extraneous concepts, in terms of which the data are reinterpreted or defined. It can therefore treat several cultures at one time. The *emic* approach is culture-specific and is applied to one culture at a time (Pike 1999, 28).

Insider perspective refers to the religious person, community or tradition in terms of the knowledge of that epistemic community. This is not the same as information presented by that person, community or tradition. The researcher can be seen as someone who is learning to understand the knowledge of the other. The outsider perspective takes as its knowledge base second-order categories from scientific theories and uses that knowledge to understand a religious person, phenomenon or tradition. In both cases the researcher is an outsider (i.e. belonging to the academic epistemic community), who adopts either an insider or an outsider perspective. The study of religion is not to be confused with the production of religion (or ‘religion-in-the-making’), just as academic linguistics is not about the production of language (i.e. as a user of language). The researcher belongs to the academic community and adopts an insider or an outsider perspective. If one adopts an insider perspective, the knowledge one builds as a researcher is informed by and formulated in terms of the knowledge of a particular religious person, community or tradition.8

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8 A researcher never copies the research object: “a theory, a model, a conceptual category cannot be simply the data writ large” (Smith 2004, 31). The researcher’s terms (theoretical notions)
suppose as researchers that we have access to this insider knowledge. If we were completely ignorant of this knowledge base, we could not adopt an insider perspective. We would stray into unknown territory without any clue about what we are seeing. The categories we use from an outsider perspective are general, transcending the specific research object (i.e. the religions or the religious people that we are studying). As researchers we must have some knowledge (the known/familiar) on which to base our research. We are not aliens coming from an alien planet! We are always in medias res, that is, in the midst of understanding the research object based on what is known about it (McCutcheon 1999, 10). In a cognitive paradigm all knowledge reflects an epistemic community. The insider perspective reflects the epistemic community of our research object (i.e. the religion under investigation); an outsider perspective reflects an object-invariant position beyond a specific religious community, tradition or phenomenon. Every research object can be studied from both an insider and an outsider perspective. For example, we can research the experiences of God’s presence in the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist. From an insider perspective his presence is closely connected with the bread and wine blessed by the officiant in the liturgy (e.g. the priest) and shared by all the communicants. From the insider perspective the bread and wine are the ‘real’ presence of Jesus Christ. Based on the knowledge of the Catholic epistemic community, the experiences of participants in a concrete ritual (such as the pope’s open air Eucharist on World Youth Days) are researched. This knowledge is based on second-order rather than first-order terms. For example, the researcher uses the phrase ‘holy bread/the consecrated host as the real presence of God’, while the participants express themselves in sentences like: “It tastes a bit like heaven” or “When I received the bread at the communion I felt God’s presence” (cf. Hermans 2009b). The same ritual can also be researched in an outsider perspective, such as the ritual form hypothesis (McCaulay & Lawson 2002). This theory developed from a cognitive paradigm, that is the perspective of cognitive constraints placed on ritual participants by the form of the ritual. The epistemic community comprises academic scholars studying religion from the perspective of cognitive science of religion. The assumption is that people intuitively search for agency in the ritual, especially for a culturally postulated supernatural agent (God). Two core principles of the ritual form hypothesis are superhuman agency (PSA) and superhuman immediacy (PSI) (see above). The ritual form hypothesis classifies the Eucharist as a special agent ritual, in which the ordained priest mediates God’s agency and bread

are always second-order; not to be confused with first-order terms of the religious persons who are being studied.
and wine are considered to be a ritual element entailing the direct presence of a supernatural agent. It is the same ritual, but expressed in terms of another knowledge base. In cognitive science of religion scholars claim to have knowledge about the cognitive constraints which they apply to the field of religion in order to build new knowledge.

The next question is which perspective is preferable in comparative research into religion. Logically there are three positions, which can all be traced in the study of religion (McCutcheon 1999). Some scholars claim that it is only possible to study our research object from an insider perspective. In the study of religion this position is pre-eminently associated with the phenomenology of religion (Allen 2005). Other scholars claim the reverse: it is impossible to study religious experience, ideas, feelings, practices, et cetera from an insider perspective, because these phenomena are opaque to the researcher. The only possible position for the researcher of religion is an outsider perspective (McCutcheon 1999, 4). The third position rejects this dichotomy, and accepts that is possible to understand our research object (the other) from both an insider and an outsider perspective. We will call this third approach the reflective position (McCutcheon 1999, 8; Van der Ven 2010, 116). The ideological battle between these different positions can be reduced to one basic question: is the knowledge base of one specific epistemic community the only possible way of studying religion, or is every knowledge base relative, that is dependent on the epistemic community which formulates the research object in terms of what they profess to know? Following a ‘weak’ rationality, we reject any claim that some epistemic communities have greater knowledge of a research object (the other) than other epistemic communities. An insider perspective is no better qualified to understand the other than an outsider perspective. And an outsider perspective is no less capable of understanding the other than the insider perspective. In both cases the researcher adopts a perspective, and in doing so, adopts a specific knowledge base from which religious phenomena are studied. From a reflective position the insider and outsider positions are not mutually exclusive. In terms of a ‘weak’ rationality it is not only possible but also necessary to expose the knowledge of our epistemic community to evaluation by wider epistemic communities. The whole academic community is ultimately the forum where we should offer our knowledge for critical evaluation, not

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9 McCutcheon distinguishes between four positions. He defines one position as neutral to the truth claims of the research subjects (McCutcheon 1999, 6–7). McCutcheon introduces a new dimension to distinguish this position from the other positions. Logically one can only distinguish between types on the basis of the same dimension (here either insider or outsider perspective).
just here and now but to all future researchers. At the same time we should bear it in mind that researchers and research programmes have a limited capacity to evaluate their findings in ever expanding epistemic communities. This limitation is not problematic as long as we remember that the ultimate forum for evaluation of all knowledge is the community of inquiry ‘without limits’.

In this process of expanding evaluation and reflection an outsider perspective has some benefits compared to an insider perspective. Following Van der Ven (2010, 112–113) we formulate three advantages in terms of the diachronic (length), synchronic (breadth) and abstraction (height) levels of academic knowledge of religion. An outsider perspective has advantages over an insider perspective in that it can include religious phenomena in different times and places. This is illustrated by the difference between an insider perspective on the Catholic Eucharist and the ritual form hypothesis as an outsider perspective. The ritual form hypothesis enables one to study rituals in different historical periods and places beyond the institution of the Eucharist in the 2nd century Christian community and the doctrine of the ‘real presence’ after the 12th century. This diachronic perspective can be extended beyond the Christian era and to other geographic regions (Egypt, the Far East). The same applies to a synchronic dimension of knowledge: an outsider perspective is better able to include different kinds of religious phenomena (e.g. different rituals or different religious experiences) in the knowledge base of a research programme. For example, the ritual form hypothesis enables one to study different types of rituals of different religions and not just the specific type of one religion (e.g. the Eucharist). Finally, it is easier to reach a higher level of abstraction from an outsider perspective. For example, with the help of the ritual form hypothesis one can study rituals on a higher level of abstraction, which the concept of the Eucharist does not permit. The two principles of superhuman agency (PSA) and superhuman immediacy (PSI) are formulated more abstractly than the Eucharistic idea of transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The fact that an outsider perspective has advantages in cross-religious comparative research into religion does not mean it is superior to an insider perspective. A reflective approach in comparative research presupposes mutually critical interaction between different perspectives. This also implies that an insider perspective can understand or explain a specific phenomenon which an outsider perspective cannot. For example, in a study of an open air Eucharist researchers registered that the fellowship between participants was experienced by participants as moments of God’s presence. The ritual form hypothesis cannot explain these experiences, because it connects cognitive
constraints with the form of rituals. From an insider perspective (e.g. Catholic sacramental theology) the idea of a community of believers is crucial for the ritual practice of the Eucharist (Hermans 2009b). This challenges the ritual form hypothesis to broaden its knowledge base in order to be able to comprehend the experience of these participants.

The decisive distinction between the insider and outsider perspectives is thus not the source of the knowledge but the aim. In the outsider perspective categories (beliefs, practices, feelings, organizations etc.) of religious persons and communities are translated into scientific categories that permit interreligious comparison (Van der Ven 2010, 112). In the insider perspective researchers try to formulate their research findings in terms of the categories used by the religious persons or communities themselves. The aim of the study is to deepen understanding of the categories from the perspective of that religion. Bearing this distinction in mind, we will clear up some misunderstandings about the distinction between insider and outsider perspective – what it does not mean.

The first misconception connects the terms ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ with different research goals. Research from an insider perspective is defined as descriptive research, and research from an outsider perspective is identified with explanatory research (Van der Ven 2010, 108). Harris (1979), for example, argues that the goal of comparative research into religion is not to describe what insiders might mean by their beliefs or practices, but rather to find explanations of why they do what they do or think what they think. The question of the research goal is not to be confused with the question of the possibility and extent of knowing the other. It is possible to do descriptive research from the perspective of both insiders and outsiders; and one can do explanatory research from both an outsider and an insider perspective. For example, one can describe a ritual (a Catholic Eucharist or Hindu offering of fire) from the perspective of the insider (participant) but also from the perspective of the outsider (scholars using the ritual form hypothesis) as a special ritual agent.

Secondly, it is a misconception to identify the insider/outsider distinction with ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-distant’ (Geertz 1999, 51). “Experience-near is, roughly, one that someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied to others. An experience distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims” (Geertz 1999, 51). The distinction between insider and outsider is not a difference in closeness to experience or about the
way individuals express themselves about this experience. How can one distinguish between words that are experience-near and experience-distant? Geertz is aware that this is a matter of degree, but at the same time gives as an example ‘fear’ as more experience-near than ‘phobia’. But this is not necessarily the case: ‘fear’ can be a concept in an outsider perspective, and ‘phobia’ can be a word used by interviewees to describe themselves. The decisive question is this: to which knowledge base or which epistemic community does a category (term, concept, idea) belong? This can be the epistemic community (religion, religious community) that is the object of our research. But in this case, too, our knowledge is not the same as ‘the data writ large’ (Smith). The categories used in an insider perspective are again second-order categories (see 2.1). The labels or words may be the same as the ones used by our research subjects, but they are couched in terms of our insider knowledge as second-order categories.

A third misconception is to equate the insider perspective with belief and the outsider perspective with unbelief (Van der Ven 2010, 109). The distinction insider versus outsider perspective refers to the faith of the believers who are our research subjects. The heart of religion is belief in God (or generally, a supernatural agent). Can scientific researchers from an outsider perspective (i.e. a nonbeliever’s perspective) understand the object of their faith, that is God? This question can also be formulated the other way round: can religion (from an outsider perspective) be understood if one believes in God (i.e. an insider perspective) (McIntyre 1999)? Each perspective speaks its own language, but they cannot understand each other! However, the insider versus outsider distinction is not between belief and unbelief. In principle, our academic theories are never about religious truth claims about God. Truth claims feature in our theories only indirectly if we base our research on a substantive definition of religion, that is our research subjects state that they have experiences ‘coram Deo’ (before God). Our knowledge, also from an insider perspective, is about subjects who claim to experience some supernatural agent (God). Our academic knowledge is about human subjects, human practices, human experiences – period! This also implies that the researcher does not have to be an adherent of the religion under investigation. As we said before, one adopts an insider perspective. I do not need to believe in dharma, karma or moksha in order to understand from an insider perspective what Hindus mean by these concepts. If you cannot adopt an insider perspective, don’t study a religious phenomenon or religion from an insider perspective.

A fourth misconception is to equate the insider perspective with normative claims and the outsider perspective with neutrality or methodological agnosticism (Van der Ven 2010, 109–110). The idea is that researchers who adopt an
insider perspective immerse themselves in their research subjects and take over the latter’s normative claims. Researchers with an outsider perspective distance themselves from their research object and are therefore neutral and objective. This distinction is nonsense, because there is no research without normative claims – neither from an insider perspective nor from an outsider perspective. Every researcher needs to explicate the normative implications of the research. This is certainly true of comparative research into religion, which has often neglected its normative (and political) implications (Urban 2004). Even simple categorizations like native versus non-native religions have an enormous impact on society, as can be seen in India where Christianity is defined as non-native (i.e. foreign) by Hindu nationalists. This definition may become a ground for legitimating violence against Christians. Every researcher has a normative stance which has political implications outside the academic community. Researchers have an obligation to explicate this normative stance. This is different from impartiality and objectivity. Impartiality means that the research object should be studied independently of our own (non-)belief and our own interests. Van der Ven (2010, 110) remarks that this is a regulative idea (in a Kantian sense) as opposed to a descriptive idea. Researchers should strive to be impartial, although they must realize that they will never be completely impartial. Van der Ven (2010, 110) quotes Rawls's idea of a rational and sympathetic spectator: “His own interest does not thwart his natural sympathy for the aspiration of others and he has a perfect knowledge of these endeavors and what they mean for those who have them.” If we apply this to our study of latent religious conflicts in Tamil Nadu, India, we need to be aware that all the researchers have a Christian background. We are not more sympathetic to the Christian students in our study than to Hindu or Muslim students. In fact, we are critical of all three religious groups, in the sense that we presume that all religions contain ideas which are supportive of violence alongside ideas which support a non-violent attitude towards other religious groups. We adopt a normative stance with regard to the role of women students in Tamil Nadu, because in all the different religious communities women have fewer opportunities than men. But we are impartial (or strive to be) towards the fact that a specific religion (notably Christianity) has a better track record in treating women the same way as men. Finally, some comments on objectivity. Objectivity can be used to qualify our research method in the sense that the results (description, explanation or design) depend on the research method and on nothing else. But objectivity does not apply to the whole of our research, especially not to the knowledge claims of our epistemic community. The reason is that these claims are connected with a specific epistemic community; they can never profess to be objective.
Finally, research programmes can adopt either an insider perspective or an outsider perspective, but also a mix of the two like the research reported in this book. For example, dimensions of religiosity in this study are structured from an outsider perspective (cf. chapter 3). We do so by placing them in a systematic framework using a cultural theory of religion (Ladrière 1988) in combination with the distinction between institutional and personal modes of religiosity (Drisbey 1994). From a cultural perspective we distinguish between cognitive, normative and expressive systems of religiosity. The *cognitive system* refers to the whole set of representations (i.e. concepts and notions) used to interpret and understand reality. The *normative system* is the whole set of values and norms that directs actions and according to which actions are judged. The *expressive system* consists of all the mediations that make the circulation of meanings and values possible. We further distinguish between institutional modes of religiosity which are shared by members of a community, and personal modes of religiosity which are individual expressions of the religious cognitive system, the religious normative system and the religious expressive system.

Our concept of mysticism originates from an insider perspective propounded by Stace (1961) in his seminal work on mystical experience (cf. chapter 4). His conceptualization of mysticism is based on cross-cultural comparison of what religious persons in different contexts claim to have experienced. His conceptual framework comprises three constructs: (a) a distinction between mystical consciousness and its interpretation; (b) a distinction between extroverted and introverted mysticism and their core characteristics; and (c) identification of universal common characteristics. This is an insider perspective because it takes the knowledge of persons claiming to have had a mystical experience (collectively forming an ‘imaginative’ epistemic community) as a frame of reference for research. The Hood scale of mysticism (Hood et al. 1996; Hood et al. 2001) is a second-order categorization (by an academic researcher) of the knowledge of this epistemic community.

Finally, our categorization of models for interpreting religious plurality stems from an insider perspective (cf. chapter 5). These are taken from conceptualizations of Christian theologians reflecting on different positions in the relationship between Christianity and other religions. Attitudes towards religious plurality are formulated in light of the problem of how to reconcile claims to universality with religious diversity (Knitter 2002). The knowledge claim of this concept is the assumption that all world religions have a universal perspective and in their particularity or uniqueness give rise to religious diversity. Although the concept derives from an insider perspective, it is formulated on a higher level of abstraction referring to different positions (or models) in
the Christian community regarding universality claims of the Christian religion and religious diversity. The different positions or models are second-order categorizations. Here our knowledge base comes from the epistemic community of Christian theologians reflecting on religious diversity.

2.5 Selection of Data in Comparative Research

Empirical cross-religious comparative research connects data with ideas. More specifically, data (or observations) are regarded either as evidence of ideas or as proof to the contrary (Ragin 1994; Hermans 2009a). Data are everything ‘out there’ in reality, but not everything is relevant to the ideas that we want to research through comparison. This question of data selection in relation to scientific ideas is the topic of this section. Which cultures, persons or phenomena does one select for comparison? Which topics and religious characteristics are the focus of our comparison? And what criteria do we apply to make these decisions? The first and paramount issue in data selection is the knowledge aim of our research. All other questions in this section relate to this major issue.

Our theoretical notions in this section derive from socio-scientific literature on survey research (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997: Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003). This is, firstly, because the social sciences have a strong methodological tradition in cross-cultural comparative research in contrast to comparative research in religious studies or history of religion, which often lacks sound methodology (see 2.1). Secondly, we are interested in building theory about specific research populations (i.e. religious groups, local religious communities, religious institutions, etc.). A research population is a collection of individuals or subjects with at least one characteristic in common, who form the research object. Research populations can be of any size (small or large), be local or global and can span any period of time (e.g. from new to centuries-old traditions). To give some examples: a population can consist of adherents of a religious tradition, visitors at a meditation centre, devotees performing a specific religious ritual or people visiting a pilgrimage site. In the scientific study of religion we want to make claims about religious traditions as shared, cultural and collective realities. If religion is not shared, it would be impossible to speak about populations. There are strict methodological rules relating the selection of research units (sampling) to the kind of claims one can make about the research population. We think that comparative research into religion has a lot to gain from the social sciences in this respect.
2.5.1 Knowledge Aims in Cross-religious Comparative Research

Our first issue is the types of knowledge aims found in cross-religious comparative research. We distinguish between four types of knowledge aims based on two dimensions (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 20ff; cf. Van de Vijver 2009). The first dimension is the degree of robustness regarding the anticipated similarities and differences. If there are no prior ideas about the nature and size of cross-religious similarities and differences, the research is exploratory. But if there are firm ideas about (the reasons for) cross-religious differences, specific models regarding the relationship between religious and personal/contextual variables may be tested for accuracy in hypothesis-testing research.

The second dimension refers to the exclusion or inclusion of personal and contextual variables to understand cross-religious similarities and/or differences. Personal variables include participants’ characteristics that could influence the cross-religious differences observed, like age, gender, language or educational level as well as personal beliefs, values, emotions and strivings. Contextual variables are those factors in the respondents’ environment that might influence the cross-religious differences found, like degree of urbanization or level of socio-economic development. If no (or little) attention is paid to personal and contextual variables, the research is characterized as descriptive. If these variables are used as likely causes of similarities and differences, the research can be characterized as explanatory.10 In the latter case the focus of the study (here the dependent variable) is placed in a structure of antecedent and consequent variables, which explain similarities and differences between religious groups. Based on these dimensions, four types of comparative research can be distinguished, each with a different knowledge aim.

1. Exploratory descriptive research simply wants to determine if there are similarities and differences between religious groups or phenomena. The researcher has no (definite) expectations about possible cross-religious similarities or differences. No theory is available to predict the nature or level of potential differences. For the most part the focus is on a specific target variable, such as a specific ritual of forgiveness, beliefs in holy books or ideas about a supernatural agent. In reflecting on the findings the researcher can only give post hoc explanations of observed differences.

2. Exploratory explanatory research tries to explore the meaning and causes of cross-religious differences with the help of personal and contextual var-

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10 Van de Vijver and Leung (1997) do not label the positions in the second dimension. The labels ‘descriptive’ and ‘explanatory’ are based on Segers (2002, 119). We do not include the third dimension (structure-oriented versus level-oriented) that Van de Vijver (2009) adds in a more recent article.
ables. Usually a large set of variables is included, because there are no specific hypotheses available for testing. But relevant variables are identified beforehand that are likely to be helpful in interpreting observed differences.

3. In descriptive hypothesis-testing clear expectations based on previous research into cross-religious similarities and differences are put to the test. This type of comparative research tests, for instance, whether findings obtained in one religious group (in a specific context), can be generalized to other religious groups in similar or different contexts. Or it validates cross-religious differences found in a specific context (e.g. between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia) when generalized to other contexts (e.g. Muslims and Christians in the Philippines). However, little attention is paid to characteristics other than the target variable. Personal and contextual factors that might help to explain cross-religious differences are not taken into account.

4. Explanatory hypothesis-testing is theory driven in the sense that one has clear expectations about cross-religious similarities and/or differences. By deliberately looking for cultural variation and the influence of antecedent variables this research aims at testing a theoretical model. Under which conditions does one find similarities or differences in a specific target variable? Contextual variables are crucial to test this external validity.

This book reports on an exploratory-explanatory study. We create cross-religious comparative measures of characteristics that might influence the perception of religious conflict among Christian, Muslim and Hindu respondents, for instance comparative measures of institutional religious practice, mysticism, attitudes towards religious plurality and religiocentrism among our respondents. We also include numerous socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious variables that might help us to interpret cross-religious similarities and differences. Obviously the inclusion of all these characteristics is not unfounded. The personal and contextual variables could influence the perception of religious conflict directly, as well as indirectly via the religious meaning system. But we do not have specific hypotheses based on previous empirical research about the reasons for or the nature and magnitude of cross-religious similarities and/or differences with regard to the perception of latent religious conflict among our Christian, Muslim and Hindu respondents in Tamil Nadu. Such hypotheses simply do not exist. Since we include personal and contextual variables to understand cross-religious similarities and differences but lack a strong hypothesis based on previous empirical research, this is an exploratory explanatory study.
2.5.2 *Looking for Differences or Similarities?*

A second question is how we decide what characteristics of the religious groups will be compared, and in which contexts we are going to compare different religions. Apart from the knowledge aim and the specific theoretical orientation, the answer to this question depends greatly on whether one is primarily looking for differences or for similarities between religions. (a) “If the objective is to look for differences, it may be more informative to start with cultures that are similar” (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 29). This is because comparable backgrounds reduce the number of alternative explanations of possible differences between religious groups. For example, the respondents in our project are similar in many respects: they are of the same age, live in the same geographical region and study at the same educational level. Cross-religious differences between Hindus in Tamil Nadu (India), Christians in Rome (Italy) and Muslims in Berlin (Germany) would be far more difficult to interpret. If respondents are dissimilar in many respects, one can only guess what the cause of cross-religious differences might be. (b) If one is primarily looking for universal patterns, it is better to choose research contexts which are as different as possible. If cross-religious similarity is observed in the context of what in many other respects (contextual, cultural, ethnic, gender) is very different, it is likely that one can generalize one’s findings with relative confidence. As Van de Vijver and Leung (1997, 30) put it, cross-religious “similarity in the context of drastic differences in other aspects of cultures is highly informative with regard to claims of universality”.

We have said that we develop scientific knowledge about populations. Populations are researched by observing members of this population. In socio-scientific methodology this is known as methodological individualism (Janssen 2010). Although we want to construct new scientific knowledge about a population, we gather data from its individual members. In the social sciences the study of a population through observation of its members is called a survey. Most scholars will think of statistical research using questionnaires when hearing the label ‘survey’. However, we need to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative surveys. The difference between the two types stems from differences in knowledge aim (Janssen 2010). In quantitative surveys the primary aim is to describe the distribution of variables in the population based on frequencies observed in a sample. In quantitative surveys the statistical representativeness of the sample, data quality and precision of estimates (confidence limits) are the main issues, because the aim is to make predictions about the distribution of variables in a population. In other words, the aim is to make claims regarding the generalization of the research findings in populations. “A survey is a qualitative survey if it does not count the frequencies of categories
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values, but searches for the empirical diversity in the properties of members, even if these properties are expressed in numbers” (Janssen 2010). In short, a qualitative survey establishes diversity or meaningful variation (relevant dimensions and values) in a population, while a quantitative survey focuses on the distribution of a variable in a population. To observe the distribution one has to construct scales which are comparable between different populations. In the process of scale construction the variation in a population is reduced, because to make comparisons one needs to have similar categories (see 2.6: measurement equivalence). Put more concisely, there is a reduction to what is comparable. And this is in fact the strength of a qualitative survey: its aim is to cover all (major) existing varieties of a phenomenon in a population (e.g. aim of saturation). What saturation is depends on the type and degree of saturation that is judged relevant with a view to comparing religious groups. Qualitative surveys can be used for exploratory descriptive purposes as well as for exploratory explanations.

2.5.3 Sampling

The last issue in the selection of data is sampling. “The ideal sample resembles the structure and characteristics of the whole population. In other words, it is a miniature of the whole” (Häder & Gabler 2003, 118). The definition of the population to be studied has to be clear and unambiguous. The core principle of sampling is that each person who fits the definition of the population should have a non-zero chance of being included in the sample (Häder & Gabler 2003, 119). The degree of compliance with this principle determines the degree of generalizability of the results. The simplest type is random sampling, which gives every member of a population the same chance to be included in the sample. A more complex type is stratified sampling. “The main purpose of stratified sampling is the reduction of the sampling variance relative to that given by a simple random sample” (Häder & Gabler 2003, 120). One can only do this type of sampling if a population list is provided (e.g. a register of all members of a church organization or meditation centre). A third type is a multi-stage sampling procedure. This method is frequently used when no list of members of the population is available (Babbie 2008, 232–236). Although this type of sampling is highly efficient, it is more subject to sampling error than the first two methods. In a two-stage sampling procedure the researcher would first select a sample of units or clusters that represents the population of clusters (e.g. schools with a specific religious affiliation). Next, a selection is made of respondents who represent the population of each unit or cluster. As one can see, this type of sampling is subject to two sampling errors, which make generalizability less certain. This problem can be reduced in two ways: increase
in sample size and increased homogeneity of the elements being sampled (Babbie 2008, 233). These rules should be taken into account in every sampling stage (i.e. in the selection of clusters from the population of clusters and the selection of elements in each cluster). In our research we used a two-stage sampling method. In the first stage we selected centres of higher education (colleges and universities) in Tamil Nadu, India. The respondents in each centre where then randomly selected with the help of the college authorities (see section 1.6).

### 2.6 Levels of Equivalence in Cross-religious Empirical Research

Cross-religious comparative research aims at comparing the religious characteristics of persons/communities/traditions. For comparisons between Christians, Muslims and Hindus this requires the use of qualitative survey measures. But to what extent can survey measures assess similar phenomena across different religious traditions? That is the equivalence at issue in this section. Equivalence is always a question of degree, because comparison is about difference and similarity. If there is no similarity, comparison is impossible. If there is no difference, there is no need to compare. We first discuss the issue of equivalence, and then look at the way in which equivalence can be established statistically. We restrict ourselves to survey designs of cross-religious comparative research.

What levels of equivalence can be distinguished in empirical comparative research? Before answering this question, it should be noted that equivalence is a property of a specific cross-religious comparison. Equivalence is a function of characteristics of both the instrument and the religious groups involved, and is not confined to the measuring instrument as such. If there is no relation between the concepts of one group and those of (one or more) other groups, there is no basis to pronounce on similarity and difference. In that case one speaks of construct inequivalence (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 8: Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003, 153). For example: how could we compare piety in Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the tradition of Voetius (the so-called ‘Nadere reformatie’) with the piety of Dogras in Kashmir? What construct could one use to compare piety based on a biblical understanding of strict rules of life with Dogra piety expressed in ritual dance and festivals? Here we deal with cases where comparability is possible to some degree and limit ourselves to equivalence in cross-religious empirical research.

Whether an instrument can be called equivalent, hence suitable for (application and comparison in) cross-religious research cannot be answered with a
simple yes or no. To answer this question a distinction should be made between three levels of equivalence: construct equivalence, measurement unit equivalence and scalar equivalence (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 7–26; Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003).

The first level is called construct equivalence (or structural equivalence). The measuring instruments in different religious groups refer to the same construct, while the stimuli to measure the concept differ. For example, the construct of a literal interpretation of the Bible or the Qu’ran may be considered the same, but the wording of this construct in a measurement instrument will differ. Another example is the measure of ‘religiosity’ for Muslims used by Sahin and Francis (2002; cf. Khan & Watson 2006) based on the measurement of religiosity among Christian respondents (Francis et al. 1995). While the questions differ, they refer to the same construct. Without construct equivalence intergroup comparison is not possible at all. Construct equivalence requires reflection on the nomological networks of the ‘same’ constructs in the religious groups that are being compared. This entails comparison of the structure of relationships of constructs in one religious group with the structure of relationships of constructs in another religious group. For example: the relationship of the concept ‘Bible’ with revelation, inspiration and tradition in Christianity is compared with ‘Qur’an’ in relation to revelation, inspiration and tradition in Islam. It implies comparison of wordings in which the same construct is measured in different religious groups.

The next level of equivalence is called measurement unit equivalence. It presupposes not only construct equivalence but also equivalence of the measurement unit for different groups. It occurs when the measurement unit is identical (at interval level) for different groups, but the origins of the scale are not. Origins of the scale are different when the stimuli (e.g. items) result in different scores for different groups, while these groups do not differ in respect of the measured concept. A well-known example is the measurement of temperature using Celsius and Kelvin scales. Each scale has a different origin, but the distance between points of measurement on each scale is equal. In the case of measurements in the religious domain, if measurements contain implicit or explicit references to a specific culture, the observed differences between

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11 Other authors distinguish types of equivalence – cultural, conceptual, functional, correlative and genetic equivalence – to indicate that comparability is not simply a one-dimensional property as the description of ‘levels’ of equivalence might suggest (e.g. Nowak 1977; Raivolo 1985). Equivalence entails more than simply the degree of comparability. Nonetheless levels of equivalence need specific attention in empirical cross-religious research.
religious groups may not be the result of actual intergroup differences, but may be attributable to a misfit between the measurement and specific cultural backgrounds. Some groups may be ‘advantaged’ in respect of a measurement, while others are ‘disadvantaged’ (Van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 8). To illustrate this problem we cite the debate on Kohlberg’s measurement of moral development. This instrument is criticized for being culturally biased because it is based on a specific theory of justice that is prevalent in the Western world (in this case Rawls’s theory of justice with its strong preference for individual autonomy as opposed to group interests). Moreover, in its original measurements men scored systematically higher on moral development than women. This does not mean that men have ‘higher’ moral standards than women, but the choice of specific dilemmas that measured moral development seemed to be better adjusted to men’s daily lives than to women’s (Gilligan & Attanucci 1988).

A second example comes from the measurement of mysticism developed by Hood (1975; 1997; see chapter 4). This instrument is based on a conceptual framework developed by Stace (1961), which is alleged to be cross-cultural, ahistorical and unbiased by religious ideology. This claim is challenged by constructivist scholars, who argue that there is no ‘common core’ in mysticism but that mystical experiences are (at least partly) influenced by culture. From a constructivist position scholars maintain that “persons who score high on mysticism are persons who have developed a feminine self-schema cognitive structure through which they process data in a way that emphasizes the unity of and identification with reality” (Mercer & Durham 1999, 175). If they are right, male respondents would score systematically lower on mysticism measurements than female respondents. It becomes even more complex, because gender interacts with other aspects of culture like religious upbringing and tradition. For example, one may ask whether female Muslim respondents in Tamil Nadu are disadvantaged in scoring on a mysticism measurement compared with female Hindu respondents. The only way to solve this problem in the absence of a scale origin is to administer the same measurement instrument to different religious groups and estimate the influence of cultural characteristics on group scores (Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003, 153). For most measurements in the study of religion this work still has to be done. And even for those scales which have been tested more extensively (like the Hood mysticism scale), the results are – to say the least – ambivalent. Knowing this, we should always be critical about the comparability of the measuring instruments that we use, especially when comparing the level of agreement between different groups.
The final and highest level of equivalence is called *scalar equivalence* or *full score equivalence*. This level supposes that the measuring instrument functions at the same ratio level in each group, so that the scores can be interpreted in the same way for all groups. Only this highest level of equivalence permits full score comparability. It is often difficult to decide whether it is a matter of measurement equivalence or scalar equivalence. Most comparative research takes another route, namely by trying to disprove scalar equivalence (e.g. based on Popper's falsification principle). One tries to identify possible relevant sources of bias (e.g. stimulus familiarity or social desirability) and show that “they cannot statistically explain observed cross-cultural differences in a multiple regression or covariance analysis” (Harkness, Van de Vijver & Mohler 2003, 154).

How can cross-religious equivalence be established maximally? The basis is always sound conceptual reasoning based on knowledge of the religious groups that are being compared. This is crucial on the level of construct equivalence but is also the basis of the higher levels of equivalence. To achieve measurement unit equivalence and scalar equivalence we also need to make use of specific statistical methods. In order to establish (at least) measurement unit equivalence, we use two statistical procedures. In the first procedure we assess the dimensionality of the measurement scale via factor analysis. In the second procedure we test whether the scale can be used to compare the ideas, attitudes or experiences of different religious groups by means of measurement invariance tests. See the design of analysis for the technical details of these procedures (1.7 above).

An example is our scale construction for mystical experience (chapter 4). In the first step of our analysis five items were included in the factor ‘mystical union’. In the second step, one item (“Did you ever have an experience in which you realized your oneness with all things?”) yielded low commonality in the case of Christians and Muslims. In the separate factor analysis of Hindus, this item had quite a high factor loading (.51). In the third step this item had to be excluded from our analysis in order to establish a commensurable scale. What this analysis shows is that the final scale for Hindus in Tamil Nadu underrepresents the experience of mystical union with all reality (i.e. perception of oneness). This is a powerful idea in Hinduism based on an *advaitic* (non-dualistic) view of reality. Accordingly we labelled the scale for mystical union ‘vertical mysticism’ because it did not include union with all reality. One may feel disappointed by this result in the sense that – based on this factor analysis – one cannot compare the research groups in respect of the perception of oneness with all reality. But the whole point of comparative research is to be able to say something about difference and similarity between cultural groups. One cannot compare groups in respect of incommensurable religious ideas, attitudes...
and practices. Only in this last step can we speak of cross-comparative dimensions for all groups.

2.7 Normativeness in Comparative Research

All research is normative. This is not problematic as long as normativeness is recognized and reflected upon. This is not something specific to comparative research but a necessity for any research. The thorny question is whether a normative perspective can be used in comparative research. There should be at least some ground for comparison, that is a possibility to establish similarity and difference between religious attitudes, ideas or practices under certain socio-cultural conditions from this normative perspective. There also has to be at least some common ground to establish similarity and difference. Our argument about weak rationality is relevant here: we cannot abstract from a conversational context to justify our normative perspective. Normative perspectives always originate in a specific epistemic tradition and need to be scrutinized and evaluated in a wider (trans-communal) context. This means that any normative perspective can be adopted in comparative research provided it is open to critical evaluation in the different forums of scientific inquiry, namely the scientific community, society and the religions which are studied. In this trans-communal evaluation it is possible to establish the validity of this normative perspective and a basis for evaluating different cultural traditions in ever widening horizons (both in terms of time and place, i.e. other traditions, later generations and societal conditions). We think that there are at least three positions which meet this condition. They can be identified as a critical-hermeneutic route, an abstract principle route and a pluralist-deliberative route (cf. Van der Ven 2010, 122ff).

The first route originates from a specific conception of what is normative in a specific religion. This need not necessarily be the religion under investigation. In a comparative study one can also take one of the religions being researched (e.g. the Christian tradition) and use its normative perspective to evaluate not only the ideas of Christian respondents but also those of Hindu and Muslim respondents. For the Christian students this is an insider perspective and for the other two groups it is an outsider perspective. Of course, there is no such thing as a single Christian perspective: there are many traditions in the Christian religion. It makes a big difference if one takes the normative perspective of the doctrinal authority of a Christian church or the normative stance of specific groups in that same church or religious tradition, such as a feminist group (cf. Gross et al. 2013). This route is characteristic of many
theological scholars engaged in comparative research (e.g. Valkenburg 2006), but it is also found among religious scholars who adopt the normative position of the religious group under investigation (e.g. immigrant Muslim women in a Western country). We call this the critical-hermeneutic route if – and only if – one is willing to adopt a critical stance towards the specific normative position. Put differently, one needs to seek a context of justification beyond the epistemic community of origin. If one is not open to trans-communal evaluation, this position becomes ideological, which is unsuited to comparative research because it does not permit distancing. This critical position is not outside or contrary to the hermeneutic process of understanding based on a specific normative perspective (Dreyer 2005, 13). Accordingly we labelled it ‘critical hermeneutic’: dialectically, it is midway between belonging and distancing, between ideology and utopia.

The second route we label the abstract principle route. It seeks to transcend all specific traditions in a normative evaluation while at the same time formulating a principle that can embrace the specific traditions. A good example is the notion of the golden rule which Van der Ven (2010, 125) uses in his comparative research into human rights. Versions of the golden rule are found in most world religions, Eastern and Western, and in many nonreligious worldviews (e.g. different forms of humanism). At the highest level of abstraction it comprises a negative and a positive form. Its negative form reads: “don’t do to others what you would not have them do to you”. Its positive form reads: “treat others as you would like to be treated yourself”. On an abstract level of formulation the golden rule is never connected with concrete behaviour, while on lower levels of abstraction it is connected with concrete instances (e.g. killing, stealing). The principle of the golden rule is to treat others symmetrically with oneself and to desist from asymmetrical treatment (Van der Ven 2010, 126). When I treat others asymmetrically, which easily happens in situations of unequal distribution of power, resources, social position and so on, there is a risk that I will inflict harm on them. To prevent unjust, harmful or violent acts towards others, I need to treat them symmetrically with myself. The golden rule is formulated in the perspective of ‘I’ and ‘you’, that is it is linked to specific conceptions of what socio-cultural groups and traditions understand to be good and bad. In the formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative two things change in the formulation: it becomes decentred and universalized (Van der Ven 2010, 126–127). It is decentred because it is no longer formulated as ‘I’ and ‘you’ (a specific other) but as ‘I’ and ‘he/she’ (any other). According to the formulation of the categorical imperative, “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” By the same token I and the
other are treated as members of humanity as a whole. This universalizing character of the categorical imperative rules out any restriction of the golden rule to members of certain groups. Abstract principles like the golden rule and the categorical imperative open up the debate on, for example, the understanding of human rights or religious laws to ever widening horizons of normative evaluation because of their decentring and universalizing character. In other words, the second route implies a two-way critical procedure from concrete interpretations informed by specific socio-cultural and religious traditions to the understanding of this abstract principle, and from this principle to specific interpretations in historical, cultural and contextual situations.

The third route we label ‘pluralist deliberative’. Where the first and second routes imply a normative criterion which is considered to be beyond rational doubt (albeit not in a ‘strong’ sense!), the third route implies a pluralist position vis-à-vis a normative criterion. In the case of the abstract principle route this may be less obvious than in that of the critical hermeneutic route, but this second route also has a criterion which is considered universal: it should be accepted by all in the normative evaluation of certain convictions, acts or laws. The third route goes beyond this by accepting pluralism in normative criteria of normative evaluation. It does not presume acceptance of a moral principle by all participants in a debate. The pluralist imperative implies readiness to deliberate between different, sometimes even conflicting normative perspectives on certain moral ideas or actions (Zwart 1993, 261–264). In the pluralist deliberative route, deliberation per se is the aim of normative evaluation. The result of this deliberation is an ever widening normative understanding of a specific issue. The more moral perspectives embark on the process of deliberation, the richer this reflection on a moral issue. In the long run in the human community as a whole (including the forums of the academy, society and religions) this will deepen our understanding without ever leading to a final conclusion. In our study we opt for this third route (see chapter 7). The reason is that the third route can also incorporate the normative evaluations of the first and the second route. We present our normative evaluation in chapter 7 based on the philosophical ideas of Paul Ricœur, who reflected on the thorny issue of evil throughout his scientific career. In the beginning he clearly follows a critical hermeneutic route when dealing with the symbolism of evil, specifically in the Christian tradition. He takes the second route when reflecting on absolute evil and forgiveness on the basis of the abstract principle that every human (also the perpetrator) is destined for goodness. Following this principle, he argues that one should always put good and evil on different normative planes and give precedence to the good (although evil may seem pervasive and absolute in a concrete context!). According to our reading of Ricœur, critical
hermeneutic and abstract principle reflections are grounded in a fundamental notion of the aporetic character of evil in human thinking. Neither thinking nor moral action can resolve the aporia in the experience of the suffering person. The impossible act of forgiveness, which nevertheless emerges in history, is equally resistant to our thinking. Accepting this aporia in our thinking, Ricœur pursued ever new avenues in his career to understand the moral issue of evil: via the human will, narratives of the suffering person, through the problematic aspects of memorizing and the impossibility of forgiveness. We think that this is what characterizes a pluralist deliberative route.