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 Éliade. 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.