Comparison in Religion: A Methodological Contribution

Chris A.M. Hermans
Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
C.Hermans@ftr.ru.nl

Carl Sterkens
Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
C.Sterkens@ftr.ru.nl

Abstract

How do we build theory on religion in cross-religious research? This article deals with four methodological issues in answering this question. What are the goals of cross-religious comparison? What is the object of cross-religious research? What kind of definition of religion is used in cross-religious comparison? And finally, how can we assess similar phenomena across different religious traditions? The last question is specified by the distinction of levels of equivalence in quantitative cross-religious survey research.

Keywords

cross-religious comparative research – goals – definition of religion – levels of equivalence

Introduction

In general one could say that scientific methodology has been poorly developed in the comparative study of religion. This is one of the main reasons that gave comparative religious studies a bad reputation in the academic study of religion (Smith 2004). Comparative study of religion not merely researches various religious traditions in general, but focuses on differences and similarities between religions. Building comparative theories on religion is important to make scientifically robust theories on religion. We all know the famous dic-
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tum of Max Müller, one of the founding fathers of the science of religion: “He who knows one, knows none” (Müller 2002, 113). Müller borrowed his statement from scholars in comparative philology, who adopted Goethe’s paradox: “He who knows one language, knows none”. This paradox reveals that there is a difference between knowing how to speak a language and to know what language is. By studying one religious tradition, we cannot be sure if phenomena which we deem to be religious are defining what we understand to be religion. On the one hand we may include elements which are not really important to religion, but on the other hand we could ignore relevant aspects because our understanding of religion is too limited. Less known is the statement of Max Müller that scholars in one religion (theologians) learn more about their own religion (Christianity) by examining other religions. Through the comparative study of religions, “we shall learn to appreciate better than ever what we have in our own religion. No one who has not examined patiently and honestly the other religions of the world, can know what Christianity really is” (Müller 2002, 64).

In this article, we like to address four major methodological issues. The first issue refers to the goals of comparative research. We argue that all research is part of a research programme. In theology or religious studies this is often not the case. We see this as a major problem in our discipline and one of the reasons why theory development on religion is so slow. Another problem is that descriptive research is dominant in the comparative study of religion. Here too, research programmes can help us. Research programmes include four types of research based on their different cognitive results: description, explanation, products and concepts. The interrelatedness between different results of research is an important condition of further development of scientific theory in general, and consequently also for theory on religion.

Next we address the issue of the object of our comparative research: religion. What kind of definition of religion should we use to build comparative theories on religion? Here the important question is what do we think to be distinctive in religion? Is this distinctiveness inherent in religion, a function of religion, or is it located in something outside religion? Three types of definition on religion can be distinguished: substantial, functional and reductionist approaches. Which type of definition should be preferred in building comparative theories on religion?

The next methodological issue is the selection of data. 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