COMPARISON IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS: REFLECTIONS AND CRITIQUES

INTRODUCTION

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Within the broad field of the academic study of religions, comparison remains a central, albeit controversial, endeavor. Whether engaged explicitly or employed implicitly, many scholars have identified a troubling dual nature of comparison. On the one hand, it is seen as the “golden center” of all academic projects, the basic method that allows us to perceive data, identify questions, establish intelligibility, clarify and ultimately communicate our thoughts. At the same time, however, explicitly comparative projects have been subject to a wide range of criticisms—charges of universalism, misrepresentation, and essentialism, claims that it is anti-contextual, superficial, impressionistic, or artificial. For some thinkers, comparison is guilty of totalizing and even tyranny. At its best, these views conclude, it is “uncritical”, and thus comparative work should be avoided in favor of “area studies” and their emphasis on historical and cultural particularity. With the rise of postmodern philosophies and their relative popularity within many scholarly communities it has become increasingly difficult to find widely endorsed comparative studies, projects, or books. All said, it is important to recognize that the question remains of how to compare well. Put differently, if comparison is a constitutive part of our work (see below) and if, at the same time, we are to take postmodern criticisms seriously, the methodology of comparison still requires our attention.

Quite appropriately, therefore, Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray, the editors of A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age (2000), ask, “Wither comparative religion?” Recognizing this dilemma associated with comparison, its apparent necessity yet problematic character, the essays collected by Patton and Ray—which were first presented at the 1995 and 1996 annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR)—offer a number of welcome insights. The volume as a whole represents the most recent sustained analysis of the comparative method in religious studies that
takes seriously a number of postmodern critiques. Even so, largely due to its diversity of opinion and the sheer complexity of its subject, the book cannot be seen as a final statement on, or a solution to, the intellectual challenges facing the method of comparison. Indeed, the book never makes such a claim. Again, even with much accomplished, more work remains.

I remember Jonathan Z. Smith suggesting to me several years ago that a major impediment to the study of religion was our (most scholars’ in the field) unwillingness to stipulate what does and does not constitute our data. The unspoken assumption many operate under, it seems, is that the facts, the data, the phenomena, simply present themselves, and therefore “stipulation” at the level of data is unnecessary, or simply wrong. Too often when scholars demarcate their field of interest for a particular project (e.g., understanding a particular myth), they ignore their role in selecting and identifying what counts as data (following the previous example: other versions of the myth, preliminary narratives, means of transmission, etc.), and rely instead on habit, happenstance, or apparent historical trends. This impedes the study of religion not only because it is uncritical of the scholar’s role at the level of data, but also because it hinders scholarly conversation and debate. With no agreement as to what constitutes significant data, with unlimited perspectives, diverse interests, and varying scales of data, discussion can too easily turn into a series of only loosely aligned monologues, each party relying on “perspective” (his or her personal interest) and simply waiting a turn to speak. How unfortunate that this so aptly describes many scholarly exchanges in the History of Religions!

Recalling this conversation, and returning to the issues surrounding the comparative study of religion, I thought perhaps it would be helpful in addressing these issues to stipulate a body of data that could serve as a basis for a more focused and extended discussion of comparison. One way, in other words, to generate a more fruitful and interesting discussion about comparison would be to give a group of scholars a common starting point of shared data, in this case, a collection of methodologies of comparison. The recent publication of Patton and Ray’s *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* could provide just such a body of data, I realized. Under the aegis of the Comparative Studies in Religion Section of the AAR, I organized, for the 2001 meeting, a panel discussion devoted to these ideas. I invited a number of scholars to read and