Philippe Bornet


The study of religion as a field distinct from the sorts of training and inquiry traditionally conducted in seminaries, yeshivas, madrasas, and monasteries is intrinsically comparative. The very category of religion as something spanning cultures and periods, along with most of the terminology and corresponding concepts employed in the field, implies that the various “parochial” phenomena that form the object of study share many features and follow patterns that are discernable only when viewed from the analytical distance of comparison. The founding figures of the field (notably, E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Emile Durkheim, and Mircea Eliade) embraced this principle with gusto, taking an encyclopedic approach often aimed at providing a single, global explanation or rationale for religion in all its forms. From the middle of the twentieth century, a distaste for the overreaching or overhomogenizing excesses of such projects, along with the broader academic trend toward narrow specialization and an emphasis on the uniqueness of individual cultures, led to a widespread retreat from explicit comparison and indeed a good deal of skepticism for those who persisted with comparative studies.

The present volume, based on Philippe Bornet’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Lausanne, provides a model of comparative study of religion based on several factors. First, the author brings a very high level of erudition not only in the scholarship on religion but in the relevant primary sources, which he handles with the philological rigor possible only for someone with an excellent command of both classical Hebrew and Sanskrit — in itself a rare qualification. Secondly, the comparison itself is superbly conceived. He has chosen just two traditions, traditions which, despite some surface differences (in their conception of the divine and on the question of imagemother), have some striking parallels despite being almost totally without
contact historically: Rabbinical Judaism and Brahmanical Dharma — Bornet wisely avoids speaking of “Hinduism,” a label that covers a much wider variety of traditions — have been described as primarily “national religions,” those self-consciously constitutive of a people and handed down as a heritage. Both traditions are built upon a foundation of priestly sacrificial rites, textual exegesis by professional teachers, and (most relevantly) a home-centered religious practice marked by elaborate ceremony. Thirdly, Bornet adopts a rigorous comparative analysis that attends to the individual comparanda within the context of the traditional discourses, practices, and larger social contexts in which they are embedded — “une comparaison discursive et contrastive, défaite de toute ambition essentialiste et mise au service d’objectifs spécifiques” (p. 254; italics original). This helps him avoid the weaknesses of the early comparativists, who blithely juxtaposed disembodied, decontextualized fragments deployed in the service of a theoretical telos.

Overt comparison is so uncommon in the field nowadays that Bornet takes the trouble to spell out his method in detail (chapter 1, “Introduction et méthodologie”). He begins by acknowledging that the Christian background of the field as it developed in the West remains a looming presence insofar as the terminology and concepts used in comparison mostly developed in the context of Christian churches and discourses, and, for a long time, comparison of religions meant comparison with Christianity. This, Bornet argues, is part of the reason to undertake a thoroughgoing comparison of two religions other than Christianity. The comparison, furthermore, is not intended to cover every aspect of the traditions but to focus on one distinctive feature that they seem to share: a heavy emphasis on hospitality.

Bornet begins with four hypotheses (pp. 13–14): (1) that hospitality rules enunciated in normative texts reveal aspects of the ideal world envisioned by their authors; (2) that the logic of exchange involved in hospitality aims at realizing the ideal social system of that envisioned world; (3) that hospitality, as a temporary social relationship, favors the integration of persons at the margins of the group; and (4) that to the extent that a religion is not highly institutionalized, there is more at stake in hospitality practices. With these issues in mind, he proceeds to an in-depth, nuanced study of the two traditions, each in its own context.

Each of the two middle chapters constitutes a free-standing analysis of hospitality traditions within Rabbinic Judaism and Brahmanical Dharmaśāstra, respectively, based on the surviving classical texts of the traditions. The structure of these chapters is adapted to the peculiarities of the two traditions and of the source-texts’ particular concerns, but Bornet is careful to call our attention to those factors that in the comparative analysis will figure as parallels.