Aaron W. Hughes


Even though relatively few comparative articles are published in leading journals, comparison is a matter that lies at the heart of a discipline sometimes referred to as “comparative religion.” This “critical primer” on comparison by Aaron W. Hughes is an extended essay blown up to a slim book. Across the five chapters, the author untiringly hammers home the following four requirements of satisfactory comparative work: (1) linguistic competence or “dexterity” (pp. x, 112); (2) attention to the nuances of historical context (“historical acumen” [p. x]); (3) theoretical sophistication; (4) self-critical reflexivity and openness about the aims and ends of the artificial act of comparing. It is, of course, impossible to disagree with any of these, even though the principle of “linguistic dexterity” restricts access to comparative work to those relatively few virtuosi who master several different languages. Furthermore, Hughes recommends that we move from what he calls “global [to] local” comparative designs — “small-c comparisons ... as opposed to some grand, capital-C Comparison” (p. 54) — i.e., to the interaction of specific groups in specific settings; we should avoid comparing “religions” or phenomena across “religions” distant in space and time. Hughes advocates “the close and detailed study of the particular” (p. 77). In the spirit of a hermeneutics of suspicion he advises his readers to ignore what actors say about themselves and instead to look out “cynically” for more sinister motives behind the surface. Only this act of “re-description” qualifies as “sober” scholarship. Should that invite his readers to attempt “cynical redescriptions” of his book? For my part, I prefer to stick with his stated aims, namely “reclaiming comparison for more sober-minded and analytical purposes” (p. 51), such as showing that one’s data is not unique but exemplifies larger questions of human meaning (p. x), of “how social groups make sense of their world” (p. 54), and “finding an adequate theoretical vocabulary” (p. 58).
To a large extent, this “primer” offers a “critical” diatribe against earlier and selected contemporary scholarship. The main villains are Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade; subservient bad guys include Shlomo Dov Goitien, Stephen Prothero, and Jeffrey Kripal (who is cursorily dismissed). His main hero is Jonathan Z. Smith; other good guys are Daniel Boyarin, Bruce Lincoln, Steven Wasserstrom, and Clifford Geertz. The critique of earlier comparative efforts is not new. Accusations as articulated in this “primer” include essentialism/essentialization, reification, context- and history-blindness, philological and historical incompetence, self-serving agendas, naivété and simplification, lack of nuance, misleading claims of objectivity, paternalism, dubious political aims and backgrounds (racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, metropolitan suppression of “others”), and questionable religious agendas (apologetics, ecumenism, Christian supremacy, Protestant bias, claims of uniqueness such as biblical exceptionalism, constructions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy). In sum, comparison has been “used in the service of a host of dubious and prejudicial causes ... Muted third-terms, hidden agendas, and idiosyncratic comparanda have all been used and abused for intellectually and morally suspect purposes” (p. 113). While this critique primarily targets Eliade’s so-called phenomenology, Hughes finds a large degree of continuity to what he calls neo-phenomenology. Generally, this seems to cover all research that believes in “religions” such as Judaism or Islam as stable phenomena. The so-called Cognitive Science of Religion also gets its share of criticism. In particular, the cognitivists, who often are trained psychologists, are criticized for paying insufficient attention to historical context (pp. 110–111).

It may be worth pointing out that not all of the scholarship reviewed by Hughes claimed to be comparative in a strict sense. In the case of Eliade, for example, Hughes may have been misled by the title of the English translation of his *Traité de l’histoire des religions*. The English translation has “comparative religion” for “histoire des religions.” But that does not make this work “comparative” in a programmatic and methodological sense. I would rather call it “synthetic.” Eliade amasses “data” from widely different religions to develop and illustrate his categories, but even when he sometimes compares his “cases” with each other, this is not the main agenda. Otto’s *Das Heilige* is not a comparative book, either, even though it sometimes uses comparison as part of its argument. Otto, however, wrote a specifically comparative work, which was even translated into English (Mysticism East and West; see also his Christianity and India’s Religion of Grace). Had Hughes drawn on this book, he would have discovered some resonances with his own methodological reflections. In light of Hughes’s stated principles, it is worth pointing out that he reads the classics in English translations rather than, as he claims we must do, the original