This is the first comprehensive survey in English of research methods in the field of religious studies. It is designed to enable non-specialists and students at upper undergraduate and graduate levels to understand the variety of research methods used in the field. The aim is to create awareness of the relevant methods currently available and to stimulate an active interest in exploring unfamiliar methods, encouraging their use in research and enabling students and scholars to evaluate academic work with reference to methodological issues. A distinguished team of contributors cover a broad spectrum of topics, from research ethics, hermeneutics and interviewing, to Internet research and video-analysis. Each chapter covers practical issues and challenges, the theoretical basis of the respective method, and the way it has been used in religious studies (illustrated by case studies).

**Michael Stausberg** is Professor of Religion at the University of Bergen, Norway. He is author of *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters*, editor of *Contemporary Theories of Religion* and European editor of the journal *Religion*.

**Steven Engler** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Mount Royal University, Canada. He is a co-editor of *Historicizing 'Tradition' in the Study of Religion* and North American editor of the journal *Religion*. 
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## PART II

### Methods

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1.2
COMPARISON

Michael Stausberg

Chapter summary

- Comparing is a commonsense routine cognitive activity; there is no way of getting around comparison.
- Far beyond being a distinct method among others, comparison is an often-unacknowledged yet undeniable part of the scholarly project of the study of religion in each of its various approaches.
- There are tacit and explicit comparisons. There are different aims and forms of comparison, and comparison can be performed on different levels.
- While comparison is often referred to as a method ('the comparative method'), it is more appropriate to call it a research design.
- Comparison is embedded in various research methods.

Introduction

The French historian Marc Bloch described comparison as a four-fold project, namely (1) selecting, in one or several different social environments, two or more phenomena that, at first sight, show certain analogies; (2) to describe the lines of their evolution; (3) to observe their similarities and differences; which (4), as far as possible, should be explained (Bloch 1963: 17). Comparison is widely practiced and much discussed across the sciences, including the humanities and the social sciences.

In recent decades, comparison has been a hot topic in the non-confessional study of religion's. As we will see, this is part of a renegotiation of the identity and the legacy of the discipline. The leading journals have published relatively few examples of comparative studies, but a wide range of publications in many languages have set out to discuss the alleged 'problem' of comparison in the study of religion's, mostly resulting in defences of comparison and some suggestions on how to improve on its bad reputation. Unfortunately, there has not been much cumulative progress in this 'fractured debate' (Roscoe 2009: 26). Here are some reasons for this lack of progress:

- the majority of the available publications fail to acknowledge or even engage each other;
these works rarely draw on the vast literature on comparison in various other disciplines and fields; and

the debate deals with methodological aspects of comparison only on the surface, while in fact addressing underlying theoretical and ideological issues: e.g. views on human nature, on culture, on religion, with the result that 'social scientists have wasted an inordinate amount of time and ink talking past one another on comparativism' (Roscoe 2009: 43).

To my eyes, comparison as such is not the problem. Inadequate comparison, of course, is a problem, but so is the inadequate use of any scholarly operation; that is why all scholarly work and use of methods is subject to correction and improvement in further research. All scholarly methods can be engaged in bad faith and appropriated for various purposes, including apologetic, colonial, ideological, imperialist, racist or sexist ones. Few would blame methods such as discourse analysis, participant observation, philology or surveys if some of its practitioners were found guilty of one or several of the above-mentioned attitudes. Yet, in the case of comparison other criteria are applied, so that comparison as such is denigrated. There are several possible reasons for the apparent anomaly in evaluating comparison. To some extent, this is because the issue of comparison masks more encompassing ideological and political questions such as:

- Can and should cultures and religion be compared?
- Which political or other interests does this serve?

Moreover, the issue of comparison closely resonates with discussions about generalization and reductionism. As we will shortly see, comparison played a pivotal role in the foundational period of the study of religion's, known in some contexts and periods as comparative religion. As with similar disciplines such as anthropology, the major repositioning of the field since the 1960s has cast doubt on the role played by comparison. Some main reasons for the by now widely shared concerns and problems with comparison will be discussed below, but the major theoretical challenge to the comparative project has been the denial of fundamental comparability in religious affairs: if 'religions' are merely colonial, imaginary and rhetorical inventions, if there are no shared traits that could be juxtaposed analytically, if there is no subject matter and no object of our study, then there would indeed be nothing to compare—and the study of religion would not make any sense (Jensen 2001). This, however, is not a methodological critique but a theoretical one (albeit with clear methodological implications).

‘Comparative religion’: Early comparative projects in the study of religion's and their continued relevance

All early approaches to the modern academic study of religion's have been informed by different comparative research designs or methodologies.

In this section we will review some main examples, briefly characterize their research questions and methodological design, and point to continuities with more recent work.
1.2 Comparison

Box 1.2.1 Early advocates of comparison in religious studies

- James G. Frazer (The Golden Bough)
- Edward B. Tylor (Primitive Culture; 'On a method of investigating the development of institutions')
- Friedrich Max Müller (Lectures on the Science of Religion)
- William James (The Varieties of Religious Experience)
- Émile Durkheim (The Rules of Sociological Method; The Elementary Forms of Religious Life)
- Max Weber (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism; works on economic ethics of world religions)

Among the most famous, or notorious, practitioners of comparison are the Victorian anthropologists James G. Frazer and Edward B. Tylor. In addition to his comparative analyses of animism and sacrifice in Primitive Culture, which are widely known among scholars of religion, Tylor published an essay in which, based on data from 282 societies, he correlated the custom of ritual avoidance of mothers-in-law with matrilocally postmarital residence. This essay sparked an important debate (Tylor 1889). Frazer's The Golden Bough originated from his attempt to explain the local custom of succession of the priesthood of Diana at Aricia (near Rome). This attempt at explanation resulted in a large-scale comparative work that unfolded theories of magic and religion, sacred kingship, dying and reviving gods. The work scandalized the public because of its inclusion of the Christian resurrection in its comparative narrative (a connection which disappeared in later editions).

Frazer's and Tylor's comparative work was closely tied to (though not dependent upon) their evolutionary theories. Contemporary evolutionary theorizing continues to rely on comparative methodology, even if this often remains unacknowledged on an explicit level: the very fact of variation, which is crucial for evolutionary theory, requires a comparative assessment for its interpretation, for example in order to establish the occurrence of natural/cultural selection or adaptations. For this reason most contributions to the study of religion that operate on the premises of contemporary evolutionary theory implicitly or explicitly operate in a comparative fashion.

Comparison played a key role in Friedrich Max Müller's foundational project of establishing a science of religion, which was modelled on the successful new science of language (i.e. comparative philology). In the first of his Lectures on the Science of Religion, Müller set out to defend comparison as a promising method, in part as the foundation of 'all higher knowledge' and in part as providing the basis for 'the widest evidence that can be obtained, on the broadest inductions that can be grasped by the human mind' (Müller 1874: 8). Müller expected the comparative approach to 'change many of the views commonly held about the origins, the character, the growth, and decay of the religions of the world' (Müller 1874: 10)—new insights of which many had reasons to be afraid. Famously, Müller wished to adopt Goethe's dictum on languages ('he who knows one language, knows none') for religion: 'He who knows one, knows none' (Müller 1874: 11). This became something like the credo of the nascent field of the study of religions, and Müller was quite aware of the potential challenge a comparative perspective could pose for all sorts of religious certainties:

The very title of the Science of Religion jars on the ears of many persons, and a comparison of all the religions of the world, in which none can claim a privileged position, must seem to many reprehensible in itself, because ignoring that peculiar
reverence which everybody, down to the mere fetish worshipper, feels for his own religion and for his own God.\textsuperscript{5}

(Müller 1874: 7)

The idea that 'no religion can claim a privileged position' is what distinguished the Science of Religion from religious projects of religious comparisons, which often are produced as taxonomies of religious aberrations or as an attempt to prove the superiority of one's own god and religion. As Müller anticipated, such projects are rejected by some religious people who consider their own religion to be incomparable and who fear the implied religious equality of being categorized in a homo-genous class of 'religions' (Strenski 2006: 273); accordingly, the discipline continues to be absent from countries dominated by some religious persuasions. Recall that the very category of religion as devised by Müller is necessarily a comparative construct since no one exemplar can exhaust its meaning.

Whatever else it is, comparative religion as practiced by the Science of Religion, therefore, is a fundamentally relativizing project.\textsuperscript{6} Sometimes, scholars use this strategy deliberately. For a recent example, consider Bruce Lincoln's comparative analysis of the speeches given by the President of the United States (George W. Bush) and the founder of al-Qaeda (Osama bin Laden) on Sunday 7 October 2001. In his analysis, Lincoln shows how both speeches 'mirror one another, offering narratives in which the speakers, as defenders of righteousness, rallied an aggrieved people to strike back at aggressors who had done them terrible wrongs' (Lincoln 2003: 27). In addition to being a brilliant comparative analysis of the use of religious motives in political rhetoric, Lincoln's essay implicitly challenged chauvinist ideas of moral supremacy in the USA and in the Bush Administration.

Where Müller compared aspects of religious traditions such as books and canonical writings in order to arrive at 'a scientific and truly genetic classification of religions' (Müller 1874: 53) as modelled on the classification of languages, William James, in his Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), suggested using comparison to explore the specificity of religion. While Müller referred to comparative philology as his model science, James pointed to psychology and psychopathology, which operate by classifying unusual cases with related phenomena. Melancholy, happiness and trance-like states typically occurring in religion are only 'special cases of kinds of human experiences of a much wider scope', and even religious melancholy is first of all melanchoy (James 1987: 30). The 'distinctive significance of religious melancholy and happiness, or of religious trances' can be ascertained 'by comparing them as conscientiously as we can with other varieties of melancholy, happiness, and trance' (James 1987: 30). To better understand religious phenomena one has to compare them to the 'mass of collateral phenomena' (James 1987: 31). The alternative, which was unacceptable for James, was to treat religious phenomena 'as if they were outside of nature's order altogether' (James 1987: 30). This expresses an approach to the study of religion's nowadays termed 'naturalism'. As practiced by, for example, cognitive and evolutionary studies, comparison continues to play an important role—not least in comparisons between modes of cognition or ascriptions of experiences (Taves 2009), whether classified as 'religious' or otherwise. Ultimately, as pointed out by James, every theory of religion is based on tacit comparisons since it must be able to distinguish religion from non-religion, affairs interpreted as religious from those interpreted differently.

Émile Durkheim's main work on religion, Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse (1912) sought to analyze how religion works in the most elementary fashion by presenting a case study of the most primitive and simple known religion (according to him), namely Australian 'totemism'; this implied a form of 'tacit comparison' (Taves 1999: 277) between religion in simple and religion in complex (modern) society, where the elementary forms were altered by
1.2 Comparison

historical circumstances. Durkheim criticized the kind of vague, broad and unspecific comparison practiced by Frazer and, as if to anticipate later criticisms of comparison, he argued that social facts cannot be understood apart from the social system to which they belong so that social facts should not be compared merely because they bear some degree of superficial resemblance, but only when the respective societies ‘resemble each other internally’, i.e. when they are ‘varieties of the same type’ (Durkheim 2001: 80). For Durkheim it was ‘essential to focus as narrowly as possible’ and to base one’s comparison only on such societies and civilizations for which one has ‘the necessary competence’ (ibid.: 80).

Comparison was pivotal for Durkheim’s ambition to establish sociology as a true science, which he modelled on the example of biology. In his view—as expressed in his 1895 Les règles de la méthode sociologique [The Rules of Sociological Method]—sociology must conform to ‘the principle of causality as it occurs in science itself’ (Durkheim 1938: 128). As a result, comparison serves the function that experiments do in other sciences: it is an ‘indirect experiment’ (ibid.: 125). For Durkheim, all sociology, in so far as it claims to be a science, has to be comparative. Analogous to biology, comparison must operate on the level of the (social) species: ‘to explain a social institution belonging to a given species, one will compare its different forms, not only among peoples of that species but in all preceding species as well’ (ibid.: 138). Given that for Durkheim each phenomenon (effect) can only have one (true) cause, comparatively analyzing concomitant variation (i.e. the interplay between correlation and difference) will reveal the relationships of causality, with permanent causes leading to observed correlations among social facts (ibid.: 131–34). While Durkheim did not apply these principles to the study of religion, they are a fundamental principle of contemporary variations of statistical methods (Ragin and Zaret 1983: 737).

**Box 1.2.2 A comparative macro-study**

In a comparative-statistical study of degrees of secularization, political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart point to a clear correlation between levels of societal development in terms of (1) the existential security societies can offer its members, and (2) the rate of secularization. Norris and Inglehart, who reject a Durkheimian theory of religion, observe that ‘with rising levels of existential security, the publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during at least the past fifty years’ (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 240). They do not claim to have established the one cause behind this, and they suggest no less than six explanatory hypotheses, which they test in order to throw light on the observed concomitant variation. This is an impressive example of a large-scale comparative study sharing the methodological legacy of a focus on patterns of relations among abstract variables rather than on single historical cases. The study is based on macro-level data from 191 nations and on survey data from almost 80 societies around the globe, supplemented by several strategies to capture longitudinal trends. The comparative framework follows a so-called most different systems research design (Przeworski and Teune 1970), ‘seeking to maximize contrast among a diverse range of almost eighty societies to distinguish systematic clusters of characteristics associated with different dimensions and types of religiosity’ (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 37).

Durkheim’s analysis of religion in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* is based on a quasi-timeless example, yet statistical analysis looking at concomitant variation similarly allows for
only limited insights into historical events and sequences that impact on the data. For this reason, causal analysis can require the identification of processes that link cause and effect. Statistical correlations are therefore often supplemented by process analysis, which can corroborate, modify or even contradict statistical findings (Mahoney 2004: 88–90). In comparative-historical research, variables can have different effects depending on their timing and duration, and ‘the temporal location of events affects their impact on outcomes of interest’ (Mahoney 2004: 91).

Contrary to the variable-based strategy, as represented by Durkheim, which seeks trans-historical generalizations, for Max Weber such generalizations served another goal, ‘genetic explanation of historical diversity’ (Ragin and Zaret 1983: 743). Where Durkheim compared in order to generalize, Weber was concerned with individual cases and compared in order to understand diversity and single cases. A well-known example is Weber’s thesis that the Protestant ethic is one adequate cause (even if not the only and maybe not even the major one) of (the spirit of) modern capitalism. This thesis is unfolded in his famous book Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism] (1904–05, 1920). In addition, it is tested in a series of extended in-depth case studies on the economic ethics of world religions (with published essays on China, India and ancient Judaism, and planned essays on Islam, early Christianity and Russian Orthodoxy). By means of intercultural comparison:

Weber was not only able to show that, when the Protestant ethic was absent, modern capitalism as a rule did not arise [...] but he also indicated that similar rational-ethical influences among certain other sects in other cultural areas [...] although they did not produce capitalism of the modern Western kind, nevertheless resulted in economic rationalization and success [...] compared with the surrounding population of the same cultural areas. This seems to indicate an adequate causal relationship between the ethics of certain kinds of sects and a generalized concept of capitalism. (Buss 1999: 326)

Where Durkheim had sought to analyze the very nature of social facts, to Weber historical configurations were mainly of interest because of their cultural significance for the observer. Weber was not so much interested in the origin and functions of religion as such, but in the (motivational) impact of religions on human action, behavior, and the cultures created by interacting humans. While Durkheim challenged the analyst to free the mind from presuppositions, Weber acknowledged the impossibility of a science free of presuppositions, and he challenged observers to heuristically reconstruct their presuppositions into testable scholarly hypotheses. This strategy informs Weber’s notion of the ideal-type, which plays a crucial role for his comparative project. An ideal-type does not mirror reality; it is a model that selects and highlights elements, from complex and messy historical reality, which the observer deems characteristic or relevant for the phenomenon under investigation. Ideal-types aid in conceptualization and in the identification of adequate causes; they help to understand and to explain. Ideal-types are created by exaggerating selected aspects and, at the same time, by connecting diffuse and discrete phenomena; they are therefore necessarily one-sided, and it remains for research to comparatively establish the extent to which reality matches up to the ideal-type (Weber 1988: 191). Ideal-types don’t occur in reality (Weber calls them ‘utopian’), but reality can be compared to them. In historical reality no priests, prophets or mystics will entirely correspond to ideal-types of ‘the priest’, ‘the prophet’ or ‘the mystic’ as constructed by scholars, but the ideal-types can serve to analyze the historical dynamics of religions.
1.2 Comparison

Box 1.2.3 An ideal-typical comparative study

A recent work on the basis of Weber's methodology is Martin Riesebrodt's comparative study of fundamentalism in the USA (early twentieth century) and Iran (mid-late twentieth century). Riesebrodt advocates a rather broad definition of fundamentalism (as a form of radical tradition-ism). He elaborates a typological differentiation between different types of fundamentalism, which assists in describing historical developments (for example from an escapist subculture to a terrorist secret society) (Riesebrodt 1990: 24). Based on his analysis of the available research literature, Riesebrodt conducts a comparative analysis of American and Iranian fundamentalism with respect to similarities and differences in their profile, their ideology, their supporters and the causes for the supporters' mobilization. This results in a new interpretation of fundamentalism as radical-patriarchal movements of protest that contrast the ideal of a morally integrated religious society with that of a modern society perceived to be characterized by class and conflict (Riesebrodt 1990: 251).

An alternative to the ideal–typical approach to comparative concept analysis and formation is the prototypical approach. A prototype is not an idealized version (an ideal–type), but a best case—a central, salient, typical instance of a category as per common sense. A prototype can then serve as the starting point for comparative work. An extension of prototypes is known as 'radical categories'. Radical categories have a central case (a prototype) but also a number of purely conventional deviations or variations 'which cannot be predicted by general rules' (Lakoff 1987: 84). Consider the case of 'a surrogate mother', or a tourist church (i.e. a church predominantly used and maintained for tourists). Radical categories are comparative and allow for comparisons.

Rejecting phenomenology—jettisoning comparison?

In my impression, the project of comparative religion is intimately linked, in the shared memory of many scholars, to the phenomenology of religion. It seems that comparative approaches now appear suspicious as a result of the general move away from phenomenology as the dominant model, trend or paradigm in the study of religion's.

However, when reviewing the main work done by phenomenologists of religion, one notices that it has rarely been comparative in a technical and explicit sense. On my reading, even if Eliade's general interpretation of religion was informed by a contrast between archaic and modern religiousities, beyond cosmos and history, the work done by phenomenologists has typically been cross-religious and synthetic rather than comparative; the phenomenologists were interested more in the general structure, 'manifestations', 'typology', or 'anatomy' of religion and in constructing cross-religious categories than in comparing religious phenomena from different cultural contexts. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, their work has, in retrospect, implicitly served as a straw doll for attacks on the validity and reliability of comparison in religious studies.

One major objection has been an overemphasis on likeness rather than on difference; this criticism hits the assumed cross-cultural design of the phenomenologist categories, into which scholars had amassed data from a wide range of religions, basically in order to fill the categories up rather than to diversify them. Some critics find difference in general more
interesting’ than likeness (Smith 1982: 35), while others warn that even differences can become essentialized and thereby dangerous (Doniger 2000: 66–67). It all depends on the purpose of a given study: some may be more interested in interpreting and explaining similar or shared features while others are concerned with the singularity of the respective case—both interests require a (tacit or explicit) comparative stance. In observation, both likeness and difference capture attention and may require explanation, and in actual practice both will be necessarily highlighted in analysis.

Box 1.2.4 A phenomenological comparison

Rudolf Otto’s book West-östliche Mystik [Mysticism East and West] is one of the few explicitly comparative monographs published by a scholar often identified (even if not self-identified) as being part of the phenomenological tradition. In the first part of this book Otto discusses the likeness between the German theologian Meister Eckhart and the Indian philosopher Adi Shankara (who serve as representative embodiments of West and East respectively), while the second part analyzes differences between the two. In his introduction, Otto makes it clear that his comparative analysis points to an ‘inner affinity of basic motives of the soul of mankind’, which transcend external contexts, while he rejects the claim that mysticism would be the same everywhere (Otto 1932). While Otto’s research design can certainly be criticized on several epistemological, theoretical and methodological grounds, it is not true to say that he was interested in likeness only.

Apart from rejecting the presumed phenomenological heritage, the general scepticism towards comparison also reflects another development in the study of religion’s. Whereas earlier scholars of religion’s, in line with Max Müller’s above-cited statement, saw themselves as generalists (even though all invariably had some area of specialization), after the demise of phenomenology it is typically considered essential for scholars of religion to have primarily an in-depth specialist expertise, either on one religion (e.g. Islam), one area (e.g. Mediterranean religion or East Asian or Japanese religions), or in one field (e.g. New Religious Movements): ‘generalization was reduced to the status of an avocation’ (Smith 1995: 411). With the exception of fields such as the sociology and psychology of religion, competence when dealing with primary sources in the respective languages and fields has become of paramount importance. Comparative analyses based on a literature review are often considered illegitimate (while this would be perfectly normal in many social sciences); the high demands placed on comparative work make many scholars hesitate to attempt it. However, there are also some historical fields where comparative research is more established than in others. The study of Indo-European religions, which have comparative analysis as their very raison d’être, is an extreme case. In the recent field of so-called New Religious Movements most scholars work on more than just one religious group and ask questions (e.g. sex and conflict; apocalypticism and violence) that require comparative designs. Generally, however, the ‘emergent ethic of particularity’ (Smith 1995: 411) has led to an emphasis on context and complexity, which have been two leitmotifs in a widely shared scepticism towards, or an occasional complete rejection of, comparative research designs. Yet even an analysis of contextualized and complex cases rests on categories that are generally informed by and allow for comparative perspectives. So far, it is difficult to imagine an academic discussion entirely based on context-thick local concepts. Moreover, a rich analysis of context and
complexity often requires inter- and intra-contextual comparison, for example with regard to
diversity of contexts, differences between various actors, factors within the respective context,
etc. Scepticism towards comparisons between religions, or aspects of different religious tradi-
tions or phenomena, is also informed by an increasing emphasis on the internal inconsistency
and incoherence of religious traditions and the rejection of ‘essentialism’; in a way, then, external
comparisons have been replaced by internal ones. Yet, comparison can also be a very effective
tool for undercutting essentialisms and for pointing to diversity and variety.

Another typical concern with comparison has been the critique, often called the deconstruc-
tion, of relevant categories—beginning with ‘religion’ but extending to virtually every cate-
gory in the vocabulary of the discipline. Logically, even if not methodologically, these important
studies cannot avoid comparative perspectives: e.g. comparing how a given concept was used in
different periods, whether or not there are similar if not equivalent terms in different languages,
cultures and religious traditions, how these terms are used and understood in different
discourses, or whether other terms might be more appropriate to analyze a given set of affairs.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Box 1.2.5 Costs of and problems with comparative designs</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Requires extensive preparations</td>
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<td>• Can require various sorts of specialist expertise</td>
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<td>• Time-consuming</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Difficult to find matching sets of source materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Prone to mistakes because of complexity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Wide-ranging comparisons sacrifice depth for breadth</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Insensitive to contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Prone to confusion because of surface similarities or differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can be poorly received by specialists</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Potentially static and essentializing</td>
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One typical way of working with general categories in the post-generalist age has been the
publication of edited volumes where specialists on various religions discuss relevant aspects of
‘their’ respective expertise in relation to the topic at hand. Most of these volumes cannot be
said to be comparative in any relevant sense; they are not even cumulative or synthetic but
rather additive or juxtapositional.

An ambitious exception was the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP) directed by
the Boston theologian and philosopher Robert Cummings Neville, which in a dense
communal inquiry brought together specialists in several Eastern and Western religious tradi-
tions with theologians and sociologists. Apart from comparing religious ideas (or rather the
ideas of different religions on issues such as ultimate realities, truth and the human condition)
the CRIP was set up to explore and defend the very possibilities of comparative work in religi-
ous studies (see Wildman 2006; Neville and Wildman 2001a). In formal terms, the CRIP
suggests the following comparative procedure (the philosophical implications and historical
applications of which cannot be addressed here):

• comparative work depends upon categories, which act as ‘third terms’ to which findings
  are related;
these categories are not neutral but have an historical background (speaking of a human condition, for example, is rooted in twentieth-century existentialism, while many other categories are rooted in Western Christianity);

- the categories need to be purified, abstracted or generalized (thus becoming usefully vague, i.e. neither so unspecific to be meaningless nor so specific as to exclude from the start a range of phenomena that might be discussed in relation to the respective categories);

- potentially relevant phenomena will then be translated to (rather than merely subsumed under) the respective category, which thereby gains greater specificity and is enriched by distinctions and differentiation (comparison ‘is to say how the specifications are similar and different in terms of the category in respect to which they are compared’ (Neville and Wildman 2001a: 16)); and

- comparison is less the assertion of hypotheses than it is the very process of making and refining such assertions (comparisons are therefore always provisional and never fixed).

Not only is this a potentially endless hermeneutical procedure, which at some point in time is cut off for pragmatic reasons, but it is also inherently vulnerable to correction and misunderstanding. In order to test the validity and reliability of the comparative categories, Neville and Wildman devised a phenomenological ‘thick description’ of the religions. This seeks to describe several factors: the respective religious idea with respect to the ways in which they are expressed by adherents (‘intrinsic representation’); how the world looks from these perspectives (‘perspectival understanding’); how they relate to other ideas and which implications they have (‘theoretical representation’); their practical bearing (‘practical representation’); and their singularity, i.e. their resistance to comparison (Neville and Wildman 2001b: 202–5). In some cases, there are even negative results: i.e. no relevant findings emerge when

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**Box 1.2.6 Two examples of in-depth micro-studies**

Two substantial recent examples of two-case comparative studies, which combine in-depth philosophical and historical knowledge with an interest in general categories and an awareness of methodological challenges, are Barbara A. Holdrege’s *Veda and Torah* (Holdrege 1996) and Oliver Freiberger’s *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte* (Freiberger 2009, 2010). Similar to the procedure applied by the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, both works start with a category, for which the authors, given their previous studies, had reasons to expect the selected traditions to offer relevant examples and source materials. Both start with a relatively vague understanding of their key concept (respectively scripture and asceticism), develop their research question, give an introduction to the sources and devote the most substantial part of their study to the analysis of their textual sources (separated by tradition) with regard to a set of themes related to their category, such as creation, cognition/revelation and practice with regard to Veda and Torah (Holdrege), or statements on the spatial and temporal location of ascesis and their dealing with bodily needs in Brahmantic and early Christian sources (Freiberger). In a final part, the findings from the sources are translated into a more specific and differentiated model of the respective category, which in turn links these studies to more general theoretical discussions in the field. In Freiberger’s case, he refines the methodology by not addressing asceticism but discourses on asceticism in Brahmantic and early Christian texts; this allows him to highlight varieties not as confounding variables but as part of variety of (perceived) behavior.
1.2 Comparison

approaching a religious tradition with a specific comparative agenda; in some cases traditions may share comparable understandings of some ideas but assign a very different importance and function to such ideas (Neville and Wildman 2001b: 201).

The CRIP was interested in comparative theology. Ideas are of course only one aspect of religions that is amenable to comparison: e.g. architecture, attitudes, behavior, discourses, events, experiences, groups, institutions, objects, performances, rhetoric, roles, or the status of religions in relation to other societal systems.14

Holdrege's and Freiberger's books (see Box 1.2.6) compare phenomena across distinct and remote religious traditions. In both cases the scholars possess the philological expertise to work on the primary sources of these distinct religious traditions. This was an exceptional circumstance, and Freiberger writes in his introduction that the choice of topic was in fact dependent on his philological expertise rather than the reverse: he did not acquire this expertise in order to conduct his study (Freiberger 2009: 34). Because of the large amount of time and mental energy necessary to acquire these skills, historians of religion are as a rule much less inclined to select cases on the grounds of hypotheses or theories; in most cases the research questions arise from the materials rather than the other way around, as is the case in research traditions in history and the social sciences.

Comparison between religious phenomena in neighboring religious traditions—such as ancient Greece and Rome, or Tibetan, Japanese and Chinese varieties of Buddhism—are closer to hand; philological expertise is often acquired in combination. Such comparisons overlap with different geographical settings (Greece and Italy; Tibet, China and Japan) within larger spatial units (the Mediterranean; East Asia). There are, of course, comparisons between varieties of religious traditions on national, regional and local levels or with regard to different groups and institutions within given religious traditions and territories. There are also studies on the different fate of religion(s) in different countries or continents (such as North America and Europe). Moreover, the forms, functions and structures of a religion can be compared with respect to different periods of time. The list can go on,15 but for some obscure reason most of such comparative works are not seen as falling under 'the comparative method'.

Comparison in the study of religion's is not limited to the subject area, but also to second-order discourses such as the different historical constructions and discursive representations of religions in scholarship. Comparative analyses of different scholarly interpretations of

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Box 1.2.7 Checklist for comparative work

- Become familiar with the relevant research literature
- Become familiar with possible primary sources
- Check with experts
- Conduct a critical analysis of earlier interpretations
- Explore the research question and its feasibility
- Translate the research question into relevant concepts, categories and variables
- Decide on appropriate cases
- Investigate valid sources and select appropriate methods
- Reflect on what the respective materials are a case of
- Re-describe and rectify descriptions in light of the comparative analysis
- Visualize cases/variables/factors (matrices, etc.) as a helpful analytical tool

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religious affairs are part of the routine business of academic work, and comparison (of coders, interpretations, including the feedback of the subjects of research) is pivotal for the validation of research. Finally, in methodological terms, a comparative analysis of data and interpretations produced by using different methods, where applicable, is generally recommended ('triangulation').

Varieties of comparative designs

The literature offers several attempts to distinguish between different comparative research designs. In the study of religions, Jan Platvoet (1982) distinguishes between unlimited and limited comparisons, i.e. comparisons that are applied to all religions without distinction ('unlimited') and comparisons that are applied to religions that are geographically or historically contiguous or that belong to a similar type of religion ('limited'). Platvoet explores the limited form of comparison, which he structures around the three key notions of field, process and context, and which he applies to an analysis of ritual communication ('prayer') in three distinct religious traditions in Ghana, Suriname and the USA (Platvoet 1982). More widely known and quoted is Jonathan Z. Smith's (1993, 1982) division into four classical modes or styles of comparison:

- ethnographic (frequently idiosyncratic unsystematic, based on travellers' impressions);
- encyclopaedic (cross-cultural material arranged by topics, mostly based on readings);
- morphological (logical-formal classification in terms of increased organization); and
- evolutionary (in the humanities a temporal arrangement of morphological classification).

Among these, Smith considers only morphological comparisons to have stood the test of time. To this list he adds three more recent approaches which seem to have sprung out of the classical ones: the statistical, the structural and the systemic. Smith holds that we now 'know better how to evaluate comparisons, but we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice' (Smith 1982: 35). Even back in 1982, that statement may have been true only when restricting one's sample to literature produced by scholars of religion.

Various forms, modes and varieties have been distinguished by a variety of scholars from other disciplines. In his useful survey of comparative history, historian Hartmut Kaebble offers several distinctions. One is generalizing versus individualizing comparisons, with the former being interested in establishing rules of human social life valid for all or most societies and the latter seeking to explore differences and distinct paths of development in different societies (Kaebble 1999: 26). There are several sub-types of these two main varieties, which are sometimes referred to as individualizing, variation finding, encompassing and universalizing; or contrasting, macro-causal, generalizing, inclusive and universalizing (Kaebble 1999: 30–33). Kaebble also refers to a comparison of totalities (such as civilizations) and the more widespread comparison of aspects of such totalities (Kaebble 1999: 36). This is often referred to as macro- versus micro-comparison. Another distinction is based on the number of cases, where N-cases (see Norris and Inglehart 2004, above) and two cases (see Freiberger, Holdrege, Otto, and Riesebrodt, above) are most widespread, but there are also examples for other numbers (such as three, four or five cases).

Of a more technical nature is the distinction between the so-called most-similar systems design and the so-called most-different systems design (Przeworski and Teune 1970: 31–39). This refers to the units of analysis. Most-similar designs tend to downplay the importance of

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similar variables in cases that are closely related (such as Scandinavian societies) and to focus on observed differences; however, even when one assumes that contextual variables are less important, these can never be entirely ignored, and the conclusions can only be valid for restricted areas (yielding middle-range theories). If one wants to generalize beyond such areas (recall the study by Norris and Inglehart) one needs to maximize differences between cases. In such circumstances, sampling highly different cases (such as countries) may help to identify the relevant independent variables (della Porta 2008: 214-16).

Main aims and functions of comparative work

Even if one sometimes cannot help finding some phenomena to be strikingly similar, academic comparisons are not discoveries of relations given by nature; they are the products of academic work, starting with the scholarly categories that serve as their points of departure. Even if scholarly comparisons need to proceed by respecting the generally accepted rules of the trade and are of main interest to the academic community, they may well have purposes that are of interest beyond the academy (and which thereby can contribute to the cultural or societal relevance of the discipline). One of the main motivations of the early comparative study of religions was precisely the idea that Christianity was not over and above all other religions, but that it was embedded in specific religious and historical contexts; in this way, comparative religion went against specific truth claims established by religious institutions. Comparative work done in the spirit of liberal theologies wished to facilitate inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Critical comparative strategies can pursue other interests: they can aim at challenging different sorts of nationalist or religious chauvinisms, and they can help to challenge stereotypes and prejudices which are often directed at little-known religions. They can be de-normalizing and destabilizing. Comparative studies can both boost and challenge national or religious identities. Yet, none of this is specific to comparative research designs.

In more specific ways, comparison is of paramount importance for some key aspects of scholarly work in the study of religion's. Some of these have already been mentioned. To begin with, the formation of analytical and theoretical categories requires comparative work. All our categories are based on concepts that have a specific historical background and the semantic and pragmatic baggage of these concepts is to a greater or lesser extent transformed into scholarly categories (but keeps on informing them). Some varieties and examples of this process have already been mentioned: e.g. ideal-types, prototypes and radical categories, the process suggested by the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, or categories such as asceticism, fundamentalism, religion and scripture. Comparative work leads to conceptual and typological distinctions. Think of distinctions between different types of charisma and authority, or between different historical varieties of dualism.19 These categories help to describe and to analyze empirical facts and also serve as platforms for more general, cross-cultural observations and for more systematic and synthetic works, which, in the architecture of knowledge, can serve as middle-range intermediaries between the levels of historical analysis on the one hand and general theories of religion on the other. At the same time, comparisons often undercut generalizations that were taken for granted.

Comparisons are invaluable for the construction and testing of hypotheses. This applies both to intra- and inter-religious comparisons. For example, any hypothesis on relations between religion and violence (or rather specific aspects and types of religion and specific forms of violence) will remain a mere assertion unless it is refined and tested. Transforming widely held assumptions about religion's into testable hypothesis and testing them empirically can be an important task of the study of religion's. Testing hypotheses often results in
new questions. Comparison can function as a heuristic tool. The necessity of looking at two cases (minimally) entails looking at the case at hand from other perspectives. At a more basic level, comparison is part of every process of interpretation and understanding, and a reflexive awareness of one's own interpretative points of departure and their limitations is part of established (but all too often ignored) hermeneutical standards. On a more ambitious level, as a kind of natural experiment, comparative research designs can be important strategies for causal analysis and explanation (recall also Durkheim above). Last but not least, typologies or taxonomies of religious phenomena, which have been a recurrent occupation of scholars of religion, can only be constructed on the basis of comparison, and the very act of taxonomical classification is a comparative weighing of like and unlike, distinguishing homologies from analogies, traits that are shared (for example caused by historical genealogy) from others that are not.

**Box 1.2.8 Purposes of comparative designs**

- Category formation
- Generalization/systematization
- Construction and testing of hypotheses
- Interpretation
- Explanation ('natural experiment')
- Typologies/taxonomies

**Comparison as research design and modus operandi of research methods**

In the literature, comparison is generally referred to as a method ('the comparative method'). This is misleading in several respects. To begin with, comparison is not one method. As noted above, early practitioners of the study of religion's already used a variety of comparative designs. In addition, a comparative perspective is often merely a mode of analysis, a way to approach a given problem.

Moreover, comparison is most often not practised as a separate method, but as a research design, i.e. as a framework for the collection and analysis of data and the analysis of research problems. Comparative research designs use different kinds of techniques or tools for the collection of data (i.e. methods in a more narrow sense), for example discourse analysis, content analysis, document analysis, philology, hermeneutics, historiography, phenomenology, surveys, etc.

Conversely, while comparative research designs engage specific methods, many methods in turn operate comparatively. It bears pointing out that comparison is part of the working routine of most methods. On this more basic level, comparison works in the most unspectacular ways and is largely uncontroversial. To begin with, the formation of concepts and classifications and related forms of systematization rely on comparison, which therefore is enshrined in all research methods. Moreover, comparison of data is standard practice in all scholarly methods; here are some brief specific examples (for more details see the chapters in Part II):

- conversation analysts compare cases;
- discourse analysts compare the use of rhetoric and turns in statements by different speakers;
1.2 Comparison

- experimenters compare the control conditions to the experimental conditions;
- historians compare sources and data from different periods in order to construct historical interpretations and narratives;
- field workers compare their expectations with their findings in the field and they compare and register observations and statements by different informants and different versions of events;
- phenomenologists compare structures of experiences;
- philologists compare manuscripts in order to establish genealogies of texts and to establish readings;
- statisticians compare samples and populations;
- structuralists compare structures in narratives and rituals.

In other words, then, even if 'the comparative method' is no longer considered as the key method in the study of religion's, comparison underlies most research activities, informs many research designs and is embedded in standard research methods that are not usually considered or labelled as 'comparative'. There is simply no way of getting around comparison.

Notes

1 See the 'further reading' section for examples.
2 See Segal 2001, 2006 for defences of the comparative method as practiced by these scholars.
3 This may be so because 'the comparative method' refers to a specific method in evolutionary biology, which obscures the significance of comparison for all variants of evolutionary analysis.
4 Comparative methods are 'one of biology's most enduring approaches for testing hypotheses of adaptation' (Pagel 2001: 2403).
5 For the implications and religious and political interests in Müller's program see Gladigow 1997; Girardot 2002; Chidester 2004.
6 See also Ninian Smart's joking comment reported by Strenski (2006: 276), that 'comparative study of religion tends to make one comparatively religious'.
7 The idea of comparison as 'natural experiment' is still a prominent one in our days. For a recent and stimulating example see the studies in Diamond and Robinson (2010). This approach seems especially promising for research questions such as the environmental (ecological) constraints for religion.
8 Ultimately, his project aimed at understanding the uniqueness of Western modernity—a development with global impact.
9 See Saler (2000) for an application to the concept of 'religion'.
10 See Wilke (1996) for a more recent example comparing the teachings of these two figures.
11 For social anthropology, Yengoan (2006: 141) notes a similar shift from a position of generalization to one of description since the 1960s.
12 Such a position is difficult to maintain in practice; see Roscoe: 'Even opponents of comparison are closet comparativists' (Roscoe 2009: 27).
13 See Hauflig (1999) for a comparative analysis of concepts of religion developed in other religious contexts.
14 See Sullivan (2008) for a comparison of the ways in which religion is theorized in two different legal regimes.
15 See Hanges (2006) for a comparison of comparative strategies within Christianities (and their partial rejection and partial appropriation of academic scholarship) and the legacy of Reformation-era comparative projects for contemporary Christians and contemporary scholarship.
16 Platvoet is the rare case of a scholar who explains his own autobiographical background as part of his book.
17 Others speak of parallel demonstration versus the contrasting type.
18 Shushan (2009) is one of the most interesting and methodologically reflective examples of comparative work in the study of religion's. He focuses on a single aspect of afterlife beliefs: conceptions relating to the experiences of the disembodied consciousness of an individual following his or her
physical death, including journeys to other realms [. . .], encounters with other beings [. . .], undergoing perils and judgement, and ultimate fates [. . .].’ (Shushan 2009: 2). Shushan compares five historically unrelated ancient religious and contemporary near-death experiences and engages a wide range of theories to explain the comparative findings.

19 For a (historical) typology of dualisms see Bianchi (2005) and other publications by this scholar.
20 See Mahoney (2004) for a discussion of necessary and sufficient causes in comparative-historical methods and new methodologies for testing hypotheses about necessary and sufficient causes (typological theory, Boolean algebra, fuzzy sets).
21 One of the most influential statements is Pettazzoni (1959).
22 Given that scholars of religion have a background of scholarly education that makes them more familiar with the work done in some fields—for example some being closer to anthropology, some to history, others to sociology—to some extent the scholarly practice in the study of religion is informed by the various comparative models as practised and discussed in these disciplines.

References

1.2 Comparison


Further reading


Reviews recent methodological approaches in the social sciences.


Collection of essays by Swiss and Italian authors.


Contains some valuable essays on comparative history.


Collection of 14 essays by American scholars of religion.


A survey of comparison in history written by a German social historian. The book discusses types and intentions of comparison in history, differences between comparison in history and the social sciences, and gives advice on how to design comparative strategies.


Special journal issue on comparison.


Useful recapitulation of the discussion and thoughtful defense of comparison.


Collection of essays by American scholars.


Reciprocal illumination is here introduced as one variety of comparison; it points to the mutual enlightenment between one religion/tradition and another, one method and another, between a tradition and a method, etc.

1.2 Comparison

Four hefty volumes containing some 70 important essays from the social sciences.


Some 17 essays by scholars from a range of disciplines (anthropologists, historians, etc.).

Key concepts

Category: A fundamental and distinct conception that groups together several concepts and serves to identify a class, group, list or set of phenomena.

Classification: Systematic assignment of beings (objects, animals, humans) into distinct units (classes).

Comparison: see chapter summary.

Concept: Basic unit of thought with corresponding meanings and representations; building blocks of categories and theories; can ideally be defined.

Strategy: goal-driven sequence of actions.

Taxonomy: Hierarchical system of classification on different levels.

Typology: A classification of types according to structural or other characteristics; alternatively, a two- or multilevel combination of classifications.