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# Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology

## Comparison Revisited

Edited by  
Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring

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# Contents

Contributors	vi
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction <i>Andreas Nehring, Perry Schmidt-Leukel</i>	1
Part 1 Comparison: Contestation and Defence	
1 Comparative Methodology and the Religious Studies Toolkit <i>Paul Hedges</i>	17
2 Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion <i>Michael Bergunder</i>	34
3 Modes of Comparison: Towards Creating a Methodological Framework for Comparative Studies <i>Oliver Freiberger</i>	53
4 Comparison as a Necessary Evil: Examples from Indian and Jewish Worlds <i>Philippe Bornet</i>	72
Part 2 Phenomenology and the Foundations of Comparison	
5 Camouflage of the Sacred: Can We Still Branch Off from Eliade's Comparative Approach? <i>Andreas Nehring</i>	95
6 The Singular and the Shared: Making Amends to Eliade after the Dismissal of the Sacred <i>Kenneth Rose</i>	110
7 Religious Practice and the Nature of the Human <i>Gavin Flood</i>	130
8 On All-Embracing Mental Structures: Towards a Transcendental Hermeneutics of Religion <i>Fabian Völker</i>	142
Part 3 Reciprocal Illumination and Comparative Theology	
9 Comparative Theology and Comparative Religion <i>Klaus von Stosch</i>	163
10 Reciprocal Illumination <i>Arvind Sharma</i>	178
11 On Creativity, Participation and Normativity: Comparative Theology in Discussion with Arvind Sharma's <i>Reciprocal Illumination</i> <i>Ulrich Winkler</i>	191
12 Christ as Bodhisattva: A Case of Reciprocal Illumination <i>Perry Schmidt-Leukel</i>	204
Index	221

2

## Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion

Michael Bergunder

### 'Postmodernist Critique' of comparative religion

In the field of religious studies and related disciplines, there is widespread agreement among scholars that comparison has become deeply problematic. Kimberley Patton gives a drastic assessment of the current situation:

For a number of years, comparative method in the study of religion has been under fire so heavy that there are few of us left standing. Those who cling gasping to the spars are often unwilling to compare religious phenomena, theologies, or artefacts outside of footnotes or less heavily policed 'epilogues'.<sup>1</sup>

Gavin Flood even concludes: 'The critique (and condemnation) of comparative religion has almost become a new orthodoxy.'<sup>2</sup> Many scholars agree on the reasons for this crisis and attribute it to the so-called 'postmodern critique.'<sup>3</sup> They invoke a notion of 'postmodernism' that is painted in broad strokes indeed: 'Postmodernism denounces order and ordering principles'<sup>4</sup> and argues that 'the wholes are bad because they produce terror'<sup>5</sup> but that 'differences, by contrast, are good and should be activated.'<sup>6</sup> This notion stems from the provocative contributions of Jean-Francois Lyotard and of the famous volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986).<sup>7</sup> However, postmodernism is also lumped together with post-structuralist philosophy. Jacques Derrida has allegedly proclaimed that 'words appear no longer to be connected to the world but to be merely unrooted signifiers,'<sup>8</sup> and Foucault is thought to have dissolved truth in 'little more than a power play.'<sup>9</sup> These sweeping and arguably misleading remarks on Derrida and Foucault make clear that in this discussion, 'postmodernism' serves as a kind of simple antithetical stereotype. There has been no interest in discussing the complex and diverse epistemological approaches and theories regarding history within current post-structuralist and postcolonial thought. With regard to comparative religion, it has all been about black and white contrasts. Accordingly, postmodernism,

established in this way, charges the comparative method with 'intellectual imperialism, universalism, theological foundationalism, and anti-contextualism.'<sup>10</sup>

In Corinne Dempsey's opinion, 'postmodern critique' can be reduced to the one central accusation that the comparative approach applies universal and abstract categories: 'It conjures and imposes categories that too often erase culturally embedded distinctions and realities.'<sup>11</sup> In the same way, Robert Segal explains that 'for the postmodernist focus on the unique ... the "modernist" concern with the general is anathema.'<sup>12</sup> Hence, it follows that postmodernism is associated with the rejection of any kind of generalization.

This peculiar framing of the 'postmodern critique' is not limited to religious studies, but is also echoed in other disciplines. From a social sciences perspective, Pauline Rosenau ascribes the following position to postmodernism:

The very act of comparing, in an effort to uncover similarities and differences, is a meaningless activity because postmodern epistemology holds it impossible ever to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened. The skeptical postmodernists' reservations about the possibility of generalizing and their emphasis on difference ... form the basis of rejecting the comparative method.<sup>13</sup>

In this debate, the allegedly postmodernist position has been driven to such an extreme that it sounds rather ridiculous. However, invoking it as an abstract counter-argument, even if more or less imaginary, helps to discuss the criticism of comparative religion in a more profound way. It shifts the debate to the epistemological foundation of scholarly generalizations and of the use of universal categories, which is not limited to comparative religion but concerns many kinds of research.

Of course, this is not a new insight. The German sociologist Joachim Matthes already pointed out that "comparison," epistemologically speaking, is a variation of conception, the forming of a concept'.<sup>14</sup> William Paden made the same argument from the perspective of religious studies:

Knowledge in any field advances by finding connections between the specific and the generic, one cannot even carry out ethnography or historical work without utilizing transcontextual concepts. Like it or not, we attend to the world not in terms of objects but in terms of categories. Wherever there is a theory, wherever there is a concept, there is a comparative program.<sup>15</sup>

One crucial point thus arises from 'postmodern critique' of comparative religion: the crisis of comparative religion is a crisis of the epistemological foundation of religious studies in general and of its concepts in particular. Comparativists should not be singled out while historians and philologists are let off the hook as if they were not affected. If religious studies wants to overcome this crisis, it has to look for a better theoretical justification of its basic concepts. This means, first of all, clarifying the meaning of 'religion' as the subject matter of the whole discipline.<sup>16</sup> In short, the crisis of comparative religion attributed to 'postmodern critique' is, first and foremost, a crisis of the theoretical justification of religious studies in general.

## Debates in social sciences on Eurocentrism and comparison

Whereas the invocation of 'postmodern critique' is helpful to get to the bottom of the epistemological problem of comparative religion, it downplays another critical point regarding the actual comparative practice: the issue of Eurocentrism, which should not be transferred to general epistemology too quickly. Corinne Dempsey notes the accusation of 'intellectual imperialism' because comparison is seen by 'postmodern critique' as 'a process that imposes universal categories that distort or disregard locally embedded meanings and differences'.<sup>17</sup> Framing the accusation of 'intellectual imperialism' in such a general way is missing a crucial problem. There is a specific practice in comparative religion that shows an inherent Eurocentrism and needs to be addressed.

Comparison frequently occurs as an operation that relates an element A with element B and investigates the similarities and differences between the two. Jonathan Smith makes clear that this is not the case in religious studies:

The statement of comparison is never dyadic, but it is always triadic; there is always an implicit 'more than', and there is always a 'with respect to'. In the case of academic comparison, the 'with respect to' is most frequently the scholar's interest, be this expressed in a question, a theory, or a model.<sup>18</sup>

Smith emphasizes the point of comparison – the *tertium comparationis* of classical formal logic – that precedes any comparison. It establishes a common ground between at least two elements to make them comparable, and its prior fixation is the prerequisite of any comparison. Hence, the justification of any kind of comparison is identical with the justification of the point of comparison, and, as Smith rightly points out, this has "political" implications<sup>19</sup> in the sense that the point of comparison is dependent on the respective research interests. These political implications open up a vast field of theoretical issues, including the question of conceptualization. However, there is at least one aspect that merits consideration in its own right. It concerns cross-cultural reach as a distinguishing feature in comparative religion. Elements compared will usually be taken from various 'cultures' and/or 'religions' that are conceptualized, at least to some extent, as being different from each other. Yet, what is taken as the kind of common ground that permits their comparison? In an analysis of the comparative procedure, the negotiation of difference and commonality is thus a crucial issue.

This cross-cultural dimension has received increasing attention in sociological and postcolonial debates. The German sociologist Joachim Matthes criticized the mechanism of cross-cultural comparison in the following way:

The logic of such 'comparisons' follows the principle first to determine similar units for the comparison on both sides, and, then, to relate them to each other through the *tertium comparationis*. Because the establishment of the respective unit on the other side is already done by the *tertium* which was retrieved as projective abstraction from the unit of the *one* side, such 'comparisons' work easily – subtracting all that which doesn't fit into it as marginal differences.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Matthes is saying that the point of comparison is usually formed as an abstraction of one element, and, before the comparison actually begins, another

element has to be identified as similar to the first one. This means that the point of comparison usually has a privileged relationship to one of the two or more elements that are to be compared, and the other element is predicated on that relationship. This results in the following combination of circumstances: if the general term A', which serves as the point of comparison, is only an abstraction of element A, then A is the prototype for A'. Prior to the comparison, B (or C, D, etc.) must be declared similar to A via A' in order to make the comparison possible. The actual act of comparison that establishes relative difference and relative similarity between elements A and B has to be preceded by an act of establishing similarity. Without this act of establishing similarity, A and B would remain in absolute difference to each other and would not share any point of comparison. It is important to understand that this prior creation of a point of comparison by making A'/A similar to B needs special attention. Naoki Sakai speaks of 'two moments in the act of comparison' to underscore this point:

The first is the postulation of the class of *genus* among compared items. Comparison is performed between or among unified objects, preliminarily identified as belonging to two *species*, while at the same time comparison is constitutive of the logical dimension of *genus* where *species difference (diaphora)* is discovered, measured, or judged. ... The second moment is the occasion or locale where we are obliged to compare. Comparison takes place because the determination of *species difference* is needed.<sup>21</sup>

Any discussion on comparison should differentiate between these two successive acts. Moreover, the second act of comparison retroactively affirms the validity of the point of comparison that was established in the first act. Through comparison, the validity of a general term A' will be reinforced and not tested, because the point of comparison is the prerequisite of the comparison and not part of it. This would also be the case if the comparison of A and B exclusively resulted in a statement of differences, because the comparison would only bring forth relative differences. Absolute difference would lead to the conclusion that both elements have nothing – absolutely nothing – to do with each other with regard to the point of comparison and, hence, would not be comparable at all. Absolute difference would deny the possibility of a point of comparison and, hence, of any comparison. If the validity of A' is reaffirmed by comparison, then comparison also reaffirms element A as the prototype of A'. Matthes argues that this is the starting point of an inherent Eurocentric praxis:

The *tertium comparationis* will be retrieved from *one* element that stands in one's own society. Its apparently essential features are elevated to a higher level of abstraction, and, on this level, a ladder of 'development' is outlined retrospectively. Then, the projectively retrieved 'theoretical' point of comparison as well as the retrospectively constructed ladder become the yardstick of the 'other'.<sup>22</sup>

He calls this a 'cultural way of interpretation' (*kulturelles Interpretament*) that took shape in the nineteenth century in the wake of European colonial domination and has been of formative influence since

the particular history of Europe transcended itself and became the center of world history, pulling into it all other particular histories. ... The western European type

of society solidifies in this sort of interpretation into an abstract model of 'modern' society that is at the top of a line of development.<sup>23</sup>

The Indian Marxist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in exactly this same direction. For him, most of the universal concepts applied by the social sciences in cross-cultural comparison have a hidden relationship to a prototype that is European in nature, from which all general terms have been derived:

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers who shape the nature of social science have produced theories that embrace the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind.<sup>24</sup>

Like Matthes, he identifies a certain European self-understanding as the cause for this phenomenon, because these European philosophers and thinkers 'have read into European history an entelechy of universal reason'<sup>25</sup>:

'Europe' remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian', 'Chinese', 'Kenyan' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'.<sup>26</sup>

If European history has been the prototype of the general terms for the social sciences, then all non-European contexts face a structural handicap. The element B, which is to be compared with A, can never be as adequate or similar to A' as A is. In relation to A' and in comparison with A, it will always show 'a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into "inadequacy"'.<sup>27</sup> The force of Chakrabarty's argument draws from his self-criticism. His previous works, as well as the subaltern studies group of which he was part, showed the strong influence of Marxist theory. Only later did Chakrabarty realize that central Marxist concepts, though represented as universal, were prototypically shaped by European history. For instance, the working class was a central abstract category in Marxist thinking, but only the historical working class of nineteenth-century European industrialization fulfilled all its key criteria. The Indian working class which Chakrabarty analysed always lacked its full development and remained inadequate because of inherent 'precapitalist' factors in Indian society. Consequently, the subaltern study group spoke of a '*historic failure of the [Indian] nation to come to its own*, a failure due to the *inadequacy* of the bourgeoisie as well as the working class to lead into ... a bourgeois-democratic revolution of the classic nineteenth-century type'.<sup>28</sup>

For Chakrabarty, this application of Marxist theory needs critical revision, because 'Europe works as a silent referent'<sup>29</sup> in it. Moreover, he argues that it is not only Marxism but social sciences and history in general that have the same problem with regard to their key concepts, which have been aggregated since the nineteenth century. Chakrabarty's criticism is so important because he insists on the global and, notably, historical nature of the problem. Even if social sciences and history have developed their key concepts with reference to a European prototype, they are not exclusively European sciences in the geographical sense:

The dominance of 'Europe' as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world. ... The everyday paradox of third world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of 'us', eminently useful in understanding our society.<sup>30</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, the European prototype has permeated the sociological and historical enterprise and has become globalized. Chakrabarty demands a 'provincializing of Europe' that reflects this historical development:

The project of provincializing Europe ... cannot be a project of cultural relativism. It cannot originate from the stance that the reason/science/universals that help define Europe as the modern are simply 'culture-specific', and therefore only belong to the European cultures.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that this project of provincializing Europe does not support two conceivable options that initially may appear to be attractive solutions. First, one might consider abandoning any general term that is dependent on a European prototype. As most academic disciplines usually rely on general terms based on European prototypes, this is hardly a feasible strategy. Further, what then could serve as the new prototype, as post-structuralist theory holds that any general term shows an inherent tension between the particular and the general?<sup>32</sup> Second, the re-designation of the current general terms as 'European' or 'Western' concepts does not help either. Using these terms with the reservation that they arose from a European or Western perspective would only be another way of stating the problem, not offering a solution. Moreover, as a consequence, A' is transformed back into A. Without A', however, there is no point of comparison, no B can be established, and comparison would become impossible. This re-designation would also ignore the most important fact, that is that nowadays these general terms are used globally. It is not solely in the possession of 'Europe' or the 'West' to (re)claim them exclusively.

Instead, Chakrabarty suggests a third way when he pleads for a strict historicization of the point of comparison, including a thorough study of its globally entangled expansion:

The project of provincializing Europe has to include certain additional moves: first, the recognition that Europe's acquisition of the adjective 'modern' for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history; and second the understanding that this equating of a certain version of Europe with 'modernity' is not the work of Europeans alone; third-world nationalisms, as modernizing ideologies par excellence, have been equal partners in the process ... one cannot but problematize 'India' at the same time as one dismantles 'Europe'.<sup>33</sup>

In short, Chakrabarty demands that general terms in social sciences and history should no longer be used without critically exploring their globally entangled histories since nineteenth-century colonialism, which gave rise to European prototypes: 'I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices. ... To attempt to provincialize this

“Europe” is to see the modern as inevitably contested.<sup>34</sup> This kind of historicization will initiate a process of self-reflection that might hopefully change our understanding of these general terms. They are never just universal categories; they have a global history that inherently informs their meaning and plausibility. Reconstructing this globally entangled history and investigating the role that European prototypes played in it will hopefully change the future usage of comparative categories and combine them with historical narratives that no longer camouflage European hegemony in the name of scientific thinking and the Enlightenment’s universalism.

### Historicizing the point of comparison in comparative religion

Whereas Matthes’ and Chakrabarty’s critiques are mainly aimed at social sciences and history, their insights are directly relevant for religious studies and comparative religion. There is already a common perception that the classical concepts of religious studies were derived from European prototypes. This is most obvious for the term ‘religion’ itself that marks the subject matter of the discipline, but it also applies to concepts like ‘God’,<sup>35</sup> ‘monotheism/polytheism’,<sup>36</sup> ‘myth’,<sup>37</sup> ‘experience’,<sup>38</sup> ‘mysticism’<sup>39</sup> and ‘ritual’.<sup>40</sup> All these classical comparative terms are nowadays widely used across the globe in many cultural contexts. One explanation for their global and cross-cultural usage is the frequent, repeated previous comparisons in which the point of comparison identified similar elements in other ‘cultures’ or ‘religions’. By repeating it each comparison had reaffirmed the point of comparison each time because, even if the comparison established differences, these were only relative differences. In this way, every new comparison has increased the plausibility of the point of comparison. In the wake of European colonialism and the overwhelming dominance of European sciences, this process has become a global one, and the point of comparison has established itself as global knowledge.<sup>41</sup> A crucial point in this line of argument is that this process has not been limited to scholarly discourses but has become part and parcel of broader public identity discourses. Religion itself is the best case study.

#### ‘Religion’ and historicity

In his monumental four-volume work on the history of the concept of religion, the German Catholic theologian Ernst Feil arrived at the conclusion that, in European philosophy and theology from antiquity up to the eighteenth century, the word religion (Lat. *religio*) for the most part stood for a concept that comprised a certain way of acting. This concept of religion depicted ‘the scrupulous diligence . . . to carry out those acts that were owed to a God (as a superior) because of the cardinal virtue of “*justitia*.”’<sup>42</sup> Besides this, Feil identified less specific ways of using ‘religion’; for example, as a synonym for the four ‘laws’ (Lat. *lex*) or ‘sects’ (Lat. *secta*) of the Christians, Jews, Muslims and Heathens. He considered that the middle of the eighteenth century represented ‘a significant break’.<sup>43</sup> ‘Religion’ now received a completely new understanding, becoming

the name of a ‘modern basic concept’ (*neuzeitlicher Grundbegriff*) that has held sway since the nineteenth century. Feil identified this with a specific Protestant theological variant of an understanding of religion: the religion of inwardness<sup>44</sup> attributed to Schleiermacher.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that Schleiermacher’s version of religion is a new concept that has no continuity with the older Christian usage of the term.<sup>46</sup>

Ernst Feil provides massive and convincing historical evidence for his findings, and he significantly modifies the genealogy that William Cantwell Smith had suggested earlier. Smith was of the opinion that ‘Renaissance humanists’ and ‘Protestant Reformers’ had ‘adopted a concept of religion to represent an inner piety’ that ‘was largely superseded by a concept of schematic externalization’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup> Other studies also located the modern concept of religion in the early modern period.<sup>48</sup> Feil’s findings do not support Smith’s historical development since the fifteenth century. However, Feil and Smith agree that an important shift in the concept was brought about by Schleiermacher, even if their assessment is different.<sup>49</sup> Feil’s historicization stops at the beginning of the nineteenth century without following the further development of the concept during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Smith had suggested that the final formulation of the modern concept of religion happened ‘in the decades before and after 1900’.<sup>51</sup> What is urgently needed is a more detailed historicization of the concept of religion for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which would also show that its final formulation occurred globally.<sup>52</sup>

Despite all these problems in the current state of research, there is consensus that the modern concept of religion derived from a *historical* European prototype. It is instructive to see how previous discussions in religious studies have tried to cope with this issue, and how this relates to Chakrabarty’s approach. I have identified at least four strategies:

1. One strategy has been to make the prototypical structure of the concept of religion explicit, either by making the prototype part of the definition or by reducing the meaning of religion to the prototype itself. The first option is connected to polythetic definitions that have become popular recently. The most comprehensive discussions of the polythetic approach have been provided by Benson Saler.<sup>53</sup> Saler presents fifteen features of religion in an additive approach that ‘consists of all the features that our cumulative scholarship induces us to attribute to religion’.<sup>54</sup> The crucial point is that these features are usually justified through the explicit establishment of prototypes. These prototypes are concrete exemplars which, according to the judgement of the scholar, are considered especially typical for the particular polythetic category. For Saler, ‘our most prototypical cases of religion’ are ‘the Western monotheisms’, by which are understood ‘Judaism’, ‘Christianity’ and ‘Islam’.<sup>55</sup> The defined contents of these Western monotheisms are directly assigned to the ‘western’ anthropologist of religion and the ‘western’ scholar of religion as a part of the process of socialization. This key formative notion, together with that of the connected consensus of ‘many contemporary academic students of religion’, brings Judaism and Christianity into the stated prototypes, which provide the polythetic model with their empirical reference.<sup>56</sup> Saler adds Islam as a third prototypical exemplar, since it is also looked

upon as 'fundamentally Western' with its 'theologies', 'eschatologies' and 'rituals', as well as mentioned 'personages', all standing in close relationship to Judaism and Christianity.<sup>57</sup> He combines these three prototypical exemplars together, then, as the 'Western monotheisms'. According to the logic of prototypical constructions, only Western monotheisms contain all the fifteen features of religion, and all other religions contain fewer of the designated features. The idea of 'Western monotheisms' remains completely vague, and Saler does not support his use of this term with any historical argument.<sup>58</sup> Even if his historical derivation of 'Western monotheisms' were not deeply flawed, the prototypical construction itself would remain problematic. As Chakrabarty has shown, explicit reference to a European prototype is hardly a solution to the crisis of comparative religion. It intensifies the problem rather than solving it.

2. Another option for explaining the prototypical structure of the concept of 'religion' is to reduce the meaning of religion to the prototype itself. Hence, it has been suggested that religion should be considered 'a western folk concept',<sup>59</sup> a 'European invention'<sup>60</sup> or simply a 'European concept'. In place of 'European', 'western', 'Christian' or 'western Christian' can be found, which certainly does not contribute any clarity to the argument. As already discussed, if A' is reduced to A, the term loses its comparative potential and nothing is achieved.

3. In this line of thought, it would be more consistent to abandon the term 'religion' altogether, and this third option has recently been vehemently presented by Timothy Fitzgerald. 'Religion', he says, is 'thoroughly imbued with Judeo-Christian monotheistic associations and world religions ecumenism' and inseparably bound to a Christian theological agenda.<sup>61</sup> For this reason, religion is not meaningfully employable for other non-Christian contexts. In the course of colonialism, it was newly 'invented' for the colonized societies and then forced upon colonial cultures.<sup>62</sup> Fitzgerald's plea is that religion as an independent academic category should be abandoned. He does not stand alone in this demand.<sup>63</sup>

However, Fitzgerald's position has met severe opposition. The critics argue that it is beyond the power of religious studies to renounce the concept of religion. Thus, David Chidester wrote:

After reviewing the history of their colonial production and reproduction on contested frontiers, we might happily abandon religion and religions as terms of analysis if we were not, as the result of that very history, stuck with them.<sup>64</sup>

With a similar choice of words, Richard King argued:

The idea that there are 'religions' out there in the real world is such an embedded part of our social imaginary that it seems premature to talk of abandoning the notion altogether.<sup>65</sup>

It is important to emphasize that we are 'stuck' with 'religion' globally and on all levels. All over the world today, outside Europe and in all non-European languages, an equivalent to 'religion' has been well established.<sup>66</sup> The comparative discourse on religion left the perimeters of scholarly comparison early on, and itself became part of religious identity formations.

In an amazing convergence with Chakrabarty's approach, a rigorous historicization has been suggested for coping with the problem instead of abandoning the term 'religion'. Russell McCutcheon speaks of the need to explore the 'the history of "religion"'<sup>67</sup> and suggests, with reference to Tomoko Masuzawa, that 'we ought to consider studying why naming part of the social world as religion has caught on so widely among diverse human communities, each with their own prior systems of self-designation, in just the past few hundred years'.<sup>68</sup> It is noteworthy that even Timothy Fitzgerald has apparently modified his position recently and argued in exactly the same direction: 'The proper study of "religion" is the category itself in its discursive relationship to "state", "politics", "secular", "sacred", "profane", "civility", and "barbarity"'.<sup>69</sup> This all shows a consensus on keeping the term 'religion' and critically researching its historical usage instead of abandoning the term.

4. Of course, the problem with religion as a comparative category would be solved once and for all if it could be reduced to a 'natural' ('material') non-discursive reference. So, it is no wonder that cognitive and neurobiological approaches have attracted growing attention, although it is highly unlikely that they will meet with broader acceptance in religious studies.<sup>70</sup> Michael Stausberg makes it clear that, while these 'recent theories rightly point to the relevance of biological and cognitive processes largely beyond the control of consciousness, concepts and representations are difficult to conceive of in social terms without taking meaning into account'.<sup>71</sup> As a result, these theories only perpetuate previous essentialist notions of religion, and 'most, if not all, contemporary theories of religion carry theories of ritual and myth in their baggage'.<sup>72</sup> Despite their naturalist claims, they are still heirs to the traditional cross-cultural categories of religious studies, and that means that they are themselves in need of historicization.

## Comparative religion and historicity

The debate about 'religion' in religious studies shows remarkable convergence towards Chakrabarty's approach of 'provincializing Europe', but this has had no apparent effect on the practice of comparative religion so far. In my opinion, this is a missed opportunity, as can be shown by a closer look at a major work on comparative religion that has been published recently.

In *Bringing the Sacred down to Earth* (2011), Corinne Dempsey defends comparative religion exclusively against the postmodern critique, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Moreover, she accuses the 'Foucauldian analysis ... [of] understand[ing] the sacred as an entity solely used as a pretext for power and as a socially constructed tool for hegemonic interests' and '[of] ignor[ing] understandings of the sacred put forward by practitioners, those most dynamically engaged with the practices and expressions under consideration'.<sup>73</sup> Instead, Dempsey wants to revive the category of "the sacred" as a category that implies ties to transcendent meaning and power yet is not limited to or divided against the unempirical or metaphysical.<sup>74</sup> 'The sacred' describes 'religiously ordained power sources, manifest and interpreted in a variety of ways, from a variety of angles, emerging sometimes as forming and controlled by systems of authority, sometimes defying and superseding the same'.<sup>75</sup> Dempsey



reinstates the sacred as the defining element for religion, though the philosophical foundation of the concept remains rather vague. At least it becomes clear that her return to the sacred is a return to a *sui generis* understanding of religion. It comes with a certain immunity to postmodern critique, per her (mis)reading. However, it does not address the sharp criticism of *sui generis* definitions of religion put forward in recent decades by McCutcheon, Fitzgerald and many others. It also ignores the postcolonial challenge to 'provincialize Europe'. Instead, she wants to get back to the comparative religion of the old days:

Departing from past tendencies to analyze religious traditions side by side, their proximities creating mutual influences that naturally call for comparison, the following chapters juxtapose decidedly nonproximate conceptions and practices.<sup>76</sup>

From a postcolonial perspective, her operation of establishing similarity in applying the sacred as a point of comparison attracts the most attention. In the book, she compares:

Indian Catholicism and Irish Catholicism  
 'Christian and Hindu theologies of liberation'  
 'Rajneeshees and Diasporic Hindu Settlers and Unsettlers' in the United States  
 Neo-Vedanta in India and Icelandic spiritualism.

The crux of the matter is that it is not the sacred that establishes similarity, but, against her own theoretical outline, some references to a shared history. This is most obvious with her comparison of Rajneeshees and Hindu migrants to the United States, which does not even fulfil her criterion of 'nonproximate'. When she relates Christian liberation theology to a Hindu tradition, she chooses the philosophy of the priest of a Hindu temple in the United States. The priest is a Tamil Brahman from Sri Lanka who was a Marxist in his youth and worked for some time in Southern Africa as an architect before permanently settling down in the United States.<sup>77</sup> Obviously his notion of the Hindu tradition, which seems to combine a peculiar interpretation of Srividya, Neo-Saiva Siddhanta and other elements, was informed by the agenda of reformist Tamil Saivism.<sup>78</sup> In any case, his socio-critical ideas about Hinduism and those of Christian liberation theology are part of the same contemporary global discourse on social justice and social equality, and, hence, are interrelated.

Most strikingly, in two other case studies, Dempsey herself explicitly emphasizes the common historical background as justification for her comparison. When she explains why she compares 'the suffering nun and the wandering priest of India and Ireland', she specifically refers to a shared colonial history:

their suffering and wandering represent Orientalist and Celticist colonial stereotypes that their respective Churches seem to have adopted and inverted. British colonial portrayals of the irrational, nonmodern Indian and the rootless Irish become for an anticolonial Indian and Irish Church ... a means for demonstrating religious and nationalist efficacies.<sup>79</sup>

When it comes to Neo-Vedanta and Icelandic spiritualism, she declares the importance of a shared history even more vocally:

Planting Neo-Vedanta and Spiritualism most sturdily in ideological proximity is the fact that both traditions arose in response to a late-nineteenth-century scientific revolution that appeared, to many, to pose a threat to religion. ... They emerged during an era of heightened global interaction between India, Britain, and the United States in which Hindu reformers and Spiritualists frequently exchanged ideas and arguments with Theosophists, Christian missionaries, and scholars of religion ... Given the intertwined roots of Neo-Vedanta and Icelandic Spiritualism, it is not surprising that the philosophical proclivities and aims of these two movements overlap as well.<sup>80</sup>

This all shows that Dempsey does not justify the point of comparison – the operation of establishing similarity that precedes the actual comparison – with regard to 'the sacred' as she is supposed to do. Her comparison is based on previous comparative operations that were part of a common global religious history since the nineteenth century, in which different phenomena were made compatible and comparable. Contrary to her theory, she refers to historical arguments, but without reflecting further on them. Her sweeping description of postmodern critique and her simple defence of traditional comparison apparently leave no room for historiographical questions. It is time to address this blind spot.

## Towards a global religious history

As the previous discussion has shown, it is too easy to attribute the crisis of comparative religion solely to reasons cited as 'postmodern critique'. This misses Chakrabarty's objection to using European history as the prototype for conceptualization, which is highly relevant to comparative religion. The intensive debates on the idea of 'religion' in religious studies show many links to Chakrabarty's 'provincializing Europe' and suggest a historicization of the point of comparison. Even a study like Dempsey's, which proposes a return to the classical paradigms of comparative religion, applies historical arguments to justify the selection of elements for comparison. Nonetheless, religious studies is stuck with its comparative terminology, which cannot be abandoned at will. If we cannot simply return to the old days, and if there is no viable alternative at present, it might be worth considering a third method. The simple suggestion is that we learn to accept that our comparative concepts have a history that needs to be disclosed as a prerequisite for any further use. Religious phenomena are comparable because history has made them so. This raises a whole set of fundamental questions that have to be addressed. To start with, a theoretical foundation is needed that explains how general terms have been historicized and, at the same time, kept as key concepts of the discipline. As has been shown elsewhere, a post-structuralist epistemology combined with Foucault's approach to historiography as genealogy could do just that.<sup>81</sup>



Apart from a theoretical foundation, there is also a more practical side to the problem. The current global usage of comparative terms can usually be traced back no earlier than the nineteenth century. What we need, then, is an appropriate form of historiography that analyses the role of the European prototype and looks for the mechanisms of its global acceptance and reception. Recent historiographical debates can help to develop such a narrative of global religious history since the nineteenth century.<sup>82</sup>

### The global history approach and the debate on Orientalism

As a starting point, one could look at the British historian Christopher A. Bayly,<sup>83</sup> who some time ago presented a comprehensive outline of a global history. Connected to this is a particular view of the long nineteenth century as decisive for setting the course of modernity and globalization. Bayly detects the 'rise of global uniformities' in the nineteenth century, related to a complex process of the 'ambivalent relationship between the global and the local'.<sup>84</sup> He gives plenty of space to the question of religion, and names the homogenization and standardization of 'world religions' as one of the central phenomena of the nineteenth century. Further global history outlines have since been published that also thematize religion in a detailed way.<sup>85</sup> It is noteworthy that within the global history approach there is an observable trend that considers the idea of 'religion' and, as a consequence, other central comparative concepts as 'Western' inventions of the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, which have been globalized since the nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup>

The global history thesis meets with the central insight of the so-called debate on Orientalism, which claims that nineteenth-century colonialism forced European and North American knowledge upon colonized cultures and societies. This theoretical framework was largely formulated by the Palestinian-American literary scholar Edward Said.<sup>87</sup> Said presented the thesis that the 'Orient' is a monological product of 'Western' knowledge, constructed as a discourse of alteration of one's own culture and religion. The Orient was always the space of the 'other', and it was this distinction which served to guarantee one's own identity. In the course of nineteenth-century colonialism, this 'Western' construction of the Orient was imposed upon the colonized, who were forced to define their identity within this framework. Using Said's approach, the cultural consequences of colonialism can be engaged. The encounter of the colonized with colonizers was not a dialogue between equals, but, rather, a negotiation process within a discourse of power, in which the positions of the speakers were unequal to the extreme. When comparative concepts became understood as a part of 'Western' knowledge about the 'Orient', then, as the discourses of colonial power developed, they were also correspondingly forced upon the colonized. At its core, an approach critiquing Orientalism resembles a global history methodology, and both justify, to a certain extent, the talk of the 'Western invention' of concepts.

### Postcolonialism and entangled histories

The debate on Orientalism prompted a wider discussion about how the role of the colonized is to be more precisely understood within the discourse of colonial power,

since Edward Said did not enter further into this area. This matter is mostly debated under the name of postcolonial studies or postcolonialism.<sup>88</sup> Postcolonialism also assumes that the colonized subjects are subjected to Orientalism as part of European knowledge and, thus, do not possess any autonomous prior subject-positions.

The discussion goes an important step further by drawing inspiration from post-structuralist discourses on the social and the political. Accordingly, every incident of fixing a meaning occurs as one concrete articulation, and the durability or sedimentation of that meaning is only guaranteed through the repetition of this articulation. Yet, no repetition is identical to another and, as a re-signification, it opens up space for transformation (Butler, Laclau).<sup>89</sup> It is precisely here that postcolonialism comes in. It is interested in the specific forms of reception of 'Western' knowledge, and understands these not merely as their identical adoption. Colonial discourses, therefore, are anything but monolithic or invariable; rather, they are of a polyphonic and unstable nature. They possess a considerable dynamic, a substantial potential for transformation.<sup>90</sup> This is exactly what postcolonialism wants to capture historically; hence the discipline's interest in the complete breadth of articulation of the colonized.

If all articulations in a discourse refer to others, insofar as they are 'citations', then they are dependent on one another. From this, the claim can be derived that global history must be comprehended as 'entangled histories', since 'the related entities are themselves in part a product of their entanglement'.<sup>91</sup> The emphasis, here, is that the 'West', through its entanglement with the colonies, did not experience an autonomous history; rather, its identity formation was entangled with the colonized. The sedimentation of 'Western' knowledge is also dependent on the repetition of the colonized. Even if Western knowledge held a hegemonic position, it was, at the same time, a product of entanglement. As was exemplarily shown in the case of religion, the comparative terms of religious studies are of historical and global character. If religious studies wants to continue using them, it should accept them as such. Global religious history provides a helpful narrative to describe them adequately.

## Conclusion

It has not received the necessary attention within religious studies that the point of comparison always has a history. To increase our understanding of the comparative problem, more research on the global religious history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is urgently required. This is a hitherto neglected field of religious studies, yet it needs special attention if we wish to advance, not only in our discussion of comparative religion but in religious studies in general. This endeavour can profit from trends in the study of modern Buddhism and Hinduism that increasingly apply a global perspective, often explicitly examining the ways in which comparative terms, including religion, have been appropriated since the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> In the end, we might come to the conclusion that comparative religion should be first and foremost a historical enterprise.

## Notes

- 1 Patton 2000: 153.
- 2 Flood 2013: 22.
- 3 Patton and Ray 2000: 1.
- 4 Ibid.: 2.
- 5 Smith 2000: 178; Patton and Ray 2000: 10.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See, for example, Patton and Ray 2000: 2–3, 7, 10; Smith 2000: 178.
- 8 Patton and Ray 2000: 2.
- 9 Ibid.: 10; Smith 2000: 179.
- 10 Patton and Ray 2000: 1.
- 11 Dempsey 2011: 5.
- 12 Segal 2001: 344.
- 13 Rosenau 1992: 105. See also Segal 2001: 344–5.
- 14 Matthes 1992: 88–9. (“Vergleichen” ist, epistemologisch betrachtet, eine Variante des Vorgangs der Begriffsbildung, der Konzeptualisierung.)
- 15 Paden 2000: 182.
- 16 Bergunder 2014a.
- 17 Dempsey 2011: 7.
- 18 Smith 1990: 51.
- 19 Ibid.: 52.
- 20 Matthes 1992: 88. (‘Die Logik solchen “Vergleichens” folgt dem Prinzip, gleichartige Einheiten für den “Vergleich” zunächst auf beiden Seiten zu ermitteln, um sie dann unter einem tertium comparationis zueinander ins Verhältnis zu setzen. Da die Ermittlung der jeweiligen Einheit auf der anderen Seite immer schon erfolgt ist über das tertium, das also projektive Abstraktion aus der Einheit der einen Seite gewonnen wird, “gelingt” solches Vergleichen leicht, – unter Abbuchung all dessen, was sich ihm nicht zu fügen scheint, als Randdifferenz.’)
- 21 Sakai 2013.
- 22 Matthes 1992: 81. (‘Nach dieser Vorstellung vom “Vergleichen” ... geht die Folie, vor der “verglichen” wird, in der geläufigen Ausdrucksweise also das tertium comparationis, aus einer Projektion einer Vergleichsgröße, wie sie an der eigenen Gesellschaft abgelesen wird, hervor. Sie wird in ihren als wesentlich erscheinenden Zügen auf eine höhere Ebene der Abstraktion gehoben, und auf dieser Ebene wird retrospektiv eine Stufenleiter von “Entwicklung” entworfen. Die projektiv gewonnene “theoretische” Vergleichsgröße wie die retrospektiv konstruierte Stufenleiter zu ihr hin werden dann als Maße für “anderes” gesetzt.’)
- 23 Matthes 1992: 82. (‘Diesem kulturellem Interpretament zufolge wächst in der europäischen Moderne die partikuläre Geschichte des Okzidents über sich selbst hinaus und wird zum Zentrum der Weltgeschichte, in die alle anderen partikulären Geschichten hineingezogen werden. Der Typus der westlich-europäischen Gesellschaft erstarrt in diesem Interpretament gleichsam zu einem abstrakten Modell von “moderner” Gesellschaft, die an der Spitze einer Entwicklungslinie steht.’)
- 24 Chakrabarty 2000: 29.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.: 27.
- 27 Ibid.: 32, 34.
- 28 Ibid.: 31–2.

- 29 Ibid.: 28.
- 30 Ibid.: 29.
- 31 Ibid.: 43.
- 32 Bergunder 2014a.
- 33 Chakrabarty 2000: 43.
- 34 Ibid.: 45–6.
- 35 Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998.
- 36 Bergunder 2006.
- 37 McCutcheon 2000.
- 38 Sharf 1998.
- 39 King 1999.
- 40 Bergunder 2011.
- 41 For the epistemological justification of this argument, see Bergunder 2014a.
- 42 Feil 1986–2007: IV.14.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.: I.25–9.
- 45 Ibid.: IV.880.
- 46 Feil 2000; Bergunder 2009.
- 47 Smith 1963: 44.
- 48 Harrison 1990; McCutcheon 1997; Dubuisson 2003.
- 49 Smith 1963: 45–6.
- 50 For a critique on Feil, see Bergunder 2014a: 257–9.
- 51 Smith 1963: 47.
- 52 Chidester 1996; King 1999; McMahan 2009.
- 53 Saler 2000, 2008.
- 54 Saler 2008: 222.
- 55 Saler 2000: 225.
- 56 Ibid.: 199.
- 57 Ibid.: 212.
- 58 For a deeper discussion of Saler’s approach, see Bergunder 2014a: 248–52.
- 59 Greil 2009.
- 60 Haußig and Scherer 2003.
- 61 Fitzgerald 2000: 19.
- 62 Ibid.: 8–9, 29–30.
- 63 Smith 1963; Feil 1986–2007; Sabatucci 2000; Dubuisson 2003.
- 64 Chidester 1996: 259.
- 65 King 2004: 256–7.
- 66 Peterson and Walhof 2002.
- 67 McCutcheon 2007a: 15–19.
- 68 McCutcheon 2007b: 976.
- 69 Fitzgerald 2007: 312.
- 70 Stausberg 2009; Greil 2009.
- 71 Stausberg 2009: 291.
- 72 Ibid.: 292.
- 73 Dempsey 2011: 10, with reference to Patton 2000. It is curious to note that neither Dempsey nor Patton engages in any way with the writings of Foucault, whom they harshly criticize.
- 74 Dempsey 2011: 14.
- 75 Ibid.: 15.

- 76 Ibid.: 12.  
 77 Ibid.: 53.  
 78 Ibid.: 52–66.  
 79 Ibid.: 21.  
 80 Ibid.: 109, 111, 120.  
 81 Bergunder 2014a.  
 82 The following is based on Bergunder 2014a: 275–9.  
 83 Bayly 2004.  
 84 Ibid.: 1–2.  
 85 Beyer 2006; Osterhammel 2009.  
 86 Osterhammel 2009: 1242.  
 87 Said 1994.  
 88 Young 2001.  
 89 Butler 2011; Laclau 2005.  
 90 Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1994.  
 91 Conrad and Randeria 2002: 17.  
 92 Pennington 2005; McMahan 2009; Josephson 2012; Kollmar-Paulenz 2013; Bergunder 2014b.

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## Modes of Comparison: Towards Creating a Methodological Framework for Comparative Studies

Oliver Freiberger

Comparison, understood in the most basic sense, is a natural feature of cognition and of scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of all disciplines, like all human beings on a daily basis, constantly compare the new with the already known. Yet, as a method in the humanities and social sciences, including the study of religion, comparison has provoked, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, scepticism, discomfort, deep criticism or flat-out rejection. The target of that criticism was hardly its basic cognitive and academic function, but, rather, particular forms of cultural comparison – those that decontextualize, essentialize and universalize in ways that were regarded as problematic on a scale from being unhelpful and misleading to being colonizing and imperializing. Eventually, comparativists responded in defence of the comparative method, on a scale from accepting much of the critique and thus restricting the comparative effort to rehabilitating even the most heavily criticized comparative approaches.<sup>2</sup>

The debate has been useful in the sense that it forces comparativists to justify what they are doing, both intellectually and methodically. In the course of these discussions, a number of important points emerged that certainly need to be addressed. Yet, it seems surprising that the attack on the comparative method had such drastic paralysing effects – to the degree that comparison was widely shunned in the study of religion for decades. The main reason for this crisis, in my view, is that the discipline lacks an established methodology of comparison that is thoroughly structured and well-grounded. The existence of such a methodology – or of several competing ones, as is common for other methods – would have enabled comparativists to plausibly reject some critical objections and integrate others by modifying the method accordingly, rather than becoming paralysed. That is not to say that scholars of religion have not discussed comparison methodologically, but if they do, it is mostly either in a short section of the introduction to a comparative study or in more theoretical articles that often are too distant from the actual comparative work to provide structured methodical guidelines. Established guidelines of that sort do not exist – let alone