

2006

Comparing Religious Ideas: There's Method in the Mob's Madness

"Comparing Religious Ideas: There's Method in the Mob's Madness," in Thomas Athanasius Indinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?*; Numen History of Religion Series (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).

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Comparing Religions

Possibilities and Perils?

Edited by

Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson,
and James Constantine Hanges



BRILL
LEIDEN • BOSTON
2006

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Comparing religions : possibilities and perils? / edited by Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges.

p. cm. — (Numen book series. Studies in the history of religions, ISSN 0169-8834 ; v. 113)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and indexes.

ISBN-13: 978-90-04-15267-0

ISBN-10: 90-04-15267-9 (alk. paper)

1. Religion—Methodology. 2. Religion—Study and teaching. 3. Religions. I. Idinopulos, Thomas A. II. Wilson, Brian C. III. Hanges, James Constantine, 1954-

BL41.C583 2006

200.7—dc22

2006048992

ISSN 0169-8834

ISBN (10) 90 04 15267-9

ISBN (13) 978 90 04 (15267-0)

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Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill Academic
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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

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CHAPTER SIX

COMPARING RELIGIOUS IDEAS: THERE'S METHOD IN THE MOB'S MADNESS

Wesley J. Wildman

INTRODUCTION

Methodological wrangling over simple tasks is a waste of time; it is better just to get on with the work at hand. If reflection on method in relation to the task of comparing religious ideas has value, it is because comparing religious ideas is an important and complex task. Self-conscious debate about comparative method ought to be useful because there is confusion and fierce debate about the primary task, from how best to do it to whether to attempt the task at all.

This essay surveys a number of attitudes and approaches to comparison in the study of religion. One of these was developed in the Crosscultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP), a Boston-based research effort running from 1995–1999. Under the leadership of Robert Neville, CRIP brought together six tradition specialists (Frank Clooney, David Eckel, Paula Fredriksen, Noman al Haq, Livia Kohn, Anthony Saldarini) and four comparative generalists (Peter Berger, John Berthrong, Robert Neville, Wesley Wildman), as well as a number of graduate students. The double aim was to test a methodology for comparing religious ideas by actually using it to make comparisons, and to explore a small-community-based pedagogical approach to the formation of potential future experts in comparative religion. The project produced three volumes of results that appeared in 2001 entitled *Ultimate Realities*, *The Human Condition*, and *Religious Truth*.¹

¹ Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities*. This essay is a significantly revised and expanded version of ch. 9 of *Ultimate Realities*. I owe a great deal to other members of CRIP, but especially to Robert Neville, with whom I collaborated closely throughout the project, co-writing many chapters, including the one profoundly revised here. Though I was first author on the original chapter and Neville's contributions were minor, it is impossible to overstate his influence on the way I understand comparison of

My purpose here is to join the ongoing conversation over comparative method by showing how the CRIP approach relates to others. I shall make a three-fold case on behalf of this view of comparison. First, I shall indicate how it draws on the strengths of existing approaches. Second, I shall identify a pervasive weakness in extant approaches to comparison of religious ideas and show how the CRIP approach overcomes it. Third, I shall show how the CRIP proposal answers the challenges issued by various comparativists, including Jonathan Z. Smith in a famous article analyzing approaches to comparison.² It follows that this essay is not only a survey of approaches to comparison but also an argument for the particular method for comparing religious ideas that the CRIP used in its research.³

The organization of the essay expresses its argumentative character. I classify a number of attitudes and approaches to comparison according to how they would answer an increasingly detailed sequence of questions. Some reject the possibility of comparison whereas I argue for its possibility. Others reject explicit categories for comparison whereas I argue that explicitness about the inevitability of comparison in categories (or respects) is a virtue overall. Still others justify categories from existing theories whereas I argue for limiting (not eliminating) this kind of justification in order to make categories more vulnerable to correction and more easily able to change in response to the process of comparison. And yet others justify categories directly from similarities in the data whereas I argue, with Smith, that this is too arbitrary a procedure.

The CRIP view, by contrast, is that there should be a dialectic between data and comparative categories whereby the task of understanding through comparison can build progressively on previous results. Categories can come from anywhere so long as a dialectical process of improvement and correction is in place. Justification of

religions. In particular, the seeds of the CRIP approach to comparison were planted in Neville's earlier works, especially *Normative Cultures*. Neville has given his permission for me to rethink and rewrite the original chapter; I take full responsibility for the result.

² Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," The paper was initially presented to the History of Judaism section of the American Academy of Religion, 1979.

³ There are many useful surveys to which those seeking more comprehensive and less quarrelsome coverage can turn. Other ways of summarizing approaches to the study of religion and the comparison of religious ideas include Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*; Ringgren, "Comparative Mythology," Smart, "Comparative-Historical Method"; Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology"; Capps, *Religious Studies*; and Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*.

comparative categories is a complex process depending both on data identified and described and on theories in which the categories get meaning by playing key roles. The CRIP approach presupposes a corporate effort to make and improve comparisons, to assemble and analyze data, and to root out bias and short-sightedness. It eschews exclusive reliance on the genius insights of brilliant comparativists and instead builds these into a wider and messier corporate approach that includes ordinary scholars as well as the occasional comparative genius. It is a method for the mob. It may seem untidy but, like the natural and social sciences, it may be able to achieve results where nothing else can. The requirement of a community of inquiry that can stabilize hypotheses for investigation lies at the heart of the pedagogical significance of the CRIP approach.

I begin by discussing comparison in general terms and describing the CRIP approach in more detail. The bulk of the paper analyzes alternative views of comparison. In the penultimate section, I review the aforementioned argument of Smith and show how the CRIP approach to comparison, though it may have weaknesses all its own, does not fall prey to the criticisms he rightly levels against extant approaches. I conclude with some reflections on the pedagogical implications of this approach to comparison.

WHAT IS COMPARISON?

Comparison is controversial when it reaches across cultures, languages, religions, worldviews, and forms of life. I venture a general discussion of this topic in an attempt to establish a relatively non-controversial basis for the subsequent discussion of strategies for comparing religions, and specifically religious ideas.

What is comparison? The Oxford English Dictionary's online definitions for the transitive verb "compare" are: (1) "To speak of or represent as similar; to liken"; and (2) "To mark or point out the similarities and differences of (two or more things); to bring or place together (actually or mentally) for the purpose of noting the similarities and differences." Both definitions are relevant to most kinds of comparison. We usually begin by noticing that two things are curiously alike and then we proceed to examine them closely, noting similarities and differences. To "bring or place together for the purpose of noting the similarities and differences" is in effect to invoke and impose a *respect* of comparison on the cognitive process. We

usually compare in respects that interest us, often neglecting respects that do not. The respect in which we compare constitutes a comparative category for the comparison.

A prosaic example may be in order. When we seek to compare oranges and apples in respect of being fruit, we use “fruit” as a comparative category. As fruit, apples and oranges are similar in some respects and different in others; these more specific respects of comparison are subordinate comparative categories. In respect of surface texture, oranges are dimpled whereas apples are smooth; in respect of rind qualities, most oranges have a thick and fleshy rind while apple rinds are thin, and both are slightly bitter; in respect of internal structure, oranges are segmented and apples are not but both carry seeds in a segmented arrangement. The respects of comparison thus define a complex array of categories, some subordinate to others, and each the basis for noting similarities and differences.

Every comparative category must be vague in order to register differences. Vagueness here does not mean perverse refusal to be specific. Rather, vagueness refers to a logical characteristic of a category, namely, that the law of non-contradiction does not apply to what falls within it. For example, the comparative category of “fruit rind” must be vague to accommodate the quite different cases of apples, oranges, watermelon, avocados, and kiwi fruit. Propositions expressing the characteristics of fruit rinds—“Fruit rinds are thick and smooth” versus “Fruit rinds are thin and furry,” for example—specify the category of “fruit rind” in ways that seem to contradict but in fact do not contradict because of the vagueness of the category “fruit rind.” The vague category is a meaningful basis for comparison and the many possible specifications of it fill out its content. To say this is not yet to say that the comparative category is *useful* or *interesting*. In fact, I selected a mundane category just to make the point that we must distinguish the logical analysis of the vagueness of a category from judgments about whether a vague category helps to detect anything interesting about important subject matters, such as religion.

All comparison is interesting, because it is the act of interpreting beings. We usually are unaware of our interests, which is why meeting people with different interests can be so entertaining or disturbing: encountering the other heightens our awareness of our own particularities. We compare apples and oranges in respect of health benefits, cost, ease of production in a local climate, seasonal demand,

shelf life, flavor, and what our kids will eat. We shift with ease among these various respects of comparison as our interests dictate and we think little of it because nothing of intellectual or moral significance seems to be at stake. But this is not always so; sometimes important moral or intellectual issues are at stake in the comparisons we make.

The vagueness and interestedness of comparative categories can combine in unexpected ways to produce bad comparisons. Specifically, we conceive categories poorly (a) when they lead to uninteresting comparisons, (b) when we fail to make them vague in just the right ways to accommodate the things we are interested in comparing, or (c) when they depend on mistaken theories about aspects of reality. I will give examples of all of these in what follows.

(a) “Rind texture” is vague in just the right way to handle the varied surface characteristics of fruit, but it is not especially interesting in isolation from some theoretical account of why fruits have rinds and why the rinds vary in character. “Large-scale segmentation” is not much use as a comparative category if we are interested in comparing apples and oranges because the category only succeeds in registering apples negatively, as not having any large-scale segmentation. In fact, if we are not properly attentive, we may conclude that apples have no segmentation at all because they do not have the segmentation we see in tangerines and oranges, and our attention is focused only on large-scale segmentation. If we were to consider the broader category of “segmentation,” we might happily make comparisons between apples and oranges with respect to several different kinds of segmentation (large-scale, sub-structure scale, seed-scale, surface bump patterns, etc.) We handle vagueness of the “segmentation” category by specifying subordinate categories to flesh out the dimensions of meaning of segmentation that the data demand.

(b) There is nothing inherently wrong with comparative categories lacking the ideal level of vagueness. But two practical problems can arise, especially when we unthinkingly adopt existing categories for new purposes. On the one hand, too much vagueness gives undue freedom to our overactive pattern-recognition skills, permitting us to see similarities and differences that suit our interests, whether or not those interests are ideologically innocent. Thus, sometimes it may suit us to compare apples and oranges in respect of their reminding us of glorious summer holidays in the south of France. Far less innocent comparisons of the same sort are possible, though perhaps not in the domain of fruit. On the other hand, our comparisons can

lack richness and insight when we use insufficiently vague categories to describe ill-suited subject matter. Consider again the comparative category of “segmented fruit structure,” for example. This category must be vague to allow for the segmented macro structure of tangerines, the segmented seed casings of apples, the fact that some apples have minor large structure segmentation (in the form of bumps at the bottom of the apple) and others do not, the symmetry of peaches and nectarines, and the fact that some oranges have delicate internal substructures and others do not. If we unconsciously understand the comparative category of segmentation to refer only to comprehensive macro-structural segmentation, then our comparative category may lead us to overlook other types of segmentation in fruit, as when the claim that “Oranges are segmented but apples are not” leads us to overlook segmentation of the apple core.

Consciousness of this problem is the first step in avoiding distorted descriptions of segmentation in apples. The most useful strategy is to develop an array of categories within which broader categories are specified by subordinate categories. This leads us to look for subtle features. It is precisely for this reason that classification schemes have been so important in the history of thought.⁴ While promoting more detailed observation, however, classification schemes also carry hidden theoretical assumptions about which we must strive to be aware lest distortion of description and flawed understanding go unnoticed.⁵ Thus, one of the tricks in improving comparisons is to allow the details of the process of comparing to make us conscious of narrowness in our comparative categories, whereafter we can either narrow the definition of a comparative category to conform to the way we were using it or broaden the definition to accommodate the features of the data that interest us. In either case, the categories of comparison are responsive to the process of comparison.

⁴ Witness the impact of Carl Linnaeus’s famous taxonomy of animals and plants. The first edition of Linnaeus’s taxonomy, *Systema Naturae*, was published in 1735 and it subsequently went into many editions, growing from a slender pamphlet to a multi-volume work. It is still in use today, though with many changes and expansions. This is but one example of the many taxonomies and classifications in use our age, from product catalogues to types of religion.

⁵ The criticisms of Linnaeus’ taxonomy are legion but the deepest problems with the taxonomy arise when morphological similarity makes organisms seem related yet genomic information suggest evolutionary distance, thereby clouding the very concept of species, which is one of the most crucial comparative categories of the classification.

(c) Some comparisons are invidious and lead to intellectual misunderstandings and moral disasters. When Aristotle compared human beings in respect of the independence and completeness of intellectual soul, he concluded that slaves had none of these qualities and that women require a man's fully developed intellectual soul to guide and complete their own partially developed intellectual soul.⁶ Aristotle seems unaware of his powerful desire to rationalize existing social practices, yet his comparison reflects this interest in a way that is obvious to people with different interests (such as Plato⁷) and still more obvious to people who live at a time when better data makes Aristotle's comparison seem silly, despite the fact that it was generous for its time in some ways (not everyone clearly distinguished women from slaves, as Aristotle did).

Where precisely does the problem with Aristotle's comparison lie? The mistake is in the meaning he gives to the comparative category by which he attempts to diagnose similarities and differences among men, women, and slaves, namely, the independence and completeness of intellectual soul. The meaning of this category derives from mostly mistaken theories about human nature, the intellect, and human reproduction, and from mostly mistaken estimates of the power of social context to condition interpretations. Aristotle was empirically minded enough to recognize that some women did not fit his model but treated them as "contrary to nature" exceptions rather than as the few women able to break through oppressive social circumstances to realize some of their intellectual power despite the almost insurmountable difficulties they faced. And Aristotle was just wrong about reproduction, as when he speculated that women had to be incomplete men because their bodies were unable to heat menstrual fluid to the point that it could become semen. Of course, he thought that semen was the source of the non-material parts of a human being, including especially intellectual soul. The theoretical framework for his comparative category of "the independence and completeness of intellectual soul" was defective and we are entitled to wonder whether he did enough to test and improve the category.

⁶ See Aristotle, *Physica* 1252b; *Generation of Animals*, I 728a (Loeb Classical Library).

⁷ See Plato's *Republic*, in which Plato allows women a role in the ruling class. But in *Timaeus* 90e, the best that women can hope for in the process of rebirth is to become a man.

The lesson here is that special interests interfere with the refinement of comparative categories. Interested comparison is inevitable but bad interested comparison is not. We can control for interests by seeking correction and refinement of our comparative categories. We can strive both to make them sensitive to the variations in the data for comparison (as when we have to avoid unconscious rigidity in our understanding of segmentation in fruit) and to give them meaning through embedding them in superior theoretical frameworks (as when we have to have accurate theories of reproduction if we are to avoid Aristotle's mistakes in wielding the category of the independence and completeness of intellectual soul).

This discussion of interested comparison drives home the sometimes-overlooked fact that behind every act of comparison there lurks an interpreter with only partially conscious interests, incomplete knowledge of the world, and an enormous capacity for making delicate discriminations to suit ruling interests, to rationalize desired actions, and to bring comfort and assurance that the "other" is comprehensible and controllable rather than terrifying. The neurological conditions for comparison are important here. Human beings have highly developed pattern recognition skills, which are especially useful for recognizing the significance of facial expressions.⁸ These skills misfire from time to time in interpreting faces. They also lead us to expect patterns where none exist, or at least none at the level we seek. This is one of the great liabilities that human beings bring to observation and inquiry, and psychologists have documented its effects in great detail.⁹ It is equally a liability in comparison, where untrained human beings are too ready to find similarities on the basis of a quick glance. This maximizes vulnerability to error due to overconfidence, and marginalizes the careful observation and analysis of theoretical frameworks that we need to save comparative conclusions from becoming victims of casual hubris borne of over-active pattern-recognition skills.

To summarize, comparison is a cognitive activity that involves

⁸ See Brothers, *Friday's Footprint*.

⁹ There are many compendiums of errors due to biological limitations on human rationality and overactive pattern recognition, including examples of the ways that unscrupulous people exploit such vulnerabilities for their own profit and amusement. See, for example, Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So*; Piatelli-Palmarini, *Inevitable Illusions*; Plous, *Psychology of Judgment*; Randi, *Flim Flam*; Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*; Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

construing multiple things as instances of a vague comparative category. Good comparison works (a) empirically by keying categorical vagueness to comparative data, (b) conservatively by allowing for over-active human pattern recognition skills, (c) theoretically by attending to the way categories derive their meaning from existing interpretations of aspects of reality, and (d) humbly by seeking correction of comparative hypotheses in light of changing observations and theories.

COMPARISON IN THE CROSSCULTURAL COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS IDEAS PROJECT

To explain the CRIP approach to comparison in more detail, we need to move beyond this basic understanding of comparison, and of what makes comparison good. In particular, we need to shift the focus to religion rather than the banal topic of fruit. The CRIP approach to comparing religious ideas has several characteristics.¹⁰

First, the CRIP approach is focused on religious ideas, rather than religious practices or religions in general. Focusing on ideas is not as limiting as it may seem at first since even religious practices are available for comparison as ideas when they are described verbally and framed theoretically. In fact, comparing practices in isolation from the ideas that make them important and relevant to people is probably futile. The point of focusing on ideas is to keep elements of interpretation in the comparative picture. Comparative categories derive their meaning from theoretical interpretations of aspects of religion and the comparative venture collapses into mere impressionism if we pretend that comparative categories somehow appear from nowhere, contextless and free of the distortions of history and the colorings of interpretation. When texts do not exist to document aspects of the meaning of religious beliefs and practices, as is the case for many modern tribal religions, cultural anthropologists and other observers of these religions must create interpretations of what they see to guide subsequent comparison.

Second, the CRIP approach is committed to a particular interpretation of the history of comparative categories. Many comparative categories owe their origins to translation decisions about how

¹⁰ Perhaps the most compelling account of the CRIP approach to comparing religious ideas is Neville and Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas".

to render in European languages key terms in the sacred texts of the world's religions. From there, those categories have had a huge impact on subsequent discussions—and not just explicit comparisons. Even apparently neutral description makes use of available terminology and so is inherently comparative in nature. When some activity is identified as a ritual, some person as a priest, some place as sacred, or some time as propitious, the descriptions presuppose comparative judgments. The comparative categories of “ritual,” “priest,” “sacred place,” and “propitious time” are stretched in these new usages and they also lead interpreters and subsequent readers of these descriptions to interpret the things described in terms of existing patterns of usage of the key categories. Comparison suffuses description and thus the only way forward even for description is to take responsibility for comparative judgments wherever they arise.

Third, the CRIP approach proposes that taking responsibility for a comparative judgment involves explicitly thematizing the category involved, subjecting it to scrutiny regarding its origins and existing usages, examining the theoretical frameworks that give it meaning, and testing to see whether it leads to distorted readings of the things described by means of it. In other words, comparative judgments are inevitable so we must create a process whereby we can correct comparative judgments and the categories they involve.

Fourth, this commitment to constant correction and improvement requires us to treat comparative judgments as fallible hypotheses, not indubitable propositions. Moreover, this commitment to correction, while freeing us to work with comparative categories regardless of their convoluted histories, leads us to be suspicious of all comparative categories and to look for the three problems identified above: categories suffering from theoretically suspect framing, categories insufficiently vague to avoid distortion, and categories so vague that there is insufficient resistance to our tendency to form hasty impressions of similarity.

Fifth, the CRIP approach assumes that comparisons aim to be true, in the dyadic sense that locates the truth or falsity of a proposition in the accuracy of interpretation of its subject matter. Famously hidden within this apparently simple dyadic understanding of the meaning of truth is the far more complex process of interpretation that associates a claim with a subject matter *in a particular respect*, and locates the act of interpretation itself in a concrete social and polit-

ical situation. It follows that we must evaluate the truth of a proposition expressing a comparative judgment in relation to the way the respect of interpretation—the comparative category—forges a link between comparative judgment and subject matter. And we must concern ourselves with the effects of comparing religions because comparison inevitably is a socially and politically contextualized act of interpretation.

Sixth, the CRIP approach proposes that justifying comparative categories begins with using the category to describe and compare religious ideas fairly, where fairness is judged by the standard that Wilfrid Cantwell Smith so ably defended: “qualified adherent approval.” But the CRIP approach also involves taking responsibility for the fact that a category derives its meaning from large-scale theories of the subject matter. That is, a category such as “ultimate reality” is not just an empty vessel that we say contains other ideas such as Allah, Brahman, Chance, Dao, Emptiness, Form, or God. Ultimate reality is itself an idea with meaning that derives from the various ways it is specified in comparisons and by theories that explain how these various specifications are related to one another (in Max Weber or Paul Tillich, for example). Some comparativists balk at entering the theoretical territory limned here but I think it is futile trying to avoid theoretically loaded comparative categories. The most prudent course of action is to make these theories explicit and to seek to refine them as opportunity allows. I shall discuss in more detail later how to manage the theoretical elements of justifying comparative categories.

Finally, the CRIP approach achieves objectivity and accuracy in comparison not by trying to avoid the many hermeneutical difficulties of comparison but rather by embracing them as inevitable and seeking, indeed constructing, a procedure whereby we can locate mistakes, overcome distortions, and improve the theoretical frameworks underlying comparisons. In this sense—here at last I offer a compact definition—the CRIP method is a dialectic of theory and data sustained within a large-scale social process devoted to the discovery, improvement, and correction of comparative hypotheses.

COMPARISON AS IMPOSSIBLE

The sequence of questions by which I survey the field and promote the CRIP approach begins with the basic one reflecting the con-

tention surrounding comparison in contemporary religious studies: Is comparison possible? If we take this question in its narrowest sense, as asking about the sheer possibility of comparison of religious ideas and practices, it is unproblematic. I think it undeniable that comparison has actually occurred, whether well or badly done.

The question is more interesting if understood as a question about the possibility of successful comparison. The ideal of “success” is contested but I think the discussion above reflects most people’s hopes for what success should mean: allowing for over-active human imagination, minimizing the effects of biased interests, identifying important features of the things compared, and winning approval of descriptions from qualified adherents, where “qualified” means experts trained in the disciplines of comparison. To this I would add the meta-constraint that the purpose of making comparisons should be morally legitimate. Understanding success in this five-fold way, I contend that relative success in comparing religious ideas is possible, at least some of the time. The views denying the possibility of successful comparison¹¹ do so in at least the following three ways.

First, some are so impressed by the differences between cultures and religions that they speak of incommensurability and deny the meaningfulness of talk about vague categories that express common respects of comparison. Even when common respects of comparison seem to be present, these critics insist, we cannot assure ourselves that real commonality exists because intricate cultural embedding makes the ideas involved incommensurable. To this “incommensurability objection” my answer is three-fold. (a) The biological structure of human life places a limit on the problem of cultural impenetrability and gives a solid basis for speaking of common features of human culture. (b) The phenomenon of multiple religious and personal identity (for instance Confucian Christians, Jewish Buddhists) shows that the claim of incommensurability is strained. (c) What is difficult to communicate or translate at one time and place may not be so always and everywhere because language and culture are mutable, dynamic phenomena. To say that comparison is a social and political act is precisely to allow that it can change circumstances, including by creating previously non-existent possibilities

¹¹ For example see Wiebe, *Religion and Truth; Beyond Legitimation*.

of communication and crosscultural understanding. These three considerations do not automatically assure the meaningfulness of speaking about common respects of comparison but they do check objections that would arrest from the outset all attempts to identify meaningful respects of comparison. Once the comparative process has begun, at least on the CRIP understanding of that process, the existence or creation of common respects of comparison is largely an empirical matter.

Second, some are so impressed by the human tendency to become attached to familiar ways of interpreting the world that they view the problem of bias as intractable. They deny that we can treat religious practices, texts, and traditions as specifications of comparative categories without fatal distortion, no matter what pains are taken to be fair. Perhaps we can imagine creatures capable of fair interpretation through being less thoroughly indebted to biologically congealed habits of understanding than human beings are. But we cannot imagine ourselves capable of overcoming the limitations of imagination and perspective that plague our attempts to be fair-minded in human affairs. My reply to this "bias objection" turns on a difference in judgment regarding the degree to which bias is problematic. I take the existence of adaptable forms of inquiry such as the natural sciences to be evidence that people are capable of establishing social arrangements wherein vulnerability and improvement of interpretations is prized. Moreover, the "qualified adherent approval test," in spite of its complexities, assures us that our efforts to be fair are sometimes relatively successful. Once again, however, nothing in this reply guarantees fairness, nor even a recipe for achieving it. Fair interpretation is an art form in which success turns on skill and effort as well as a clear-headed method.

Third, some might grant the meaningfulness of respects of comparison and even the possibility of making allowance for bias, yet view the purpose of comparison as essentially immoral, thus making successful comparison impossible where "success" connotes worthiness. Whether the goal of comparison is to satisfy curiosity, to enhance understanding, to build theories, or something else, the "morality objection" insists that comparison is an exercise of cultural power for which it is hard to take full and fair responsibility. If not a blatant exertion of cultural force, then it is at the very least a dangerous form of transformative praxis: comparison changes things, both the things compared and those making the comparisons. My reply

to the morality objection begins by granting that comparison is interested and transformative praxis. Indeed, the very purpose of comparison in the social context of interreligious dialogue is to bring about cultural and personal change through mutual understanding. I think that purposes in making comparisons or religious ideas are often and perhaps usually morally legitimate. There are no guarantees, however, for moral judgments of this kind change with time and place. I have no trouble imagining settings in which curiosity should be checked and understanding sacrificed for the sake of some relatively higher moral purpose, such as the protection from scrutiny of an exquisite and fragile cultural phenomenon.

The incommensurability, bias, and morality objections to the possibility of successful comparison are potent. My reply in each case turns heavily not only on the conception of comparison I am defending but also on the social process of comparison that plays an essential role in making corrections and adjustments in comparative judgments. My resistance to non-empirical pronouncements about what is possible and what is impossible in comparison makes sense only in the context of a serious positive viewpoint that moves beyond hopeful speculation about comparative method. That alternative is a properly empirical procedure that prizes vulnerability of comparative hypotheses and actively seeks to improve them in as many ways and with as much diligence as possible. This is the CRIP approach.

COMPARISON AS SOMETHING OTHER THAN AN EXPLICIT COGNITIVE PROCESS

Positions answering the question of possibility in the affirmative can be differentiated by their responses to a second question: To what extent should comparison proceed as an explicitly cognitive process with the results of comparison represented as (hypothetical) ideas? The argument that an act of comparison presupposes a respect of comparison (a category) is sound; it is simply a part of the grammar of comparison that two things are similar or different *somehow*—and the *how* is the respect or category of comparison. Nevertheless, comparisons of religious ideas sometimes avoid any explicit mention of the operative categories. This may be because of lack of interest or because of inconsistency, which would be serious defects. This silence also may serve a constructive goal: resistance to making the act of comparison an explicit cognitive process. To suppress discus-

sion of the category of comparison while still making comparisons is effectively to leave the results and categories of comparison implicit in the comparative act itself.

There are at least two reasons why this goal sometimes seems important. First, if we view knowledge as an event of illumination within a dynamic process, we might feel averse rather than drawn to explicit hypotheses about religions voiced explicitly in terms of comparative categories. Rather, proper knowledge is attained when the results involve a seeing-as with potentially transformative effects. Second, refusing to make the results of comparison explicit in the form of clear hypotheses is a hedge against so-called logocentrism. Vigilantly deconstructing comparative conclusions as fast as they materialize keeps the mind agile, avoids the ironic trapping of theorists by their own comparative conclusions, and most adequately respects differences among traditions. Some theorists deem these virtues so important that they willingly forsake the rather different virtues of self-consciousness of procedure, vulnerability to correction, and detection of bias that pertain to acts of comparison structured as explicit cognitive processes along CRIP lines.

There are a number of examples of this reticent approach to comparison. They vary in the degree to which they oppose representation of comparison as an explicit cognitive process and of comparative conclusions as ideas but they uniformly insist on the value of comparison in absence of a cognitive representation of the results as a third thing. Such approaches may use respects of comparison drawn from narrative structures¹² or metaphors.¹³ Alternatively, they may juxtapose points of view¹⁴ or facilitate intellectually illuminating play across differences.¹⁵ These approaches avoid large-scale theories about categories of comparison (such as the human condition, ultimate realities, or religious truth). Moreover, they tend to be suspicious of accounts of causal factors that purport to explain conceptual similarities between traditions or texts.¹⁶ The suspicion is understandable:

¹² Doniger, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts; Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities*.

¹³ Eckel, *To See the Buddha*.

¹⁴ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*; "Comparative Theology," 521–550.

¹⁵ Smith, *Imagining Religion*; Smith, *Map is Not Territory*.

¹⁶ See *Ultimate Realities*, ch. 8, where such causal explanations appear.

theories about comparative categories and causal analyses tend to be seriously underdetermined by the comparative data.

I have some sympathy for these indirect approaches to comparison. They highlight a genuine weakness, albeit one that fades with time (I hope), in the CRIP approach to comparison. These views hold in common that successful comparison is a moment of genius insight in which an illuminating similarity is grasped intuitively and then expressed gracefully, avoiding the unattractive mistake of smothering the insights with an unwieldy theoretical apparatus. Almost any broad theoretical framework either will be too abstract to explain anything or will quickly predict not only the insight under investigation but a horde of other comparative conclusions as well. In fact, it will predict so much on the basis of such slender data that the theory will collapse under the weight of its own pretensions. A theory about a comparative category is, on these views, drastically underdetermined by the data, and thus extensively stipulates what ought to be the case, invariably getting too much wrong to be attractive. Making comparison into an explicit cognitive process with a dialectical methodology of vulnerability, debate, and improvement seems too facile, too unrealistic about the complex data to be accounted for in comparisons, and too optimistic about the power of theories to coordinate the disparate data consistently. What is left for comparison, then, except to be the domain of genius insight? And what is the point of rendering comparison an explicit cognitive process except boldly to hide from the fact that we simply cannot regulate comparative efforts in the way the CRIP approach claims is possible?

Note how modest is the objection to the CRIP approach that I infer from these viewpoints. It does not claim that successful comparison is impossible on *a priori* grounds. Rather, it plausibly argues that a slender base of comparative data about religious phenomena and a worrying history of distortion and arbitrariness in previous comparative efforts combine with the irreducible complexity of the task to make the safest approach one of avoiding too formalized and aggressive an approach to comparison. Leave it to those deeply initiated into several traditions. Let us be content with their moments of illumination and the comparative insights they produce. Let us avoid systematization and cognitive fretting. It's just not worth it.

The relationship between this view and the CRIP view resembles the relationship between Mahayana and Theravada sensibilities in Buddhism. In Theravada, the focused journey toward enlightenment

is for the monks, for the genius experts. In Mahayana, enlightenment is for the masses; not being genius experts, however, they must find ways to work together. In the same way, I am urging that the process of comparison should be made more public, that many kinds of people should combine forces to search for stable comparative hypotheses, and that the key to this approach is an explicit method. This method must prize stability and vulnerability to correction in comparative hypotheses, render its provisional conclusions as ideas on the way to theories about religious matters, and demand careful justification for the comparative categories that make stable comparative hypotheses feasible. The CRIP approach goes even further, however—and here the Buddhist analogy begins to strain, though the “egalitarian rebellion” version of the origins of Mahayana keeps the analogy alive. I argue that the genius insight method of comparison was never sufficiently productive of deep insights and that such insights as were won were never made as fruitful as they might have been for the work of others. In short, there is a scientific approach to comparison that promises far better results due to the coordinated work of many in place of the rare, uncoordinated insights of the few genius comparativists.

The question becomes, therefore, whether the CRIP method works. As sympathetic as I am to the criticism I have been discussing, I do think that more can be achieved than it allows. I return to these matters below. For now, the relation between the CRIP approach and this family of critics suggests an amusing image, flattering to both sides in different ways yet gently mocking both, too. What begins as conflicting bets over what would be gained by self-consciousness about method in comparison ends with the reticent, Theravada approach having nothing to do but watch while the enthusiastic Mahayana crowd uses every available resource to maximize the impact of their combined efforts. The members of the disciplined monkish group, amazed at the innocence of their non-adept friends, with some justification predict that the corporate experiment will begin in optimistic methodological stipulations and, chaotically stumbling along a host of mistake-ridden paths, end in utter failure. The large, noisy group, for its part, is unconcerned with the adepts’ opinions because time is on its side. Where the adepts can only watch in amusement, already pressed hard up against their self-imposed limits for what is possible in comparison, the corporate experiment’s refusal to accept any limitations *a priori* on what comparison can

achieve gives it time and opportunity to learn from its many mistakes and to generate new approaches and new forms of cooperation. The outcome remains an intriguing question. I bet on the mob.

COMPARISON BASED ON CATEGORIES JUSTIFIED BY EXISTING THEORIES OF RELIGION

Approaches to comparison that produce explicit cognitive representations of the process and results of comparing religious ideas constitute a large group, though it is diverse and produces results of uneven quality. We can distinguish these views based on the answers they provide to the question about how we should justify the categories used for comparison. A later section of this essay deals with approaches that attempt to justify categories directly from "similarities" in the data of religious ideas and practices; this is an extremely dubious procedure but it has its own special virtue, as we shall see. The current section deals with approaches that borrow or deduce categories for comparison from existing theories of religion and justify the use of those categories by virtue of the plausibility they gain from those theories. We can distinguish such approaches, though not without overlap, by the nature of the theory of religion that furnishes and justifies the categories. I present them here for convenience in family groupings.

First, one family of approaches begins from a confessional religious perspective, approaching other religious traditions in terms of categories dominant within the home tradition.¹⁷ An important social phenomenon connected with this is interreligious dialogue, in which representatives of religious traditions join in discussion over shared issues of practical importance or simply to increase mutual understanding. Surely this is the most natural way, in the sense of being simplest and most direct, to approach the task of making comparisons among religious ideas. What could be more straightforward or more morally satisfying than to approach the plurality of religions from one's own perspective? I heartily affirm the moral and existential naturalness of this kind of approach to comparison. Yet it

¹⁷ See, among numerous others, Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 115-134; Pannenberg, "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions," pp. 65-118.

has an obvious downside in that the categories for comparison are so heavily indebted to a particular confessional perspective that they cannot be as responsive to the data as scholars and theorists of religion require. An ideal dialogue encounter for many religious-believer comparativists may not be ideal for comparativists for whose purposes the inflexibility of categories derived from and justified by confessional commitments interferes with the scholarly task. Flexible categories are better in the CRIP approach because comparative categories always need improvement, and any theory that produces and justifies categories always needs refinement.

Second, another family of approaches justifies the key categories for comparison by means of a theological-mystical-metaphysical theory. This is true in very different ways of the perennial philosophy,¹⁸ various archetype and Jungian approaches,¹⁹ and even certain contributions in the philosophy of religion.²⁰ The theory in question may be more or less complete and more or less empirically driven, yet it is persuasive enough to commend its principal theoretical categories to the comparativist. There are many examples that we might consider here but, for the sake of specificity, I shall discuss the perennial philosophy.

The perennial philosophy offers a way to see how adepts of all religious traditions hold certain key ideas in common, albeit under sometimes radically different descriptions, while explaining why non-adepts could flatly disagree with each other about religious beliefs and practices. The existence of this purported common core is the reason the perennial philosophy is sometimes called the primordial tradition. It is defended by thinkers who in some cases—and pre-eminently in the case of Huston Smith, its best known contemporary representative—have spent a great deal of time learning about religious practices and texts from all over the world.²¹ Its advocates would say without hesitation that its plausibility derives mainly from the fact that it can make sense of a great deal of data. Just because

¹⁸ For example, see Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*; Schuon, *Transcendent Unity of Religions*; Smith, *Forgotten Truth*.

¹⁹ For example, see Campbell, *The Masks of God*; Eliade, *Cosmos and History*; Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*; Eliade, *Images and Symbols*; Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*; Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*; Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*.

²⁰ For example, see Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

²¹ The fruits of this research effort are especially evident in Smith, *The World's Religions*.

of this, we are told, we should not hesitate to adopt categories from the perennial philosophy for the sake of making detailed comparisons. From its hierarchical ontology of the Great Chain of Being we receive the categories of Godhead (*nirguna Brahman*), God (*saguna Brahman*), discarnates and other intermediate beings, human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Its cosmology offers categories such as the human condition, ultimate and proximate religious truth, savior figures and bodhisattvas, ignorance and liberation. Its view of the religious quest leads to other comparative categories such as morality, ritual, sacred texts, and special revelations, each of which is interpreted through the lens of the ontology and cosmology of the perennial philosophy. When a powerful large-scale theoretical interpretation of religion furnishes categories, perennialists urge, comparison can proceed untroubled by the problem of categorial justification, focusing instead on comparative details. Ultimately, on this view, the result is the further illumination and consolidation of the theory of religion that furnishes the categories in the first place.

What happens, however, when some data beg for comparison in fundamental categories other than those served up by the perennial philosophy? The existence of such data is predicted within the perennial philosophy approach and explained by means of the distinction between what is ultimately and proximately true; in this way the contraindicative force of such data is contained. Ultimately, the contraindicating data are really not so important even if, proximately, they are pervasive and central. Going further, what happens if, by following this procedure, most of the interesting details of religious practices and ideas are effectively eliminated from having a say in what the fundamental categories for comparison should be? For example, the majority of scholars in religious studies simply cannot accept that pervasive themes in religion such as food and purity can be marginalized in the way that the perennial philosophy does. As beautiful as the perennial philosophy is, it has few followers. This is partly because of an ontology that is opposed to the naturalist tendencies of modern western science but also because its handling of comparative data is felt to be arbitrary. The sense of arbitrariness derives from the fact that the theory furnishing the categories for comparison is too neat, too easily able to deflect objections, and thus too convenient, too invulnerable, too unresponsive to criticism, and too uninterested in correction and improvement.

For all that, of course, the perennial philosophy might be correct, at least in its essentials. The point here, however, is that the vulnerability of comparative categories is at least as important a virtue as the coherence and simplicity of a theological-mystical-metaphysical theory that might produce them. The same goes for other members of this family, including especially the various archetype theories of religion, regardless of whether we provide a metaphysical or other explanation for the universality of the archetypes: vulnerability of categories is an essential hedge against ignorance about religion and the wider reality in which religion exists.

A third family of approaches justifies comparative categories by virtue of one or another scientific-causal theory about the origin and nature of religion. Such approaches, including many of the brightest stars in the sky of the scientific study of religion, usually have begun from particular scientific or social-scientific disciplines, thereafter leading out into proposals for more or less comprehensive theories of religion. Examples are legion, and usually emphasize a particular discipline such as evolutionary biology,²² anthropology,²³ sociology,²⁴ neuroscience,²⁵ cognitive science,²⁶ or psychology.²⁷

The word “causal” in scientific-causal is helpfully vague. On the one hand, it cuts in the direction of the second family’s expectation that there are naturally occurring limitations on how religious ideas fit together. Of course, the third family explains these limitations in terms of the sphere of interest of the leading scientific discipline

²² Frazer, *Creation and Evolution*; Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Spencer Harrison, *Nature and Reality of Religion*; Tylor, *Primitive Cultures*.

²³ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*; Lévi-Straus, *Totemism*; Lévi-Straus, *Structural Anthropology*; Douglas, *Natural Symbols*; Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*.

²⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Weber, *Essays in Sociology*; Weber, *The Religion of China*; Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*; Geertz, “Deep Play,” Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*; Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Berger, ed., *The Other Side of God*.

²⁵ Jaynes, *Origin of Consciousness*; Ashbrook, *The Human Mind*; d’Aquili, Laughlin, and McManus, *The Spectrum of Ritual*; d’Aquili and Newberg, “Religious and Mystical States,” 177–99; d’Aquili and Newberg, “The Neuropsychological Basis of Religions,” 190–91.

²⁶ Boyer, *Religion Explained*; Boyer, *Naturalness of Religious Ideas*; Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*.

²⁷ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*; Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*; Erikson, *Young Man Luther Rizzuto*, *The Birth of the Living God*.

(e.g. social patterns, brain structure and function, psychological mechanisms) rather than in the second family's more metaphysical or mystical ways. On the other hand, causation points in the direction of historical influence whereby certain comparative categories achieve a high degree of naturalness, as when the historical emergence of Buddhism and Hinduism from earlier Brahmanic religions means that *samsara* and *moksha* are natural categories for both. The historical influences in question might vary widely, from the effects of trade contacts or missionary zeal to planned cultural engineering. Some approaches in the third family make appeal to both kinds of causation to justify comparative categories. This is true especially of approaches to comparison that allow the philosophy of history to play as large a role as historical details.²⁸ Unfortunately, sometimes these views presuppose influence where none has been shown to have any historical-causal basis. Alternatively, they presuppose an evolution of ideas where the close-knit cultural competition needed for the natural selection of ideas cannot be demonstrated.

The third family displays relatively less interest in the first family's approach to religious pluralism, beginning from one's personal religious point of view. It also contrasts with the second family by limiting attention to recognizably scientific theories or to historical causation, at least in intention if not always in practice. The problem with the third family of approaches, however, is the same as the problem in the first and second families: comparative categories need to be more vulnerable to correction than these approaches allow. We must be able to take account of all that is learned about religious traditions in the process of making comparisons.

It would be churlish to criticize the many instances of creative genius in the study of religion that abound in these three families of approaches. Let me be clear that in no case is it the source of comparative categories that troubles me. Each of these types of theories of religion has bequeathed valuable categories for comparing religious beliefs and practices. The problem is rather the rigidity that categories suffer when we justify them mainly with reference to large-scale theories of religion. These theorists themselves, and I daresay the bulk of those making use of their comparative categories, have not said clearly enough how these categories can respond to resis-

²⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*. Also see Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*.

tant data. My contention is that, regardless of the source of categories for comparison, the methodology of comparison must prize vulnerability of comparative categories and of the comparisons they permit.

COMPARISON BASED ON CATEGORIES JUSTIFIED FROM SIMILARITIES IN DATA

When categories receive their justification from an existing complete or partial theory of religion, they are even less flexible and responsive than the theories themselves. When too much data is not registered well enough by an array of categories, the dependence on a background theory makes flexible correction of categories almost impossible. This has long been sensed within the study of religion and by reaction has produced a fundamentally descriptive group of approaches to comparison. In this group, the justification of comparative categories derives from how well they express the relative importance of the data and of the relations between data.

Justification of this sort is a delicate procedure. Sometimes comparativists have justified comparative categories merely on the putatively self-evident character of the similarities themselves. The failure of “what just seems similar” to justify categories of “the similar” is notorious,²⁹ however, for two reasons. On the one hand, the role of the interpreter is so powerful in appeals to the obvious that it can swamp the ideal of descriptive impartiality. On the other hand, it continues to be difficult to figure out when phenomena are “essentially similar”; comparison seems not to advance this phenomenological task so much as codify persistent perplexity about it (but see below for a brief account of how philosophical phenomenology is supposed to overcome this challenge). Despite these problems, something like an appeal to the obvious is indispensable to the justification of categories in these approaches because of their insistence on allowing data to speak for themselves. The problem is unavoidable, therefore; it must be managed rather than avoided. I cluster the views in this group into families based on strategies for managing the challenge of impartiality in judging obvious similarities.

²⁹ This criticism is made forcefully in Smith, *Imagining Religion*.

First, experience and brilliance matter, and thus one family of approaches simply does the descriptive task well. That is to say, some writers adduce descriptive categories on the basis of intensive grounding in multiple religious traditions, with the benefit of ongoing discussions with a wide variety of people. The result is descriptions of religious phenomena and ideas that win the grudging but secretly appreciative approval of large numbers of experts. Under this heading I include the luminaries of description in the study of religion. Some of these could be called descriptive phenomenologists of religion, as against philosophical phenomenology to which I will return presently.³⁰ For others the phenomenological label is less apt but they are nonetheless expert observers and describers of religious phenomena.³¹ There are many others of both sorts.³² There are also many figures from the previous sections whose projects crucially depend on expertise in description so it is as well to remember that this group is distinguished primarily by a commitment to descriptive adequacy as primary justification for comparative categories.

Second, another family of approaches to comparison manages the problem of bias in description by partially relying on the lines of justification already discussed. This has to be done in precisely the right way, however: the aim is to relieve pressure on descriptive adequacy as the sole justification for comparative categories while still avoiding reliance on large-scale theories of religion in order to maintain the close ties between categories and data. One example of such a judicious hybrid approach is the comparative strategy advocated by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*.³³ In that work Otto blends phenomenological description with a partial theological viewpoint. There is no fully worked out theory of religion underlying Otto's categories of *mysterium* and *tremendum*; he himself says that he only

³⁰ For example, see van der Leeuw, *Religion*; Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*; Jastrow, *The Study of Religion*.

³¹ Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*; Sharpe, *Understanding Religion*; Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*; Smart, "Comparative-Historical Method," Smith, *Faith and Belief*; Smith, *Towards a World Theology*.

³² One of the most pervasive suppliers and reinforcers of comparative categories should be mentioned under this heading, though it is less systematic than any of the examples so far mentioned: the almost universally used classification system of the United States Library of Congress. See *Library of Congress Classification Schedules* Runchock and Droste eds.

³³ Otto, *Idea of the Holy*. Also relevant here are Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*; Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*.

focuses on the irrational element in religion, which leaves out an enormous amount of data. Yet the categories achieve justification not only by observations of the recurrence of phenomena that are arguably identical in substance, but also by a partial worldview that postulates the religious potency of reality.

Third, another hybrid family of examples uses various kinds of higher-order classifications of the data to supplement justification of comparative categories by means of their adequacy for describing data. Examples are plentiful, including the classification systems of Watson and Dilworth³⁴ and Paul Tillich's analysis of God concepts.³⁵ In such cases, structural similarities in the ideas of diverse religious traditions suggest a classification. This classification is then supported in at least one of four ways: (a) by elimination of alternative classifications, (b) by the theoretical beauty and economy of the classification, (c) by the classification's efficacy in organizing further data, and (d) by the classification's production of new insights. These classifications may or may not be ideal, in the sense of being defined by key features that are rarely realized purely in actual instances, and they may be partial or exhaustive.

All of the approaches to justifying categories discussed in this section prescind from heavy reliance on well worked out theories of religion. By contrast with the views discussed in previous sections, they cleave to whatever relevant data is available, without the aid of much in the way of a theoretical superstructure to add authority to the classifications and categories that result. This is so even in hybrid approaches to justification (the second and third families). The attempt to stay closer to the data by resisting the potentially blinkered influence of large-scale theories is to be lauded, in spite of the problems of justification merely from impressions of similarity. From this we learn the crucial lesson that, difficult though it may be, we must limit (not eliminate) the role that big-deal theories of religion play in the justification of comparative categories.

Yet anti-theoretical, data-driven comparison is too arbitrary, so we must not exclude large-scale theories of religion altogether from the justification of comparative categories. We must maintain a distinction—it can never safely be made rigid—between the task of comparison that produces and justifies comparative categories and the subsequent

³⁴ See Watson, *Architectonics of Meaning*, and Dilworth, *Philosophy in World Perspective*.

³⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*.

task of theory building that takes the categories as well-attested ways of organizing data. In this way we arrive at the necessity for a dialectical approach, which is the CRIP way.

COMPARISON BASED ON A DIALECTIC OF DATA AND CATEGORIES

The final group of approaches to comparison attempt, by contrast with all approaches discussed so far, to introduce procedures that gradually improve categories, however they are produced. The most feasible procedure for such improvement is a thoroughgoing dialectic between the raw data and the categories used in making comparisons of the data. These approaches tend to be unwieldy because of the number of variables involved. Not only is there a large amount of data to manage, but this data needs to be effective for the correction of the categories in use. Moreover, the theories guiding interpretation of the data are themselves complex and subject to correction. I discuss here three dialectical approaches.

The first and most famous is E. Husserl's philosophical phenomenology.³⁶ Husserl's attempt to allow phenomenological generalizations to respond to data is truly impressive. The CRIP approach follows him in this respect, though in few other ways. Husserl's program is burdened by awkward philosophical assumptions that it is less than optimally helpful for a general theory of comparison. In particular, his foundationalist epistemic project seems wrongheaded and produces confusions in his method that obscure the details salient for a general theory of comparison. His elaborate procedure for guiding phenomenological reflection is both too little in respect of attending to too few sources of corrective wisdom, and too much in respect of being thoroughly overbearing and impossibly demanding. If ever there were a comparative method for adepts it is Husserl's. That said, I do admire his attempt to found a discipline of comparative phenomenology, his scientifically minded respect for vulnerability of categories inferred from data, and his use of a dialectic of data and categories to drive his phenomenological method.

The second example also focuses on phenomenological reports: the heterophenomenological method advocated by D. C. Dennett.³⁷

³⁶ Husserl, *Ideas*; Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

³⁷ Dennett, "A Method for Phenomenology," pp. 66-98.

Dennett's approach can be regarded either as an attempt to correct some of Husserl's excesses or as a simplified version of Husserl's own procedures. Unfortunately, Dennett does not say enough about Husserl's method to enable a fair judgment of the relationship between the two. Suffice to say that Dennett sees clearly the philosophical problems associated with the comparison of phenomenological reports and he is as keenly aware as Husserl was of how splendid it would be to have a way to know when apparently different descriptions were really essentially about the same phenomenon. I heartily agree with both Dennett and Husserl in this regard. I am betting, however, that the vision of effective comparative phenomenology will never be realized until neurophysiology advances to the point that it can make meaningful contributions to judgments about the essential similarity and difference of the experiences giving rise to the phenomenological descriptions being compared.³⁸

The third example is the CRIP approach, summarized above.³⁹ I confine myself in the next section to some comments on the meaning and significance of the dialectic between categories and data that the CRIP approach advocates.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMPARISON CONDUCTED AS DIALECTIC BETWEEN CATEGORIES AND DATA

A brief excursus in the territory of philosophy of science may prove illuminating at this point. In the 1960's, Imre Lakatos proposed a fairly detailed model for the operation of the natural sciences (the so-called methodology of scientific research programs).⁴⁰ It succeeded in overcoming to a significant degree the discontinuity between scientific work within a paradigm ("normal" science) and what Thomas Kuhn had identified as "paradigm shifts."⁴¹ The discontinuity had

³⁸ For one account of how neurophysiology might make such a contribution to the study of religious experience, see Wildman and Brothers, "A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences".

³⁹ Also see *Ultimate Realities*, ch. 8, and the summary in ch. 1 of that volume. A fuller account is furnished in several parts of *The Human Condition*. For a more detailed presentation, though lacking some of the insights accrued during the CRIP process, see Neville, *Normative Cultures*.

⁴⁰ Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes".

⁴¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

proved awkward because the history of science suggested on the whole that paradigm shifts fit into the flow of science more easily than Kuhn's proposal allowed. Lakatos's own proposal was also controversial, however. Though it allowed for paradigm shifts, it tended to make them more rational than the history of science suggested has been the case. The controversy between Lakatos's relatively rational account of theory change and Paul Feyerabend's insistence that changing between scientific research programs cannot finally be given exhaustively rational justification⁴² is one of the great debates of twentieth-century philosophy of science. It appears that, although reasons can be given for abandoning an apparently degenerating scientific research program in favor of a more progressive alternative, the decision remains a judgment call that cannot be decided completely rationally.

This shows that the dialectic between data and theoretical categories is a delicate one even in the natural sciences. Its management depends on having stylish good judgment about one's work, akin perhaps to what John Henry Newman called "illative sense."⁴³ That is how one balances the virtues of switching to a promising new hypothesis that (hopefully temporarily) flies in the face of important data, on the one hand, and the virtues of staying with a trusted old hypothesis that might be more consistent with data but seems to be running out of predictive steam, on the other. Newman's illative sense is the key to efficient, potent argumentation as much as it is the key to making decisions between two competing hypotheses that each call for the investment of time and energy. This ineradicably artistic dimension of human reason is a sharp reminder that any dialectic between data and categories will be as subtle as it is complex.

Perhaps Lakatos' most important insight was his detailed account of the complex path from data to theory and back again, in contrast with Karl Popper's more straightforward focus on falsification.⁴⁴ In the natural sciences, data is incomprehensible apart from theories of instrumentation, which themselves are justified both by the sense they make of raw data and by their derivation from active theories about how nature works. Additional essentially interpreta-

⁴² Feyerabend, *Against Method*.

⁴³ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.

⁴⁴ Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

tive theories are also needed for guiding the relating of data to theory, and for picking out essential features of the gathered masses of data. Most important is the way that the data, already multiply interpreted in these ways, can have an impact on the central hypotheses that guide the research program. No good scientist would ever throw over a well-tested hypothesis because of one piece of contraindicating evidence. Rather, attempts would be made—frantic attempts, perhaps—on the one hand to test the data by replicating an experiment or confirming theories of instrumentation, and on the other hand to explain the data with an auxiliary hypothesis that effectively protects the central hypotheses from falsification. It is partly the extension of theories to new data, even to potentially threatening data, by means of auxiliary hypotheses that helps to make research programs in the natural sciences seem progressive. Another sign of a progressive research program is its ability to predict novel facts. Of course, if novel facts are no longer forthcoming and explanations of threatening data seem contrived and merely face-saving, then the operative research program would be judged, sooner by its critics than by its advocates, to be degenerating.

What is true in the natural sciences is no less true in the study of religion: the relationship between data and theoretical terms, including comparative categories, is exceedingly complex.⁴⁵ Most of the views I have discussed recognize this. Determined recognition of complexity is the precondition for resisting the extremes of data-blind enthusiasm and theory-blind confusion. This acknowledgment also involves a discriminating appreciation of similarities and differences among the various kinds of inquiries we see around us. The subject matters of religious studies are very different from those of the natural sciences or economics or literature. Nevertheless, Lakatos's methodology of research programs, when appropriately generalized, fairly describes the way effective inquiry works in any context from the natural sciences to the humanities and even to common sense problem solving. The same characteristics are crucial: a conservative approach whereby a feasible hypothesis is relinquished reluctantly, and a sense of adventure that prizes vulnerability to correction by whatever means are available given the nature of the inquiry.

⁴⁵ Lakatosian research programs have been proposed as models for the study of religion in Clayton, *Explanation from Physics to Theology*; and Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*. They are used in Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility*.

Charles Saunders Peirce, and then John Dewey, first appreciated the potential generality of this sort of theory of inquiry.⁴⁶ Peirce actually anticipated Lakatos in many details relevant to inquiry in the natural sciences.⁴⁷ Peirce's more impressive achievements in this area, however, were his rich awareness of the complex relations between data and theory and his vision for extending a generalized theory of inquiry from the natural sciences all the way into the humanities and metaphysics. I share Peirce's and Dewey's basic intuition.⁴⁸ I see no reason why the confusing data of religious beliefs and practices cannot be given flexible interpretative structures that render them able not only to inspire but also to correct theories of religion and of religious topics such as the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth.

What form should such flexible interpretative structures take? They should take the form of the provisional conclusions of the study of crosscultural comparative religious ideas and practices, which is precisely what CRIP attempted to produce. That is to say, the comparative results of the CRIP effort are the first step toward a more effective approach to the generation and testing of theories of religion and religious topics. The categories within which comparisons of religious ideas and practices take place are precisely the flexible means of organizing data that constructive theoretical efforts require. In effect, these comparative results are the analogue of theories of instrumentation and interpretation in the natural sciences: they allow theorists of religion to do better work by stabilizing data in a network of comparative categories.

The CRIP approach thus conceives comparative categories as flexible interpretative structures or theories of instrumentation that make data available to wider theory-building efforts in religious studies while maintaining a dialectical relationship with data that is strong enough to force changes in the comparative categories and in the theories that make use of them. This hints at the ways theorists justify the comparative categories they use: justification comes both from the data side and from the theory side. To be more explicit about

⁴⁶ Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," Dewey, *Logic*.

⁴⁷ Peirce, *Essays in the Philosophy of Science*.

⁴⁸ For more details on the general theory of inquiry suggested here, see Wildman, "The Resilience of Religion in Secular Social Environments".

this, I offer the following parsing of the task of justifying comparative generalizations.

Each part of the task of justifying comparative categories corresponds to an impulse present in one or more of the approaches to comparison that I have discussed in this essay. Coordination of these lines of justification is essential, as is remembering that we speak here of justifying categories for comparing *religious ideas*. There needs to be (a) a delimiting of possibilities whereby the ideas of interest within a comparative category are set in a wider framework of plausible religious ideas of the same sort, so as not to overlook vital alternatives; (b) an account of the dynamic logical connections among these various possible ideas so that the category is specified not merely by a list of ideas but also by relationships among the ideas themselves; (c) a genetic analysis of specific symbolic representations of these religious ideas, so that historical influences among ideas and social-cultural influences on the origins of the ideas are explicit; and (d) analyses of the circumstances that accompany the key shifts in symbolic representation during the history of the religious ideas within the category. If all four of these theory-side lines of justification are accomplished convincingly, with no detection of excessive arbitrariness or distortion, then we will have good reason to think, from the theory side at least, that our comparative category is doing useful work. To these theory-side considerations we must add the basic phenomenological point on the data side, namely, that (e) our sense of what is similar, when carefully conditioned by scrupulous preparation and exposure to many variations, really should count as partial justification of comparative categories.

These five requirements for justifying comparative categories draw on standard commitments within the history of religions, the philosophy of religion, and the phenomenology of religion. I shall list those debts more formally below. They are the tests by which we determine whether comparative categories organize the data well and thus whether the categories themselves are adequate. It is perfectly clear that these tests are theoretical endeavors related to the larger theories of religion and of religious themes for which comparative categories serve as the organizers and mediators of relevant data. With all of those lines of explanation and justification in place, the CRIP approach to comparison leads out in interesting directions: to the birth of systematic comparative metaphysics; to a strengthened, potentially progressive, multidisciplinary investigation of religious phe-

nomena; to a more unified approach to the scientific study of religion that coordinates the typically more isolated disciplines of the history of religion, the phenomenology of religion, and the philosophy of religion; and to a particular view of pedagogy in religious studies.

CRIP was primarily concerned with the preliminary task of organizing data by means of categories for comparison in a complex dialectical process—precisely as complex as the formation of a community of inquiry from differently-minded scholars, including specialists and generalists. There were forays into more adventurous theoretical efforts but that is secondary. The categories used were shamelessly begged, borrowed, or stolen from multiple sources, including early translations of sacred texts, many of the various sources mentioned in earlier sections of this essay, and the creative intuition of project members. Comparison always begins in the middle of data-processing. Yet the CRIP effort also actively sought ways to correct comparative categories in an effort to organize the data of religious ideas in the most natural, efficacious ways. In fact, it adopted a promiscuous attitude to correction, excluding a priori no source of potential wisdom, grading sources according to their actual fruitfulness for making data relevant to the refinement of the comparative categories and the comparisons they permit. The three CRIP volumes are a kind of test: if the primary task of comparison has gone well enough, then we will have good reason to think that flexible structuring of the wild data of religious ideas is possible and that a more critical and data-aware form of theory building ought to be possible.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

By way of summarizing the CRIP approach, I recite a list of debts and corrections to existing comparative approaches. First, comparativists borrowing categories from existing theories are exercising a kind of wisdom. They are backing categories that are at least partially attested by the theory that gives them meaning and they seek in that way to extend the core theory itself to new tracts of data. That is why I can admire the perennial philosophers' dogged adherence to their interpretation of the world religions. Without fidelity to core hypotheses, even sometimes to the point of arbitrary han-

dling of data, we will almost certainly overlook some special virtue of the core hypothesis. Such devotion to research programs is vital to the stability of interpretative theories. Without stability, vulnerability for the sake of progressive correction is impossible. From these laborers in our vineyards we can learn to take good categories from wherever we find them and to be unafraid of the need for persistence in testing any theory of religion against data. However, we will still seek a fairer and more flexible approach to the data itself.

Second, comparativists that refuse to make explicit the categories in respect of which they make comparisons could well be exercising another kind of wisdom. In this case it is the recognition that analogues of scientific theories of instrumentation do not exist in the study of religion to any great degree, at least not yet. Thus, they prefer moving gracefully among the forest of data to trying to map and regulate the data's wildness for the sake of evaluating its force for or against the particular interpretations of it implied in the explicit use of comparative categories. From these fellow workers we can learn not to underestimate the complexity and disarray of the data of religious studies. It may be, however, that we can develop within the scientific study of religion decent analogues for data-handling theories of instrumentation in the sciences.

Third, comparativists who try to maximize the virtue of empiricism in generating comparative categories from data are wisely recognizing that there must be some degree of self-conscious distance between the comparative task and the task of larger theory building in religious studies. From them we can learn that categories are a middle-level beast. They help to organize data for the sake of big-deal theory construction yet they derive their justification as much from their polished data management as from the theories that use them. However, I remain sharply aware of the problem pointed out by J. Z. Smith of justifying comparative categories on the basis of apparent similarities in data.⁴⁹ The CRIP solution to this problem is the four theory-side criteria for justifying comparative categories in conjunction with an affirmation on the data side of the usefulness of phenomenological intuition of respects of similarity and difference, though only when the phenomenological imagination is

⁴⁹ See Smith, *Imagining Religion*.

properly prepared. I reaffirm Peirce's insistence that categories derived from theory for classifying data need to be checked against independent phenomenological analyses of the data to determine their suitability.⁵⁰

Fourth, in addition to the important critique of intuitions of similarity just mentioned, J. Z. Smith also argues that, at the date of his writing, there was no approach to comparison that produces or discovers, as against constructs, comparisons,⁵¹ and further that there was no satisfactory approach to comparison under discussion anywhere.⁵² I agree on the second point but demur, slightly, with regard to the first. In Smith's language, nobody "has presented rules for the production of" discoveries in the domains of the natural sciences either, yet discoveries happen. Moreover, the insights of well-trained describers and comparers of religions can be novel, at times, and those insights can transcend the level of the flimsy associative connections that Smith rightly attacks. I agree, however, that discovery occurs too rarely. The scarcity is because it is so difficult to acquire the competence that makes novel insights also profound ones. The CRIP proposal helps by requiring less the genius of comparative adepts than the scrupulous hard work of ordinary expert comparativists. Many of the novel ideas that can be put into the dialectic of categories and data that CRIP described and enacted may turn out to be of little use; certainly the project disposed of a lot more categories than it kept. Similarly, some categories and comparisons may never achieve the multi-faceted justification on which CRIP insisted; it surely is a demanding five-fold standard for justification, after all. We can fairly describe those categories that do make the grade as profound, however, and in at least some cases, novel. After that, discovery is a matter of learning to look for what worked elsewhere in new situations, tentatively extending the reach of data-management that the web of comparative categories enables, and always seeking for the kinds of dissonance that should force revisions. The CRIP approach answers Smith's call for a comparative method that can escape the weakness of extant approaches.

⁵⁰ On this matter, see the discussions in Neville, ed., *The Human Condition*, chs. 1–2; and Neville, *Normative Cultures*, pp. 74–84.

⁵¹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, p. 21.

⁵² Smith, *Imagining Religion*, p. 25.

Finally, I also take seriously the alternatives to explicit methodologies of comparison discussed above by trying to incorporate their strengths into the corrective procedures of the proposed approach. This is present, for example, in the way that theoretical justifications for categories help to deconstruct assumptions about what seems obvious. Moreover, judgments of similarity, for all their dangers, can call forth theoretical efforts of justification—and all this for the sake of fidelity to the data. Nevertheless, the CRIP approach is explicit about the categories and the provisional results of comparisons. Here I enter my wager in favor of the loosely coordinated march of many feet, all contributing to the task of generating and improving comparative hypotheses. This bet includes the gamble that the chaos will in time yield to something more like the organized frenzy of the natural and social sciences. I do see reasons to think that such a transformation in comparative religion will be difficult. After all, the forging of the CRIP community of inquiry was a demanding, drawn-out process.⁵³ And then there are the intimate existential entanglements that link comparativists to their subject matters in ways that do not occur, say, for physical chemists. That is the nature of religion: its study is often profoundly self-referential. These difficulties notwithstanding, I see no reasons to think that my bet on the future of the CRIP approach to comparison must necessarily lose. On the contrary, especially because of its promise for aiding a more critical, data-aware era of theory-building in the scientific study of religion and comparative theology, we have every reason to be hopeful.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The pedagogical implications of all this are now close to the surface. The CRIP approach absolutely demands a community of inquiry that stabilizes comparative judgments for investigation, capitalizes on diverse insights and types of expertise, and introduces novices into procedures and habits of thinking that facilitate effective comparison of religious ideas. In fact, the CRIP project was explicitly designed with these pedagogical considerations in mind. The four-year effort

⁵³ See the appendices to each of the volumes of the CRIP project for my account of the CRIP process.

funded one comparative-religion graduate student for each of the six tradition-specialists involved in the project. These students observed the roughly two hundred hours of in-meeting conversation and debate among the six specialists and four generalists, and participated more and more freely as time passed. They had formal opportunities to present their ideas and in some cases they became co-authors with the specialists on papers for the project's publications. They gave us feedback on the dynamics of the community-formation process and commented on what about the project's approach seemed to work and what did not. In this way, these fortunate students were initiated into a community of scholarship whose values were cooperation and mutual respect, and whose mission was the identification and ruthless criticism of candidate comparative categories for making comparisons among the vital ideas of the world's religions.

The aim of initiation expresses the distinctive contribution of the CRIP approach to pedagogy in religious studies. Of course, in one sense, all scholarly learning is initiation into ways of thinking, key literatures, and disciplinary meta-questions of method and value. Initiation means something more concrete in the case of the CRIP approach to comparison, however, because the community of inquiry is indispensable. Thus, initiation is not just learning the ropes and sails, after which the student can go off sailing by him or herself. It must also mean accepting a place within a community of investigation that has differentiated roles and a common goal. It means being apprenticed not just in a specialty with its languages and literatures, but also in general theoretical issues in the study of religion, in the philosophy of comparison, and in both the theory-oriented and data-oriented aspects of the task of justifying comparative categories. It means committing to an ideal of scientific comparison for which mutual reliance and information sharing are crucial.

This understanding of initiation into a community of inquiry makes sense in the context of students capable of research so long as there is a real community devoted to comparison in which the study can materially participate. This happened in the CRIP project but it does not always happen for graduate students in comparative religion. Like doctoral students in most fields, they are often alone in their work, and up to a point this is inevitable and good. But the ideal of participation in a community of inquiry is unhelpfully abstract when the community can only be imagined. Graduate programs in religion should strive to cultivate a working community of inquirers,

and possibly (as happened in the CRIP project) an intentional community of inquiry with a concrete goal. These differently equipped inquirers should learn not only their specialties but also the classic works in comparative religion and the central methodological debates that arc across and through its various disciplines. This is how students become bonded together despite their differences and the disciplinary fights they study.

At the undergraduate level, initiation begins as introduction. There is an enormous amount of raw information to grasp in introductory religion classes. I do not pretend that many novices in comparative religion can meaningfully participate in any community of inquiry capable of making corporate headway on problems of identifying, testing, and justifying comparative categories and producing comparisons of religious ideas by means of these categories. For religious studies majors, however, something approximating the graduate student's experience of initiation into a working community of inquiry should be possible in the later years of a degree program, particularly through seminars devoted to in-depth discussion of a particular theme or problem in religious studies.

The most perplexing problem facing all of these pedagogical recommendations is the fractured state of the community of religious studies scholars. This slightly desperate situation makes constructing actual working groups of comparativists more difficult than it should be, and calls for significant social engineering efforts. As long as comparativists want to work only with ideologically like-minded colleagues, the kind of community that the CRIP was and calls for will remain rare. Scholars of religious studies themselves need to initiate each other into the central tasks and problems of comparative religion, even if this means reaching uncomfortably beyond the narrow confines of their disciplinary specializations. The discomfort was visceral for the CRIP working group and the community obligations exhausting, at times. Yet the group achieved what no one member could achieve alone, despite individual brilliance. This is the heart of the CRIP approach to comparison: we can do more and better by working together.

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