On Comparing Religious Ideas

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1.1 On Comparison: Why It Is Important

To understand another person, to negotiate a business deal, to settle a trade dispute, to avert a war, to generate cross-culturally feasible solutions to global ecological problems, to cultivate habits of tolerance in a local community—these are all activities in which people must grasp what is important to each other in terms that all participants can understand. Consider the complex task of forging international resistance to torture, for instance. Torture may be repudiated by one person on the basis of an inalienable right to personal safety, by another because of divinely guaranteed dignity of human life, by another because of long-term pragmatic concerns for social stability, and by yet another because it destroys the honor of everyone involved. Nevertheless, all may reach an understanding that can be expressed in terms general enough to encompass everyone’s particular interpretation. That agreement might be expressed by saying that “torture is wrong and must be stopped.” Each of the key terms in this sentence (“torture,” “wrong,” “must,” “stop”) is vague, because each is understood differently by the various people who affirm it. Nevertheless, the sentence as a whole and each term within it are meaningful.
This illustrates the value of common terminology for mutual understanding and solving problems cross-culturally. The terminology does not need to apply univocally to all of the instances it must cover; nor can it be equivocal, because no mutual understanding would then occur. Rather, such common terminology must be vague in just the right way: vague enough to be specifiable differently in each case it describes, but not so vague as to be meaningless. Very often terms with the right sort of vagueness do not already exist before a practical problem draws attention to the need for them. In that case, diligent work can yield new concepts or perhaps modify the nuances of old language to create the needed terminology.

The central component of such diligent work is comparison, for comparison is required both to detect the need for better terminology, and to generate and test proposed terminology. Yet comparison itself requires common terminology, so a complex dialectical process is implied here: as the terminology improves, comparison gets more nuanced; and as comparison is more adequate, the terminology gets more accurate. This dialectical process is prevented from becoming viciously circular by the specific character of the things or approaches that are engaged in comparison, and to which the terms apply.

That the process of comparison is dialectical in this sense means that comparisons are never complete or fixed, but rather provisional through being dependent upon the subsequent stability of the comparative terminology. Moreover, a particular statement of a comparison is an abstracted part of the larger dialectical process of developing and criticizing the limits of the terminology. The terminology thus needs to be understood not only in its stipulated meaning but also through the history of its development. Comparison is a process of making, evaluating, and correcting comparative assertions, not merely the assertions themselves lifted from the process. The critical process renders the terminology vulnerable just as it does the assertions made within it. Perhaps the most important methodological theme of this book is that comparison is a process that is all the better the more vulnerable it is to correction. The research project of which this book is a partial expression centers around the critical process of probing the vulnerabilities of the comparisons it considers.

In this book, the objects of study are religious ideas about the human condition. Comparison is used to develop, probate, and improve appropriately vague terminology, most of which (like the phrase “human condition” itself) is inherited from past discussions, and then semantically tweaked. The terminology about the human condition produced in this way is presented here ready to serve three main purposes: deepening mu-
tual understanding of the religious traditions discussed through accurate description, elaborating a comparative understanding of religious traditions that allows us to say how they are similar and different in relation to the human condition, and enhancing well-established traditions of interpretation about the human condition in cross-cultural perspective. Other goals for this flexible, multipurpose terminology can be imagined easily enough, but do not figure explicitly in this book. For example, detecting what is religiously important about the human condition connotes a kind of systematic, normative inquiry into the human condition that lies outside the goals of this volume. Presumably, the terminology produced by diligent comparison here will be of use to others who might wish to pursue such a task.¹

A further word should be said here about what is to be compared in this volume, namely, religious ideas about the human condition. Religions involve much more than ideas, and in fact it is difficult to find a situation in which religious ideas are deemed more important than their intended practical purposes. Typical representatives of even intensely philosophical traditions such as Madhyamaka Buddhism and Medieval European Christianity would say that religious ideas are for the sake of guiding practice, sometimes paradoxically so. Accordingly, comparative religions is a far broader project than comparative religious ideas, our topic here. For those traditions comfortable with the word “theology,” the topic discipline is “comparative theology,” and for those traditions uncomfortable with that word, the comparison is with the ideas and ways of thinking that either take the place of theology or exclude theology and its analogues. A more exact statement of what falls within the category of “religious ideas,” considering diverse traditions of world religions, is itself part of the project’s inquiry (although it falls within the research projected for the third year). We have chosen to compare religious ideas rather than the many other religious phenomena and practices that might be compared in order to narrow the project somewhat and to be able to employ traditional disciplines of analysis that themselves have a critical history, namely the analysis of texts in various traditions. As noted in the preface, this approach to comparative religious ideas limits the religious traditions that we can study to those with extended textual intellectual traditions—although surely religious people from primal or traditional religions and popular and marginalized religious groups have interesting religious ideas to compare. Whatever conclusions we reach should be qualified by the recognition of the fragmentariness of the project: ideas are only a fragment of religious reality, and religious traditions with extensive literatures are only a fragment of religious life.
1.1.1 Comparative Method

"Comparative method" means at least three things. One is the conception of comparison, what comparison consists in, what counts as a comparison. Another is the ongoing process of comparison whereby comparisons are proposed as hypotheses, refined, tested from as many angles as possible, and related to one another. Yet a third is the procedure our specific project has followed, the character of our seminar discussions and the writing and rewriting of papers.

Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested to many people that there is no method in comparison, only a "magical" leap of imagination, and therefore that talk of comparative method such as we venture in this project is necessarily self-deceptive. That Smith's argument does not serve the ends of those who would exorcise comparison from the study of religion is evident from the fact that he himself makes intriguing comparisons, even in the same volume. Nevertheless, a challenge is issued to those such as ourselves who would defend the possibility of methodical comparison. Actually, Smith's objection is most forcefully pronounced against comparison as a science in the sense of Geisteswissenschaft, something we do not mean here at all. There is a lot of territory between comparison as strict science and comparison as magical leap, however, and our project has been cultivating a patch of ground in that middle territory.

To be clear, we agree with Smith that comparison of religious phenomena is ill-served by a method offering an algorithm for moving from demonstrably true premises to a thereby demonstrably true conclusion. Descartes grandly defended that conception of method in relation to all forms of inquiry in Discourse on Method and Meditations. Aristotle and Boethius earlier had also conceived of method in that narrow, logical way. It was understandable that discussion of methods for inquiry at first did not clearly distinguish method from logic, being content to focus on the complex debates over which forms of argument really succeed in extending truth from premises to conclusion solely by virtue of the argument's formal structure. But logic in that narrow sense is merely the aspect of method that deals with the validity of argumentation. Ongoing debates in logic bear out its importance; logicians want the validity of argumentation to be rightly described by logic regardless of the field in which argumentation is used. Method for inquiry, by contrast, must be attuned to the specifics of each field of inquiry, including the relevant data, modes of interpretation, and strategies for correction of proposals. Logic is merely the beginning of method. Therefore, to agree with Smith that narrowly logical conceptions of method are not useful for guiding the comparison of religious phenomena is merely the beginning and not
the end of discussions of comparative method. For us, comparative method must attend faithfully to the complexities and frustrations inherent in comparing religious ideas.

1.1.2 Vulnerability and Stability

Comparing religious ideas begins in confusion with possibly misleading verbal comparative similarities and interpretive biases of which there are good reasons to be suspicious. Beginning in medias res, comparative method by various devices imagines new and potentially improved hypotheses about comparisons, and then proceeds to reflect on them and test them from many points of view. The final status of the hypotheses is not that they are guaranteed by the structure of some method but that they are formulated in such a way as to be vulnerable to correction. Whatever stability and justification they possess derives from how they have been tested so far. Their worth depends on their vulnerability, which is the degree to which they can be sustained or corrected by new tests and perspectives as these are put into play. In our pragmatic approach, a comparative hypothesis that seems to have been guaranteed by the method through which it was produced is likely to have been made somewhat invulnerable to correction. An invulnerable hypothesis suffers from the fact that its limitations and possible falsity are obscured, perhaps as a result of delight or relief at having something seemingly firm to hold onto while at sea in the genuinely baffling world of religious ideas. If Jonathan Z. Smith is sometimes misread as being opposed to all comparison of religious phenomena, it may be most often by those who have developed a visceral allergy to the obscuring of the vulnerability of comparative hypotheses by surreptitious ideological biases. We share the allergy but advocate a method for comparison that helps maintain vulnerability and diagnose bias.

Our comparative method aims to produce stable comparative hypotheses without endangering the virtue of vulnerability, a matter of delicate balance. On the one hand we need to present hypotheses supported by good reasons in order to take them seriously for further study. Vulnerability to future correction thus cannot mean hypotheses so silly that any fool can see through them. On the other hand the comparative hypotheses might very well be corrected radically in the future, shown to have great limitations that were not immediately apparent, or revealed to be more projections of the comparativists' conceptions than genuine features of the phenomena. Stability does not imply no exceptions: quite the contrary, an hypothesis is stable if many exceptions to it are noted and yet on balance the comparative point holds. We have discovered that almost
anything in a religious tradition has some analogue in the other traditions and that, even though configuration and weighting of shared elements varies among traditions, generally stable comparative distinctions between traditions and texts can be made, at least for the purpose of further exploration. Thus, part of the meaning of "stability" is that the comparison can become destabilized by attention to details without always causing the wholesale collapse of an hypothesis. Resorting and reconfiguring might be the way to register the complexity of the phenomena while preserving the insight of the extant hypothesis. When that fails, abandoning or replacing the hypothesis is demanded. Comparative method is a process of framing stable hypotheses, destabilizing them in properly empirical fashion, amending them and recovering stability where possible, and scrapping the hypothesis in favor of a new idea when the time comes.

1.2 Vague Categories

When two or more things are compared, they are compared in the same respect. We call the respect of comparison a "vague category," which is to say a category used vaguely enough to allow room for the coexistence of different kinds of things within it. A category is vague if it allows things that contradict one another to fall within it; a category is merely general if it requires the things that fall within it to be mutually consistent. So, to compare our six religious traditions in respect to what their representatives think about the human condition is to treat "the human condition" as a vague category. Just what the various traditions say about the human condition are the ways they specify the vague category. What they say might be in contradiction with one another but still fall under the vague category of the human condition. A comparative category, therefore, has at least two modes, moments, or levels: the vague and the specified. (There is a third, to be discussed shortly.)

To be clear about this distinction is extremely important, and unfortunately this clarity is not common in the comparative traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What has been common is to take one tradition, usually Christianity, to be the source for vague categories and then to construe all the traditions as specifications of those categories as determined by their source-tradition, in which process Christianity gets preferential treatment and all traditions (including Christianity) are distorted. This is a literal description of Hegel's comparisons, though not of the order of his exposition. The vague category properly must be no more biased toward one specification than toward another. Therefore, part of the process of comparison is the continual reformulation of the
category as vague so as to be neutral to the ideas compared within it. Nearly every vague category has some particular historical roots—"the human condition" is heavily influenced by twentieth-century existentialism—but the category needs to be abstracted and purified so as to be as neutral as possible in registering what is compared by means of it.

Another common mistake has been to rest content with applying a vague category to traditions being compared without bothering to make clear how each tradition specifies the vague category in its own way. This blinds us to the details, which is disastrous because nuances are often the most important features of a tradition. To say that the West Asian traditions and many of the South Asian ones are "theisms" is vaguely true; but this does not say how or in what sense any of those traditions are theisms, and no tradition is a theism in general, not even Western Enlightenment deism. Comparisons require attention to the concrete details. None of this presumes that the details of religious ideas are always more important or more real than the vague categories they specify. Indeed, in certain interpretive contexts the relatively vague fact that all those religions are theisms, in contrast to Confucianism, say, might be far more important than the differences between them and the commonality might point to the metaphysically more fundamental reality. In general, making progress in comparison requires moving back and forth between the details and the vaguer commonalities. Although things need to be compared in a common respect in order for differences to be noted, if what the things compared have in common is vague, the most fundamental question is whether and if so how they are different or similar in respect to it. Clarity regarding the logical place of the relatively vague and specific is crucial.

Comparison requires a third logical step, mode, or moment beyond articulating vague categories and how each of the traditions compared variously specify them. The specifications need to be translated into the language of the vague comparative category. That is, whatever the comparativists decide are specifications of the human condition needs to be translated into the language of the human condition. Thus, the language expressing the vague category gets enriched and filled in so as to register the distinctions in the various specifications. As this step advances, the category itself becomes rich and concrete, expressing how all the traditions compared articulate it. From this vantage point both the category vaguely articulated and the separate specifications are abstractions from what the comparativists now know about the human condition, expressed in at least momentarily stable hypotheses.

Only when the specifications are translated into the language of the vague category, enriching that language, is it possible to make comparisons. Only then is it possible to see whether the traditions say the same,
radically different, partially overlapping, contradictory, or virtually incommensurate things. To say that the various religions fall under the same vague category is not comparison. To say that the specifications sit side by side is not comparison. Comparison is to say how the specifications are similar and different in terms of the category in respect to which they are compared.

To be clear in this way about what would be a successful comparison is not automatically to establish that successful comparisons are possible. Our judgment about the prospects for successful comparison of religious ideas can be summarized in a triply conditional statement, as follows. If the category vaguely considered is indeed a common respect for comparison, if the specifications are made with pains to avoid imposing biases, and if the point of comparison is legitimate, then the translations of the specifications into the language of the category can allow for genuine comparisons. It must be stressed that even this conditional judgment is a provisional, empirical result and not somehow guaranteed in the abstract by some theory of how much human beings can know about religious matters. The real challenges to successful comparison are the three conditions, however, and the test of any comparative method is whether that method helps to detect commonalities without bias for a legitimate purpose. While some thinkers have philosophical commitments for or against the possibilities of meeting these conditions, we do not. Our comparative method does not guarantee that the three conditions can be met; it only optimizes the process of comparison. It is our experience, not our philosophical commitments, that suggests that the three conditions can be met, sometimes, and so that genuine comparisons can sometimes be made.

1.3 Criteria for Success

Success in comparing religious ideas is a more elusive goal than success in comparing other features of the world, such as cars, economic policies, or even human personalities. The problem can be expressed in terms of the three conditions that we think must be met before successful comparisons can be achieved.

First, it is hard to tell in relation to religious ideas whether or not we have genuine commonality in the vague categories presupposed in a comparison. The main reason for this is two-sided. On the one hand, religious ideas can be interpreted descriptively, as affirming something about reality. On the other hand, they can be interpreted in terms of the qualities with which they carry what is important in their referents over into
the interpreters. "Getting a true description" is one kind of carryover. But conforming one's soul to God, giving up attachments, shaping liturgies for their proper effects, affecting the moral life of a community—all these are potentially "true" carryovers that are not ordinarily descriptive. Again and again we have noted the importance of the soteriological purposes of religious ideas, in contrast to their descriptive purposes. Symbols used non-descriptively say something about their referents, but often it is hard to determine what this is, for the sake of comparison, even when a descriptive interpretation of the symbol is silly ("God is the rock of my salvation"). Accordingly, special care needs to be taken when translating highly symbolic ideas into the language of the comparative category.

Second, personal investment in religious matters makes the avoidance of bias more difficult than in many other areas of comparison. Even with the best will in the world, religious convictions run deep and are multiply, invisibly, connected to the criteria we bring to bear on judgments of many kinds. And sometimes the will is not at its best, even among comparativists. Special care is needed here, too, and our comparative method is an asset in detecting and correcting bias.

Third, legitimacy of the purposes of comparison is often difficult to judge. The usual reasons people compare religious ideas are to satisfy curiosity, to increase understanding, and to serve other theoretical purposes such as the construction of theories of religion or theories of religious realities. While there are other reasons, some perhaps more noble and some less, there are problems even with the usual reasons, and here are two. First, comparison asks questions of tradition's religious ideas that those traditions themselves may not ask. Even when the tradition itself is involved in comparison the questions we ask may be differently voiced. Leaving aside how adherents feel about it, this can be of concern to some thinkers because the very act of comparison alters at least the expression if not the substance of the specific texts and traditions. Second, comparing religious ideas can have implications for the comparers' own existence and distortion occurs when the quest for impartiality robs the ideas of their natural relevance for transforming people's lives, even when the people in question are those comparing the ideas in a scholarly way. This is the intriguing opposite of the problem of bias: distortion can also be the result of the struggle to be unaffected by the ideas we compare. How serious are these two problems? Our provisional viewpoint is that, if done carefully and vulnerably, allowing comparative questions to draw out implications and reveal new aspects of the subject can be helpful for everyone and everything concerned—adherents, scholarship, personal lives. Comparison is an act that changes things and we hold that our comparative method helps us take responsibility for those changes.
Whether the value of our purposes in comparing religious ideas finally justifies such distortion or changes as might occur in the resulting processes of translation and evaluation is a matter of moral judgment informed by experience. We think our purposes valuable enough in our context to justify comparison. We can imagine contexts in which our moral compass would point in the opposite direction.

The goal of success in comparing religious ideas is a truly adventurous one. It is problematic, at least in these three ways, but these are problems appropriate to such an adventure. Our empirically grounded conclusion continues to be that all three problems can be managed with the aid of a good comparative method and that successful comparison is possible.

1.4 Process and Strategy

From what has been said it is apparent that the work of coming to understand religious ideas comparatively is a process within which a presentation such as this book is a report on progress. This should not be construed to mean that the same authors will keep revising and revising, never finally meaning what they say. On the contrary, the process should be reported out when the comparativists think they have done the best they can with their material. Further corrections will be done when new perspectives, new questions, new data have been found, and often this will have to be done by others. That it is a report on progress means that our project is part of a larger cultural comparative enterprise.

A particular comparative project, dealing with a finite set of subjects as in our study here, needs to be considered as part of a larger intellectual and social milieu, as we began to do above in reflecting on the morality of comparing religious ideas. There are many assumptions about other comparative topics that are in play as we study the human condition and we assume things about parts of religions other than those under focused discussion here. At any given moment there are assumptions shaping the background of comparisons, often assumptions unique to each of the fields represented—Chinese studies, Indian studies, Jewish studies, sociology of knowledge, metaphysics, history of Christian theology, and so forth. Although these masses of background assumptions are easily engaged with one another, they are never clearly exposed except when attention turns from the focused topic to them directly. Yet being provoked by our shared struggle with the material under comparison also serves to call into question and alter our background assumptions, especially as we learn from one another. In the long run, perhaps the most critical tests for vulnerable ideas come not when they them-
selves are the focus of attention but rather when they are critical ele-
ments in the background of a project engaging something else. The solid,
nuanced pragmatic tests of hypotheses come when the hypotheses are
put into play in a larger arena.

Having said this much about the place of our kind of study in the on-
going process by which a society comes to understand and relate to its
various cultures, more can be said about the process of comparison inter-
nal to our project. The process begins with the methodological affirma-
tion that several different disciplines are needed to make progress and
that a multidisciplinary approach is better pursued together than by any
of us working alone. The process then picks up some obvious compara-
tive topics, for instance, the human condition, ultimate realities, and reli-
gious truth, that nearly everyone would agree cut across most religions
and in respect of which they can be compared. But then the process en-
counters different understandings of those topics, even at the vague level,
which need to be talked through. The differences among the specialists
come from the tendency to see the vague category in terms of the *prima
facie* exemplifications or specification in their respective traditions and
texts. For the generalists, the differences come from the cultures of their
different disciplines. Yet all of us operate in the same general late-modern
academic world so that these discussions move quickly and productively.

The process of comparison then turns to explicit discussion of the
specifications of the comparative category proposed by the specialists in
each tradition. Suggestions are entertained and criticized. Criticism is
usually double-edged, pursuing two questions, often both at once. One is
whether some religious idea is really an *instance* of specifying the human
condition. The other, in light of ambiguities or puzzles regarding the first
question, is whether we have correctly parsed the human condition at the
vague level. At this point, it is helpful to break the main comparative cat-
egory down into subcategories and thus come to a multidimensional
understanding of the vague categories, such as the cosmological, social,
and personal aspects of the human condition. Such a division then calls
for new attempts to locate and relate specifications, and thus a constant
back-and-forth critical dialectic is established, only slowly coming to
steady articulations of the vague categories and settled specifications.

Yet another dimension of the process is the translation of what is
learned through specifying the vague categories into the language of the
categories themselves, for instance, the human condition. At no point is
the comparative process wholly devoid of this translation procedure in
which the actual comparison is expressed. But the translation process be-
comes more systematic and fulsome as the comparative hypotheses are
formulated and tested.
Vulnerability within this process characterizes each of the moments. We might discover that we have misstated the vague category, or misidentified and misdescribed a specification, or mistranslated the significance of that specification for the vague category and the other specifications. In our own conversations, as well as in the larger process of comparison that has been flourishing for at least two centuries, it is sometimes difficult to identify just what is wrong: the category for comparison, the identification and analysis of a specification, or the development of a language to treat the specifications in comparative fashion relative to the category. It is easier without being easy in the context of self-consciousness about the nature of comparison made possible by a comparative method.

In this process, we have attempted to build in not only the dialectic of criticism between specialists and generalists but also that of continually reassessing the vague categories as grounds for comparison, the selection and interpretation of specifications from the various traditions, and the interpretive translation of the specifications into the language of the human condition and the drawing of comparative conclusions. We believe this is the logic of how good comparison gets done in the larger comparative-religions conversation. We have tried to operationalize and epitomize it in our project procedures.

This is sufficient anticipation to key in readers to the selectivity in the six chapters ahead. The selectivity will be emphasized once again at the beginning of chapter 8.

Notes

1. Extended discussions of the nature and purposes of comparison, the special terminology it can produce, and its historical and philosophical background, are to be found in *Ultimate Realities*, chap. 8.


3. The language of “vagueness” comes from the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, and it is discussed, with the references to Peirce, in *Ultimate Realities*, chap. 8.


5. In *Religious Truth* we distinguish three kinds of truth, or rather three problematics for understanding truth: epistemological truth, scriptural and revelational truth, and truth in practice. The last has to do with realizing truth, becoming true, manifesting truth, living in the truth. See especially chaps. 7 and 8.