Appendix A

On the Process of the Project During the First Year

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The Comparative Religious Ideas Project, or CRIP as we affectionately call it, might well have been called the Comparative Religious Ideas *Process*. The project was designed on the assumption that it is not possible to implement and evaluate a cooperative, self-correcting methodology for the comparison of religious ideas without also creating a community of scholars to serve as medium and laboratory. The members of this community would have to teach each other, write with each other in mind, criticize each other, and be drawn out of their usual modes of scholarly work to embrace unfamiliar approaches. All that involves intellectual excitement and discomfort, lots of time, many shared meals, endless discussions, writing and rewriting papers, and moments of laughter, frustration, disagreement, exhaustion, satisfaction, and breakthrough insight.

The three volumes of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project represent its formal output. They were written mostly in sequence and, despite later editing rearrangements, it is easy to see that the three volumes are quite different from one another in ways that suggest a process of development. There is a fascinating story to be told about this process, one that illumines the crucial corporate aspect of the method that was used in the project. This appendix is the first of three, one at the end of each volume, that jointly attempt to expose this process of development to

scrutiny by scholars in religious studies interested in comparison. The three appendices are designed to be read together but also to make sense as standalone accounts. All three appendices have been written *after* the entire process is complete. They are, therefore, *retrospective analyses* of the process rather than simple descriptions of it. They draw on and occasionally quote from a large stack of meeting reports that were distributed to project members throughout the years of meetings as a kind of feedback mechanism aimed at helping the group to reflect on its discussions and to develop a sense of its overall direction. The retrospective analysis in these appendices is in large part also my own reading of the group process, informed by more or less extensive discussions with project members and thorough involvement. Indeed, more than one project member would argue that my meeting reports were also to a large extent my own reading of what happened during our meetings rather than objective reporting! The perspectival quality of such reporting and analysis is inevitable and, accordingly, the style of objectivity sought is not that of the biologist sketching plants or the architect drafting a plan but rather that of the ideally imaginative and observant writer seeking to illumine the pluripotent reality of a complex group process in a way that evinces agreement from those involved, albeit grudging or limited agreement. It follows that this set of appendices is as much a part of the group process as the events and developments discussed.

The project group several times debated whether to make the group process that lay behind the books more evident to the reader, perhaps by including the meeting notes in the volumes or by publishing them on the Web. We were concerned, frankly, that this would not be at all effective; many of the interesting moments are alluded to in the notes but it is a case of the reader having had to be there to make the connections. Frustrated with the problem of conveying in writing something so viscerally important to the method, and having made a couple of attempts, we resigned ourselves to relying on the various descriptions of the method itself that are scattered through the three volumes. After all, those descriptions stress the importance of a community of inquiry and, as Frank pointed out at the end of the first year, "Past projects of this sort have not succeeded when they have tried to initiate readers into the process of the project." We remained uneasy with this solution, however, and our advisors at the project's concluding conference confirmed our concerns. All of them insisted that it is vital to portray the group process for the readership of these volumes. They argued that descriptions of its importance in philosophical chapters on method would never succeed in conveying what this aspect of the project's method was all about. Our suspicions thus decisively confirmed, we were convinced that something had to be

said. We remained no closer to having a good way to say it, however, and we are still somewhat at a loss for words.

This series of appendices adopts a somewhat experimental approach to the problem of conveying the social background for CRIP. Two challenges need to be met. First, while the main body of each volume can remain an approximately faithful snapshot of where we were at the end of each year, the description of the social background needs to be different; it cannot be hobbled by the very real limitations in perception that we suffered along the way. The retrospective approach is intended to meet this challenge. Our perspective at the end of the project also needs enrichment, of course, but it is significantly more adequate because of the process that produced it than our self-understanding at any point prior to the culmination of our work together. Second, the social background needs to be conveyed in a way that permits personality and humor to shine through. To that end, the appendices often use a narrative style and the picturesque language needed for conveying the color of the group process. This is meant to invite the reader imaginatively to enter into the group's work and struggles together.

With these introductory remarks in place, therefore, I turn to describing and analyzing the group process that enabled the Comparative Religious Ideas Project.

The Setting

Picture an ordinary seminar room on Commonwealth Avenue, Boston University. This is where CRIP meets on most occasions. In the middle stands a large rectangular table surrounded by sixteen purple chairs. On meeting days, there stands in one corner a small trolley with breakfast supplies secured by Susan Only, the CRIP coordinator, traffic cop, arranger of details, and money person. There are urns of coffee, glass bottles of orange juice, plastic bottles of water, and plenty of *Dunkin' Donuts'* creations, sometimes with colored icing (my personal favorites). Bob Neville, the principal investigator, always pokes his head in early but, if the room is empty, he dashes back across the corridor to his office where he quickly dictates a letter or two, eager to make the most of spare minutes. A few minutes before nine o'clock, people start arriving. Frank Clooney (Hinduism specialist) and Tony Saldarini (Judaism) show up early, traveling the short distance from Boston College together. Friendly greetings are exchanged with whomever happens to be in the room. The local Boston University folk drift in, usually beginning with co-principal investigator John Berthrong with the hat and outfit of the day

and his latest load of stories. David Eckel (Buddhism) and Livia Kohn (Chinese religion) typically arrive right on time and Paula Fredriksen (Christianity) a little after that. The greetings multiply like latticework and people cluster around the food and drink. Peter Berger, the other co-principal investigator, is often late but warms the room with his big smile when he arrives. No shortage of jokes and stories there, either. Nomanul Haq (Islam) has the real commute and, being more at the mercy of the transportation gods than the rest of us, has a less predictable arrival. But the hardest arrivals to predict are the six graduate students, most of whose lives are not yet steadied by age or an unyielding need for sleep to the point that they have consistent morning habits (or morning appearances, for that matter). Yours truly arrives early, of course, because I have to get the note-taking computer set up and do initial editing of the document that is to record my observations of the day's work. But I have time to grab too many donuts and a bottle of orange juice as I say or wave hello to arrivals.

Ah, food and greetings. If it weren't for food, we never could have worked together. According to our experience, it is the number one precondition for successful corporate comparative work. We often speculated on the most fitting big-deal topics for imagined fourth and subsequent volumes (heaven forfend!) and repeatedly came back to food. Not only is food one of the central themes in all religions, sharing food together was our most spiritual practice. It brought and kept us together in a way that intellectual adventuring alone could not. In this sense, Susan Only's ministrations of food and drink served as midwife to the strange birth of our group's identity, or perhaps as the priestess of the caloric sacrifices that wrung a kind of togetherness from the gods of religious studies who so often seem to prefer dispersal and mutual incomprehensibility.

We are arrived, we have food and drink, and we are prepared for our corporate task with the social fuel of greetings and smiles. Of course, someone might be missing, for some reason, and as time went on we felt such absences more acutely. Even the quieter graduate students are missed when they aren't there, perhaps especially because of their stellar attendance records. But in various configurations—everyone on most occasions during that first year—we are arrived.

We work for an hour and a half and then break for more food, drink, and mingling. Someone seeks out Susan for some administrative question. Someone else finds me to point out that I had mischaracterized a remark in my report for the last meeting, enabling me to make a correction. A graduate student raises a question with a researcher. Academic business is transacted. Then work resumes. After another ninety minutes, it is off to lunch, which was consistently good food, inexplicable considering

its institutional origins. We chat as we line up for the salads and sandwiches. Kosher meals off to one side, cookies at the end of the table, drinks in the ice-filled bowl—but you had to get there early to snag an orange soda. At one point a complaint about the scarcity of orange soda somehow reached all the way to Susan's ears and, sure enough, more orange soda appeared next time. The Boston University people might try to squeeze in a few minutes of phone-message checking before returning for the afternoon session. Frank eats fast to leave time for his midday constitutional walk along the Charles River. If you want to walk with him, you have to walk fast and he will even stipulate that as a condition of sharing his company. That's a serious walker. When I went with him I had to slow my usual pace a bit, but I never let on.

When lunch is over, the student carrion from around the building, though knowing little of CRIP, can sense food. Gathering for the leftovers, they tentatively approach the lunchroom, sometimes with encouragement from their professors or each other. After lunch the morning pattern repeats, with two ninety-minute sessions separated by a thirty-minute break. The afternoon break has a different quality. The remaining lunchtime cookies, if any, are rescued from the lunchroom lest they be consumed by hungry students and thus are preserved for afternoon tea but sometimes there is not much to eat. Usually the colorful orange juice is gone by now and only bottles of water remain for drinking, unless it is an afternoon cup of coffee. People are tired after three sessions of intense thinking and arguing. Sometimes they are confused or frustrated, sometimes they want to clarify some point with a colleague. The energy level is lower. People are starting to think about going home. But we all dig in for the last ninety minutes and, to our own surprise, sometimes the final session of the day is marvelous. A few people have to leave early, perhaps, but most remain to think all the way through the three hundred and sixtieth minute of session time. Come the end of the day, the circle of work complete, dispersal is rapid. Farewells are abbreviated compared to morning greetings and people move on to their next obligation quickly.

Twenty-five times we did this, eight times in the year devoted to the study of the human condition, 1995–1996. A few times we had guests, including during the final meeting of the first year, when advisors Rabbi Jordan Pearlson from Toronto and Prof. Max Stackhouse from Princeton Seminary joined us. It felt strange to have visitors with us, people who had not been formed by the food and the drink and the rhythm of the days the way the rest of us had been. But they were welcome and made us think about what we were doing from new perspectives. The fact that there could be an "otherness" about visitors was telling, at least to me: despite

our differences, we were becoming a group with an identity focused by doing meaningful work together.

The Diversity

People with wicked imaginations, presumably mostly Bob Neville, designed the working group. Pandering to the aforementioned desire of the religious-studies gods for chaos and mutual incomprehension, perhaps, the project designers juxtaposed people with utterly different working styles. While the working group design has been described abstractly in the general preface and elsewhere, there are vital details to convey.

There are six tradition specialists, each devoted to historical details and linguistic nuances and thus allergic both to historical anachronism in all its subtle and not-so-subtle forms and to generalizations that obscure diversity or paper over awkward facts. Having worked for years on historical Jesus research, Paula has seen plenty of projecting backwards onto historical figures the interests of contemporary interpreters and her allergic reaction to historical anachronism is correspondingly acute. Frank and David have been interested in comparative theology for many years yet both have a fine-tuned sensitivity to the way that generalizations about religious ideas mask all-important differences. Frank is quick to point out that our own interests are surreptitiously present in the making of comparisons, which really are a type of generalization, and that self-awareness is necessary for right understanding. David's immersion in Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy has sensitized him to the dangers of generalization as a kind of naming, which is always also a making of reality that distorts perception. Noman, Livia, and Tony have similar sensitivities to anachronism and generalization but they are less extreme. Tony is happy to make generalizations about Judaism if they are warranted but is sharply aware of how comparison can make Judaism look similar to something else while the internal diversity of Judaism is never registered in the comparison. Livia is as sensitive to details as anyone but has no time for tiptoeing around generalizations; she wades right in and says with rare courage what Chinese religion is about; this boldness proved extremely helpful for the group. Noman is determined to convey the nuances of key Arabic terms and distinctions, reading to us in Arabic, and helping us with transliteration; yet his work in a tradition that has a relatively clear sense of identity gives him a heightened readiness to make generalizations and to entertain comparisons.

None of these six tradition representatives is personally affiliated with the religion he or she studies except for Noman. That is another design

feature but it is hard to determine its value for the group or its results because there is no alternative arrangement to which we can compare our process in that respect. It is possible to note that Noman was the most concerned of all the specialists to convey to the group the hypothetical adherent's view of his or her religion ("Islam is what Muslims say it is," he would say); this is apparent in his chapters for the three volumes. This concern was only a little more evident in Noman than in the other specialists, however, and I could not discern any impact on the group process or results because of it.

Four other scholars who, by design at least, represent the interests of comparison complement the six tradition specialists and their commitment to fidelity of description. Bob is the archetypal metaphysician, dreaming up seven theories before breakfast, all in the abstract language of his burgeoning philosophical system. Shockingly for a metaphysician, however, he wants to test and improve his theory of comparison. Peter is the archetypal sociologist and brings to the table a practiced eye for plausible generalizations, along with the intellectual gift of being able to frame elegant questions that consistently drive to the heart of a confusing discussion. John is a hybrid: trained in Chinese religion, especially Confucianism, he complements Livia's expertise in Daoism, yet he also works actively and eclectically in the comparison of religious ideas. As for me, my training in contemporary theology, philosophy, and science made me, besides the taker of notes, the representative of an unadvertised seventh tradition: the scientific naturalism of the modern West.

The six graduate students, one for each specialist, were invited both to watch what happens when six-and-a-half scholars nervous about generalizations work alongside three-and-a-half scholars for whom generalizations are the stuff of intellectual life (I count John standing half on each side of this fence) and to involve themselves in the process. Amazingly enough, there was turnover in only one of the six student positions during the whole course of the project (their names are listed in the general preface). At the beginning most of the students were quiet most of the time. Eventually, however, some of them started to talk or were forced to talk by virtue of being assigned presentation tasks by their specialist advisors. At times, the confusing currents of debate seemed to frustrate one or more of them and, certain that he or she could not do worse, a brave student soul would wade into dangerous waters in an attempt to rescue the struggling experts. It rarely helped much because their point was usually already taken for granted by those stuck in the swirling confusion but real insights were offered, confidence built, and rites of initiation passed in such moments. On occasion, a student would confront his or her mentor, which was especially gratifying and exciting.

For example, the most active student participant, John J. Thatamanil, now teaching his own students, attempted at one point during the first meeting to keep alive the possibility of a reality that helps to cause religious ideas to come out a certain way. This was in reaction to what John sensed was David's Madhyamaka-like readiness to see all categories as constructions. Here is how the notes record the exchange:

> David expressed the importance of vagueness in comparative categories when he suggested that the quest for comparative categories had to be understood as a search of "placeholders" in systematic representations of religious traditions. In reply, Thatamanil emphasized the perspective that truth-seeking is native to the human condition, and so these placeholders should correspond to joints in reality itself, and that the reality of these joints was the ground of the possibility of cross-cultural comparison of religious ideas.

What the notes do not record is the energy of the exchange, including several sharp rejoinders. It illustrates how CRIP served as a place of exploration and wing-stretching for the graduate students.

The First Blank Look

In a group this diverse, there is mutual incomprehension at times. Indeed, the design calls for blank looks but also for their gradual overcoming as scholars learn the ways of thinking of their differently brained and trained colleagues. The first blank look was not long in coming. In fact, on the very first meeting day, a large-scale blank look occurred around the required reading for that day: Bob's theory of comparison in *Normative Cultures*. Most people really didn't understand what they read. They knew that Bob is smart and that it probably all makes some sort of sense but for many the reading experience was akin to staring at the Rosetta Stone: the book is written in some strange sort of code and interpreting it rightly seemed pretty much out of the question. Of course, on the first day, saying that directly also seemed pretty much out of the question, so we struggled along politely. The usual symptoms of such a situation were present: the group rarely took up a technical point of theory but concentrated instead on talking about relevant issues that were well understood before the encounter with Bob's theory of comparison. The result was not unlike an interview, with Bob taking up one objection or concern after another and trying to expound the corner of his theory that deals with it.

This might be entertaining to some—I smile to remember it now—but

sitting there watching all this politeness I was half convinced that the whole project was impossible, that the group was too diverse to achieve anything, that the method was impossible to test, and that we would never become sufficiently comfortable with each other to speak up when we didn't get it. And I doubt that I was the only one with such thoughts. Peter can be enormously encouraging at moments like these because he is probably the most self-assured of our group and almost certainly the most likely to say, "Bob, I think I discerned the general drift of your book but, to be frank about it, I really did not understand much about this theory of comparison. I could not penetrate your specialized language enough to decide whether my sense of the general drift was correct or not." Peter was restrained on this occasion, unfortunately, though I believe I have represented his actual view correctly. He would be this helpfully blunt at other times.

Afterwards I went home and worked *hard* on those meeting notes, trying to convey what Bob means by his theory of comparison in a less specialized language, more accessible to a broader range of scholars. I was slightly desperate, perhaps—anxious that CRIP should not be sunk before it had even left port. I feared that my explanations would be no clearer than Bob's but I kept refining the meeting notes. It was the beginning of my self-appointed role in the group as the one who keeps trying to help everyone understand each other. But it is a role that I probably need not have taken on; it is the controlling instinct of the young scholar—the young person—and, as every wise person knows, most good things in groups happen in spite of attempts to control the process. Good things would happen to our little group of scholarly adventurers but, on this first day, we had both blank looks and excessive politeness. It could only get better in those respects.

The Possibility of Comparison

The first meeting also had encouraging dimensions as classic issues familiar to every scholar in religious studies were debated. Reservations about comparison came out quickly as we struggled not particularly with Bob's theory of comparison (as I have said) but with the much more general question of the very possibility of comparison. Almost every facet of this problem must have been raised, from the power-analysis questions of "Who decides, who benefits, and who gets left out?" to the biographical-motivational line of "Why this project here and now in your life?" (a question Frank memorably directed to Bob, evoking an intriguing answer). In what follows I comment on three dimensions of the problem of

comparison's possibility that were raised in that first meeting and returned to several times during the first year and beyond.

First, there is the problem of the big-deal categories that determine the topic for each of the project's three years: the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth. Each category fits some traditions more naturally than others and there is always the worry that some surreptitious agenda is being served by allowing such categories to determine the direction of work. For instance, Tony pointed out that beginning with the human condition is a bit forced for Judaism, though there is no problem with the category as such. Paula later asked the other specialists which category they would choose to begin with, confessing that she quite liked beginning with the human condition. The answers were as follows: Tony—God or creation; Noman—history; Frank—food or ritual; Livia—cosmology (David was not present at this moment). The answers show that the problem has two wings: the order in which categories should be taken up and the choice of which categories to use. We all knew that there is a degree of arbitrariness about these categories, partly due to the need to write grants before the project begins. And we also knew that all categories used in the description and comparison of religious phenomena have questionable parentage. Some emerge from early translations of sacred texts that stick, others from trailblazing works in the study of religion. Even more worryingly, some categories seem so obvious that we can't say for sure where they come from or what influences are set loose by their use. We discussed these issues back and forth and realized that one of the premises of the method of comparison we are using is correct: as David put the point, "We begin the process of comparison of religious ideas in the middle, for we already possess comparative categories (by default, in translations and traditions of discussion). The aim must be to correct, sharpen, and enlarge the collection of categories rather than to start over." It's like the strategic decision about whether to plant a lawn: you can never get pure soil and pure seed; except in extreme cases, it is almost always better to improve the lawn you have, gradually.

Second, the "human condition" is such a vague category that we were forced to wonder whether any meaningful comparisons can be made by means of it. We had lots of discussions about the vagueness of general categories and about how vague categories are given specific content by the comparisons made by means of them. That is all a part of the formal method we were supposed to be testing and refining, as described in a number of places and ways throughout the project volumes. In practice, however, we all struggled with how the specification of the human condition is supposed to be carried off without undue arbitrariness. The notes record that "Tony stressed the difficulty involved in trying move back

and forth between comparative categories and detailed descriptions of specific situations, citing two common problems in support of his point, and illustrating each with reference to Eliade. First, the comparative categories are frequently overly conditioned by one particular religious tradition, usually that of the comparativist. Second, the categories themselves simply don't work that well at the level of detail." This is closely related to the problems of translatability and commensurability that are as familiar to anthropologists as to scholars in religious studies. An anthropologist makes comparisons under the vague category of "marriage" or "family" across cultures only by deciding what counts as marriage or family in each culture studied, and that is such a famously perilous decision that plenty of anthropologists have given up and opted for incommensurability of cultural forms instead. The specialists in our group were keenly aware of this problem and so skittish about deciding what counts as the human condition in all of the traditions we were considering.

Third, there was the question about the moral justification of embarking on a comparative enterprise. The notes record the following exchange, questioning Bob:

> Noman raised the question about whether it was permissible within the scope of the project to question the very desirability of comparison of religions. Frank pointed out that that in some groups there was even a religious objection to comparison, especially where it was perceived as a threat or as somehow demeaning or insulting. Bob replied that the strategy of the project is to proceed with this as an open question, one to be settled empirically. He conceded that the interest in comparing is the characteristic chiefly (though not only) of pluralistic Western culture. However, he is prepared to argue that, on balance, comparison is desirable. He listed three reasons: (1) we can't understand ourselves without understanding others; (2) healthy intercultural political interaction demands civilized conversation and mutual understanding; and (3) personal life requires orientation to the world, and the most worthwhile orientations are hard-won, requiring the labor of comparison. This moral argument for comparison outweighs the obligation to respect the religious allergy to comparison of individual traditions, thinks Bob, without thereby conferring carte blanche license to pry and poke where such curiosity is not welcome.

The group found itself looking over its shoulder repeatedly at these and other questions bearing on the advisability of spending time in comparing religious ideas across cultures. The moral justification of comparison, in particular, is a concern that simply never dissolved in our group consciousness.

The Struggle to Compare

In this first meeting, we settled on a routine that held steady for all three years. There were eight meetings each year, four in the Fall semester and four in the Spring. The first meeting of the year introduced and discussed the topic for the year—for the first year, the human condition. The six specialists introduced and led discussion of paper drafts at the remaining three Fall meetings, two each time, with the papers read by the group in advance. These exploratory papers were to expound what each tradition has to say about the human condition. The first three meetings in the Spring followed the same pattern except that the second set of papers were supposed to engage and synthesize what was presented in the first set, aiming to make comparisons where possible. The final meeting was a wrap-up discussion and contemplated how the year's volume would be structured.

From this arrangement it follows that the specialists, even those skeptical of the possibility or value of comparing, would not only represent their tradition for other scholars but also work toward making comparisons across traditions themselves. It wouldn't only be *other* people making the comparisons; the specialists themselves would do it, as called for in the method. But the making of comparisons involves the making of generalizations, hazards anachronism, and flies in the face of the current religious-studies convention of leaving comparison to genius experts with enough professional seniority that they can risk the associated notoriety. No religious studies scholar makes his or her professional reputation by comparing any more than a psychologist begins a career by leaping directly into an experimental study of human sexual behavior. First you work with texts and translate and interpret until everyone knows that you know what you are doing, at least in one tradition or subtradition. Then and only then, if at all, do you venture to make comparisons. By design, the specialists are mid-career, active publishers with at least two or three books and a host of articles in their respective fields already under their belts. They are in a position professionally to consider making comparisons of religious ideas in public or already have done so. But there is understandable reluctance for several reasons.

First, in most cases the specialists were not used to making the kinds of comparisons required. They were perfectly well aware that even their mono-traditional descriptions and translations inevitably use comparative categories. Moreover, all of them make comparisons between culturally and temporally proximate situations or texts, usually with some direct causal connection between them to give the comparison a solid historical basis. But comparison across such large cultural distances,

often between traditions with no significant contact, is a task for which few are prepared by training or scholarly experience.

Second, the basis for this sort of long-distance comparison was obscure. Comparison of the "This religious idea in Hinduism is rather like that idea in Judaism" sort is a recipe for disaster; we do not need any more opinions about similarities. Yet neither was the project adopting any of the standard ways of furnishing a basis for comparison—say, a theory of archetypes or a theory of evolutionary development. Worst of all, we had only a fuzzy understanding of how we were supposed to make good use of the mass of details that were emerging in our discussions. It wasn't all so grim; we had made advances. For example, we had improved over the impression-of-similarity approach to comparison because we had detailed descriptions at our disposal that were capable of refuting initial impressions of similarity as more details were drawn into the interpretative picture. We had succeeded in making our comparisons vulnerable to correction by amassing details that comparisons, thought of as interpretative tools, needed to take properly into account. Thus, we were sometimes able to tell when a category was too vague, and thus arbitrary in its application, or when a category was not vague enough, and thus distorting in its application (usually because it was too much in thrall to one particular tradition). In this way we were able to reject many comparative categories as not useful. Indeed, it is striking how many categories for comparison were raised, explored, and then rejected as insufficiently illuminating; only a small portion of those listed in the meeting reports survived into the published volumes and the reports themselves do not mention every category raised and discussed. These advances are important and they were evident fairly quickly in the group's work together. But at this stage we were not able to explain to our own satisfaction why it made sense to reject a category as "insufficiently illuminating," "arbitrary," or "distorting." That is a philosophically subtle issue bearing on the justification of categories that was not addressed satisfactorily in Bob's prior work on theory of comparison and one with important implications. Basically, though it sounds harsh, I think we were all somewhat confused at this stage, even Bob. Bob was giving instructions using terms like "vulnerability" and "dialectic of vagueness and specificity" but they were not always translating into manageable tasks for those who had to follow them. The problem turned out to be twofold. On the one hand, as described in the Introduction to *Ultimate Realities*, we had not completed our own methodological procedure by translating comparisons made back into the terminology of the vague category, which is to say that we were not using the comparisons to infuse the concept of human condition with meaning. We needed to develop a theory of the

human condition that expressed what we had learned from the multitude of detailed comparisons, we later decided, but all we had was a list of categories, subcategories, and comparisons. On the other hand, we had not isolated theoretically what was required to justify comparative categories as adequate. We were relying on adequacy to phenomenological description of the things compared but we did not yet realize that there were other important dimensions to the task of justifying comparative categories. We would figure out the answers to these questions later in the second year as we became more accomplished at working together.

Third, the subcategories guiding the discussion of the human condition—the cosmic, the social, and the personal (each with their subcategories)—did not emerge until well into the second year, as we were finishing the rewriting of the first volume. Distinctively Chinese in tone and origin (Livia proposed and first used them), they emerged as an appealing way to specify the vague category of "human condition" but they emerged so late in the process that the specialists had little time to work with them. Moreover, there were other proposals for subcategories to specify the human condition. David made a strong case for a narrative approach that stresses the way we come from somewhere and encounter various situations on the way to going somewhere else, which is an approach congenial to Buddhism with its stress on the problem of the human condition and the way of its resolution. This would have led to a set of comparative subcategories that would configure religious ideas across cultures rather differently than the set recommended by Livia. It took the group some time to decide what to do and it seems probable that both approaches would have worked well. But the timing made using the categories to guide the specialists' comparisons problematic. This was the downside of something rather positive: a genuinely empirical procedure leading to consensus around a set of subcategories that was deemed to make best sense of the amassed data about the human condition.

Fourth, the scope of the specialists' discussions was dramatically different, which made comparison quite difficult. Here is an excerpt from the notes on this problem, which was discussed on several occasions and is broached in the Introduction to *Ultimate Realities*. It shows both Peter's delightful bluntness and Frank's pleasantly ironic sense of humor.

Peter: I'd like to take a step back to assess the volume as a whole for a moment. I think it is fine for us as individual scholars to develop our reflections in relation to views that enjoy widely varying representation in our respective traditions—Livia can work from a cosmology that she thinks enjoys 90 percent representation in China, and Frank from a text that relishes its .01 percent

representation in India. However, the book will look a bit odd if chapters next to each other are so different in the way they balance generalized judgments about traditions and specific interpretation of texts.

Frank: Perhaps we should have the eventual publisher make the chapters detachable. Then chapters disliked by individual readers could be disposed of efficiently. More seriously, one way to conceive the project is that we have a common problem and we are all looking for solutions to that problem. Alternatively, it may be that we are trying to solve different problems entirely.

Peter: If one person does something different, OK. But if everyone does entirely different things, then the project has failed.

The general point expressed in this extreme instance concerns whether the specialists should seek to characterize entire traditions or rather focus more narrowly on particular texts. In the first year, the diversity of genre and scope in the specialists' work made comparisons difficult to frame both for them and for the generalists trying to draw conclusions. This problem was to ease in the second and subsequent years as most of the specialists tried to juxtapose characterizations of traditions as a whole with analysis of the particular text or theme on which their research focused, the approach required by the method. Some of the specialists were deeply uncomfortable with characterizations of entire traditions as a counterpoint to their more detailed analyses while others, aware of the dangers, just dove in and did it anyway. The following excerpt from the notes on the year's final meeting illustrates this issue, with both visiting advisors chiming in.

Bob: Last time we agreed that each chapter of the book should combine generalized conceptions of a tradition with analysis of a specific viewpoint or text. Livia has found a way to do this that stresses the generalizations.

Frank: But the broad conceptions of a tradition do not need to be flat, comprehensive generalizations; to some extent they can be induced from the more specific analyses.

Bob: Indeed—and we don't have to agree exactly on the approaches we take, either.

Jordan: As we create ways of looking at these traditions by means of careful generalizations, we must always keep close at hand our knowledge of the realizations in actual places and times of each tradition.

John B: Livia's view is bold and will probably be attacked in a number of ways, but it is particularly useful in that it forces scholars to grapple with large-scale questions. For example, is there a pan-Chinese worldview in relation to which any Chinese cosmology can be articulated?

Max: How would you articulate the objection you anticipate to Livia's approach?

John B: The criticism would assert that Livia's view distorts too much of what

actually happened by setting up a dominant paradigm within which certain majority views show up easily and others are effectively suppressed.

Bob: In this seminar to date, the theoretical device for taking account of these questions has been "vague categories." Livia has an hypothesis here that is worthy of testing; if the generalizations turn out to be too wooden or too narrow, then that is a criticism of the vagueness of the categories, to the effect that they are not vague enough in the right ways.

Finally, and closely related to this last point, there was the worry that making comparisons would lead to anachronism by abstracting ideas from their historical contexts. Paula held the lamp high in this resistance movement throughout the years of the project, resisting every attempt to characterize Christianity as a whole and confining her attention to the specific episode or thinker she was investigating. From the first meeting she signaled her concerns about anachronism, as the following passage illustrates.

> Paula described the criterion of "anachronism" that is used (too infrequently, according to her!) to judge the absence of depth in historical work. While the history of religions *as history* can always make use of this criterion, what might function similarly in the case of comparisons? In particular, philosophy seems singularly insensitive to the problem of anachronism; that's worrying because philosophers are frequently those who take up the generalist roles in comparisons.
>
> Bob entered a reply to this none-too veiled expression of concern about the entire project, partly granting the charge against philosophy but defending the sensitivity of *some* philosophical traditions to the historical conditioning of ideas and giving an example of how anachronism might be detected in the comparative task. This was a moment of genuine intellectual excitement: archetypal historian meets archetypal philosopher in a critical dialogue. It's just as good as historian meets phenomenologist, or tradition-specialist meets comparative-generalist.

The Drafts of Volume 1

The first volume reflects the intricate complexities of this struggle to compare during the first year. Apart from introductory material, the volume consists of individually fascinating specialist chapters that richly describe the human condition from various points of view while offering a few comparisons. Then there are two concluding chapters that (1) have to set up comparisons (to overcome the scope problem described above), (2)

make comparisons (instead of summarizing them), (3) amass them into a formidable grid (in accordance with the group's much debated goal for the first volume), (4) without finally saying much synthetically about the human condition. These conclusions also had to juggle numerous subcategories and the phenomenological sites of importance, making them extraordinarily difficult to produce. In fact, a confession is on order: I simply could not do it. Although I composed most of the introductory material to the conclusions, as second author on those chapters I was overwhelmed by my task of enhancing Bob's drafts. I was unable to juggle all the variables and to manage the different scopes of the specialists' descriptions without becoming paralyzed by the need to enter thousands of caveats for which there was no space. Bob, even more aware of the needed caveats than I, somehow managed to press himself through the process in the name of fulfilling the group's stated goals for the first volume. I was personally amazed by Bob, just as I am by those who write dictionaries for a living and by any scholar who can by mental discipline unaided by threats against their personal safety or family members force himself or herself to go, machine-like, through the agony of drafting such chapters. I know he found it agonizing, though there were a few moments of excitement and satisfaction—and he had to do it twice more in later rewrites. It was not only an act of astonishing discipline, however, it was also one of enormous confidence, not to say hubris, to compare everything to everything else from multiple points of view in numerous respects. And each comparison made drove home Bob's worry about the project because he was not summarizing the specialist's comparisons but having to make the comparisons himself.

In any event, the introduction to *Ultimate Realities* describes the difficulties fairly well and I shall not go into it here any more than I have already. Instead, I shall give a retrospective analysis of the first volume's strengths and weaknesses and then I shall try to convey something of the group's own reactions to it.

With regard to analysis, the volume's weaknesses are obvious. First, the specialist chapters make some interesting comparisons but they are out of sync with respect to scope and sometimes topic. Second, the conclusions take the form of a grid that makes for lousy reading and the grid is overdeveloped relative to the degree of our control over the details of the data, indicating some possibly unnecessary yet nevertheless lurking arbitrariness in the subcategories used. Third, the linkage between specialist and concluding chapters is constructed mostly in the concluding chapters on the basis of the group's conversations and Bob's imagination whereas more of that linkage should be explicitly in the specialists' chapters themselves. Fourth, but more subtly, the categories used in the comparisons

are justified only implicitly by virtue of their claim to make sense of the mass of data but this is insufficient warrant, as we see the matter after working on the second and third volumes. Fifth—and this is the result of deliberate decision as our apologies for being differently focused show—the volume almost completely neglects important, high-profile issues in the current study of religion, including especially power-analyses of texts and traditions, looking for missing voices and the experiences and ideas that are suppressed as a result.

These and other weaknesses are easy to point out and we were more painfully aware of them than anyone. But we battled on because of a number of less obvious strengths in the first volume, strengths that are rare in literature on the comparison of religious ideas and directly relevant to our goal of using and improving a particular method for comparison. First, the chapters by the specialists are fascinating and make serious contributions to the study of the human condition within each tradition and in religious studies generally. Second, the systematic character of the conclusions is quite unusual and valuable, even though it impairs readability. Particularly important is the procedure of using the five phenomenological sites of importance (actually, only four were used, as the fifth is intrinsically unsuitable for comparative work). That, together with the exhausting comparison of each pair of traditions within each subcategory, allows the human condition to be presented from a large number of angles. The comparisons ventured are but the tip of the iceberg, of course, but they are thought-provoking and they enrich our interpretation of the human condition while exposing it to constructive scrutiny from other experts. That systematic approach was to disappear in subsequent volumes but it is a virtue that should not be overlooked. Third, the subcategories under the general category of the human condition were arrived at in genuinely empirical fashion, late in the process of discussing masses of details, by means of trying out hypotheses and improving or rejecting them. This is unquestionably rare and genuinely refreshing in religious studies, which tends to be plagued by attempts at description that falsely pretend to be free of comparative categories or by the use of arbitrary categories that are never made vulnerable to correction. We mean forcefully to commend these categories to the community of religious studies specialists and, though their justification even in our own project was incomplete, we take them to be considerably less arbitrary than going alternatives and far better placed to profit from correction. All this is evidence of the positive value both of corporate work within groups of diverse scholars and of the method used in our group.

With regard now to the group's reactions to the first volume as it took shape, I have space for only a few remarks. Although the members of our

group were always polite even when they were blunt, I think that the specialists and indeed others in our intrepid band were almost at a loss for words when they initially saw the first draft of the concluding chapters. I took this to be an indication of the limited possibility of politeness under the circumstances. It is quite amusing in retrospect. My sense was that the specialists believed there had to be a better way. Bob's viewpoint was that there certainly was a better way and it is what happened in subsequent volumes, especially the third in which the conclusions truly summarize the specialist's comparisons.

As a group we were sorely tempted to abandon the structure of the concluding chapters and to produce instead something more colorful, punchy, and less systematic. Some might think it professionally prudent to have done just that! Looking back on it now I smile to recall how gentle the specialists were when they probably wanted to scream in horror. I think it was David who made the breakthrough remark suggesting that we give up the goal of fully cooperative comparisons for the first volume and allow the generalists to say what they wanted in the conclusions, so long as it was accurate, while the specialists would be content to take responsibility for their own chapters only. This brought a welcome sense of freedom to everyone, none more than Bob who was now liberated from the curse of having faithfully to tie the conclusions to the scope and content of the specialist chapters. But it also indicated a partial failure of our method. While we could rectify the breakdown of joint ownership of conclusions to some extent by abandoning systematic grids and the use of phenomenological sites of importance in the second and third volumes, we never completely achieved the goal of cooperative work that took us as a group all the way from data to consensus conclusions. We had consensus as far along in the process as the construction of the comparisons used to draw conclusions (which is no mean feat in itself) but no further. Conclusions remained subject to criticisms from the group concerning accuracy and judiciousness but after the partial failure of the first year no mechanism was introduced to seek and achieve consensus around those conclusions.

As for the temptation to abandon the grid-like structure of the concluding chapters even in the first volume, we resisted it out of a real desire to proceed empirically. During the first year, the group had several times discussed its goal in terms of a network or a grid of categories, together with a commentary on how each tradition specifies each category and subcategory, thereby to infuse the higher-level categories with content from the lower-level details. That is precisely what we achieved in the two concluding chapters and so it is a fair record of our self-consciousness at the time. Moreover, though we all felt dissatisfied with

the outcome in terms of its reference-work style, which is as fragmentary as it is overbearing even in the published version, it constitutes a powerful argument to the religious studies community that the category of the human condition and the subcategories by which it is elaborated should be used in future comparative work, thereby to test and refine those categories. There was much to be pleased about, accordingly. We had only begun to work collaboratively, however, and as that dimension of the project improved, despite the decision to abandon consensus conclusions, the strength of the comparative method we were using would become more evident.

The End of a Year

There were two endings to the first year: the eighth meeting and the end of the first round of revisions on the first volume, which was much later. It was in between these two endings that our working group had to go through the pain of confronting the dual problems of specialist chapters without much comparison and conclusions that said little synthetically and even less beautifully about the human condition. The two endings themselves were fairly positive events, however, with an air of celebration and, I think, a quiet determination to do better even when there continued to be misgivings about the project.

Many themes surfaced during the first year that I have not mentioned. Standard concerns in religious studies showed up repeatedly in discussions yet appear in the first volume only rarely or not at all. There were numerous stories and jokes, crucial debates about how to conceive of the project and how to organize the first volume, and many breathtaking distinctions of lasting value that are recorded only in the meeting reports and will probably never see the light of day, except perhaps in the work of a graduate student who keeps and rereads those reports or who made his or her own notes. Fortunately, comprehensiveness is not the goal of these appendices. Their point is rather to describe and analyze the way that our motley group of researchers made use of a collaborative method for comparative work. To be sure, the method was not always clearly understood and it changed as it was used—points broached here and to be considered more in another appendix—but it *was* used and it *did* produce results. Those results would improve as the specialists became bolder in the making of comparisons, the generalists more attuned to details, and everyone more vocal in their opinions. And through it all, improbable though it may seem given the levels of diversity and controversy, we became fond of each other and learned to appreciate the differences among us as enabling.