8.1 Comparison of Religious Ideas as a Cognitive Enterprise

The comparisons advanced in the previous chapters are interesting on their own and established well enough to merit serious consideration. Part of that merit comes from the method of collaborative practice that defined the Comparative Religious Ideas Project. That practice in turn originated from a philosophical conception of comparison. This theory of comparison has been sketched briefly in the preface of this volume, and in some greater detail in the first chapter of *The Human Condition*. The purpose of the present chapter is to lay out the theory formally. As has been said repeatedly in this book and its companion volumes, *The Human Condition* and *Religious Truth*, one of the purposes of this study has been to refine and test the conception of comparison itself.

Comparing religious ideas can be a cognitive enterprise aiming to produce true and important knowledge. Whereas this ought to be obvious, the point is necessary to stress in a social context such as ours in which influential thinkers assert that comparison is more a matter of will, of the exercise of power, than of cognition. For some, comparison is a blatantly political move to conform other cultures or religions to the agenda and categories of the comparers’ own, eventually to get all the religions compared to think of themselves in the comparers’ terms. This is the burden
of Colonialist Theory as it applies to comparison of religious ideas. For others, comparison is merely the premature effort to get things into the comparers' understanding, which, lacking a valid understanding of the others, results in reducing them to the intellectual agenda and categories of the comparers; this is the error signaled by Descartes of making assertions by will when we do not have sufficient understanding to do so. Any approach that affirms the primacy of cognition over will in comparison needs to be able to answer these critical positions, and we shall do so.

To defend the primacy of cognition in comparing religious ideas, it is necessary to have a theory that shows how comparisons can be true and important and a method that makes comparisons vulnerable to correction. The theory presented here asserts that truth consists of well-grounded but fallible hypotheses that interpret the subject matters for comparison in respects that are important for understanding religion. The meaning of truth, on our theory, is the kind of correspondence that is characteristic of interpretation theory. That is, given that a claim purports to interpret its subject matter in some respect, the claim is true if it interprets the subject matter correctly in that respect. Correctness in this means that the claim asserts of the subject matter that it is what it is, or denies of it that it is what it is not; this is Aristotle's definition of truth. Correctness of interpretation, and hence truth, is a dyadic right-or-wrong relation of the claim to its object or subject matter.

Claims are neither true nor false except when taken to interpret their subject matter. The dyadic structure of truth or falsity is therefore set within the triadic structure of interpretation. The three elements of interpretation are: (1) the claim that is a sign of (2) the subject matter as its object when (3) an interpretive act takes the subject matter to be interpreted by the claim in a certain respect. We commonly suppose that the claim displays on its own face the respect in which it purports to interpret the subject matter. But this often is not so, especially in religious matters. "All is suffering," "all is craving," and "all is empty" are three claims predicating of everything, characteristics that are apparently contradictory to one another but that are reconciled in Buddhism. They are reconcilable because they interpret everything in different respects, and these different respects cannot be read off from the claims themselves. Rather, elaborating the differences and connections among those respects in which "all" might be interpreted requires a theory that helps to fit those different respects together, such as the Buddhist theory of the Four Noble Truths (The Human Condition 3.2). Whereas it might be tempting to say that "all" in each of the claims refers to different things, the Buddhist theory makes sense only when they refer to the same thing but in different respects of interpretation. That is (in order), everything is interpreted in
respect to how it is subjectively experienced, in respect to the cause of that experience, and in respect to what everything really is as removed from that cause. Because of the triadic structure of interpretation that always lays open the question of the respect in which a claim is taken to interpret its subject matter, we rightly note that claims, and hence comparisons, can be truer than others, true in some respects but not in others, or true to an extent but potentially misleading, all as fallibly subject to further interpretation. Nevertheless, in making those qualifications, the operative truth claim remains dyadic—right or wrong—which is evident once the respect of interpretation is more exactly clarified.

The criteria of truth, in distinction from its meaning, have to do with the processes of correcting the claims as hypotheses. An hypothesis is well-grounded, though still fallible, when it has been subjected to the tests that we have learned to respect and require: tests of consistency, coherence, applicability to the subject matter, and adequacy. Although formal logic plays some role in testing the theoretical structures of claims, most tests are pragmatic and contingent. For instance, we have learned to test comparative claims for bias arising from the comparativists' cultural agenda and categories. The fallibility of a truth claim consists in the fact that further tests might be discovered that would qualify or even disqualify the claim.

Because claims have truth value only when affirmed in interpretations, the meaning of truth and the criteria of truth cannot be separated. The intention to interpret a subject matter with a particular claim is to suppose that there is reason to believe that the claim is right, that it passes the tests of the appropriate criteria. That supposition might in fact be false, if there is no reason, or bad reasons, or if the criteria are misunderstood. But the intention of the interpretation involves the supposition that sufficient criteria are met for the claim to be asserted as true. An interpretation has the logical status of an hypothesis; the intention to interpret with a given hypothesis can have subjective confidence ranging from "we can take it for granted" to "it might be interesting to explore if someone gives us a grant." When an interpretation is made without that supposition of some plausibility, then indeed the interpretation is a matter of will, not cognition: the interpretation is not an act of taking the subject matter to be the way the claim says but an act of willing the subject matter to be regarded as the claim says.

The cognitive act of comparing religious ideas thus needs to be justified by a method that gives good reasons for the comparisons according to the best criteria that can be employed. Method is not quite the right word, for it might falsely connote some kind of procedure or algorithm that would guarantee truth; Descartes would have liked that. Rather, what is needed is a comparative procedure that puts comparative claims in the way of
being corrected, that makes them vulnerable. This requires understanding what might correct them and framing them so that they engage the tests. For this we need a theory of what comparison consists in as well as pragmatic knowledge about the relevant tests for particular comparisons. This introductory section can be concluded with four truisms.

1. **Comparison requires understanding all sides to be compared in their own terms.** If this is not done, the religions to be compared will be grasped in terms of the theoretical structure that brings them into connection. Whether recognized or not, however, that would be classification, not comparison, at least in the sense that it would classify the phenomena only in the terms of the theoretical structure. Good comparison requires that the categories and theoretical structures it employs themselves be developed through a process that recognizes the proper place of understanding things in their own terms. Defending classification against the charge that it biases interpretation with the agenda and categories of the classifiers is impossible because it does not include a representation of the things compared in their own terms that can be shown to be rightly grasped by the classificatory terms.

2. **Comparison is more than assembling accurate representations of the things to be compared; like a “third term” it says how the things relate to one another, how they are similar and different.** Although much is learned by attending to the variety of religious ideas and appreciating their juxtaposition, that has not achieved comparison. A comparison is a claim about the way the religious ideas relate, a claim that itself can be true or false and that needs explication and defense. A mere assemblage or juxtaposition of religious ideas is neither true nor false.

3. **Comparisons are claims that aim to be true in what they assert about the relations among religious ideas and they need to be grounded in processes that test them according to relevant criteria.** For beginning students who do not know anything about a particular religion’s ideas and are taught by comparison with religions they do know about, a comparison will seem helpful even if it is not well-grounded because it gives them a handle on the unknown, a place to start; the subsequent process of correcting really wrong ideas is sometimes a good way to learn. For adept scholars, a comparison might produce a striking Aha! experience, putting clearly a connection they had groped to express. But the Aha! might merely fulfill and confirm the scholars’ wrongheaded line of inquiry, unrelated to the truth of the comparative claim. Independently of heuristic helpfulness and productivity of feelings of insight, comparisons need to be grounded in the tests appropriate to them.

4. **Claims to the truth of comparisons ought not fade in the face of critical qualifications but should amend themselves as improved.** Some people
might be tempted to abandon a valid comparison when challenged by accusations that the comparative claim comes from only one perspective among others, or takes into account only certain kinds of material and not others, or represents only one approach among others. The proper response to these accusations is to tailor the interpretation of the claim to the appropriate respects in which the claim can be asserted. Although a claim might approach the subject matter from only one of a number of possible perspectives, it can be true or false as the interpretation of the subject matter in respect of that perspective. Of course, it might turn out that the only respect in which one's claim is true is a trivial one; but that is another matter, not to be decided by the admission that the claim is made in a limited respect.

The theory of comparison of religious ideas we defend here is based on an analysis of comparative categories, categories according to which the ideas of different religions can be compared. In this volume, the categories pertain to ultimate realities. The next several sections spell this out.

8.2 The General Principle of Comparative Categories

Comparison involves first determining a respect in which things can be compared and then laying out how they compare in that respect. This innocent-looking observation is the general principle for understanding, constructing, and correcting comparative categories: a comparative category has two elements, the respect in which things are compared and the comparisons made in that respect.

That comparisons are always in some respect or other is obvious once noticed. An idea in one religion can be compared with an idea in another only if both of the ideas interpret their subject matter in the same respect; only if both purport to be "about the same thing" can we determine whether they say the same or different things about that subject matter. "About the same thing" entails not only identity of subject matter but identity of respect in which the subject matter is interpreted. Both scholars and ordinary people commonly neglect to be self-conscious about the respect in which the comparison is being made. This is understandable because the respect of comparison has already been assumed by the time we are aware that comparison is occurring. Only when we begin to suspect some confusion, some mixing of categories, do we reflect critically on the respect in which the comparison is being made. Superficial comparisons are sometimes unmasked by the fact that the ideas compared interpret their objects in different respects; for instance, the Buddhist idea of emptiness and the Christian idea of kenosis are really different even
though they seem alike,\footnote{\textit{On Comparing Religious Ideas}} general, theological debates are often frustrating because, despite verbal similarities, the different positions interpret their objects in different respects. People are conscious of the need to agree on the same object, which can be hard enough when different symbolic histories, cosmologies, and ontologies are involved. But to be conscious of interpreting the same object in the same respect is very hard indeed.

The importance of identifying the respect of comparison was hinted at in the discussion of truth in the previous section. In an act of interpretation, a sign is taken as standing for its object in a certain respect. "The barn is red" answers the question "What color is the barn?"; the object barn is interpreted by red in respect of its color. If the question had been, "Is the barn full or empty?", the answer in terms of color would have been irrelevant and confusing, albeit true in its own way. Of course, interpretation is far more complex than can be modeled by a simple proposition such as "the barn is red." Interpretation is an act by an interpreter or community of interpreters that engages a subject matter using the proper portion of the operative linguistic or cultural semiotic system. This presupposes an entire semiotic world from signs and syntax to interpretive contexts and purposes, as well as dynamic interaction between these elements. This complexity suggests that shifts of respects of interpretation will frequently pass unnoticed. How many debates lapse into confusion because the respect of interpretation is shifted subtly in just this way! Being aware of respects of interpretations is difficult but vital for any serious discussion.

Interpretation in religious matters is still more complex than has been indicated so far. Consider assertions made about religious ideas, for example. To be sure, sometimes simple assertion is all that is intended. Far more often, however, such assertions occur in liturgies, exhortations, or communal living and in such contexts possess complex illocutionary force. They exhort or express or enact even as they assert something about the way things are. Interpreting such assertions competently requires noticing the various ways they function. In particular, if analyzed as asserting something about the way things are in a certain respect, those assertions may be true or false, but ordinarily they are simply taken as rightly describing their objects in a general way while the intentionality of their use has other functions. There are other complexities associated with interpretation in religious matters. Religious symbols come in complex systems and so the presumption is that the symbol system as a whole, or in at least some of its connections, is right about the complex of objects to which the symbols can be referred. Symbol systems such as sacred histories, myths, even theological systems, are taken to be iconic of the way things are, and then more limited interpretations can be made within those systems. Even anti-metaphysical theological systems, for instance, some forms of Buddhism that deny "objective reality" to some interpretive objects, take that lack of objective reality to be the way things are (see chapter 6, \textit{The Human Condition}, chapter 3, and \textit{Religious Truth}, chapter 3). In all, religious interpretation is vastly complicated with meaning systems that are difficult to render in propositional form. But this only serves to underline the importance of determining the respect of interpretation for every assertion by suggesting how quickly discussion of religious matters can unravel when this is neglected.

Determining respects of interpretation in the context of cross-cultural comparison of religious ideas—that is, identifying feasible comparative categories—is additionally problematic for two reasons. First, ideas from different religious systems presuppose different semiotic systems, different signs and symbols, both specifically in the context of particular assertions and iconically in taking reality to be one way or another. Within a semiotic system it is possible to say "this barn is red and that one is white," and "this barn is white and empty." But where the semiotic symbol systems are different, it might be difficult to interpret what symbols interpret the barn in respect of color and what in terms of fullness, as would be the case, for instance, in a language in which a color might symbolize fullness or emptiness, as "blue" and "black" symbolize moods and "yellow" connotes a lack of courage. Prior to careful translations back and forth, and setting the translations in the different cultural and historical contexts, it is difficult in matters of religion to tell what symbols can be compared in the same respect.

Second, determining the respect of comparison of different religious symbols is difficult because different semiotic systems might genuinely interpret their objects in different respects. There simply may be no valid respect of comparison, no feasible comparative category. Each religious system embodies within its symbols judgments about the respects of reality that are important to be interpreted and the different traditions actually interpret religious realities in respects that might be different. The moral is that the respect of interpretation must be determined in order to compare the traditions and there can be no facile assumption that a suitable respect of comparison will be obvious or even possible. Each comparison needs to be approached empirically on its own terms.

The dialectical character of comparison noted in the introduction is all the more apparent now. Comparison cannot begin without some assumption about the respect of comparison and that assumption itself is problematic. Only by trying out comparisons alleged to be made in some respect can we see whether or not that respect is one in which the
religious ideas compared do indeed interpret a common object or reality. This dialectical interplay modifies the conception of the respect of comparison, which in turn sharpens the comparisons. We have agreed that all of the religions we study contain insights into what is religiously important about ultimate realities. But to compare those insights requires laying out the respects in which they say what they do.

A comparison compares two or more religious ideas in the same respect in which the ideas, each in its own religious context, are taken separately to interpret their subject matter. The respect of interpretation (the comparative category), as well as the subject matter, is common to both traditions, and the comparison says how the religions interpret that subject matter in that respect differently or similarly. Within each religion separately, the respect of interpretation functions as a category and might be identified as such by a theologian or a scholar in that tradition. The category becomes comparative when comparativists identify it as the respect in which different religious traditions might be compared.

Comparison is a circular mode of thought. On the one hand, it depends on comparing ideas from two traditions that are held to interpret the same subject matter in the same respect, so it has to have made a comparison of respects before it can get to the business of comparing what the traditions say in that respect. And, to make a comparison of respects, on the other hand, it has to have identified the common respects in which the respects to be compared interpret their subject matter, and so on. This is circular but not viciously so, for the following reasons.

First, comparisons are already under way, which means that the dense continuity of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic contexts for any interpretation are all in play, contexts for contexts for contexts on to utter vagueness and triviality. Comparisons are no different from any other mode of thought in supposing an indefinitely deep and complex semiotic medium.

Second, the question to ask of comparisons is whether they are right. If the comparison under investigation presupposes other comparisons, those others might be investigated in turn, so on and on. The issue is not to justify starting a comparison but to correct comparisons already made, or lines of comparative thought. Of course, there are novel comparisons, but they move by analogy, stretched metaphors, lucky guesses, all having a hypothetical form and all supposing dense semiotic contexts.

Third, any provisional comparative judgment in this ongoing process embodies the criticism of former comparisons. This process of criticism and improvement is rendered methodical in our approach by the dialectic engendered between the vaguer and more specific levels within the categories. The process of specifying a vague category in terms of the particular religious ideas being compared corrects the vaguely presupposed putative respects of comparison, and that correction in turn enables more precise specifications, developing along the way a very complex but particularized version of the category as exhibiting the ideas compared in all their relations. The movement of the dialectic may never bring all the presupposed respects of comparison into scrutiny at once but it should at least move through them all and focus on the important and problematic ones.

The language of "categories" conjures up many associations, from "category mistakes" to previous uses of the word. These are worth discussing. The objection to comparing apples and oranges is a valid objection to a confusion of categories. But of course we can compare apples and oranges, which is to say that we can employ categories within which both fit (e.g., fruit). Laying out the theoretical structure of a religious system of ideas is mainly a matter of working out the connections among their categories or the respects in which they interpret reality, as illustrated in the above discussion of the Four Noble Truths. Comparisons take place on many levels: the point is that at each level there is a category or respect of interpretation in play. The language of "categories" highlights and substantializes the respects of interpretation to bring them to attention for analysis and correction. It is a safeguard against unnoticed bias.

This use of the notion of category differs from Aristotle's. Aristotle's categories were basic forms of predication. This supposes that interpretation is the same as predication in language. That supposition is false, however. The internal structure of semiotic systems, including predication and far more subtle forms of intentionality, is a code or pattern of possible signs or claims. Interpretation is not a pattern but an intentional act of engaging the subject matter with the semiotic pattern. "All is suffering" is a semiotic pattern that might be taken as a sign for interpreting reality. "All is suffering" is true is another semiotic pattern that might be taken as a sign for interpreting reality (in a different respect, of course). But signs or semiotic patterns are not interpretations. A well-developed theology or set of religious ideas, self-conscious and self-interpreting, will create a semiotic system of theological signs that includes representations of the categories in respect of which the religion interprets the world. These will not be limited to forms of predication, as Aristotle thought, but will express what the religion takes to be real and worthy of comment.

Our use of the language of "categories" differs also from Kant's. Kant argued that Aristotelian logical forms of predication, suitably adjusted, are more than mere patterns in the semiotic system: they are in
fact the only respects according to which we can interpret reality successfully. Any alleged interpretation that does not limit itself to them will fail to ground itself in a scientifically deterministic scheme that can distinguish between subjective fantasy and objective reality. We can distinguish our objective from merely subjective representations, Kant insisted, only by showing how they empirically fill in the logical forms of predication. In his theory, therefore, the logical forms of predication are really categories to which our knowledge of reality must conform in order to be objective, regardless of what reality might be in addition. Our use of "category" differs from this by being radically empirical: the respects in which reality might be interpreted are to be discovered by attempted interpretations that pass the appropriate pragmatic tests. Hence, there might be vastly more categories than either Aristotle or Kant would suspect from their analysis of predication. Language might get at religious realities, including categories in which reality might be interpreted, through all sorts of metaphoric and other probative inquiry, not just logical forms of predication. And we think it does! Religious language is highly symbolic, which is to say that it does not conform neatly to schemes of logical classification and inference. Our religious semiotic systems have learned from and been enriched by millennia of religious interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations. They are thus far richer in categories for interpreting religiously interesting matters than could be derived from analysis of the subjective forms of logical predication.

8.3 The Logical Structure of Comparative Categories

Briefly stated, our hypothesis is that comparison is by means of categories that are internally complex with two or more levels of determinateness. On the one hand, categories are determinate with respect to other categories on the same level. For instance, to refer to the previous example, the category of "how all reality subjectively is experienced ordinarily" (which Buddhism specifies as suffering) is determinately different from that of "the cause of that experience" (craving, for Buddhism), which in turn is determinately different from the category of "what reality is precluding from that causing of ordinary subjective experience" (empty, for Buddhism), which again is determinately different from "how all reality is experienced subjectively when that cause is practically removed" (bliss, for Buddhism). On the other hand, a category can be partially indeterminate or vague with respect to what might fall under it, or specify it, or instantiate it (all equivalent expressions). For instance, to continue

Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman

the example, the category of the ordinary subjective experience of all reality might be specified by the Buddhist answer, suffering; but it might also be specified by a Chinese answer such as "all reality ordinarily is experienced as a fundamentally harmonious field with problematic glitches" (see The Human Condition 2.1-2), or by a West Asian answer such as "all reality ordinarily is experienced as a field for exercising moral responsibility" (The Human Condition 5.1.1, 7.3.1). The category at this level is vague in the sense that it tolerates a whole host of specifications that might or might not be compatible with each other but that individually interpret reality in the respect expressed in the category.

Categories are made more specific by laying out the comparisons they permit, comparisons that exhibit how religious ideas are similar and different and thus serve to specify the vague category in a variety of ways. The vague category of the human condition, for instance, is specified typically by motifs of ignorance and enlightenment in religions originating in South Asia, by motifs of disharmony and attunement in those of East Asia, and by those of disobedient injustice and righteousness in religions originating in West Asia, as Huston Smith has argued. The vague category ultimate realities is specified by motifs of ultimate ontological realities and ultimate goals. The former in turn are specified further by anthropomorphic deities and transcendent creative principles. To continue the previous example, the category of how reality is subjectively experienced can be specified or filled in by the instances given, and by many more. This requires laying out just what it means to say that reality is experienced as suffering, as a harmony with problematic glitches, as a field for responsible action, and so forth, with all that is entailed in each one.

For the sake of comparison the vague and specified levels of internal determinateness within a comparative category must remain distinguished. Neither by itself is the comparative category, but only the levels functioning together in comparative inquiry. It is apparent once again why comparison is dynamic and never reducible to a comparative claim at a given time: specifications can continue indefinitely, always with further clarification of the differences and similarities. As inquirers struggle to become clear about this, they also clarify the vaguer level of the category, showing just how it can tolerate its instances and so forth. Imperfect comparisons might happen because of faults at either level: the respect of comparison is not properly understood, or the things compared are not expressed properly in relation to one another so as to make them available to interpretation in the respect of comparison. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the specifications themselves might be vague on their own level; enlightenment, for instance, is itself vague with respect to different specifications by Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta;
Buddhist enlightenment is vague with respect to sudden and gradual versions, and so forth.

The hypothesis of the two-level categories of comparison is more complicated than it seems, and the purpose of this chapter is to spell out some of the complications.

8.4 Vagueness and Specificity: The Making of Comparison

Vagueness is a logical notion, first analyzed in detail by Charles S. Peirce, and in our use of it here does not mean fuzzy-minded, perversely indefinite, or mysterious. Rather, it is a characteristic of a category according to which the law of non-contradiction does not apply to what might fall under the category or specify it. The category of the subjective experience of all reality, for instance, allows of being specified by the position that "life is a blast" as well as by "life is suffering." These positions cannot both be true in every shared respect because the principle of non-contradiction does apply to the dyadic true-false relation. But they both can meaningfully specify the vague category of the ordinary experience of life. That the principle of contradiction does not apply within a vague category means that things that are contradictory to one another still can fall under the category. If things that are contradictory can specify the category, then so can things that are not apparently determinate with respect to one another, that might or might not be contradictory, that relate in ways that have not been laid out by comparison. This is the case with the alternatives to suffering as the ordinary subjective experience was listed above, namely, life as an underlying harmony with problematic disharmonies, and life as a field for the exercise of responsibility: prior to analysis it is not clear how these relate to one another. Things can be compared only when they all can specify the same category—that they all can be shown to intermix their objects in the same respects.

Vagueness in a category allows all the potential specifications to be brought under one head with the proviso that the specific relations among them remain to be determined. All the instances of the category do not have to be contradictory to one another. They can be alike, or similar in some respects and different in others. They can even turn out upon analysis to be incommensurate with one another except in the respect in which they fall under the vague category. Candidates for falling under the category might turn out, upon analysis, not to be relevant specifications of it.

That categories are vague with respect to what falls under them does not mean they have no precision with respect to other categories on their own level, as mentioned above. It is one thing to talk about ultimate realities and another to talk about the human condition, and quite another again to talk about religious truth (the topics of the three years of our project). Although it has not been our concern in this project seminar, it might be possible to develop a formal theory of religion by defining the vague category in terms of one another, distinguishing and relating, for instance, the categories of rituals, mythologies, and cosmologies, personal spiritual practices, and so on, each of which is vague with respect to how different religions would specify them. We have avoided developing theories of religion because of our sense that the variety of categories such a theory ought to encompass can be determined only by making much more progress in the matter of comparison than has been made so far. More will be said about theories of religion in Religious Truth, chapter 9, where we explain that a theory of religion cannot be a mere compilation of subcategories.

We have said that vague categories are specified, in the instance of religions, by what thinkers within the different religions, or different strains within a given religion, have to say about the category. But merely to note the fact that a category is specified by several religious positions is not yet to exhibit a comparison. Two further steps are necessary.

First, specification is not merely cataloguing phenomena under a category but translating the phenomena so that they thereby receive greater specificity to the category. None of the religions we studied in The Human Condition discusses the human condition in just those terms. Rather, to use the above example, those of East Asia say that the human condition is religiously characterized by problems of harmony and disharmony; in South Asia it is a matter of reality, ignorance, and enlightenment; in West Asia it is a matter of responsibility and reconciliation. Specification requires translating each tradition's roots, concepts, myths, assumptions, and so forth into the language of the human condition, saying how each is a specification of that category. This involves a twofold enrichment of the category's language. On the one hand, the religious positions are translated into the language of the human condition, which says more about them than they said about themselves. On the other hand, the language of the human condition is enriched by having to express specifically what it did not express at the level of unspecified vagueness, namely, the details of the positions that specify it. As specified, the category is far more concrete and detailed.

The second step, once the specifying positions are interpreted in a common language, is to analyze what they claim and deny with reference to one another. At this point it should be possible to see how they are similar and different, where they are complementary or contradictory,
where attempts to translate them into a common language fail so that they remain incommensurable, and when it can be concluded that they do not really fall under the same category, because they are not really about the same thing.

In the above example, we might be inclined, ironically, to say that the human condition involves all three specifications (East Asian, South Asian, and West Asian) and possibly others besides these as complementary and overlapping aspects. So, the human condition might be described in a complex way that involves all the major motifs of all three religious regions and the comparison is one of complementarity. In other comparisons, however, the religious traditions might contradict one another clearly, and that contradiction is recognized when their ideas are translated into the comparing language of the human condition. To take our other example of the category of the ordinary subjective experience of life's basic characters, the Buddhist claim that all is suffering is contradicted in part by the West Asian religions' claim that life is fundamentally a field of responsibility, even though Buddhists acknowledge responsibilities and West Asian religions acknowledge suffering. Perhaps more likely is the situation in which religious traditions say overlapping things about the human condition. For instance, it might be argued that all religions, save perhaps extreme deterministic versions of them, agree that individuals can make some progress toward spiritual improvement by following appropriate prescriptions; but disagree over the definition of the goals and the best way to identify the problematic or immature beginning point.

Translating the representations of the various traditions into the language of the comparative category both enriches the comparative category and allows for commensurate comparison. An enriched vague category, consciously employed at both its vague and specific levels, fosters objectivity in approaching religious phenomena, making comparisons more a matter of self-corrective empirical inquiry than of recognition of the familiar and surprise at the unfamiliar. For instance, given the above example about East, South, and West Asian Axial Age religions on the human condition, comparativists asking about the human condition as understood by shamanism or traditional African religions have the tools to be very clear about not superimposing the Axial Age representations on their subject. They can ask directly about whether these traditional religions specify the vague category differently. This is different from approaching traditional religions with only the specific assumptions of the Axial Age religions and without the vague category, the fault of which earlier comparativists who approach all religions with Christian assumptions about the nature of religion rightly are accused. This is different also from approaching traditional religions with the pretense of only a vague category so that the specifics of one's own tradition are smuggled in unaware.

Translation of religious phenomena into the language of the comparative category at both levels is itself the condition for comparison. Only when each tradition's views of ultimate realities are registered, for instance, is it possible to tell whether they are saying similar or different things, asserting identity, are complementary, contradictory, or whatever. Religions' metaphoric systems might use the same symbols but mean very different things, or vice versa. Only by seeing what they say about the comparative category (the respect in which they are being compared) is it possible to be precise about the comparisons.

"Translation" may not be the right word for the process of specifying a vague category in terms of religions to be compared. It misleadingly suggests that there are two languages, that of the vague category and that of the religion, and that specification is merely the translation of the latter into the former. Rather, the process is one of determining what the religion asserts or assumes about the topic expressed in the comparative category, and this process is dialectical and hermeneutical, moving back and forth between both languages and enriching the understanding of both in the process. The process of specification often is indirect and itself metaphorical, moving by juxtapositions. Its goal, however, is not aesthetic "aha's" but the articulation of assertions and assumptions that can be compared.

Attention should be called to the fact that comparisons need to be sensitive to differences in importance. Religious traditions might have clearly comparable understandings of, say, the cosmos, with articulate similarities and differences, but also with a very great difference in the importance of the roles those understandings play. The motifs of Judaism (for instance, in Genesis) and Chinese religion (in the Yi Jing) about the cosmos can be compared neatly. But whereas those cosmological representations are very important throughout Chinese religion, they have far less importance in Judaism. Comparison involves assessing importance as well as representational or assertive structure.

Finally, it should be noted that sometimes comparison turns up negative results. That is, a religion might not have anything to say about the topic of a comparative category that is very helpful for comparing with other religions. Recognition of this helps guard against the illegitimate superimposition of certain properties as essential to religion. There might indeed be universal characteristics, but whether this is so needs to be determined empirically. Hypotheses about these defining elements need to be tested with alertness to the possibility of negative results. The
hypothesis, for instance, that all religions have rituals, conceptual representations, and spiritual practices needs to be checked out.\footnote{\textit{On Comparing Religious Ideas}}

### 8.5 Vulnerability and Phenomenological Testing

The great danger with comparisons is that the theoretical structure of the comparative categories will bias the representation of phenomena to be compared. Therefore explicit effort needs to be made to test and modify the categories by phenomenologically thick representations of them. "Thick description" is the phrase coined by Clifford Geertz to describe an anthropological approach to cultures through the analysis of their symbol systems and symbolic behavior.\footnote{\textit{The Human Condition}} The phenomenological representations of religions need to be even thicker than the anthropological ones, if that is possible. Although any tentative comparison, such as those made in this volume, can be only partial, the process itself, however far it goes, should be guided by an ideal that leaves no stones unturned in questioning whether the representations of the religions are faithful. This ideal has been operative in our work for this volume but we have only just begun the process of testing our results. A feasible way to intensify testing is to explore in more detail some of the specific results of this volume and, indeed, some of us may undertake to do this in individual work. Our next step as a group, however, has been to look at our comparative efforts on ultimate realities from the new angles made possible by similar comparative efforts in relation to the general topics of the human condition and religious truth.

The investigation of five "sites" of phenomenological analysis can help us in questioning whether a religious idea is being represented fairly: representations of an idea as it is understood intrinsically within a tradition, the perspectival interpretations of context promoted by an idea, representations of the idea in relation to other ideas, interpretations of the idea in relation to practical matters, and representations of the idea as singular and incommensurable with other ideas.\footnote{\textit{The Human Condition}} For convenience, we shall call these sites of phenomenological analysis intrinsic, perspectival, theoretical, practical, and singular, respectively. The following discussions of these five terms will serve to explain them in more detail.

**Intrinsic** representation is thinking and expressing the religious idea in its own terms, as thought by the people who think it religiously. There are diverse forms of expressions of religious ideas, of course, including specific texts, ancient motifs, commentarial traditions of re-expressions of the ideas, intellectual systems, and so forth.

Specific texts perhaps are the easiest to understand intrinsically because they allow us to try reading them as they would have been read by their supposed authors or later groups of readers. Frank Clooney's discussion of "reading texts" in his \textit{Theology after Vedanta} and \textit{Seeing through Texts} is a direct expression of this form of understanding. While recognizing the limits of getting inside the mind of readers within another tradition, Clooney is clear about how to improve one's reading.

Ideas in the form of ancient motifs, such as the Chinese conception of yin and yang as constitutive of natural process, are more difficult to identify intrinsically. They are not reducible to their written expressions, say in the \textit{Yijing} or the \textit{Tajiguan} classics, but need to be discerned from popular expressions and also indirectly, as from texts not about yin and yang but structured by those ideas. Moreover, motifs are reflected differently, often contradictorily, in different historical instances. Intrinsic understanding of motifs involves getting on the inside of each of the expressions as well as of the general habits of thought mediating those expressions. There is no single author or community but rather a social habit of thought shaped by the motifs and differently expressing them. The work of Livia Kohn in the first chapter of this volume and elsewhere, such as in \textit{The Human Condition} (chapter 2) and \textit{Early Chinese Mysticism}, is motif analysis.

The expression of ideas in commentarial traditions is perhaps the thickest way of inhabiting the intrinsic character of ideas, seeing them through permutations given with reasons against alternatives. Paula Fredriksen's treatment of Augustine's reading of the Bible (\textit{The Human Condition}, chapter 6), Anthony Saladin's treatment of Midrashic commentary on the Torah (\textit{The Human Condition}, chapter 5), David Eckel's treatment of Bh\textashadesha's Buddhist commentary in \textit{To See the Buddha}, and Frank Clooney's reading of commentaries within the Advaita Vedanta tradition in \textit{Theology after Vedanta} all get at the intrinsic character of ideas carried down a tradition through commentary.

Systems of ideas, such as Augustine's, Śaṅkara's, or Zhuxi's, are expressed in texts, but perhaps in several texts written over a lifetime, and have elements of commentary as well as expressions of motifs. But their intellectual character lies in their systematic nature. Nomanul Haq's discussion of Jabir's system in \textit{Names, Natures and Things} is an intrinsic representation of a system. The point of all this is to understand the texts, the motifs and their history, ideas in commentarial traditions, and systems, all in their own terms, a feat of hermeneutics.

The perspectival understanding of a religious idea is not how we look at it from our perspective but how that idea configures perspectives on the context of those who use it, including us. Perhaps it is too easy to rush from an intrinsic representation of an idea to its placement in a comparative category. It is important to slow down and see how that idea shapes perspectives on the world from its standpoint. Single ideas, of course, do not evoke perspectives on things by themselves, but they participate with
other ideas in shaping a perspective on things. The phenomenological importance of this is to see how the world looks from the perspective of the religions being compared. For instance, most forms of Hinduism (The Human Condition 4.1) affirm the importance of the self (atman), which at bottom is Brahman, whereas most forms of Buddhism (The Human Condition 3.3) deny the reality of that self. Is this a disagreement about reality within a shared perspective on the world? Or do Hinduism and Buddhism, despite their intertwined histories and common languages, have different perspectives on the world as expressed in and shaped by their core ideas? Surely Judaism and Christianity have different perspectives on Messianic expectations.

The theoretical representation of ideas has to do with their effects on other ideas, often as involved with them in symbol systems. Ideas are to be understood by their implications, their roles in larger systems, their effects in reinforcing or undermining other ideas, and so forth. Some interpreters (some pragmatists, structuralists, and deconstructionists) believe that the whole meaning of ideas lies in their theoretical implications, although that is likely going too far. The intrinsic representation of ideas is thinking them again from the context of their original authors and communities. Thinking out their implications and other theoretical consequences might move far beyond the thought-world of the religions employing those ideas. Often it has to do with tracing historical consequences of ideas and bringing more recent conceptual models to bear in order to express the extrinsic relations. This is an entirely legitimate check on the representation of religious ideas in comparisons.

The practical representation of ideas is the tracing of the ways they shape communities of practice. Understanding the practical bearing of ideas and the ways they affect social and personal life is crucial for testing whether ideas are being represented fairly. If ideas are interpreted and quickly brought into a comparison with a meaning that stands at odds with the effects of those ideas in the communities shaped by them, something is wrong. However similar they look on the surface, Christian love is not just like Buddhist compassion because the former is readily mated with tolerance and bellicosity in ways the latter is not; Christian love shapes its community in ways Buddhist compassion does not. Some interpreters (other pragmatists, some anthropologists, some Wittgensteinians) think the practical consequences of ideas are their whole meaning. That too is extreme. Nevertheless, the representation of the practice-shaping powers of ideas is important for correcting the biases of formal comparative categories.

The singularity of an idea is a peculiar notion because ideas by definition are general, not singular. Expressions of ideas in texts might be singular, but that is not the point here. The point is that ideas can have such particularity in a religious tradition that, in some respects at least, representation of them always distorts. Even intrinsic representations that get inside texts to reproduce meanings as closely as possible to authorial intention or formal structure involve representational moves from the hermeneutic’s culture to the text’s. The singularity of an idea or cluster of ideas resists representation and translation. We point to it by means of metaphors whose very metaphorical quality says the indexed idea is more than or different from what it is pointed out to be. The singularity of ideas obviously cannot be brought into comparisons. But that very fact is important to know: whereas the idea’s intrinsic, perspectival, theoretical, and practical meanings can be compared, the singularity of a religion’s idea of something, in that singularity, simply is incomparable. Some critics of comparison of religious ideas hold, in our terms, that all religious ideas are importantly singular and so incomparable. This is an exaggeration; not all religious ideas have important singularity. But some do, especially those ideas with indexical or pointing reference to the ultimate that are derived from mystical experience. Often comparison finds it important to note that certain aspects of the things compared cannot be brought into the comparison. Singularity is not a site for our comparisons, leaving us with only four.

The point of this complicated multiphasic and multilevel phenomenology is to make comparison vulnerable to correction. A vague comparative category ought to be vulnerable to correction through the discovery that aspects of the ideas being compared by means of it do not fit within its scope. Likewise, the representation of phenomena for comparison ought to be vulnerable to learning that they are not what they formerly seemed from the vantage point of the comparative category. And the process of translating or interpreting the phenomena in terms of the category, giving the category specificity in the phenomena’s terms, ought to be vulnerable to correction from what is learned on the way. No comparison is ever complete, much less proven. Vulnerability should be the hallmark of comparison, accordingly. Whereas some thinkers might want well-entrenched comparisons, so as to legitimate evaluative inferences, usually to the glory of their own religion or academic tradition, we think trenched and bulwarked stand in the way of inquiry. Because of the dual levels of vagueness and specificity we recognize in comparative categories, the process of comparing is an ongoing dialectic of correction.

Comparison is an historical activity, with a history to its concepts and moves. That history should also be under constant scrutiny, even (or especially) when it seems to have produced fruitful understanding and clarity. The idea of method in modern intellectual work has been insidious.
Method in the Cartesian sense is supposed to guarantee the results of inquiry if it is begun with true premises and followed faithfully. In practice that means that the bias of one's starting point is methodically elaborated into distortion in the conclusions. Good inquiry, rather, is always in the middle, never starting, never justified antecedently, and hopefully corrective of antecedent biases. Good inquiry attempts to break the chains of bias. The comparative process advocated here proceeds according to no methodological principles that might bias the outcome save the recognition of the several different parts of the task and an imperative to look at things from as many angles as possible.

8.6 The Historical Provenance and Discursive Form of Comparative Categories

Comparative categories are not innocent of particular histories. They are not neutral, abstract, empty notions, created to be fair to all sides. On the contrary, the categories come from specific traditions and have to be made neutral and fair by a process of criticism, purification, and use, such as is embodied in this project.

For instance, the category of the human condition has such a history. To say that the human condition is a category with a history is to recognize that it comes from a particular tradition of understanding. Specifically, it has been made popular by twentieth-century existentialism, especially that of Jaspers and Heidegger, and is prominent in the work of influential Christian theologians such as Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich, among many others. Original as the existentialist movement was, it was developing a movement in Western thought that had core texts in Renaissance humanism and the "turn to the subject" in the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the Enlightenment. That movement was powerfully fed by the development of the social and human sciences, beginning with Hobbes and flourishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its roots are even more ancient. The human condition relative to God was a primary concern for the Talmudic thinkers as well as for Christian theologians attempting to define the nature and status of Jesus. And of course the psalmist sang:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
(Psalms 8, New Revised Standard Version)

There are, of course, parallels in other religious traditions, even if they have not independently developed social and human sciences on the Western model. Chinese Confucianism is famous as a humanism and on that ground many claim that it is not a religion but a humanistic philosophy. The Bhagavad Gītā can be read rightly as an essay on the human condition, as confronted problematically by Arjuna on the field of battle. If there were not detailed treatments in the major traditions of the human condition, we would be sorely remiss for giving it prominence in a study of comparative religious ideas! As a matter of fact, however, the term human condition comes to those working on our project especially but not exclusively through the history of its use in twentieth-century existential religious thinking.

That confession of historical particularity needs to be balanced by the fact that the term human condition has been purified of considerable historical particularity. To refer to the human as such is already to have moved beyond the worldview in which the name of one's own tribe means "human" and other people are not quite of the human sort. That only "one's own" people are human is one interpretation of the human condition among others. The term also abstracts from specific interpretations of the condition of all humanity, for instance, that people are created by God with a divine image, but fallen. Tillich and others wanted the nature of the human condition to be subject to analysis and interpretation by a variety of disciplines and approaches, including the arts and sciences, that are not specifically Christian. His purpose was to provide a specifically Christian resolution to certain problems within the human condition where the term itself was understood more generally at least in some ways.

In The Human Condition we purified or generalized the term human condition even further to be tolerant of whatever the world religions take to be characteristic of human life and reality. We acknowledged that human condition can be construed so broadly that it might have many aspects to which any religion or all religions would be irrelevant; so we
sometimes spoke of the religious dimension of the human condition. But in practice we have not found many characteristics of the human to which religion is wholly irrelevant, whether the material conditions for existence to intellectual, artistic, and cultural life. All this is to say that we have consciously reframed the notion of the human condition to be properly vague so as to allow for specification by the traditions we aim to compare.

Even as purified or made vague this way, the notion of the human condition still has a specific historical character. As noted, it treats the universality of Homo sapiens as the religiously important subject. Religions differ as to what this might mean. For the religions of hunter-gatherer societies it would mean little at all. Judaism notes the creaturely status of all human beings in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, but its religious concerns deal mainly with the descendents of Abraham through Isaac. Islam by contrast, even using the same texts, prescribes religion for all human beings. The religions of reincarnation in principle do not limit their religious concerns to human beings but rather to all sentient beings; in practice, however, we did not feel that the focus on the human condition distorted those traditions as religions. The category of human condition also supposes that the human condition is a state of being, or a state of being caused, or a nature and result of things. Given the vagueness of the notion of condition, we judged that little of importance was distorted or excluded from consideration in any of the religious traditions under study by its use. For all the care which we had framed the category of the human condition, it is still not too vague to be helpful. Interpreting the religious dimension of the human condition is helpful in differentiating ultimate realities, or the nature of religious truth, however much the positions under each category cross over with implications for the others. Analogous histories can be given for the categories of ultimate realities and religious truth.

It should be clear now that comparative categories are not well symbolized by single words and that to speak of religious ideas falling under categories for purposes of comparison tends to underscore the complexity of the process of comparison. Comparative categories are to be described by elaborate theories, surrounded by accounts of their historical development, and in terms that suggest that they are the process of being revised even as we speak. To compare religious ideas is to give a long and discursive account, an account that is better the more vulnerable it is to revision. Hence we cannot chart our categories or comparative conclusions except by means of a kind of shorthand for a review of the discursive comparative process. This point needs constantly to be brought to mind because of the great temptation to confuse a comparison with a chart of its intellectual representations.

Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman

Notes

1. See Descartes, Meditations, #4.
2. See Aristotle, Metaphysics 4-7, at 1011b26.
4. See Neville's Normative Cultures (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), chap. 2, for a discussion of the kinds of critical analyses and tests to be made of abductions.
5. The hypothesis about vague comparative categories and their diverse alternative specifications is spelled out in philosophical detail in Neville, Normative Cultures, chaps. 1-4. Chap. 1 discusses the problem of theory, construed as synoptic vision, in light of recent criticisms of logocentric bias, and presents a theory of theories advancing upon certain vulnerable models. The theory is indebted to Charles Peirce who first developed the "logic of vagueness" in contrast with "generality." Chap. 2 discusses value and importance as characteristics of things in reality and as built in as biases to the forms of theory; comparison is analyzed as the synoptic display of importance. Chap. 3 discusses how comparisons bring unity to phenomena but at the price of selection and trivialization; devices are presented to make sure that the important elements in the phenomena are selected and the unimportant ones trivialized, rendering the value-biases in the formal categories in correspondence with the phenomena and, though being made explicit, vulnerable to correction. Chap. 4 discusses the formal criteria that frame comparisons so as to defer to the subject matter rather than impose alien connections.

item falls under a category and the favorite example seems to be how many hairs a man has to have in order not to be bald. Peirce's concern, and ours, is with the fact that a vague category tolerates instances that might be contradictory to one another.

7. This discussion summarizes the one in *Normative Cultures*, chap. 3. On the logic of making similar, complementary, overlapping, or contradictory things commensurate theoretically, see Neville's *The Highroad around Modernism*, chap. 6.

8. On metaphors, see Neville's *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, 44 and passim.

9. This hypothesis has been put forward and explored tentatively and conceptually by Neville in *Soldier, Sage, Saint* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978), chap. 1, and *Behind the Masks of God*, chap. 10.


11. This is a variation, for the sake of religious ideas, on the discussion of different kinds of "importance" in Neville's *Normative Cultures*, chap. 2.


How Our Approach to Comparison Relates to Others

Wesley J. Wildman and Robert Cummings Neville

Methodological wrangling over simple tasks is a waste of time. Few people care how many ways there are to erase a chalkboard and even fewer desire to debate which way is best—surely a good thing. If reflection on method in relation to the task of comparing religious ideas has importance at all, it is only because comparing religious ideas is an important and complex task; method subserves task. Comparison of religious ideas is indeed a complex matter, which may help to explain the proliferation of approaches to comparison and the denial in some quarters of the possibility of success. Self-conscious debate about comparative method ought to be useful when there is such confusion about the primary task. Generally we opt for getting jobs done over discussing how to do them. In this case, however, pausing to chew on the methodological bone promises to be worth the trouble, even if later we feel the urge to bury the result.

This chapter systematically describes a number of attitudes and approaches to comparison in the study of religion. Our aim is to join the ongoing conversation over comparative method by showing how our approach relates to others. We shall make a threefold case for our view of comparison. First, we shall indicate how we have drawn on the strengths of other approaches. We are neither proud nor even especially creative, so