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
212 – Our Approach to Comparison

We happily learn from other methods even as we seek to improve on them in the hope of moving ahead with what we think is an important task. The second part of our case consists in placing a sharp focus on a pervasive weakness in extant approaches to comparison of religious ideas, a weakness that our own approach is designed to overcome. The third part of our case is to show how our proposal answers the challenges issued by various comparatists, including Jonathan Z. Smith in a famous article analyzing approaches to comparison. It follows that this chapter is not so much a survey of approaches to comparison as an argument for the comparative method that we have followed in this project. There are many useful surveys to which we refer those seeking more comprehensive coverage.

The organization of the chapter expresses its argumentative character. We classify a number of attitudes and approaches to comparison according to how they would answer an increasingly detailed set of questions. Some reject the possibility of comparison whereas we argue for its possibility. Others reject explicit categories for comparison whereas we argue that explicitness about the inevitability of comparison in categories (or respects) is a virtue overall. Still others justify categories from existing theories whereas we argue that the categories should be more vulnerable to correction and hence likely to change in the process of comparison. And yet others justify categories directly from similarities in the data whereas we argue that this is too arbitrary a procedure.

Our view, then, is that there should be a dialectic between data and comparative categories whereby the task of understanding through comparison is able to build progressively on previous results. Categories can come from anywhere so long as a dialectical process of improvement and correction is in place. Justification of the categories is a complex process depending both on data identified, articulated, and checked by means of that dialectical process and on theories in which the categories play key roles. The penultimate section of this chapter redescribes our own approach to comparison and its significance by means of a discussion of the complex relations between data and categories that this dialectic is supposed to mediate. That section restates the ways by which categories and the comparisons they facilitate are to be justified. In the final section, we review the aforementioned article of Smith and show how our own approach to comparison, though it may have weaknesses all its own, does not fail prey to the criticisms he rightly urges against extant approaches.

9.1 Comparison as Impossible

The sequence of questions by which we shall survey the field and advocate our approach begins with the basic one reflecting the contention surrounding comparison in contemporary religious studies: Is comparison possible? If this question is taken in the narrowest sense, as asking about the sheer possibility of comparison of religious ideas, it is unproblematic. While there are attitudes (not approaches!) to comparison that deny its possibility, we take ourselves to have done comparison in this and the previous volume of this series, thereby answering the question of its sheer possibility.

The question is more interesting if understood loosely, as a question about the possibility of successful comparison. In the first chapter of The Human Condition (1.2–3) we discussed the meaning of successful comparison and gave our argument that success is possible, at least some of the time, on some understandings of success. There we announced our triply conditional hypothesis about what it takes to make successful comparisons and we report it here, slightly reworded: If the category of comparison vaguely considered is indeed a common respect for comparison, if the specifications of the category are made with pains taken to avoid imposing biases, and if the point of comparison is legitimate, then the translations of the specifications into the language of the category can allow of genuine comparisons. The views denying the possibility of successful comparison do so in three ways corresponding to the three conditions of this hypothesis.

First, some are so impressed by the differences between cultures that they speak of incommensurability and deny the meaningfulness of talk about vague categories that express common respects of comparison. Even when common respects of comparison seem to be present, it is not possible to assure ourselves that real commonality exists because intrinsic cultural embedding makes the ideas involved incommensurable. To this our answer is twofold. The biological givenness of human life places a limit on the problem of cultural inpenetrability and gives a solid basis for speaking of common features of human culture. And the phenomenon of multiple religious and personal identity (for instance, Daoistic Confucians, Jewish Christians) shows that the claim of incommensurability is strained. These considerations do not automatically assure the meaningfulness of speaking about common respects of comparison but they do check objections that would arrest an attempt to find common respects of comparison before it even begins. Once the comparative process has begun, at least on our understanding of that process, the reality of common respects of comparison is largely an empirical matter.

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

Third, some might grant the meaningfulness of respects of comparison and even the possibility of making allowance for bias, yet view the point of comparison as essentially immoral, thus making successful comparison impossible where "success" connotes worthliness. Whether the goal of comparison is to satisfy curiosity, to enhance understanding, to build theories, or something else, comparison is an exercise of cultural power for which it is hard to take full and fair responsibility. If not a blatant exertion of cultural force, then it is at the very least a form of transformative praxis: comparison changes things, both the things compared and those making the comparisons. Indeed, that is the very purpose of comparison in the social context of interreligious dialogue, to bring about cultural and personal change through mutual understanding. We already discussed this problem in 1.3 of The Human Condition and offered a report on our own moral compass to the effect that our purposes in making comparisons are, in our context, morally legitimate. There are no guarantees in this case either, however, for moral judgments of this kind change with time and place. We have no trouble imagining settings in which curiosity should be checked and understanding sacrificed for the sake of some relatively higher moral purpose, such as the protection from scrutiny of an exquisite and fragile cultural phenomenon.

Our replies to these objections to the possibility of successful comparison all turn heavily on the process of comparison we defend. Our resistance to non-empirical pronouncements about what is possible and what is not only makes sense in the context of a serious positive viewpoint that moves beyond mere speculation or hopeful stipulation about comparative method. That alternative is a properly empirical procedure that prizes vulnerability of comparative hypotheses and actively seeks to improve them in as many ways and with as much diligence as possible.

9.2 Comparison as Something Other than an Explicit Cognitive Process

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

There are at least two reasons why this goal sometimes is deemed important. First, when knowledge is viewed as an event of illumination within an ongoing process, comparison does not much serve the end of knowledge if the results are given explicit representation in the form of hypotheses about a comparative category. Rather, proper knowledge is attained when the results involve a seeing-as with potentially transformative effects. Second, the refusal to make the results of comparison explicit in the form of ideas is a hedge against so-called logoscentrism. Vigilant deconstruction of comparative conclusions as far as they materialize keeps the mind mobile, avoids the ironic trapping of theorists by their own comparative conclusions, and most adequately respects differences among traditions. Some theorists deem these virtues so important that they willingly forsake the rather different virtues of self-consciousness of procedure, vulnerability to correction, and detection of bias that pertain in a work of comparison structured as explicit cognitive processes along the lines we defend.

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

This is an important point with which we have some sympathy. It highlights a genuine weakness, albeit one that fades (we hope) with time, in our approach to comparison. These views hold in common that successful comparison is an act of genius in which an illuminating similarity is grasped intuitively and then expressed gracefully, avoiding the unattractive mistake of smothering the insights with an unwieldy theoretical apparatus. The problem with such theoretical framing is that it explains too much. Almost any broad theoretical framework either will be too abstract to explain anything or will quickly predict not only the insight to be explained but a horde of other comparative conclusions as well. In fact, it will predict so much on the basis of such slender data that the theory will collapse before it builds up a head of steam. A theory about a comparative category is, on these views, drastically underdetermined by the data, and so extensively stipulates what ought to be the case, invariably getting too much wrong to be attractive. Making comparison into an explicit cognitive process with a dialectical methodology of vulnerability, debate, and improvement seems too facile, too unrealistic about the complex data to be accounted for in comparisons, and too optimistic about the power of theories to explain the disparate data. What is left for comparison, then, except to be the domain of genius insight? And what is the point of rendering comparison an explicit cognitive process complete with codetermination of vague categories and their specifications except boldly to hide from the fact that we are in no position to regulate our comparative efforts in the way we claim is possible in this project? Note how modest is the objection to our approach that we infer from these viewpoints. It does not claim that successful comparison is impossible on a priori grounds. Rather, it plausibly assumes that a slender base of comparative data about religious phenomena and a worrying history of distortion and arbitrariness in previous comparative efforts combine with the irredcible complexity of the task to make avoiding too formalized and aggressive an approach to it the safest bet. Leave it to those deeply initiated into several traditions. Let us be content with their moments of illumination and the comparative insights they produce. Let us avoid systematization and cognitive fretting. It's just not worth it.

The relationship between this view and our own resembles the relationship between Mahāyāna and Theravāda sensibilities in Buddhism. In Theravāda, the focused journey toward enlightenment is for the monks, for the genius experts. In Mahāyāna, enlightenment is for the masses; not being genius experts, however, they must find ways to work together. In the same way, we are urging that the process of comparison should made more public, that many kinds of people should combine forces to search for stable comparative hypotheses, and that the key to this approach is an explicit method. This method must prize stability and vulnerability to correction in comparative hypotheses, render its provisional conclusions as ideas on the way to theories about religious matters, and demand careful justification for the comparative categories that make stable comparative hypotheses feasible. We go even further, however—and here the Buddhist analogy begins to strain, though the "egalitarian rebellion" version of the origins of Mahāyāna still works. We argue that the genius insight method of comparison was never sufficiently productive of deep insights and that such insights as were won were never made as fruitful as they might have been for the work of others. In short, there is a scientific approach to comparison that promises far better results due to the unprecedented work of many in place of the rare, uncoordinated insights of the few genius comparativists.

The question becomes, therefore, whether the method works. As sympathetic as we are to the criticism we have been discussing, we do think that more can be achieved than it allows. We return to these matters below. For now, our relation to this family of critics suggests an amusing image, flattering to both sides in different ways yet gently mitigating each, too. What begins as conflicting bets over what would be gained by self-consciousness, ends with the reticent, Theravāda approach having nothing to do but watch while the enthusiastic Mahāyāna crowd uses every available resource to maximize the impact of their combined efforts. The members of the disciplined monkish group, amazed at the innocence of their non-adept friends, with some justification predict that the corporate experiment will begin in opposition to methodological stipulations and, chaotically stumbling along a host of mistake-riddled paths, end in utter failure. The large, noisy group, for its part, is unconcerned with the adepts' opinions, because time is on its side. Where the adepts can only watch in amusement, already pressed hard up against their self-imposed limits for what is possible in comparison, the corporate experiment's refusal to accept any
limitations a priori on what comparison can achieve gives it time and opportunity to learn from its many mistakes and to generate new approaches and new forms of cooperation. The outcome remains an intriguing question. We bet on the mob.

9.3 Comparison Based on Categories
Justified by Existing Theories of Religion

Approaches that produce explicit cognitive representations of the process and results of comparing religious practices and beliefs constitute the largest group, though it is diverse and of uneven quality. These views can be distinguished based on the answers they provide to the question about how the categories used for comparison are justified. Section 9.4 below deals with approaches that attempt to justify categories directly from “similarities” in the data of religious ideas and practices; this is an extremely dubious procedure but it has its own special virtue, as we shall see. The current section is concerned with the large group of approaches that borrow or deduce categories for comparison from existing theories about religion and justify the use of those categories by virtue of the plausibility they gain from those theories. Such approaches can be distinguished, though with some overlap, by the nature of the theory of religion that furnishes and justifies the categories. We present them here for convenience in family groupings.

First, one family of approaches begins from a confessional religious perspective, approaching other religious traditions in terms of categories dominant within their own. An important social phenomenon connected with this is interreligious dialogue, in which representatives of religious traditions join in discussion over shared issues of importance or simply to increase mutual understanding. Surely this is the most natural way, in the sense of being simplest and most direct, to approach the task of making comparisons among religious ideas. What could be more straightforward or more morally satisfying than to approach the plurality of religions from one’s own perspective? We heartily affirm the moral and existential naturalness of this kind of approach to comparison. Yet it has an obvious downside in that the categories for comparison are so heavily indebted to a particular confessional perspective that they cannot be as responsive to the data as scholars and theorists of religion require. There is moral and existential satisfaction to be had in the approach to comparison from one’s own confessional point of view, if it is a strong one. But an ideal form of encounter for many religious-believer comparatists may not be ideal for comparatists for whose purposes the inflexibility of categories derived from and justified by confessional commitments interferes with their scholarly task. Flexible categories are better for us because improvement of comparative categories is always needed, as is refinement of any theory that produces and justifies them.

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

The perennial philosophy offers a way to see how the adepts from all traditions hold certain key ideas in common, albeit under sometimes radically different descriptions, while explaining why non-adepts could flatly disagree with each other about the truth of religious ideas and practices. The existence of this purported common core is the reason the perennial philosophy is sometimes called the primordial tradition. It is defended by thinkers who in some cases—and preeminently in the case of Huston Smith, its best known contemporary representative—have spent a great deal of time learning about religious practices and texts from all over the world. Its advocates would say without hesitation that its plausibility derives mainly from the fact that it can make sense of a great deal of data. Just because of this, we are told, we should not hesitate to take over the categories given prominence in the perennial philosophy for the sake of making detailed comparisons. From its ontology of the Great Chain of Being we receive the categories of Godhead (nriga Namrta Brahman), God (saguna Brahman), discerns and other intermediate beings, human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Its cosmology offers categories such as the human condition, ultimate and proximate religious truth, savior figures and bodhisattvas, ignorance and liberation. Its view of the religious quest leads to other comparative categories such as morality, ritual, sacred texts, and special revelations, each of which is interpreted through the lens of the ontology and cosmology of the perennial philosophy. With categories furnished by a powerful large-scale theoretical interpretation of religion, comparison can proceed untroubled by the problem of categorial justification, focusing instead on comparative details. Ultimately, the result is the further illumination and consolidation of the theory of religion that furnishes the categories themselves.

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

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

Third, another group of approaches justifies comparative categories by virtue of a scientific-causal theory about the origin and nature of religion. Such approaches, including many of the brightest stars in the religious studies sky, usually have begun from particular scientific or social-scientific disciplines, thereafter leading out into proposals for more or less comprehensive theories of religion. Most such theories can be organized by a leading discipline: evolutionary biology, anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, and psychology.

The word “causal” in scientific-causal is helpfully vague. On the one hand, it cuts in the direction of the second family’s expectation that there are naturally occurring limitations on how religious ideas fit together. Of course, in the third family these limitations are explained in terms of the sphere of interest of the leading scientific discipline (e.g., social mechanisms, brain structure and function, psychological laws) rather than in the second family’s more metaphysical or mystical ways. On the other hand, causation points in the direction of historical influence whereby certain comparative categories achieve a high degree of naturalness. Very often approaches in this family make appeal to both kinds of causation to justify comparative categories. This is true of many of the representative views listed above, as well as approaches to comparison that allow the philosophy of history to play as large a role as historical details. The historical influences in question might vary widely, from the effects of trade contacts or missionary zeal to planned cultural engineering. Unfortunately, sometimes these views presuppose influence where none has been shown to have any historical-cause basis. Alternatively, they presuppose an evolution of ideas in which the close-knit cultural competition needed for the natural selection of ideas cannot be demonstrated.

The third family displays a relatively lower interest in an existentially and morally natural approach to religious pluralism from one’s own religious point of view. It also contrasts with the second family by virtue of the limitation to recognizably scientific theories or to historical causation, at least in intention if not always in practice. The problem with the third family of approaches, however, is the same as the problem in the first and second families: comparative categories need to be more vulnerable to correction than these approaches suggest so as to be able to take account of all that is learned about religious traditions in the process of making comparisons.

It would be churlish to be critical of the many instances of creative genius in the study of religion that abound in these three families of approaches. Let us be clear that in no case is it the source of comparative categories that troubles us. Each of these theorists has bequeathed categories for comparing religious ideas and practices and the value of these categories is incontestable. The problem is rather the rigidity from which categories suffer by virtue of receiving their justification from being key terms in large-scale theories of religion. These theorists themselves, and we daresay the bulk of those making use of their comparative categories, have not taken pains to say how these categories could be made responsive to resistant data. If the categories begin to seem contrived or otherwise inadequate, the underlying theory might profit somehow, though the mechanism for this is rarely explained, but the comparative task simply folds. It has nowhere to go. Our contention is that, regardless of the source of categories for comparison, the methodology of comparison must prize vulnerability of comparative categories and of the comparison they permit.
9.4 Comparison Based on Categories
Justified from Similarities in Data

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

Justification of this sort is an extremely delicate question. Arguably, sometimes justification has been limited to implicit reliance merely on the self-evidence of the similarities themselves. The failure of “what just seems similar” to justify categories of “the similar” is notorious, however, for two reasons. On the one hand, the role of the interpreter is so powerful in appeals to the obvious that it can swamp the ideal of descriptive impartiality. On the other hand, it continues to be difficult to figure out when phenomena are “essentially similar”; comparison seems not to advance this phenomenological task so much as codify persistent perplexity about it (but see below in section 9.5 for a brief account of how philosophical phenomenology is supposed to overcome this challenge). Despite these problems, something like an appeal to the obvious is indispensable to the justification of categories in these approaches because of the insistence on allowing data to speak for themselves. The problem is unavoidable, therefore; it must be managed rather than avoided. The views in this group can be clustered into families based on strategies for managing the challenge of impartiality in judging other similarities.

First, one family of approaches simply does the descriptive task really well! That is, descriptive categories are adduced on the basis of intensive grounding in multiple religious traditions, with the benefit of ongoing discussions with a wide variety of people. The result is descriptions of religious phenomena and ideas that win the grudging but secretly appreciative approval of large numbers of experts. Under this heading we list the luminaries of description in the study of religion. Some of these could be called descriptive phenomenologists of religion, as against exponents of philosophical phenomenology to which we will return presently. For others the phenomenological label is less apt but they are nonetheless ex-

pert observers and describers of religious phenomena. There are many others of both sorts. There are also many figures from the previous groups (sections 9.2 and 9.3, above) whose projects crucially depend on expertise in description so it is as well to remember that this group is distinguished primarily by a commitment to descriptive adequacy as primary justification for comparative categories.

Second, another family of approaches to comparison manages the problem of bias in description by partially relying on the lines of justification already discussed. This has to be done in precisely the right way, however: the aim is to relieve pressure on descriptive adequacy as the sole justification for comparative categories while still avoiding reliance on large-scale theories of religion in order to maintain the close ties between categories and data. One example of such a judicious hybrid approach is the comparative strategy advocated by Rudolf Otto in The Idea of the Holy. In that work Otto blends phenomenological description with a partial theological viewpoint. There is no fully worked out theory of religion underlying Otto’s categories of mysterium et tremendum; he himself says that he only focuses on the irrational element in religion, which leaves out an enormous amount of data. Yet the categories are justified not only by observations of the recurrence of phenomena that are arguably identical in substance, but also by a partial worldview that postulates the religious potency of reality.

Another set of examples supplements justification of comparative categories by their adequacy for describing data with various kinds of higher-order classifications of the data. Examples are plentiful, including the classification systems of Watson and Dilworth and Paul Tillich’s analysis of God concepts. In such cases, structural similarities in the ideas of diverse religious traditions suggest a classification. This classification is then supported in at least one of three ways: by a justification of the classification through elimination based on a philosophical analysis of possible options, by the theoretical beauty and economy of the classification, and by the classification’s efficacy in organizing further data. These classifications may or may not be ideal, in the sense of being defined by key features that are rarely realized purely in actual instances, and they may be partial or exhaustive.

All of the approaches to justifying categories discussed in this section proceed from reliance on well-worked out theories of religion. By contrast with the views discussed in section 9.4, they content themselves with observations formed on the basis of incomplete data, without the aid of much in the way of a theoretical superstructure to add authority to the classifications and categories that result. This is so even when a hybrid approach to justification is adopted. The attempt to stay closer to the
data by resisting the potentially blinkered influence of large-scale theories is to be lauded, despite the problems of justification from the appearance of similarity. From this we learn the crucial lesson that, as difficult as it may be, justification of categories by virtue of their roles in big-idea theories is to be minimized, even though it can never be eliminated completely. That is, there must be a partial distinction—it can never be made rigid—between the task of comparison that produces and justifies comparative categories and the subsequent task of theory building that takes the categories as well-attested ways of organizing data. But the increase in the empirical sensibility of this group over the more theory-dependent approaches (section 9.4) only eases the curse of invulnerability to correction; it does not escape it. While learning from this approach, therefore, we hold out for greater responsiveness to data and more clearly defined ways of correcting hypothetical comparative categories.

9.5 Comparison Based on a Dialectic of Data and Categories

With this we come to the final group of approaches to comparison. These approaches attempt, by contrast with all approaches discussed so far, to introduce procedures by which categories, however they are produced, can be improved with time. The most feasible procedure for such improvement is a thoroughgoing dialectic between the raw data and the categories used in making comparisons of the data. These approaches tend to be unwieldy because of the number of variables involved. Not only is there a large amount of data to be managed, but this data needs to be made effective for the correction of the categories in use, and the theories guiding interpretation of the data are themselves complex and subject to correction. We are aware of only three such approaches.

The first and most famous is Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology. Husserl's attempt to allow phenomenological generalizations to be responsive to data is truly impressive. We take ourselves to be following in his footsteps in this respect, but in few other ways. Husserl's program is, from our point of view, so plagued by awkward philosophical overhead that his approach is not helpful for a general theory of comparison. In particular, his foundationalist epistemic project seems wrong-headed to us and productive of confusions in his method that obscure the details salient for a general theory of comparison. His elaborate method for guiding phenomenological reflection is both too little in respect of attending to too few sources of corrective wisdom, and too much in respect of being thoroughly overbearing and impossibly difficult. If ever there were a comparative method for adepts it is Husserl's. That said, we do admire his attempt to found a discipline of comparative phenomenology, his scientifically minded respect for vulnerability of categories inferred from data, and his use of a dialectic between data and categories to drive his phenomenological method.

The second example also focuses on phenomenological reports: the heterophenomenological method advocated by Daniel C. Dennett.26 Dennett's approach can be regarded either as an attempt to correct some of Husserl's excesses or as a simplified version of Husserl's own procedures. Unfortunately, Dennett does not say enough about Husserl's method to enable a fair judgment of the relationship between the two. Suffice to say that Dennett sees clearly the philosophical problems associated with the comparison of phenomenological reports and he is as keenly aware as Husserl was of how splendid it would be to have a way to know when apparently different descriptions were really essentially about the same phenomenon. We heartily agree with both Dennett and Husserl in this regard. We are betting, however, that the vision of effective comparative phenomenology will never be realized until neurophysiology advances to the point that it can make meaningful contributions to judgments about the essential similarity and difference of the experiences giving rise to the phenomenological descriptions being compared.27

The third example is our own approach. It has been summarized already in this volume and elsewhere. and some of our main commitments have been discussed in passing in this chapter, so we confine ourselves in the next section to some comments on the meaning and significance of the dialectic between categories and data that we advocate.

9.6 The Significance of Comparison

Conducted as Dialectic between Categories and Data

In the 1960s, Imre Lakatos proposed a fairly detailed model for the operation of the natural sciences (the so-called methodology of scientific research programs).29 It succeeded in overcoming to a significant degree the discontinuity between scientific work within a paradigm ("normal" science) and what Thomas Kuhn had identified as "paradigm shifts." The discontinuity had proved awkward because the history of science suggested on the whole that paradigm shifts fit into the flow of science more easily than Kuhn's proposal allowed. Lakatos's own proposal was also controversial, however. Although it allowed for paradigm shifts, it tended to make them more rational than the history of science suggested has been the case. The controversy between Lakatos's relatively rational account of theory change and Paul Feyerabend's insistence that changing
between scientific research programs cannot finally be given exhaustively rational justification is one of the great debates of twentieth-century philosophy of science.\textsuperscript{21} It appears that, although reasons can be given for abandoning an apparently degenerating scientific research program in favor of a more progressive alternative, the decision remains a judgment call that cannot be completely rationally decided.

This shows that the dialectic between data and the principle theoretical categories is a delicate one even in the natural sciences. Its management depends on having stylishly good judgment about one's work, akin perhaps to what John Henry Newman called "illusive sense."\textsuperscript{32} That is how one balances the virtues of switching to a promising new hypothesis that (one hopes temporarily) flies in the face of important data, on the one hand, and the virtues of staying with a trusted old hypothesis that might be more consistent with data but seems to be running out of predictive steam, on the other. Newman's illusive sense is the key to efficient, potent argumentation as much as it is the key to making decisions between two competing hypotheses that each call for the investment of time and energy. This artistic dimension of human reason is a sharp reminder that any dialectic between data and categories will be as subtle as it is complex.

Perhaps the most important insight of Lakatos was his detailed spelling out of how complex is the path from data to theory and back again, in contrast with Karl Popper's more straightforward focus on falsification.\textsuperscript{33} In the natural sciences the data is incomprehensible apart from theories of instrumentation, which themselves are justified both by the sense they make of raw data and by inference from active theories about how nature works. Additional essentially interpretative theories are also needed for guiding the relating of data and for picking out essential features of the masses of data that are gathered. Most important is the way that the data, already multiply interpreted in these ways, can have an impact on the central hypotheses that guide the research program. No good scientist would ever throw over a well-tested hypothesis because of one piece of contra-indicating evidence. Rather, attempts would be made—frantic attempts, perhaps—on the one hand to test the data by replicating the experiment or confirming the theories of instrumentation, and on the other hand to explain the data with an auxiliary hypothesis that effectively protects the central hypotheses from falsification. It is the extension of theories to new data, even to potentially threatening data, by means of auxiliary hypotheses that helps to make research programs in the natural sciences seem progressive. Another sign of a progressive research program is its ability to predict novel facts. Of course, if novel facts are no longer predicted and the explanations of threatening data come to seem contrived and merely face-saving, then the research program would be judged, sooner by its critics than by its advocates, to be degenerating.

What is true in the natural sciences is no less true in the study of religion: the relationship between data and theoretical terms, including comparative categories, is exceedingly complex, as is the relation between data and research program.\textsuperscript{34} Most of the views we have discussed recognize this. We hold that determined recognition of complexity is the precondition for resisting the extremes of data-blind enthusiasm and theory-blind confusion. This acknowledgment also involves a discriminating appreciation of similarities and differences among the various kinds of inquiries we see around us. The subject matters of religious studies are very different from those of the natural sciences or economics or literature. Nevertheless, we hold that Lakatos's methodology of research programs, in its general outlines if not in its details, fairly describes the way effective inquiry works in any context from the natural sciences to the humanities and even to commonsense problem solving. The same characteristics are crucial: a conservative approach whereby a feasible hypothesis is relinquished reluctantly, conjoined with a sense of adventure that prizes vulnerability to correction by whatever means are available given the nature of the inquiry.

The generality of the theory of inquiry implied here was first appreciated by Charles S. Peirce and then by John Dewey.\textsuperscript{35} Peirce actually anticipated Lakatos in many details relevant to inquiry in the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{36} Peirce's more impressive achievements in this area, however, were his rich awareness of the complex relations between data and theory and his vision for extending a generalized theory of inquiry from the natural sciences all the way into the humanities and metaphysics. We share Peirce's basic intuition. We see no reason why the confusing data of religious ideas and practices cannot be given flexible interpretative structures that render them able not only to inspire but also to correct theories of religion and of religious topics such as the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth.

And what form, we ask, should such flexible interpretative structures—the analogues of theories of instrumentation and interpretation in the natural sciences—take? They should take the form of the provisional conclusions of the study of cross-cultural comparative religious ideas and practices, precisely what our project is producing. That is, we understand the comparative method we advocate as the first step toward a more effective approach to the generation and testing of theories of religion and religious topics, the analogue of theories of instrumentation and interpretation in the natural sciences. The categories
within which comparisons of religious ideas and practices take place are precisely the flexible means of organizing data that constructive theoretical efforts require.

Interpretative theories by which data are made available to more constructive theoretical ventures are interwoven with those larger theoretical ventures, even as theories of instrumentation are closely connected with the physical theories they serve. In section 7.1.1, we outlined some of the dimensions of this interweaving by parsing the justification of comparative generalizations into four requirements. Each corresponds to an impulse present in one or more the approaches to comparison that we have discussed. Any requirement alone is insufficient, however; coordination of these lines of justification is essential. We list them again here. There need to be (1) a delimiting of possibilities whereby plausible religious ideas of the sort relevant to the comparative generalization are identified; (2) an account of the dynamic logical connections among ideas; (3) a genetic analysis of specific symbolic representations of the religious ideas in question; and (4) analyses of the circumstances that accompany the key shift in symbolic representation during the history of the relevant religious ideas. To these must be added the basic phenomological point that our sense of what is similar, when carefully conditioned by scrupulous preparation and exposure to many variations, really should count as partial justification of comparative categories. These requirements indicate our indebtedness to standard commitments within both the history of religions and the philosophy of religion, and we shall list those debts more formally below (section 9.7). They are the tests by which we determine whether the data have been well organized by our comparative categories and thus whether the categories themselves are adequate. It is perfectly clear that these tests are theoretical endeavors related to the larger theories of religion and of religious themes for which comparative categories serve as the organizers and mediators of relevant data.

In connection with this, consider the theory of contingency outlined in chapter 7. It is intended to explain a relatively simple comparative point about ultimate realities, yet it does so by describing some stable abstract facts about the world that will be encountered in any cultural setting and thus will constrain any conceptual expressions and introduce dynamics of changing ideas. It is a partial and vague theory only, in the sense that it is compatible with a number of more detailed metaphysical theories that would specify the way these stable abstract facts about the world are encountered in practice. It is a theory nonetheless and one that helps justify the category of ultimate realities and a number of subsidiary categories used in this book. Of course, there would be objections. On the one hand, some critics would charge either that the theory of contingency is too abstract to be brought to bear on explanations of any comparative hypothesis or that it produces so many predictions that it will be immediately falsified. Either of those charges seems to us prima facie plausible, yet as a matter of fact we think that this theory beats the odds; it is a good theory that is fairly accurate and has been set in a methodological context wherein it can be improved as necessary. Moreover, if the theory of contingency holds water, then a basic characteristic of the world has been described in such a way that we are in a better position to notice the expressions of it variously modulated in the religions and cultures of the world. This would demonstrate the fruitfulness of the categories we propose. On the other hand, other critics would urge that our explanation is unduly disconnected with historical details. It is not an historical explanation, of course. Rather, it is one of the four types of explanation that jointly justify comparative categories, the third and fourth of which deal explicitly with historical contingencies and influences. Section 7.3.3 also indicates a theory of the third type as a contributor to the justification of our categories.

The theory of contingency thus helps to justify comparative categories and the comparisons they permit, and other kinds of arguments make their own, more historical contribution to the same task. With all of those lines of explanation and justification in place, our approach to comparison leads out in interesting directions: to the birth of systematic comparative metaphysics; to a strengthened, potentially progressive, multidisciplinary investigation of religious phenomena; and to a more unified approach to the study of religion that coordinates the approaches of the history of religion, the phenomenology of religion, and the philosophy of religion.

The Comparative Religious Ideas Project in which we are involved is primarily concerned with the preliminary task of organizing data by means of categories for comparison in a complex dialectical process—precisely as complex, in our experience, as the formation of a community of inquiry from differently minded scholars, including specialists and generalists. There have been forays into more adventurous theoretical efforts but that is secondary. We recognize and even celebrate that the comparative categories we use have been beggared, borrowed, or stolen from multiple sources, including early translations of sacred texts, all of the various sources mentioned previously in 9.2 through 9.4, and the creative intuition of project members. Comparison always begins in the middle of data-processing. Yet we also actively seek ways of correcting comparative categories in an effort to organize the data of religious ideas in the most natural, efficacious ways. In fact, we adopt a promissory attitude to correction, excluding a priori no source of potential wisdom,
grading sources according to their actual fruitfulness for making data relevant to the refinement of the comparative categories and the comparisons they permit. If our primary task goes well enough, then we will have created a powerful reason to think both that flexible structuring of the wild data of religious ideas is possible and that a more critical and data-aware form of theory building ought to be possible, soon if not immediately.

9.7 Learning from the Past

In closing, and by way of summary, we pause to recite our list of debts and corrections to existing comparative approaches.

First, comparativists borrowing categories from existing theories are exercising a kind of wisdom, we think. They are backing categories that are at least partially attested by the theory that articulates them and they seek in that way to extend the core theory itself to new tracts of data. That is why we can admire the perennial philosophers' dogged adherence to their interpretation of the world religions, for example. Without such fidelity to core hypotheses, even sometimes to the point of arbitrary handling of data, it is almost guaranteed that some special virtue of the core hypothesis will be overlooked. Such devotion to research programs is vital to the stability of interpretative theories. Without stability, vulnerability for the sake of progressive correction is impossible. From these laborers in our vineyards we learn to take good categories from wherever they may be found and to be unafraid of the need for persistence in testing any theory of religion against data. However, we seek a fairer and more flexible approach to the data itself.

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

Third, comparativists who try to maximize the virtue of empiricism in generating comparative categories from data are wisely recognizing that there must be some degree of self-conscious distance between the comparative task and the task of larger theory building in religious studies. From them we learn that categories are a middle-level beast. They help to organize data for the sake of big-deal theory construction yet they derive their justification more from their effectiveness of the data management they facilitate than from the theories that use them. However, we remain sharply aware of the problem pointed out by Jonathan Z. Smith of justifying comparative categories on the basis of apparent similarities in data. Our solution to this problem is the fourfold set of theories discussed above (section 9.6) in conjunction with an affirmation of the usefulness of phenomenological intuition of respects of similarity and difference, though only when the phenomenological imagination is properly prepared. We reaffirm Peirce’s insistence that categories derived from theory for classifying data need to be checked against independent phenomenological analyses of the data to determine their suitability.\(^3\)

Fourth, in addition to the important critique of intuitions of similarity just mentioned, Jonathan Z. Smith also argues that, at the date of his writing, there was no approach to comparison that produces or discovers, as against constructs, comparisons,\(^3\) and further that there was no satisfactory approach to comparison under discussion anywhere.\(^3\) We agree on the second point but demur, slightly, with regard to the first. We point out, using Smith's language, that nobody “has presented rules for the production of” discoveries in the domains of the natural sciences either, yet they happen. Moreover, we think both that the insights of well-trained describers and comparers of religions can be novel, at times, and that those insights can transcend the level of the flimsy associative connections that Smith rightly attacks. We agree, however, that this occurs more rarely than ought to be the case; its scarcity is because it is so difficult to acquire the competence that makes novel insights also profound ones. Our proposal helps, we think, by requiring less the genius of admirable comparative adepts and more scrupulous hard work. Many of the novel ideas that can be put into the dialectic of categories and data that we have described and enacted in our project may turn out to be of little use; certainly our project disposed of a lot more categories than it kept. Similarly, some categories and comparisons may never achieve the multifaceted justification on which we insist; it surely is a demanding standard for justification, after all. Those that do, however, can fairly be described as profound and, in at least some cases, novel. After that, discovery is a matter of learning to look in new situations for what worked elsewhere, tentatively extending the reach of the data-management web that comparative categories constitute, and always seeking the kinds of dissonance that should force revisions. We also believe that we have answered
Our Approach to Comparison

Smith's call for a comparative method that can escape the weakness of extant approaches.

Finally, we also take seriously the alternatives to explicit methodologies of comparison discussed in 9.2 by trying to incorporate their strengths into the corrective procedures of our own approach. This is present, for example, in the way that theoretical justifications for categories help to deconstruct assumptions about what seems obvious, even as simple judgments of similarity for all their dangers can also call forth theoretical efforts of justification—and all this for the sake of fidelity to the data. Nevertheless, we are explicit about the categories and the provisional results of comparisons, and here we enter our wager in favor of the loosely coordinated march of many feet, all contributing to the task of generating and improving comparative hypotheses in the way we propose. Our bet includes the gamble that the chaos will in time yield to something more like the organized frenzy of the natural and social sciences. We do see reasons to think that such a transformation will be difficult. After all, the forging of our project's community of inquiry has been a demanding, drawn-out process. And then there are the intimate existential entanglements that link comparatists to their subject matters in ways that do not occur for physical chemists. That is the nature of religion: its study is often profoundly self-referential. These difficulties notwithstanding, we see no reasons to think that our bet on the future of our approach to comparison must necessarily lose. On the contrary, especially because of its promise for aiding a more critical, data-aware era of theory-building in religious studies and comparative theology, we have every reason to be hopeful.

Notes

1. First-person pronouns usually refer to Wildman and Neville and references to other members of the project will be made explicit.

Wesley J. Wildman and Robert Cummings Neville


22. One of the most pervasive suppliers and reinforcers of comparative categories should be mentioned under this heading, though it is less systematic than any of the examples so far mentioned: the almost universally used classification system of the United States Library of Congress (see Library of Congress, *Library of Congress Classification Schedules: Class B, Subclasses BI, BM, BP, BQ. Religion: Religions, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism*, ed. Rita Runchlow and Kathleen Drose (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Processing Services, Subject Cataloguing Division, 1992)).


27. For one account of how neurophysiology might make such a contribution, see Wesley Wildman and Leslie A. Brothers, “A Neuropsychocological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences,” *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo Meyering, and Michael Arbib (Vatican City State and Berkeley, Calif.: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2000).

28. Important elements are mentioned in chapter 8, a summary and fuller account is furnished in several parts of *The Human Condition*, and a detailed
The Idea of Categories in Historical Comparative Perspective

John H. Berthrong

10.1 Introduction

The history of the development of categories and theories about categorial (categorial pertains to categories per se; categorical pertains to a quality of a category, such as Kant's categorical imperative) thinking is a vast topic, yet each history has a beginning as a product of human judgment about the world. Norwithstanding the vastness of the topic in space, ideas, and time, the notes included here with the volume on ultimate realities are not quite as random as they might appear at first glance. They were actually generated as part of the seminars on the six specific religious traditions. While the main topic under consideration was how adherents in the six cumulative religious traditions thought about ultimate realities, a subtheme for all the discussions was the role categories played in these traditions. How did each tradition deal with the second-order nature of categorial thinking? How did their theories of categories affect their reflections on the human predicament?

One of the most perplexing questions for anyone who considers the form of inquiry designated as the comparative study of religion is: What is to be compared? One of the things that became clear to our seminar was that we were, quite self-consciously, committed to the comparison of