Appendix A

On the Process of the Project During the Third Year

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Can a diverse group of scholars with very different backgrounds and training ever agree on anything crosscultural? In religious studies, we commonly see irreconcilable disagreement to the point of rancorous chaos or appreciation of insights to the point of undiscriminating indulgence. Skepticism about the prospects for solid consensus about crosscultural comparative judgments is understandable. Moreover, any claim that agreement about comparisons had been achieved would be deeply suspect. After all, serious agreement presupposes a high degree of cooperation among members of a group that is representatively diverse with regard to training and approach. But we all know that highly diverse groups of any sort famously cannot work together, except perhaps in the experimental sciences, in the armed forces, or where vast sums of money are involved. It follows that the chances are slim of ever putting together a diverse group of religious studies scholars who could still work together enough even to test whether they can agree about comparisons.

One of the exciting dimensions of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project is that it was conducted by just such a group—designed with high diversity yet, despite profound disagreements about how to approach the material under discussion, able to work together well enough both to generate comparisons that are vulnerable to correction and to get somewhere with actually correcting them. While the project’s objective output takes the form of three volumes, of which the present volume is the third,
the corporate dimension of the project is difficult to convey in publicly digestible form. We have been tempted not even to try; but a group process of the sort we have experienced is essential to the methodology of the project and leaving out a faithful description and analysis of that process would seriously distort the account of our results offered in these volumes. In an appendix to each volume, therefore, I have tried to convey something of the character of our group process in order to illumine our method from angles other than those that dominate the rest of each volume. The three appendices can be read together but each makes sense by itself. Each is an analysis of one year in the life of the project, written from the point of view of the project's endpoint. This last installment covers the third year's meetings and the continuation of the work into the fourth year as we met in conference with our advisors and as the editing tasks proceeded. I refer to participants listed as contributors to this volume by their given names, which was our practice during seminar meetings.

At the Beginning of a Third Year

The third year's beginning was quite different from those of the previous two years of the project for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, our project meetings held few surprises after having done it sixteen times so the expectation of hard work was a larger factor in everyone's minds than curiosity about how our discussions would develop. On the other hand, we were all deeply involved in writing and rewriting the draft chapters for the first and second volumes. The pleasure at seeing each other again at the first meeting was thus complicated by the awareness of how exhausting the effort of learning so much new material and the process of mutual criticism would continue to be. The expectation of hard work in familiar circumstances brought with it a certain comfort, however, as did seeing one another again.

The group was identical to that of the second year. A new configuration of faculty leaves led us, as in year two, to select a schedule that would minimize absences at project seminar meetings. The research students were further along in their own studies, most teaching on the side, writing dissertations, and looking for jobs; each was enormously busy in just the ways that graduate students inevitably are expected to be.

The first two seminar meetings of the year were held on consecutive days at the Boston Research Institute for the Twenty-First Century, in Cambridge. There, after warm greetings and fine breakfast food, we began by discussing the future of the project. Bob gave his reasons for not applying for another three years of grant money, resolving a question that had been asked from the beginning. With regard to the testing and
enhancement of the comparative method, another three years were not really needed. With regard to using the method to generate stable cross-cultural comparative categories, the work was almost infinite in scope and it was not at all clear that we ought to be the ones to press further ahead with it. Together with consideration for everyone’s time and energy, these factors suggested that ending the project after three years, allowing for an advisors’ conference in the fourth year, would be the most effective use of the sponsors’ money and best for everyone involved. My impression is that the knowledge that there would be a firm schedule for completion of the entire project helped energize us all for the final year’s effort.

The first meeting then yielded to intensive discussions of the existing drafts of the first two volumes. There was no trouble whatsoever in filling an entire day with feedback, comments, debates over organization and emphasis, and reevaluations of certain categories. In the afternoon we finally settled on the major categories that were to guide the specialists’ chapters for volume two on Ultimate Realities, having spent the previous year discussing that theme. The care with which these decisions were conducted and the group’s fidelity to the goal of discerning the primary categories from out of the swirling hours of debate and mutual correction cannot be overstressed. It is hard to imagine how we could be any more empirically grounded given the basic limitation that we were studying not chemistry in a laboratory but religious ideas in texts.

The second and subsequent meetings followed the usual pattern. Each day, two specialists would make a presentation of a draft of their papers on religious truth, aiming to describe how religious truth is thought of within their traditions. Respondents were assigned in order to focus the ensuing discussion. We also followed the same daily schedule of four ninety-minute sessions separated by two 30-minute breaks and an hour-long lunch. Our project was on the home stretch.

Religious Truth

There was an important difference between the way the categories for religious truth were arrived at and the way categories were figured out for previous years. Rather than waiting until after each year’s discussions were complete before attempting to infer what categories had finally bubbled to the top of the cauldron of discussion, we began year three with a clear sense of what categories were important for the elucidation of religious truth across the traditions we were studying. Specifically, we needed to consider the three-fold distinction among philosophical truth, scriptural truth, and truth in practice, all three of which tended to recur in the ideas of our religious traditions with a colorful variety of emphases.
It is not that the empirical commitment of our proceedings had somehow been violated. On the contrary, these categories had emerged in the previous years as we grappled with the human condition and ultimate realities; the topic of religious truth just kept coming up. Each time it resurfaced, we would take care to distinguish ideas having to do with religious truth from those bearing on the topic for the current year. In this way we developed some useful distinctions for making clear what was important to our various traditions about religious truth and we also generated a strong consensus around the three-fold distinction just mentioned. This was particularly pleasing because it showed that the intertwining of the major categories for our project did not need to hinder our work but actually could make it more efficient.

The theme of justification of our categories was broached in the appendix to the second volume on *Ultimate Realities* and it was just as large a concern in the minds of the generalists in the third year. Having seen in previous years the need for openness about the role of philosophical ideas, we were determined to be clear on that point from the beginning and also to try to be as self-aware as possible of the multiple lines of argument that flow together to justify a set of categories. At the same time, our discussions of religious truth moved comfortably from questions of philosophical presuppositions and justification of categories to the detailed analyses of religious traditions, texts, and practices—and back again. The dialectic of vagueness and specificity described in a number of places in the three volumes was operating more smoothly than ever. The specialists’ essays, especially the revised drafts that guided our discussions in the second half of the year, were more adventurous in the making of comparisons, on the whole, than in previous years. They were also more compatible with one another in terms of the scope of coverage of each tradition. Both changes improved the prospects of drawing meaningful conclusions from the specialists’ work.

To my mind, all of these developments demonstrate that it really is possible for a diverse group of religious studies scholars to teach each other both how to think outside of the boundaries set by training and familiarity—be it learning tradition-specific details or by venturing comparisons—and how to contribute to a larger project that no one of us could have managed alone.

The Concluding Conference

As the third year drew to a close, we turned our attention to completing the drafts of all three volumes. During the fall of the fourth year, we met
to discuss the evolving drafts and to make needed adjustments. During the Christmas break of the fourth year, drafts of the volumes (at various stages of refinement) finally became available. The three volumes were then sent out to a number of prominent scholars in religious studies for their comments. These scholars were invited to join the project members and advisors in a conference in the Spring of the fourth year (May, 1999). The aim of the conference was for project members to have the opportunity to take account of as diverse an array of criticisms and suggestions as possible, with a view to improving the final drafts.

Many changes were made before the volumes reached their published forms. Some of these changes were structural, some were matters of emphasis and rhetoric, and some were corrections of factual details or omissions. Most were indebted in one way or another to the discussions that took place at the concluding conference. I think it is fair to say that project members were slightly nervous prior to the conference because a project such as ours is complex enough to make it easy to misunderstand as well as politically somewhat incorrect given the skepticism about comparison that seems to abound in the religious studies academy at the present time. Scholars also get nervous when they move out of the regions of their demonstrated expertise into the strange new lands of the expertise of others—and everyone in our project had made that unsettling journey to various degrees. The drive of our project toward vulnerability and improvement was expressed perhaps most tangibly in the determination to learn as much as possible from our advisors and guest critics, despite the natural discomfort at having our adventurous attempts at scholarly collaboration scrutinized so closely. But the goal of vulnerability to correction is vain talk if it cannot be given this sort of existentially daunting translation into encounters with serious feedback.

The conference was held in the Boston University School of Management in lovely surroundings. As always, the food was wonderful, which takes me back to the importance of food in bringing and holding our motley group together, a topic on which I mused briefly in the appendix to the first volume on *The Human Condition*. Each of the visiting scholars was assigned the task of responding to various aspects of the project. Each helped us understand the project from his or her own distinctive point of view. Even though those points of view were utterly familiar from our own group discussions, there is something refreshing about being in the presence of someone who holds it and uses it to evaluate our corporate efforts. In particular, it was driven home to all of the project members how large was the gap between the rich diversity of our seminar discussions and the relatively focused presentations of our work in the three volumes. Almost everything anyone ever thought in religious studies
came up in one form or another over the course of four years in those two hundred hours of seminar meetings or in the manifold discussions outside the formal seminar meeting days. Yet only a fraction of that rich awareness of the world of religious studies was registered in the volumes.

The reminder of this difference between the internal and external points of view on our project was mildly unnerving. We knew it would be difficult to communicate effectively with the ranks of religious studies scholars who are delicately attuned to issues that receive little coverage in the volumes even though we talked about them in our seminar meetings all the time—issues such as the need for power analyses of religious histories and texts, the question of fair treatment of the other in the broiling aftermath of colonialism, the critique of the quest for master narratives to guide the interpretation of religious ideas and practices, or the need for awareness of the subtle and not-so-subtle influences on our research of our own religious convictions and scholarly habits. We could not constantly apologize for not covering other important questions, however, but had to plunge ahead with the important questions that we had committed ourselves to investigate. Perhaps it is fair to say, then, that this aspect of the final conference drove home to us the impossibility of controlling the readings that the volumes would receive and so catalyzed in us a simple determination to express what we did cover as well as we possibly could.

The visiting scholars and advisors at the conference were anxious for us to convey to readers how the method we used actually worked in practice. The expositions of it in the various volumes have an abstract philosophical orientation, even when they are pared back for the sake of ready understanding. As mentioned in the appendix to the first volume on The Human Condition, this was an issue that our group debated back and forth almost from the beginning. On the one hand, it is pointless trying to recreate in a book the process by which the results were achieved; most readers would be bored by that anyway and likely to find the references to group process distracting and self-indulgent. On the other hand, the project is devoted in part to the implementation and refinement of a method for detecting and justifying comparative categories and the social process is so important a part of that that any reader interested in the method would be justly frustrated if no account if it were furnished. As a group, project members had eventually decided against making the attempt to convey anything about the process but we were urged to change our minds at the conference. The insistence on the importance of making the group process at least somewhat transparent was heartwarming; at least these careful readers had grasped the methodological innovations of our procedure. Yet we still had no idea how to satisfy their demand for some
degree of transparency. After much hand wringing and puzzling, these appendices were deemed to be the optimal way to proceed but there is only so much they can convey and we are sharply aware of their limitations.

As to the method itself, the visiting scholars at the conference were both appreciative and ready with suggestions, of which I mention but two here. First, we were urged to consider how our own approach to comparison relates to the approaches to comparison in play in other cultural-intellectual contexts. We had set out to track this angle on comparative method right from the beginning but simply had to let it go because we had too much else to do. We returned to it now and then, as when we studied South Asian philosophy’s pramāṇa theory and the Indian practice of interreligious debates before powerful benefactors, but we could not give the issue the focused attention that it deserved.

Second, we were challenged to treat the thesis of incommensurability more seriously rather than simply blocking the extreme versions of it with obvious appeals to biological continuity of humanity across cultures, thereby evading the complexities of the middle ground. Of course, in the first volume on The Human Condition we had taken full advantage of the so-called phenomenological sites of importance in which the complexities associated with translation and interpreting the other are thematized in powerful ways. But that way of presenting our conclusions fell away after the first volume (though not in our seminar discussions) because there was too much to manage. Nevertheless, our commentators forced a number of significant changes in the final versions of the three volumes as we attempted to register more fully the complexities of this issue.

With regard to the results of our research, our scholarly advisors and critics were again appreciative without being short on suggestions. Two issues will suffice as a representative sample of a great many comments. We were invited to consider the arbitrariness of the categories that name the three volumes. This we were happy to do; there are a number of comments in the three volumes in which this acknowledgement is clear. Yet we also wanted to push back, claiming that our own results rather strongly confirmed these categories (we called them the “big three”) as applicable to all of our traditions and helpfully illuminating. Alternative “big” categories were suggested but our list of alternatives was already comically long. Perhaps the most forceful criticism under the heading of results concerned the near absence of ethical considerations in the three volumes. Of course, there is actually rather a lot about ethical matters in our work but there is no centralizing of ethical categories in the second and third volumes. I think we all wondered about that from time to time. My reading is that we had a natural way of dealing with ethics under the heading of the human condition but that too many normative questions
had to begged if ethical categories were to be introduced under the en-
compassing categories of ultimate realities or religious truth. In other
words, ethical categories would tend to be distorting, which is a sign of
their not being really basic. Though I see a conclusion rather than merely
an omission in this treatment of ethics, I am not confident that this con-
clusion would command consensus in our group as a whole were we to
discuss the issue.

In all, the conference was an informative and challenging experience
for project members. We were left with a wealth of insights by which our
final revisions could be guided and a debt of gratitude to the men and
women who spent good hours from their lives laboring over our work.

Looking toward the Future

The conference was the last time we were together as a group. There was
rewriting to be done, of course, and ad hoc meetings in twos and threes
to facilitate that. And we still regularly ran into each other at meetings
or, for locals, in elevators. That said, I miss everyone. It is not that any-
one wanted to continue on—heaven forefend! I suspect that we are all re-
lieved to be done with the project; for my part, I derive considerable
pleasure from the realization that I need write no more notes for project
seminars and no more chapters or appendices for project books. It is
rather because of interrupted habits of rhythmic discussion, writing, and
eating that I miss everyone. I hazard that in this I am typical, which if cor-
rect would be a tangible reminder of the way our comparative method
works: it really does forge a community of inquirers guided by habits of
communication and mutual criticism, a community capable of tolerating
both frustration with the process and the life changes that affect us all
over time.

Such a community includes personal dimensions well as professional
ones. We had tried to estimate at the beginning the odds of one of our
number dying sometime during the course of the project—I believe one of
our advisors, Max Stackhouse, brought this possibility to our attention.
Well, nobody died but we had one departure, some nasty diseases, several
traumas to limbs, at least two job placements, a tenure case, many book
publications, new relationships, and two babies. All that and nineteen
lives of teaching and learning parallel to everything we did in the project.

With this multi-faceted image of corporate scholarly life in place, we
come to a glance forwards into the future of the study of religion. If we are
right, comparative efforts will go best when diverse groups of scholars
commit themselves to the complex joys and frustrations, the attachments
and confusions of collaborative work. A few comparative geniuses may
not need the help. For the rest of us, moving beyond the randomly associative aha! approach to comparison in the direction of producing sturdy justifications of comparative categories is possible only with collaboration. Successful collaboration permits the growth of the kind of serious dialectic of vagueness and specificity that we sought to achieve and that we contend is needed to keep the generalizations of comparative categories in touch with the details of traditions and texts. Many sorts of research in religious studies need not have this collaborative aspect but rigorous comparison probably requires it.

As an investment in this future, the project was designed from the outset as a training ground for graduate students, of which we had the honor of working with seven at various times—eight, if we include the project administrator, and another ten if we include those who worked on the bibliographies. For those working with the six specialist scholars and attending all of the meetings, the aim was to inspire or perhaps to infect them with indelible memories of collaborative work. We also wanted them to experience first hand the virtues and discomforts of trying to transcend disciplinary boundaries in the name of curiosity about complex realities that do not conform neatly to academic fields. Those graduate students already have or will soon have teaching positions and so take their experiences on to other places and people. Every bit as much as the three project volumes, these men and women represent our investment in a collaborative vision of scholarly research in religious studies.

Meanwhile, the volumes themselves will be read and discussed, praised and criticized. The attempt to make our work vulnerable to correction means first that we make our case as strongly as we possibly can, perhaps even risking the mistaken impression that we don’t really want any feedback. Then we pay close attention to responses with a view to discerning how our position can be improved or perhaps even whether it needs to be abandoned. The process of correction and improvement is not just our task, however, but also the task of scholars who engage our work and attempt to improve on it or fight against it in all of the ways that these responses are played out in academic circles.

Our collaborative group is now dispersed, with vacant spaces where once stood habits of work, and with relief to be regaining the time to pursue other scholarly ventures. But our efforts are meant to change the way comparison is done, both in terms of the way comparison is conceived in the minds of individual scholars and in terms of the hoped-for emergence of other scholarly groups who value collaboration as the optimal context for rigorous comparison of religious ideas. We can only hope that these anticipated groups will enjoy the fun, frustration, and quality of food and companionship that has brought such color into our lives for the last four years.