On the Nature of Religion

Lessons We Have Learned

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The Comparative Religious Ideas Project has not been about religion, as such, but rather about literate religious ideas. That leaves out a lot, from religious practices to tribal religions lacking an extensive literature of ideas, as well as other cultural phenomena with a religious character yet not closely associated with religious texts. Nevertheless, there are a number of implications for the understanding of religion embedded in the project's work. The task of this chapter is to tease out these implications.

Two motivations are especially important as we consider this subject. First, to avoid misunderstanding, it is important to be clear about what can and cannot be inferred from the project's research with regard to controversial issues such as the nature or the identification of religion as such. Second, and more constructively, we (Wildman and Neville) think that the project's conclusions imply hypotheses that can be tested in future attempts to formulate theories both about particular religious ideas (such as the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth) and about the nature of religion as such. These hypotheses should be stated clearly as a way to expose the results of the project to discussion and correction.
Our observations are organized into four sections. First, we have a number of general comments about the nature of religion that are especially pertinent to its complex nature and the resulting complexities of its study, which is of course what we have been grappling with in this project for a number of years. Second, we shall offer some more specific comments about the nature of religion that emerge from the attempts we have made to construct (incomplete) theories about various aspects of religion. Third, we have comments on the nature of religion in respect of the relation between comparison and theory building. Finally, we make two conjectures, one concerning whether categories for comparison determine theories of various aspects of religion (such as religious truth), and the other concerning the possibility of constructing an overall theory of religion based on the results of systematic comparison.

9.1 Remarks on Our Experience of Studying Religion

Religion has been studied in many times and places, and in many ways, with an intriguing result. There is a proliferation of definitions of religion and few who have studied it are willing to fall on their swords (or knitting needles) for any one of them, even for a definition they themselves advocate. Why is this? Simply stated, religion is enormously complicated. Few generalizations survive scrutiny. Even the point of making generalizations can seem obscure after sufficient exposure to the details. As in the study of history, it seems, details are everything in the study of religion. Our project's work amply confirmed this feature of religion. In fact, it did so in several quite specific ways that bear simultaneously on the study of religion and the nature of religion.

First, if the point of generalizations in the study of religion can be rendered obscure by the masses of details relevant to testing them, then comparative generalizations about religious phenomena might wisely be avoided. This is one of the reasons so many scholars are skittish about comparison in religion. Surely they are wise to be cautious. Yet in working together our project members confirmed an impression already formed from familiarity with the literature: we frequently make comparisons about religious phenomena even when we are not explicit about doing so. Comparing is a fundamental element of human rationality, especially where making sense of a lot of context-dependent details is needed. Even the apparently innocent move to call a particular religious activity a "ritual" is actually to classify and thus to make the comparative judgments of similarity and class membership that underlie all classifications. Comparison is extremely common in the study of religion.
Being in it up to our necks, we would do well to be self-conscious about it so as to do it as fairly and competently as possible—and to avoid being swallowed up in the confusion that results from lack of awareness about scholarly procedures.

The facts that comparison is unavoidable and that religion is complicated jointly have determined the task of our project. It is precisely in recognition of the complexity of religion, not in defiance of it, that we have advanced, used, and tested a sophisticated theory of comparison. Moreover, the character of that theory of comparison reflects our unanimous impression that it is genuinely difficult to produce stable generalizations about religious phenomena. How so? The details of religious phenomena make any comparative generalization so precarious that it can only survive if it is vaguer than the phenomena compared by means of it. Details that might destroy an overly specific generalization can be regarded as specifications of carefully constructed, but vague, comparative generalizations. This is not a strategy to protect comparative judgments from immediate falsification by the data of religious studies. Rather, it is in the very nature of the case that the only kinds of comparisons that can be rendered stable in the study of religion are comparisons of this vague sort. In other words, the theory of comparison being tested in our project is a theory developed in recognition of the complexity of religious phenomena.

Second, studying the crystal structure of quartz using the tools of X-ray crystallography and analytical chemistry is usually an existentially uncomplicated matter. By contrast, religion is complicated in a special way that makes its study existentially tricky. Religion makes claims on and about people who study it in a way that quartz does not. Moreover, trying to take those claims seriously necessarily involves taking up a posture toward the fact that they are about us. For example, to study a religious text in which a disciple is portrayed as learning from a master that understanding of any sort is only possible through the cultivation of a special capacity to see reality rightly, beyond the limits of conventional seeing, is to pose an intense difficulty for the scholar of religion. How can such a text be taken as seriously as it demands when it is studied merely in the dispassionate scholarly mode? And how can such a text be meaningfully compared with other religious attitudes to spiritually enlightened knowledge unless all such texts can be taken with the seriousness demanded by the account of understanding they offer? The problem goes beyond existential self-reference of this specifically epistemological sort. Almost all religious texts invite, even demand, particular attitudes in their study and most religious ideas implicite the one who thinks about them in ways that reach far beyond the scholarly role.
Surely this conundrum is one of the reasons that it simply has not occurred to most people in most cultures through most of history to make what we now call religious phenomena the objects of study. We found instances of interest in comparing certain aspects of religions in all of the traditions we studied—least of all in Judaism but even there the divine covenant with Noah is interpreted at times as relevant to the understanding of non-Jewish people. Nonetheless, comparative religion has been of most interest in the West, specifically among Christians, and most recently a fascination of the Western academy. How is the dimension of the complexity of religion that bears on existential self-referentiality handled in our project, which is an instance of the Western academy’s interest in the study of religion? This is a problem upon which we reflected several times in our project without coming to a satisfactory solution. The Western academic model for comparing religious phenomena is quite simply limited. It is conceivable that we did in fact miss out on important insights because our group did not meditate together or try to achieve the conventionality-transcending ways of understanding promised in so many texts. We were forced to rest content with the hope that our distinctively Western form of partiality—which includes the claim to impartiality and strategies for achieving it—would have special virtues that might make our project valuable in spite of everything it did not and could not achieve.

Third, the importance of complex details in religion showed up in another way in the course of our project. The first volume, *The Human Condition*, made explicit use of five phenomenological sites of importance as a rubric for describing religious phenomena that was designed to ensure that those descriptions would be properly balanced. The second and third volumes did not make explicit use of that rubric but the awareness of its importance stayed with us. The vital contribution of the phenomenological sites of importance was to help us express our awareness of the complexity of religion with respect to the various points of view from which the significance of religious phenomena can be appreciated. Phenomenological sites of importance are relevant to describing realities beyond the borders of the religious but they are especially important in religion.

The first four sites of phenomenological importance are: (1) the intrinsic, which involves expressing and analyzing ideas in their own terms; (2) the perspectival, which concerns the ways that religious ideas determine a larger perspective on life; (3) the theoretical, by which we mean the ways that the ideas lead to larger theoretical considerations; and (4) the practical, which has to do with the implications of the religious ideas for practice. Each of these sites is an important part of properly thick descriptions of religious ideas and we tried to register all of
them throughout our project with varying degrees of success. The fifth
site deserves special mention. It is the singularity of religious phenomena,
the special qualities that cannot be analyzed or compared. The only way
to get at religious ideas and practices in their singularity is to become
competent in their use, which in the case of ideas superficially involves
mastery of metaphor and other forms of indirection used in the special
social-linguistic context within which the achievement of mastery is fos-
tered. More profoundly it involves engaging putatively religious realities
to see whether truth is quickened. It follows that not everything in reli-
gious phenomena can be brought to the discussion table and made the
object of comparative generalizations. Our project has been keenly
aware that our comparative efforts have been both limited by ideas con-
sidered as singular and complicated by the diversity of phenomenological
sites that are relevant to expressing them.

By way of summary then, the complexity of religious phenomena has
been registered in our project in a variety of ways. One sort of complex-
ity is associated with masses of details, another with the unavoidability of
vagueness in comparisons, and still another with the conundrums of ex-
sistential self-reference. Then there is the complexity associated with the
various dimensions of the importance of religious phenomena expressed
in the phenomenological sites, and finally the singular quality of religious
phenomena in respect of which they cannot be brought into the domains
of analysis and comparison. Our project has grappled with each of these
dimensions of the complexity of religion quite self-consciously, though
with varying degrees of success.

Having admitted the complexities that limit comparison, we should
not fail to stress that we have in fact articulated and explored a number
of important comparisons throughout the three volumes. On the one
hand, these are all hypotheses about comparison, asking for further pro-
bation. On the other, they have been made stable by the challenges we
have given them. Some of our comparisons are merely vague, especially
in The Human Condition where we specified similarities and differences
according to grids that mark out the details of the sites of phenomenolog-
ical importance. Others have been framed vaguely and then specified in
detail through cumulative discussions; these are found primarily in the
specialists’ chapters when they are read sequentially through the three
volumes, for instance, the three treatments of Chinese religion, the three
of Islam, and so forth. Yet other comparisons combine both the vague
articulations and the specific filling in of detail with analyses of how these
add up to say something about the human condition, ultimate realities,
and religious truth. These last are found mainly in our (Wildman and Ne-
ville) reflective chapters in each volume.
9.2 Remarks on Our Construction of Theories of Aspects of Religion

In this volume and the previous one, *Ultimate Realities*, we (Neville and Wildman) made an attempt to develop theories of aspects of religion, though not of religion as a whole. These theories remain incomplete, of course, and their elaboration was not our main concern. Nevertheless, they are important for justifying comparative categories and we gave a fair bit of thought to them. In the process, we noticed that certain well-known features of religion had to be addressed. These features are usually registered in two famously distinguished strands within the study of religion and so we have come to think of our comparison-based approach to theory building in religion as a synthesis of these existing approaches.

First, many sorts of philosophy of religion, comparative mythology, and Jungian or other archetype approaches to religion, lift up a fundamental feature of religion, and especially of religious ideas: religion is not entirely conventional. Religious ideas are many and varied, to be sure, and their meanings are strongly dependent on cultural context, but they are not arbitrary. There is something about the way the world shows up religiously to people across cultures and history that invites certain religious ideas and not others. Ultimate reality has never been thought of by any major religious tradition as seventy-three dimensional, as a beat-up yellow Volkswagen, as more blue than red, or as a lot like sliced pineapple. It is not that these ideas could never be used for ultimate reality, just that they are never likely to catch on. Moreover, there are important similarities in ideas of ultimate reality, as expressed in the comparative generalizations of *Ultimate Realities*. Likewise, there are significant similarities in ideas of the human condition and religious truth, as seen in the first volume on *The Human Condition*, and in this volume.

The givenness of religion is not, therefore, merely a matter of Durkheimian codification of ultimate social commitments that is then objectified in social processes and encountered as something capable of molding our imaginations and experiences. That process occurs, as the sociology of knowledge has amply demonstrated, but the givenness of religion also appears to involve culturally transcendent or invariant features. Another way of saying this is that there is a feedback mechanism capable of correcting ideas about religious realities in the long term. It is not much like the strong feedback mechanism relied on in scientific experimentation, nor does it seem capable of forcing adjustments in all religious ideas. Nevertheless, a weak and partial feedback mechanism does seem to be operative. How this is to be explained is a matter for philosophers, theologians, or psychologists—and many have tried in the
history of the study of religion. For our purposes, the main point is not
to explain it but to allow this genuine feature of religion to be registered
properly in our work.

In practice, the givenness of religion has shown up in two ways in the
course of the project. The first is in the comparative conclusions that we
have drawn about the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious
truth. Such conclusions cannot seriously be thought of merely as contingen-
t structural similarities among utterly conventional cultural-religious
ideas, though they are certainly culturally dependent and conventional. It
is the patterns among these similarities that make the “merely conven-
tional” line of explanation for them implausible. This has been noticed
repeatedly in the history of the study of religion; archetype theories of re-
ligion get that much correct even if they neglect the proper roles of histor-
ical contingencies and cultural conventionality. The second way the gi-
venness of religion shows up in our project is in the justification of
comparative categories, which relies heavily not just on phenomenologi-
cal considerations but also on theoretical articulations of what is possible
with regard to religious ideas of any particular sort. For example, with
regard to ultimate realities in the second volume, we (Neville and Wild-
man) argued that the possible ideas range from ontological ultimates to
ultimate ways and from personal gods to impersonal principles. More-
over, we argued that certain transformations of symbolic expressions of
those ideas are also inherently likely, as when an emphasis on personal
symbolizations of ultimacy evokes balancing, non-personal symboliza-
tions, and vice versa. Which of the possible ideas is realized in any given
cultural context, and which transformation is sponsored by any histori-
cal circumstance, is a matter of contingent influences both external and
internal to the religious tradition. But the givenness of religion is present
in the structuring of possibilities for symbolization of ultimate realities.

Second, the history of religions approach has tended to explain any
particular configuration of ideas in a cultural-religious setting in terms of
influences and contingencies, ranging from geography to weather pat-
terns and from trade routes to invasions. This surely reflects a genuine
characteristic of religion: religious phenomena are highly dependent on
every kind of context, on historical contingencies, and on raw chance.
Our awareness of this feature of religion shows up as the balance side to
the feature just called “givenness” above. For instance, in justifying com-
parative categories, the reason why any of a wide range of possible ideas
is realized in any particular place and time is to be explained not by ap-
peal to the givenness of religion but in terms of contingencies. Likewise,
even if patterns of possible change can be expressed in theoretical terms
independently of any particular cultural-religious context, actual changes
within the matrix of the possible dynamics of religious ideas require explanation in terms of concrete circumstances and cultural contingencies. All of this is reflected in our theory of religious truth in chapter 8.

The givenness and the contingency of religious ideas are both indispensable in justifications of comparative generalizations. In this way, theories of aspects of religion based on the comparative procedure we defend synthesize the two main explanatory traditions within the study of religion: those that focus on givenness such as philosophy of religion and comparative mythology and those that stress contingency such as the history of religion. There is no need to separate these traditions within the study of religion because they complement each other, as we hope we have begun to show in this volume. Nor is there any need to oppose these approaches to the tradition of the phenomenology of religion, with its emphasis on description rather than explanation. Thick phenomenological descriptions, paying attention to the sites of importance previously discussed, are the condition for the possibility of comparative judgments even as those judgments must in the end also be supported by explanatory theories drawing on the givenness and the contingency of religious phenomena.

How might we think of givenness in religion so as to avoid the suggestion that phenomena are given in some pure or uninterpreted state, such as the logical positivists supposed about sense data? Likewise, how might we speak of contingency in religion so as to avoid the suggestion that conventions are merely contingent and arbitrary, that they are only "about" other conventions with no reference? If we might be pardoned a linguistic barbarism, the combination of attention to givenness and contingency in the reflective comparative study of religious ideas might best be called a complex analysis of religious "takenness." We study how different traditions "take" the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth. This supposes that the subject matters are "real," but not identified except through contingent conventions. It supposes also that the conventions are historically and contextually contingent, and yet not wholly arbitrary. Religious conventions, like those in agriculture and warfare, arise through the engagements of life, even if they do not have the strong feedback mechanisms of modern science. The critique of the "myth of the given" does not apply against our procedure of supposing that religions "take" real aspects of existence by means of their conventional signs and practices. Nor can our approach to religion be charged with epistemic solipsism just because we recognize that it is interpreted in being "taken"; religious ideas could not be said to be true or false, faithful or foolish in directing practice, unless they are supposed to refer. Once this point is appreciated, the barbarism of "takenness" can be expunged.
Our attempts to acknowledge and combine those disciplines that build upon givenness and those that emphasize contingency by construing religious ideas to take their objects to be such and so, admitting the complexity of identifying the objects, are consistent with the theory of truth defended earlier. It follows from the emphasis on engagement. It is also consistent with the theory of comparative categories detailed in *Ultimate Realities*, and with how religions frequently construe the dimensions of truth in their own affirmations and practices.

9.3 Remarks on the Relation between Comparison and Theory Building

This chapter so far has focused on general observations about how our project has expressed and taken account of certain features of religious phenomena. More specific issues are driven into the open by our contention that comparative categories are justified not only on the basis of phenomenological descriptions but also by theoretical ventures. The issues can be encapsulated in the form of a deceptively simple question: What is the relation between comparison and theory building in religion? On the face of it, this question may seem strange, perhaps bordering on a category mistake owing to the intuition that comparison and theory building are only distantly related intellectual activities. We (Wildman and Neville) believe the project has shown that there are at least two ways in which the relation between comparing and theory building is quite intimate.

First, comparative categories in our procedure are justified in the first instance by judgments of similarity or dissimilarity based on rich phenomenological descriptions. Subsequently, justification calls for theoretical ventures of four sorts: articulations of (1) what is possible with regard to religious ideas, (2) what is possible with regard to the dynamics of religious-idea change, (3) what contingencies in fact caused certain ideas to be realized rather than other possibilities, and (4) what contingencies in fact caused certain dynamics of religious-idea change to be realized rather than other possibilities. The first two derive from the feature of religion called “givenness” above, while the second two derive from the feature of religion called “contingency.” Comparison can proceed without these theoretical justifications, of course; anyone can make comparisons about anything. As we argued in *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 9, however, without such theoretical forms of justification, comparative generalizations are always in danger of the arbitrariness that plagues judgments of similarity. Virtually any two things are similar in some respect. The trick
in successful comparison is to find the respects of comparison that disclose what is important about the phenomena being compared. Respects of comparison are nothing other than comparative categories and the best comparative categories are those for which complex theoretical justifications of these four sorts can be offered.

The problem of arbitrariness in comparison of religious phenomena is also addressed in our approach by the way in which the dual justification of comparative categories by means of phenomenology and theory renders our comparative generalizations vulnerable to correction in specific, detailed ways. That is, the complex yet explicit justification for our comparative category of religious truth in this volume makes it clear what someone would have to do to challenge it. This is a great improvement over the all-too-familiar situation of comparative generalizations that can never be pinned down specifically enough to see what would be required to overthrow them as inadequate. Thus, the connection between comparing and theory-building in the study of religion is not only close, it is also important for overcoming one of the great weaknesses in the comparative study of religion to date.

Second, there is another kind of connection between comparing and theory building in religious studies. Because of the enormous complexity of religious phenomena, efforts to give explanations for them are immediately swamped with data, with the result that arbitrariness in constructive efforts becomes an insurmountable problem. Anyone can advance a theory that makes sense of some of the data but the hordes of exceptions and the masses of unaanalyzed data lead to lame or face-saving theoretical excuses, or else are simply ignored. What is needed is a way to organize the data of religion so that what is more important for building theories of religious phenomena can be distinguished from what is less important, and so that theories can be made more clearly vulnerable to the data they intend to explain. In the natural sciences, such data-organizing theories are called theories of instrumentation. In the study of religion, the analogues of theories of instrumentation are produced in the process of comparison in the form that we have described and tested it in this project.

Comparative categories, when carefully justified from as many angles as possible, offer a flexible organization of the data of religion, as we (Wildman and Neville) argued in *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 9. This organization makes explicit the theory-laden character of the data of religion, which makes for greater accountability of both comparativists and theory builders. The flexibility of this comparison-based method of data organization follows from what has been said above about the vulnerability to correction of properly justified comparative categories. The end result remains something of a pipe dream, but it is one that we have
begun to explore. Theory construction in religion is far less arbitrary and far more vulnerable to improvement when it proceeds on the basis of data organized by means of a process of comparison, in our sense. It involves the work of many people, to be sure, and corrections in data organization by comparativists might force messy changes in the work of religious theorists. The conjecture, for which we (Wildman and Neville) argued at greater length in *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 9, is that this messy process will not be utterly chaotic and uncontrolled but, in the long term, more akin to the organized chaos of the natural or perhaps the social sciences. The key to such a transformation in the study of religion is the provisional embrace of a theory of comparison—a theory that we take to be the most adequate extant offering but that stands ready to be improved by subsequent insights.

9.4 Conjectures on Comparison and Theories of Religion

Having advanced an audacious conjecture about the future of the study of religion, we conclude with two more, both bearing on the relation between comparison and theories of religion, and each an answer to a question.

First, do well-established comparative categories determine theories of aspects of religion? For example, once a significant amount of comparative work has rendered the category of religious truth stable and well justified, do we then automatically have a theory of religious truth? Our conjecture is that we do: a well-established comparative category determines at least a partial theory about the topic of that category. The reason for this is that the process of justifying the comparative category involves theories of the sort previously discussed in 9.3. A full theory of religious truth doubtless would cover more than the two basically philosophical and the two basically historical aspects of the theoretical justification of religious truth as an adequate comparative category. But the theoretical adventures involved in justifying the comparative category certainly give any more general theory of religious truth a flying start.

The more general theory also would inherit helpful structural features from the part-theory generated in the process of justifying the comparative category in question. For example, the part-theory is already structured by the dialectic of vagueness and specificity (described in numerous places in the project’s publications). This allows various sorts of religious truth to be distinguished and coordinated as specifications of religious truth more generally. The result is that a hierarchy of comparative subcategories can be elaborated, beginning at the most general level with
three major categories of this volume: epistemological truth, scriptural truth, and truth in practice. This is not merely a principle of organization; the justification of the general category of religious truth includes theoretical explanations for why truth in religion shows up in these three ways. Any more general theory of religious truth that intends to be based on the part-theory produced in justifying the comparative category would be structured in a similar way.

This hierarchical structure of vagueness and specificity has a number of promising virtues for a more general theory. It forces the full theory to notice more of the data than many other theories of religious truth in the past have managed to take into account. It subjects the full theory to correction more specifically by actual religious data. And it provides a natural structure for elaboration of theoretical concerns that are not immediately relevant to the justification of the comparative category. For instance, theoretical elaboration of the connection between truth and logic might be tied to the subcategory of philosophical truth whereas theoretical elaboration of the connection between truth and hermeneutics might be tied to the subcategory of textual truth. Overall, then, the process of comparison aids theory building by offering a foundation that is both structured by the dialectic of vagueness and specificity and closely related to the data to which the theory must be responsible.

Second, do well-established comparative categories determine an overall theory of religion? In this case we have an innocent looking question that is in fact capable of bringing our entire project into disrepute, for good reasons. The long-standing experience of experts in the study of religion is that religious details rudely interrupt large-scale theories of religion, catching them by their pretensions and flinging them onto the towering trash heap of grandiose speculations. We have already ventured into unpopular territory by trying to show how a properly justified comparative category offers a basis for theories of aspects of religion such as religious truth or the human condition. Has our project led us to that basest form of corruption in which depraved state we could believe that this greatest of theoretical challenges—producing a master theory of religion—can be solved, or dissolved, by our procedure for comparison? Well, in this case our answer runs in a negative direction, but with a twist.

Here is the negative part: We (Wildman and Neville) conjecture that an overall theory of religion is not determined by any amount of comparison using the approach we defend. The reason for this is, basically, that our project had little use for "religion" as a comparative category. We use the word "religious" in the name of the project and we have used "religion" and cognates denotatively in the course of the project, as when we
speak of "religious truth," "religious ultimates," and "Chinese religion." On the face of it, it might well be thought of as a vague comparative category that has been specified in our various uses of it. Then an attempt could be made to justify the category "religion" in all of the usual phenomenological and theoretical ways. If successful, the result would be a partial theory of religion capable of serving as a structured foundation for a full theory of religion. As a matter of fact, however, none of us seemed to have much confidence that the category "religion" could be treated in this way.

The more general theoretical point being made here is quite important. In the course of our project, we disposed of many more candidate comparative categories than we kept. Just because we can think of a category and begin to try to organize data with it does not mean that it can be justified either phenomenologically or theoretically. The point of justification is to identify categories with special characteristics such as effective registering of patterns in the data, naturalness with regard to what we earlier called the "givenness" of religious phenomena, and convenient sorting of what we earlier called the "contingencies" of religious phenomena. The most effective categories, the ones that survive, are the ones that can be justified best in these ways. In the scope of our project, "religion" always seemed a bad candidate for justification. While useful in a hand-waving way for indicating denotationally what we mean sometimes (e.g., we are dealing with religious ideas and not just any old ideas), any attempt to specify a precise boundary between religious and nonreligious ideas is futile. Moreover, the specifications of religion—even the six we used: Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are themselves not much use as comparative subcategories in our sense; they suffer from the same problems that "religion" does. Dividing up religious phenomena into religious groups is only useful in limited ways for the historical "contingency" sorts of considerations but not useful at all for the philosophical "givenness" sorts of considerations or the phenomenological considerations, all of which must feed into the justification of categories. So our conjecture is that "religion" is not useful as a comparative category and thus that our comparative procedure is unlikely to be able to specify the theoretical basis for a general theory of religion.

So much for the negative conjecture; now for the twist. Actually, there are two twists. First, we can imagine circumstances under which religion might be a feasible comparative category in a way that seems unlikely at present. This speculative scenario would falsify our second conjecture but it would also lead to the basis for a general theory of religion. To see how this might occur, consider that the concept "religion" plays a heuristic,
denotative role in our work. We have been able to articulate a host of subcategories organized under three major comparative categories—the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth—because we have presupposed informal and unanalyzed notions of religion as such. These notions functioned denotatively to allow us to marshal our various disciplinary contributions for the construction and exploration of sturdy comparative categories. We somehow knew what we were “taking” comparatively even if the disparate conventions of our traditions and the existential commitments of different religious practices made detailed agreement difficult. “Culture,” “economics,” “science,” and “society” are similarly heuristic concepts in other scholarly contexts. Such larger, informal denotative contexts are crucial in human understanding. If one could be found that allowed religion to be specified more precisely—perhaps along with culture, economics, science, and society as well—then religion would at least have a chance to be a viable comparative category. Whether the comparative category “religion” could be justified under those circumstances remains an open question.

What might such a broader, unanalyzed heuristic context be? Religious studies as a field is not yet ready to treat religion responsibly as a comparative category but perhaps it might be able to serve as a broader heuristic context at some point in the future. For some thinkers, frustration with the difficulty of developing a responsible comparative theory of religion has trickled down to frustration with any and all comparisons. In this project we believe that we have taken some small and partial, but decisive steps to reverse that frustration. Comparisons can be made responsibly, subject to the limitations we have described (and perhaps others). Well-grounded comparative categories can indeed function to order something like a data-organizing theory of instrumentation for the further study of religion. Prolonged comparative work can contribute to theories of important aspects of religion. And the dialectic of vagueness, specification, theoretical hypotheses, and vulnerability to correction serves to model at least part of the structure of further studies that might undertake a full-blown theory of religion. As we have said, this is highly speculative. Under such circumstances, however, we would be glad to see our second conjecture fail.

The second twist is consistent with our second conjecture and quite realistic. There is a way that a large-scale pseudo-theory about religion can be pieced together from large-scale theories about other topics. The result would not be a systematic theory of religion but it would be a loosely coordinated conglomeration of relevant theoretical insights. That is more or less what is happening at the present time. To see what is meant here, consider an example of a large-scale theory of a stable
comparative category—not religion itself, which we do not think can be made a stable category, but a category such as the human condition. The part-theory emerging from the justification of the comparative category “human condition”—a justification that we did not attempt systematically, unfortunately—forms the basis for a general theory of human beings in regard to religious concerns. That general theory of human beings as religious could then be (and in fact sometimes is) placed into conversation with other general theories of human beings, such as those from anthropology, evolutionary biology, psychology, or neuroscience. Such a process of interdisciplinary cooperation might have a chance of producing the grand theoretical narrative to trump all other grand narratives about human beings—at least for a while.

Meanwhile, the same interdisciplinary cooperation can be applied to topics such as religious truth and ultimate realities, among others. The result is a family of theories about topics that are important in religious studies. Piecing these together, we have a loosely coordinated series of ideally profound and systematic insights into religion. We do not have a master theory of religion but we have something important nonetheless—and it may well be as far as we can travel in the way of a comprehensive theory of religion. None of this can be achieved without both a serviceable theory of comparison and an extended history of comparison by means of which the data of religion are made available for the systematic formulation and correction of theoretical ventures in religious studies. Our project has aimed to take a single, sure step in the direction of that goal.