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COMPARATIVE RELIGION IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENSIONS, AND CROSS-TRADITIONAL DIALOGUE

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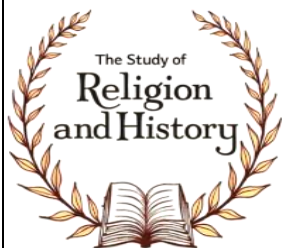
ABSTRACT

Comparative Religion, alternatively referred to as Religionswissenschaft, science of religion, or simply religious studies, is a particular branch of academia that exists in an idiosyncratic, often contentious, position relative to other humanities disciplines. This paper will focus on analyzing the methodologies involved in the comparative study of religions, looking into its intellectual origins, beginning from the seminal contributions of Friedrich Max Müller during the nineteenth century until now when it has become the subject of criticism by postcolonialism and feminism. The paper posits that, while the use of comparisons is an essential technique for conducting research, one must exercise constant self-reflection about the inherent power dynamics in engaging in such comparisons. Through the use of specific examples from the religions of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the paper will investigate how common human concerns, theodicy, eschatology, rituals, and ethics are dealt with across different faiths, and how these intersections and differences reveal the nature of religious experiences. Lastly, the paper asserts that interreligious dialogue is possible only when one goes beyond mere neutral phenomenology, and that a more profound epistemological modesty is necessary based on the understanding that religious beliefs cannot be reduced to sociology or psychology alone.

Keywords: Comparative Religion, Methodology, Epistemology, Cross-Traditional Dialogue, Phenomenology, Religious Studies, Interfaith Scholarship

1. INTRODUCTION

No enterprise is as grand or as conceptually complex as comparative religion, whereby researchers attempt to make sense of religious diversity across the globe. While comparative religion, when properly conceived, represents an effort aimed at achieving insight into religious traditions beyond the parochial confines of one specific belief system, thus revealing the common humanity behind all traditions, it can also be construed as a reductionist effort whereby scholars sacrifice the particularity of living religious traditions for the benefit of creating typologies and other abstract categories to advance their own scholarly goals. Indeed, the history of the field demonstrates a constant oscillation between these two extremes. It was precisely during the latter part of the nineteenth century that comparative religion became formally established as a legitimate discipline within academia. One of the pioneers of the field, Friedrich Max Müller, famously argued that one who knows only one religion does not know even one. In doing so, he succinctly captured the very essence of comparative religion, namely, the notion that true comprehension can only be achieved through the study of other religions alongside any given religion. His groundbreaking translation of the Sacred Books of the East was instrumental in opening up the Western academy to the textual riches of Hinduism,



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Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam in unprecedented ways, laying the groundwork for a genuinely global religious scholarship¹.

However, the very context out of which this scholarship emerged was hardly unbiased. It is precisely colonial expansionism on the part of the West that provided both the concrete tools – in terms of colonial archives, missionary narratives, and government censuses – and the motivation behind the project to categorize, describe, and understand the worldviews of non-Western cultures and their religions. Comparative religion from its earliest stages was heavily influenced by ideas about hierarchical civilizations, evolution, and normative values of Protestant Christianity. The awareness of these distortions has fundamentally changed the field in the past several decades and led to important scholarly discussions of methodologies².

This paper is organized into four parts. The first part introduces the reader to some of the key methodologies of comparative religion, namely phenomenology, structuralism, and hermeneutics. The second part discusses the difficulties associated with inter-traditional comparison in terms of knowledge, issues of translatability, incommensurability, and scholars' standpoint. The third part presents thematic comparisons of the worldviews of different traditions concerning such topics as the problem of evil, eschatology, and law. Finally, the fourth part offers an innovative model for comparative methodology in relation to critical theory and epistemic validity of religious beliefs themselves.

2. Phenomenology

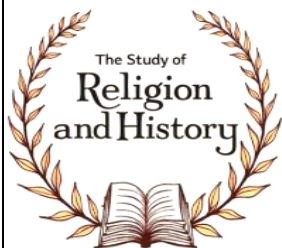
Phenomenology of religion, especially in the works of Gerardus van der Leeuw and his successor, Mircea Eliade, attempted to establish a description of irreducible religious experiences regardless of culture or historical period. According to Eliade, the basic binary opposition for humans is that between the sacred and the profane; the goal of the scholar of religion, therefore, is to decipher the morphology of the sacred, as revealed in myths, rituals, and symbolism. His concept of the hierophany, the expression of the sacred in the language of the profane constitutes a significant interpretive device³. Phenomenology has had an immense impact on the development of mid-twentieth-century scholarship on religion, partly because it provided a methodological framework that, at least ostensibly, allowed for the objective comparison of religions independent of their truth claims. In other words, the phenomenologist would bracket the issue of ontology (*epoché*) and examine only the intentional aspect of religious experience. Yet, this claim to scientific objectivity and neutrality has been subject to strong criticism. Notably, Jonathan Z. Smith argued persuasively that comparisons of any kind involve not mere description but construction, which in turn requires theory⁴.

¹ Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), 16. Müller's editorial project, *The Sacred Books of the East*, eventually ran to fifty volumes published by Oxford University Press between 1879 and 1910.

² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–35.

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 11–13.

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi; see also Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23–44.



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2.1 Approaches of Structuralism and Hermeneutics

According to the structuralist approach, taking cues from Claude Lévi-Strauss' theories in anthropology, the deep grammar of religion lay in the universal dualities of nature/culture, sacred/profane and pure/impure. When applied to religious texts and rites, structuralism produced some insightful analyses of religious myths and how they worked internally. However, its inclination towards subordinating semantics to structure, as well as its underlying universalism about human psychology, invited critique from those concerned with the historicity and particularity of religious meaning⁵.

Hermeneutics, grounded in the philosophy of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer, sought to rectify the above shortcomings by stressing the importance of historicity in understanding. According to Gadamer, interpretation always takes place in a tradition-defined horizon of preunderstandings and genuine understanding can only take place through an encounter or fusion of such horizons and not by way of creating a pretended objectivity. In terms of comparative religion, the implication seems to be that a genuine cross-traditional understanding will involve not the erasure of the subjectivity of the scholar, but rather its recognition and confrontation with the otherness of that which is being studied⁶.

2.3 Postcolonial and Feminist Critiques

With its attention to the discipline of religious studies as a product of the intellectual project of colonialism, the postcolonial approach has been particularly effective in critiquing the basic assumptions upon which the field rests. Through his genealogy of the key terms of religious studies, such as religion, mysticism, and world religions, Richard King along with others including Tomoko Masuzawa and Talal Asad has demonstrated how such categories emerged from the particular context of Protestant Christianity and were thus necessarily Eurocentric. The assertion by Talal Asad of the very construct of religion as a universal category is a modern Western invention calls for rethinking the nature of the comparisons undertaken by comparative religion⁷.

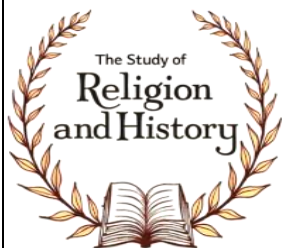
The work of feminist academics has added yet another layer of analysis by highlighting the role of gender politics not only within the traditions themselves but also within the academic discipline of studying those traditions. The focus of classical comparative religion on written texts, doctrine, and institutions, which have traditionally been controlled by upper-class men, has meant that the experience of religion for women has been overlooked. A comparative religion that is truly comprehensive must take note of this oversight.⁸

5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206–231.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 302–307.

Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 62–85.

Ursula King, ed., *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 1–38; Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 115–140.



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3. Tensions in Epistemology of Cross-Tradition Comparison

3.1 The Challenge of Translation and Translatability

The first great problem faced by the comparativist is the problem of translation. This is not a simple matter of translating between languages, but rather one of attempting to translate conceptual worlds from one tradition into the conceptual framework of another. It is simply not true that religious traditions can be reduced to propositions that can easily be decoded and re-translated into a universal metalanguage. Traditions are rich symbolic universes, where meaning is generated in complex networks of narrative, praxis, community, and experience. Terms such as *tawakkul* in Arabic, *dharma* in Sanskrit, *chesed* in Hebrew, and *dukkha* in Buddhist thought all possess layers of meaning impossible to render in any other language or tradition⁹.

Translatability is thus at the core of the comparative project. When academics refer to mysticism in the context of Sufism and Jewish Kabbalah, or to natural law in Islamic jurisprudence and Thomistic theology, they are making analogies that reveal certain structures common to both traditions, while masking other important distinctions between them. Thus, the comparativist must always be attentive to both points of contact and to differences in their very point of connection.

3.2 Incommensurability and the Boundaries of Comprehension

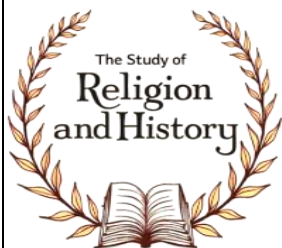
Some philosophers of religion have gone on to claim that there are genuine cases of incommensurability in which certain truth claims within religions cannot be compared in any neutral sense, that is, their differing structures of meaning and value are such that they do not even admit of being evaluated in relation to each other. For example, since Buddhism and Islam are founded upon entirely different metaphysical frameworks, how could it possibly be determined in what sense an *attā* differs from *nafs al-ammārah*? In other words, strong incommensurabilists contend that any attempt to compare two different religions is always an act of epistemic violence in which the categories of one are brought to bear upon the other¹⁰. Such a position, however, fails to acknowledge that the very notion of difference implies a framework against which such difference can be understood. It seems, then, that making the claim of incommensurability already implies making some comparison. Alternatively, scholars such as William Christian Sr. and George Lindbeck have advocated for modes of particularist comparison which accept the essential differences among the various traditions and attempt to discover common points despite them.

3.3 Positionality of Religious Scholarship and the Emic/Etic Duality

The duality of emic (insider's) vs. etic (outsider's) view of religious phenomena has long played an important role in discussion of methodology in religious scholarship. The emphasis on the emic perspective in religious scholarship implies privileging the understanding of religious phenomena by the members of the tradition themselves and using concepts familiar to and comprehensible to those individuals to describe the traditions studied. The etic approach emphasizes the search for conceptual categories which can be applied across religious

⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 144–162.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 326–348



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traditions irrespective of whether they are familiar or unfamiliar to the members of particular traditions¹¹.

Neither one of the approaches is sufficient alone. While the exclusive reliance on the emic approach may lead to the lack of necessary scholarly detachment, the exclusive reliance on the etic perspective may lead to the creation of an artificial picture of the studied phenomena which lacks any correspondence to reality. It seems that the most promising approach to the analysis of contemporary religious phenomena consists in combining the two approaches to create a balanced account of the tradition¹².

4. CASE STUDIES ON TRENDS AND THOUGHTS BY COMPARATIVE STUDY

4.1 Theodicy: Problem of Evil and Suffering

The concept of theodicy that raises issues about how a merciful and omnipotent God can co-exist with evil and suffering is central to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism which have theistic tradition, while the concept can be found in Buddhism and in some Hindu schools but from non-theistic perspectives. In Islam, the problem of theodicy is addressed from the perspective of God's *qadā'* and *qadar* (God's divine decree and predestination) where there is an emphasis on *sabr* of a believer which means patient endurance. The role of suffering of prophets especially of the prophet Ayyūb (Job) who is considered a model of the suffering person shows that suffering may be purifying and spiritually elevating instead of an indicator of absence of divine mercy¹³.

Christian theological discussion of theodicy is directly connected with the teaching about the Atonement and the story of the Cross. Suffering of Christ is associated with his voluntary kenosis when God emptied himself and became vulnerable. The Christian theology of the cross, as formulated by Jürgen Moltmann, presented God not as the uninvolved Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle, but as a God who participates actively in and suffers alongside His creation; instead of a theoretical answer to the question of theodicy, Moltmann posited God's presence within it. In sharp contrast, Islam denies the notion that God could share in the pain and suffering of the world, making the attribution of such qualities to Him unacceptable for theological purposes¹⁴.

Unlike the theistic religions, Buddhism completely reconceptualizes the question of theodicy by raising doubts concerning the ontological nature of the individual whose suffering raises the question in the first place. The First Noble Truth posits the existence of suffering (*dukkha*) not because of the lack of will to prevent it, but simply as an unavoidable characteristic of conditional existence. The root cause of suffering according to the Second Noble Truth is ignorance (*avidyā*)-based desire (*tanhā*), and the way out lies in overcoming the factors responsible for suffering, not in addressing God with requests for help.

4.2 Eschatology: Visions of the Ultimate End

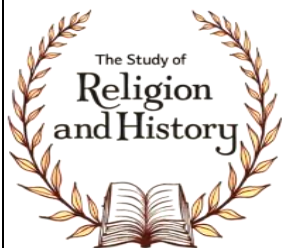
Eschatological doctrines, that is, those teachings that concern the ultimate destination of the individual and the universe as a whole, are among the areas where it becomes possible to make

¹¹ Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979), 32–45

¹² al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, ed. Badawī Ṭabāna (Cairo: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 4:56–72.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 235–249.

Ibn Kathīr, *al-Nihāyah fī al-Fitan wa-al-Malāḥim*, ed. Ṭāhā Zīnī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1988), 1:1–22.¹⁴



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some of the richest comparisons across different religious traditions, because here the most fundamental beliefs about human life, justice, and reality tend to be most fully articulated. Islam has one of the most detailed accounts of eschatology among world religions, involving the end-time events of al-sā'ah (the Last Hour), al-ba'th (resurrection of the dead), al-ḥisāb (divine judgment), and eternal differentiation into the Jannah (heaven/Gardens of Paradise) and Nār (hell/the Fire). According to the Quranic teaching, each person will have to face the detailed list of all their deeds performed on earth and receive divine justice perfectly executed¹⁵. By contrast, Hindu eschatology assumes the cyclical nature of time rather than its linearity; the soul (ātman) goes through the repeated cycle of reincarnations (saṃsāra), determined by the law of karma (moral causality). Moksha, or liberation, does not involve reaching any sort of paradisiacal destination but, rather, is the final dissolution of the identity of the individual self into the infinitely-grounded reality of Brahman itself. Though the ontological and temporal presuppositions of the two eschatologies are utterly at odds and their comparison might serve only to distort rather than clarify, the importance of ethics and the ultimate judgment of every individual soul based on his deeds in this life is common to both traditions¹⁶.

4.3 Moral Law: Sharia, Dharma, Torah, and Natural Law

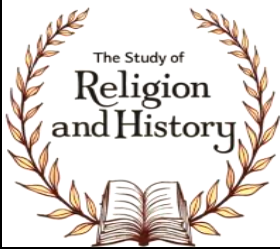
There are few religious principles that are as universal as the idea of morality or moral law – an order dictated by divine will and the cosmos itself to regulate human actions. Within the Islamic tradition, the process of elaborating on the provisions of Sharia occurs through the use of fiqh, the science of jurisprudence whose foundations lie in four primary sources: the Quran, the normative practice of the Prophet (ﷺ) called Sunnah, consensus of scholars called ijma', and analogy called qiyas¹⁷.

The concept of dharma in the Hindu tradition is similarly pervasive and similarly multivalent, encompassing cosmic order, ritual duty, social obligation, and personal virtue. Unlike Shari'ah, dharma is not codified in a single authoritative scripture or a single juristic tradition, but is distributed across an enormous range of texts from the R̥gveda to the Dharmasāstras and is understood as variously constituted according to caste, stage of life (āśrama), and particular circumstance. The universality of dharma as cosmic order is thus compatible with a significant degree of moral particularism at the level of individual obligation. The Thomistic tradition's concept of natural law accessible to human reason independently of divine revelation offers a third and distinct model: an objective moral order inscribed in the rational structure of human nature and knowable, at least in principle, by any reflective person. The resemblances and differences among these three models of moral law are instructive for comparative ethics, revealing how different metaphysical frameworks generate different accounts of the source, scope, and structure of moral normativity.

¹⁵ Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah*, ed. 'Abdallāh Darrāz (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā, n.d.), 1:38–65.

Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 1–18.

¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 73–98.



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5. A DIRECTION TOWARDS A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO COMPARATIVE RELIGION STUDIES

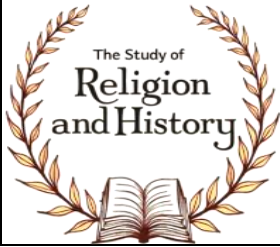
The above analyses indicate that the methodological approach to comparative religion studies should meet a number of rigorous requirements simultaneously. First, it should be based on solid empirical data derived from comprehensive knowledge of the traditions in question. Second, such knowledge needs to be gained not through generalized popular information but through thorough study of authentic religious texts. Third, it must be critical toward its own methodological premises and predispositions, recognizing the cultural backgrounds of researchers and their assumptions. Finally, it must be dialogical, which means that its premises and frameworks need to remain flexible to change through exposure to other traditions. The work of Raimon Panikkar, a scholar equally at home in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, is instructive in this regard. Panikkar developed the concept of diatopical hermeneutics an approach to cross-traditional understanding that proceeds not by translating one tradition's concepts into the language of another but by allowing both traditions to be transformed through genuine encounter. The goal is not synthesis, which would dissolve the genuine differences between traditions, nor parallelism, which would simply enumerate differences without engagement, but what Panikkar called mutual fecundation a creative interaction in which each tradition is enriched by its encounter with the other while remaining distinctly itself¹⁸.

Such an approach resonates with the Islamic concept of *ḥikmah* (wisdom) as a value not confined to a single tradition. The well-known hadith tradition *al-ḥikmatu dāllatu al-mu'min, ḥaythumā wajadahā fahuwa aḥaqqu bihā* affirms that wisdom is the lost property of the believer, to be claimed wherever it is found. This tradition has been invoked by Muslim scholars from al-Kindī in the ninth century to contemporary Islamic philosophers as a theological warrant for engaging seriously with the intellectual contributions of non-Islamic traditions, not as a concession to relativism but as an expression of the universality of the divine creative intelligence that underlies all genuine insight.¹⁸

At the same time, it is essential to resist the temptation of what has been called perennialism the claim that beneath the surface diversity of religious traditions lies a single identical core of mystical or metaphysical insight. While there are genuine structural resemblances between the mystical traditions of different religions, and while comparative analysis can illuminate these resemblances in illuminating ways, the differences between traditions are not merely exoteric husks concealing an identical esoteric kernel. They reflect genuine and irreducible differences in metaphysical commitment, ritual practice, communal identity, and normative orientation that deserve to be respected in their integrity.

The integrative framework proposed here therefore combines three methodological commitments. First, a commitment to historical and philological rigor: comparative claims must be grounded in careful reading of primary sources in their original languages and historical contexts. Second, a commitment to critical reflexivity: scholars must subject their own comparative frameworks to the same scrutiny they apply to the traditions they study. Third, a commitment to dialogical openness: the goal of comparative religion is not merely academic knowledge production but genuine understanding across difference, an

Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-Falsafiyah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Hādī Abū Rīdah (Cairo: ¹⁸ Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1950), 1:103.



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understanding that has the potential to enrich both scholarship and the lived practice of interfaith relations.

6. CONCLUSION

An ideal academic comparative religion, as far as it goes, fulfills two roles. Firstly, it is a scholarly pursuit that expands humanity's knowledge of the extraordinary richness and commonality of religious experience, helping us to better understand the answers people from various backgrounds have tried to provide to the perennially human questions. Secondly, as a culture and an ethic, it adds something essential to the ongoing project of cultivating understanding through differences. This has never been more urgent in a world where religious plurality becomes an undeniable feature of our day-to-day existence.

While it should go without saying that such methodological problems as the difficulty of translation, the conflict of viewpoints, the danger of applying foreign categorizations, and epistemic modesty in the face of actual truth claims will continue to challenge comparative scholars throughout the ages, it should also be remembered that the greatest comparativists of all time have always been precisely those who found productive harmony in those conflicting forces rather than attempted to resolve them prematurely.

It is in this spirit that the present article has sought to engage with comparative religion not as a neutral science standing above the traditions it studies but as a disciplined and responsible practice of understanding across difference, one that is enriched rather than threatened by its engagement with the irreducible particularity and depth of the world's religious traditions.