

Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 256 pp. ISBN 9780199965007 (hbk.)

Since Eliade's works came under generalized criticism in the 1980s, comparison has been in the center of heated methodological debates in the study of religion, with "big questions" such as: Why compare? What is the actual purpose of comparing? What to compare? Is it possible to compare items that are not historically related without falling into the pitfalls of phenomenology? What role does comparison play in the study of religion as an academic discipline? Is it a marginal and outdated or, on the contrary, a crucial and timely method for scholars of religion? As an important addition to the debate, the present work analyzes critiques of comparison and offers its own proposition for a comparative method as a cardinal method for the study of religion. That the book has been written by someone who actually completed a book-long comparative study in 2009 (*Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung brahmanischer und frühchristlicher Texte*, Harrassowitz) gives a pragmatic focus on theoretical issues that, regrettably, have sometimes been discussed by scholars with little or no experience in actual comparative work. Edited with a particular care for clarity, the book tackles complex theoretical issues while remaining accessible even to junior scholars.

In the first chapter, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion," the author argues that comparison is particularly essential for the study of religion and is actually inherent in most scholarly work undertaken within its disciplinary boundaries: "Even when they do not produce explicitly comparative studies, scholars in religious studies look at a phenomenon with a comparative gaze, being interested in it not primarily for its own sake but as a variant of something that may be found in other contexts as well" (p. 43). As such, comparison appears as perhaps the most distinctive method in the discipline.

Classical critiques and challenges of comparison in the study of religion are then reviewed in the second chapter, "Comparison: Critiques and Challenges." Two major issues are specifically highlighted: decontextualization and essentialization. While some decontextualization is inevitable, Freiberger argues convincingly that it can be done transparently, responsively, and productively—for example by studying the data "in its context as comprehensively and accurately as possible" (p. 53) before proceeding with decontextualization. As to essentialization, Freiberger refers to William Paden's notion of "nonfoundational comparativism" ("Elements of a New Comparativism," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 8(1) [1996]: 5–14) and to the rich debate it engendered. Analyzing first a criticism labeled as "postcolonial" or "postmodern" (i.e., that

comparison has often served to construct totalizing narratives and that the comparativist's own interests have often not been disclosed), Freiberger takes this argument not as a general criticism of comparison, but as an incentive to pay attention to both similarities and differences, and to work with a minimum of reflexivity. The second critical perspective comes from scholars developing "naturalistic" (i.e., cognitivist, socio-biological) approaches to religion and judging Paden's model too weak. Freiberger argues that these approaches can actually highlight a "variety of behavior patterns," which in turn can constitute particularly fruitful entry points for a comparative investigation (p. 78).

The third chapter, "Comparison in Theory," digs further into the "postcolonial" argument, focusing on the scholar's role in designing a comparative work. This logically leads the author to discuss the place of the *tertium comparationis*, whose selection — as J. Z. Smith repeatedly argued — is the scholar's own work. Freiberger makes the case that nothing is in principle incomparable, so that "the idiom of apples and oranges seems to indicate not so much the impossibility of comparison but an inappropriate assertion of sameness" (pp. 92–93). As to judging whether a specific choice of *tertium comparationis* is appropriate or not, it should be "useful for the scholar," heuristically promising, and revisable. The refining of categories located on that conceptual level is shown to be a fundamental purpose of comparison in the study of religion.

In the fourth chapter, "Comparison in Practice," Freiberger offers a framework to characterize different types of comparative studies by distinguishing "modes," "scales," and "scopes." By "modes" the author first refers to Jonathan Z. Smith's classic piece on various types comparison and their respective shortcomings ("In Comparison a Magic Dwells," *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, University of Chicago Press, 1982), before focusing on two "modes with potential": the illuminative and taxonomic modes (pp. 126–127). In the former, the goal is to shed light on "blind spots" in a particular historical object by comparing it with a similar and well-known case. In the taxonomic mode, a comparison suggests generalizations out of the comparative data. Freiberger's "scales" help to distinguish between studies working on the macro, meso, and micro levels, each of them coming with assets and limitations. The criterion of "scope" offers a distinction between "contextual" (*comparanda* located in the same historical context), "cross-cultural" (*comparanda* located in two different historico-cultural contexts), and "transhistorical" (*comparanda* located in the same context, but at two different periods) perspectives. This classification is strongly reminiscent of the usual distinction between analogical and genealogical (which Freiberger proposes to rename as "relational," to better suggest a bidirectional stream of influence between the

compared objects) comparison with its implications for the interpretation of similarities and differences. Five components of the comparative process are then identified: selection of *comparanda* and *tertium*, description and analysis of each *comparandum*, juxtaposition (analyzing similarities and differences), re-description, and rectification / theory formation. Particularly noteworthy here are the two last components: re-description, which aims at a fresh description of the *comparanda*, enriched by the conclusions of comparison; and theory formation, which contributes to the correction of analytical categories and on the building of theories in light of the empirical cases.

The final chapter, "Comparison in Practice: A Methodological Framework" exemplifies the proposed comparative framework with a case of "discourse comparison" located on the micro-level. Retracing the steps of his own comparative study of ascetic discourses in Brahmanical and Early Christian texts, Freiburger explains why he chose the two sets of texts that he compared, before asking the central question: "What are the similarities and differences in the variety of concepts of ascetic practice in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and can this tell us anything about how we should conceptualize asceticism?" (p. 181). Answering that question leads to the identification of three domains that are relevant for analyzing both cases: patterns of regulatory and antiregulatory argumentation; hierarchies of values; and spectra of practices. This finally leads to conclusions on a conceptual level, offering, *inter alia*, a new and richer working definition of asceticism.

In sum, the book provides not only an excellent survey of "classical" debates about comparison in the study of religion, including most recent examples, but also helpful guidelines for comparativists. Reading the book, one cannot but get the impression that the debate is now in a mature stage: we are far away from the time when comparativists had to distance themselves from Eliadean phenomenology as a necessary preliminary to the actual study. In my view, Freiburger makes three particularly valuable contributions: first, the framework to compare and classify comparisons (in particular, the distinction between modes, scales, and scopes) is a useful conceptual tool to both retroactively analyze comparative projects, and to become more aware of the different parameters at work in one's own comparative work. Second, the notion of "discourse comparison" is helpful for situating the empirical objects of a comparative study, not as faithfully representing a religious tradition but as possibly reflecting conflictual positions within a given tradition. Thirdly, the proposed articulation between philological and naturalistic approaches is a particularly interesting proposition to overcome what is perhaps one of the major challenges to the disciplinary integrity of the field.

Still, a few questions remain, so the debate is not entirely over yet. A first question relates to the macro level of comparison: while one would like to agree with the author that there can be valid studies on that level, provided they acknowledge their limitations, it is not entirely clear what such studies would look like (p. 136). Can the *comparanda* undergo a proper contextualization in that case — a “precomparative” phase that is precisely shown here to be essential — and can a *macro* level study contribute to the “rectification” of the theoretical apparatus?

Another question is about the specificity of “religion” for a comparative study. Most of the debates mentioned in the book have taken place between people identifying as “scholars of religion” of various types, but without referring to similar debates in history, social sciences, or philosophy, beginning perhaps with the seminal observations of Franz Boas or Marc Bloch about comparison in anthropology and history. What could we learn from these closely related — and still ongoing — debates and how can they be transposed to the study of religion (or not)? Is the object of our studies so specific that it warrants a specific type of comparative methodology?

Finally, while the present reviewer entirely sympathizes with the view that comparison — and even more, “discourse comparison” — can be a (the?) central method for the study of religion, not everyone will agree. In particular, people from the two fields mentioned in the second chapter might still not be entirely convinced: for some, the theological heritage of the notion of “religion” and its Eurocentric character have irremediably compromised its potential for designing responsible comparative studies, despite all the precautions envisioned by the author; for others, a constructivist and interpretative framework such as that offered here, with goals such as “re-description” and “rectification,” actually might not be ambitious enough, because it does not allow arriving at explanations that would be applicable transculturally.

Whatever one’s own methodological convictions, however, the book is an essential read for anyone looking for an updated and lucid examination of what the stakes of comparison in the study of religion are, and of course for those about to undertake a comparative project themselves.

Philippe Bornet

Oriental Studies Department, University of Lausanne, Lausanne,
Switzerland

Philippe.Bornet@unil.ch