



*Comparing religions*

Brill, Leiden, 2006, xvii + 320 pp

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# Comparing religions

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## REFERENCES

Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson and James Constantine Hanges (eds.).  
2006. *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* Leiden: Brill. xvii + 320 pp, 93,00€. ISBN:  
90-04-15267-9

- 1 Imagine, if you will, entering a university lecture or seminar on religion and that floating above the heads of each participant is a thought-bubble – the kind found in a cartoon or comic book. Imagine further that contained in these bubbles are the thoughts that each participant entertains concerning aspects or features of the religion being discussed. It would be relatively safe to assume that eventually, on some level, these thoughts would be of a comparative nature and could generally be stated in the form »how is x similar to or different from y?« The editors of this anthology have made it their task to examine the issues involved in the asking of such questions about religion in the classroom.
- 2 The work consists of contributions from twelve authors and is divided into three parts: »Part One [chapters 1–5]: Theoretical Aspects of Comparison, Part Two [chapters 6–10]: Theory into Method: Comparison of Religions in the Study and the Classroom, and Part Three [chapters 11–14]: Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Modernism in the Comparison of Religion.«
- 3 The anthology begins with Anthony J. Blasi addressing the characteristics of comparative categories, specifically their inclusiveness, their exclusiveness, and their use in establishing boundaries in and between the objects of comparison. In chapter 2, George Weckman raises the issue of judgments and prejudices that can be brought to the comparison by the scholar's relationship to the topic and by the negative connotations of certain terms typically used in comparison. In the next chapter, David Cave, following the work of Bruce Lincoln, chooses authority as a conceptual means for

justifying whether or not certain objects can be compared, for locating the scholar within both the religious and the academic discourse, and for increasing the likelihood that the »act of comparison itself becomes consequential.«(p. 50) In the fourth chapter Thomas Athenasius Idinopulos argues for the importance of understanding the historical »birth process« (p. 57) of new religions out of old religions and the relevance of this process in the comparative endeavor. In the last chapter of Part One, William E. Paden focuses on panhuman contexts and dispositions and their arguable usefulness in comparing the various »worldmaking« capacities manifested in religious traditions.

- 4 Part Two begins with Wesley J. Wildmans's explication of the Crosscultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP), which attempts to establish a method (or better yet, a program) for the comparison of religious ideas that is not based as much on the soundness or adequacy of categories and theories in any single, comparative study as on the susceptibility of the chosen categories to subsequent improvement and correction in hopes of building post-comparison theories. In chapter seven John Stratton Hawley provides the most pedagogically-oriented chapter (including a summarized syllabus) of the anthology by detailing the rationale behind a course he teaches, which, after »historicizing the history of religion« (p. 116) and »comparativizing comparative religion« (p. 132), enables students to critically evaluate differing works on religion and encourages them to be more self-conscious in their own research projects. Next, James Constantine Hanges examines how a questionable comparison of religious founder-figures can be turned into a justifiable comparison of the problems encountered by the authors of the compared texts, in which the founder-figures are mentioned. Idinopulos' chapter nine examines the strengths and weaknesses of Joseph Klausner's treatment of the emergence of Christianity out of Judaism – Klausner's strengths being found in his knowledge of materials and methods of usage and his weaknesses being found in his lack of »appreciation of the novelty and mystery and authenticity« of the new religion (pp. 179-80). Hanges' second contribution to this anthology (chapter 10) follows Hawley's previous strategy in so far as that he compares comparisons, but rather than addressing comparison in the study of religion, he examines the apologetic use of comparisons of glossolalia within certain Christian traditions.
- 5 Part Three begins with Arvind Sharma's argument that the introduction of Orientalism into the understanding of the comparative enterprise compels scholars to be conscious of the extent to which Western scholarship has played a formative role in certain religious traditions themselves. In chapter twelve, Russell T. McCutcheon draws attention to and elaborates on the various and numerous problems in comparison associated with presupposing an »us« and a »them« - the insider/outsider problem. On a different note in the thirteenth chapter, Robert Segal defends »old comparativism« by offering refutations to several critiques leveled by postmodernists, i.e. »ignoring differences, confusing similarities with identity, generalizing too broadly [and] prematurely, taking phenomena out of context, and generalizing at all.«(p. 258) Lastly, Ivan Strenski proposes what he considers to be a feasible »strong program« of comparison as developed in the tradition of Durkheim, which recognizes and embraces both the unavoidable consequences of the investigator's involvement in comparison and the constructed nature of the comparative categories.
- 6 This compilation, a single work which represents several different approaches to comparison in the study of religion, was intended to raise further questions rather

than provide answers. »[I]f our contributors have shown the several roads to comparison and also raised consciousness about the difficulty in and desirability of traveling these roads, they will have done their work as scholars and teachers very well.« (p. xvi) The individual contributions obviously deserve more time, space, and attention than a single review can provide. Inasmuch as this anthology provides a resource for instructors in helping their students engage the many issues associated with comparison in the study of religion and in so far as this work, as a whole, provides several touchstones for evaluating works produced by both scholars and students, this work could find constructive use both inside and outside of the classroom. Both of the above comments, however, are rather vague as to *how* this work could be implemented, and it is to a possible approach to that issue that I would like to turn for a moment.

- 7 The work as a whole is not as much about the activity of comparison, *per se*, as it is about the eventual consequences of our categories in the study of religion. The possibilities and perils mentioned in the title seem to stem from the success or failure in justifying categories rather than the capacity to perform comparisons – although the two activities are interlocking. Wildman, stressing the importance of justifying categories, spends two pages discussing how we can justify comparing apples and oranges as segmented fruits! (pp. 80-82) If we return to our example of thought-bubbles, a few helpful observations can be made. Several features of the seminar room full of thought-bubbles are noticeable from the outset. First, the thought-bubbles are *someone's* thought-bubbles and might be the product of *someone's desire to compare* two or more “religious” things. (p. ix) Second, the thought-bubbles have *content*. Third, in so far as the content of the thought-bubble is a question, it can be *asserted* in the form of a proposition, which *raises the question of and commits one to the truth of the assertion at some level*. Recognizing these characteristics of our imagined scenario may help identify the theoretical contexts of many of the anthology's contributions and aid in implementing these contributions in the classroom.
- 8 To take Hanges' chapter eight as an example, we begin to see the way in which the category »founder-figure« is a *content* not so easily identifiable apart from the *someone* identifying individuals as »founder-figures«. In this sense, Hanges readily admits that his handling of the problems shared by the authors of different texts also serves to help *students* identify their own categorical presuppositions. (p. 150) As compared to Hanges' chapter 10, he shifts the importance away from the justifiability of *content* (from founder-figure to glossolalia) to an importance of identifying the *someone* doing the comparing (from the scholar/student to the apologetic Christian). Several authors touch on the »*commitment to truth at some level*« aspect in our imagined classroom context in, for example, mentioning the possibility or desirability of hypothesis testing – in short, what the »study« in »study of religion« means. Strenski seems to have few qualms about stating his position – »By »strong program« I understand that comparisons are devised for the sake of testing hypotheses.«(p. 278) Blasi's approach, on the other hand, seems to be more reserved. Regarding the importance he sees in developing inclusive, sensitizing concepts, Blasi adds, »such an approach stands in marked contrast to those who would »test« hypotheses to see whether they qualify as instances of a scientific »law«« (p. 10). Finally, from the fact that *someone* might have a *desire* to undertake a comparison, it need not follow that the *content* (comparative categories) are automatically justified. This observation is relatively obvious in almost all of the individual contributions of this book.

- 9 Thus, it should come as no surprise that in such an anthology certain background controversies in the study of religion will rise to the surface. It is ultimately the instructor's decision how he or she addresses the issues involved in the comparison of religion – a few of which are mentioned in this anthology. One can choose a combination of strategies ranging from bubble-bursting to bubble- appreciation. In light of this anthology, however, the instructor who focuses only on destroying comparative thought-bubbles does the student a great disservice, as does the instructor who leaves the comparative thought-bubbles unexamined.
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