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Scholarly Imaginations - and Modes of Their Comparability

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Abstract

Comparison, the study of religion and the name J.Z.Smith are inextricably linked. In spite of adversity, Smith defended the necessity of comparison in many of his contributions to the field, once known as Comparative Religion. This homage to Smith sketches a theoretical model of 4 domains of comparabilities which may further enhance the methodological awareness of scholars of religion.

Keywords

Comparison - comparative methodology - conceptual models - cultural posits – semantics - meaning

In his 1982 work, *Imagining Religion*, Jonathan Z. Smith stated that:

...there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982, p. xi)

Now, the history of comparative research on religion demonstrates that 'comparativists' have not always been aware that they work with imaginations or, even, 'fabrications'. In many of the ruminations that followed J.Z.Smith's earlier publications (1982; 1990) there was a 'misuse' of his ideas: The conviction that because it was all 'just' imagination on behalf of the scholar then subjectivity and relativism must reign - in the service of whatever one wishes to legitimate and safeguard (see e.g. Engler 2004, 298). Others, postmodernist scholars, for example, have critically emphasized the role of the comparative scholar as an external agent, an 'outsider', who has an agenda different from those whom she studies (Patton and Ray 2000, 1-5). Therefore, if or when those who are studied consider themselves unique (which is mostly the case concerning religions),

comparison may become abuse, misappropriation, symbolic violence or just plainly uninteresting. Some things then become incomparable, 'sui generis' and untranslatable - that is, not describable under any other frame of reference than its own original one. If that is so, however, then the scholarly enterprise itself is at peril, according to Smith who notes that this is '...to attack the possibility of translation itself, most often attempted through appeals to incommensurability. Such appeals, if accepted, must entail the conclusion that the enterprise of the sciences is, strictly speaking, impossible.' (2001, 144) Supporting Smith I shall defend the possibility of translating, comparing, generalizing and working with models and categories that are of our own making - without this leading to circularity, scepticism and methodological solipsism.

The theoretical object, the *genus* is 'religion' - just as 'language' and 'culture' serve as the theoretical object 'genera' of linguistics and anthropology. Each is a 'nominal, intellectual construction, surely not to be taken as a 'reality.' After all, there are no existent genera.' (Smith 2001, 142). The fact that our theoretical object is a construction does not mean that the particular subject matters disappear. On the contrary, it is by virtue of the construction that the subject matters become evidence in a research process.

I. Beyond imagination - these things are real

Thus, even if 'religion' is imagined, there are real things beyond the imagination: human practices informed by representations labelled 'religious' - depending on the chosen definition of 'religion'. (Jensen 2017) Many religious practices may also simultaneously be analysed under other frames of description, such as social practice, discourse, cognitive functions, economic and political action - many of these aspects are involved in the same complex interactions. Scholars of religion are (or should be) aware of this, but as scholars of religion they mostly analyse representations and actions which deal most directly with superhuman agents and related institutions (e.g. ritual purity and

dietary codes). These matters are as real as those studied by political scientists, economists, and others involved with things humanly made. Let this assuage the doubts about studying 'non-existent' entities.

For long, comparative approaches suffered criticism in the study of religion as either descriptively shallow or as considered apologetic in the service of an agenda (often itself religious). It was to Jonathan Z. Smith's honour that he stayed with the problems of comparative analysis and tried to solve them rather than abandon them. All scholars do comparative studies - even the most empirical and ideographical work consists in comparing A with B etc. So, the problems of comparison do not disappear simply by re-description; they are an inherent methodological problem (Detienne 2008). In response to these concerns some scholars have attempted to reclaim the legitimacy of comparison in the study of religion (e.g. Paden 2017). The present argument is a contribution to that re-legitimization of comparison and comparative analyses in the study of religion.

The questions of how and what we compare are closely tied to the question of what we can study *at all*. Already here it seems that there is no way to avoid comparison: First, comparison is a basic cognitive operation. The mind works by difference; but just how it does so we do not know (yet). Second, social and cultural systems work by difference - just think of systems of classifications or of language. Third, comparison is also a common scientific operation, being a combination of 1 and 2 above. In any science, comparisons of the models, maps, metaphors etc. make the world intelligible to us. The models, maps, and metaphors (etc.) have different epistemic and ontological status and so scientists and philosophers disagree on the issue. Comparison drives our cognitive inference-systems and it drives our scientific pursuits.

Part of the opposition against comparison of socio-cultural facts stems from their problematic ontology. They seem to belong to the natural (physical world) and yet they are also

mental and social phenomena. Football is a very physical phenomenon, but what about the rules of football without which the physical movements of bodies and balls would be meaningless? On the other hand, we have no difficulty in distinguishing various *kinds* of football and other sports from each other. Likewise with other behavioural complexes such as languages and games - they are easy to tell apart and to compare. And not because they are simply just physical or mental but because they are constituted by different rules. Social facts - of all kinds - are constituted by rules (Searle 2011).

II. The transcendental conditions of comparison

What do we compare when we compare - real empirical 'stuff' or our own imaginations? Imagine that we compare various instances of sacrifice or asceticism or some other item familiar to the study of religion, and then we find that we disagree. Now, we may discover that the points over which we disagree are not directly in the sources (e.g. texts), but that they are produced through models and concepts with various properties and *without which* the source materials would have said very little that was intelligible to us. Thus, we differ not over the directly observable empirical information in the sources but over aspects and properties of our models, concepts, and theories. The sceptical empiricist will reply that then we are not really analysing and comparing the sources but our own models and so our efforts are circular. Is that really true? If so, what is the solution to this? The tried (and largely discarded) positivistic method would suggest that we get rid of the models and concepts and let things 'speak for themselves' or go ask the 'believers' who are (to some) always right. These are not viable solutions. Something else must be done.

In reply, we grant the sceptical empiricist that it *is true* that we differ not over the *brute facts* but over our models of, say, sacrifice. Models derived from a theory by Marcel Mauss or Roy Rappaport obviously elicit differing aspects of the subject matter and of the models, but we do not

differ over the models only. Without the models we would not even know that we are arguing over ‘sacrifice.’ This only means that the models do their job and that without them there would be no point of the discussion. Models are *property-enhancing* in virtue of which bits of information are turned into manageable ‘chunks’ of knowledge. The objects of analysis come with properties that warrant their comparability, but these properties owe their existence to and are only discernable through the use of models and associated concepts from relevant theories. For any item of the world to be debatable, it must become a ‘cultural posit’, an entity that occupies a place in our terminology. Cognitive properties must also be transformed into cultural posits before they can become objects of comparison for scientists. Now, even non-existent (as far as we now) entities such as unicorns and the Homeric gods may become cultural posits that are meaningful in their own semantic universe - in spite of ‘massive referential decoupling’ from the natural world. The complex entities that we compare in the study of religion consist of cultural posits, meaningful entities produced and consumed by humans. Let it suffice for the moment to note that if cultural entities did not have some kind of ontology, this text would not be comprehensible. You would not even be in a position to disagree with it. Here, I focus on the properties which make socio-cultural entities comparable in comparative studies and claim that it is possible to construct a catalogue of ‘comparabilities’. I suggest we reduce the number of kinds, realms or domains of comparison that may go into the study of religion (and similarly in other human and social sciences...) to four, namely ‘form’, ‘function’, ‘structure’, and ‘meaning’. Probably imprecise, but ‘domain’ seems the most fortunate term so far.

III. The Domain of Form Comparability

This domain of comparability is relatively non-controversial as in the obvious aspects of ritual such as bodily movements, layout of sacred spaces or the number of gods represented at an ancestor worship altar. They may even, as they often do in religious representations, represent ‘non-things’,

that is, things imagined. One way to recognize unicorns is by their form: they have four legs and one horn... All forms of communication must have some kind of shape or substance, in order to be re-cognizable and become an object of thought. Concrete objects in mythical thought are examples of how abstract concepts are given material 'handles' so that they can be transformed into tangible objects for intersubjective exchange. Religious iconography and material culture are created in order to render the invisible visible. Ontogenetically, children's gradual mastery of associating properties and qualities with form help them along in their cognitive development. There is an analogue in cultural evolution, of which the first step might well be termed 'mimetic' (Donald 2001). Mimetic activity implies comparison and so culture, ritual and religion are built on im-and-explicit comparison as their epistemic foundation. Humans compare themselves with others all the time in social and physical self-evaluations.

IV. The Domain of Function Comparability

To this domain belong such 'entities' as influences, connexions, mechanisms, such as, for instance, the rules of syntax. Communication presupposes function, such as when religious concepts excite the cognitive systems, when metaphors link different domains, or the proper rites appease the ancestors. In brief: most 'things' (e.g., subjects, objects, actions) contribute to something. The aspect of function turns our attention to how things may influence and connect and what results from what. Communication is nothing if it does not function. Religious communication consists of or is related to actions that are either caused or causing - according to the explanatory procedures permitted in a given version of a worldview. It is by their function that we classify, e.g., healing rituals or aetiological myths.

Some functions are easily detected when responsible for something else coming into or going out of existence. Others only surface through meticulous analysis. What something *does* is

central to its role in any analysis. There is a deeply entrenched capacity in human cognition for detecting dynamics and objects exerting influence on others. The domain of function comparabilities is therefore a strong heuristic tool (although ‘function’ is an abstract metaphysical concept).

As an example: when the shaman finds the patient’s lost soul, then that is a function in a specific universe. The entire realm of ritual, symbolic exchange (e.g. in sacrifice) is composed of functional dynamics in the exchange or circulation of ritual objects between agents - human and super-human. The ‘do-ut-des’ formula is a prime example of such a functional mechanism: I give so that you will give - one function triggers (ideally) another function. Functions are thus dynamic, generally causal and bring about transformations of objects, agents, and situations.

Comparisons of components in meta-cognitive self-monitoring and moral appraisal are evidently socially and mentally functional (‘what you do unto others,’ etc.). The socially fundamental activities of ‘policing’ in- and out-group behaviour and detection of defector behaviour are clear examples of functional comparison in the cognitive and social domains.

V. The Domain of Structure Comparability

The domain of structure is slightly more problematic. Structures may be difficult to detect, they are often ‘hidden’ in the arrangement of things having perceptible form. For more obvious examples, think of the constellations of the stars or organizational diagrams of government institutions. More intricate are the deep-structures of languages and symbolic systems. Cognition and other mental functions are also structured, or they would not work. Communication requires structure as the ‘architectures’ of meaning depend on structural properties for their function. It would be ‘meaningless’ if it is not against a background that is structured: The moves made by chess players would be nonsensical and aimless without the structures provided by the systems of rules. Likewise,

social actions would be completely random and chaotic if not performed against a background of structured assumptions as to what counts as what. Structures are the arrangements or patterns of relations. Myths are structured, so are rituals and institutions. None of these could communicate anything sensible if not structured. In comparative analyses, the structures of, say, rituals may be made eminently comparable when depicted in diagrams. The examples given by Lawson and McCauley in their analysis of different types of rituals (1990) are eminent demonstrations of this.

VI. The Domain of Meaning Comparability

This is the most problematic domain of the four. ‘Meaning’ is a notoriously polyvalent word in the English language. It denotes such diverse matters as ‘purpose’, ‘intention’, ‘semantic import’, ‘reference’ and more. ‘Meaning’ is also an unwieldy notion in linguistics and philosophy, and thus a complicated one in the study of religion as well (see e.g. Jensen 2004; Engler and Gardiner 2017). In the present context it designates the ‘stuff’ without which information would be senseless. The domain of ‘meaning’ encompasses (at least) the following: the semantic domains of words, symbols, sentences, and discourse meaning; the modalities of the thought-of and lived-in worlds; the hermeneutics of human existence as mediated by signs and symbols; the sense and signification produced and contained in human intentionality in general and the symbolic products themselves as the materials ‘handled’ by our human cognitive mechanisms. ‘Meaning’ is what minds produce and exchange. Meaning is the matter circulated in social semantic ‘economies’.

The existence of semantic meaning depends on there being minds capable of producing it and therefore also on the cognitive abilities of humans. Cognition is deeply involved in language itself: there are many spatial and dynamic dimensions in our vocabulary, e.g. in how we can ‘understand’ and ‘com-pare’. In the study of religion meaning involves the semantic contents of utterances, actions and institutions which present inferential potential for humans, by evoking,

translating, and mapping between various domains of thought (e.g. in holy books and in rituals, as well as in the shaman's incantations, all contain meaning). Meaning is an abstract term, a shorthand designation for a cluster of mental processes and the qualities of the materials they process and exchange. Turning to Smith's note above on translation one may say that meaning is the 'stuff' that gets translated and so translatability (however difficult it may be) is a prime property of meaning. Conversely, semantic matters that are not translatable are probably not matters of meaning at all. Differences in translation attest to how easy it is for us humans to detect differences in the meaning domain - here, we may say that disagreement brings the point home: we so easily detect when we disagree. Children are extremely apt at telling one story from one another. Humans are semantically hypersensitive. Courtroom cases and differences in religious interpretations are prime examples. That is another reason for why it makes sense to operate with a 'meaning' domain in the comparative methodology.

Humans make sense. Human practice is made meaningful in language, in discourse and in narratives. Religions are, among many other 'things', modes of attributing meaning to the world. This view of religion as 'meaning making' is primarily intellectualist. When one studies these aspects of religions, it makes good sense to view religions in the manner of attribution theory and as ways and means to explain matters in the worlds lived-in and imagined. Religions make the world speak so that the cosmos becomes fit for human habitation by being converted into a 'conversation partner'. The items in the 'speaking world' of religion - myths, cosmologies, purity systems, rituals and institutions - are programs of action or acted programs that depend on the existence and deployment of narrative schemata. Narrative schemata are easily comparable - children can do it. So, the comparative study of religious subject matters may become de-mystified by turning the items for comparison into narrative schemata. What are, for instance the stories 'hidden' in a healing ritual or in a social institution such as marriage. These stories (narrative schemata) contain

the ‘meaning’ - the ‘aboutness’ - of the ritual or the institution. That is, socio-cultural discursive formations (such as rituals etc.) contain programs of intentionality because they are *about* something (Jensen 2004).

In religions, heaps of intentionality have been ‘stored’, or *deposited*, in religious narratives, concepts, artefacts and practices. It is because others have once deposited the meanings that these intentionality-saturated ‘objects’ contain that we are able to read them, interpret, explain, understand and act. The meanings deposited may be interpreted in many different ways, but that only means that they take on the existence of new and altered meanings for other to relate to - and only so after having been compared as to their semantic content.

When a religious tradition functions as a convention-maker humans compare and align their intentions and meanings with those of others in the same tradition and so minds inhabit a common descriptive *and* normative ‘space of reasons’ - as it was coined by Wilfrid Sellars (1963). That ‘space’ consists of the conceptual and behavioural webs of meaning that humans use to navigate in their world(s) intelligently. Human beliefs, attitudes and actions gain contents from the role they play in social interaction and religions have always provided (or been) such spaces of reasons for humans to operate in. Human intentionality is eminently social, so that: ‘We must take subjectivity and the concept of objectivity to emerge together, out of initiation into the space of reasons’ (McDowell 1996, 186) The human cognitive equipment only functions properly in shared language and a ‘form of life’. Meaning and intentionality can be distributed across populations and generations because humans have developed means by which to do so - in writing, stories, songs, rituals, material culture etc. That is why and how traditions exist and continue as on-going interpretive activities. Intentionality is thus not only individual and direct, but ever so much social as derived intentionality externalized in various media and so it may become ‘deposited’. Once so deposited it may be ‘downloaded’ or ‘retrieved’ in the interpretive activities that lead to

enculturation and become responsible for who we are and what we do. As Donald concludes in his analysis of ‘deep enculturation’: ‘Culture effectively wires up functional subsystems in the brain that would not otherwise exist.’ (2001, 212) This means that humans can direct their intentionality at much more than what ‘meets the eye’: they can break out of the solipsism of individual brains inside skulls. Humans may calibrate their immediate perceptive attention and share plans about what to do in ‘joint intentionality’. They conveniently adjust their intentions; when they ‘triangulate’, agree or disagree on something with someone, they do so in relation to a third factor, e.g. the cosmology of a religious tradition. Consequently, meaning is eminently public and not just subjective as a first intuitive impression may suggest. What we tend to take to be our very own individual subjective meanings in the head are internalizations of public meaning. Studies in developmental psychology and language acquisition show how this mastery of meaning is gradually achieved in ontogeny. The external properties of meaning provide the grounding for the comparisons of ‘meaning’ materials.

VII. Further thoughts

Here, I have attempted to break down the notions and activities of comparison in the study of religion (and, potentially, other cultural and social constructions) and the conclusion is in fact quite simple: The fear of comparison is unjustified. Comparison is what we do all the time and there should in principle be no difference between comparing matters related to religions and comparing menus in restaurants or the features of used cars. We always compare things that are mediated in language, in symbols, in concepts and in models, and what we can do with them depends on our theories. Our concepts and models are responsible for the questions we are able to ask and the answers we may get. If we did not have those concepts or models, say of ‘sacrifice’, we would have no comparison at all, at any rate not of anything that we could *consider* as ‘sacrifice’. Our concepts

and models are also ‘social facts’, because there are meanings attached to them concerning what counts, e.g., as ‘sacrifice’. This is how our concepts and models are partly constitutive of and *performative* in relation to the subject matters that we compare (Jensen 2009). We do not compare ‘things-in-themselves’. Certainly, the items we compare in the study of religion are the products of scholarly (and other) human activities and in that sense are they ‘made up’. But so are law, government, money and many others things that we consider real enough to worry about them (Searle 2011).

The issue of comparison has been ‘politicized’ from the very beginnings of the study of religion and muddled with theological and political agendas. Comparison certainly has a problematic history in the study of religion but that is not a justification for shunning it. On the contrary, there is all the reason to try to do it better and explain to ourselves and to others the reasons and motivations behind the comparative endeavours (Jensen 2003).

By focusing on the four domains of comparability scholars become more conscious of what they do, that is, avoid confusing form and content as was so often the case in early days of comparative religion (Jensen 2003, 45-72). By dissolving content into function, structure, and meaning we make it much more obvious to us what it is we are doing in our comparative endeavours. Finally, and that is to my mind the most important advance: by *demystifying* meaning we make it comparable. Meanings in religions, of whatever kind of medium they are ‘recorded’ in, are not some inaccessible, mysterious clouds of knowing, set apart for the initiates only. Religious subject matters and their associated meanings can be as banal or sophisticated as most other kinds of meanings. They can be described, explained, interpreted or compared in many ways. However, many of these ways will not be met with theological or political approval - but that is an entirely different story.

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