

Rehabilitating The Neglected ‘Similar’: Confronting The Issue Of Cross-Cultural Similarities In The Study Of Religions

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The purpose of this paper¹ is to argue for the methodological viability of cross-cultural comparative studies of myth and religion, particularly those which consider, or even focus on, similarities. As victims of a postmodern backlash, ‘comparison’ and ‘similar’ have almost become taboo words in the study of religions. So academically unfashionable has ‘comparative religion’ become that until a recent but tentative resurgence, it was all but superseded by research into single religious traditions in isolation. While I agree with many of the criticisms levied by comparison-sceptics,² I would also contend that the problem is not that comparison is an inherently naïve and flawed exercise: the problem is that comparative methodologies often are. In looking specifically at the issue of similarities, I will attempt to disentangle it from criticisms of comparison *per se*.

Perhaps the most common criticism of comparative research is that it has tended to ignore social and historical contexts in the search for grand, unified theories. This is (or was) often motivated by a highly idealized romantic universalism typified by figures such as Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade, among others. It is, in part, a reaction to universalist ideas that has all but driven the study of cross-cultural similarities out of the field. To suggest even that ‘religion’ itself might be universal is academically hazardous, let alone arguing that particular beliefs or practices are.³

Immediately we can discern two conflated arguments here: We should not compare – or we should only focus on differences – because comparative scholars look for similarities in order to bolster a universalist agenda. It is undeniable that many comparisons in the past have indeed

argued for a universalist interpretation, but this does not indicate that ‘comparison’ means the same thing as ‘looking for universals.’ Comparison itself does not dictate to researchers what they discover or their conclusions, as Robert Segal has cogently discussed;⁴ or even their overall methodology. It is their own theoretical frameworks, and their own scholarly and personal perspectives, interpretations, and indeed sometimes agendas. While it may be the case that personal universalist orientations have motivated some scholars to (consciously or otherwise) construct dubious similarities in order to support their theories or beliefs, it is also the case that comparison can lead to observations of genuine (dare I say objective) similarities (see below). The fact that such observations can then lead to arguments which favour universalism (in one or more of its many guises) as the most compelling explanation is beside the point. In other words, comparison and the observation of similarities are methods of enquiry, not theories or conclusions.

Comparative studies have also (often rightly) been criticized for assuming an evolutionist position, with Christianity in particular (and sometimes Abrahamic monotheism in general) being characterized as not only the normative standard by which all ‘other’ belief-systems are judged and found wanting, but the pinnacle of human religious thought with a monopoly on ‘truth.’ However, we cannot in the same breath criticize comparison for being evolutionist (promoting the exclusivity of religious ‘truth’) and universalist (promoting the inclusivity of religious ‘truth’). Claims that comparison is faulty for generally assuming historical connection or diffusion⁵ as an explanation for cross-cultural similarities adds a further element to the conundrum of generali-

zations about comparison: does it assume evolutionism? Or does it assume universalism? Or does it assume diffusionism? Because these are competing arguments, comparison cannot assume all three simultaneously.

In actuality, comparison doesn't assume anything (other than the existence of comparands), any more than not making comparisons assumes something. Making comparisons and not making comparisons are not theories in and of themselves – they are methods. Segal⁶ writes that criticisms of comparative studies of religion are often 'mischaracterizations either of the method or of the quest for knowledge itself,' clarifying that 'the comparative method is itself neutral.'⁷ While I would add here that the term 'comparative method' should be modified to the plural 'methods' in order to avoid implying that there is a single way of comparing, comparison indeed should be seen as a methodological tool, not a stance. As Segal adds, comparison 'dictates no one explanation and is compatible with any.'⁸ Comparison itself is an act, even a concept; though it is not the epiphenomena of an *-ism*.

The postmodern orientation, when it has allowed for comparison at all, has explicitly favoured difference. Some even consider the act of focusing on cross-cultural similarities to be politically incorrect, on the grounds that it allegedly denies individuality by ignoring the uniqueness of each tradition. It is, apparently, 'violating the integrity'⁹ of one religious tradition to suggest that it has things in common with another. Patton and Ray summarize the position of this extreme end of the anti-comparative campaign:

...to compare is to abstract, and abstraction is construed as a political act aimed at domination and annihilation; cross-cultural comparison becomes intrinsically imperialistic, obliterating the cultural matrix from which it 'lifts' the compared object. Thus, to compare religious traditions, particularly historically unrelated ones, or elements and phenomena within those traditions, is to attempt to control and ultimately destroy them.¹⁰

How this relates to those of us who undertake comparisons of ancient religions is unclear, for there is no possibility of using our academic imperialism to annihilate that which no longer exists. While this may seem a facetious remark, it is relevant in that it demonstrates clearly that the accusation cannot withstand scrutiny if it is applied to the act of comparison overall (as opposed to being used to critique individual cases). Furthermore, it should be noted that Western universalizing scholars do not have a monopoly on the observation of similarities: those with 'other' perspectives sometimes see similarities between the traditions of their own cultural background and 'alien' Christianity, as is evidenced by any number of non-Western syncretisms from Din-i-Ilahi to Baha'i to Haitian Vodou.¹¹ As with our other *-isms*, comparison is not by definition imperialism.

In response to such arguments, Wendy Doniger¹² makes the excellent point that too much focus on difference can be more damaging than focusing on similarities, because it can create or validate divisive categories of 'us' and 'them.' This can lead to far more serious consequences than post-Saïd Western academic guilt complexes, such as legitimizing religious intolerance and racism. As Doniger also points out, the original intent of the focus on similarities in comparative studies by people such as Eliade was, after all, to foster understanding of other cultures, partly through identification with one's own. It is not an 'injustice'¹³ to simply observe that the religions or mythologies of different cultures share similar concepts and themes. To say 'I am like you' or 'you are like me' or even 'you two are alike' is not necessarily an insult. In fact, such an observation can be seen as validation of each tradition's beliefs, as Huston Smith¹⁴ argues. And as Smart¹⁵ pointed out, while every culture is unique, 'it does not follow that we have no common feelings or perspectives.'

Nevertheless, Doniger¹⁶ also writes that similarities are mainly valuable as 'a useful base from which to proceed to ask questions about the differences.' She does not, however, provide a sound methodological or theoretical reason why it cannot be the reverse – why differences cannot be a

useful base from which to proceed to ask questions about similarities.

The position of 'difference' is so grave, in fact, that as Doniger¹⁷ has noted, it often undergoes linguistic Gallicization in order to convey its true postmodern import; the subtle nuances of *différence* apparently being untranslatable into English. In response, my argument here may be similarly loaded with the *gravité* of the French language by characterizing this exclusivity of focus on difference as a veritable *crainte des similitudes*.

Jonathan Z. Smith wrote that similarity is 'incapable of generating interesting theory.'¹⁸ Let us look at this statement in detail. The first difficulty is that Smith does not make explicit what he means by his use of the entirely subjective term 'interesting.' Even if we may disagree with the theories of Jung, Frazer, Levi-Strauss, or Eliade, we cannot fault their work simply on grounds of being 'uninteresting.' Indeed, even the works of the most 'discredited' of comparative scholars are 'interesting' (as well as important), even if only in that they gave rise to increased reflexivity in the field and have led to reconceptualizations of comparison.

The second problem is that I am not sure that Smith's perception of 'theory' in this case is something intended to explain a particular given set of data, or to answer a particular question relating to religions. Instead, it seems that Smith is considering theory to be something that exists for its own sake, as an end in itself – an abstract intellectual exercise rather than a tool in the service of explanation. It is not a 'practical' model in that it appears to be designed to reveal more about ourselves than to facilitate actual research which will help us to better understand religions. Of course, it is a matter of personal preference and interest whether one wishes to study religions, or whether one wishes to study the Study of Religions. The issue is perhaps that the concept of similarities simply does not facilitate the kind of scholarship which personally interests Smith. This, however, is not a compelling argument against anyone else focusing on similarities in comparative studies of religions.

Smith¹⁹ has also argued that the very act of comparison is a 'subjective experience.' Comparison 'is more impressionistic than methodical,' and is 'not science, but magic.'²⁰ Patton and Ray²¹ concur, characterizing comparison as an 'intellectually creative exercise' more akin to art than science. Again, this view presents various difficulties. While comparative studies may be imperfect in that they rely on the researcher's 'intuition' and are limited by his or her skills, knowledge, insight, powers of observation, and methodology,²² what form of scholarly endeavour (or even human endeavour) does not fit this description – including, of course, noncomparative studies of religions? Certainly there is always an element of creativity and imagination in the analysis of data. If postmodernism has taught us anything, it is the impossibility of an entirely neutral and value-free scholarship. Indeed, without individual interpretation and observation (both creative acts) we would have only description (which, as Smith rightly argues, is in itself interpretative and reliant on observation).

It does not, however, follow that objective similarities do not exist (as Doniger concurs²³); any more than it follows that objective differences do not exist. An acknowledgement of intellectual creativity by no means demonstrates that the identification of a cross-cultural parallel is by definition an entirely subjective experience, or entirely created by the mind of the scholar. Clear objective similarities can be discerned cross-culturally in many areas, and amply demonstrated phenomenologically, just as differences can. In this context, 'phenomenology' does not embody essentialist or other types of theories with which it is often associated, but is rather simply the method of attempting to empirically determine what is apparent in a text, image, etc. As with comparison and similarity, phenomenology is not by definition linked with a particular type of conclusion. If, for example, a phenomenological analysis of five texts from five different traditions contain, within the context of descriptions of afterlife experiences, references to a post-mortem evaluation of the earthly behaviour of the deceased,²⁴ it would be invidious to argue that this is a subjective scholarly fabrication, and

a wilful denial of the apparent for the sake of abstract (and abstruse) argument (and of course, it would be equally invidious to argue that the descriptions are exactly the same and wholly independent of their individual contexts). These descriptions are not only comparable (*anything* is technically ‘comparable’), they are directly analogous, thematically as well as phenomenologically (and in some cases, functionally). In contrast, a description of the perils which face souls of the dead in the ancient Egyptian *Coffin Texts* is clearly not analogous in any of these ways to a description of equestrian equipage from a 1906 Sears and Roebuck catalogue. While such an observation would seem self-evident to the point of absurdity to the etic guest observer of the subtle and arcane questions which occupy practitioners of the art/science of the Study of Religions, the point apparently needs to be made. It may be that similarities are *found* because one is looking for them (just as differences are), though this does not mean that the similarities themselves are dependent upon observation (Schrödinger’s Cat notwithstanding!). While *description* may be reliant upon observation/interpretation, *existence* is not. The comparison of religions is not an exact empirical science, though solipsism is not the inevitable alternative. In short, there has been no convincing argument for the usefulness of, or the logic behind a default theoretical or methodological primacy of difference over similarity.

Of course, what we identify as a similarity and what we identify as a difference is another matter for personal observation and interpretation. Again, this does not mean that similarities or differences do not exist, but rather that there are different levels of difference/similarity on which one might focus: structural (a myth, for example), thematic (the episodic components of the overall narrative), and symbolic (the specific way the thematic components are expressed).²⁵ Because similarity and difference are on a continuum, the definitions and boundaries of each term (or any others the scholar might use) must be determined by the individual according to the questions being asked.

Just as ‘comparison’ does not mean ‘looking for universals,’ by the same token ‘looking at

similarities’ does not mean ‘ignoring differences.’ As Carter²⁶ reminds us, the identification of similarities assumes the existence of differences. Put simply, without difference there could be no concept of similarity, for difference is (what we perceive to be) the norm which makes the similarities apparent. Inversely, the concept of ‘different’ is only comprehensible by reference to the concept of ‘similar.’ Each provides us with the opposing category, and therefore with the tools which enable us to organize and interpret our data. Indeed, both similarities and differences can only be adequately *explained* with reference to each other. As Paden²⁷ stated, ‘True comparative sensibility is held captive neither by particulars nor universals...’

Perhaps one of the reasons comparative studies have so often focused on similarities is that the dissimilarities are so vast as to be almost incalculable. We are not surprised, for example, to find that the Egyptian god Osiris does not judge the Vedic Indian dead; or that the Sumerian goddess Inana does not descend to the Chinese Yellow Springs to play a Maya underworld football game with a decapitated head. These kinds of culture-specific differences are unsurprising, to say the least. Considering similarities is not to deny uniqueness, but rather to take it for granted. In fact, it is the vastness and expectedness of differences that makes the similarities potentially significant. It is precisely because of this that differences can be ‘a useful base from which to proceed to ask questions about similarities.’ While the fact that differences occur is mundane, the very existence of similarities demands explanation, for it means that the belief or phenomena in question cannot be explained solely by reference to the given culture’s own belief context. This does not mean that interpretation of similarities (or differences) is dependent on any particular theoretical *-ism* (just as comparison itself is not). The presence of similarities does not dictate what conclusions will be drawn from them. Indeed, options do include the currently dreaded universalism and diffusionism, but also more fashionable reductionist explanations based on cognitive theory or social/environmental constructivism (both of which, incidentally, also rely

on some sort of universalism), as well as theoretically eclectic approaches.²⁸

In addition, the purpose of looking at similarities need not always be to explain why they exist, as Freidenreich has amply demonstrated.²⁹ Sharma's³⁰ 'reciprocal illumination' model, Doniger's recontextualization (despite her main interest being difference)³¹ among others have demonstrated alternative ways in which considering similarities in comparative studies can be fruitful.

In conclusion, the concepts of 'similarity' and 'difference' are methodological problems and not inherently theoretical ones (in the sense that they are not, by definition, dependent on an association with any particular theory). The use to which one puts these categories, and whether one's research question concerns historical connection, universalism, recontextualization or whatever, is a matter of individual scholarly orientation. It is possible to explore any and all of these areas responsibly, as long as it is done with a sound and explicit theory and methodology which acknowledges the most important lesson learned from the postmodern critique of comparison: the importance of an awareness of context, both of our data and of ourselves.

While many criticisms of particular cross-cultural comparisons and their methodologies are valid, the critical reaction has sometimes been over-corrective and unproductive. I would argue that the neglect and scorn of similarities because of political orientation or theoretical bias – this *crainte des similitudes* – is bad scholarship and bad science. Similarities and differences must both be taken into account, for examining half the data can only result in the formulation of half a theory. Of course, the extent to which we engage with one or the other depends upon the questions being asked.

¹ The ideas and arguments in this article were developed for my book *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience* (Continuum, Advances in Religious Studies, London & New York, 2009), where they are explored further and put to practical use.

- ² For a summary, see Patton, K.C. & B.C. Ray, "Introduction" in K.C. Patton & B.C. Ray (eds.) *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-modern Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. P. 1-19.
- ³ Martin, L., "Of religious syncretism, comparative religion and spiritual quests" in: A.W. Geertz & R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religions*. Leiden: Brill, 2000. P. 277-286.
- ⁴ Segal, R.A. (2001). "In defense of the comparative method." *Numen*, No. 48, p. 348
- ⁵ Smith, J.Z., "The 'end' of comparison: redescription and rectification" in: K.C. Patton & B.C. Ray (eds.) *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-modern Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. P. 237.
- ⁶ Segal, "In defense of the comparative method." P. 339.
- ⁷ Ibid. P. 349.
- ⁸ Ibid. P. 373.
- ⁹ Kobber, A.J.F., "Comparativists and non-comparativists in anthropology" in: R. Narroll & R. Cohen (eds.), *A Handbook of Methodology in Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973. P. 190.
- ¹⁰ Patton and Ray (2000), op. cit., P. 2.
- ¹¹ This idea will be explored further in a paper entitled, 'A world theology or western imperialist construction?: syncretism, universalism and cross-cultural emic perceptions of etic "sacreds"' (in progress).
- ¹² Doniger, W., "Minimyths and maximyths and political points of view" in: L.L. Patton & W. Doniger (eds.), *Myth and Method*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996. P. 109.
- ¹³ Kobber, "Comparativists and non-comparativists." P. 190.
- ¹⁴ Smith, H., "Methodology, comparisons, and truth." In K.C. Patton & B.C. Ray (eds.), *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-modern Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2000. P. 177, 180.
- ¹⁵ Smart, N., *Dimensions of the Sacred: Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. P. 6.
- ¹⁶ Doniger, "Minimyths and maximyths." P. 109.
- ¹⁷ Doniger, W., *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. P. 71.
- ¹⁸ Smith, "The 'end' of comparison." P. 237.
- ¹⁹ Smith, J.Z., *Imagining Religion*. Chicago University Press, 1982. P. 22.
- ²⁰ Smith, "The 'end' of comparison." P. 239.

- ²¹ Patton & Ray "Introduction." P. 4.
- ²² Smith, *Imagining Religion*. P. 23.
- ²³ Doniger, *The Implied Spider*. P. 76.
- ²⁴ Shushan, G., *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience*. London: Continuum Advances in Religious Studies, 2009. P. 146-7; 159
- ²⁵ See Doniger, *The Implied Spider*. P. 88 on the various systems of classifying elements of myth; and Shushan *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations* (P. 154-7; 200-201) for a revised system.
- ²⁶ Carter, J., "Comparison in the history of religions: reflections and critiques." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16(2004). P. 3-11.
- ²⁷ Paden, W., "Universals revisited: human behaviours and cultural variations." *Numen* 48(2001). P. 276-89.
- ²⁸ Shushan, *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations*, P. 20-1; 194-201.
- ²⁹ Freidenreich, D.M., "Comparisons compared: a methodological survey of comparisons of religion from 'A Magic Dwells' to 'A Magic Still Dwells.'" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16 (2004). P. 80-101.
- ³⁰ Sharma, A. *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination*. SUNY, 2005.
- ³¹ Doniger, *The Implied Spider*.

Biography

Dr. Gregory Shushan is author of *Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience* (Continuum Advances in Religious Studies, 2009). He has been Visiting Lecturer in Religious Studies at University of Wales Lampeter, Lecturer in the Study of Religions at University College Cork, guest lecturer in Anthropology of Religions at Swiss University, and Research Fellow at the Centro Incontri Umani (The Cross Cultural Centre) at Ascona, Switzerland. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford, researching comparative afterlife beliefs in indigenous religions worldwide in the context of shamanic and near-death experiences. The project is supported by a grant from the Perrot-Warrick Fund, Trinity College, Cambridge.

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