Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology

Comparison Revisited

Editor(s): Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Andreas Nehring

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Review

Interreligious comparisons have been an interesting subject for both religious individuals and academics. The language of comparison has been contested by almost all who rely upon it, from some Western scholars who started such comparisons at the turn of the twentieth century, to phenomenologists and postmodernists. This range of disparate views on the subject was probably what prompted the small expert symposium organized by the “Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology” section of the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie in Berlin in May 2013. This
symposium mainly “discussed Arvind Sharma’s concept of ‘reciprocal illumination’ and Arvind Sharma himself participated in the lively discussions” (ix). Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology includes participants in this symposium, but also contributors who were not a part of it.

The editors, Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring, succinctly introduce the subject with a brief overview of the development of interreligious comparisons and then pinpoint its present challenges. Explaining that interreligious comparisons were almost abolished due to postcolonial and postmodern influences, Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring emphasise that the problem now is “whom or what to compare” (4). They hold Sharma’s method, in which “comparison should be done in such a way that through comparison, the compared data will appear in a new light that the data themselves shed upon each other,” to be “promising” (6).

Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology is divided into three sections: “Comparison: Contestation and Defence,” “Phenomenology and the Foundations of Comparison,” and “Reciprocal Illumination and Comparative Theology.” Each section has four chapters. The first section begins with Paul Hedges’s “Comparative Methodology and the Religious Studies Toolkit.” Hedges is confident that “we can restore comparative methodology once again to its rightful place within the interdisciplinary toolkit of the scholar of religion” (17). Discussing the conclusions of various scholars of comparative religions and phenomenology, he ends by making “a manifesto call for a return to careful and mature comparative analysis as central to religious studies” (29). The second chapter of the first section is “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion” by Michael Bergunder, who juxtaposes comparative religion and historicity, concluding that in order to properly compare religions, we need to increase research on global religious history.

Oliver Freiberger’s “Modes of Comparison: Towards Creating a Methodological Framework for Comparative Studies” is the third chapter of the first section. Analyzing the common styles of comparing religions, Freiberger holds that illuminative and taxonomic modes of comparison are the most promising, concluding “that an overemphasis on particularity seems just as unsatisfactory as an overemphasis on generalization” (64). The fourth and last chapter of the first section is Philippe Borete’s “Comparison as a Necessary Evil: Exemples from Indian and Jewish Worlds.” Borete surveys various approaches to religious comparison. He asserts that comparison could be used as an effective “tool for ‘de-provincializing’ the study of religions” (85). However, he cautions “comparison is ... a highly risky intellectual operation that needs to be carefully constructed and closely controlled” (86).

In the first chapter of the second section, Nehring explores the question “Camouflage of the Sacred: Can We Still Branch Off from Eliade’s Comparative Approach?” Nehring revisits Mircea Eliade’s approach to comparing religions, focusing in particular on “consciousness as the locus of the sacred and the profane” (100). He concludes that we should consider Eliade “as a religious thinker whose foremost aim was not academic in orientation” (107). Kenneth Rose’s “The Singular and the Shared: Making Amends to Eliade after the Dismissal of the Sacred,” the second chapter of the second section, is another attempt to reassess Eliade. Rose makes a pertinent point when he remarks: “Although these foundational masters of religious studies have been relegated to the sidelines in recent decades, it may be time for the discipline of religious studies ... [to take up] once again the search for the universal elements of human religiosity and spirituality while avoiding a crudely reductionistic and dehumanizing worldview” (122). The third chapter of this section, Gavin Flood’s
"Religious Practice and the Nature of the Human," focuses on "a materialism that is non-reductive because of the insistence upon a hermeneutical [sic] with neuro-cognition" (138). Flood is clear that if "religions are important to human communities ... then comparative religion as a critical discipline is important in understanding these cultural forms as stemming from brain processes that accompany religious practices and in recognizing the inevitable sociality of human cognition" (139). In the fourth chapter of the section, Fabian Völker discusses "On All-Empacing Mental Structures: Towards a Transcendental Hermeneutics of Religion."

"Comparative Theology and Comparative Religion" by Klaus von Stosch is the first chapter of the third section. Von Stosch calls for a concrete methodology for comparative theology if it is to succeed. Sharma's "Reciprocal Illumination" is the second chapter of this section. Here, Sharma clarifies his concept of "reciprocal illumination" by giving three examples: a comparison between an orphaned boy-ascetic and the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi/Chuang-Tzu; a comparison between Elijah and Mahatma Gandhi; and how various points of interest correlate on the mysterious nature of the origins of the universe. The third chapter in this section, Ulrich Winkler's "On Creativity, Participation and Normativity: Comparative Theology in Discussion with Arvind Sharma's Reciprocal Illumination," argues that Sharma's approach does not give due importance to postcolonial and cultural studies and that therefore it could be useful to "reflect on normativity and identity as markers of the borders between comparative theology and religious studies" (200). This section's fourth chapter by Schmidt-Leukel focuses on "Christ as Bodhisattva: A Case of Reciprocal Illumination." In sum, this volume is a contemporary and in-depth study of issues in interreligious comparisons and an impetus for new studies of this topic.

About the Reviewer(s):
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