BRINGING THE SACRED DOWN TO EARTH

Adventures in Comparative Religion

Corinne G. Dempsey

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ICELANDIC AND INDIAN LANGUAGE NOTES

The Icelandic alphabet contains several letters not included in the (modern) English alphabet. I have chosen to keep original spellings of Icelandic names and words because letter variations are few and simple to learn. Furthermore, if (non-Icelandic) readers adhere to the following guide, pertinent to the Icelandic words used in the chapter 4, they will not only get the pronunciation right but also duly impress all their Icelandic friends.

á	*ow*, as in *cow*
é	*ye*, as in *yes*
æ	*i*, as in *like*
ei	*ay*, as in *way*
ö	*e*, as in *bed*, but with rounded lips
ð	soft *th*, as in *father*
f	*v*, as in *vase*
j	*y*, as in *yes*
þ	hard *th*, as in *thick*

To accommodate readers not familiar with Indian languages, I have chosen to anglicize rather than apply standard transliteration to Sanskrit and Tamil words. Although this system is not foolproof, it manages to simplify while keeping proper pronunciation fairly intact.

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Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth

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Introduction

Adventures and Misadventures in Comparison

This book's comparison of religious phenomena will seem, to some, an innocent enough endeavor. To others, its juxtapositions of Hindu and Christian traditions, many of which exist on opposite sides of the planet, represent a leap, with faith, into a disciplinary minefield. One side of this debate has argued for decades that comparison is an outmoded, politically troubled approach to the human sciences. Opponents, represented by a growing number of religion scholars, are recently "writing back" in comparison's defense, both ameliorating and rejecting their critics' concerns, asserting the invaluable merits of a readjusted, new comparativism.

Just days before I started writing this introduction I overheard a passionate exchange that spoke to me about the ways this book, broadly speaking, engages the comparative religion debate. I was walking home from campus one afternoon and passed a solid wooden fence lining one of our neighbor's yards. I could hear voices just behind the fence belonging to two children I know to be around six or seven years old who seemed to be setting down ground rules for a freelance game. Just as I was opposite them on the other side of the fence, one of the children loudly established, with authority, "This here [which I couldn't see] is magic." After a brief pause, another voice said, rather indignantly, "*Everything* can't be magic." Seemingly having anticipated this complaint, the original voice shot back, "Oh yes it can!" I did not hear the rest of the argument as I kept on walking, chuckling to myself (although now I wish I'd slowed my pace).

It occurred to me as I neared my house, my mind switching back to this introduction, that this debate about magic, featuring the sticky issues of what is perceived as such and who gets to decide, could be extended and applied to this book on two levels: to the comparative method that gives it shape and to the topic of religion and the sacred that founds its substance.[1] Similar to the over-the-fence argument, current critique of the comparative method often rests on questioning the authority presumed in determining what will and will not (magically) be compared. At what point is the power conferred on those who perform seemingly whimsical comparisons overdetermining if not oppressive to those whose practices and beliefs she brings into her charmed circle? On the other hand, similar to the voice that insists that everything can indeed be magic, new comparison advocates argue that comparison is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human activity and thought. The question then becomes not whether we should compare but, in comparing, how we can do so transparently and responsibly. How do we choose among infinitely available points of comparison such that the process advances rather than predetermines or undermines our knowledge of religious phenomena? Depending on how comparisons are conceived and executed, the game need not be unfair, uninteresting, or over.

The second way this book echoes the over-of-the-fence argument has to do with the problem of religious (and other) authorities' designations of the category of the sacred. The following chapters investigate understandings of where and how the sacred resides, who has the authority to decide, and whether such decisions are fair—all written in the knowledge that definitions of and access to the sacred are eternally precarious, at best. Under scrutiny are official religious, political, and epistemological processes that keep the sacred at least partially out of reach from the general populace, abstracted and disembodied in ways that make them irrelevant to if not neglectful of earthly realities. Working at cross purposes, described in each of the volume's chapters, are religious contexts that attend to material needs, confer sacred access to a wider public, and imbue land and bodies with sacred meaning and power. This process of grounding the sacred is enabled by folklore figures, democratizing theologies, newly sanctified land, and extraordinary human abilities. Like the voices on the other side of the fence, this book narrates how the disposition and location of the sacred is not only hotly contested, given its potency, but can also shift depending on who is calling the shots.[2] For some the sacred must, by its very nature, be closely sequestered and beyond the solid grasp of all but a select few. For others, although *everything* cannot be sacred, neither should it be unavailable to or beyond the reach of those who faithfully wish, or need, to engage.

These dual debates—reflecting the method and structure of this book—emerge as a two-pronged rebuttal to two similarly constructed scholarly critiques. A complaint often lodged against the comparative approach, as I soon elaborate, is that it conjures and imposes abstracted categories that too often erase culturally embedded distinctions and realities. Likewise, critics of religion often note how religious systems impose on adherents spiritualizing abstractions that deflect and neglect material needs and realities. As both sets of critics have it, scholarly comparison and religion, imposed from above, easily lend themselves to imperialistic structures of oppression. It is no surprise that, as frameworks that name and claim varieties of power, both are often guilty as charged. Yet by working contextually—and perhaps brazenly—across religious and cultural divides, the following chapters demonstrate instances in which concepts and performances of the sacred, when brought down to earth, can dismantle such impositions and abstractions.

The horizontal and vertical leaps forming the weave of this book thus offer challenges to top-heavy power dynamics in purported spheres of anathema. Each chapter contains a comparative case study that turns on its own axis of discovery and analysis, exploring contests for naming and claiming the sacred from different angles and in a variety of settings. Working from a range of sources, employing a variety of approaches, each undertakes comparison to reveal instances in which religious expressions and experiences engage with rather than ignore earthly existence. Each chapter ultimately demonstrates comparison's potential to shed light on angles and contours otherwise obscured within particular religious contexts and, in the process, suggests possibilities for bridging human contingencies and perceptions across religious, cultural, and disciplinary divides.

COMPARATIVE RELIGION AND ITS CRITICS

In the beginning, comparative religion was synonymous with the field of religious studies.[3] From its inception in the mid- to late 1800s, one of the expressed aims of religious studies as a discipline was to bring all religions—including those outside Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that is, those previously labeled "pagan"—on equal footing through the process of comparison. Contrasting what he understood to be the objectivity of this new discipline with the religious bias of theology, Max Müller championed a "Science of Religion" that was to be based on methods of comparison.[4] Müller considered it impossible to understand any religion's deities, myths, and rituals unless they were put in cross-cultural context, juxtaposed with other deities, myths, and rituals. In this spirit, he famously remarked about religion: "He who knows one, knows none."[5]

Although comparative religion set its sights differently than theology, its aim to be value neutral and non-Christian-centric seems to have missed its mark significantly from the start. Informed by Darwinian-Spencerian theories of evolution popular at the time, the comparative approach hinged upon classifying religions on an evolutionary scale from primitive to civilized, inferior to superior, in which Christianity, the normative template from which the category "religion" arose, typically fared well.[6] Furthermore, the data early scholars used for their comparisons were gleaned largely from interactions between European colonizers and the "pagan" or "primitive" societies they managed. Although these scholars of religion did not typically identify with colonial frontiers or imperial centers, the emerging understanding of global religious systems nonetheless was informed by sources and methodologies that reflected racist presumptions.[7]

Although Protestant Christianity managed well in the evolutionary ordering of early religion scholars, comparative religion was often accused of an anti-religion, anti-Christian bias. The rise of the field coincided with nineteenth-century scientific breakthroughs that, for many, threatened religion's validity, often putting religion advocates on the defensive. The fact that comparative religion identified itself, at the start, as a science that relied heavily on Darwinian methodology made it appear to some as though the field had positioned itself as an enemy to religion. Comparative religion's task of identifying shared patterns of belief and practice among all religions, including nonmonotheistic traditions, also challenged for some the uniqueness, and therefore the validity, of Christianity. This uneasiness held considerable sway up into the middle of the twentieth century, prompting Joachim Wach, founder of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, to defend the comparative approach to religious studies in a 1935 address, republished in 1965 as the introduction to the seminal volume *The History of Religions*. Here, Wach reassures his audience of the merits of comparison for enhancing religious loyalties:

> To observe the multiplicity of religious life and of religious expression, to discover similarities and relationships, need not, as some fear, have a sobering or paralyzing effect on one's own religiosity. On the contrary, it could become a support and an aid in the battle against the godless and estranged powers; it ought to lead to the examination and preservation of one's own religious faith. (Wach 1965: 4)[8]

Wach's faith-friendly view was shared, but in a different form, by his successor at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential comparativists of the twentieth century who received critique from the other side of the fence. Like Müller before him, Eliade felt that essential to the study and understanding of religion was the comparison of religious phenomena—the irreducible core of which, for Eliade, was the element of the sacred (Eliade 1958: xiii). Eliade categorized and organized a wide range of religious data into cross-cultural studies that, unlike some of his predecessors' work, were intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive; phenomena he identified as sacred were not meant to be ordered as superior or inferior, but could be investigated without resorting to judgment. Although Eliade's comparisons were designed to reveal the sacred as perceived by practitioners, colleagues criticized his purportedly "scientific" study for appearing to advocate for the recovery of sacred values. Eliade indeed believed that comparative religion had the potential to bring about a second Renaissance of sorts, allowing new, non-Western ideas to influence Western culture and self-understanding.[9]

The most recent charges leveled against comparativism arise from postmodern and postcolonial perspectives that, unlike earlier critiques, have threatened the very existence of comparison as a viable means for studying religions. At very least, these criticisms have altered the course of the field forever. Here, the list of charges against comparativism can be boiled down to accusations that it creates uncontextualized, abstracted categories that lead to essentialism and intellectual imperialism. In the wake of these accusations, comparative religion has often found itself on the sidelines, dismissed by scholars both within and outside the discipline, vanished from graduate programs in favor of more narrowly focused area-studies research into specific religious texts and communities (Patton and Ray 2000: 1, 3; Patton 2000a: 153).

Reminiscent of the fact that comparative religion's origins can be traced to colonial frontiers, a core critique of comparativism today is of intellectual imperialism, a process that imposes universal categories that distort or disregard locally embedded meanings and differences. Somewhat like the earlier religiously generated discomfort with what was felt to be comparativism's neglect of crucial religious differences, this more recent critique asserts an obligation to recognize cultural particularities.[10] As Wendy Doniger notes, contemporary critics who consider comparison to be politically rather than religiously problematic find that, in this era of "multinationalism and the politics of individual ethnic and religious groups, of identity politics and minority politics, to assume that two phenomena from different cultures are 'the same' in any significant way is regarded as demeaning to the individualism of each, a reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that 'all wogs look alike'" (Doniger 2000: 64).[11]