



Breaking the Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Research Approaches & Methods

The Comparative Method in Religious Studies

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Abstract: This paper discusses the usage of the Comparative Method in religious studies. The Comparative Method is employed in academic study by many different disciplines, such as the natural sciences of physics and biology, to name but a few. However, the effectiveness of the Comparative Method has been debated in the discipline of religious studies. The main criticism is that the Comparative Method is only interested in similarities and either ignores or downplays differences. For this reason, critics such as J Z Smith have argued that the usage of the Comparative Method should be revised in religious studies. Scholars, such as Smith, have argued that differences, as well as similarities, ought to be considered. Nevertheless, this paper will present the argument that that the objections to the Comparative Method are based on misunderstandings. Firstly, it will be put forward that seeking differences does not provide a methodological advantage. The discipline of religious studies aims to study religion scientifically. This can only be accomplished via generalisation and in turn, by seeking similarities. If differences are considered, in addition to similarities, generalisation becomes difficult, if not impossible, in the discipline of religious studies. Secondly, it will be explained that only seeking similarities does not necessitate the denial of differences. The paper will discuss most traditional users of the Comparative Method are concerned with similar human needs, rather than the similarity of religions; therefore most traditional users of the Comparative Method have no issue accepting differences. Additionally, generalisations made by the Comparative Method can be



revised if they fail. The paper concludes that the objections to the Comparative Method are unjustified.

Keywords: Comparative Method, Religion.

1 The Comparative Method and Other Schools of Thought

1.1 Particularism

The Comparative Method has long been used throughout the academic world in many different disciplines. For example, biologists are able to categorise animals through comparing and cross-referencing animals' DNA. It is only by comparing two dogs from different parts of the world, that they can be classified as belonging to the same species. In the absence of comparison, any similarity between them is written off as coincidence.

Subsequent theorists have attempted to take a similar approach in the discipline of religious studies. Such scholars maintain that laws which govern the human mind and society can be inferred by comparing the similarities existing within cultures (Satlow, 2005). Scholars of religion who adopt this approach are referred to as Comparativists (Segal, 2001). Comparativist approaches are interested in the similarities which exist between different religions. They maintain that a common origin and function can be assigned for all religions, regardless of their geographic location. Furthermore, scholars of religion maintain that religion can be explained in the same way as natural laws (Roscoe, 2008). Physical laws are posited by scientists to account for natural phenomena (Hempel, 1966). Certain scholars maintain that religion can be understood similarly (Satlow, 2005).

Such scholars maintain that religion arises as a result of human needs. In maintaining this, scholars of religion assume naturalistic and thus non-religious explanations. Adherents of religion often presuppose religious and thus supernatural explanations for their religion's origin. Conversely, a scholar of religion may also



presuppose non-religious explanations and in turn naturalistic causes of religion (Segal, 2018). Before going any further, it should be noted that scholars studying religion are not concerned with any religion's truth (Segal, 2018). They are instead concerned with the question of why humans become religious and why they remain religious. A religion's truth is a matter to be dealt with by philosophers and theologians, rather than scholars of religion. Such scholars are thus concerned with the origin and function of religion as a phenomenon. They maintain that all religions can be explained as originating and persisting as a result of similar causes, despite historic and geographic differences (Segal, 2018). These causes can be similarities in human nature or environment.

For example, consider Durkheim's theory of religion. Religion, for Durkheim, functions to unify society (Durkheim, 1915). All religions, according to Durkheim are based on drawing a distinction between the Sacred and the Profane (Durkheim, 1915). The Sacred consists of anything that is set apart from and valued by society. This, for example, can consist of a certain object such as a statue, or a certain animal such as a rabbit. The Profane, on the other hand, consists of individual concerns. A group system is consolidated when something sacred is revered. The individual members of a religion feel united when sharing a common faith (Durkheim, 1915). They are united, in the sense that they form part of a moral community. The shared beliefs and practices of religion reinforce members' relationships to one another (Durkheim, 1915).

All religions, for Durkheim, function to preserve connections in society by consolidating beliefs and practices. For example, consider Durkheim's study of totemism. Totemism is the worship of a specific animal or plant, which is believed to be the totem (ancestor) of the tribe. Members of the rabbit clan would, for example, have the rabbit as their totem. According to Durkheim's analysis, members of the tribe are unified because they share the same beliefs about the totem. Members of the tribe thus feel connected to one another, as they believe that they are all descended from the same totem. It is by sharing the same beliefs and practices, that religion helps to consolidate society (Durkheim, 1915). Religions are similar, for Durkheim, because each originates to fulfil the human need to unify society (Durkheim, 1915). For Comparativists such as Durkheim, similarities between religions are taken as evidence for the common need that religion serves, regardless of location.



Another school of thought is Particularism (Segal, 2001). Whereas Comparativism emphasises similarities, Particularists, by contrast, emphasise differences (Segal, 1999). Particularists maintain that every myth or ritual is bound by cultural context. Particularists, therefore, argue that any myth or ritual can only be understood on an individual, rather than on a comparative, basis.

Historically, the academic study of religion has focused on Christianity and chiefly on the Protestant branch. Hence, most nineteenth century theories applied the Abrahamic understanding of religion, when investigating other religions. For example, the Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto defined religion as the experience of the Holy. The Holy is experienced in such a way that it is removed from the physical world. For Otto, religion is defined as an experience of the transcendent, where the numen is “felt as objective and outside the self.” (Otto, 1924). In modern times, however, this approach to religious studies has been regarded as problematic. Although this definition may find ground among Abrahamic religions, it would not fare well among Eastern religions. For example, Buddhists aim to achieve Nirvana in order to experience nonduality with the world, rather than contact with a higher realm (Comstock, 1972: 24). Particularists, such as Mark C Taylor, therefore, argue that Particularism is a preferable approach as Comparativism has historically either ignored or misdescribed the context of non-Western cultures (Taylor, 1998).

Particularists maintain that the similarities deciphered by Comparativists are “vague and superficial” (Segal, 2021: 2-3). This is not to say that Particularists deny similarities; most Particularists accept that some similarities remain, even after differences have been explicated. Even so, Particularists regard similarities as too vague to be considered important.

Although Particularists emphasise differences between cultures, they are, by no means, opposed to comparison. Like Comparativists, Particularists also employ the Comparative Method. However, whereas Comparativists compare, looking only for similarities, Particularists, instead, look for differences. In Taylor’s (1998: 14) words:

“The challenge of effective comparison is to find a mean between these extremes which allows interpreters to understand differences without erasing them.”



1.2 Postmodernism

One branch of Particularism is Postmodernism. Not all Particularists are Postmodernists. However, all Postmodernists are Particularists. According to Postmodernists, Comparativists are only interested in similarities and therefore either deny differences or downplay them (Taylor, 1998).

Postmodernists maintain that each religion has its own unique context, and any religion can only be studied within the context of the culture in which it was created. Therefore, from a Postmodernist perspective, any search for similarities is bound to either ignore or minimise the differences between Western religions and non-Western religions. As Taylor (1998: 15) writes:

“The very effort to establish similarities where there appear to be differences is, in the final analysis, intellectually misleading and politically misguided.”

Furthermore, Postmodernists argue that Comparativists’ focus on similarities presupposes that each religion can be grouped under a definition that is common to all religions (Taylor, 1998). Opponents point out that the evidence reveals there is no common definition which can fit every religion. One of the best examples of this can be seen in J Z Smith’s discussion of Eliade’s theory of religion. Although Smith himself was not a Postmodernist, his views are widely cited by Postmodernists, in defence of their approaches (Taylor, 1998).

2 New Comparativism – J Z Smith

2.1 Smith’s critique of Eliade’s theory of the Sacred

Mircea Eliade defines religion as the experience of the Sacred. For Eliade, all religious entities such as gods and angels originate from what he terms ‘the Sacred’. The Sacred can never be understood directly, but can only be comprehended through its various manifestations within different religions. Religions and myths, according to Eliade, function as ways to manifest and experience the Sacred within the material world (Gill, 1998). Time, for Eliade, is divided into the Sacred and the Profane. Profane time is the type of time that is familiar and natural. Sacred time, by contrast, does not pass; it



is eternal (Babuts, 2014). Eliade maintains that myth and religion function manifest and enable experience of the Sacred within the world. The world and man's actions become significant and meaningful through re-enacting the sacred event (Eliade, 1959). As Eliade (1957: 23) puts it:

“In imitating the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythical hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time.”

Myth, in Eliade's view, is a narrative which recounts a sacred history, re-enacted by religion. To read, hear, or re-enact a myth, is to be mystically transported back to the time in which the myth took place (Eliade, 1959). Adherents are transferred back to the origin of the myth. Humans, thus, become reconnected with their sacred origin. This results in a cosmic regeneration which in turn provides meaning to their existence. In Eliade's analysis, the strongest place is the centre. It is the place which gives orientation to all space. Structurally, the centre can have no other valuation than sacredness since it is the locus of all creative and therefore religious activity, both divine and human. Sacred space is thus focused upon and is oriented by the sacred centre (Gill, 1998).

As an example, Eliade analyses the Aboriginal Australian Tjilpa (referred to by Eliade as the Achilpa) myth of the origin of the totem pole. According to Tjilpan mythology, the totem pole originated from the god Numbakula. After crafting a sacred pole from a gum tree, Numbakula anointed it with blood. Thereafter, Numbakula climbed up the sacred pole, into the skies. In Eliade's view, the “pole represented a cosmic axis, for it is around the sacred pole that territory becomes habitable, hence becomes transformed into a world.” (Eliade, 1959).

The pole, Eliade argues, enabled the Tjilpa to connect the heavens to the earth (Smith, 1987). This explains why the Tjilpa always carry it with them during their wanderings. Furthermore, the direction towards which the pole leans determines the direction the Tjilpa are to take. This allows them to be in communication with the sky into which Numbakula vanished, whilst continually being on the move (Eliade, 1959). According to Eliade, the myth details that the pole breaks. By losing the sacred pole, the Tjilpa, in Eliade's (1959:33-34) view, in turn lost:



“The means by which they can communicate with the sky realm. Now, human existence is possible only by virtue of this permanent communication with the sky. The world of the Achilpa really becomes their world only in proportion as it reproduces the cosmos organized and sanctified by Numbakula. Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human beings cannot live in chaos. Once contact with the transcendent is lost, existence in the world ceases to be possible — and the Achilpa let themselves die.”

The Tjilpa, for Eliade, thus served as one of the examples of religions which are based on connecting the heavens with the earth. In his view, the breaking of the sacred pole led to the death of the Tjilpa ancestors. The loss of the totem pole, led, in turn, to the loss of meaning for the Tjilpa ancestors (Eliade, 1959). They therefore let themselves die as a result. Nevertheless, Smith argues that Eliade’s understanding of the Tjilpan beliefs and practices is misguided. Smith points out that although it is true that the totem pole does break, this does not, as Eliade claims, cause the death of the ancestors. Instead, Smith claims that the ancestors die of tiredness (Smith, 1987) There is no connection between the breaking of the pole and the ancestors’ death.

From this, Smith argues that the Tjilpan religion does not share the categories required by Eliade’s theory. The Tjilpan myth, Smith (1987:15) maintains, does not emphasise:

“The dramatic creation of the world out of chaos by transcendental figures, or on the ‘rupture’ between these figures and men. Rather, the emphasis is on transformation and continuity, on a world fashioned by ancestral wanderings across the featureless, primeval surface of the earth.”

The Aboriginal Australian Tjilpa beliefs and practices are based on their belief in the ancestral ‘Dreamtime’. Every feature of the contemporary landscape represents a ‘track’, a deed or a work of these ancestors. In most of the ancestral myths, the ancestors are themselves transformed into natural features such as rocks or trees. Each feature of the landscape, as well as each living Tjilpa, is an objectification of these ancestors and their deeds (Smith, 1987).

In the earlier example, the broken pole becomes transformed into a tall stone, which stands in the same spot on which it was broken. Likewise, the deaths of the Tjilpa



ancestors resulted in the creation of a large hill. On that hill, there are stones which mark the place where each ancestor died. However, no memorials exist in Eliade's analysis of the myth (Smith, 1987). Smith (1987:9, therefore, argues from this that:

“By focussing on the false causal relationship- from broken pole to corporate death- Eliade has missed the actual structure of the narrative.”

Furthermore, Smith points out that Eliade's understanding of Sacred Space is heavily derived from Indo-European religions. Smith argues that Eliade thus missed a crucial difference between the Tjilpan and the Indo-European religions' understanding of space, as the latter place the gods within the sky (Smith, 1987). The role of humans is therefore to connect the heavens and the earth, through building sacred sites such as temples, towers, or fortresses. The connection between gods and humans is preserved by maintaining the sacred site. Smith, however, argues that no such understanding of space exists among the Tjilpa. Smith points out that the Tjilpa believe that their ancestors become features of the natural landscapes after death. The Tjilpa religion is, thus, in Smith's view, concerned with preserving the memory of the ancestors, rather than connecting with the heavens (Smith, 1987).

Furthermore, many Indo-European religions are based on the belief that humans can commune with the gods. In Eliade's view, the Tjilpan totem pole enables this communion to take place. Smith, however, maintains that according to the Tjilpan understanding of their religion, no such communion can take place. Smith (1987:12) points out that when the ancestors are transformed into features of the landscape after death, the transformation:

“Is an event that bars, forever, direct access to his particular person...the only limitation on the number of 'places' of ancestral objectification are the attention and memory of the Aranda, the ability of men of the proper group who are related to the specific ancestor to be attentive, to recall the ancestral deeds and experience the ancestor's continued presence.”

Therefore, Smith argues that the Tjilpan pole serves as a memorial rather than serving as a medium to connect with the heavens. It functions to preserve the memory of a past event. In such a system, Smith (1987:13) argues that:



“Rupture does not occur by breaking pole linking heaven to earth; rupture occur through the human act of forgetfulness.”

Consequently, Smith argues that scholars such as Eliade have historically mischaracterised non-Western religions when comparing religions. For this reason, Smith maintains that the usage of the Comparative Method should be revised. Instead of simply concerning itself with similarities, the Comparative Method ought to also consider differences. By taking account of differences, one is able to avoid previous mischaracterisation and thus gain a more accurate understanding of each religion. Smith (1987:14-15) writes that:

“It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting...The questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference: What differences are to be maintained in the interest of comparative inquiry?”

Nonetheless, although Smith recognises the importance of differences, he simultaneously acknowledges, the importance of seeking similarities, writing that:

“Uniqueness denies the possibility of comparison and taxonomy.... To put this another way, absolute difference is not a category for thought but one that denies the possibility of thought.” (Smith, 1987: 34-35)

Consequently, rather than attempting to abandon the search for similarities, Smith instead seeks a middle ground between the search for similarities and differences.

To explain this, this paper will clarify and distinguish between the different uses of the Comparative Method. The use of the Comparative Method by Comparativists and Postmodernism has already been discussed. Comparativists are only concerned with similarities; Postmodernists, on the other hand, are only concerned with differences (Segal, 2010:). Smith’s version of comparing religion is referred to as ‘New Comparativism’. Although Smith himself never used this term, his views are widely cited as an example of New Comparativism by contemporary scholars (Segal, 2010).



2.2 Old Comparativism

The traditional version of Comparativism outlined above is now referred to as ‘Old Comparativism’ by contemporary academics (Segal, 2010). As mentioned, Old Comparativism only considers similarities when comparing religion. New Comparativism, on the other hand, differs in that it looks for differences in addition to similarities. Smith maintains that differences are more conspicuous when compared to similarities (Smith, 1987). By studying the differences, one will, in Smith’s view, be able to preserve the authenticity of each religion. Smith, unlike Postmodernists, recognises the importance of generalisation in the domain of religious studies. By concerning himself with both similarities and differences, one will, in his view, be able to generalise, whilst simultaneously avoiding mischaracterisations of non-Western religions.

3 Evaluation of Smith’s New Comparativism

3.1 The Problem of Generalisation and New Comparativism

Religious studies, as a discipline, does not only seek to understand what adherents believe and practise (Allen, 2020). It also seeks to understand the reasons why individuals join a religion and why they choose to remain part of that religion. After all, an evolutionary biologist does not simply seek to understand the diversity of organisms which exist in the world; they also seek to understand the evolutionary processes which account for that diversity. Similarly, scholars of religion do not only seek to understand the distinctiveness of each religion. They also seek to understand the reasons for the origin of the phenomenon of religion and why it continues to exist. This, however, cannot be achieved by focusing exclusively on differences between religions.

Scientists, after all, do not observe laws. They instead propose them to explain an observed phenomenon (Hempel, 1966). Gravity, for instance, is posited as the best explanation for why objects fall. A scientist can infer that a similar cause is responsible by observing the similarities between objects falling. Scientific theories, therefore, require generalisation (Segal, 2006). They require the presupposition that each event is brought about by the same cause, despite the differences which may exist between



those events. If, on the other hand, one removed generalisation from the theory of gravity, one would only have the phenomenon of objects falling. The cause would be left open-ended. Similarly, if scholars of religion were only concerned with the differences between each religion, then the causes behind religion as a general phenomenon would be left underdetermined (Allen, 2020). Therefore, if a religious studies scholar is to study religion theoretically, they can only do so by generalisation. This, in turn, requires the seeking of similarities. Thus, even if one accepts differences, one cannot entirely abandon similarities. As Michael Satlow (2005:290) puts it:

“Just as the field of economics assumes the universal existence of markets and then constantly tests that assumption as it also attempts to describes the universal “laws” of market activity, so too do many scholars of religion attempt to explain the universal laws of religious behaviours, while at the same time questioning and rectifying their hypotheses.”

It is true that Smith does allow for similarities, in addition to differences. Nonetheless, generalisation does not only require the acceptance of similarities; it also requires similarities to be prioritised over differences. To explain this the requirements of scientific generalisations will be examined.

Scientific generalisations presuppose that events are similar because each event is brought about by the same cause (Bechtel, 2009). For example, it is only by prioritising similarities that one is justified in classifying all polar bears as members of the same species. On the other hand, if the differences were regarded as important then each polar bear would be categorised as a unique organism, rather a member of the same species. Similarly, to accept generalisation as possible in religious studies requires one to regard similarities as more important than differences.

For example, consider that a scholar categorises two religions as Animistic in their beliefs and practices. Natural objects such as the sun, stones, and trees are, according to Animists, inhabited by souls (Harvey, 2017). These souls govern the life and movement of all entities in the natural world. There is, consequently, no distinction between life and non-life. Animists believe that natural phenomena are endowed with agency and consciousness, just like humans and animals (Harvey, 2017). If one is to categorise any two religions as Animistic, one cannot just claim that these religions



share similarities. One must also maintain that they are so similar that a common definition can be applied to both. To categorise two religions as Animistic, presupposes that their similarities outweigh their differences.

It is true that these religions could differ regarding their beliefs about the nature of souls. For instance, one religion could maintain that words, names and metaphors have souls, whilst another religion could restrict souls to only applying to entities in the natural environment (Harvey, 2017). Nevertheless, if two religions are to be classified as Animistic, then there must be focus on similarities. Both would have to share the same basic assumption that all life and motion is governed by souls. It is only by emphasising similarities that the scholar can be justified in categorising any two religions as Animistic. Consequently, if Smith is to permit generalisation, he cannot simply allow for similarities; he must also argue that similarities ought to be prioritised.

3.2 Difficulties of Generalisation in New Comparativism

It is difficult to see how Smith can defend generalisation whilst simultaneously maintaining that differences ought to be regarded as just as important as similarities. Recall Smith's evaluation of Eliade. Smith argued that Eliade's analysis of the Tjilpa was inaccurate because Eliade only considered similarities; he assumed that the Tjilpan beliefs and practices were identical to those of Indo-European religions, whose beliefs and practices focus on achieving communion with the gods. This is accomplished by establishing sacred sites to enable connection between the heavens and the earth. Eliade assumed that the Tjilpan totem pole, likewise, functioned to connect the heavens with the earth. The breaking of the pole, in Eliade's view, led to the death of the ancestors. Smith, however, points out that this incident instead resulted in the creation of a memorial on the spot where it broke (Smith, 1987). He therefore concluded that because the beliefs of the Tjilpa are different from the requirements of Eliade's theory, Eliade's theory cannot apply to the Tjilpa.

Nonetheless, Smith can only argue against Eliade's application to the Tjilpa by presupposing generalisations. To justify his rejection of Eliade, Smith has to presuppose that all members of the Tjilpa can be categorised under one definition. It is this assumption which allows him to contrast the Tjilpa beliefs with Eliade's theory's



requirements. The differences between the Tjilpa and Eliade's theory justifies Smith's rejection of Eliade.

It is difficult to see how Smith can justify categorising all members of the Tjilpa under a single definition if Smith takes both similarities and differences into account. If Smith considered differences among the Tjilpa, then he would be assuming that not all the Tjilpa share the same beliefs. If not all the Tjilpa share the same beliefs, then they cannot be grouped together under a single definition. Smith could claim that the beliefs of the Tjilpa share similarities. However, each member of the Tjilpa could be categorised as having different beliefs, despite sharing similarities.

To categorise all members as belonging to a particular religion requires that one focuses on similarities. Buddhists, for instance, are classified as sharing the tenets of Buddhist religion. It is true that there are different branches of Buddhism, such as the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana denominations (Ching and Amore, 1996); nonetheless, despite the differences, they are all categorised as belonging to the Buddhist religion owing to the similarities of their beliefs. Moreover, even when one is focusing on a particular branch of Buddhism, such as that of Theravada, one would still need to focus more on similarities rather than differences, to justify a generalisation. One would have to presuppose that all Theravada members share the same beliefs to allow them to be categorised as adherents of the Theravada denomination. Likewise, to justify a categorisation of the Tjilpa sharing the same beliefs, Smith would have to regard the similarities between them as more important than the differences. It is therefore only by focusing on the similarities that one is justified in making generalisations. This, however, cannot be achieved if Smith regards differences as equally important as similarities. With Old Comparativism, on the other hand, there is little issue with generalisation, because of the focus on similarities. Furthermore, even if one is only interested in similarities, it would not follow that one should deny differences.

3.3 Old Comparativists are concerned with the function of religion and not with the content of religion

It is true that some Old Comparativists have historically denied differences. Very few, however, would take this route. Most Old Comparativists are not interested in



whether a religion resembles another. They are instead interested in the function of religion. For Old Comparativists, the function of each religion is not only similar. It is identical. That is to say, the human need that each religion's beliefs and practices fulfil, remains the same, regardless of the differences (Segal, 1999).

For example, recall Durkheim's theory. According to his view, all religions arise and persist to fulfil the human need to preserve the unity of society. This is achieved through establishing a unified system of beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1915). However, the exact nature of those beliefs and practices will depend on the religion in question. For instance, if Durkheim compared Christianity with Hinduism, he would not be interested in whether the beliefs and practices of Hinduism resemble those of Christianity. Durkheim would, instead, be interested in the function which both Hinduism and Christianity fulfil. Despite the different beliefs and practices in each religion they both, in Durkheim's view, function to unify society. Durkheim does not deny differences; he is simply not interested in them. Durkheim is, instead, interested in the similar human need that religion fulfils. He is indifferent to whether any two religions resemble each other.

Another example can be seen in Edmund Burnett Tylor's theory of myth (Segal, 2004). Tylor regards myth and by extension, ancient religion, as fulfilling the equivalent function which science provides in most contemporary societies (Tylor, 1920). Science explains the natural world through impersonal laws. Ancient societies, in Tylor's view, on the other hand, lacked science and as a result posited gods in the place of physical laws (Segal, 1999). All humans, according to Tylor, are born with the need to explain the physical world. Myths and ancient religions are therefore similar in that all function to fulfil this need. Nevertheless, according to Tylor, although all humans share the need to explain the physical world, each culture explains the physical world differently.

For example, consider myths relating to thunderstorms. All such myths function to explain this natural phenomenon. However, each culture explains it differently. For instance, in Norse mythology, Thor riding his chariot across the clouds is believed to be the cause of thunderstorms (Adams, 2005). In certain Native American mythology, on the other hand, the cause of thunderstorms is the beating of the thunderbird's wings (Riordan, 2009). It is true that these two myths differ in their explanation of



thunderstorms. Nevertheless, they both, in Tylor's view, fulfil the same function; they provide an explanation for the phenomenon of the thunderstorm. Tylor, like Durkheim, is indifferent to whether Norse mythology resembles Native American mythology. What matters for him is that both myths are employed to explain the physical world. Therefore, although the function of myth is the same for Tylor, its content is, nevertheless, relative to each culture.

Most Old Comparativists would not dispute the New Comparativist claim that differences exist among religions. They are simply not interested in studying them. To use an analogy, categorising polar bears as members of the same species does not deny that there are differences among individual polar bears. Some polar bears may, for example, only have three legs, or the colour of their fur may be slightly different. Despite this, they are still categorised as members of the same species. The biologist is not denying that there are differences; they are simply not interested in examining them. Old Comparativists use the Comparative Method similarly. When looking for similarities among religions, they are not claiming that every religion resembles each other. They are, instead, claiming that all religions fulfil the same function despite their differences.

In Tylor's case, the function is the human need to explain the physical world. In Durkheim's case, it is the human need to unify society. Old Comparativists are not claiming that all religions are identical. They are, instead, claiming that all religions originate and persist to fulfil the same function, despite differences (Segal, 2022). Old Comparativists, therefore, have no problem accepting differences.

3.4 Old Comparativist conclusions can be revised if they fail

Smith could argue in response that Old Comparativists are still at fault, because they presuppose that a common function is applicable to all religions. Nevertheless, it is still possible that any two religions may have entirely different functions. For example, as examined earlier, Smith demonstrated that the Tjilpan pole functioned as a memorial to the Tjilpan ancestors, rather than as a means of connecting with the heavens, as was presumed by Eliade.

The failure of individual theorists such as Eliade, however, constitutes no argument against Old Comparativists. Theories in religious studies can be revised or rejected,



depending on the available evidence. Even if one theory fails to apply to all religions, it would still be possible for another theory to apply.

Modern scientific theories are classified as scientific when their conclusions are falsifiable (Bird, 1998). For example, the generalisation that ‘all swans are white’ (Couvalis, 1997), was falsified by the discovery of black swans in Australia. However, the fact that the generalisation turned out to be false does not imply that it was unjustified. Most swans observed throughout the world, up until that time, were white. It was therefore reasonable to infer that the swans in unexplored countries would also be white. A similar approach can be applied when considering the Old Comparativists. For instance, recall Eliade’s theory of *The Sacred*. Although this theory failed in its application to the Tjilpa, this does not mean that it was unjustified. All the religions studied by Eliade up until that point demonstrated beliefs and practices which were based on connecting the earth with the heavens (Eliade, 1959). It would, therefore, be reasonable to infer that religions such as that of the Tjilpa would be similar.

Furthermore, even if theories such as Eliade’s fail to apply to all religions, this does not imply that every theory of religion will always fail to apply. Old Comparativists are mainly interested in the human needs that each religion fulfils. If one theory of religion cannot account for every need that a given religion serves, then that theory can be replaced with another more applicable theory. It is true, as was observed, that the Tjilpan understanding of space differed from that presupposed by Indo-European religions. However, this does not imply that there is no common function that can be applied to both.

Consider applying Durkheim’s theory to the Tjilpa and Abrahamic religions. As discussed previously, Durkheim’s theory is interested in how the beliefs and practices of religions help to consolidate unity in society. Durkheim is not interested in whether Tjilpan beliefs and practices resemble those of other religions. What matters, for Durkheim, is that both the Tjilpa religion and the Abrahamic religions both help unify their social groups through a system of shared beliefs and practices. For example, we have observed that Smith maintained that the totem pole functioned as memorial for the Tjilpan ancestors (Smith, 1987). Smith (1987:13-14) details that the Tjilpa practice ceremonies “to recall the ancestral deeds and experience the ancestor’s continuous



presence”. By repeating the ceremonies, the individual members of the Tjilpa are bonded with an obligation to preserve the memory of the ancestor. From Durkheim’s point of view, the Tjilpa religion has a social function. It bonds members of the Tjilpa to preserve the memory of the ancestor. Abrahamic religions, such as Christianity, likewise fulfil a social function. Christianity provides a shared set of beliefs and practices which consolidate and stabilise the Christian community. Adherents, thus, feel part of a unified community (Durkheim, 1915).

There are indisputable differences between the beliefs and practices of Christianity and those of the Tjilpan religion. Christianity is based on the belief in one deity; the Tjilpan religion, on the other hand, is based on ancestor reverence. Durkheim, however, is not interested in whether the beliefs and practices of these religions are alike. He is instead interested in the function of those beliefs and practices. Durkheim’s theory would, thus, still be applicable even if the beliefs and practices of the Tjilpa had little to no similarity to Christianity.

Consequently, even if a theory fails to apply to all religions, it can be replaced by another which better explains the origin and function of religion. In the above example, although Eliade’s theory failed to apply to the Tjilpa, Durkheim’s theory is applicable. The fact that Old Comparativist conclusions can fail therefore provides no reason to reject their general approach.

4 Conclusion

This paper has examined the role and use of the Comparative Method in the discipline of religious studies. It began with an examination of Smith’s rejection of Old Comparativism due to its focus on similarities. Smith maintained differences ought to be of equal consideration. Nonetheless, this paper has shown that Smith’s argument is found wanting. Firstly, it has been argued that the methods of religious studies can only become akin to those adopted by modern science through generalisation. Generalisation is only possible when there is priority placed on similarities.;there is thus no advantage gained in considering differences. Secondly, it has been shown that the objections to Old Comparativism are based on misunderstandings. Scholars such as Smith have criticised Old Comparativists for either denying or downplaying differences.



However, it has been demonstrated that Old Comparativists are interested in the similar human needs that all religions fulfil. Most Old Comparativists, therefore, have little problem in accepting differences among religions; what is important is that the human need, which each religion fulfils, remains identical. It has thus been shown that there is no need to adopt a New Comparativist perspective in order to represent religions accurately. Moreover, even if an Old Comparativist generalisation fails to apply to all religions, it can be replaced by another. Therefore, Smith fails to provide a strong reason to reject Old Comparativism.

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