

Comparison and the Analytical Study of Religion

Friday, November 21, 2014, 12:45 - 5:15 p.m.

One aspect of Weber's comparative project that I have found puzzling, however, is the absence of any theorization on his part of the comparative method itself, its historical ontology, its logic, even its purposes. Wolfgang Schluchter, one of the great Weber scholars of our time and an editor of the *Gesamtausgabe*, assured me that the fault lay not with me, and at the same time sought to provide the methodological gloss that Weber himself did not: "Indeed, you are looking in vain. There is no essay on the comparative method written by Weber. He practiced it, with the self-imposed qualification that only dilettantes compare (a famous statement in a letter to von Below written in 1914). **He practiced it in order to identify the distinctive features of a phenomenon, not to explain it. For explanation, we need nomological knowledge, not only in sociology, but also in historiography.**"

Sheldon Pollock, "[Comparison without Hegemony](#)" 185-186 (2011)

In its fourth year, toward better design and deployment of comparative work in studies of religion, the SORAAAD workshop will focus on the act of comparison itself. How has comparison served as a method in the study of religion? How do we design research projects wherein data vary across space, time, or conceptual valence? How do we structure comparative studies in order to identify and mitigate hegemonic assumptions? How do we relate deep studies of small populations to larger populations and discourses? How transferable are the insights and mechanics developed within different settings? Addressing these and related questions, SORAAAD seeks not only to recover subfields from essentialism, but also to foster new inter- and intra-disciplinary development.

The SORAAAD workshop will be of interest to scholars who already enact social science and critical humanities research methodologies; to those interested in research design wherein comparison is a critical component; and to anyone who wants to rethink how comparison itself shapes and frames the study of religion.

The SORAAAD workshop is co-sponsored by:

The SBL's Redescribing Christian Origins Group and Metacriticism of Biblical Scholarship Consultation; and the AAR's Critical Theories and Discourses on Religion Group, Cultural History of the Study of Religion Group, and Sociology of Religion Group

The SORAAAD organizing committee thanks the University of Regina Department of Religious Studies for underwriting the 2014 SORAAAD workshop.

The SORAAAD organizing committee also thanks Craig Martin and Michael Jerryson for their help with the development of the 2014 program.

Comparison and the Analytical Study of Religion

In the first half of the workshop, our speakers will explore the deployment of comparison in research operating within broadly accepted understandings of periodization and assumed understandings of space.

Part One: Comparison in the Study of Religion in Mediterranean Late Antiquity

[John Kloppenborg](#) and [David Frankfurter](#). [William Arnal](#), moderator

Part Two: Comparison and Reconceptualizing ‘Black Atlantic Religions’

[Paul Christopher Johnson](#), [Kathryn Lofton](#), respondent

To balance ‘periodization,’ ‘space,’ and (per Paul Johnson) “theoretical geographies” as large-scale frames of comparison, parts three and four of the workshop will address how the study of religion has been organized around certain human activities (e. g. violence and ritual) and examine about how comparison might be integrated into study design of human behaviors.

Part Three: Comparison and the Analysis of Religion and Violence.

[Jamel Velji](#) and [Margo Kitts](#). [Ipsita Chatterjea](#), moderator

Part Four: Comparison and the Analysis of Religion and Ritual.

[Jens Kreinath](#) and [Michael Houseman](#). [David Walker](#), moderator

For each segment of the workshop

The *suggested readings* for each segment of the SORAAAD workshop will be, along with the presentations, the basis for discussion during each part of the workshop. The program will be updated on academia.edu ([PDF](#)) and the [SORAAAD website](#), adding additional links to Suggested Readings as we acquire permission and access from the authors.

Further readings are grounding points of reference for scholars new to a methodology or technique.

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We ask that everyone read:

Pollock, Sheldon. 2010. "[Comparison without Hegemony](#)." In *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*. Festschrift for Bjorn Wittrock on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, edited by Barbro Klein and Hans Joas, 185-204. Leiden: Brill.

Skocpol, Theda and Margaret Somers. 1980. "[The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry](#)." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 2: 174-97.

Frankfurter, David. 2012. [Comparison and the Study of Religion in Late Antiquity](#) In *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques Controverses et propositions*, edited by Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln, 83-98. Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège.

Lincoln, Bruce. 2012. "Theses on Comparison." *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Calame, Claude et Bruce Lincoln. 2012. "[Les approches comparatives en histoire des religions antiques : controverses récurrentes et propositions nouvelles](#)" in *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques Controverses et propositions*, edited by Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln, 7-11. Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège.
With Bruce Lincoln's permission a [PDF](#) of the article has been posted on the SORAAAD website, please follow either link and then scroll to the bottom of the page to download the file.

Corrections and Updates to the program (reflected in the current program)

Please note that a reading for Margo Kitt's presentation was left off the original program, Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. "[Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology](#)." *Ethos* 18:1, 5-47. *We apologize for the omission*.

Jens Kreinath's blog post on September 19, 2014, [Inter-rituality as a Framework of Analysis: A New Approach to the Study of Interreligious Encounters and the Economies of Ritual](#) will aid discussion for the segment three.

The SORAAAD Workshop Ethos

Registration is free, thanks to sponsorship by the University of Regina Department of Religion. The participation limit is 70.

To register: please place "SORAAAD - 2014 - Registration" in the subject line of an email to CTDR.Group@gmail.com. Please indicate your name and if applicable indicate rank and institutional affiliation in the body of the email.

Comparison and the Analytical Study of Religion

Introduction

(12:45-12:50 p.m.)

[Ipsita Chatterjea](#) - Presider - "SORAAAD Workshop Year Four, 'Comparison and the Analytical Study of Religion.'"

Part One: *Comparison in the Study of Mediterranean Late Antiquity.*

(12:50-1:45 p.m.)

Moderator: [William Arnal](#) - University of Regina, Department of Religious Studies

Speakers:

[John Kloppenborg](#) - University of Toronto, Study of Religion

[David Frankfurter](#) - Boston University, Department of Religion

[John Kloppenborg](#)

"Comparing Christ Groups and Graeco-Roman Associations"

The goal of this session is to illustrate the importance of comparison for reframing the study of early Christ cults in Greece and Macedonia. Arguing that "associations are good to think with" (paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss), I will suggest that setting early Christ groups, about which we know relatively little, alongside Greek and Roman cultic associations and occupational guilds, about which we know much more, helps both to raise heuristic questions about Christ groups, and to 'normalize' them as historical phenomena.

Suggested Readings for John Kloppenborg

Arnal, William E. and Russell T. McCutcheon. 2013. "The Origins of Christianity Within and Without "Religion" In *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of Religion*, 134–70, 203–14. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ascough, Richard S. 2014. [Re-Describing the Thessalonian's "Mission" in Light of Greco-Roman Associations](#). *NTS* 60, 1:61–82.

Bendlin, Andreas. 2011. [Associations, Funerals, Sociality and Roman Law The Collegium of Diana and Antinous in Lanuvium \(CIL 14.2112\) Reconsidered](#). In *Aposteldekret und*

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antikes Vereinswesen WUNT 280, edited by Markus Öhler, 207–96. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Kloppenborg, John S. 2013. [Membership Practices in Pauline Christ Groups](#). *Early Christianity* 4, no. 2:183–215.

Venticinque, Philip F. 2013. “[Matters of Trust: Associations and Social Capital in Roman Egypt](#).” *CHS Research Bulletin* 1, no. 2.

Primary Texts

IG II₂ 2347 = GRA I 12 (Salamis, ca.300 BCE)

IG II₂ 1368 = GRA I 51 (Athens, 164/65 CE)

EKM 27 (Beroea, before 212 CE)

David Frankfurter

“Comparison and the Conceptualization of Ancient Religion”

I will rehearse some of my major points about the necessity and inevitability of comparison from [my 2012 Paris paper](#), then move to critique Carolyn Bynum’s recent *History of Religions* essay and recent problems in developing effective comparative categories. I will conclude with a discussion of spirit possession in early Christianity that will link with Paul Johnson’s presentation and demonstrate the crucial recourse to comparison.

Suggested Readings for David Frankfurter

Bynum, Carolyn Walker. 2014. “Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology: Or, Why Compare?” *History of Religions*, 53, 4: 341-368

Frankfurter, David. 2010. “[Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saint-Shrines Late Antiquity](#),” *Harvard Theological Review* 103, 1, 27-46.

Smith, J. Z. 1990. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago University of Chicago Press.

_____. 2000. “The ‘End’ of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification,” In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, edited by Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, 237-41. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Part Two: Comparison and Reconceptualizing 'Black Atlantic Religions'
(1:50-2:40 p.m.)

Speaker:

[Paul Christopher Johnson](#) - University of Michigan - Department of History and Department of Afroamerican and African Studies

Respondent:

[Kathryn Lofton](#)- Yale University, LGBT Studies, Religious Studies & American Studies

[Paul Christopher Johnson](#)

“Comparison and Reconceptualizing ‘Black Atlantic Religions’”

In this section we can highlight at least four productively fuzzy issues on comparison: First, is it clear that “Black Religion” is the right, or most productive, category? How is it like or unlike “Black Atlantic” religions, or “African Diaspora” religions? How do words like “Black,” “Atlantic,” and “Diaspora” variously push comparison in slightly different directions, and with what kinds of consequences? Second, all of these clusters at least attempt to raise comparative issues related to race and religion, and by extension, questions of “religion” and power, and the ways classifications of religion extend toward and intersect with other kinds of classifications of people. We might ask comparative questions about the specific religion-race linkage: What kinds of social dynamics, power differentials and institutions does/has it helped to produce, in comparison with other *religion*--_____ hybrids? Is the semiotic bundling of religion and race into relative durable social forms comparatively more pernicious and dangerous than other forms of bundling or clustering, and for that reason of our special attention? Third, it seems clear that “theoretical geographies” or “geographies of theory” are in play in our comparative study of religion. That is, certain regions and peoples become especially associated with specific issues or ‘problems.’ For example, for those categorized under the rubric of “Black Religion,” the issues of syncretism and spirit possession have been powerfully foregrounded. Why? How, for example, did “spirit possession” work differently for the classical West (as David Frankfurter discusses) and for the early modern and modern Africa and African Americas? Does its tenor shift when applied with a more narrow or broad aperture: when it includes the temple of ancient Delphi and contemporary Vodou in Montreal, versus when it is applied to more restricted comparisons, say between Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé. Fourth and finally, what comparative issues have the religions of the African Americas and the Caribbean ‘put on the map’ for the broader study of religion?

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Suggested Reading for Paul Christopher Johnson.

Johnson, Paul Christopher. 2011. "[An Atlantic Genealogy of "Spirit Possession"](#)" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 2: 393-425.

Palmié, Stephan. 2013. "[BL2532.S3 or, How Not to Study "Afro"- "Cuban" "Religion"](#)", in Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*, 1-32. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

J. Lorand Matory. 2009. "[The Many Who Dance in Me: Afro-Atlantic Ontology and the Problem with 'Transnationalism'](#)", in *Transnational Transcendence, Essays on Religion and Globalization*, edited by Thomas J, Csordas, 231-262. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sarró, Ramon, and Ruy Llera Blanes. 2009. "[Prophetic Diasporas: Moving Religion Across the Lusophone Atlantic.](#)" *African Diaspora* 2: 52-72.

Further Readings for Paul Christopher Johnson

Painter, Nell Irvin. 2010. *The History of White People*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Workshop Break

(2:40-3:20 p.m.)

The Workshop break is by design long enough to allow a break and for all participants to talk to one another without a moderator as well as to enable follow up questions for the speakers for the first half of the workshop and pre-presentation questions for the speakers for the second half.

Part Three: Comparison and the Analysis of Religion and Violence.

(3:20-4:15 p.m.)

Moderator: Ipsita Chatterjea

Speakers:

[Jamel Velji](#) - Haverford College, Department of Religion

[Margo Kitts](#) - Hawaii Pacific University, Religious Studies and East-West Classical Studies

[Jamel Velji](#)

“(De)limiting the end: comparative dimensions of apocalyptic religion and violence”

Stars falling, seas boiling over, and mountains vanishing are but three Qur’anic signs heralding the imminent arrival of God’s final judgment. This *yawm al-dīn*, the Day of Reckoning, appears throughout the Qur’ān, constantly reminding its readers that there are everlasting consequences for violating the precepts of its message. While these visions of the end of time served as a primary motive force for the earliest members of the Islamic community (Donner, Shoemaker), also animating so many renewal movements throughout Islamic history, comparative work on apocalypticism—within the Islamic context and outside of it—still remains a scholarly rarity. After focusing on why this might be, I reflect on some of the challenges scholars working on (Islamic) apocalypticism face in constructing comparisons—and offer some suggestions concerning how we might be able to move forward.

Suggested Reading for Jamel Velji

Lawson, Todd, 2008. “[Duality, Opposition and Typology in the Qur’an: The Apocalyptic Substrate](#)” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 10, 2 :23-49

Sells, Michael, 2013 "'Armageddon' in Christian, Sunni, and Shia traditions." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson, 467-495. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Velji, Jamel. 2013. "[Apocalyptic Religion and Violence](#)." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson, 250-59. New York: Oxford University Press.

Margo Kitts:

"On ritual and violence"

Analyzing ritual and violence is fraught with epistemological problems from the start. First, both terms are hotly contested. While it is generally agreed that there is a certain register to ritual which separates it from everyday behavior, how one ascertains that register is not transparent. Does one intuit a special kind of sensuous experience? Is it the visual spectacle? The rhythm? The focus? The peculiar instrumental logic? The deference to authority? Is it discursively accessible at all? There is an obvious hermeneutic loop in trying to discern discursive sense in experiences which may be fundamentally non-discursive. Violence is an even more troublesome term. Consider the range of possibilities: infliction of bodily pain or death, implied threats (e.g., military displays, menacing postures, manipulation of threatening symbols), rude gestures, verbal abuse, social suppressions and disciplinary behaviors, ceremonial maiming (e.g., scarification, circumcision, finger severing), desecrations of holy sites, agonistic sports, outright war, even restrictive categorizations – the possibilities seem endless! As for the violence-ritual link, it is obvious that violent acts need not be entirely constitutive of a ritual for that ritual to lead to acts of violence in a different context. Yet is it hard to conceive of a deliberate act of violence which does not have a performative, if not explicitly ritualized, dimension. All of these problems arguably rest on an epistemological problem outlined by Pollock in his summary of Kant and Hegel. That is the tacitly comparative aspect of any precise awareness, emergent as it is from a more profound sensory immersion. This talk will sketch some of these intricate problems in comparing rituals, violence, and religious experience.

Suggested Readings for Margo Kitts

NEW: Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. "[Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology](#)." *Ethos* 18:1, 5-47. (N.B., This reading was inadvertently left out of the program, we apologize for the omission)

Kapferer, Bruce. 2005. "Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning." In *Ritual in its Own Right*, edited by Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist, 35-54. New York: Berghahn Books.

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- Aijmer, Goran. 2000. "Introduction: The Idiom of Violence in Imagery and Discourse." In *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Göran Aijmer and Jon Abbink, 1-54. Oxford: Berg.
- Handelman, Don. 2003. "Re-Framing Ritual." In *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Hartung and Deschner, 9-20. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bloch, Maurice. 2004. "Ritual and Deference." *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw, 65-78. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 2010. "[Comparison without Hegemony](#)." In *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*. Festschrift for Bjorn Wittrock on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, edited by Barbro Klein and Hans Joas, 185-204. Leiden: Brill.

Part Four: Comparison and the Analysis of Religion and Ritual.

(4:25-5:20 p.m.)

Moderator: David Walker, University of California, Santa Barbara

Speakers :

[Jens Kreinath](#) - Wichita State University, Department of Anthropology

[Michael Houseman](#) - *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Department of Anthropology and Department of African Religions

[Jens Kreinath](#).

Mimesis, Interrituality, and the Comparative Study of Rituals

To facilitate a comparative approach to the study of ritual, it is of major importance to develop critical concepts that facilitate the analysis of specific types of cultural performances or public events that are called "ritual." In order to do that it is necessary to establish a framework that allows us to analyze the uniqueness of these events and performances starting with the indexical notions of space, time, and subject. With the help of this kind of an analytical framework it becomes possible to elaborate comparative parameters that allow for

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the analysis and comparison of rituals on an empirical basis. In light of the diversity of empirical data emerging from the study of rituals, it is necessary to demarcate methodologically the difference between empirical data and analytical concepts. This contribution proposes 'mimesis' and 'interrituality' as such analytical concepts to study Christian and Muslim rituals of saint veneration in southern Turkey.

Suggested Readings for Jens Kreinath

NEW: Kreinath, Jens, [Inter-rituality as a Framework of Analysis: A New Approach to the Study of Interreligious Encounters and the Economies of Ritual](#) posted on [PluRel - en blogg om religion og samfunn](#), on September 19, 2014.

Michael Houseman

"'Ritual' and Other Modes of Participation as Tools for Comparison"

A possible basis for the comparative study of rituals might consist in recognizing that most empirical performative events are not pure instances either of ritual, spectacle, play or everyday interaction, but a combination of several of these, organized with respect to each other in specific ways. In this regard, such events can be described in terms of the alternation, embedding, juxtaposition, etc. of various "building blocks", whose particular articulation, in a given event, is what provides that event with its distinctive efficacy. To the degree that this is the case, the object of analysis is to determine which "building blocks" are used and how they relate to each other in particular cases, the goal of comparative study being to identify recurrent patterns of interrelationship. However, in order to do this one has to have a fairly reductive definition of the building blocks in question, namely "ritual," "play," "everyday interaction," "spectacle," or the like.

Suggested Readings for Jens Kreinath and Michael Houseman

Handelman, Don. 2006. "[Conceptual Alternative to 'Ritual'](#)." In *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, 37-49. Leiden: Brill.

Snoek, Jan. "'Defining' Rituals." In *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, 3-14. Leiden: Brill.

The Study of Religion as an Analytical Discipline

2011 - The Study of Religion as an Analytical Discipline

2012 - [The Analytical Handling of Norms and Values in the Study of Religion](#)

2013 - [Methodologies and the Analytical Study of Religion](#)

2014 - [Comparison and the Analytical Study of Religion](#)

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