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Oliver Freiberger

FREEDOM FOR THE
TERTIUM: ON
CONDITIONS AND
PROVISIONS FOR
COMPARISON IN THE
STUDY OF RELIGION

Before a scholar of religion can carry out the act of comparison—which is, in fact, not a single act at all but rather a complex, nonlinear process—many things must have happened. Put in the simplest terms, before comparison can take place, the researcher must determine two (or more) units that are to be compared (the *comparands*) as well as the “third of comparison” (the *tertium comparationis*), which is the aspect *in view of which* the units will be compared. While this may seem obvious, a closer look reveals an extremely complex operation. Consider the following questions: By means of which criteria are the units selected? Why these and not other units in their respective vicinity—why A and not B, why X and not Y? What constitutes such a unit in the first place? How is it delineated within—and thus distinguished from—its social and historical context? Do the units exist as entities in social reality, or to what degree are they constructed by the researcher? How stable are they? Why is unit A being compared with unit X (and not with B or Y)? How does the researcher arrive at the point at which she or he expects that comparing A and X might be interesting and productive? How is the *tertium comparationis* selected? Which factors advance the expectation that comparing units A and

I conducted much of the methodological work from which this article draws during the academic year 2014–15 as a visiting research fellow at the Käte Hamburger Center, Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe, at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany. I thank my cohort of fellows and the colleagues in Bochum for the most-stimulating conversations about comparison. I also thank Ulrich Berner (Bayreuth), who read an earlier draft of this article and made a number of comments that were, as always, invaluable for fleshing out my argument.

X in view of this particular aspect will yield important insights? Which kinds of insights does the researcher consider important, and how is this related to determining the comparands and the *tertium comparationis*?

In a recent, thought-provoking article entitled “Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology: Or, Why Compare?,” Carolyn Walker Bynum offers a sophisticated discussion of some issues raised by these questions.¹ Bynum is a distinguished scholar of religion in the European Middle Ages from late antiquity to the sixteenth century whose many books and articles focus, in particular, on questions of gender, the body, and material culture. Her 28-page essay contains multiple learned references to discussions in history, art history, literary criticism, cognitive science, and South Asian studies (albeit few references to method and theory in religious studies).² It is rich also in its presentation of historical evidence, both from medieval Europe and from India.

I wish to focus my discussion on Bynum’s main argument about selecting comparands. Her impression is that this is mostly done on a rather superficial level: what looks alike will be compared.

Even more than their fellow humanists, scholars in religious studies have tended to assume that finding the “likes” is the easy part. The question, “how do you know where to start?” is seldom raised. If you are interested in women and religion, compare goddess figures; if you are interested in idolatry or iconoclasm, compare idols. Depending on your question, the choice of comparanda would appear to follow quite easily. But choosing comparanda is more complicated, it seems to me, than it initially appears. Unless we are careful, it may be circular, on the one hand, or unproductive, on the other. . . . Even before we come to delineating differences, we need to think far more carefully than we often have about the likenesses we start with. Morphology or similitude—that is, “looking like”—may not be the best basis for a comparative study that must, in the final analysis, consider both similarity and difference to be problematic if it is to illuminate either side of a comparison. The tyranny of morphology . . . has operated too long in comparative study. (345–46)

This is the article’s main thesis. Bynum then presents three examples of comparison in order to explore various ways of choosing comparanda. The first is a comparison of image processions. The article describes a procession of the Madonna in contemporary New York City as well as a similar festival in the

¹ Carolyn W. Bynum, “Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?,” *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (2014): 341–68. Hereafter, this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² One important work from Bynum’s own discipline, history, that also advocates comparison, is missing here: Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). In this “manifesto” (xi) Detienne sharply criticizes the dominant, restrictive nation-centered approach of historians (who regarded their own national history as “incomparable”) and calls for a collaboration with anthropologists—which comes with a comparative approach. He presents in his book four comparative ventures that emerged out of such collaborations.

South of France where the images of two female saints, believed to be relatives of the Virgin Mary who traveled to France from the Holy Land, are taken on a procession from the church to the beach, and back. Bynum then juxtaposes these with a procession of the Hindu goddess Durgā that she attended in Varanasi, India, in 2009. While those processions can be, and have been, studied in various perspectives, like in view of theories of liminality or of divine presence in material objects, Bynum identifies a major and fundamental difference, aside from all the minor ones: the Durgā image, she notes, “made from the clay of the river Ganga, returns to the sacred waters,” while “one cannot imagine throwing the Madonna of Mt. Carmel into the Hudson River or the two Marys of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer into the ocean. However much the Marys of Catholic worship may represent the paradox of fertility and purity, they do not come from or return to mud” (350–51). This leads Bynum to the following conclusion:

Thus, the parallel between the Hindu goddess and the Catholic saint, although their processions can each be elaborated with anthropological or “thing” theory, turns out to be relatively superficial. However much we may be confronted in both cases with an intense presence of something we can call power, general theories of “living pictures” or even of “liminality” do not take us very far when wood, mud, paint, and the female form occur in such different specific contexts and carry with them such different penumbra. Once one begins to allow the singularity to emerge, as Shulman puts it, one finds vastly divergent assumptions about the world. . . . Perhaps Durga and Maria are only cases of pseudomorphism: female forms venerated in religious ritual but not really “very much alike.” If so, our task would be to probe whether the religious shapes we think we see are in fact either similar or, in any meaningful way, different. . . . The category of “look-alikes”—even false look-alikes—is more complicated and more contextually conditioned than we tend to assume. (352–53)

Bynum then moves on to the second example, for which she does three comparisons: first, she compares images within the Christian and the Hindu interpretative contexts, respectively; then she compares the two religions in view of the ways in which these images are embedded in their respective interpretative context. The first image is that of the side wound of Christ, which, if portrayed vertically, “has reminded modern viewers of a vagina with labia, giving rise to elaborate feminist or queer interpretations of the image as erotic or gendered” (354). Studying the image, both in its artistic and textual representation, she finds that its interpretations feature a variety of aspects, among them maternal, physiological, as well as erotic and sexual ones, and she concludes that “there is a complex dialogue of likeness and unlikeness here between slit, wound, mandorla, and vagina that leads us to query what sort of relationship between body part and whole body is implied by such veneration” (356). In Hinduism, she considers the god Siva in his form as the cylindrical-shaped, phallic *liṅga*. There she also finds both generative and sexual connotations. “But even if we

see an erect penis in the linga, we do not really see what is there unless we encounter it in both its textual and its ritual setting. Like the wound of Christ, the linga is generative as well as erotic in its sexual connotations. To really see this stone cylinder, we must see it decorated with flowers, cloths, and ghee (clarified butter) and revered in hymn and prayer as font of both life and destruction” (358). Juxtaposing the Christian and the Hindu material, Bynum states:

Like the wound of Christ, the Shiva linga raises complex questions about the complete presence of god in what appears to be a fragment (a fragment that sometimes even visually becomes the whole) and about physiological images (both like and not like a body part) as anthropomorphizing the sacred. . . . The comparison I draw is, as I said above, relational. I suggest that the problem raised by the linga in its context is analogous to the problem raised by the side wound in its. The parallel is between the relations of objects to their context, not between the objects themselves. (358)

With her third example Bynum returns to the comparison of Maria and Durgā. Having found the similarities of the processions superficial and thus the comparison unproductive, she now suggests that “what we should ask is not ‘how is image in one culture like or not like image in another culture?’ but rather ‘where (in what place, object, or person) do religious presence and power reside?’ In other words, the ground of comparison becomes phenomenological or structural or ‘representational’ (in the sense of re-presenting or making present)” (358). She goes on to suggest a “better comparison” (359), namely of “Hindu images of gods and goddesses (both iconic and aniconic), on the one hand, and the Christian Eucharist, on the other” (361). Studying the ways in which the Eucharist is prepared and carried out ritually in the medieval sources, she finds many parallels to how Hindu images and statues are made, consecrated, and worshiped:

The real parallel to the consecration process in Hinduism lies in the central locus of holiness in late medieval Christianity: the consecration of the Eucharist. That process is far more like the preparation of Durga . . . than we have recognized. For all the emphasis of theologians and canon lawyers on consecration by the clergy as a moment of transformation from bread into flesh, the encounter with god in foodstuff was prepared for materially and experientially. By the later Middle Ages, the communion wafer was no longer homebaked bread offered by housewives but a flat, thin, almost transparent disk, often stamped with an image of the crucified Christ. It was ritually prepared by clergy or monks, and according to some monastic customs, the wheat was selected kernel by kernel, the mill hung with curtains, and the millers specially garbed; the bakers either sang hymns while preparing it or kept silent lest their breath touch the bread.

Not only was the consecration of the bread prepared for, as the wood was prepared before the carving of a Hindu god, encounter with the Eucharist was, for the faithful,

a process in some ways similar to the encounter with Durga in festival and song. . . . Moreover, the consecrated host, paraded in Corpus Christi processions or exposed on the altar outside the mass in gorgeous crystal and gold monstrances, became a holy object in and of itself, inspiring terror as well as devotion. (365)

After having discussed the three examples, Bynum returns to her initial question and concludes:

Comparison must start with similarities, or it cannot begin. But deciding what is similar to what is far from obvious. Students of religion have been too cavalier in assuming that choosing comparanda is the easy part of any research. Obvious choices of parallels may result all too quickly in discoveries of difference that are not only obvious but finally unproductive. How then do I think students of religion should proceed in choosing things to compare? First, they should avoid assuming that “look-alikes”—either to explore or to dismiss—are the best parallels for understanding cultures. Second, they should seek structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional—rather than purely morphological—parallels, prepared for the possibility that startling similarities may emerge between things that look radically different. Third, they should place each of the carefully chosen comparanda in its own context before drawing out the comparison of these things-in-context with each other. (368)

In her article, Bynum makes important points and raises some crucial questions. Particularly the initial question, “How do you know where to start?,” seems fundamental. It is curious, however, that when discussing the examples, the article seems rather unconcerned with the actual start of the process of choosing comparands. For example, it does not discuss the rationale underlying the expectation that some comparisons to the European Middle Ages would emerge from Bynum’s five-week trip to India, on which she hoped “to immerse [her]self as far as possible in Hindu religious culture.”³ To be sure, I do not believe that she fell for the stereotype that contemporary Indian culture was somehow stuck in the Middle Ages. But why India—and not China or Japan, Nigeria or Brazil? Why Varanasi—and not Kanchipuram or Calcutta? Why Hinduism—and not Jainism, Sikhism, or Islam? Why the Durgā procession—and not that of another deity? The same goes for her European examples: Why those particular Virgin Mary processions, why the side wound of Christ, why the Eucharist?

While the article’s argument primarily addresses the question of which items should, or should not, be juxtaposed in a comparative study, for discussing the

³ Her introductory statement reads: “I am a student of Christianity in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries whose recent scholarly work has focused on northern Germany. But I spent five weeks in India in fall 2009, hoping to immerse myself as far as possible in Hindu religious culture. As a medievalist, I expected some comparisons to the European Middle Ages to emerge” (Bynum, “Avoiding the Tyranny,” 341).

selection of comparands it seems useful to consider also the process leading up to a comparison, including the options that are available to individual researchers. The following general thoughts on the conditions and provisions for a comparative study are therefore, first of all, intended to complement Bynum's discussion;⁴ but they will also give rise to some concerns about her conclusions that I shall discuss subsequently.

DETERMINING COMPARANDS AND THE *TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS*

As indicated in my initial questions, a number of factors play into selecting both the comparands and the *tertium comparationis*. Considering the comparands first, it seems important to note that every researcher has access only to a certain set of sources, which limits the options for choosing units for comparison. This set of sources is determined by the scholarly training and the totality of all potential material the researcher has happened to have encountered up to this point in her or his life. It is thus the result of both academic training and other, more contingent, factors. A philologically trained scholar, for example, has access to texts composed in languages that he or she has command of, aside from having learned how to read and interpret texts critically. One trained in sociological or ethnographic methods knows how to handle sources created from interviews, surveys, or participant observation. An art historian is trained in "reading" artistic expressions of religion. And so on. Certainly one researcher may be versed in various such methods, but there is a natural limit to what an individual can master.

In addition to the sources to which each researcher has potential access due to his or her methodical training, there are sources that the person knows due to other, also nonacademic interests or simply by chance—a novel that was given to them as a present, a movie that they watched on the plane, a temple that they stumbled into on a trip, a song that they heard on the radio, and so forth. All these can become potential sources for comparison if the scholarly training allows for it. For example, a philologist working on ancient India could conduct a microcomparison between religious ideas in some ancient Indian text and in Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, a book that he or she may have never discussed in an academic environment. Since this researcher is trained to read and interpret texts, familiarizing him- or herself with the scholarly literature on Hesse and *Siddhartha* and then using Hesse's novel for comparison would be a manageable task. So while there are generally no limits to the material which may be used for a comparative study, the individual limitations of the researcher naturally restrict the options for determining comparands.⁵

⁴ These considerations summarize a larger argument that will be laid out elsewhere.

⁵ The often-suggested teamwork for comparative studies would certainly widen the scope of potential sources but this widening is only relative to the number of members on the team.

DELINEATING UNITS

Within the range of sources available to the researcher, two (or more) units must be identified for comparison. In order to explore the ways in which these units are determined, it seems useful to reflect first on how we conceptualize a unit that may be used as a comparand. I have deliberately chosen the vague and generic term “unit” because the issue is more complex than it may seem at first glance. Sociological reflections on the equally ambivalent term “case,” collected in a volume entitled *What Is A Case?*, edited by Charles Ragin and Howard Becker, can help us think this through.⁶ In his introduction, Charles Ragin distinguishes two dichotomies in how cases are conceived, based on various contributions to the book: “(1) whether they are seen as involving empirical units or theoretical constructs and (2) whether these, in turn, are understood as general or specific.”⁷ The first dichotomy distinguishes two approaches: (i) one that assumes that cases are “out there,” empirically verifiable and thus discoverable; and (ii) one that views cases as constructed by the researcher on the basis of certain theories or conventions. The second dichotomy distinguishes between (a) the idea that cases emerge or are delineated in the course of research—and thus specific to the respective study—and (b) the idea that cases are general units, widely recognized in scholarship and thus already existing prior to the respective research (e.g., nation-states). Ragin’s analysis provides a useful starting point for thinking about the ways in which units for comparison are determined. Rather than speaking of dichotomies, however, for our purposes I suggest considering them to be ends on a spectrum and stages in a process, respectively.

EMPIRICAL AND CONSTRUCTED UNITS

If we envision the first dichotomy as two ends on a spectrum, located toward one end are empirical “facts.” Most tangible examples would be physical objects like books or statues, which are empirically verifiable and thus exist, undeniably, outside the mind of the scholar. At the other end of the spectrum more complex constructs are located, such as religious fundamentalism, syncretism, or the concept of secularity. And there is a lot in-between. The notion of a spectrum implies that even the two extreme ends are connected; neither end is totally “pure.” In other words, in order to serve as a comparand, a particular unit must always have both empirical and theoretical properties. A physical object becomes interesting to the comparativist of religion only if some religious value is ascribed to it—if it can be identified as a *religious* object. This identification,

⁶ Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker, eds., *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁷ Charles C. Ragin, “Introduction: Cases of ‘What Is a Case?’,” in Ragin and Becker, *What Is a Case?*, 1–17, at 8.

however, is not self-evident but rather based on what the researcher deems “religious” or, more precisely, on his or her theory of religion. The object will only serve as a comparand if it is, in addition to being empirically verifiable, constructed by the researcher as a *religious* object. Conversely, a more complex construct at the other end of the spectrum can only work as a comparand when it is empirically researchable. Comparing secularity in modern France and medieval Japan, for example, is only possible if secularity—and thus a distinction between secular and religious—is empirically verifiable in each context.

One aspect that is not prominent in Ragin’s discussion about cases but crucial for determining comparands in the study of religion is the emic interpretation. This became already apparent in the two discussed cases: Who “ascribes religious value” to a physical object? Who “distinguishes between secular and religious”? The actors in that particular historical situation do. Certainly, in the first case it is the researcher who identifies the value as “religious”—based on his or her theory of religion—but the *ascription* of this value must be carried out by the social actor (consciously or not). In the second case, too, the researcher defines what “secular” and “religious” mean for the purpose of the study, but only when social actors themselves distinguish between the two can secularity become an object of study.

Viewed as two ends on a spectrum, empirical verifiability and theoretical construction appear as two aspects that are both necessarily present in each unit, yet their respective proportions vary. Let me give a few examples, roughly arranged along the spectrum from strongest empirical verifiability to strongest theoretical construction: physical objects (images, altars, temples); actions; narratives; doctrinal concepts (transmigration, divine intervention, merit-making); social institutions and their ideological legitimations; theoretical constructs (asceticism, fundamentalism, syncretism); and yet more abstract theoretical constructs (routinization of charisma, authority, secularity). All these can become units for comparison.

EMERGING AND PREDEFINED UNITS

Ragin’s second dichotomy distinguishes between cases that are predefined, general units and cases that emerge in the course of research. For determining units for comparison it seems useful to consider the two to be stages in a research process that starts with general, recognized units and may lead to individually defined cases. The most generic units in the study of religion are “the religions.” They are somewhat predefined, in that scholars, while being aware of the risk of essentializing, generally recognize them as somewhat meaningful units. But as comparands they are too generic and need to be specified. Consider, for example, a comparison of image worship in Hinduism and Christian-

ity. “Hinduism” and “Christianity” are the general units, but since these are too complex to be compared in toto, the actual study has to be narrowed down to specific sources, time periods, geographical locations, and so forth.⁸ There are many predefined units also on lower levels of generality, some of which coincide with units identified in sociology (cities, families, nation-states, etc.)—say, in comparing leadership succession in the Church of Scientology in the United States and Germany—while others are more specific to the respective religious traditions (canonical texts, priestly offices, ritual settings, etc.).

As noted, determining comparands is a process with many variables. Potential sources are limited by the researcher’s training and scope, which already eliminates a number of religious traditions, regions, and/or time periods from the consideration. In the remaining pool of material, normally a narrowing down from general to specific takes place, for example: Hinduism → Hinduism in northern India → Hinduism in Varanasi → Durgā worship in Varanasi → Durgā images → Durgā image use in a particular procession. Here the unit that will be used for comparison emerges from narrowing down general, predefined units.⁹ Clearly, this is not the only possible procedure for determining comparands—the comparand may remain a predefined unit, like a certain book or a piece of artwork—but it should be assumed that whatever enters the comparison as a comparand is the result of a selection process.

In this process, again, the emic interpretation plays a crucial role. Ragin describes the general units in the dichotomy as “conventionalized, generic categories independent of any particular research effort” that “exist prior to research and are collectively recognized as valid units by at least a subset of social scientists,” for example, “individuals, families, cities, firms.”¹⁰ Apparently these are meant to be categories that were established in scholarship and that most scholars consider valid for analysis. In the study of religion, many of the categories that describe potential units for comparison were formed, at least partly, by the religious traditions themselves. Consider categories such as temple, baptism, saṅgha (monastic community), diviner, creation myth, pilgrimage, canon, sacred kingship, or ancestor veneration. Not all such categories have directly corresponding terms in the respective object language (yet many do), but clearly each one is based on a concept that was formed within the religious tradition by religious actors.

The two dichotomies of Ragin’s analysis thus help us understand better both the *range* of potential comparands—from more empirically verifiable ones to more theoretically constructed ones—and the *process of narrowing down*

⁸ Note that this is an analytical, not an empirical description of the process.

⁹ For a discussion of this process, see also Michel Wieviorka, “Case Studies: History or Sociology?,” in Ragin and Becker. *What Is a Case?*, 159–72.

¹⁰ Ragin, “Introduction,” 8–9.

units for comparison—from generic categories that are established (both in scholarship and in traditional conceptualizations) to individually defined units which may or may not overlap with established categories. In addition, by describing a particular unit as a “case of” something and thereby placing it in a certain class, particular aspects of that unit are highlighted.¹¹ When a text is categorized as a cosmogonic myth, for example, the focus lies on its narrative content, and it may thus be compared to other stories about the creation of the world. But perhaps the same text can also be read as a sectarian polemic that uses the genre of cosmogony to demonstrate the superiority of one sect over others. In this case it could also be categorized as an apologetic text and compared with other, noncosmogonic, apologies. Or it can be read as a parable that contains a subtle critique of current political leadership and can thus be compared with other parables—or other critiques of authorities. Or the text, in its physical form as a book, is ritually venerated and could thus be compared with other ritually venerated objects. Since units tend to have multiple aspects with regard to which they can be studied, all these (and more) could apply to one and the same text simultaneously.

This applies to the units that Bynum has chosen as well. Depending on the respective aspect that the scholar wishes to highlight, the Durgā procession can enter a comparison about processions, about the presence of the divine, and about many other things; depictions of the side wound of Christ can be compared in view of their art historical properties, their generative symbolism, their sexual connotations, and many other aspects. In a comparative study, the aspect in view of which two (or more) units are compared is called the “third of comparison,” the *tertium comparationis*.

THE CASE AGAINST INCOMPARABILITY

Before exploring the ways in which units may be compared, let me briefly address a more general question: Are all things comparable? Are there certain items that cannot be compared with certain other items? In common parlance, the word “incomparable” is often used rather loosely. When we are told about the incomparable beauty of Venice, what is meant is not that it is impossible to compare Venice, but rather that *when compared*, no other city’s beauty lives up to Venice’s. The word simply denotes an item’s exceptional status. It is equally used for negative evaluations, like when we read about the incomparable cruelty of slavery. Here again, the actual meaning is that no other cruelty equals that of slavery, a statement that clearly presupposes a comparison with other forms of cruelty. Thus, in common idioms “comparison” often

¹¹ For the act of “casing,” see also Charles C. Ragin, “‘Casing’ and the Process of Social Inquiry,” in Ragin and Becker, *What Is a Case?*, 217–26.

expresses mere equivalence or sameness. When Sinéad O'Connor sang, "Nothing compares to you," bemoaning the loss of her boyfriend, she meant that "No one is *like* you." When a film critic notes that a movie "bears no comparison" to the novel on which it was based, she simply declares that the former is not *on a par* with the latter—which, again, presupposes that she has compared the two.

A slightly different case, at least at first glance, is the popular idiom according to which a certain comparative act was "like comparing apples and oranges." It refers to what the speaker views as a false analogy or an undue comparison. Stating, for example, that comparing Jesus and L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of the Church of Scientology, was like comparing apples and oranges is saying that they are too different to be compared in a meaningful way—that these are simply the wrong comparands.¹² But even if two units seem fundamentally different in certain respects, this can hardly be an argument against a comparative study, since juxtaposing and contrasting items that are different can be very instructive. Comparison is about investigating *both* similarities and differences. It seems, rather, that referring to apples and oranges is a warning against forcing two items into the same category. Thus, the idiom of apples and oranges too seems to indicate not so much the impossibility of comparison but an undue assertion of sameness.

This semantic dissonance in everyday language finds an echo also in more sophisticated academic discussions about incomparability, incommensurability, cultural relativism, untranslatability, and so on. A number of scholars have argued convincingly against some radical claims.¹³ Let me mention, in addition, a recent work by Swiss philosopher Ralph Weber, who makes the case against incomparability from the perspective of comparative philosophy. He argues that on principle, "anything is comparable with anything in some respect."¹⁴ Testing out the limits, he asks: Can we compare prime numbers with the Gobi desert? Or a living crocodile with the word "while"? His answer is: on principle, yes. In fact, when we ask these questions we have already started

¹² In what seems like a similar spirit, although not drawing on the "apples and oranges" idiom, Bynum says the same about comparing the Madonna and Durgā processions.

¹³ For an excellent survey of philosophical and sociological approaches and a careful refutation, see Gabriele Cappai, "Der interkulturelle Vergleich: Herausforderungen und Strategien einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Methode," in *Kulturen vergleichen: Sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Grundlagen und Kontroversen*, ed. Nja Srubar, Joachim Renn, and Ulrich Wenzel (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 48–78. See also Joachim Matthes, "The Operation Called 'Vergleichen,'" in *Zwischen den Kulturen? Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs*, ed. Joachim Matthes (Göttingen: Schwartz, 1992), 75–99; Gabriele Cappai, "Vergleichen," in *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz: Grundbegriffe, Theorien, Anwendungsfelder*, ed. Jürgen Straub, Arne Weidemann, and Doris Weidemann (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2007), 94–101.

¹⁴ Ralph Weber, "Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13 (2014): 151–71, at 166.

comparing the items. It is possible to find commonalities on which one could base a comparison, at least formal ones: The respective items exist in the universe. They appear in the same sentence. Weber identifies “external relations” as a basis for comparison: A common property that lies in the common relation to other things (also known in philosophy as the “Cambridge property”), such as: “Both items are being liked by Mary.” Or, more fundamentally, they have in common that they are both of interest to the comparativist.¹⁵ As we will see, this point is much more crucial than it may seem.

Such commonalities may not be sufficient to begin a comparative study. But it seems important to note that there is no epistemological argument against bringing two items, whatever they are, together in a comparative study. That we may spontaneously not be able to think of a common class for prime numbers and the Gobi desert—or a research situation in which comparing the two might become interesting—does not mean that those cannot exist.

DETERMINING THE *TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS*

The fact that anything can be compared to anything else does not imply that all comparisons are useful or interesting from everybody’s point of view. Whether or not comparing two items is considered useful or interesting, and by whom, depends primarily on the *tertium comparationis*. Ralph Weber argues that the *tertium comparationis* can be described as a property that the comparands have in common. He shows that it also applies to concepts like similarity, family resemblance, and analogy, all of which can be identified as “ways of comparison that in some way or other rely on assertions of commonality.”¹⁶ For a comparative study the researcher must determine not only the units of analysis that she or he wishes to compare but also the *tertium comparationis*. Comparison can begin only when the point of comparison is set. However, how do we know that two units are suitable for an interesting comparison? Weber makes an important argument for what he calls a “pre-comparative *tertium*”: “In comparative studies, the placing of one *comparatum* next to the other for the sake of subsequent comparison is not done purely at will but on the basis of a presumed or asserted relation, which is expressive of a claim of resemblance or dissemblance (or of identity or difference) and thus is also the result of prior comparison(s): ‘pre-comparative’ is in this sense always ‘post-comparative.’”¹⁷ In other words, the researcher must have already compared the items she or he sets out to compare, at least to a certain degree. The expectation that a comparative study of Jesus and L. Ron Hubbard will be promising presupposes that the two have been compared before. But then, how did the researcher select the comparands and the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163–66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155–62, at 156.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

tertium for that precomparison? Maybe at an earlier stage there was a larger pool of religious leaders as potential candidates out of which the two were selected. And again, the members of that larger pool too must have been compared to qualify as potential candidates. And so on. If a precomparative *tertium* is always also post-comparative, as Weber correctly suggests, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine when and where a particular comparative endeavor really begins.

While separating the comparands and the *tertium* is helpful for the analysis, these considerations also suggest that we would be wrong to assume that they are brought together only for a particular study. In fact, their ties must have a prehistory. The researcher's cultural background, academic training, personal and scholarly interests, as well as his or her individual decisions begin to shape the conjunction of comparands and *tertium* long before the researcher designs the actual study.¹⁸

ON DISSOLVING TYRANNIES AND LIBERATING THE *TERTIUM*

After having discussed the selection of comparands and the *tertium* in more general terms, let me now return to Carolyn Walker Bynum's article. Some of the points discussed above correspond to her approach, especially to her call for not restricting the scope of potential comparands, yet others seem to call several points made in the article into question. To discuss this, let me reiterate Bynum's recommendations for aspiring comparativists:

First, they should avoid assuming that "look-alikes"—either to explore or to dismiss—are the best parallels for understanding cultures.

Second, they should seek structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional—rather than purely morphological—parallels, prepared for the possibility that startling similarities may emerge between things that look radically different.

Third, they should place each of the carefully chosen comparanda in its own context before drawing out the comparison of these things-in-context with each other. (368)

Starting with the third suggestion, I could not agree more. It is not only a push against decontextualization but also a call for new and innovative forms of comparison. Bynum's own studies—the second and the third example—show this well. She clearly demonstrates that the relations of depictions of the side wound of Christ to their Christian interpretative context can be fruitfully compared with relations of the Śiva *linga* to its Hindu interpretative context. This comparison of

¹⁸ As I plan to argue elsewhere, for analytical purposes we can roughly distinguish three major types of factors in this process: cultural, academic, and personal.

relations is an extremely interesting approach for the study of religion.¹⁹ Also her third example, the comparison of the Durgā procession with the Eucharist, is productive and illuminating. Bynum summarizes her insight as follows: “Having found a better comparandum for the Hindu statue in the Christian Eucharist, I have actually come to see the Eucharist in a new way—as less anthropomorphic and more processual than I understood before. . . . Once understood as similar to as well as different from a Hindu statue, the Christian Eucharist never looks the same again” (366, 368).²⁰ More problematic, it seems to me, is dismissing the first example, the comparison of the Catholic and Hindu processions. Like in the previous quote, which talks about a “better” comparandum, Bynum’s article rejects this type of comparison repeatedly with terms like “superficial,” “false,” “wrong,” or “misleading”—as opposed to “deep probing,” the “right comparison,” and the “real parallels”—perhaps most pointedly in these passages: “I want now not merely to suggest that comparing images is not necessarily the right comparison; I want to explore what sort of comparison we might put in its place. . . . [M]uch of the recent study of Christianity seems to me to adduce the wrong Western/non-Western comparisons. Not only is it misleading to compare Durga and Mary as if their processions were parallel; it seems misleading to assume that we will probe the nature of sacred presence most deeply if we compare statues” (358, 360). First we must recognize that this is an attack on a straw man. Note that the example was hypothetical: the article does not refer to a study that actually compared the processions in view of the nature of sacred presence. So even if Bynum were right that this particular comparison is not productive, nobody claimed that it would be. Second, however, I do not feel that a convincing case for its unproductivity is made. Does the mere fact that the Durgā images are

¹⁹ It is also similar to my own approach of discourse comparison, which I suggested in the same journal and which Bynum must have missed (Oliver Freiberger, “Locating the Ascetic’s Habitat: Toward a Micro-Comparison of Religious Discourses,” *History of Religions* 50, no. 2 [2010]: 162–92). I developed it during the course of a microcomparative study of asceticism in early Christianity and classical Hinduism after realizing that the selected sources of both traditions display a plurality of standpoints regarding ascetic practices. I argued that a comparison of discourses, rather than of single phenomena, can be most useful for the study of religion.

²⁰ This conclusion expresses most precisely the benefits of what I call an illuminative mode of comparison, in which the researcher draws on parallel cases in order to recognize blind spots and thus to illuminate the item she or he is primarily interested in. This approach corresponds to what comparative historian Jürgen Kocka has aptly called “asymmetrical” comparison, as Bynum notes too (n. 3; see Jürgen Kocka, “Comparative History: Methodology and Ethos,” in *Explorations in Comparative History*, ed. Benjamin Z. Kedar [Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2009], 29–35). Alternatively, comparison in the study of religion may be done in the taxonomic mode, which aims at classifying religious items. This comparison is symmetric, meaning that in order to develop and refine metalinguistic categories, all “species” receive equal analytical attention in the comparative process. See Oliver Freiberger, “Modes of Comparison: Towards Creating a Methodological Framework for Comparative Studies,” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 53–71.

drowned after the procession, while the Marys are not, really disqualify them from a comparison regarding divine presence? Even if one considers that difference to be fundamental, does this not raise a host of fascinating questions for a comparative study? Third, when the quoted passage says, “as if their processions were parallel,” it is not clear what “parallel” is supposed to mean here. Clearly the processions do feature many commonalities—otherwise the critique of superficial resemblance would not make sense—but the point seems to be that they are not “parallel” in one specific way, namely the way in which Bynum wants them to be parallel. This passage reveals that her value judgment (“false, misleading”) is tied to a very specific *tertium comparationis*. When she declares that “what we should ask is not ‘how is image in one culture like or not like image in another culture?’ but rather ‘where (in what place, object, or person) do religious presence and power reside?’” (358), it almost seems as if all comparison must be about “sacred presence.” By contrast, it is easy to conceive of multiple other *tertia* for which the Christian and Hindu processions would be extremely promising comparands. Consider the numerous perspectives of ritual studies, including the discussions about ritual efficacy and ritual failure; the respective roles of specialists, laypeople, and observers at the event, their motivations, and the dynamics of their interactions; questions about religious economy; about sacred and secular space; about the forms and functions of accompanying music; and so on and so forth. It seems difficult to argue that these are of lesser value for comparison in the study of religion.²¹

Bynum discusses the selection of comparands, but the article says little about the many respects in which items may be compared. In other words, it does not spend much time reflecting on the *tertium comparationis*.²² Her innovative selection of seemingly “unlike” comparanda demonstrates well that no limits should be set on potential units for comparison. Comparing a Durgā image with the Eucharist is not quite as extreme as comparing prime numbers and the Gobi desert, but it makes an excellent case for thinking outside the box. All the more surprising is the artificial restriction that Bynum’s article puts on the *tertium comparationis*. If we liberate the comparanda from an (alleged) tyranny, we should grant the *tertium* some freedom too.

²¹ There is a certain strand in the history of religious studies, however, represented by Mircea Eliade and other phenomenologists, that does advocate the study of the “real” or “deeper” meaning of religious phenomena. Long criticized and rejected, this approach seems to have regained attraction recently. Bynum’s suggestions could be viewed as part of this development.

²² Of course, the fact that the very term *tertium comparationis* does not appear in the article does not mean that Bynum did not consider the question in view of which points items are being compared. But in her discussion such considerations remain short and abstract, like in the call that the “ground of comparison” should become “phenomenological or structural or ‘representational’ (in the sense of re-presenting or making present)” (“Avoiding the Tyranny,” 358) or that we should seek “structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional . . . parallels” (*ibid.*, 368).

In her second recommendation, Bynum urges comparativists to “seek structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional—rather than purely morphological—parallels.” While this is good advice, it is also not exactly new. Scholars of religion have long noticed and criticized superficiality in comparison, one example being Jonathan Z. Smith’s discussion of what he calls ethnographic and encyclopaedic modes of comparison—first published in 1978 and again in a follow-up article in 1982.²³ And in 2005, religion scholar Arvind Sharma suggested a distinction between homonymous and synonymous comparisons, which describes Bynum’s approach quite precisely:

Homonymous comparisons are between phenomena, which appear similar but are really different, just as homonyms are words with similar sounds but with different meanings. Synonymous comparisons are between phenomena that appear different but possess similar significance in each tradition, just as synonyms are words that have different sounds but are similar in meaning. Old comparative religion has been oriented toward making homonymous comparisons, but new comparative religion—at least, the kind I would like to practice—will be oriented toward making synonymous comparisons. Now, when synonymous comparisons are made between two traditions, they often result in what I like to call reciprocal illumination.²⁴

Bynum’s article does not cite Jonathan Z. Smith at all, or Sharma—or, in fact, barely any scholars of religion who discuss method and theory of comparison. This might also explain the sweeping statement that “students of religion have been too cavalier in assuming that choosing comparanda is the easy part of any research. Obvious choices of parallels may result all too quickly in discoveries of difference that are not only obvious but finally unproductive” (367–68).²⁵ Major comparative studies of religion from recent decades, like those of Barbara Holdrege, Wendy Doniger, Christel Manning, Kathryn McClymond, Kimberley Patton, Gregory Shushan, Phillippe Bornet, David Freidenreich, Corinne Dempsey, myself, and others—none of which the article cites—seem to suggest otherwise.²⁶ Detecting and deploring a “tyranny of morphology” in

²³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnis Acervus Erit,” in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 240–64, and “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35; see also Freiberger, “Modes of Comparison.”

²⁴ Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 25.

²⁵ See also the above-quoted claim that “even more than their fellow humanists, scholars in religious studies have tended to assume that finding the ‘likes’ is the easy part” (Bynum, “Avoiding the Tyranny,” 345).

²⁶ Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women*

the study of religion would certainly seem more persuasive if it were accompanied by some supporting evidence from that discipline.²⁷

Finally, as important and interesting as it is to “seek structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional parallels,” it seems easier said than done. The article does not provide any strategies for finding comparands that, while not looking alike, display those parallels. In fact, it does not even explain in greater detail how Bynum did it herself. How does a scholar arrive at the point where she compares such diverse items like the side wound of Christ and the Śiva *liṅga* or the Eucharist and a Durgā image? For Bynum the Christian items apparently suggested themselves, which is clearly related to the fact that she has worked on these topics for decades and knows them inside out. All the more interesting it would be to learn about the strategies that she used to pick the “right” comparands on the Indian side. Of course, it is possible—and would be perfectly legitimate—that she had no specific strategy at all but rather happened to encounter the Hindu practices during her five-week stay in India in 2009, began thinking about similarities and differences of those practices and the Christian material that she knows so well, found original comparands, and developed a fruitful comparative study. But if that is the case, more discussion about how the insights gained from this study can be generalized and turned into an exclusive, programmatic approach would be useful.

CONCLUSION

Carolyn Walker Bynum’s article is rich, learned, and thought provoking for anyone interested in comparison or in medieval European religion. But I would submit that the comparison of alleged “look-alikes”—whatever that

Grapple with Feminism (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Kimberley C. Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gregory Shushan, *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism and Near-Death Experience* (London: Continuum, 2009); Oliver Freiberger, *Der Asketediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung brahmanischer und frühchristlicher Texte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009); Phillippe Bomet, *Rites et pratiques de l’hospitalité: Mondes juifs et indiens anciens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010); David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Corinne G. Dempsey, *Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth: Adventures in Comparative Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁷ As a side note, while Bynum clearly defines what she means by morphology, the term is often used in a broader way, referring to more than mere outward and superficial appearance, for example in linguistics and biology, but also in the study of religion. On Eliade’s vision of morphology, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Acknowledgments: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949–1999),” pts. 1 and 2, *History of Religions* 39, no. 4 (2000): 315–31 and 332–51.

exactly means²⁸—should not be dismissed so easily. In fact, whether or not comparands look alike appears to be much less relevant than the actual research question pursued in the comparative study. For this research question, a well-defined *tertium comparationis* might play an even more important role than the comparands do.

At a closer look, the process of selecting both the comparands and the *tertium comparationis* turned out to be rather complex. Multiple factors are at play, from the researcher's training and personal interests to cultural, academic, and disciplinary frameworks and paradigms. In addition, it appears that the comparands and the *tertium* that eventually get chosen have been in a complex relationship even before they are put forward in an actual study. Therefore, while I speak of "conditions and provisions" for comparison and thus separate, for analytical purposes, the precomparative phase from comparison itself, the process appears to be all-encompassing and nonlinear. Sorting out the factors that have an impact on this process will be an important future task for methodologists of comparison. We should restrict the selection of neither comparands nor of the *tertium comparationis*. But we can ask comparativists in the study of religion to make the rationale underlying their selection as transparent as possible.

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²⁸ Bynum does recognize the problems of the fuzzy category of "look-alikes" ("Avoiding the Tyranny," 353), but it is not quite clear in which ways she sees her general rejection affected by them.