

RETHINKING COMPARISON IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES: METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Abstract. *Comparison has shaped the academic study of religion since the field began, yet its status as a method remains disputed. Scholars often speak of a “comparative method,” but they usually mean a general approach rather than a defined procedure. This article reassesses the methodological foundations of comparative religion, drawing on classical debates and on recent scholarship, especially Oliver Freiberger’s claim that comparison is not an independent first-order method but a second-order operation organised by four parameters – goal, mode, scale, and scope – and by a sequence of steps: selection, description, juxtaposition, redescription, rectification, and theory formation. Reading the literature through a hermeneutic and historical-critical lens, the study examines four recurrent hazards – decontextualisation, essentialisation, oversimplification, and universalisation – and situates the emic–etic distinction within postcolonial and decolonial critiques, engaging Asad and Masuzawa in particular. The main result is a single framework that reconciles three competing labels – method, tool, and research design – as facets of one operation seen at different scales, and that treats an explicit tertium comparationis and careful contextualisation as the conditions of a valid comparison. The framework is illustrated through a short worked example, and the article recovers a premodern, non-European precedent for empathetic comparison in al-Bīrūnī.*

Keywords: *comparative religion; methodology of religious studies; tertium comparationis; emic and etic perspectives; second-order method; postcolonial critique; decolonial critique; al-Bīrūnī*

¹**Nematullo Mukhamedov** – Doctor of Historical Sciences, Department of History and Source Studies of Islam – IRCICA, International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan
E-mail: nematulloh@mail.ru

²**Nurulloh Turambetov** – Lecturer, UNESCO Chair in Comparative Study of World Religions, International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan
E-mail: nurullohturambetov@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Since the study of religion sought recognition as an independent field, comparison has been one of its defining operations. It has been celebrated as the discipline's signature contribution and subjected to sustained criticism. A striking feature of the discourse is that when scholars speak of a "comparative method," their attention gravitates toward the adjective rather than the noun: the expression is treated as interchangeable with "comparison" or "comparative approach," leaving its procedural content underspecified. As Freiburger observes, although comparison has been extensively debated, it has rarely been examined in strictly methodological terms; a large body of comparative studies has accumulated, yet the question of how comparison works as a method has seldom been confronted directly (Freiburger O., 2018:6).

This study takes that observation as its point of departure and asks: in what sense, if any, is it legitimate to describe comparison as a "method"? The question is both disciplinary and contemporary. Postmodern and postcolonial critiques cast doubt on whether comparison could avoid imposing a Western, specifically Protestant, template on non-Western traditions (McCutcheon R.T., 1997:viii; Fitzgerald T., 2000:4). Yet no major critic has called for abandoning comparison altogether (Freiburger O., 2019:24). The result is a discipline that cannot do without comparison but has struggled to articulate the conditions for practising it responsibly.

The **object** of the study is the comparative enterprise in religious studies; its **subject** is the methodological status and internal structure of comparison. The **aim** is to consolidate a fragmented discourse into a coherent framework and to evaluate the principal positions on the nature, procedures, and limits of comparison. Four **research questions** guide it: (1) Is comparison a method, a tool, a research design, or an analytical framework? (2) What operations and parameters constitute a disciplined comparison? (3) Which recurrent errors threaten its validity? (4) How do the emic–etic and descriptive–evaluative distinctions, and postcolonial critiques, reshape its practice? The **hypothesis** is that comparison is most defensibly understood not as a self-sufficient first-order method but as a second-order operation whose legitimacy depends on an explicit tertium comparationis and rigorous contextualisation.

The originality of the study lies in four contributions. **Methodologically**, it consolidates debates usually pursued in isolation into one framework. **Conceptually**,

it reframes comparison as a second-order operation reconciling the labels of method, tool, and research design. **Theoretically**, it integrates the postcolonial category critique constructively rather than as a counsel of despair. **Historiographically**, it broadens the field's genealogy by recovering the premodern precedent of al-Bīrūnī.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern discourse is conventionally traced to the founders. Müller's dictum – that one who knows only one religion knows none – gave comparison a constitutive role in the emerging “science of religion” (Müller F.M., 1873:13), while evolutionists such as Tylor arranged traditions as stages of a single developmental sequence (Tylor E.B., 1871:1). The phenomenological-morphological tradition culminating in Eliade sought recurrent patterns of the sacred across separated traditions (Eliade M., 1958:1). Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that the reified concept of “religion” was itself a modern Western construct ill-suited to the traditions it compared (Smith W.C., 1962:50). This early comparativism – and the institutional consolidation of the discipline in nineteenth-century German scholarship (Mukhamedov N. & Turambetov N., 2024:268) – was later criticised for its teleological assumptions and for treating non-Christian traditions as deficient approximations of a Protestant norm.

The decisive turn is associated with Jonathan Z. Smith, whose “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” argued that the “magical” resemblances of much comparative work were artefacts of the scholar's ordering activity rather than properties of the data; comparison presupposes the postulate of difference and its controlled manipulation toward a defined end (Smith J.Z., 1982:21). In *Drudgery Divine* he showed how confessional agendas had silently structured ostensibly scholarly comparisons (Smith J.Z., 1990:36), yet he reframed comparison around “redescription” and “rectification,” supplying the vocabulary later methodologists systematised (Smith J.Z., 2000:240). Responses gathered in *A Magic Still Dwells* sought to rehabilitate comparison for a postmodern age (Patton K.C. & Ray B.C., 2000:1; Freidenreich D.M., 2004:80).

A more radical line questioned the category itself. McCutcheon argued that treating religion as *sui generis* rendered the field theoretically naive (McCutcheon R.T., 1997:viii), and Fitzgerald held that “religion” functions as an ideological rather than analytical category (Fitzgerald T., 2000:4). The most influential statement is Talal

Asad's genealogy of "religion" as a culturally specific, post-Reformation construct, which implies that cross-cultural comparison risks projecting that construct onto traditions that did not conceive themselves in its terms (Asad T., 1993:29). Masuzawa showed how the taxonomy of "world religions" preserved European universalism in the language of pluralism (Masuzawa T., 2005:14); these arguments share ancestry with Said's account of scholarship in the service of power (Said E.W., 1978:3) and are radicalised in Lincoln's insistence on a resolutely historical, critical comparison (Lincoln B., 2003:1).

A constructive methodological literature has matured since the mid-2010s. Kripal reframed comparison as transformative practice (Kripal J.J., 2014:1); Freiberger's *Considering Comparison* proposed "discourse comparison" as a corrective to decontextualisation and universalisation (Freiberger O., 2019:24), tested in the 2018 *Religions* special issue (Freidenreich D.M., 2018:1; Kreinath J., 2018:1). A parallel metatheoretical literature – Flood's move beyond phenomenology (Flood G., 1999:1), Jensen's general study of religion (Jensen J.S., 2003:1), and the scientific self-understanding urged by Strenski and Wiebe (Strenski I., 2006:1; Wiebe D., 1999:9) – supplies the disciplinary self-consciousness within which any defence of comparison must now operate. Two issues remain unresolved: whether comparison is a method, tool, design, or framework; and the under-theorised relation between the emic–etic distinction and comparison (Engler S. & Whitesides K.A., 2022:8). The article addresses both.

METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual investigation rather than an empirical comparison of traditions; its data are the scholarly literature on comparison itself. Its design is a critical conceptual synthesis within which four procedures operate in integrated fashion. The **historical-critical method** situates each position in context, distinguishing nineteenth-century evolutionist comparativism from present reflexive comparativism. **Hermeneutic analysis** interprets the key texts on their own terms, attending to their vocabulary – mode, scale, scope, redescription, rectification. A **discourse-analytical** approach treats the shifting use of "method," "approach," and "perspective" as itself a datum. A **phenomenologically informed** sensitivity to insider self-understanding underpins the emic–etic discussion. These methods suit an object that is a body of argument, not of religious facts. The **scientific novelty** lies in integrating the classical

critique, the procedural turn, and the decolonial reorientation into one framework, and in foregrounding a premodern non-European precedent (Flood G., 1999:1; Geertz A.W., 2016:97).

ANALYSIS

Comparison as Method, Tool, Research Design, or Second-Order Operation.

Stausberg holds that comparison functions not as a discrete method but as a research design within which specific methods – discourse analysis, content analysis, philology, hermeneutics, historical analysis, phenomenology – generate the evidence (Stausberg M. & Engler S., 2011:21). A further difficulty is that comparison is so embedded in cognition that it resists isolation: concept formation, classification, and juxtaposition pervade all research, making comparison a precondition of analysis rather than one technique among others. Freiburger resolves this by classifying comparison as a **second-order method**: first-order methods gather and analyse particular data, while second-order methods operate on their results (Freiberger O., 2019:24). Comparison cannot replace philology or content analysis; it presupposes their results and recombines them from a new vantage point. Only objects first studied in depth can be compared fruitfully – and this dependence is what makes comparison generative of interpretations exceeding the first-order methods.

This conception reconciles the competing characterisations: comparison is a research design when it organises a whole study, a discipline-constitutive method when it is the operation through which results are redescribed, and an analytical tool when mobilised locally. The classifications describe one operation at different scales.

The Structure of a Disciplined Comparison

A disciplined comparison can be analysed along four **parameters** and a sequence of **operations** (Smith J.Z., 1982:21; Freiburger O., 2018:6; 2019:24). The **goal** is illuminative (deepening understanding of a phenomenon) or taxonomic (forming and refining categories). The **mode** captures the style in which one compares. The **scale** ranges across micro-level (two texts, rituals, persons), meso-level (communities or movements), and macro-level (whole traditions or civilisations) comparisons. The **scope** sets the relationship between comparands: contextual (one milieu, likely contact), cross-cultural (formal or functional similarity across unrelated settings), or historical

(change over time). A persistent error is the mismatch of scales – drawing a macro-level conclusion from a single micro-level observation.

The process resolves into operations. **Selection** identifies the comparands and the *tertium comparationis* – the criterion in respect of which they are compared. **Description** situates each comparand in its own context, resisting premature simplification. **Juxtaposition**, the analytical heart, sets them side by side to establish both similarity and difference. **Redescription** articulates the new understanding the juxtaposition makes possible, and **rectification** refines the general categories – “sacredness,” “ritual,” “revelation” – in its light; in some cases the process culminates in **theory formation**. This articulated structure distinguishes scholarly comparison from the intuitive noticing of resemblances.

Objectivity, Bias, and Contextualisation

The cardinal principle is contextualisation. Because religious phenomena are shaped by particular periods and societies, a symbol or doctrine wrenched from its setting and juxtaposed with another generates spurious conclusions. The most serious error is therefore decontextualisation: judging one tradition’s rituals by another’s criteria collapses the very differences comparison exists to illuminate. Closely related is confessional bias – the tendency, traced by the category critique to the discipline’s formation within a Protestant theological matrix, to measure all traditions against Christian benchmarks (McCutcheon R.T., 1997:viii; Fitzgerald T., 2000:4), so that some traditions may be indifferent to questions central to Christianity, or may not conceive themselves as a “religion” at all (de Lange N., 1986:1–4).

Hence the demand for terminological precision. “God” cannot be transferred unreflectively from strictly monotheistic Judaism to Hinduism, whose landscape includes polytheistic, monistic, and monotheistic strands; “salvation” differs likewise, since in the monotheistic traditions it concerns eternal life, whereas in Hinduism and Buddhism the goal is release from rebirth (*moksa*, *nirvāṇa*). Each term must be grasped within its own semantic horizon before being cautiously juxtaposed with cognates elsewhere.

Emic and Etic Perspectives

The emic perspective expresses the believer’s self-understanding – the dimension Otto’s account of the holy sought to render in its own terms (Otto R., 1958:5) – while

the etic is the external observer's analytical account. A worship act that is emically a spiritual practice may be studied etically as a social phenomenon; the two are jointly necessary. The principle that each tradition be understood through its own categories before subsumption under the scholar's metalanguage is now widely accepted, and recent work explores elevating indigenous emic concepts into cross-culturally useful etic categories (Engler S. & Whitesides K.A., 2022:8). Decolonial scholarship warns that the distinction can ossify into a hierarchy in which studied communities supply only "raw" emic data; the corrective is to recognise its pragmatic character and distribute theoretical agency more equitably.

Universalisation, Oversimplification, and Other Errors

Several errors degrade analysis. **Oversimplification** reduces a tradition to one dimension – a "religion of ritual" or "of doctrine" – a risk inherent in any single-factor account, including the reduction of religion to social function (Durkheim É., 2001:46). **Universalisation** draws sweeping conclusions about religion as such from a narrow base – the vice Smith's critique exposed. **One-sidedness** attends only to similarities (dissolving distinctiveness) or only to differences (denying shared ground). Against these stand two productive modes: the *illuminative*, explaining one phenomenon through another (reciprocal illumination), and the *taxonomic*, comparing several to build a category, as when sacred sites refine "sacred space." Geertz's "thick description" underwrites both, insisting the phenomenon be read in its cultural texture (Geertz C., 1973:5).

Contemporary Critiques and Constructive Responses

The contemporary state is a cautious recovery of comparison after the late-twentieth-century criticism. The category critiques of Asad, McCutcheon, and Fitzgerald exposed how the inherited notion of religion could reproduce Protestant and imperial assumptions (Asad T., 1993:29; McCutcheon R.T., 1997:viii; Fitzgerald T., 2000:4); Asad's is the most demanding, implying that the unit of comparison is partly produced by the comparison itself, so a responsible method must treat its categories as provisional. The constructive response disciplines comparison rather than abandoning it: Freiburger's "discourse comparison" confronts decontextualisation, essentialisation, and universalisation by treating comparands as at once empirical units and theoretical constructs (Freiburger O., 2019:24; 2020:497). The resulting practice favours smaller-

scale, contextually anchored comparisons (Kreinath J., 2018:1), reweights categories along decolonial lines (Engler S. & Whitesides K.A., 2022:8), and treats comparison as a teachable, evaluable procedure (Freiberger O., 2019:24; Stausberg M. & Engler S., 2011:21) – a chastened, reflexive instrument rather than the engine of a universal science of religion.

Decentring the Genealogy: A Premodern Precedent

The standard narrative locates the field's origins in nineteenth-century Europe, but this is incomplete. The Central Asian polymath Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), in his *Kitāb al-Hind*, undertook a systematic and empathetic study of Indian traditions, learning Sanskrit, engaging Hindu scriptures directly, and framing his work as a record of facts rather than polemic (al-Bīrūnī A.R., 1910:7). Recent scholarship reads his approach as combining descriptive accuracy, systematic comparison, and a deliberate objectivity that did not require him to suspend his own commitments (Senin N., 2019:392; Mukhamedov N. & Turambetov N., 2023:106). His differentiation of educated and popular religiosity and his insistence on understanding a tradition in its own terms anticipate principles – contextualisation, the emic orientation, the suspension of judgement – that contemporary methodology articulates explicitly, and prefigure the multidimensional analysis later formalised by Smart (Smart N., 1996:10). Recognising such precedents complicates the assumption that comparative religion is an exclusively European invention.

DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the hypothesis. The most defensible position is that comparison is neither a self-sufficient first-order method nor a dispensable flourish, but a second-order operation whose validity is conditional on explicit procedural control. Its principal strength is the capacity to generate redescrptions and refine categories no single-tradition study could produce: it is constitutive of religious studies as a comparative discipline. The convergence of Smith's redescription–rectification vocabulary with Freiberger's parameterised model marks a genuine, if recent, methodological maturation.

The limitations are clear. The methodology has outpaced its application; few full-scale studies actually implement the proposed frameworks (Stausberg M., 2020:742). The category critique is not fully answered: if “religion” is a contestable construct,

the comparands are theory-laden in ways no procedural rigour fully neutralises. And the decolonial critique shows that even a flawless comparison operates within structures distributing interpretive authority unequally. Against previous treatments, the framework here reconciles the competing characterisations of comparison by locating them at different scales, and integrates historical, procedural, and decolonial strands usually pursued in isolation. The same tension between particular and general recurs in comparative history, sociology, and anthropology – suggesting these are instances of a problem common to the human sciences.

CONCLUSION

Comparison is best understood as a second-order, discipline-constitutive operation that presupposes the results of first-order methods and recombines them through an articulated sequence – selection, description, juxtaposition, redescription, rectification, and sometimes theory formation – configured by goal, mode, scale, and scope. Its validity depends on an explicit *tertium comparationis*, rigorous contextualisation, and a disciplined balance between similarity and difference.

The article contributes in four ways: **methodologically**, consolidating a fragmented discourse into one framework; **conceptually**, resolving whether comparison is a method, tool, or design by showing these are facets of one second-order operation at different scales; **theoretically**, integrating the category critique of Asad and Masuzawa constructively, treating the instability of the comparand as a condition to be managed; and **historiographically**, decentring the Eurocentric genealogy by recovering al-Bīrūnī.

Future research should produce full-scale studies implementing the framework, and attend to four horizons: digital-humanities comparison at scale, which risks amplifying decontextualisation; machine learning and large language models, raising whether automated pattern-detection supplies a genuine *tertium comparationis* or reproduces “magical” resemblances at speed; intercultural and interreligious dialogue studies; and the sustained incorporation of non-Western epistemologies – including Central, South, and East Asian categories – as resources for theory rather than raw data. Underlying all is the question whether comparative religion can proceed without a stable concept of religion, or whether its future lies in comparing the historically situated discourses through which traditions constitute themselves.

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