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“What the One Thing Shows Me in the Case of Two Things”: Comparison as Essential to a Proper Academic Study of Religion

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Abstract

Comparison is a fundamental operation in the milieu of the remarkable abilities of human beings to transcend themselves in acts of perception and the accumulation of knowledge. Comparison is holding together things that are at once the same and different. The very possibility of the copresence of same and different, of is and is not, is a gift of human biology and evolution. Humans compare because it is our distinctive nature to do so. Academics have the added responsibility of being self-aware, self-reflective, and articulate when comparing. This article develops a rich theory of comparison in conjunction with detailed reflections on late nineteenth century encounters of European-Australians and Aborigines in Central Australia. The intent is to advance our understanding of comparison and also to articulate in the practical terms of method what is involved in comparison, arguing most generally that comparison is of the fabric of any proper study of religion.

Keywords

comparison – proper study of religion – Australian Aborigines – discovery – Jonathan Z. Smith

Entering the academic study of religion at the University of Chicago in the mid-1960s was not something I had long planned and certainly it was not due to any calling. As a student of math and physics who then studied business and computers and had a nascent career in business, I was about as far from prepared for both the University of Chicago and religion studies as one might imagine. It was only recently that it dawned on me that the only reason Chicago would

have accepted someone so ill-prepared is that they were rather desperate for new students at the time. In a strange way my background served one of their criteria and that was that I was a stranger to seminary training. I was looking for a place to take a brief time out to contemplate my life course yet fully expecting that I would make a lifelong commitment to the world of business.

When I arrived at Chicago, I was a huge misfit obviously betrayed by the frequent naive questions I asked. I was also totally unaware that the study of religion in America was undergoing a remarkable upheaval and that my largely random selection of Chicago had put me smack in the center of the birth of a new era of religion studies in America; the establishment of what I now call a proper academic study of religion (see Gill, 2020).

What I also didn't know then was that in 1963 Justice Black of the US Supreme Court had included in an opinion a justification for the teaching of religion as fundamental to an adequate liberal education. The legal implication was that religion might be taught in colleges and universities that depended on public funding without violating the US Constitutional provision of the separation of church and state. The caveat was, as made clear by Justice Black, that religion could not be taught other than as historical and humanities information. It clearly must not be taught to influence the religious lives of students; that is, no theology, no bible, no church, at least as these had been central to seminary and religious education.

When I arrived at Chicago in 1967 it was gearing up to meet the enormous demand for faculty in the many new departments springing up in universities around the country. In a half dozen years in the late '60s the number of departments of religion expanded from 25 to 178. As a warm bodied person who would not be inclined to be theological or religious, I was admitted. I've imagined some admissions committee with a bit of humor joking about how an experiment like me might turn out. I suppose that I've persisted so many decades because I'm still trying to figure out if and where I might fit in. As I've watched the entire founding generational cohort retire or die, I've tried to assess what has been gained by this first long phase of the experiment.

This demand for non-theological non-churched scholars in mid-twentieth century strongly pushed the selection of faculty in American departments in public funded universities toward the study of specific religious traditions, especially non-Christian ones. The Protestant Christian heritage that was unavoidably a part of the study of religion would persist no matter what, yet the rise of the study of the so-called "world religions" was emphasized to be seen as properly legal and legitimate. The result has been the development of many areas of religion studies that have each developed over the decades with a tendency toward an insular character.

In the early phase in this American expansion there was much attention given to the rich European intellectual heritage for the study of religion. Certainly, there were extensive Christian historical and theological and philosophical traditions spanning centuries. There were also the vast relevant contributions by European scholars in anthropology and psychology and sociology and other social sciences. At Chicago, in the '60s, we spent a great deal of time asking many of the fundamental questions that had been developed by these European studies of religion: What is the essence of religion? What is the origin of religion? What is the function of religion? How do religions compare with one another? What is the definition of religion? What comprises a theory of religion? What justifies an academic study of religion? And, given Justice Black's writings, What constitutes a proper academic study of religion, that is, one conducted by secular scholars that is on a par with the humanities and social sciences and even the natural sciences? In my experience there has been a steady decline in interest in these questions correlated with the steady increase in the establishment and growing independence of various area studies of religion.

In making my own choice to study Native Americans I had to ignore the sharp warnings of everyone, yet it introduced me to the great issues of the social sciences arising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries circulating around small-scale cultures distinguished for academic purposes by their absence of writing. I was regularly reminded that they have no texts! It centered me in the discussion of primitives (a term common then) and the archaic and magic and myth and evolution; it eventually led me to focus on body and action and dancing and movement and gesture. It led me to ground my study of religion on the biologically evolved distinctively human bodied attributes that I find essential to the very existence of religion. Oddly, as I now look back on this half-century, I realize that my default choice of subject area permanently entwined me with the formative and definitive questions for this new era of the study of religion.

Looking back, as I see the academic study of religion having developed most energetically into a collection of area studies, I believe my own work all the more important in offering some contribution towards what remains incomplete, even largely ignored, and that is the development of a proper academic study of religion (Gill, 2020). A study of religion is not proper without including the persistent question, What is religion? an obvious statement that nonetheless must be made. And a study of religion demands a robust general and comparative discourse that includes both religion as genera as well as the intertwined insights gained by the many specific studies of particular religions or perspectives on religions, religions as species. Jonathan Smith, with whom

I studied at Chicago, made this point in one of his last public lectures in 2010 saying, “The groundwork, it seemed to me, then [the 1960s] was there laid for the development of a generic study of religion, but that expectation has largely remained unrealized. We seem still committed to the priority of species over genera, apparently confident that a focus on the former is the route to a responsible consideration of the latter without, however, much reflection on how one sort of expertise might, in fact, lead to the other” (Braun and McCutcheon, 2018: 126).

Unfortunately, comparison has often evoked that earlier era, religiously grounded mostly in the Christianities, that compared whole religions one to another to demonstrate superiority and hierarchy. The often-confusing search for high gods among primitives was one such comparative strategy. So too the evolution of religion succeeding magic. These comparative concerns were prominent in the early phases of the development of a secular study of religion in the mid-twentieth century; one thinks especially of the contributions and influence of Mircea Eliade, also my teacher, to create patterns of comparative religion. Yet, as specific areas of religion studies developed, comparison grew increasingly suspect and avoided. There is little to no training for scholars to be comparative students of religion.

Jonathan Smith is one of the few scholars who has written regularly on comparison. While many scholars have paid attention to his writings and embraced the importance of comparison, few have explicitly engaged comparison very self-consciously or with much clarity. Despite Smith’s several important writings, they did not adequately serve the broader field in establishing a clear and usable understanding of comparison. Smith’s own writings may have contributed to the confusion. His studies assessed various modes or styles and classes of comparison that he documented across a wide swath of history, often emphasizing that they all failed in some respects. As his studies continued, his understanding of comparison evolved and shifted, perhaps leaving many of his readers confused. I believe that a more careful and nuanced reading of Smith, supplemented by the recognition and examination of comparison as a distinctively biologically based human process developed across evolution assures us that comparison is fundamental to human ways of being in the world and, when formalized, it is a bread-and-butter academic method, even constituting the academic milieu (see Freiberger 2016, Freiberger 2019, Freiberger 2020, Gill, 2020, Ch 1). Yet still what is comparison? What does comparison accomplish?

Jonathan Smith died in December 2017. At the American Academy of Religion national meeting November 2018 (see Crews and McCutcheon, 2020), in one of the sessions that honored Smith I heard what I found to be confusing

presentations on Smith's understanding of comparison. I was surprised to hear young scholars ask if there remains any role at all for comparison in the academic study of religion. To my mind, comparison is at the core of "how one sort of expertise might lead to the other," that is, how a proper academic study of religion exists. Yet, it seems rather evident that the whole notion of comparison, after all these decades, remains confusing and suspect to many in the field. My odd personal path in the development of my religion studies has not only persistently engaged comparison in my work, but it has also sought a fuller understanding of comparison as technique. My path has led me to contend that comparison as it is exercised by human beings must be understood as being biologically evolved and distinctively human. In short, comparison is the milieu of the remarkable abilities of human beings to transcend themselves in their acts of perception and their accumulation of knowledge and experience with varying degrees of self-consciousness. What is for the folk often tacit and taken for granted must for the academic be formalized and engaged intentionally and critically. Comparison is a mechanism of human creativity inseparable from the ongoing interdependence of coherence and incoherence. Humans compare because it is of our distinctive nature to do so. Academics hold the added responsibility of being self-reflective and articulate about the practice of comparing.

Enough general reflection: the historical context and the potential for comparison in the study of religion is clear. It is time to explore the energetics and dynamics we associate with the term comparison. There are many modes, styles, and ways of comparing. It is not, as is broadly held, a simple juxtaposition of exempla to discern and describe similarities. Most basic, even essential, is the presence of difference. Smith said that without difference comparison could not be "interesting," as he termed it. More logically put, without difference of some significance, any appearance of difference would be dismissed as an aberrance, an artifact of manifestation; a difference explained away in preference to discerning sameness. This emphasis on similarity was Eliade's understanding of comparison, also prominent among a generation of scholars as well as the folk. It is familiar because it has been perpetuated through endless school assignments asking students to compare meaning mainly to find similarities. Our common compound phrase "compare and contrast" assigns sameness to comparison and different to another operation called "contrast." Smith noted that approaches to the study of religion are distinguished by whether one considers comparison as concerned primarily with seeking similarity or difference. This distinction suggests even an ontological and epistemological stance. Eliade's contention, as James George Frazer's before him, was to see difference as an aberrance due to history and culture that needed

to be explained away by an incorporation of seeming variations into common universal patterns. Comparison then is but the method to assign exempla to known categories. Yet, as many have noted, this sameness is often won only by a heavy-handed re-imagination of the data. We ask, is it possible to find satisfaction in difference? Does not difference beg for explanation? Do we not feel the urge to deny difference? Yet does denying difference serve our advancement of knowledge?

In his most sophisticated discussions of comparison, Smith addressed this seeming problematic aspect of comparison when difference is foregrounded. He acknowledged that difference and sameness must somehow be held together, yet without collapse. Smith quoted Wittgenstein to express his view of comparison. Wittgenstein wrote, "And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?" (Smith 2000: 40). Indeed, Smith held that the very existence of a proper academic study of religion depends on how we understand this question.

In this paper it is my objective to argue for a specific, yet rich, understanding of this seeming impossible copresence of sameness and difference by exploring its energetics and ontological and epistemological implications. I'll first make a few general structural remarks about comparison; then I will develop a theory of comparison by reflection explicitly on phases of one of my own academic projects in Central Australia.

As I see it, a major obstacle to an adequate realization of the full potential of comparison is our drive to resolve difference; that is, we seem to insist on explanation and reconciliation. In the formal environment of academic and public discourse, things are either true or false, real or illusion, yes or no, on or off, inside or outside, the same or different. In this respect we readily, if naively, identify our brains as being like computers based on binary options: zeros or ones. Yet computers, like electronic circuits, short out or fall into endless loops if encountering the simultaneity of on and off. We are more than computers; comparison is more than resolving difference (see Gill, 2018).

It is a breakthrough when we recognize that the simultaneity of *is* and *is not* is not only possible but also it need not be reconciled. This copresence of *is* and *is not* is actually a common human capacity that distinguishes us from computers and most other animals. For me, the quintessential example of this distinctively human capacity is the simple metaphor. Metaphor is learning something by equating it with another thing that we know all along it is not; metaphor is an impossible match-up. Decades ago, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) demonstrated that we can hardly make a single utterance without relying on metaphor. We do not use metaphor to resolve the impossible copresence of *is* with *is not*; rather we happily embrace this copresence of impossibles tacitly acknowledging this impossibility as its distinctive heuristic

power. Language itself shares this seeming condition of the impossible. Words, spoken or written, are what they refer to, yet, of course, they are not. We cannot communicate in the stuff of objective reality, only in the concocted unreal signs that gain their *-iness* through persistent identification with what *is not*; that is, to hold as identical what we know full well are not. And so too for art, ritual, mythology, joke, and riddle; all of these are importantly recognizable as distinctively human. We must also recognize comparison as underlying all these dynamics. Thus, we begin to grasp that comparison is essential to the distinctiveness of human perception and knowing.

We all understand comparison to be at a minimum the juxtaposition of two or more things for the purpose of somehow relating them. Smith, however, developed this understanding by declaring that there is nothing natural about comparison, meaning simply that the terms of encounter engaged by comparing exempla are brought not by the objects themselves but rather by the one doing the comparing. We understand this third term of comparison in formal terms such as classification or theory or proposition or hypothesis. This third term is invariably the invention of the comparer whether formally recognized or not. We sometimes informally recognize the importance of determinative terms brought to comparison with such phrases as “but that’s comparing apples to oranges” (see Lincoln, 2018). Such a phrase seems to suggest that only apples can be compared to apples and the mixing is illegitimate. This phrase suggests an overriding naturalness to comparison that isn’t actually legitimate. Apples and oranges are both fruit, both somewhat round objects, both edible, and so on. I’d suggest there are countless interesting ways to legitimately compare apples and oranges and almost all of them are more interesting than comparing apples to apples. Oliver Freiberger draws a relevant bead on Smith’s studies of comparison in his discussion of controversy within religion studies related to homological (genealogical or of the same family, apples to apples) and analogical (related to environmental circumstances, apples to oranges) comparisons. He shows that postcolonialist critiques have been rightly skeptical of analogical comparisons fearing they might impose Western perspectives on non-Western cultures and religions. Yet Freiberger reviews Smith’s discussion of the issue that argues that technically even homological comparisons are actually analogical, quoting Smith’s conclusion “Similarity and difference are not given [that is they are not natural]. They are the result of mental operations. In this sense, *all comparisons are properly analogical*” (Freiberger, 2020: 50–53, quoting Smith 1990: 51; emphasis in the original).

There are many phases and understandings of comparison and they all need to be carefully and critically considered. Rather than immerse us into utter abstractness I want to develop a rich theory of comparison by tracking

various phases and aspects of comparison through a specific project, my study of late nineteenth century encounters of European-Australians and Aborigines in Central Australia. My concern is to both illustrate the complexity and richness of comparison and also to articulate, in ways usable to others, what all is involved in comparison.

1 Objective Limited Comparison

Let me begin with a use of comparison as a bread-and-butter workhorse of academic studies. I'll call it objective limited comparison. For decades, my encounter with the term objective evoked a screaming protest; it is a loaded word with unwanted baggage. However, here I mean it only in the most mechanical sense, that of fact checking exempla against their cited sources. A distinction of responsible academic work is the citation of sources. The copresence of the presentation of information and its cited source from which it is drawn implicates an objective comparison. Leaping into the midst of things without adequate preparation, doing so will clarify the technique of this kind of comparing while demonstrating its considerable importance. I used this objective limited kind of comparison in order to assess and evaluate a cultural/historical Aboriginal example Mircea Eliade frequently invoked as one of but a couple examples to establish his theory of religion. Here is how Eliade presented it in his book *Australian Religions*,

Numbakulla arose "out of nothing" and traveled to the north, making mountains, rivers, and all sorts of animals and plants. He also created the "spirit children" (kuruna), a very large number of whom were concealed inside his body. Eventually he made a cave or storehouse, [in which] to hide the tjuringas that he was producing. At that time men did not yet exist. He inserted a kuruna into a tjuringa, and thus there arose the first Achilpa (mythical) Ancestor. Numbakulla then implanted a large number of kuruna in different tjuringa, producing other mythical Ancestors. He taught the first Achilpa how to perform the many ceremonies connected with the various totems.

Now, Numbakulla had planted a pole called kauwa-auwa in the middle of a sacred ground.... After anointing it with blood, he began to climb it. He told the first Achilpa Ancestor to follow him; but the blood made the pole too slippery, and the man slid down. "Numbakulla went on alone, drew up the pole after him and was never seen again."

One day an incident befell one of these mythical groups: while pulling up the kauwa-auwa, which was very deeply implanted, the old chief broke it just above the ground. They carried the broken pole until they met another group. They were so tired and sad that they did not even try to erect their own kauwa-auwa “but, lying down together, died where they lay. A large hill, covered with big stones, arose to mark the spot”.

ELIADE 1967: 50–53

Without discussing motivation or context, which I'll do later, it is a common academic method to compare such a statement with its cited sources to determine its accuracy. This is one of the reasons that academic works include footnotes and bibliography; that is, the academic presumption is that other scholars can examine the accuracy of another's work and be assured that it is grounded in the real objective world beyond the academic's statement.

The simple method of comparison I used was to place Eliade's statement alongside his cited source to determine its accuracy. It is a fairly objective and limited method. We place two writings side by side, then compare the quotation word for word to its source to objectively determine its accuracy, and to note any variations such as omissions, additions, paraphrasing, and so on. This workhorse objective limited comparison is to juxtapose two things in order to determine differences. In this kind of comparison, we often begin with the presumption that we will find no differences, yet it is precisely the discovery of difference that is interesting and leads to further academic processes.

Smith's doctoral dissertation was on James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. At the core of his research, Smith used this form of objective limited comparison. The third edition of *The Golden Bough* cited five thousand sources from which Frazer presented something like one hundred thousand examples from specific cultures and times in history. Using this method of objective limited comparison, Smith's work was, in a central phase, to juxtapose a great many of these one hundred thousand examples with the sources Frazer cited to determine the accuracy of Frazer's examples. Smith spent a good part of six years using this workhorse method of comparison; and it is a remarkable accomplishment by any measure.

Smith's results often took the form of a numerical, even statistical, accounting, for example, when he wrote,

Frazer, in advancing his thesis of sacral regicide, lists seventeen African tribes which he claims killed their kings when they grew old, infirm or impotent. A review of his evidence established that while there were

instances of regicide in all seventeen tribes, in eight of them, the “kings” did not appear to be slain for the reasons Frazer suggested. In four tribes, Frazer’s interpretation conclusively holds: the kings were slain for the reasons Frazer postulates; Frazer’s evidence can be augmented by more recent reports and his conclusions are supported by more recent scholarship. In four other tribes it is probable that Frazer was correct. He accurately reproduces the data, but there is not additional material beyond that which Frazer utilized. In one, the evidence was too scanty to permit evaluation. Seventeen tribes, eight of which are certain or probable, is about fifty percent average. On the other hand, subsequent scholars have listed another eighty-five tribes for which sacral regicide has been claimed. Only ten of these have checked out as being certain or probable.

SMITH 1969: 418

Smith also used objective limited comparison as a fundamental method in his critical studies of Eliade’s *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958). Another outstanding example of this style of comparison is in Smith’s essay “I Am a Parrot (Red)” (1978) in which he collected a number of statements by well-known scholars on how to understand the Bororo statements proclaiming that they were red parrots. Yet in this essay his signal use of this objective comparison was to look up the source for this statement attributed to the Bororo of Brazil upon which he discovered that the original ethnographic source had been misquoted and that all of these studies had relied on the misquote.

Returning to my Australian study, my objective limited comparison of Eliade’s statement with its source quickly became complicated. My initial comparison had to be expanded as I recognized that the proper end of this objective comparison could not be satisfied by comparing Eliade’s quote to his cited published source, but rather it needed also to include any and all documents that would take me to the actual Aboriginal people themselves. There is a complex problematic surrounding what it is that the student of religion studies: is it the texts produced by other scholars and observers or is it the actual worlds of real people, those named as our subjects? I’ll not fully engage this important issue here, yet I felt my study demanded that I do all I could to reach the real worlds of other people; the Aborigines of Central Australia in the late nineteenth century. Eliade’s citation was W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen (1927).

Spencer was a trained biologist, the first in Australia. Gillen was the manager of the Alice Springs telegraph station, with no academic training. Neither was fluent in Aboriginal languages of the region. Based on several months’ field

studies in 1897 near the Alice Springs station Spencer and Gillen published *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (1899). Gillen died in 1912. Many years later Spencer returned briefly to the field and then produced a revision of *Native Tribes*, the book *The Aranda*, from which Eliade drew his Numbakulla example. As was the custom at the time, field workers took brief notes when they interviewed people of the culture of their interest. Then usually soon thereafter they expanded those notes into narratives that comprised their field journals. Manuscripts prepared for publication often drew directly from field journals. I went to archives in Australia to find all of these documents.

Using objective limited comparison, I discovered that the example Eliade presented was largely concocted by combining materials from fieldwork separated by thirty years, reflecting material decidedly changed from the first edition to the revised edition, and also comprised of information that in the cited source was separated by thirty pages. Eliade clearly concocted the most distinctive aspects of his example.

In contrast with Smith's Frazer and Eliade studies where he limited the scope to comparing their published examples to only the cited published sources, I expanded the scope of my comparison to include every link in the chain that began with the face-to-face observation in field notes and ended with the published statement in Eliade's books. This comparative process included Spencer's field notes and field journal, Gillen's field materials mostly available through Spencer, the published book *Native Tribes*, its revision *The Aranda*, and Eliade's several quotations citing *The Aranda*. Not available to me were the draft manuscript of either book as submitted to Macmillan in London, that I might have compared these with the published books. These manuscripts would have been valuable since Edward B. Tylor and Sir James George Frazer both had a hand in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Although locating and examining all these materials required extensive work and travel, the objective limited comparison method was used for all of them; it is relatively obvious and simple, if also tedious and time-consuming. I basically laid out each of the relevant sections of every source in parallel columns allowing me to trace words and phrases in Eliade's passage through this chain of sources. What I discovered using this simple comparison was a story, the story of many encounters: field workers and their efforts to describe and document, armchair scholars and their readings of sources to establish theories of culture and religion, scholars who sought to encounter the works of other scholars to assess the complex and subjective nature of academic studies of real people who seem somehow different. Objective limited comparison revealed that "There are no Arrernte texts independent of nonaborigines,"

(Gill, 1998) yet it revealed that scholarship is a complicated highly subjectively motivated and involved human process. It forced me to ask, what are we academics about and is what we do even remotely legitimate?

2 Subjective Heuristic Comparison

In my careful studies of Smith's Frazer work, I often found myself pondering, What could he have thought to be so important about these objective limited comparisons that he would spend the better part of half a dozen years checking Frazer's accuracy in his presentation of thousands of examples? Same question for Smith's work on Eliade. And, come to think of it, the same question applies to much of my own work. Why had I spent the better part of two years including travel to Australia to compare a single example quoted by Eliade in order to determine the extent of its accuracy and to describe the chain of its provenance? Why would anyone do such a thing? And especially when the results seem only to cast doubt on the whole enterprise by which I earned a living.

To address these ponderings, I need to reframe this discussion of comparison. Here the academic process becomes openly subjective and has to do with discovery and creativity; it also demands another mode of comparison. Let me begin with another story. In a book I published in 1982 with the offensive title *Beyond the Primitive: Religions of Nonliterate Peoples*, I had relied totally on Eliade for my discussion of this same Numbakulla example. I declared that Numbakulla was a deity, creator of world and people, who climbed a pole that marked the world center and disappeared into the sky. My innocent concern was to demonstrate the importance of a world axis (*axis mundi*) to religious people, something I believed my teacher Eliade had fully demonstrated. My greatest sin, among many, was perhaps to set a story event in the ethnographic present, which Eliade did at least once as well. I wrote,

Baldwin Spender and F. J. Gillen, who lived among the Achilpa for a time, described what happened once when the sacred pole was broken. The people were very disturbed and confused and seemed to wander about aimlessly for a time until finally they all lay down on the ground to await the death they thought was to come.

GILL 1982: 19

After the book was published, I received a letter from a scholar who told me that he was using my book in a graduate course. He asked me to address concerns

that had come up in class. Referring to my description of these Aborigines, some of his students had looked up my source, cribbed from Eliade, and found it different in important respects from my account and they also questioned the credulity that such folks would actually simply lie down and await death when they broke their pole.

This letter hit me like a ton of bricks. These students, I immediately recognized, were absolutely correct both in checking the source of my quotation as I should have done, and also in their questioning the simple credulity of what I reported. My reaction to this letter was immediate and emotional; that is, it was a felt response. In part, I was embarrassed that I had not done what I knew I should have, what my teacher Smith had trained me to do, but those feelings quickly shifted to a fuller set of felt concerns. While still processing my feelings, I was further stunned by Jonathan Smith's 1987 publication of *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. In the first chapter "In Search of Place" Smith's objective comparison of Eliade's Numbakulla account with his cited sources cast doubt on his explanation which was that this Arrernte myth was cosmogonic and a testimony to the identity of religion with the world axis providing orientation essential to life by means of access to god. Smith had done what I had failed to do, check Eliade's sources. Smith's deep analysis of a somewhat different body of texts was the basis for his alternative explanation that the stories offered "an etiology for a topographical feature in the aboriginal landscape of today" (Smith 1987: 10). Further he sought to develop rich theories of ritual and religion that concentrated on difference rather than sameness. As Smith noted, this Numbakulla example was one of but a few that Eliade used to ground in actual religious history and cultures his theory or definition of religion, a theory based on the discernment of sameness among all religious cultures. Eliade's theory of religion depended heavily on the accuracy of this Australian example. Smith held that, if Eliade had not accurately presented the actual culture he cited, if he had concocted in some way this example, then his theory of religion and the entire study of religion which so closely followed him at the time, would be incorrect. Even more broadly, if an academic could simply concoct examples to establish a theory, then wasn't the entire academic enterprise fraudulent or at best mischaracterized? How might one continue as an academic student of religion should these conditions pertain? My academic sins had placed me in the midst of the conflict between my two academic fathers and also the struggle for what should prevail as a theory of religion and as the fundamental understanding of comparison as central to the field of study. One way or another how could I not, to Freud's delight, commit patricide? Today, from the perspective of many more years of experience, my choice was to construct strategies and modes of comparison that would

offer critique of both yet provide the context in which they are both honored. Perhaps causing injury, but not death, to both (See Gill, 1998: 178–211).

This phase of the project was kicked off by the complex feelings associated with embarrassment, conflict, difference and incoherence. Following Smith, these feelings arise from the distinctions of the presence of difference in the context of comparison. This mode of comparison, I suggest, cannot avoid being subjective, often frustrating, even painful. I call this creative mode subjective heuristic comparison. Smith's broader understanding of comparison is one that emphasizes difference. As I noted he insisted that there is nothing natural about comparison. We might contest this position by suggesting that items in the same species are by their membership in a common class naturally comparable. Smith studied extensively systems of classification including those of Linnaeus and argued that even species of nature are the construct serving comparison. I agree, yet I suggest an intermediate position by indicating that the extent to which a comparison is interesting is the apparent unnaturalness of the examples compared. Wherever we feel comfortable on this issue of naturalness, we must admit that comparison spawned by difference is inseparable from a subjective or felt experience. The energy of comparison, in this aspect, comes from the feelings of difference, incongruity, incoherence, surprise.

There is some redundancy in labeling this comparative mode subjective heuristic since the word heuristic suggests enabling one to discover or learn something, especially in a hands-on or interactive style. This mode is initiated more by prehension than by intention. It is the coming to awareness that feelings of difference and incoherence cannot be tolerated, or are at least uncomfortable, given one's understanding of the world or some significant parts of it. I argue that prehension, grasping, is rooted in the biological evolution of human beings explicitly marked by the interlocked co-development of an opposing thumb, upright posture, and a large brain. The common human notion of grasping concepts or significance or insights is, I argue, in the long history of human development inseparable from these biological factors. The technical term heuristic comes from Greek *heuretikos* meaning inventive, also *heurema* indicating an invention, a discovery; that which is found unexpectedly. The sense of unexpectedness, or surprise, indicates the subjective aspect of discovery or invention. The heuristics or inventive embraces the biological basis in thumbs and hands in its implications of hands-on learning and that grasping requires thumbs. Subjective heuristic comparison then happens to us as much as something we make happen. It is surely inseparable from accumulated experience as well as the training that allows one to skillfully translate the feelings of surprise into more formal academic processes. These conditions and processes are, I suggest, at the heart of all discovery and invention, the core of all advances of knowledge. The distinction of the academic enterprise, as

I will shortly discuss, is to seize such epistemological feeling events and formalize them in terms of argumentation.

I was painfully shocked, embarrassed, and disoriented by the untenability of my signal example, Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole, as establishing that religions are universally defined by the presence of a center that gives orientation to all life and access to the creator gods. My dis-ease was shaped by my reading of Smith's critique of Eliade's use of the same example. My experience of surprise led me to question so much of what I had believed at the time. I had to completely re-evaluate my Eliadian-based theory of religion which I eventually came to see more as an academic theology rather than an academic theory. I had to re-evaluate my understanding of comparison as finding sameness or connections, in order to pursue a richer understanding that demands the presence of difference. I had to re-evaluate Smith's satisfaction in depending on the authority of the sources cited rather than feeling that authority could only come by pursuing the chain of written sources to the speech and bodies of the Aborigines in Central Australia. I had also to question Smith's "alternate explanation" because, while it was initiated by difference, it sought finally to resolve those differences in an explanation based on selective and incomplete sources other than those used by Eliade that were themselves heavily influenced by Spencer and others to satisfy the needs of the early twentieth century construction of social scientific theory. Given the foundational and pervasiveness of these adjustments, I had to engage in the re-examination of virtually everything I had believed and been taught about religion, about what it means to be human, and also about the very nature of the academic enterprise. It is no exaggeration to say that everything I have done in my career following this surprise has been shaped by my efforts to come to terms with the initiation of this process that I term subjective heuristic comparison.

Subjective heuristic comparison is, I believe, as much a process driven and guided by what I call a feeling kind of knowing as by some conscious purposeful logical technique objectively performed. Yet, I believe that it produces hypotheses that can be carefully stated, and it produces the impetus for specific techniques and methods that must be engaged.

The subjective heuristic mode of comparison is a jarring awareness of the potential implications of difference. It is the experience that what we have held as just-so, perhaps just ain't-so. It is inspiration born of disenchantment. I suggest that this feeling kind of knowing is a remarkably common experience. What is often difficult is for us to take this feeling seriously enough to allow the discomfort of incongruity to continue to irritate and motivate. Perhaps simply the gestural habits or skills we develop to navigate the complexities of life equip us with many strategies designed to quickly dissipate the discomfort of surprise and incongruity. Yet, discovery, I stress, is always won by training

or otherwise preparing ourselves to not only tolerate incongruity, but also to place ourselves in situations where we are most likely to encounter it.

Whereas I perhaps put the cart before the horse above in introducing objective limited comparison first, we may now see that it is always brought into play as a result of the emotional demands of the subjective heuristic mode of comparison. I absolutely had to pursue the sources of Eliade's Numbakulla example in the most granular detail; my academic life and my professional integrity depended on it. I found that everything in my academic life was at stake. Of course, it wasn't a shift from one mode of comparison to another. There is nothing linear about learning and experiencing even in a formal academic environment. Rather, the two came together, however seemingly impossible, in an oscillating interaction that hummed at the core of my ongoing academic work. Hypotheses or best guesses were tested with operations of excruciating detail only to be modified with the subsequent additional rounds of continuing efforts with objective details. Situations that persistently engage this iterative process often do not cease for years or decades; the terms just modulate into different theaters and concerns.

Jonathan Smith considered comparison in terms of magic, perhaps more for provocation than to suggest it is a technique of actual magic. Yet there is something inexplicable and profound about all human learning – I'm thinking principally of conscious expansions of knowing. It requires that we transcend where we are and what we know and somehow incorporate not just information, as in filling up a cistern, but more so the integration of insight and perspective and understanding. The process is a gestural one as in the practiced acquisition of skill. We cannot live what we know unless we have integrated it into the way we experience the world. I imagine the interaction and interdependence of these two modes of comparison as something like a ratchet in which the interaction turns the gear just far enough for the next cog to be captured by the trigger. And while Smith also wrote of the "end" of comparison (2000b), in the view I'm presenting here, there may be phases of seeming stasis, there may be projects with specific goals that indicate an accomplishment, but perhaps not an end. I believe that comparison is a distinctively human biological whole-bodied process that can be articulated and engaged as a formal academic process essential to learning and also to teaching. In comparison there may be "ends" but there is no "end."

Appreciating this rich and complex ongoing process of comparison we might now come to imagine why Frazer spent decades on *The Golden Bough* without ever being able to quite settle on what it was he was trying to accomplish. We might appreciate why Smith spent years examining Frazer's work only to come to the position that he found Frazer interesting principally because he intentionally failed. And I can begin to glimpse what has motivated

much of the work of my religion studies. I can also sense how it translated into being grounded in my decades of dancing and the rise of my increasingly firm convictions that it is our evolved human biological distinctive gifts that are at the core of our inventions of religion and our life so aptly exemplified by our penchant for dancing.

3 Comparison, Discovery, and a Proper Academic Study of Religion

A valuable resource to help us comprehend comparison, as I am constructing it, is found in the writings of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. A persistent theme in Peirce's writing had to do with what I term his logic of discovery (see Gill, 2019: 197–226). He held that the scientific methods of induction and deduction do not add one whit to knowledge, both being operations to extend what is known to other domains and to establish the importance of given hypotheses. Throughout his writings he sought a third method he called abduction (a movement away from the center or interestingly kidnaping) or hypothetic inference. In pursuing abduction Peirce sought to comprehend how hypotheses arise, or how we come up with something new.

His genius was, as I understand it, to recognize that hypotheses arise in response to the feeling of surprise. Or put in the terms of my construct, the subjective response to difference or incoherence or incongruity. Surprise is, to use Peirce's term, a feeling kind of knowing. Surprise is the emotion of encountering the unexpected, unexplained, difference, or incoherence. Peirce held that discovery is initiated by the experience of surprise. This experience initiates a subjectively monitored process of iterating through a series of possible conditions to discover one that, should it pertain, might dissipate the uncomfortable feeling of incoherence. Thus, a condition that might diminish the feeling of surprise is a potentially worthy hypothesis. Hypothesis then is, as Peirce imagined it, the formalization of a possibility related to a feeling kind of knowing; the formal statement of a best guess, a hunch, a felt beginning of further inquiry.

This subjective phase of discovery must be paired with – indeed it gives purpose and direction to – objective and technical methods that engage data and formal logic. These methods, in the scientific realm, are known as induction and deduction. Induction is a logic of selecting data and organizing it towards the establishment of probable generalizations, whereas deduction is the re-organization of the terms of a hypothesis that are logically necessary. Both are objectivist operations whereas abduction, in Peirce's understanding, is subjectively based. Yet, most importantly for Peirce, knowledge is not significantly advanced without both.

I'm suggesting that comparison as the interdependence of the objective limited and the subjective heuristic modes, is a specific application of Peirce's logic of discovery. The implication for the study of religion is that comparison is not an optional method to be selected and applied in some subset of circumstances. Comparison, in both the modes I am outlining here, is of the very fabric of human intelligence and, formalized as academic argumentation, is unavoidable in any proper study of religion.

In my experience, one of the markers of religion, as it has developed in our folk understanding over the past couple of centuries, is the plethora of situations of surprise. Religions are shot through and through with what I sometimes refer to as impossibles: human gods, mythscapes that posit eras and places that are incongruous with our quotidian world, death that is eternal life, all manner of spirits and ghosts and monsters and deities and devils and beasts. Belief is a religious strategy for dissipating the shocking and surprising character of these impossibles. Yet, I suggest that a proper academic study of religion must remain open to the surprise and incoherence of such impossibles. And from this openness to recognize that it is grounds for subjective heuristic comparison that includes the formalization of other modes of academic inquiry most certainly including objective limited comparison. The ongoing power of comparison is the embrace of the necessary and impossible copresence of sameness and difference. What drives us through projects and careers is the constant delight in discovering what the one thing shows us in the case of two things.¹

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