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Why Magic Still Dwells?:

A Historical Overview of the Methodologies in the Comparative Study of Religion

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Abstract: The comparative study of religion has long occupied an uneasy position between claims of academic rigor and charges of subjectivity. Since its nineteenth-century origins in the comparative philology initiated by Max Müller, comparison has been alternately defended as the methodological core of religious studies and dismissed as an intellectual construct imposed by scholars. This thesis provides a historical and critical overview of the major comparative methodologies adopted by representative East–West comparative scholarship in the past five decades and asks why comparison continues to exert theoretical appeal despite persistent skepticism about its coherence. Engaging with scholars such as Robert Neville, Lee Yearley, Yao Xinzhong, Aaron Stalnaker, Julia Ching, David Hall, Roger Ames, and Michael Puett, the thesis analyzes their strategies for negotiating emic and etic perspectives, historical context, and conceptual translation. The discussion begins with Jonathan Z. Smith's rejection of Mircea Eliade's archetypal and universalizing categories. While Smith's critique is often interpreted as a challenge to the legitimacy of comparison itself, this thesis argues that it instead opens a space for methodological renewal. The thesis then examines the emergence of a "new comparativism" in response to Smith, especially in the work of William Paden and Kimberley Patton, which reconceives comparison as reflexive and heuristic. Finally, this thesis argues that comparison entails both promise and risks, including decontextualization, analogical overreach, and the theological instrumentalization of religious objects and ideas. Hence, this thesis concludes that no single methodology can resolve the inherent tensions of comparison. Nevertheless, it is suggested that a viable comparative study of religion requires careful selection of categories, sensitivity to historical and cultural contexts, and a sustained balance between similarities and differences. If comparison remains "magical," it is because it demands epistemic humility—the condition under which its power becomes self-restrained and intellectually responsible.

Keywords: Comparative Religion, Comparative Theology, New Comparativism, Jonathan Z. Smith, East-West Comparison

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Introduction

The comparative study of religion is inherent to the nature of religious studies as a *sui generis* discipline. The field's predecessor, Max Müller, once said: "He who knows one, knows none." (Müller 1893, p. 13) Although his argument stemmed from the perspective of comparative philology, he set the tone for religious study to become truly scientific. Unsurprisingly, there have been counterarguments that doubt how one tradition has anything to do with another and whether the comparative study of religion is only an illusion. Jonathan Z. Smith is an exemplary critic who is skeptical about the viability of comparison, which he regards as the artifact created by the comparativists. The Chinese master of military strategy, Sun Tzu, says, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles" (Sun 2014, p. 17). Drawing from Sun Zi's wisdom, I believe that a religion scholar must learn from the critique of comparativists to reflect upon the methodologies of comparativists and save the comparative study of religion.

Hence, my essay treats Smith's challenge of comparative study of religion first, especially the schematic and problematic categories used by Mircea Eliade in his analysis of religious patterns. Then, I turn to William Paden's frame of comparison and Kimberley Patton's new comparativism to demonstrate how they responded to Smith's criticism and defended the comparative study. Later, I use Robert Neville's theoretical framework of comparative theology as a transition to scholars who have a particular interest in comparing the East with the West. Starting from Lee Yearley, Yao Xinzhong, and Aaron Stalnaker who focused on either key terms or key figures in comparing two traditions, I discuss Julia Ching and John Berthrong who shared the drive of syncretism between Confucianism and Christianity informed by their different theological interests. I also include David Hall and Roger Ames who advocate a comparative philosophy and philosophy of culture to connect Confucius with Western society. Ultimately, I touch upon Michael Puett's methodology of contextualizing texts against the reading of Confucius by Hall and Ames. Cautiously speaking, none of the methodologies I mentioned above is perfect for conducting the comparative study, but at least all of them offer valuable inspiration for exploring the new direction for the comparative study of religion in a postmodern and post-secular age.

I. Jonathan Z. Smith against the Comparative Study of Religion

The comparative study of religion centers on similarities and differences among various traditions. Jonathan Z. Smith rejects the simple pursuit of similarities between religions as he ridicules comparativists such as Eliade who hypothesized the existence of a comprehensive system of every religion

that consists of the sacred and different levels of manifestation. Smith fears such a comparative tendency leaning toward correspondence between traditions would lead to the superficial and even incorrect association of things on the surface without preserving the uniqueness of each religion and differences between the comparands. He cautions against the association of the collection of similarities in comparative study, as the law of association is contiguity. (Smith 1982, p. 21) He shares his reading experience of Eliade and criticizes the latter for his "un système cohérent behind the various manifestations and hierophanies" (Smith 1971, p. 84) In Smith's eyes, the problem lies in the archetype of "hierophanies from the most elementary to the most complex" in Eliade's arrangement of materials, which was assumed to "preexist any particular manifestation" (Smith 1971, p. 84). For Smith, the presupposition of *Homo religiosus* is at best a hypothesis, which cannot constitute an objective standard for similarities. Moreover, the coherent system proposed by Eliade in Smith's opinion is the recreation and reconstruction of religions with scholarly endeavor but does not necessarily reflect the essence of religions in comparison. According to Smith, Eliade assumed the interconnectedness between myths and rituals across time and space in terms of the possibility of repetition and correspondence. (Smith 1993, pp. 308-309)

Eliade lays out his phenomenological approach to religion, which hinges on "the analysis of each group of hierophanies, by making a natural division among the various modalities of the sacred, and showing how they fit together in a coherent system" (Eliade 1996, p. xiv). However, Smith mocks Eliade's "fitting economy" because he finds Eliade's comparative study is self-restraining (Smith 1971, p. 85). Smith points out that the "limited number of systems or archetypes" straitjackets "an infinite number of manifestations" (Smith 1971, p. 85). In other words, the binary models adopted by Eliade such as sacred vs. profane and mana vs. taboo cannot exhaust all classes of hierophanies. Smith suggests that the comparative study of religion with a global scope should not be confined by a fixed framework offered by Eliade. Specifically, Smith attacks Eliade's archetypes as transcendent models that "do not take historical, linear development into account" (Smith 1971, p. 85).

On the contrary, Eliade objects to taking historical or linear development into account as he believes it rests on the highly unwarranted "presumption of an evolution in the religious phenomenon, from the simple to the complex" (Eliade 1996, p. xii). Instead, he aims at "seeing just what things are religious in nature and what those things reveal" (Eliade 1996, p. xii). Yet, Smith has reservations about whether Eliade's comparisons between the pattern and manifestation only arrive at "the degree of manifestation and its intelligibility" so the latter only translates religions onto a cosmic map that is already

prescribed by categories or archetypes suited to display their similarities. Smith is sober about religion as "a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence" (Smith 1993, p. 291). Furthermore, he acknowledges that studying religion entails "the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation," but he is still concerned with the abusive use of interpretive or the mapping power of the comparativist (Smith 1993, p. 291). Smith is not completely against comparative study but worries about its lack of coherent rules. Consequently, it would be too creative to sketch religion out of one's imagination in comparative study.

Smith doubts whether comparative study would lose its explanatory power and its validity as science as it slips into the performance of magic by the comparativist. He dismisses the idea that the comparative "procedure is homeopathic" and its "theory is built upon contagion" (Smith 1982, p. 21). Similarities found between religions are not discoveries but inventions for Smith if the study is less methodological than impressionistic. He worries that the incongruities between religions are overshadowed by the phenomenological and morphological comparison. He rejects the type of comparative study that makes judgment calls and identifies affinities among religions at the expense of their differences. For Smith, comparative study should be grounded upon differences between traditions rather than imagined similarities. (Smith 1982, p. 35) Concluding comparisons with the message that religions are more or less the same falls into perennialism. More importantly, differences give meaning to comparative projects. If two religions appear almost the same, there is no need to conduct comparative research. Hence, Smith stresses the significance of preserving differences in comparison because he maintains that is how new knowledge or thought emerges. (Smith 1982, pp. 293-294) Smith's critique is not an announcement of the death of comparison between religions but offers an opportunity to reflect upon how to build solid theoretical grounds for it.

II. Defending Comparative the Study of Religion: William Paden's Comparative Paradigm and Kimberley Patton's New Comparativism

In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, comparativists respond to Smith's challenge by providing their case studies and theoretical frameworks to champion a new comparativism that recognizes the incommensurability among various traditions. Cautioning against Smith's disapproval of schematic comparative archetypes, they treat similarities via a self-controlled and self-examined application of comparative categories. However, scholars such as Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray who strive to

save the comparative study of religion from Smith's criticism find Eliade unredeemable because of his "vision of a universal, transcendent 'sacred' refracted in the ritual and mythic behavior of a cross-cultural human archetype called *Homo religiosus*" (Ray and Patton 2000, pp. 1-2). They seem to side with Smith against Eliade's archetype, which has "a visionary quality" inescapable from the charge of universalism and anti-contextualism (Smith 1982, p. 23). Still, they attempt to defend the potential of the comparative study of religion from the standpoint Smith also comes from: its creativity and possibility of generating knowledge. They argue that comparison might not work as hard-core science as Smith demands since it is an art- "an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 4). They reenvision a self-critical comparative study of religion that "attends as strongly to difference as to similarity while recognizing that both depend upon the scholar's choices and assumptions" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 18). In other words, they align with Smith that differences between the religious objects of studies should not be neglected but be directed to "thicken the description of similarity" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 52).

William Paden proposes a helpful comparative framework to incorporate both similarities and differences in comparison: (1) the bilateral function of comparison, (2) the heuristic nature of the comparative process, (3) a conceptually expanded notion of the idea of patterns, (4) the controlled, delimitative function of comparison, and (5) the distinction between meaning to-the-comparativist and meaning-to-the-insider. (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 182) Such a frame stresses the sense of reflexivity in using patterns for comparing religions. Paden finds Eliade's patterns problematic in the sense of "staticism and noncontextualism" but they capture comparable human behaviors in world construction. (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 183) For Paden, comparative categories can be refined to reflect cultural-historical specificity embedded in religions as imaginative creations of the universe across time and space.

To avoid timeless hierophanies in Eliade, Paden introduces the pattern as a "common factor" to illuminate both similarities in the world-formation of religious systems and differences in their cosmic configurations. The bilateral comparativism situates differences and similarities in relation to the common factor without reducing cultural and social styles and contents to a simple and transcendent pattern as Eliade does. (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 185) Furthermore, the heuristic nature of the comparative process requires "refinement, differentiation, or reconstruction, as each element of the pattern is confronted by historical data, new questions, or possible misfits" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 185). Hence, the comparative process becomes a self-scrutinized and open-ended investigation of both the compared objects and

the patterns through which to look into them. Consequently, patterns are extended from religious themes to "topical, conceptual, or classificatory categories" including "authority, power, gender, or discourse, or it could be a function like class empowerment, or a process like urbanization" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 187). The overall purpose of expanding patterns is to engage the comparative study of religions with the complexity and inexhaustible contents of the world. For the new comparativism to operate a multiform nexus of analysis with continuously generated and updated reference points in the changing world, it is essential to accumulate the repertoire of conceptual apparatus and build a network of particular variables.

From Paden's perspective, it helps disenchant the magical process of comparing and adds scientific layers to the enterprise. Also, Paden's theoretical framework shifts the focus of comparative study to aspectual features of religions. Instead of making generalizing and totalizing claims about religions, the new comparativism delimits the scope of comparability without stretching too far. Guided by moderation and prudence, comparativists should be aware of the usage of the pattern not for wholesale analysis. They only address "one point of resemblance that has interpretive utility" while leaving untouched all other meanings and contexts connected with that object that are not intrinsic to the limited theoretical function of the pattern" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 188). Most importantly, comparativists should distinguish the emic voices from the etic ones to avoid subjecting the discourse of insiders to the interpreter. Kimberley Patton notices that "the similarities that comparativists perceive between different religious traditions are often realities for the believers themselves" rather than the outsiders (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 14). The Eliadean archetype and his assumption of its universalism exemplify the etic perspective while Smith's dissatisfaction with Eliade's approach embodies the emic stance with an emphasis on difference and uniqueness. It is important to examine whether similarities and differences are uncovered by scholars from a neutral stance or the vantage point of religious adherents themselves. The differentiation of the domains of meaning restrains comparativists from reading their own commitments into studies and favoring one tradition over others.

More importantly, the new comparativism with a self-consciously eclectic approach requires the comparativist to be fully aware of himself as "enculturated, classifying, and purposive subject" in the process and practice of selectivity (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 190). Dwelling upon such a theoretical frame that "evenhandedly defends the bilateral prospects and character of the comparative process," William Paden is confident that comparativists "neither ignore resemblances nor simplistically collapse them into superficial sameness"; and they will "neither ignore differences nor magnify them out of

proportion to the human, cross-cultural commonalities of structure and function which run through them" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 190). Paden envisions the comparative study of religion would become "an exercise in understanding what recurs, what is different, and why" without running headlong to the radical conclusion that all traditions are more or less the same or one has nothing to do with others (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 190). Such statements reveal the prejudices that ought to avoid in comparing religions that are not conducive to acquiring new knowledge.

For Patton, Smith's suspicion of similarities among religions betrays his preference for differences. His skepticism is based on the belief that differences constitute religious realities while sameness is fantasized by the comparativists as truth. (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 155) Patton acknowledges that comparison is identical with magic but not the same. Since she admits "comparison is the scholar's invention" but to empower mutual dialogue and the quest for understanding," a comparative framework is disposed to generate insights into religion in all its variety through shared beliefs and practices (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 157). Comparative religion operates similarly to magic as a mental play and display because it can be "an efficacious act of conjuring, of delineating and evoking homologous relationships" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 18). However, it simultaneously beholds "undisputed differentials" to maintain "a fruitful tension" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 18). The outcome yielded from comparison is also magical because it sheds light on what gives birth to it as a third party. More importantly, it would be impossible to accentuate the uniqueness of each tradition alone. With a self-conscious comparativism, Patton refashions the comparative study of religion in "eclectic and circumscribed" manners that entail "dialogical in style and heuristic in nature" (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 18). The goal of comparing religions is not to "create more generic patterns of the sacred" and impose them upon others under the guise of the hegemonic pursuit of knowledge but to enlarge the understanding of ourselves and others in the explanatory mode (Ray and Patton 2000, p. 18). Even though the comparative study of religion is conceived as a magical work of the mind, Patton intends to show it is magic without tricks and secrets. Comparativists are intellectual magicians with truthful shows but not tricksters with deceitful devices.

III. Robert Neville's Comparative Theology

The self-critical and self-examined comparativism also resonates with Robert Neville's methodology. He argues that the comparative study as an ongoing process should keep amending its comparative categories. Besides, comparison ought to overcome biases and lacunae, and maintain fairness and

inclusiveness. For Neville, the starting point of comparison is to pinpoint the aspects of religious objects that can be compared, which he identifies as comparative categories. (Neville 2018, p. 148) The three broad categories proposed by him are the human condition, ultimate reality, and religious truth. He suggests that "a comparative category needs to be logically vague" to the extent of allowing "mutually incompatible instantiations" (Neville 2018, p. 149). He is aligned with Patton's new comparativism and Paden's comparative frame to open up comparative categories for further specification and revision. For example, he mentions that one may begin from conceptions of God from theistic traditions but then "consciously amend its comparative category to something like ultimacy, in order to embrace in a vague and fair way the nontheistic theological conceptions of ultimacy" (Neville 2018, p. 149). The vagueness of categories opens to variegated expressions of ultimate realities conveyed by various traditions, so they can contain all specific statements and notions on ultimacy.

Based on the specification of categories among various traditions, Neville proposes five procedures in comparison to preserve both similarities and differences, etic and emic voices, and theological and academic perspectives. First, the intrinsic expression that allows religious tradition to specify categories in its terms and words; second, its unique take on the world and other traditions; third, a conceptual analysis of traditions in scholarly terms as a form of specification; fourth, the practical implications of tradition for specifying its identity; finally, the singular and incommensurate element of one tradition for specifying the limits of potential comparison. (Neville 2018, p. 151) These five procedures though not a guarantee for avoiding inserting prejudices into comparison at least establish "sites of phenomenological analysis" with objective criteria (Neville 2018, p. 151). With procedures in mind, comparativists analyze comparative categories in diverse religious expression to see just how traditions "agree, disagree, overlap, lift up different subcategories for comparison, differ in perspectives on the world, imply different practical consequences, and so forth" (Neville 2018, p. 151). For Neville, comparisons are formulated as hypotheses to be put to test with the enriched categories of the human condition, ultimacy, and religious truth. Interpretation and analysis of religious data in comparison are hypotheses and hence religious truth is susceptible to fallibility. (Neville 2001, p. 189) Therefore, comparative study is an ongoing dynamic process between finding comparable categories, enriching categories with specific religious content and ideas, and refining them with analysis and hypothesis.

For Neville, a comparative study is self-consciously dialectic and dialogical as it is a self-correcting conversation between religious data and comparative categories. It is also self-critical and heuristic in cumulatively

enhancing the understanding of comparable traditions in the light of new observations of religious phenomena. There is nothing magical in the selection of comparative categories for Neville, but the affirmation of the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth as the taxonomic categories is the upshot of his presupposed selection. Neville presumes they have universal validity and applicability as they are the foundation and canopy covering other subcategories in comparison, and hence are likely to be immune to revision and refinement in the comparative process.

He declares his approach as comparative theology that "is inevitably normative in ascribing importance to the categories of comparison," which means comparativists are obligatory to "turn its normative ascriptions into hypotheses that can be examined and tested" (Neville 2018, p. 156). Put differently, Neville's affirmation of comparative study as a self-scrutinized process is close to Patton's new comparativism but for a theological reason. He regards comparative theology as inseparable from "normative theology in the larger systematic sense" (Neville 2018, p. 157). Neville posits comparative theology against systematic theology to circumscribe and test itself with the larger normative sense embedded in the latter. The norms of comparative theology are not given by any single tradition but by an all-embracing theology, under which collaborative inquiry into theological topics gives rise to the important categories for comparison and reflections on religious truth for each tradition.[1] Distinguished from confessional statements of truth rooted in religious identities, Neville envisages a theological public that would ensure comparative theology as a continuous collaborative theological process. It is open to correction and inclusive to religious others. (Neville 2018, p. 159-160) The vision of a theological public is not found in Patton and Paden, as Neville goes as far as to recommend a social structure favorable to the actualization of comparative theology in the world. Undoubtedly, Neville assigns to comparative study a theological mission that not every

1 The all-embracing theology still has the residue of process theology in debt to Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929). Yet, Neville started to get over Whitehead from *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (1980), as the concrescence, relationality and creativity cannot fully solve the problem of one and many. Neville explains the problem as "how different things can be sufficiently unified so as to relate as determinately different from one another, and at the same time be external enough from one another so as to be different in the first place" (Neville 2018, p. 25). For a neatly treatment of process theology and Neville's deviation from Whitehead, see John H. Berthrong, *All under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 142-153.

comparativist shares.

IV. How to Compare Religious Traditions in the East and the West: Magic Still Dwells?

Lee Yearley's *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* exemplifies how the magic of comparison performs as he finds virtues and religious ethics as the middle ground for bringing Mencius and Aquinas into a fruitful conversation concerning human flourishing. He depicts his project as both "a descriptive enterprise" relying on "utilizing our imaginative power" and "a constructive enterprise" depending upon "utilizing descriptive materials" (Yearley 1990, p. 1). Yearley's magic dwells upon the fact that both Mencius and Aquinas believe in the singular form of human flourishing. At the same time, there are resemblances between "their ideas on semblances of virtue and expansions of virtues, and in the conceptions of the self that underlie their ideas on virtue; that is, in their accounts of the character and interactions of practical reason, the emotions" (Yearley 1990, p. 5). Besides that, he is fully aware of the stark contrast between Mencius and Aquinas in terms of their historical context and culturally given conceptual vocabularies. Thus, he adds more tricks to the magic of comparison. He elevates the intricacy of comparative study by eliciting the interrelation of the compared objects since he attempts to "chart similarities within differences and differences within similarities" by examining the idea of virtue in Mencius and Aquinas (Yearley 1990, p. 3).

He appropriates the conceptual apparatus of primary and secondary theories from the anthropologist Robin Horton. Primary theory is the discourse on the phenomena in nature and daily life that empowers people across different cultures to cope with normal problems in the world. (Yearley 1990, p. 176) It has a universal characteristic in which resemblances among different traditions can be found. Secondary theory usually offers diversified metaphysical or religious accounts of peculiar events by appealing to invisible entities, where cross-cultural differences reside. (Yearley 1990, p. 176) Furthermore, Yearley adds practical theory to the reflection upon the nuanced dynamics between religious discourses and practices. In Yearley's account, practical theory wedges into the primary and secondary theories but synthesizes both to generate an understanding of how to live. (Yearley 1990, p. 177) It is partially shared across cultures as it offers guidance for human actions, so it is a fertile ground for comparison, especially for finding dissimilar in similar and similar in dissimilar. He suggests that partially overlapping practical theories are "real and textured resemblances" between Mencius's and Aquinas's conceptions of virtue, especially courage, while noting only "thin resemblances" and stark differences in other areas of their

thoughts. (Yearley 1990, p. 174) Undoubtedly, Yearley's comparative methodology is innovative in advancing the complexity and profoundness of comparative study. However, it is not replicable and imitable for comparativists to apply its theoretical framework to any other two thinkers in two distinct traditions. It is a work that shows more genius of the comparativist than the religious truth and the commensurability of Mencius and Aquinas.

The comparative tricks boil down to the "analogical imagination" mentioned by Yearley, which does not necessarily mean one can wield the imaginative power wildly.[2] Instead, it operates as "a shaping, ordering power that can enable an interpreter to see inner relationships that bind and even unify what appears only to diverge" (Yearley 1990, p. 200). Yet, Yearley's imaginative power puts aside the religious objects in comparison and becomes the mental game of the comparativist. He claims that "the locus of comparison must exist in the scholar's mind and not in the objects studied" (Yearley 1990, p. 198). His assertion makes his comparative project the target that Smith's criticism hits. Although he emphasizes the analogical imagination ought to be "rule-governed and liable to specifiable forms of error," it is unclear what the standard of evaluating whether "interpretations and rules that can be followed well or badly" is (Yearley 1990, p. 197). I think Yearley is too eager to prioritize the etic over the emic. He argues that the imaginative redescription of religious objects produces "personally formed, evocative kinds of invention" that confront the living experience with the study of the distant world (Yearley 1990, p. 197). The prospect of human flourishing under the moral guidance produced by comparing moral ideals is too tempting for him. What is at stake in his book is his belief in the necessity of intellectual virtues for knowing and comparing ideals of religious flourishing markedly different from one's tradition to meet the challenge of diversifying society. (Yearley 1990, p. 3-4) Given that Mencius and Aquinas shared no texts, culture, language, religion, time, or place and knew nothing of each another, one must rely on analogical imagination to expand one's moral concepts and lead oneself to a more complete flourishing for fully grasping Yearley's enterprise.

Still, what Yearley leaves unaddressed is a serious discussion about the truth of those moral ideas outside of one's cultural-linguistic context, so that he can engage profoundly with both traditions. Also, it is questionable

2 See Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1990), 236. He points out his borrowing the term from David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* but with less theological orientation and strong modesty for criticism.

whether Yearley's analogical imagination works on non-moral concepts with respect to which one seeks similarities and differences between different traditions. The comparative methodology proposed by Yearley requires the comparativist to be familiar enough with the compared traditions to utilize the analogical imagination at its best power. Nevertheless, it has the great danger of turning the comparative study into a self-fulfilling prophecy as the comparativist is the only one who knows the scheme. I am sympathetic with Yearley's effort of fusing a prescriptive enterprise into a descriptive comparison but his approach seems limited to religious ethics.

Influenced by Yearley's work, Yao Xinzhong in *Confucianism and Christianity*: *A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* compares religious ethics by focusing on moral concepts of universal love in Confucianism and neighborly love in Christianity. Yao does not adopt the analogical imagination of Yearley but seeks an objective standard that is lacking in Yearley's approach. Yao advocates a "consistent principle of impartiality" in the comparative study of religions to avoid promoting one tradition at the expense of others (Yao 1996, p. 4). He is aware of the religious commitment of different researchers that readily results in imposing personal values upon the object of study. Meanwhile, one needs to give evaluative claims and criticism in comparison. Dismissing comparative study as a way of reinforcing one's bias and preference is the equivalent of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Thus, he suggests that one should not aim at finding a perfect middle ground in comparing two religions but rather "apply the same criteria to both sides from beginning to end" (Yao 1996, p. 5). In doing so, Yao assures that "one's own values and commitments are also subject to examination" in observing and interpreting religions. Therefore, impartiality guarantees that one's judgments of religion are also open to self-criticism and self-reflection.

Furthermore, adhering to the same principle, Yao proposes three tasks of comparative study: finding similarities, discovering differences, investigating similarities in differences, and uncovering differences in similarities. (Yao 1996, p. 5) Yao borrows from Yearley's suggestions of constructing a productive comparative philosophy of religious flourishing. He believes "similarities are based on the common nature of human beings while differences reflect discursive expressions of human civilization" (Yao 1996, p. 12). Then, he supplies two approaches for completing the task: phenomenological and structural. The phenomenological study of religion concerns the religious practice and belief in time and space, which satisfies sociological and anthropological examinations but falls short of philosophical and religious inquiry into the "inner structure and corresponding functions" of religions (Yao 1996, p. 6). Thus, the structural approach goes beyond the descriptive presentation of religious phenomena. Examining the similarities

against the backdrop of differences and vice versa also demands a structural study of religion that overcomes "the phenomenological variety of origin and geography" (Yao 1996, p. 13). It aims at digging out the ultimate meaning of life furnished by religion.

Yao's methodology is premised on his definition of religion as "a way to overcome the limitations of life" and "a search thereby for life's ultimate meaning" (Yao 1996, p. 6). Hence, Yao uses a triad pattern consisting of the Transcendent, Humans, and Nature to display the inner structure of religion. (Yao 1996, p. 7) Yet, one of them can be the pivotal point that the others have a bearing on. Next, he defines the transcendent aspect as "a super-natural and super-human power or force or personality, in which Transcendent Being or Power is believed to control human affairs and destiny and to decide the evolutionary course of nature" (Yao 1996, p. 8). Thus, religion functions in the sense of generating dependence of humans and nature on the transcendent through "theoretical reflection on the Unlimited, or Infinite, and his/her/its creation to human beings and to the natural world" (Yao 1996, p. 8). If a religion situates human beings at its center, Yao thinks they are religious subjects, and the Transcendent and Nature are religious objects. According to Yao, it focuses on the religious dimension and seeks "the ultimate meaning of life through communicating with the Infinite and through harmonizing life with its material conditions" (Yao 1996, p. 9). Hence, faith as a religious expression mediating between religious subjects and objects determines whether religion functions well. However, when he turns to the ethical dimension, he centers the interaction between Humans and Nature but treats it as an extension of the two aspects mentioned above. Meanwhile, he states that religious ethics are distinct from philosophical or anthropological ethics in the sense of their foundations are on "the transcendental value of moral rules and moral perception" (Yao 1996, p. 9). It seems that the inconsistency of the ethical dimension lies in the fact it concerns "the relationship extending from humans to other humans and to nature" but its moral justification is grounded in the commitment to "the religious ultimate" (Yao 1996, p. 9). Therefore, Nature is not the center of gratuity in his paradigm of analyzing the inner structure of religion, which I regard as the weakest point in his pattern of studying religions.

He places excessive emphasis on the transcendent aspect in the triad since he admits that "the transcendental consideration is always decisive and lays the basis for the other two aspects" (Yao 1996, p. 11). Consequently, the other two aspects "are regarded as its extension and application," so his triangular structure is unbalanced, positing the Transcendent on the top (Yao 1996, pp. 10-11). Yet, the inconsistency within his structural pattern is further illustrated when he offers a typology of religion. Nature resumes the central position for

naturalistic religion, e.g., classical Taoism. (Yao 1996, p. 16) It is natural to match the Transcendent with the theocentric religion and Humans with the humanistic religion, but the gap between Nature, ethical aspect, and Naturalistic religion is hard to bridge. The insistence on the triad pattern reveals the loophole in his theory. It elicits speculation on whether a Christian framework fundamentally informs his enforcement of a structural entity with three aspects of the Trinity. At least, it is evident that his comparative methodology relies heavily on Confucianism since he confesses his adaptation of the five ways of learning mentioned in *the Doctrine of the Mean* to his study. (Yao 1996, p. 18) Thus, I have reservations about how he can stick to the principle of impartiality while his structural paradigm is Christian and his methodology is Confucian. More problematically, he does not apply his structural approach of looking into three corresponding aspects of Christianity and Confucianism in the book but picks one word from each tradition, i.e., agape and jen respectively. Although he argues that both words are the focal points of each religion, it is unconvincing and irresponsible to reduce Confucianism merely to Jen and Christianity to agape, considering he promises a comparative study of religion ought to tease out their similarities, differences, and similarities in differences and differences in similarities.

Aaron Stalnaker's *Overcoming Our Evil Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* continues the path that Yearley and Yao have paved for comparing East and West moral concepts. Theoretically, he introduces the theoretical apparatus of "bridge concepts" and "thin concepts" that reflect the middle ground on which Yearley and Yao's methodologies have bearings respectively. According to his definition, bridge concepts are "general ideas, such as 'virtue' and 'human nature,' which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in different cases" (*Overcoming Our Evil*, p. 17). In contrast, Yao's "jen" and "agape" are "thin concepts" meant specifically to "facilitate a particular comparison of a delimited number of objects, and so are chosen with those objects in mind" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 17). Stalnaker would agree with Patton's envision of comparative study as a self-critical and dialogical enterprise that registers creativity. He is inclined to put the focal concepts in analysis to test for further revision or complete abandonment. (Stalnaker 2010, p. 2) For example, his book "attempts to analyze and refine ideas of 'human nature' and 'spiritual exercises', but ironically not to discard them. Because they are not just "categories for ordering primary material from other sources" but also "topics of inquiry themselves", from which readers would gain greater purchase on virtue ethics through refining such concepts (Stalnaker 2010, p. 2). Besides human nature and spiritual exercises as bridge concepts to discuss how both Augustine and Xunzi perceived the inherent

depravity in human nature, both thinkers advocated self-transformation as the mode of forming moral characters. He also focuses on personhood and will as thin concepts to articulate the mechanism of exercising personal transformation.

Generally, the magical part of comparison for Stalnaker is its generation of "a hypothetical dialogue between various positions" and consequently its creation of "a new dialectic that points toward positions that would have been difficult to arrive at without comparison" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 2). Also, he brings out the practical value of comparison as it is a way of cultivating the virtue of global citizenship and prepares future generations for handling religious pluralism and social complexity responsibly. The underlying motivation behind the comparative study for Stalnaker is "global neighborliness, which seeks to live with others peaceably and learn from them as much as can be learned, and to offer help carefully and respectfully as needed, within imprecise limits set by humility and tact" (Stalnaker 2010, p. xiii). It also has a theoretical dimension serving as "a governing ideal for cross-traditional interpretation" for "grappling with alternative regimes for the cultivation of virtue" (Stalnaker 2010, pp. xvii-4). It entails a charitable interpretation and friendly gesture toward treating religious others. Without overgeneralization and oversimplification, it takes the religious commitment of others seriously and alerts the complexity and changeability of bridge concepts for different traditions (Stalnaker 2010, pp. 299-301).

Then, the comparative study for Stalnaker allows exploration of "different ethico-religious 'vocabularies' of thought and practice allows moderns to reflect on them as candidates for contemporary retrieval, adjustment, and use." (Stalnaker 2010, pp. xv-xvi). These ethico-religious vocabularies provided by alternative regimes are meant to preserve the distinctiveness of different traditions within the interrelation while bridge concepts enable "distant ethical statements into interrelation and conversation" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 17). Inherited from Yearley and Yao's intricate structure of comparison, Stalnaker argues "bridge concepts can be articulated in the process of comparison in such a way that they highlight both similarities and differences, and even more subtle similarities within differences, and differences within similarities" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 18). Yet, unlike Yearley's analogical imagination and Yao's structural analysis of religion, Stalnaker looks for "near-equivalent terms for the various aspects of the bridge concept can be found in each set of writings to be compared" without hypothesizing "transcultural universals that purport to bring" deep or epistemic structures of "human religion or ethics to the surface" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 17). However, it is unnecessary to pin down exactly equivalent terms, because bridge concepts as matrixes of religious thoughts and practices rely upon inductive

reasoning. In other words, the process of selection and refinement on bridge concepts requires comparativists projecting them into "each thinker or text to be compared as a way to thematize their disparate elements and order their details around these anchoring terms", so they are "essentially hypothetical and subject to further testing and revision in wider inquiries" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 17).

This approach makes comparative study an ongoing self-scrutinizing and self-revising process. Nevertheless, it faces the problem of decontextualizing culturally given concepts from their traditions, so the comparative analysis turns into a groundless analytic and semantic exercise. I understand Stalnaker has no interest in a wholesale evaluation of traditions, so he intentionally chooses a tight focus in comparison for the sake of precise treatment. He even states the narrowed-down focal points in the comparative study "approximate the level of contextualization in capable intellectual history" (Stalnaker 2010, p. 14). Still, the induction from bridge concepts to the entirety of traditions has theoretical gaps and explanatory hoops to jump. It also means comparison of religious ethics cannot exhaust and replace the comparative study of religion. Finally, his focus on spiritual exercises and global neighborliness reveals a stronger theological interest or drive rather than a purely scholar one in familiarizing oneself with other traditions for the potential of converting others if they are proved and shown to be amenable.

Certainly, Stalnaker is not the first one who baked theological interest or mission into comparative study, as Julia Ching's *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* intentionally addresses religious communities and situates the book at the rising reception of Buddhism in the West. Ching argues a stronger case for the compatibility of Confucianism with Christianity than Buddhism due to shared ethical concerns for self-esteem, self-transcendence, and social responsibilities. (Ching 1977, p. xxiii) She uplifts Confucianism in order to synthesize Confucianism with Christianity for building Asian theologies acculturated to Christian doctrines. To engage Confucianism with Christianity, she adopts a modern understanding of Christianity as a humanism corresponding to Confucianism as a human-centered tradition. (Ching 1977, pp. 69-70) Her self-described approach is problem-oriented, "drawing from the nature of the traditions being studied, proceeding, in each case, from the sacred books and classical texts to the development of philosophical interpretations and their present-day relevance," so comparison is an exegetical task for her. (Ching 1977, p. xvii). However, she bends Christianity to revolve around the problems of people, God, and transcendence so that it is amenable and receptive to Confucian ideas of jen and self-transcendence as moral striving. Therefore, it is sensible to say Yao's comparative analysis of jen and agape to some extent is the continuation of

Ching's program.

Ching acknowledges the inherent incongruity between the two traditions: Confucianism is a tradition of human wisdom, whereas Christianity is a revealed religion (Ching 1977, p. xvi). Still, her exegesis on Christianity betrays her reading of Confucianism and Confucian ethics into the former. She clearly distinguishes Christianity which "is constituted by the belief in the God of Jesus Christ" from Confucianism that is sustained by ethical values, but she insists on centering man rather than Christ in her presentation of Christianity (Ching 1977, p. xxii). Her hermeneutical bias is reflected in her lopsided interest in popularizing Confucianism to a Christian audience. Yet, her comparative category of faith seems to originate from a Christian perspective alone but is foreign to Confucianism. The ambivalence of her interpretative stance reflects her caught-up between East and West, Confucianism and Christianity.

Ching identifies herself as "a comparative historian of ideas and doctrines" who maintains a theological horizon to initiate interreligious dialogues. (Ching 1977, p. xvii) Although she asserts her position as a non-judgmental one "according to any predetermined, hierarchically oriented, system of values," her focus is Confucianism "in light of certain perspectives borrowed from Christianity" (Ching 1977, pp. xviii-xix). Despite her intention to "promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue", her targeted audience consists of Christians in both the West and East Asia (Ching 1977, p. 215). Reading Confucianism against the backdrop and perspectives of Christianity has a twofold meaning: the enculturated Christians with ecumenicism in mind for realization and newer Asian Christians who search for theological expressions without leaving their cultural heritages behind. (Ching 1977, p. 215) It is ambiguous whether she wears her academic or theologian hat throughout the book. She also wavers between the emic and etic voices without clarifying her actual standpoint. At any rate, the underlying motivation of her comparison is more theological than scholarly.

Admittedly, the maturity of her comparative awareness is praiseworthy. To some extent, she anticipates Smith's challenge to the commensurability of any two traditions, as she realizes the incompatibility between Confucian rites and Christian faith. (Ching 1977, p. xx) Meanwhile, she is sober about the complexity and comprehensiveness of comparison even though she does not put it in Yearley's phrase of finding similarities in dissimilar and dissimilar in similarities. She lays out the "common themes" shared by Christianity and Confucianism such as the praxis of self-transcendence, the Absolute/God, and mystique and cult while paying attention to the similarities and differences inherent in them and implications for both sides (Ching 1977, p. xx). She also situates her comparison in the historical encounter between Jesuit

missionaries and Confucianism. She sends the caveat of "fossilization of ideas and ideals" since they are contingent on historical contexts and conditions, so she pays close attention to the evolution and transmission of key terms in comparison. (Ching 1977, p. xxiv) Her comparative study is a good example of juxtaposing two traditions, their common themes, and shared concepts within historical contexts.

How Confucianism comes to terms with Christian teachings implied in Ching's project echoes John H. Berthrong's comparative study. His double foci in his work *All Under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue* are "the pressing theological question of a Christian response to religious pluralism in the modern world" and setting up Confucianism as the emerging interlocutor in the renewed Confucian-Christian dialogue (Berthrong 1994, pp. 1-2). He attempts to elicit the religious dimensions of the Confucian tradition with selected historical materials, but he does not treat Confucianism as a religion *per se*, as Ching probably describes it to be (Berthrong 1994, p. 70). Yet, he agrees with Ching that its religious dimension derives from the fact that it centers on the question of the ultimate values for human life.

He also proceeds with Ching's syncretism between Confucianism and Christianity with ecumenicism in mind except that he draws heavily from the process thought represented by Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. (Berthrong 1994, p. 4) He remodels Whitehead's categories of eternal objects, creativity, and concrescence into a "triple thread" process-based hermeneutic of form, dynamics, and unification that describes the metasystem of Christianity and Confucianism. Yet, he confesses that the categories stemming from both Whitehead and Zhu Xi are inconsistent and unbelievably odd. (Berthrong 1994, p. 9) What is more problematic is to put Whitehead and Zhu Xi as the mediators between Christianity and Confucianism. Whitehead's understanding of Christianity is filtered through process theology while Zhu Xi represents Neo-Confucianism rather than Confucianism. Berthrong's comparative project is dominated by the process thought so that the only meeting point of Christianity and Confucianism seems to be the bridge built between Whitehead and Zhu Xi because Zhu Xi in his assessment comes closest to process theology. Hence, the so-called Confucian-Christian dialogue becomes a conversation between Whitehead and Zhu Xi due to their affinities through the lens of process philosophy.

His methodology of triple thread denotes that "any text, in any way whatsoever, can be described in terms of form, the dynamic interaction of form and the world and the necessary unification of these two traits into the why, how and what of any entity or event among the other things of the world" (Berthrong 1994, p. 9). I believe he overstates the tenability of his method and

underestimates the complexity of texts. The schematic approach informed by process thought unveils Berthrong's imposition of the Whiteheadian frame upon Zhu Xi. Specifically, form entails "the definiteness that separates it from other things", and Berthrong finds the Mandate of Heaven (Li理) in Zhu Xi as the counterpart of Whitehead's eternal objects. (Berthrong 1994, pp. 10) As for dynamics, Zhu Xi's notion of matter-energy (Qi氣) is the equivalent of Whitehead's creativity. (Berthrong 1994, p. 10) In terms of unification, it means "harmony achieved by the self and every other entity by means of its fusion of form and dynamic" (Berthrong 1994, p. 10). Bertherong suggests that "the creative advance into novelty" in Whitehead echoes Zhu Xi's "Will of Heaven (Tian Ming天命) for the increase of ethical perfection and the spiritual testing of sagely persons" (Berthrong 1994, p. 10). I am sympathetic to Betherong's effort to square Zhu Xi's ideas with Whitehead's terminology, but he goes too far to flatten Zhu Xi's idea to fit the Whiteheadian framework.

For instance, the Mandate of Heaven manifests the Confucian Way as the overarching principle that determines the nature of entities in the world, which also partakes in the principle. Whitehead's eternal objects are less sophisticated than the profound meanings of "Li" in the Confucian tradition, which encompass form, dynamics, and unification in one word. Bertherong's comparative enterprise clings to the process philosophy for a good reason, because he deems it "inherently pluralistic in nature and therefore capable of crosscultural formulation" (Berthrong 1994, p. 11). His target audience is Christians who face the challenge of religious pluralism, especially Confucianism which is probably farthest apart from acquainted theistic traditions. His reliance on Hartshorne's notion of dual transcendence illustrates how process theology's understanding of divine-world relationship opens access to the Way-humanity relation in Confucianism: the deity creates the world of finite creatures, who in turn manifests divinity through their freedom of exercising creativity. (Berthrong 1994, p. 153) However, the comparison can only be analogical. Although Berthrong is aware of the methodological problem, he does not offer a good solution to the theological reconstruction of Confucianism through analogical imagination. (Berthrong 1994, p. 49) Berthrong seems to fall in the same pitfall Yearley trapped himself but for another reason. Yearley has faith in the creativity of the comparativists for a deeper understanding of different traditions. In comparison, Berthrong puts hope in the peace-making effect of interreligious communication. (Berthrong 1994, pp. 12-15) As Bertherong's theological vision of global peace hinges on the harmony among different traditions, Whitehead and process philosophy provides a better venue for peaceful interfaith dialogues than exchanging arms and violence.

According to the genealogical account of the process movement provided by Berthrong, David Hall is also indebted to Whitehead's theoretical insights into cross-cultural dialogue. (Berthrong 1994, p. 56) He is on the side of Neville in terms of treating "Confucianism as a living, important philosophic and spiritual system" (Berthrong 1994, p. 56). Yet, David Hall and Roger Ames's collaborative project *Thinking Through Confucius* launches the method of philosophy of culture in comparative study. Precisely speaking, they name it "cross-cultural anachronism," whereby they try to "understand the thinking of Confucius by recourse to issues originating within contemporary Western philosophic culture", but issues Confucius might not entertain (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 6). Put differently, they appeal to Confucius as an exotic intellectual resource for explicating and addressing issues particular to Western philosophy as anachronistic references. They state that "the comparative method employed in this essay" has led them to "isolate a particular problem" within the Western cultural milieu and then "to employ the thought of Confucius as a means of clarifying precisely" (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 5). They believe it would form "a truer account of Confucius" independently from anachronistic references compared to "current Western understandings of Confucius" emerging from "the mostly unconscious importation of philosophical and theological assumptions into primary translations" (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 7). In my view, they have witnessed the tendency in Ching's interpretation of Confucianism and anticipate the hermeneutical biases demonstrated by Yearley, Berthrong, Yao, and Stalnaker in their readings of Confucianism from the mainstream of the Anglo-European tradition. Therefore, they encourage readers to wipe out pre-installed interpretive categories informed by those assumptions that have seriously distorted the reading of Confucius.

However, I doubt whether their theoretical move serves to insert their hermeneutical prejudices into understanding Confucianism in light of the relationship between Confucius and Western culture. They prioritize differences over similarities for a different reason than Smith. For them, recognition of what is truly alien and distinctive in Confucius's thought and practice is more fruitful for comparison since shared assumptions of similarities unveil only hidden projections inhering in the comparative categories. They explicitly say that "this present book is written in the belief, first, that in the enterprise of comparative philosophy, difference is more interesting than similarity," so their emphasis on differences between "the rich and diverse fabrics of Confucian and Anglo-European cultures" offers a great opportunity for "mutual enrichment by suggesting alternative responses to problems that resist satisfactory resolution within a single culture" (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 5). The idea of mutual enrichment seems ideal as I do not see

how Confucian culture can benefit from being instrumentalized to elucidate issues in Anglo-European culture solely. Instead, their judgment of the failings of Confucius is Anglo-European-centric and condescending. It only reflects the element of Confucianism that they think is unacceptable and useless by labeling it as "provincialism and parochialism" (Hall and Ames 1987, pp. 308-309). The pragmatism embedded in their comparative project reveals the self-claimed "truer" presentation of Confucius to be the representation of its more useful version for Anglo-European audiences. Stalnaker notices that their interpretation "draws heavily on American pragmatism" and takes up Confucius as a "launch pad" for their creative philosophizing (Stalnaker 2010, pp. 15-16). In other words, their comparative approach is not concerned with what Confucius was concerned with in ancient China but more about how Confucius helps respond to the concerns of the modern West.

While rejecting categories and dismiss similarities in cross-cultural comparison, they have to begin with what they are familiar with. They confess that their project of comparative philosophy has to start not only with categories and language in the Anglo-European tradition to articulate Confucianism, but also with the underlying similarity between ancient China and the West to accommodate differences. (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 14) Nevertheless, their approach of borrowing the familiar categories for interpreting the foreign culture undermines its explanatory power since they exclude the possibility that great thinkers in other traditions may transcend their cultural experiences. Neville notes their drawback that important "individual figures and schools rarely fit their cultural background" would be ignored (Neville 2018, p. 155). Similar to Berthrong's approach of drawing an analogy between the thoughts of Whitehead and Zhu Xi, Hall and Ames also attempt to uncover analogous structures between the cultural experiences of Confucius and the Anglo-Europeans for registering differences through similarities. For example, they appeal to the Anglo-European philosophical categories of transcendence and immanence to distinguish Western culture from Confucianism. Consequently, they argue for the lack of a transcendent dimension in early China. This reading of Confucius shows Hall and Ames are entrapped in the anachronism comparison between different cultural backgrounds because their claim is based solely on the Western philosophical understanding of transcendence. Their assessment of the relationship between deity and humanity in ancient China neglects the possible Confucian vocabulary for denoting the sense of transcendence. They muffle the emic voice of Confucianism that could speak on its terms. Most importantly, the categories they use only provide prisms for looking at Confucianism but cannot exhaust all the dimensions of Confucianism as a lively culture and

lived tradition.

Michael Puett's *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* pushes back against Hall and Ames's methodology of constructing a contrastive framework of two traditions laden with and bound by Anglo-European philosophical categories. Puett smells the danger of their approach in the sense of "taking particular texts out of context and reading them as assumptions of the entire cultures being compared" (Puett 2011, p. 21). He criticizes this approach of detaching text from its context and equating it with the complete cultural experience as cultural-essentialists. (Puett 2011, p. 18) On the contrary, he prefers restoring the historical context that gives meaning and power to the text. He objects to reducing Confucian texts to "simply examples of the common Chinese way of thinking" as Hall and Ames did but brings about "the cultural potency" those texts possessed (Puett 2011, p. 23). Puett's approach to contextualizing the texts relevant to early Chinese cosmology aims at understanding "why certain figures presented cosmological arguments, what they were reacting to, and what impact their claims had at the time" (Puett 2011, p. 23). His nuanced methodology brings texts back into the reconstructed context for examining the historical circumstances that give rise to certain cosmological statements concerning humans, divinities, and sacrificial practice and their historical consequences. He observes the tendency of self-transformation into the spirits through self-cultivation for people in both early China and ancient Greece. (Puett 2011, pp. 93-95) Later, he also makes a comparison between Augustus and Emperor Wu of Han on theocratic agenda and the ideology of imperial power. (Puett 2011, pp. 231-245) Opposed to Hall and Ames's anachronism, Puett's comparative study has the feature of synchronism. Yet, he does not explicate the theoretical grounds of his synchronic comparison but assumes that early China and Western antiquity share a similar context from which theomorphic claims arise. It is also debatable and untransparent why the significant ideas about the interaction between humans and the divine ought to be arranged in the chronological order as Puett does. However, Puett's synchronic mode of East-West comparison has opened a new venue of contextualizing both traditions in the same analytic space that demands expansion of both the scope and methodologies of comparative religion.

In recent years, scholars have begun to treat early China and Greco-Roman in parallel, and a few have even brought in Abrahamic tradition as the third party. For instance, Vittorio Cotesta's *The Heavens and the Earth: Graeco-Roman, Ancient Chinese, and Mediaeval Islamic Images of the World* presents "the vision of the universe, of the natural and social world, the conception of human beings and their destiny" in three different civilizations with the hope of establishing a global society despite conflicts and competitions that exist

among nation-states (Cotesta 2023, p. 12). Another example is Yao Xinzhong's *Wisdom in Early Confucian and Israelite Traditions*, where he focuses on comparing Confucian classics with the Hebrew and Greek wisdom literature. Though Yao adopts a hermeneutic approach to writings across religions, he does not only regard "them as historical documents of the past but also as living discourses that continue to address the central concerns of these two traditions" (Yao 2016, p. 26). He cautiously opens to "test the hypothesis about philosophical and religious divergence and convergence" in his comparative study. The cross-cultural analysis of religious phenomena and ideas in the juxtaposition of East and West at the same phase of history is further explored by *Old Society, New Belief: Religious Transformation of China and Rome, Ca. 1st-6th Centuries*. The anthology compares the historical process by which Buddhism and Christianity were introduced into and "interacted with the well-established religious and cultural traditions of the states in which they spread" (Pu and Drake 2017, p. 2). From the cases above, comparative study of religions alone is insufficient to achieve a comprehensive understanding of cultures, thoughts, and societies in two distinct civilizations. Therefore, comparative history, comparative philosophy, and comparative literature complement the methodologies of comparative religion.

In addition, theologians doing comparative theology endeavor to carry on interreligious dialogues and enrich the understanding of different religious traditions. Based on the principle of faith seeking understanding (*Fides quaerens intellectum*), comparative theology as a methodology has a strong doctrinal grounding that expresses claims about religious truth or ultimate reality. In *How to Do Comparative Theology*, Clooney and Stosch admit that doing comparative theology is a theology committing to "learning from both outside and within one's own community in a way that remains theologically sensitive and conducive to mutual transformation in study (Clooney and Stosch 2018, p. 1). In the same spirit, Catherine Cornille in *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* contends that comparative theology orients toward "gaining not only greater understanding of a particular religious phenomenon, but of the ultimate reality and truth itself;" namely, enhancing a theological understanding from a faith perspective (Cornille 2020, p. 2). What comparative theology is concerned with, but comparative theology does not touch upon, is spiritual advancement. Therefore, theological implication for practice is not integral part of comparative religion. Comparative religion needs not carry theological bearing or register confessional commitment with its study.

V. Conclusion

After examining the possibility of the comparative study of religion and its specific application in comparing religions in the East and the West, I am inclined to say it will still be a battlefield among different methodologies. Unlike Kimberley Patton, I am less concerned with the external threat that postmodernism poses to the comparative study of religion than with its internal coherence and consistency. I suggest a tentative framework for doing comparative religion in a postmodern and post-secular age. My goal is to defend the possibility of comparative religion while addressing the effectiveness of comparison.

First, I believe comparative religion should distinguish itself from comparative theology and distance itself from faith perspective. Comparative religion ought to build upon objective, neutral and impartial ground instead of serving any non-academic agenda. Second, the focal points of a well-rounded comparative approach should be grounded upon the prudent selection of comparative categories, addressing both emic and etic perspectives, paying attention to historicity of compared objects, and keeping a sustained balance between similarities and differences in interreligious analysis. Third, a sober awareness of comparative study as a hermeneutic practice. Comparison is an exegetical exercise of depicting and classifying religions without a prescriptive agenda. Fourth, comparative religion requires a philological basis that enables cross-cultural dialogue. Key concepts and their counterparts in the comparand are essential for bridging the gap between seemingly incommensurable traditions. Fifth, a triadic comparison among three different religions might be fruitful if the third comparand acts as "mediator" or "arbitrator" between the other two. It can illuminate similarities and differences between traditions without undermining its own uniqueness since it would be the reference point for the other two in comparison.

Certainly, the nature of comparison as an exegetical exercise faces the difficulty of warding off the hermeneutical biases of the comparativist. It is somewhat magical for the comparativist to navigate between different texts and weave threads of thought among various traditions to display discoveries at the will of one's designation. Still, the comparative study of religion will continue to conduct many enjoyable shows to watch, expand human imagination, and enrich knowledge of world religions. It is the responsibility of scholars of religious studies to demystify the magic of comparative religion with academic rigor.

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