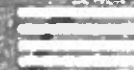


COLLECTION
RELIGIONS

Comparer en histoire des religions antiques

Claude CALAME -- Bruce LINCOLN



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seems worth preserving: for example, an attention to original languages. If one cannot read all the languages one needs, one should seek out the best interpreters and translators rather than abandoning the project of comparison altogether. I want to summon also the legacy of the humanities, of literary studies that do not aspire to the state of the sciences, social or human, embracing a ludic, expansive, associative, rhizomic method. Rather than seeking a rigorous critical methodology that scientifically guarantees its benefits, I'd like to call for a looser, more open form of comparison that allows for anachronism as well as synchronicity, relations such as sequence, consequence, diffusion, difference as well as similarity, — of theme, address, rhetoric. It seems to me limiting, perhaps impossible, to try to establish a fixed protocol for the study of ancient cult practices, including hymns and rituals, also known anachronistically as "poems." We do need to break out of the closed world of the traditional disciplines, and think comparatively, opening possibilities challenging our preconceptions about poetry, about ritual, about religion, when we encounter such phenomena as ancient song.

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Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity¹

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This essay seeks to introduce and justify methods of comparison in the study of religions of late antiquity, a field distinctive for including — or for many scholars, framing — the rise of Christianity. A comparative approach is explained in which primary materials are understood first in the context of systems and then as examples of some larger pattern. That pattern provides the means of generalizing across two or more further examples from the same historical period, but it might be more richly exemplified in some geographically or historically removed (even modern) examples. By reference to such larger patterns or categories, obscure or challenging phenomena can be understood in familiar terms, ostensibly familiar phenomena can be understood in richer and often more challenging contexts, and — most importantly — historical interpretation itself, which relies intrinsically on the phrasing of indigenous ("emic") ideas and actions in modern critical ("etic") categories can operate at a more responsible and constructive level. The third and fourth parts of this essay will explore ways in which comparison has aided work on the religions of late antiquity.

CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIONS TO COMPARISON IN THE STUDY OF LATE ANTIQUE RELIGIONS

The documentation for religion in late antiquity challenges us in multiple ways: the invention of broad discourses of empire and salvation; the nature and dynamics of Christianization; and the beginnings of indigenous notions of "religion" and anti-religion or heresy. But it is also an area of study that has been, perhaps more than any other, distorted by triumphalist, romantic, and theologically-motivated scholarship, *both* in the uncritical nomenclature of "church" and "paganism" to which most historians still cling, *and* in the assumptions about conversion, decline, and religion itself that still undergird most late antique studies.

1. I am immensely grateful to Claude Calame and to the Casablanca Group for comments in the revision of this essay.

Part of the blame for the uncritical perpetuation of *theological* bias lies in the very status of the period as one of Christian triumph, pagan decline, or the "paganization" of apostolic Christianity — in short, a transition between two morally-loaded states of culture. This was the way Edward Gibbon saw it in his time, William Ramsay and Alphonse Barb in theirs, and in different ways, a number of scholars today.² Even as blatantly theological motivations have subsided in most work on religions of the Roman empire, the same terms and spiritual criteria have so thoroughly influenced the field that we continue to read them in discussions of "paganism," "mysteries," and "syncretism."

The context in which so much scholarship on religion in late antiquity maintains these theological undertones can be found in the very self-conception of fields like classics, history, and archaeology, out of whose ranks most late antiquity scholars come. These are fields that have traditionally imagined themselves as empirical, dedicated only to primary documents and voices that they merely interpret. The notion that interpretation and historical inference, especially about broader themes like religion or Christianization, might be informed by assumptions tends to be discounted.

Except for synchronic contrasts (or elisions) of cultures or Christianities within the late antique world in the service of historical generalization, comparison has been altogether unusual as a method in the interpretation of this period.³ One might call this a strange, even ludicrous avoidance, since other pre-modern cultures also integrated Christianity and assimilated Christian myth and ideology in popular, elite, and economic domains. If our historical interest lies in religious transformation and Christianization, then how could the late antique Mediterranean and Europe conceivably be unique? Mayan cultures, Andean cultures, and African cultures all provide exceedingly well-documented cases and sophisticated ethnographic investigations of Christianization in action. The dynamics of Islamization and Buddhization at the regional level have much to teach the student of late antique Christianization in the areas of thaumaturgy and charisma, textuality and magic, and cults of images and relics. But historians of late antiquity have long shied away from investigating how similar processes might have gone on elsewhere, invariably out of fear of dilletantism, linguistic inability, even anxiety about what to *do* with ethnographic *comparanda*. What could a "similar case" in Guatemala possibly prove? Couldn't you find a *comparandum* to "prove" anything you want?⁴ Who would want to be identified with the excesses of the comparativists of yore, for whom every likeness revealed some theological notion? And isn't there enough work to do in one's historical field without reading about everything else? How much time does anyone have in the day?

2. See, e.g., Luck, 2000, p. 223–38; Cameron, 2011, p. 3. See also Ascough, 2009.

3. See, e.g., Lane Fox, 1987; MacMullen, 1997.

4. Echoing Cameron, 2007, p. 43.

Obviously these responses misunderstand the reasons for comparison — indeed, the inevitability of comparison. For comparison is the very foundation of *generalization*, which historians do habitually, with every second-order term they use or system they observe. Our use of "religion," "sacrifice," "magic," "amulet," "canon," "ritual," or "shrine" is not a simple "emic" translation of some unambiguous Greek or Latin or Hebrew word but a second-order, heuristic category of classification that implies applicability to a particular spectrum of like data. And to the degree that we historians of religion tend to latch onto historical situations in which "canon" or "votive deposit" or "sacrifice" assume some hybrid form or instigate some historical controversy, we do well to read widely in the dynamics of such a category — such a phenomenon in religion — to get accustomed to its parameters and tendencies cross-culturally.

THE METHOD AND INEVITABILITY OF COMPARISON

V. Bonnell: Analytic and Illustrative Comparison

As Victoria Bonnell laid it out in her classic 1980 article, there are two types of useful comparison. In the first, which she labels the *analytic* mode, one examines several different historical incidences, usually linked by major cultural variables, to identify specific differences. We might think of the different local responses to Satanic sorcery in sixteenth-century Germany, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and England, or the differing functions of church liturgy between seventh-century Byzantium and the western Catholic Church. No broader interest is expressed in, say, the *general* parameters of constructing and expelling evil in local cultures, on the one hand, or the *general* functions of ritual space and architecture, on the other. The analytic comparison is relatively bounded in space and time and usually serves the historical reconstruction of a particular period: e.g. during the seventh century, while *eastern* basilicas sought to cultivate a sense of the heavenly world with icons and incense, *Latin* churches became the locus for reproducing Christ's sacrifice in the Eucharist. The categories used are often specific to the period: liturgy, Eucharist, Sabbath, icon. There is generalization, of course, but the generalizations are discrete to the period or the religious formation — to the identification of independent variables — and no claims are made to contributing to the understanding of religion itself.

The other mode of comparison, which Bonnell calls *illustrative*, seeks to frame, articulate, and rectify a *general pattern* that can be used (and further rectified) to highlight historical anomalies in further cases and, ultimately, to gain a better sense of the meaning of the pattern itself. The individual cases serve ultimately as *examples* of the pattern, and so there must always be more than two cases. A *pattern* can only be extrapolated from more than two cases, although the historian might only want to test it in one particular case.

J.Z. Smith: Examples and the "Third Term" of Comparison

This mode of comparison has been principally associated in recent decades with the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, the American historian of ancient Mediterranean religions who, notably, prefaced his academic career with extensive work in botany. In a series of essays and published lectures over the course of the 1970s and 1980s Smith developed a set of principles for meaningful and productive comparison of religious phenomena that sought to move comparison beyond the theologically-motivated efforts of prior scholars, especially those who focused on Christianity, Judaism, and so-called "paganism" in the ancient world. The foundation of these principles was the historian or interpreter's readiness (a) to comprehend the anomaly, the Other, and (b), by a series of comparative steps, to render that anomaly familiar (Smith's own examples included the inverted crucifixion of Peter in the *Acts of Peter* and the mass-suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978). By the same token, he insisted, the familiar datum — the Gospel text, the votive stela, or the incised cross — must be itself constructed as *anomalous* and then *re-familiarized* through comparison if it is to be understood as anything but a theological projection.⁵

How, then, to proceed comparatively? First, Smith argued for the comparison of systems, not isolated and acontextual words or images: thus, for example, meal rituals rather than bread; apotropaic image rather than the cross.⁶ Then, in a way paralleling Bonnell, he insisted that comparison always take place in relationship to a "third term" — a taxon or pattern — which prevents the implication (or subsequent proposition) of borrowing or influence. This principle, he argues, is especially important for the study of Christianity among the religions of the Mediterranean world, since scholars have typically assumed that parallels between Christian ideas and (say) Mithraic or Dionysiac materials implied Christianity's dependence on these religions, no matter the relative historical context of the data.⁷ Finally, comparison among data should always proceed in relationship to that third term, and preferably with more than two *comparanda*. It means little to show that *x* resembles *y*; it means a lot to demonstrate that *x* resembles *y* more than *z* with respect to [pattern *X*], for this strategy admits the multiplicity of potentially comparable data at the same time as the important differences (context, history, social world) that prevent mere "parallelomania" — that is, the gratuitous juxtaposition of similar data without regard for context, difference, or the meaning of similarity.⁸ For example, the cult banquet for the Sarapis *súnodos* in Greco-Roman Oxyrhynchus may indeed resemble certain early texts about the

5. See Smith, 1982, p. xii–xiii; 2004, p. 230–250. Examples: Smith, 1978, p. 147–171; 1982, p. 102–120.

6. See Smith, 1982, chap. 2.

7. See esp. Smith, 1990, p. 99.

8. Referring to the critique by Sandmel, 1962. See Smith, 1990, p. 51–53; 2000; and Paden, 2000.

Christian Eucharist more closely than the stylized Jewish ritual meals at Qumran with respect to the sacred meal in antiquity — or more precisely the symbolizing of meal components in the course of the sacred meal. We begin to learn about the variety and taxonomy of "sacred meal" through the relative differences among these *exempla*. "That is to say," Smith points out, "comparison does not necessarily tell us how things 'are'...; like models and metaphors, comparison tell us how things might be conceived, how they might be 're-described'... Comparison provides the means by which we 're-vision' phenomena as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems."⁹

The Generalized Pattern as Interpretive Goal

Comparison in this sense is ultimately conducted between proposed pattern (meal rituals, magical gesture, public ceremony) and situation or datum (Book of Revelation, Qumran document, votive inscription, historical narrative) rather than between one datum and another. Furthermore, the pattern — even the very framing of the datum under discussion — is constantly adjusted in order to determine relevance: should we be talking about "magical gestures" or rather apotropaic gestures? What about when early Christian people cross themselves: protective, purifying, or a gesture of identity? Should we be sub-dividing the concept of "sacred meal" in order to make sense of some major variations? By what general terms should we describe the angelic songs, bowls, and trumpets in the *Book of Revelation* so that we can allow for the author's gesture to *both* Jewish temple priesthood *and* the public ruler cults of Asia Minor?

The comparative enterprise is thus far more than simplistic juxtapositions but covers the entire dialectical process by which we define what it is we are talking about with religious phenomena, from the translation of simple "emic" terms (*mágos*, *euaggélion*, *eulógion*) to the operable generalization about actions, attitudes, structures, or religious processes ("sacrifice," "prayer," "syncretism," "shrine"). Each term depends on a cluster of *exempla*, some of which might be regarded as typical and some as anomalous, and that term thereby dictates how further data will be understood, labelled, and brought into the cluster. We may restrict the cluster to a single archaeological site, a single historical period, a single region over several centuries, or — as is typical with studies in religions of late antiquity — the entire Mediterranean world from the first through fourth centuries. We may also open up the cluster to modern ethnographic examples that might, as I shall explain below, offer richer, "living" contexts for religious phenomena than ancient archaeological or literary materials by themselves can afford.

There is a humanistic aspect to this type of comparison. That is to say, one's eyes are on the broader intellectual understanding of phenomena, not simply the particulars. As the entomologist studying a particular beetle in New Guinea is

9. Smith, 1990, p. 52; see also, 2004, chap. 8, esp. p. 194.

ultimately concerned with the articulation and rectification of Coleoptera, the order of beetles, so the pattern-comparativist may *ultimately* be interested in the patterns as illustrative of human cultural dynamics — religious, economic, political, even psychological. We engage in it for the greater understanding of human society. For this kind of *illustrative* comparison our own specialty areas — through which we investigate patterns comparatively — really constitute a kind of ethnographic fieldwork for the larger understanding of religion.

We do not, of course, delude ourselves with the impression that the patterns exist apart from their *heuristic* function in making sense of religion in context or that they grasp in any way the totality of content or experience. They simply aid us in making sense of phenomena and in bringing our observations to new situations.

Comparison and the Fallacy of "Emic Interpretation"

While Bonnell and Smith both associate comparison with this broader mandate, the observation, definition, and rectification of patterns, it is extremely important (for historians and classicists in particular) to understand the influence of comparison — whether critical or implicit — on the very terms we use to translate key words or interpret situations. We may tend to assume that in discussing *mageia* or *sacerdos* or *thusia* or *sacrificium* as "magic" or "priest" or "sacrifice" we are reflecting the indigenous, "emic" sensibilities of the Greeks or Romans whose voices we are interpreting, but this is quite erroneous. To translate is inevitably to lift a term from its "emic" sense into an often heavily loaded, modern, "etic" category. "Magic," "priest," and "sacrifice," for example, are irrevocably tainted through implicit comparison to Christian tradition — indeed, Protestant critiques of Catholic tradition¹⁰ — and cannot "simply" translate Greek, Latin, or other primary terms for some ambiguous area of ritual power, some acquired ceremonial leadership role, or a range of offering traditions that included ritual animal slaughter.¹¹

That is to say, we deceive ourselves when we imagine ourselves to be working on historical or textual materials purely in indigenous terms — "as the Greeks/Romans/Egyptians understood this matter" — for our translations and interpretive discussions lift indigenous terms and perspectives out of their world and into a modern context in which they can *only* gain meaning and value for discussion through comparison. And if that comparison is not constructed with critical attention to the general and specific terminology by which an ancient phenomenon is rendered intelligible, then it will be constructed by default through unconscious comparisons that lie close at hand in the culture: terminology drawn from Protestant or Catholic Christian tradition, exotic stereotypes of priests or "pagans," and for "sacrifice" romantic notions of Christ and selfless mothers. If criticism provides the means by which scholars consider the biases and implications

10. See esp. Smith, 1990.

11. On the category "sacrifice" see now Frankfurter, 2011.

of their categories and terms, comparison (in the sense developed here) allows the rectification and consistency of those categories and terms, such that a study of the "priesthoods" in Roman Oxyrhynchus, the uses of ritual animal slaughter in Hellenistic Phrygia, or the use of binding spells in fourth-century Rome actually furthers thinking in the field of ancient religions.¹²

CONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION IN LATE ANTIQUITY THROUGH COMPARATIVE METHODS

The Potential of the Ethnographic Comparandum to Rectify Historical Themes

Great historical writing always reveals larger themes and underlying trends, whether by reinterpreting well-known data or introducing new data. The question then becomes how these themes are developed, justified, and articulated, since the "emic" terminology of the historical insiders is never sufficient to substantiate a theme that covers many regions, cultures, or periods. Beyond such critical questions as the process and progress of Christianization, the transformation or diminishment of traditional cults, and the political and economic aspects of both, historians of late antique religions have long proposed such general trends — religious patterns, in fact — as a rise in cultural anxiety or superstition, transformations in sacrifice and scripture, new constructions of holy men, asceticism and new constructions of sexuality, a desperate syncretism with multiple religious traditions or, conversely, new types of religious totalism and intolerance, such as iconoclastic violence.¹³ Each of these trends involves a religious pattern of sorts, generated out of impressions of, and then selections from, the data for religion in late antiquity. These historical patterns are therefore, *ipso facto*, comparative productions and therefore subject to the same testing by reference to further *comparanda* as any comparative pattern: was asceticism really new? How does one describe the new attitudes to the body? How does a Christian saint differ from an itinerant Jewish prophet? Is "anxiety" or "superstition" a viable "etic" category for the description of late antique religious phenomena? How representative is the voluminous epigraphical and iconographic evidence for theological syncretism in the Roman world, and what kind of pattern does it really reveal?

These larger questions of description, terminology, and generalization demand a second level of comparison, in which examples offering richer, more dynamic context, even if more historically removed, are sought out to test the patterns developed for late antique materials. New developments in the self-representation of Egyptian temple priesthoods might, for example, be clarified through comparison to traditional ritual experts of other cultures forced to reinvent themselves to

12. Many of the criticisms Claude Calame marshals against anthropological interpretation (2002) are all the more applicable to the less self-conscious disciplines of ancient history and archaeology.

13. See, e.g., Dodds, 1965; Lane Fox, 1987; Stroumsa, 2009.

maintain authority in a new cultural situation.¹⁴ Such a comparison would sharpen our attention to aspects of the ancient historical data we might otherwise have missed, our sense of the dynamics surrounding the ancient historical data (perhaps limited to inscriptions or fictional narratives), and the language we use to describe the process. The activities of the domestic cult and its relationship to civic cult (or pilgrimage shrine) in Roman or late antique Ostia, Panopolis, or Sepphoris might likewise be clarified and enriched by comparison to living traditions of family altars and their cycle of decoration.¹⁵

Peter Brown: Social Anthropology and the Articulation of Religious Patterns

This approach to the generalizing of religious patterns in late antiquity is especially represented in the work of Peter Brown. Brown's work on the social and religious world of late antiquity has been so inspiring to several generations of scholars for its unusual sensitivity to voices and realities once deemed marginal or decadent: the holy man, the cult of the saints, the strange abhorrence of the body in Christian asceticism. In these respects Brown is typically regarded as an *historian* of the late Roman and medieval periods. But many of Brown's distinctive insights have actually involved the application of Durkheimian social theory — via Mary Douglas's work — to the data of late antique Christianity through a series of implicit comparisons, in which his formulation of patterns in the religious transformation of the late antique Mediterranean world reflected social theories of charisma, the body, and social structure developed in the world of anthropology. Indeed, we can track Brown's application and development of Mary Douglas's anthropology from his 1970 essay on the location of malevolent powers in the early Christian empire, which drew closely on Douglas's essay "Powers and Dangers," to his 1988 book *The Body and Society*, which followed the insights of her 1985 *Natural Symbols*.¹⁶ Brown uses Douglas's formulations of social theory to sensitize himself to data he might otherwise overlook, to develop a descriptive language for patterns he observes in the late antique data, and to articulate the patterns themselves as important and real features of religious experience in late antiquity.

Perhaps most indicative of this method is his 1971 essay, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" (1971/1982), in which Brown articulates the social and economic roles of Christian holy men in their immediate *milieux* according to patterns generated by reading in North African and Siberian ethnography. That is to say, by *reference* to modern anthropological work that stressed the dynamics of exorcism, of emotional dramaturgy, of small community tensions, and of the authority of the peripheral prophet in negotiating a diversity of

14. See Smith, 1978, p. 172–189; Frankfurter, 1998, p. 198–237; 2000a.

15. See, e.g., Frankfurter, 1998, p. 131–142.

16. Brown, 1970, following Douglas, 1966, p. 94–113. See also Brown, 1978, chap. 2, and Brown, 1998, esp. p. 359–360.

social tensions, Brown laid out how holy men in late antiquity likewise functioned in their social environments as catalysts of religious change.¹⁷ They were (as he put it in a subsequent book) "friends of God," setting the Christian phenomenon in terms of — and according to the observed social dynamics surrounding — north African Muslim saints, who are known as *awliyā*, "friends [of God]."¹⁸

This mode of comparison involves very much the Bonnell/Smith, "illustrative" comparative model described earlier, insofar as *various* ethnographic sources are read as reflecting a general phenomenon, or taxon, of charisma in society and its varying dynamics, for which the Christian holy men of the late antique eastern Mediterranean *also* serve as examples and for which all the examples offer critical rectification of a category "holy man" in particular historical situations. Brown later reflected that his late antique materials were not significantly different from the "tribes" — the diverse peoples in ethnographic reports — that Douglas herself used so adroitly as exempla to develop social theories.¹⁹ To be sure, Brown generally couched his comparisons, indeed, his very use of ethnographic *comparanda*, in the background of his published work (while recommending to his students a vast range of comparative materials to supplement and frame their historical interests). And it is thus testimony to the historical utility and accuracy of the models he generated through comparison that his approaches to the holy man, cults of saints, and the social symbolism of the body (among other patterns) have become the foundations of subsequent work on Christianity in late antiquity, continually applied, tested, and adjusted with new materials and new regions, and have even been extended to phenomena in medieval Ethiopia and modern Sri Lanka.²⁰

Comparison by Reference to a Social Model

In his use of Mary Douglas's comparative social theory, Peter Brown exemplifies the value of the social model itself in this kind of second-order comparison. That is to say, the model represents critical generalization — pattern-developing — out of multiple ethnographic *comparanda*, often quite far-flung in origin; and it offers the historian of religions an articulated and dynamic formulation for a kind of social system (Some classic models, of course, have seemed so intrinsically convincing that scholars assume their veracity without *testing* them against new data). The comparative use of such social models must then begin with the question, does the system it reveals apply to the scholar's immediate data? And as in the initial stages of the comparative enterprise, that data must first be conceptualized and described in comparative terms, and then studied as a *potential exemplum* of the anthropologist's system. What data is missing from the historical record whose

17. E.g. Brown, 1982, p. 118, 123, 124, 131.

18. Brown, 1978, chap. 3.

19. Brown, 1998, p. 303.

20. See, e.g., Kaplan, 1984; Stirrat, 1992; Howard-Johnston & Hayward, 1999; Frankfurter, 2003.

existence the model implies or requires? In what ways might the data reflect the social model even while differing from the model's classic exempla? Can the ancient data provoke an adjusted form of the social model? Douglas's 1970 *Natural Symbols*, for example, which proposed a relationship between the symbols by which groups understood themselves, especially the body itself, and the degree of social articulation and social boundaries observed in the group, has had considerable influence on religious studies, especially studies of nascent Christianity, in offering a model to understand group behavior and, more importantly, to frame those behaviors comparatively.²¹

It should be noted at this point that the critical use of anthropological models and ethnographic *comparanda* to enrich the description of religious context and justify the terminology by which ancient materials are translated and generalized does not require expertise in an entirely other world of data, any more than the anthropologist who develops a theoretical language of patterns on the basis of her fieldwork in Malaysia needs to do equivalent fieldwork in Guatemala, Nigeria, and Amsterdam in order to justify her models. To attend carefully and critically to the terminology and patterns used to describe and generalize ancient data, it is sufficient simply to look out for *comparanda* from other cultures and for dynamic models based on modern ethnography as resources for the sharpening and enrichment of the materials at hand. One researches the theme as it might be explored cross-culturally, not just the datum in its own historical context. That is, it is not infinitely broad expertise that is required to invite a comparandum but a sense of what it is one is trying to describe, to frame, to clarify.

By way of contrast, one might turn to the eminent historian Sabine MacCormack, who managed over her career to master and publish in two entirely different historical fields, the late Roman empire and the colonial Inca empire, allowing her a rare capability to think across two distinct worlds of religious transformation and Christianization.²² However, the course of her oeuvre led not to the formulation of general models *on the basis of* two divergent fields of *comparanda* — the “illustrative” comparative mode explicated by Bonnell and Smith — but rather coincidental parallels (“much as *x* took place in late antiquity, so *y* took place in Peru”) and, in her most recent book, the proposal of an historical and genealogical relationship between notions of Roman empire and early modern notions of Inca and Christian empire.²³

Now, this can be a risky endeavor as part of a comparative enterprise. The assertion of genealogical relations between *comparanda*, as Jonathan Z. Smith observed, has commonly concluded (or even driven theologically) comparative work in ancient Mediterranean religions: for example, mystery cults proposed as

21. E.g. Gager, 1982; Meeks, 1983; Kraemer, 1992.

22. MacCormack 1981, 1991.

23. MacCormack 1984, 2006, 2007.

the *source* of Christian Eucharist, or Greco-Roman “divine men” as the *source* of Jesus as miracle-worker.²⁴ Of course, genealogical relations may well constitute the only plausible conclusion from the relative historical contexts of the *comparanda* (especially if the scholar clarifies, as MacCormack does, the precise means of “influence”). But comparison in the service of deducing priority is an entirely different endeavor from what we have been exploring in this essay — closer to Bonnell’s model of *analytic* comparison, insofar as it examines the metamorphosis of ideas through the comparison of diachronically-arranged examples.

COMPARISON AND/AS RELIGIOUS STUDIES: ANCIENT DATA AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELIGION

Perhaps the development of larger themes and patterns, the *illustrative* comparative mode, presupposes a prior disciplinary commitment, less to the intrinsic interest and wonders of a particular historical period than to the *implications* of that historical period and its data for the broader understanding of religion. In my own case, the beginning and end of my historical work is the problem of the critical description of religion and religious dynamics, so I have a prior dedication to bringing the data *back* to the rectification of some larger theme or pattern. My primary interests lie therefore in general phenomena, like the mechanisms of religious violence, the mechanisms and domains of Christianization (as a subset of cultural transformation more generally — Hellenization, Romanization, Islamization), and the phenomenology of domestic and “popular” religion. My historical work in Roman Egypt and the late antique East serves as “fieldwork,” in the sense of those anthropologists who move between historically-contextual descriptions of cultures and the formulation of larger observations about, say, the function of demonology in popular discourse or the relationship of religion and landscape. Anthropologists think of their data as *examples* of something human, social, performative, responsive — worthy of framing for broader comparative purposes.²⁵

But historical work in religions inevitably involves combing through ancient data familiar and new in search of the *aphormé*, to borrow Maurizio Bettini’s term: that anomaly in text or archaeological record that serves as a point of departure, the datum that does not fit prior models or assumptions and thereby challenges our assumptions.²⁶ My procedure then largely follows the method that Smith laid out: (a) to understand that anomaly as part of a *system*, (b) to *describe* it tentatively, (c) to ask of what phenomenon it might be an *example*, (d) to describe it according to some *critical terminology*, (e) to ask or seek out what might be a *fuller or richer example*; (f) to articulate, on the basis of both proximate *comparanda* with limited context and distant *comparanda* with richer context, a plausible social context in

24. Smith, 1990; 2000, p. 238.

25. See, e.g., Poole, 1986, p. 429–430.

26. Bettini here above in this book.

which the datum makes sense; the anomaly familiarized — a context that may require abandonment or adjustment with further primary data; and finally (g) to propose some broader observations about the *pattern*, the phenomenon, on the basis of this new data.

By way of example I want to introduce two anomalies that served as points of departure for me, my initial efforts to contextualize them through proximal comparisons, and my recourse to social models and ethnography to gather a larger and more meaningful context for the data.

*The Performative Construction of Demons and Spirit Possession*²⁷

A number of authors from across the late antique Mediterranean world report that so-called demons would appear in Christian holy places and, before (or even instead of) being exorcised, would serve as oracles or mediums for assembled people. Most such reports come from the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., like this one by the historian Sozomen:

It is said that while the battle was being fought, a demoniac presented himself in the temple of God which is in the Hebdomos, where the emperor had engaged in prayer on starting out, and insulted John the Baptist, taunting him with having his head cut off, and shouted the following words: "You conquer me, and lay snares for my army." The persons who happened to be on the spot, and who were waiting impatiently to learn some news of the war, were amazed, and wrote an account of it on the day that it occurred, and afterwards ascertained that it was the same day as that on which the battle had been fought.²⁸

What struck me about this and similar reports by Sulpicius Severus, Gregory of Tours, Athanasius of Alexandria, Shenoute of Atripe, and others was the ambiguity of the "demons." The character of the reports suggested to me that this ambiguity was not simply some narrative trope but potentially revealed an ambiguity about the nature of possessing spirits in performance. Several authors — those closest to the events described — seemed themselves to waver over the nature of the spirits, referring to them sometimes as demons and sometimes in more neutral or positive terms.²⁹

What also struck me was the relationship of these demonic appearances, which sometimes culminated in the "demons'" acclamation of Christian divinities, and saints' shrines. Did these possession performances reflect the resurgence of traditional gods in opposition to Christianity or a kind of local agency in the reception and acceptance of Christian authority?

27. See Frankfurter, 2010.

28. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7, 24, transl. Schaff, *NPNF* ser. 2, vol. 2, p. 393.

29. [Firmilian to] Cyprian, *Epistle* 75, 10, 2–5; Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 42.

Thus far I was working comparatively across a cluster of exempla from throughout the Mediterranean world and over several centuries: the kind of "comparison" that historians of late antiquity pursue habitually. However, the nature of my questions, my terminology (spirit possession, performance, local agency), and my tentative contextual models all depended on the richly contextual and theorized anthropology of spirit possession by Ioan M. Lewis (1989) and others. Pursuing the process of the local identification of possessing spirits more broadly in this literature, I learned that "demon" and its various equivalents are rarely (if ever) such static understandings of possessing spirits; that, rather, possessing spirits that might be viewed by religious authorities in evil terms may offer devotees within the same religious system oracles, healing, and reassurance; and that, even in historical Christian cultures more attentive to the control of spirits, the process of identifying a spirit as ancestral, prophetic, or demonic may last years, negotiated between seer, family, community, and various religious authorities.³⁰ The larger pattern, then, of which the early Christian cases under discussion would be *particular examples* (along with many from medieval and early modern Europe and modern North Africa), involves the diachronic process by which spirits and spirit possession become interpreted and "situated" in communities, as a dialectical relationship between the mantic subject, the immediate community, and institutional authorities near and far. It also involves, I proposed, the means by which communities accept a new religious system, through the agency of possession.

Comparison in this case went well beyond the mere collection of parallels, for more than anything else I sought through analogous cases the refinement of a terminology to describe phenomena "on the ground," beyond the literary representation. Comparison also allowed the development of a model of Christianization that took into account possession, the discourse of demonology, and the novel space of the Christian shrine. And finally, it allowed the peculiar data for possession in late antique Christianity to contribute to a larger theoretical conversation about spirit possession and religious change.

*Popular Christian violence in the generation after Christianization*³¹

Most discussion of violence in the Christianization of the late antique countryside revolves around the instigation of bishops and abbots, whereas villagers and laity appear (in primary and secondary materials) as either passive observers or paralyzed and anxious victims.³² Given popular participation in the destruction, or defense, of traditional shrines and images during the Christianization of Latin America, Polynesia, Africa, and other cultures, I have long wondered, would late antique villagers really have been so passive?

30. This work was also stimulated by the works of Caciola, 2003, and Sluhovský, 2007.

31. Frankfurter, 2000b.

32. E.g. Caseau, 2001; Sizgorich, 2009.

Near the end of the fifth century C.E., Abbot Besa of the White Monastery in Atripe in upper Egypt wrote to local villagers who had been, in his words, "fighting for nothing over a piece of wood."³³ In an era of increasing Christianization, following a period of iconoclastic violence under the prior abbot, Shenoute, this obscure allusion offered both an anomaly and a point of departure: what kind of wood would cause fighting? What I proposed in a publication was that this "piece of wood" was actually an Egyptian divine image and that the violence over it, which Besa specifies as village-based, had arisen as a purge movement by local Christians against the keepers of such divine images: adherents of traditional Egyptian ritual expressions in a period when such expressions were less tolerated.

I proceeded first by exploring the cultural and religious context of this region in Egypt in the fifth century, showing that by all accounts Christianity there and then was still in the process of being negotiated and assimilated. The language "only a piece of wood" was itself often used in Egyptian Christian polemic to dismiss the value of traditional statuary. Then I explored some religious situations elsewhere in Egypt from the same period that resembled the one I proposed for Besa's village dispute. This was the first level of comparison: cases of local religious conflict in which traditional religious adherents — "pagans," as it were — were subjected to violence on the part of Christian monks and/or villagers. This more elaborate documentation, I argued, filled out the historical picture of Besa's village dispute.

But I also referred to a case that Mary Douglas had reported among the Lele of Zaire in the 1980s, in which local Catholic priests had incited a popular iconoclastic purge movement against traditional images and their elderly owners well after Catholic Christianity had been established in the region.³⁴ My interest lay in the larger phenomenon of *local* peoples' — as opposed to missionaries' — "enactions" of Christian enthusiasm or exorcistic iconoclasm in the generations following the introduction of Christianity to a region. That is, Besa's allusion to popular violence led me to hypothesize a pattern of popular iconoclastic purge (as opposed to that mobilized by bishops or abbots). Examples of just such popular iconoclastic violence following Christianization or reform from modern Africa, as well as early modern Europe and Mexico, showed me how the pattern might work and what contexts might be significant: the role of priests or lay leaders, the youthfulness of the participants, recent Christianization, the types of rumors circulating, even divergent relationships to landscape and buildings. My own comparative work thus consisted in developing the situation in Abbot Besa's world as an *example* of post-missionary popular iconoclasm, and beyond that, religious violence of a particular sort.

Now, it may seem as if I was simply producing a template and forcing historical data into it. But it is no different than proposing an hypothesis for anomalous

33. Besa, fr. 41: "To the Dignitaries and People of the Village," ed. & transl. Kuhn, 1956, 21, p. 129–130 (text), 22, p. 123–124 (transl.).

34. Douglas, 1999.

ossuary or archaeological data — an hypothesis that can collapse or gain nuance with further data (or more apt comparisons) but ultimately allows one to make sense of artifacts and stimulate their discussion. At a broader level, hypotheses that propose artifacts or data as examples of larger patterns serve also the rectification of those patterns — and ultimately help us understand the phenomena of religion.

Religious violence as a phenomenon, for example, only gains meaning as a category through particular incidences of iconoclasm, massacre, expulsion, incineration, desecration, or even (as some of my colleagues are currently pursuing) monastic discipline, which must be scrutinized in historical and social context and compared if one is at all to justify or constitute a category "religious violence." Indeed, this case I described involves only one particular genus of religious violence, quite different from the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, from Franciscan monks' depredations in Mexico, Baruch Goldstein's Purim massacre, or the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque for a Ram temple. As obvious or simple a term as it might sound, "religious violence" is itself a comparative pattern, one that implies — and should be defined in terms of — some dynamic system of action, mobilization, ideology, and religious discourse that can be experimentally applied to various historical cases in order to understand further their religious nature.³⁵ Those cases to which I proposed the fifth-century Egyptian case could be productively (and carefully) compared, including modern African witch-cleansing and exorcistic movements, allowed some insight into how religious images and their owners might have been regarded by their persecutors in fifth-century Egypt. That is, the lingering, venerated religious image can appear as an obstruction to civic fortune to some, while to others of a more traditional bent the image may be the last preserver of civic fortune. But such insights arise from proposing the historical situation's exemplification of a particular type of religious violence.

My method thus involves looking at historical data with an eye for situations that might elucidate or complicate a pattern discussed comparatively in anthropological literature — or simply for anomalies, for *aphormai*, that relate to general themes in the study of religion that have long interested me, like violence, possession, christianization, ritual, popular religion, and magical aspects of religion. It presumes, of course, wide reading in historical and ethnographic literature that addresses the kinds of religious phenomena that interest me so that I can recognize anomalies or problems of consequence, to describe them, and to have some sense of how *comparanda* manifest themselves cross-culturally. Finally, the method points in two ways: (a) to the critical reconstruction of an historical context, on the basis of *comparanda*, that renders the anomaly both familiar and exemplary; and (b) to the greater understanding of some general pattern in the history of religions: e.g., the relationship of possession performance to religious change, the varieties of religious violence.

35. As developed in such exemplary comparatively-informed studies as Friedland & Hecht, 1998, and Lincoln, 2003.

CONCLUSIONS

The kind of illustrative or taxonomic comparison described in this essay is not for everyone, and there is much work to be done in strictly philological, archaeological, or historical modes without the need to draw in other cultural examples or to read programmatically in history or ethnography outside one's "home" field. However, few scholars in history, classics, or archaeology admit the degree to which the very language they use to translate and explore "paganism," "sacrifice," "magic," "votive offering," or "conversion" (*inter alia*) depends on comparison, on theoretical models and hypothetical patterns, whether they intend so or not. And if there is not some critical effort to lay out those models and implicit *comparanda*, to justify the term or the pattern, then the comparisons will inevitably come from those old theological notions of Catholic priesthood and liturgy that nineteenth-century scholars habitually projected onto their materials.³⁶ So at one level comparison is intrinsic to the historian's inevitable generalizations, and some measure of critical justification of one's generalizations or terms, as ideas generated from a selection of examples — of *comparanda* — serves the integrity of historical work of any sort.

But comparison may also involve, I have suggested, a more deliberate mode, in the formulation of a pattern — the holy man and his social function, post-mission popular Christian violence, spirit possession as an acknowledgment of Christian sainthood, and so on — that relates ancient data to richer ethnographic cases. And for those inclined to explore the data of ancient religions in this comparative mode, they must begin their explorations *not* with the question, "what is this datum like?" but rather by asking, "Of what phenomenon or system in religion might this datum be an *example*?" A pattern is articulated in rigorously "etic" terminology to maintain hermeneutical independence from "emic" language, even if it is only one or two particular cultures under discussion, and even if "emic" categories (like "wali" or "darshan") might aid in the description of the pattern or lend it a short-hand label. More importantly, one uses the pattern not as a static grid to force on the data but as (a) a gauge of *difference* among cases across history while also a principle for *relating* those cases (how might Catholic statuary and traditional Egyptian wooden images be viewed differently by their zealous detractors?); (b) a hypothetical *dynamic system* in which a text or archaeological datum makes sense *pending additional data*; and (c) a means of bringing an historical artifact — text, object, event — into broader conversation with humanistic inquiry, not as an amusing anecdote or exotic anomaly but as a critically described *case* of some revealingly human phenomenon.

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Theses on Comparison

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THESES PROPER

Let us begin with a few schematic observations concerning the goals, logic, and continuing appeal of comparatism, the very formidable obstacles it faces, its sorry historic record and the reasons for its many failures.

- 1) As both Heraclitus and Saussure observed, meaning is constructed through contrast. All knowledge, indeed all intelligibility thus derives from consideration of data whose differences become instructive and revealing when set against the similarities that render them comparable.
- 2) It is also the case that the same exercise supports errors and misconstructions of every sort, there being no guarantees. At best, comparison yields not knowledge, but that which provisionally passes for knowledge while inviting falsification or revision as further examples are considered and familiar examples receive fuller study. This process of testing, amplification and rectification is interminable.
- 3) All generalization depends on comparison, although the latter is usually pursued in ways inadequate to the task. Still, the only alternatives are a) a discourse whose generalizations remain intuitive, unreflective, and common-sensical, i.e. without basis, rigor, or merit and b) a parochialism that dares speak nothing beyond the petty and the particular.
- 4) Comparison is never innocent, but is always interested and the interests of the researcher (which are never arbitrary, exclusively intellectual, or fully conscious) inevitably condition a) definition of the issues and categories to be considered, b) selection of the examples judged relevant, c) evaluation of these data (including the relative dignity and importance accorded to each), and d) the ultimate conclusions.
- 5) Whether acknowledged or not, the researcher's world (nation, culture, religion, politics, e.g.) and his/her attitudes toward it enter and inflect all comparative projects, most often providing the implicit point of reference against which other data are measured. The only check on this tendency is collegial criticism.

36. See Smith, 1990.

6) Wide-ranging comparison — comparatism of the strong sort — has consistently disappointed. The books of Lévi-Strauss, Dumézil, and Eliade now sit beside those of Max Müller and Frazer as cautionary examples. Although one can admire the energy, intelligence, and dedication of all these scholars, they consistently misrecognized products of their own imagination and desire ("the human mind," "tripartite ideology," "homo religiosus") for objects having historic, prehistoric, and/or transhistoric actuality. Others made the same mistake regarding such fictive entities as "totemism," "Urmonotheismus," "la mentalité primitive," and "the collective unconscious."

7) The more examples compared, the more superficial and peremptory is the analysis of each. In such cases, researchers regularly turn their understanding of a few key data into a template for treating less familiar examples. The deception and self-deception involved in such ventures is of the same sort that typifies all ideology: misrepresenting a part for the whole.

8) Comparative endeavors of the strong sort fall into one of three types, based on the horizon of their ambitions: a) Those that claim to reveal universal patterns (Tylor, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Lévy-Bruhl, Eliade, Girard, e.g.); b) Those that claim to demonstrate a genetic relation among specific peoples and phenomena (Jacob Grimm, Max Müller, Robertson Smith, Dumézil, Gimbutas, e.g.); c) Those that claim to trace diffusion of certain traits from one group to others over the course of history (Reitzenstein, Widengren, Burkert, Bernal, e.g.). All three types constitute similarity as the fact of primary interest and regard difference as a complicating development of considerably lesser importance.

9) With regard to the universalizing type: There are no true universals, save at a level of generalization so high as to yield only banalities. Thus, while it is true that all humans have bodies, the way they theorize their bodies, also the ways they use and experience them vary with history, class, and culture (as Mauss was first to observe). Real interest emerges only as one pays attention to these differences.

10) With regard to the genetic type: Use of comparison to reconstruct (i.e. hypothesize) a remote past era for which no direct evidence survives is an invitation to project one's favored fantasies onto a relatively blank screen. That screen, moreover, is distorting and prejudicial, as it invests such projections with the prestige of "origins" (e.g. "our most ancient traditions," "the world of our ancestors," "the archaic," "the primordial").

11) With regard to the diffusionist type: The attempt to show transmission of culture traits always advances — if only subtextually — a tendentious ranking of the peoples involved, constituting temporal primacy ("originality," "invention," "authenticity") as the sign of superior status, while conversely treating reception as a mark of relative backwardness, need and submission.

12) These strong forms of comparatism having failed, it is time we entertained comparatism of weaker and more modest sorts that a) focus on a relatively small number of *comparanda* that the researcher can study closely; b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and those of difference; c) grant equal dignity and intelligence to all parties considered; and d) are attentive to the social, historical, and political contexts and subtexts of religious and literary texts. As precedents, one might invoke the examples of Fustel de Coulanges, Geoffrey Lloyd, and Eric Havelock or — should one stray beyond classical antiquity — those of Marc Bloch, Max Gluckman, Norbert Elias, and Marshall Sahlins.

AHREMAN'S ENVY AT CREATION

As an example of the weak kind of comparatism we take to be both defensible and productive, let us offer a case involving two data only: a classic scene from Middle Persian myth and one from Anglo-Saxon epic. The first is taken from the *Greater Bundahišn*, a priestly compendium committed to writing in the ninth century C.E.¹

Chapter One of that text opens with two antithetical beings: the Wise Lord (Ohrmazd), possessed of omniscience and benevolence, and the Evil Spirit (Ahreman), characterized by a spiteful, destructive stupidity. Neither is omnipotent and each has to confront the other's power. Still, their initial situation is a stability born of separation, with Ohrmazd dwelling in endless light above, Ahreman in infinite darkness below.² Still, the Wise Lord anticipates conflict, understanding that Ahreman's innate disposition to envy (Pahlavi *arešk*) will make him turn aggressive.³ In contrast, the Evil Spirit understands nothing. Wandering idly, he encounters light for the first time and his reaction — one of aggression, prompted by envy, just as the Wise Lord foresaw — sets all subsequent history in motion.

Because he possessed (only) knowledge-after-the-fact, the Foul Spirit was unaware of the Wise Lord's existence. Then he rose from the depth and he came to the boundary of the visible lights. When he saw the Wise Lord and the light of ungraspable brightness, because of his aggressivity and his envious nature (*arēšk-gōhrīh*), he launched an attack in order to destroy it.⁴

1. On the general nature and importance of the *Bundahišn*, see Ceretti, 2001, p. 87–105. The standard edition is now Pakzad, 2005. All translations that follow are original.
2. This is spelled out in *Greater Bundahišn* 1, 1–11.
3. *Greater Bundahišn* 1, 12: In his omniscience, the Wise Lord knows that the Foul Spirit exists, because he [i.e. Ahreman] draws up plans in envious desire, as he mixes things up from beginning to end in countless ways. Spiritually, [the Wise Lord] created the creation that is necessary for his power." Ohrmazd pad harwisp-āgāhīh dānist kū Gannāg-Mēnōg ast čē 'handāzēd[ud kunēd] pad arēšk-kāmagih ciyōn /andar\ gūmēzēd <az> fragān /ta\ frazām abāg cand abzārān. u-š mēnōghā ān dām ī pad ān abzār andar abāyēd frāz brēhēnid.
4. *Greater Bundahišn* 1, 14–15: Gannāg-Mēnōg pas-dānišnīh rāy az (h)astīh ī Ohrmazd an-āgāh būd. pas az ān zōfāyīg 'axēzīd ō wimand ī didār ī rōšnān mad. ka-š did Ohrmazd ud ān rōšnīh ī a-griftār frāz 'payrūd zadār-kāmagih ud arēšk-gōhrīh rāy pad murnjēnīdan tag abar kard. *Greater Bundahišn* 4, 10 describes Ahreman's primordial assault, once again tracing the violent