Review

Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies, by Oliver Freiberger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 256 pp., £64 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19996-500-7.

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As a scholar of Indian religion, I am sometimes frustrated that the theories and methods of the broader field of Religious Studies are often developed in relation to—and tested against—exclusively ‘Western’ religious data, with any Asian contexts added on as an afterthought. It is therefore always refreshing to see a methodological reflection emerge from a scholar with a robust training in Indology and Indian religions, as in the case of this new volume from Oliver Freiberger. Even better, Freiberger is not proposing a methodological framework only relevant to the study of Indian religions; rather he is tackling that most thorny of questions: How do we compare?

Comparative religion might have a dubious reputation these days, but Freiberger makes a compelling case for its reinvigoration and critical adoption throughout the field of RS. Indeed, Freiberger argues that all scholars of religion use a comparative method even without knowing, since whenever we use a label such as ‘shrine’ or ‘ritual’ we are inherently comparing with other things in that same ‘metalinguistic category’, as well as seeking to refine our understanding of the category itself. Going one step further, and adopting a comparative method as an explicit second-order method (in contrast to first-order methods such as philology or ethnography; see p. 30) allows for increased understanding of the things compared (the ‘comparands’) as well as of the aspect chosen for comparison (the ‘tertium comparationis’ or ‘third of comparison’).

Freiberger tackles the critics and critiques of the comparative method in Chapter 2 (‘Comparison: Critiques and Challenges’). He makes the point that we should not dismiss the comparative method because of its associations with scholars who had dubious agendas, since it is these agendas and not the method itself that are at fault. He seeks to disentangle the issue of ‘decontextualization’, a certain degree of which is necessary to the comparative method (but, he argues, can be done responsibly), and ‘essentialization’,

which he claims to be entirely unnecessary if scholars have the necessary expertise and commitment. He also carefully addresses postmodernist and postcolonial critiques, such as the idea that comparing using western categories is a form of colonial endeavour; as Freiburger points out, once again it is not the method itself that is at fault, but the way in which the comparative project is framed.

How to responsibly frame a comparative project occupies Chapters 3 and 4, before the discussion of a case study from Freiburger's own research into asceticism in Indian and early Christian contexts in Chapter 5. Chapter 3 offers a careful, if somewhat dense, discussion of the factors affecting the choice of comparands and tertium comparationis, with a particular focus on the need for a 'scholar-centered approach' that is reflexive. Of particular value in this chapter is Freiburger's discussion of the necessity of a unit of comparison being both 'empirical' and 'theoretical', and the proposal that these be seen as on a spectrum. Thus while some comparands are closer to the empirical end (e.g. two texts) and some closer to the theoretical end (e.g. two occasions of syncretism), even the most empirical comparands (e.g. two statues) are worthy of comparison only because they are 'religious', which is a theoretical label, while a theoretical concept can only be studied if there are empirically researchable aspects (see pp. 85–87). This discussion is just one example of the care and clarity with which Freiburger walks his readers through the different aspects of his project.

Chapter 4 presents the nuts and bolts of what goes on when embarking on a comparative project, both in terms of how the project is configured, and the research process itself. A lot of terminology is discussed here, including from other scholars, while Freiburger himself offers his own categories: 'illuminative' and 'taxonomic' modes (pp. 126ff.), 'macro', 'micro' and 'meso' scales of comparison (pp. 131ff., compared helpfully to different scales of map, which are all useful for some things, but useless for others) and 'contextual', 'cross-cultural' and 'trans-historical' scopes (p. 143ff.). By scope Freiburger is referring to the distance between the comparands, and how this affects the choices made in configuring the study. For example, a contextual scope (comparing things within a single cultural context) usually assumes a *relationship* between comparands, while cross-cultural comparisons usually look for *analogous* comparands.

Freiburger divides the process itself into five parts, each feeding back into a cycle: (1) transparent and reflexive selection of the comparands and tertium; (2) description and analysis of the comparands in their respective contexts; (3) juxtaposition and exploration of similarities and differences; (4) redescription of one or more of the comparands in light of insights gained from the comparison; (5) rectification and theory formation in relation to the comparative category or term. Freiburger helpfully clarifies that while the last two may not apply to every project, at least one of them should. Indeed, his determination to remind readers of the broader motivation of

our scholarship—better understanding of different religious contexts, but also better understanding of the terms and categories we use when studying them—is prominent throughout the work.

Methodological reflections are not everyone's cup of tea, but I personally found this book very enriching, and there is much more to it than the brief overview here can capture. The clarity with which Freiburger articulates his understanding of all the different aspects of the method is truly impressive. This clarity exposes the reasons why past comparative projects have sometimes failed, but also the reasons why we should not be put off the comparative method as a whole. Students, including undergraduates, will be able to follow the reflections, and for scholars engaged in—or considering engaging in—comparative research it is something of a handbook, and provides tools for explaining and justifying our approach. I have done much comparative work myself and am now able to confidently explain why my mode is primarily illuminative, my scale fairly micro, and my scope contextual. In future projects I will be able to take greater care in articulating my reasons for selecting what to compare, and my reasons for wanting to compare things in the first place. There may be other possible models for doing this, but to my mind the model offered in this volume is the clearest and most compelling yet.