A Magic Still Dwells

Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age

EDITED BY
KIMBERLEY C. PATTON
AND BENJAMIN C. RAY

"Methodology, comparison & truth"
Huxley Smith

© 2000

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON
METHODOLOGY, COMPARISONS, AND TRUTH

HUSTON SMITH

On its surface this essay may appear disingenuous if not hypocritical, for I begin by blasting methodology and then proceed with a straight face to describe my own. The discrepancy is more apparent than real, however. There is nothing wrong with methodologies per se; short of randomness, we all have ways of going about things which amount to methodologies in the loosest sense of the word. What I am against is the attempt to extract methodologies that are ad hoc, embedded, and mostly subliminal, from their working contexts in the hope that getting straight about what we are up to and how we should proceed will improve our results; the project is sometimes called critical theory. To sharpen a chisel before using it makes good sense, but that model doesn’t hold for knowing.

Against Method

Over twenty years ago Paul Feyerabend wrote a landmark book Against Method, but he was a philosopher of science, so (with a nod to him for the title of this section) I will develop my own arguments on the subject as they relate to religious studies.

Obviously, we can look at different aspects of religion—its history, its texts, its rituals, its truth claims, and the like. But after targeting which aspect of the subject we propose to study, to obsess over strategies for studying it is a waste of time and worse. For it’s not just that it takes time away from looking at our subject as we back off and try to figure out how to look at it, as if a knowledge of optics could help art critics. More serious is the fact that any method we fix on will be edged by blinders that create tunnel vision. For methods are like the proverbial Zen finger pointing to the moon; they direct our gaze in a given direction. But how do we know that the moon is in the direction that our fingers point? If we need a methodology to determine that, we face an infinite regress, but let that pass. The point is: if our chosen methodology does not point in the right direction, it will divert us from where the pay dirt lies. One could offer pages of illustrations on how (a) the phenomenological method which van der Leeuw adapted from Kant, (b) Bultmann’s Heideggerianly derived method for reading the New Testament, (c) Whiteheadianly vectored process theology, (d) deconstruction as fueled by Nietzsche, and (e) the critical-historical method that the Jesus Seminar employs are all, in their several ways, procrustean for excluding certain things we should be looking at—by my lights, the most important things. This isn’t the place to argue that charge, so I limit myself to a single oblique question about the last in my list. Is the methodology of the Jesus Seminar capable of producing (as a sequel to Robert Funk’s Honest to Jesus) a responsible book titled Honest to Christ? N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God allows for such a sequel, but that is because Wright works (with equal critical competence) outside the Seminar and relativizes its methods.

The subtitle of Walter Capps’s recent admirable study, Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline, is instructive here, for it shows that those of us who ply this trade have a dual loyalty. On the one hand we are beholden to our subject, religion, and at the same time (if we are orthodox), we are beholden to the way we study it: our discipline. That way is, in the bulk, an offshoot of the Enlightenment Project with its decidedly secular thrust. Accommodating to that thrust may have been necessary to get us back on campus after higher education went public and became secularized, but we need to be aware of the toll that the accommodation exacts. Using secular tools to interpret sacred materials is not an innocent enterprise. To cite only one indication, most of the giants who shaped the second-order traditions that structure our discipline accepted uncritically the Enlightenment’s biological model of history, which links the history of culture to the life-cycle of individuals—the past was the childhood of the human race which has now (in the enlightened West) advanced to maturity. That assessment wipes out re-
My "Method"

As far back as I can remember I have wanted to know the truth; specifically, the truth about the ultimate nature of things, for how does one know in which direction to move unless one knows the lay of the land? William Sheldon tells us that continued observations in clinical practice reveal that the deepest craving in the human makeup is not for possessions, or sex, or power, but for "knowledge of the right direction—for orientation," and that calls for a map.

In my early, most formative years, the Bible was my map. In college and graduate school philosophy upset it for having (in the university's eyes) a wider purview, so I switched from religion (my undergraduate major) to the philosophy of religion. But then the strictures of modern philosophy obstructed—positivism, linguistic philosophy, analytic philosophy, and from the continental side, phenomenology and existentialism. Somewhat later I realized that those strictures derived from the deeper pervasive mindset of modernity, which has progressively lost sight of transcendence because science ("our sacral mode of knowing," Alex Comfort calls it) has no way of accessing it. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities, the stuff of which values are made: better and worse, superior and inferior. Several years ago The Chronicle of Higher Education packed the consequence into a sentence. "If anything characterizes modernity," it noted, "it is the loss of the sense of transcendence—of a reality that encompasses and surpasses our quotidian affairs."

When these realizations crystallized, I wanted out—out of modernity. So I cut back to the trunk of the tree, the traditional world from which modernity sprang, which I found to be more alive and interesting. Meta-physically more alive and interesting, I must quickly add, for I never fell for the romantic notion that the past as a whole was better than the present. Only its Big Picture—its ontology, its metaphysics, its worldview, religiously speaking, its revelations—is more commodious for being anchored in realities that far exceed the natural world. Naturally the hermeneutics of suspicion forced me to ask if those realities are only projections, but it didn't take much thought to see that most of the rhetoric about humanity's having come of age is shallow bluster. Modernity hasn't uncovered any facts that counter transcendence. It has simply turned away from it in the mistaken belief that the scientific worldview is more reliable, as if there could be such a thing as a scientific worldview when it becomes more evident every decade that science deals...
with only part of the picture, not its whole. "Everything we know about nature," the physicist Henry Stapp writes, "is in accord with the idea that the fundamental process of Nature lies outside space-time."

That's enough for my trajectory; how have I traveled it? Simply stated, by cornering the wisest representative of each of the major religions that I could find—preferably living so I could dialogue with them and receive their darshan, but where they had "dropped their bodies," as the Indians say, their writings have served. Then I apprenticed myself to them with all the focus and fervor I could muster. This has led me to say on occasion that I am self-taught in world religions, but all I mean by that is that my most important learning has taken place outside the academy. I know Asia's asrams, monasteries, khanaqabs, and zawiyabs better than I know its universities. After my parents, the photographs of my principal teachers that line my office include a swami, a zen roshi, the Dalai Lama, a Sufi shaikh, a Trappist monk, and a Native American Road man. No professors, though I owe many of them a great deal and feel great affection for several.

Comparisons

It was the charge that religious comparisons are otiose that sparked this book, but it is difficult for me to take that charge seriously. Logically, everything is both like and unlike everything else; it is like everything else because it too exists, and it is unlike everything or it would not be an individual in its own right. And since the crux of intelligence is the ability to draw distinctions, intelligence has no choice but to traffic in similarities and differences from the word go, and doing that requires comparing. So it cannot be comparing per se that is at issue; it has to be certain kinds of comparing, and in the case at hand it is comparing religions and cultures.

I am reminded of Robert Frost's last poetry reading in which he touched on the subject of hate. In the course of that aside he mentioned two things he hated. "I hate it when my books of poetry come to me in mailing jackets stamped 'educational materials,'" he said, "and I hate it when people say to me, 'Stop generalizing,' for that's all I have been doing my entire life." If I change "generalizing" to "comparing," I could say the same, and once more (because concrete cases help to settle the dust) I will turn the spotlight inward and try to ferret out how comparison has entered my work.

The first important time was in graduate school when I compared theology with philosophy and found it wanting. After I got my doctorate and stopped letting my teachers direct my thoughts, I reversed that judgment, and along with it my graduate school opinion that modernity has a better grasp of the Big Picture than our forebears had. Those were blanket comparisons. The first time I can remember comparing religions was when the Vedanta crashed over me and I found its concept of nirguna Brahman, "God beyond forms," more commanding than the personal God of Christianity I had been brought up on. Later I discovered that Christianity has its counterpart to nirguna Brahman in Eckhart's Godhead, but there is no point in itemizing the series of religious comparisons that followed that first one. I can skip directly to the conclusion of my personal story. Two of my books turned out to deal entirely with comparisons. Forgotten Truth presents what religions have in common; Essays in World Religion registers their differences. The second shows us what we can learn from others; the first finds at the heart of the world's religions a Truth which, because it is attested to by them all, we can wholeheartedly believe. That both books contain mistakes goes without saying, but I cannot understand how anyone could consider their projects to be misguided.

That has been my personal involvement with comparisons. Their place in religious studies centers in comparative religions, so again I turn to Walter Capps for what he says about that subdiscipline:

So compelling has comparative religion become that it tends now to pervade religious studies in all of its aspects. It belongs to the context, the framework, of religious studies. It helps define the field's direction and compelling intellectual interests. Indeed, from this time forward, no aspect of religious studies can be thought through systematically—no aspect of religious studies can even be approached—without explicit acknowledgment of its cross-cultural dimensionalities. Already it is impossible to conduct scholarly research in religious studies except within an intellectual framework that treats cross-cultural sensitivities as being regulative.

This strong endorsement of religious comparisons by the leading historian of our field doesn't make it any easier for me to take seriously those who dismiss the enterprise, but they must have something in mind, so what is it? As far as I can make out, they take two important half-truths and turn them into full truths.

First, it is indeed the case that thinking is embedded in cultural-linguistic contexts and is affected by them, but to argue that those contexts are so insulated from one another that it is impossible to under-
stand what goes on in them except from the inside is going too far. (Complete understanding is a red herring here, for that is seldom achieved even by speakers of the same language when important differences are in dispute.) When Alasdair MacIntyre argues against “any overall rationality that can supply a sort of universal language among traditions, or any universal human practices that can elucidate understandings of the human good, and hence ground conceptions of virtue that can be shared and that are intelligible among and across traditions”—when, as I say, MacIntyre so argues, I (whose life was once saved by Maasai warriors whose language and “practices” were as different from mine as the human species allows) have difficulty agreeing.

The second objection to cross-cultural comparisons comes mainly from the deconstructionists, who would have us believe that once one starts stepping across cultural boundaries there is no stopping short of oppressive totalism. The passage that Kimberley Patton quotes from Jean-François Lyotard in her contribution to this book is so instructive here that I shall reproduce and comment on it. “It must be clear,” Lyotard writes that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language-games (which under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and sensible, for the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire of a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.7

What does this diatribe shake down to by way of sober claims? That, to generalize, wholes are bad because they produce terror, and, specifically, that they are responsible for the horrors of the last two centuries. Differences, by contrast, are good and should be activated; and in any case they are inevitable because language-games cannot be reconciled. That here too there is some truth is again not in question: wholes can be misused and have been, and differences do have their place. But the unnuanced, uncompromising dichotomy that Lyotard erects between wholes and parts is unconvincing, and nowhere in postmodernism do I find it argued straightforwardly and persuasively. To mention only a single problem with the thesis: predictably, Lyotard drags in Hegel for his whipping boy; but is the line from Hegel-the-lumper to Nazism any straighter than the line that runs to from Nietzsche-the-splitter to that dénouement?

Truth

The revolt against wholes—metaphysics, metanarratives, and pejoratively, totality—has severely impacted the idea of Truth. In Foucault and much of postmodernism, truth comes close to being no more than a power play. Wilfred Cantwell Smith reports that though truth remains enshrined in Harvard’s insignia, the word doesn’t appear in the statement on the aims of undergraduate education that its faculty took two years to hammer out shortly before Smith retired.

Absolute Truth has to be grounded in absolute, all-inclusive Reality, for were it not, something beyond what it is tied to could relativize it; in fact, in the end the two come to the same thing, as the Sanskrit sat and the Arabic baqqq attest. So what (allegedly) is wrong with Reality, and what is (actually) right about it? The arguments against it cannot be metaphysical, since metaphysics is what is under attack—human beings don’t discern reality; the claim is that they project, invent, or construct it. This leaves deconstructionists with morality and epistemology as the directions to shoot from.

In both cases the objections seem to rely more on caricatures of the opposition than on solid reasoning. On the moral front, pressing the “terror” button relieves critics of the need to demonstrate that metanarratives necessarily marginalize. Why respect for the rights of others cannot be built into metanarratives as one of their moral corollaries is not explained.

As for epistemic objections, these too rely mostly on caricatures, the familiar ones here being that to think that reliable inclusive views are possible is tantamount to thinking that one can jump out of one’s own skin; or (when the objection comes from historicism) like thinking that one can cross historical horizons in helicopters; or finally, like thinking that one can achieve a God’s-eye view of things, as if omniscience were ever in the picture. The fitting metaphor is altogether different; it is the Himalayan range viewed from a distance. Its boulders, ravines, and glaciers don’t show, but the contours of the range are reliably etched. That’s
all that responsible metaphysicians ever claim—that Reality’s outlines are available to us respecting what human beings need to know about it; presumably other species approach those outlines from different angles. And responsible metaphysicians agree with Lyotard (and yes, as against Hegel if one wants to get into that), that “our business [is] to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented,” and that we should be “witnesses to the unrepresentable,” for in their final, apophatic registers the wisdom traditions all recognize that finitude can only point to the Infinite, not deliver it.

One more epistemic bugbear needs to be laid to rest: the charge that belief in absolute Truth lands one in dogmatism. The truth is almost the opposite. Logically, it is fallibilism that is absolutism’s corollary, for in the absence of a concept of the way things are, it is impossible to be mistaken about them.

If this tempers some of the objections to the big picture that the idea of Truth presupposes, I can round off my remarks by noting what such pictures contribute.

Religion, religio—presumably religious studies’ primary reference point—has to do with being connected. Are deconstructionists, cultured despisers of metaphysics that they are, aware of how (to quote Lyotard one last time) their call to “wage war on totality [and] activate . . . differences” pulls against connectedness? If our century has given us all the terror we can take, it has also given us all the dismembering we need. Already at the opening of this century Yeats was warning that things were falling apart, that the center doesn’t hold. Gertrude Stein followed him by noting that “in the twentieth century nothing is in agreement with anything else.” Ezra Pound saw man as “hurling himself at indomitable chaos,” and the most durable line from the play Green Pastures has been, “Everything that is tied down is coming loose.” No wonder that when in her last interview Rebecca West was asked to name the dominant mood of our time, she replied, “A desperate search for a pattern.” The search is desperate because it seems futile to look for a pattern when reality has become, in Roland Barthes’s vivid image, kaleidoscopic. With every tick of the clock the pieces of experience come down in new array.

Earlier and without using those names, I criticized communitarianism and holism for dead-ending meaning in cultural-linguistic wholes and their respective practices, but the position does connect us to something: it connects us to communities by recognizing that the meanings that inform our lives are solidly grounded in them. Its shadow side consists in limiting our meanings to the communities that generate them and questioning the possibility of trafficking between them. The providential feature of the human religious heritage is its consistent refusal to stop there—indeed, its refusal to let human connectedness stop anywhere short of Reality itself. That is the final explanation for religion’s power.

One of the most arresting sentences I have come upon in the last two years relates to this. I regret now that I failed to make note of its author, but it reads as follows: “Liberals do not recognize the spiritual wholeness that can come from the sense of certainty.” It has been one of the aims of this paper to argue that on ultimate questions, only metanarratives can provide that certainty, for only they elude the possibility of being relativized by things beyond themselves.

When the sense of certainty does explode within us, the image that comes to my mind is of our newly acquired, state-of-the-art air mattresses. When, with a twist of my wrist, I screw its mouth into the electric pump that comes with it, it inflates with a sonic boom and such force that I have to release some air to make it comfortable to lie on.

That’s pneuma for you.

Notes

1. Walter Capps opens his Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) by saying that “little objective understanding of religion existed before inquirers learned how to make it intelligible” two hundred years ago. I don’t know what to think about that statement. Are things intelligible, and to be understood, only from the outside?


4. From an unpublished public lecture delivered by Henry Stapp, professor of physics, University of California, Berkeley.


