

Oliver Freiberger: *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 240pp.

‘About time.’ This is what I think repeatedly when reading Oliver Freiberger’s new book about the comparative method in religious studies. Of course, as Freiberger underlines, comparison is nothing new in religious studies. It is one of many methods used in it and related fields. However, it is also a useful method in itself. Again, this is not a new idea, but one in need of exploration and development. This has been lacking thus far. Many of us do comparative studies, but we do not always reflect on why and how, and might even find it difficult to make a case for, what we do. We are aware of its issues – the risk of decontextualisation, essentialisation, and universalisation – but not of how to use this awareness to our advantage and get more out of comparison. This is what Freiberger wishes to help the reader with in presenting views on comparison in religious studies and its inherent challenges, and perspectives on comparison in theory and practice.

The postmodern and postcolonial critique of comparison has led to many doubts about it – and rightly so. Looking back at early comparative studies, it is easy to identify the problems with a non-critical approach. Aspects are taken out of context of both time and place, and forced into often largely western understandings and models. Spe-

cifics are ignored or downplayed, resulting in undue exoticisation and simplification. The critique of post-modern and postcolonial thinkers is thus to be taken seriously but can also be an aid. When as a scholar you properly consider the perspective from which you come, the risks and benefits of the methods you use, and the scope and limitations of your knowledge, you can create a solid and worthwhile study. The steps and perspectives Freiberger and the scholars on whom he builds offer can help with this.

A simple but noteworthy point Freiberger raises on several occasions in *Considering Comparison* is that comparison is not merely about similarities but about differences. This might sound obvious, but as Freiberger illustrates in his overview of previous research, scholars have tended to focus on either one or the other, often because of the theoretical perspectives in the field within which they are working. Both a general emphasis on difference and similarities can be problematic. By focusing primarily on difference, one might want to avoid interpreting contexts according to the norms of a different setting; however, one might at the same time risk essentialising the studied setting. In turn, by focusing on similarities, one risks only proving one’s own perspective instead of truly challenging one’s views and learning something new from comparison. Thus, a more balanced method is needed, and Freiberger proposes one such method.

Freiberger is not the first to present a methodology of comparison, as he shows in his study. His point is not that his method is better than others and should replace previous endeavours. Rather, he offers a discussion starter and practical outline on which a researcher can build. He also clearly illustrates how his method relates to previous methods, their similarities, and where he offers somewhat different views. The method he proposes has five stages: selection; description and analysis; juxtaposition; redescription and rectification; and theory formation. Although presented separately, the stages are of course in reality often interlinked and do not always follow a clear linear order. The two last stages especially are not also necessarily of the same concern in all studies. While Freiberger argues for the transparency of the research process, he does not call for an exhaustive description of it. He argues that comparison very much builds on and relates to previous knowledge, and that capturing a thought process exactly is far from always possible or even necessary.

In the final chapter of *Considering Comparison* Freiberger exemplifies his proposed method with a previous study of his own. In this case he calls the specific method discourse comparison, because his concern is to explore and compare discourses about ascetism in two collections of texts. Although this is an illustrative chapter, it is at the same time one of the weaker parts of the book, and it leaves the reader wanting more.

Wanting more is not necessarily a bad thing when one has come to the end of the book, but the chapter does highlight some of the limitations of Freiberger's work. His expertise is in certain historical settings and seems to be related mostly to literary sources. How can his method be adapted to working with different kinds of qualitative and quantitative material? Freiberger does underline that this first order method question – gathering the material as such and all it entails – largely falls outside the study, because so many processes are possible. However, this also means that many questions preoccupying scholars working with transnational studies, for example, and many forms of quantitative and qualitative material are not approached.

Having had the opportunity to be part of a study that has explored the worldviews of young adult university students in thirteen different contexts worldwide (Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective), the challenges of developing and realising a large quantitative and qualitative study and obtaining comparative data is a vivid one for me and my co-researchers. At first glance Freiberger's method seems too general and text-based to be really useful from this perspective. Nevertheless, a conclusion of this kind would miss several of the essential points Freiberger is trying to make. Instead of simply arguing for the need to be careful with comparisons because contexts are so different, it encourages not only an

acknowledgement of the challenges but of what we have done to address them. This pushes us to trust in the benefits of thoughtful comparison, and the opportunity to learn both something about the contexts being compared and about the area of comparison in the process.

Although *Considering Comparison* might not be a method book directly applicable to the whole range of comparative approaches available to the study of religions, it is still an excellent starting point. Critically used, Freiburger's theorising allows us to hone in on challenges and build a case for our approach, clarify the kind of comparisons we are seeking concerning aims, scale and scope, identify the stages and questions that need consideration, and present findings in a manner that can both be illustrative and help us develop new perspectives and insights. With its concise structure and clear and illustrative language, it also works well for researchers at many different stages of their research career. I therefore warmly recommend this study and look forward to the discussions, developments and, not least, comparative studies it will no doubt inspire.

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