

# Of Bogeymen and The Promises of The Past or How to Construct a Uniform Identity

*A Response to Markus Davidsen*

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## **Abstract**

The response to Markus Altena Davidsen's article 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out' analyses the image of anthropology depicted in the article. It delineates the role anthropology plays in formulating Davidsen's vision for a new disciplinary identity and research agenda of a 'science of religion'. The response further questions if reanimating a research program from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is indeed the way forward for the discipline. The last part will discuss different views of comparison and its role in research on religion at large.

**Keywords:** anthropology, the study of religion, comparison, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminist critique, disciplinary identity, diversity, heterogenous discipline

When I was approached to write a response to Markus Davidsen's article, I was asked to particularly write from the perspective of anthropology. At that time, I did not think too much of it as I regard myself as a scholar of religious studies with one foot in anthropology and one foot in sociology. I acquired my academic training in the discipline *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany with minors in anthropology and sociology. In my own research, I work with a combination of these three disciplinary approaches to religion. In Davidsen's article, however, anthropology (together with area studies) is painted as 'the other' of a 'science of religion' proper and anthropology is

identified as the external threat to the future of the discipline. After reading the article, I somehow feel placed in a box in which I would not posit myself, while being asked to speak in the name of anthropology. In general, I have no qualms with wearing the anthropological hat, but it is not the sole label that defines me as a scholar or my work. If I have to position myself, I would describe myself as a scholar in the study of religion who employs anthropological and sociological theories and methods in studying religion under the conditions of modernity and globalization. Since I entered academia, practicing and teaching the study of religion has been my passion and I sympathize with Davidsen's concerns for the future of the discipline even if I do not agree with his solution of the problem. I ask the reader to keep all this in mind when reading my response to his article.

In my reply, I will first address the image of anthropology depicted in the article. Second, I will discuss if reanimating a research program from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is indeed the way forward for the discipline, and in the last part, I will address the issue of comparison and disciplinary identity.

### **Anthropology in its 'postmodern theory-hostile incarnations' will 'quagmire' an analytically driven study of religion aimed a theory formation<sup>1</sup>**

What reads like a populist headline prophesizing the extinction of the study of religion is actually the author's generalized depiction of anthropology. It is not only a grotesquely distorted image of the actual academic practice of anthropology, but simply seems to serve as the stereotypical bogeyman to strengthen Davidsen's own argument. All we learn about anthropology (which is usually mentioned together with area studies) are two things: first, it is particularistic, and second, under the influence of 'postmodernist, postcolonialist, and feminist critiques', anthropology has turned its back on a 'comparative, theoretical, and systematic study of religion'.<sup>2</sup> What is entirely missing in the article is an actual engagement with anthropological works, their arguments, and theories. In the absence of these, we should ask why is anthropology

1 The actual quote on page xxx reads as follows: 'We need to act quickly, however, before we find ourselves again in a situation where a stronger discipline (area studies and anthropology, in their postmodern theory-hostile incarnations) will be able to quagmire us.'

2 M. Davidsen, 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out', 238.

mentioned at all? For the most part, Davidsen would accomplish what he sets out to do without bashing anthropology. He presents a valid discussion of Van Baaren's research program, an analysis of the factors that prevented the realization of such a program in the Netherlands, a comparison with other Nordic countries, and finally a plea and program for renewed efforts to establish a 'science of religion' inspired by Van Baaren in order to strengthen the institutional and academic relevance of the study of religion in the Netherlands. By singling out anthropology, Davidsen invests in 'the drawing of an antagonistic frontier' that helps to constitute the unity of his envisioned discipline 'the science of religion' *vis-à-vis* its imagined other, i.e. anthropology.<sup>3</sup> He calls us to 'regroup and consolidate ourselves as scholars of religion with a shared disciplinary identity and a shared research agenda', while articulating what is excluded from that very identity: 'Today's threat comes from area studies and anthropology where postmodernist, postcolonialist, and feminist critiques have spawned an opposition towards the comparative, theoretical, and systematic study of religion.'<sup>4</sup> Here, anthropology is not something to be engaged with content-wise and constructively; the mentioning of anthropology solely serves the purpose of constructing an institutionalized other in order to create disciplinary identity and cohesion.

Neither do I recognize myself nor the works of colleagues in what is here depicted as anthropology. I do wonder how the author can be so blindingly unaware of the comparative and systematic work done in the anthropology of religion that contributes significantly to our academic discourse on religion at large. I advise my students engaged in qualitative research (i.e. fieldwork and interviews) that it will not suffice to describe and analyze their particular case study, but that they have to put their findings into a dialogue with other studies on the same or similar issues and that their particular work must connect and contribute to thematic and theoretical debates in the study of religion. While anthropological works focus on particular cases and attempt to understand the dynamics and structures of specific groups or populations, they use their data and analyses to contribute to broader debates in the field. Many classical anthropological works on religion have used their particular data to formulate general theories. Although grand sweeping theories have fallen out of favor for good

3 E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005, 78.

4 Davidsen, 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited', 238.

reasons and the writing culture debate opened the discipline for post-structural, postcolonial, and feminist influences, anthropological work is still heavily engaged in conceptual work and theorizing. How would we otherwise classify the works of anthropologists like André Droogers on syncretism, ritual, and ‘methodological ludism’ or Birgit Meyer’s contributions on ‘religion as a practice of mediation’ and conceptual frameworks for the study of religion such as ‘sensational forms’ and ‘aesthetic formations’?<sup>5</sup> What about Thomas Tweed’s proposal for a theory of religion, which is heavily informed by his anthropological research among Cuban migrants at the shrine of Our Lady in the Exile in Miami?<sup>6</sup> What about Saba Mahmood’s intervention in feminist approaches to concepts such as agency, gender, and embodiment and how these are applied in research on religion?<sup>7</sup> Droogers, Meyer, and Tweed directly engage with central concepts and metalinguistic categories of our classical religious studies vocabulary, while Mahmood does this for theoretical concepts, which – I would argue – are as central to our analysis and theorizing about religion as are the categories suggested by Davidsen (i.e. religious ritual, religious experience, religious institution).

Davidsen’s emphasis on comparison as the central method and identity defining element of a ‘science of religion’ tallies well (probably unknowingly) with anthropological approaches. Several scholars have pointed out that religious studies shares the comparative framework with other disciplines, among them anthropology.<sup>8</sup> But I detect a crucial difference between Davidsen’s ideal outcome of comparative work, i.e. generalizations about the category religion or related subcategories, and what anthropologists like Peter van der Veer see as the purpose of comparison, which is decidedly not aiming at generalizations:

5 A. F. Droogers, *Play and Power in Religion: Collected Essays*, Berlin 2012; B. Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York 2010; B. Meyer, ‘Picturing the Invisible – Visual Culture and the Study of Religion’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015), 333-360.

6 T. A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge 2008.

7 S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject*, Princeton 2005.

8 O. Freiburger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, New York 2019, 24; M. Schnegg, ‘Anthropology and Comparison: Methodological Challenges and Tentative Solutions’, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 139 (2014), 55-72; P. van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, Durham 2016.

What has to be curbed is the quite understandable desire to say something general about, say, religion as a universal entity (as a 'cultural system') or about a particular society's religion in general (as in 'The religion of Java') or about the general and thus comparable features of a world religion's manifestations in different societies ('Islam observed'). The move from fragment to a larger insight is a conceptual and theoretical one and not a form of generalization. It does not come from mere observation, but is theory-laden.<sup>9</sup>

For Van der Veer, comparison is not about creating general models, nor about taking some universalistic point of view from which a predefined essentialist entity ('ritual' or 'religious experience') is studied and compared cross-culturally.<sup>10</sup> While Van der Veer thinks about comparative practice as bottom up, from the particular case to the larger picture, Davidsen conceptualizes comparison top down, starting from predefined categories applied cross-culturally or transhistorically to material out there. In contrast to such a positivist approach, Van der Veer sees one of the tasks of comparative work to critically interrogate our conceived categories, which emerged as products of the Western historical experience. Michael Bergunder is another scholar who takes insights from postcolonial and poststructuralist theories to rethink and methodologically revise comparison for the study of religion.<sup>11</sup>

I have a hard time to recognize the supposedly theory-hostile stance in the anthropology of religion that comes with the influence of postcolonial, poststructuralist, and feminist critiques. On the contrary, these theoretical influences brought forth new fruitful attempts in revising existing conceptual tools and theories and in developing new approaches. The few anthropologists mentioned here are no exceptions to the rule, but representative of how the anthropology of religion constantly contributes to our academic discourse and knowledge production on religion in its broadest sense. Could it be the case that Davidsen characterizing anthropology as 'theory-hostile' simply translates into 'not my kind of theory' because it does not aim at generalizations or universalisms?

9 P. van der Veer, 'The Value of Comparison: Transcript of the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture given on November 13, 2013', *Hau – Morgan Lecture Initiatives* (2014), 2-3, [http://www.hau-journal.org/vanderVeer\\_TheValueOfComparison\\_LHML\\_Transcript.pdf](http://www.hau-journal.org/vanderVeer_TheValueOfComparison_LHML_Transcript.pdf).

10 Van der Veer, 'Value of Comparison', 2; P. van der Veer, 'Resisting General Models', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (2017), 533-536.

11 M. Bergunder, 'Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion', in P. Schmidt-Leukel, A. Nehring (ed.), *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, London 2016; 34-52.

## Is looking backwards the only way forward?

Davidson suggests a particular approach to the study of religion as basis for a shared disciplinary identity, in which I detect strong essentialist and positivist tendencies that smack of a research program from the 1950/60s and it does so because it is heavily indebted to Theo van Baaren. In Davidson's refashioning of Van Baaren's ideas as basis for a shared research agenda and disciplinary identity for the study of religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we first would ideally 're-establish the clear focus on religion' and all agree on one, preferably substantive definition of our subject matter 'religion'.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, we would make comparison our main method to detect general patterns and produce knowledge about the genus 'religion' and related subcategories (e.g. religious ritual, religious experience, religious institutions) as basis for a general history and theory of religion.<sup>13</sup> Davidson's suggestions sound like the only way to move forward is to orient ourselves backwards and remodel our discipline, our self-understanding, and our approaches along the lines of a research program that might have sounded promising in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but is rather questionable for the future given the theoretical and methodological developments since then.<sup>14</sup> This backward orientation seems to be particularly attractive to Davidson because it would bring us back to a moment in time before our theories and methods were challenged and complicated by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist interventions; a time when our subject matter was simply a given and not yet thoroughly deconstructed.

I wonder what precisely is meant when Davidson demands that we 're-establish the clear focus on *religion*'? Does it mean that we do not investigate 'the secular' and how our notions of 'the secular' are entangled with the history and discourse of the category religion? Does it mean that we do not invest time and resources into research on so called 'nones', 'new atheists' or people leaving religious institutions because we cannot learn anything useful about the general subcategories of 'religious ritual' or 'religious experiences' from people not anymore invested in what one could call 'religion proper'? Or does it mean that we should not spend any more energy in critically interrogating our own categories, conceptual tools, and

12 Davidson, 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited', 234.

13 Davidson, 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited', 218, 225, 235-236.

14 A. Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien*, Velbrück 2000, provides an overview of theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

theories because these are not themselves religious, but merely means to analyze and theorize ‘religion’?

While I have no problem with a scholar using a substantive definition of religion suitable for a particular study and research question, I do not see the need for all of us adopting one and the same definition neither for our research nor for our disciplinary identity. If we would do so, we would assume that this is what ‘religion really is’, something out there, a “natural” (“material”) non-discursive reference’ that is independent of time and locality and simultaneously self-identical through history and across cultures.<sup>15</sup> While I do not think of religion in such essentialist terms, I also do not perceive religion to be solely the product of the scholarly mind. There is a third position that takes the emergence of the category religion (and related categories such as ritual, myth, etc.) in a particular historical context (i.e. Western/European) into account. Once it emerged, the notion was abstracted and universalized into this general category ‘religion’. Subsequently, it left the realms of scholarly discourses, circulated globally (on the pathways of colonialism and Western hegemony in academic discourse), entered the repertoire of common knowledge, and became part of religious identity formations.<sup>16</sup> The notion of religion and related practices and materialities are constantly negotiated, appropriated, and reshaped. Religion is not an essentialist category, but a relational phenomenon, which makes it rather unproductive to state anything general about the genus ‘religion’, because the term does not refer to a stable referent, but to contingent and changing formations. That leaves us with the question what then can we actually compare?

### **A case of ‘illuminative comparison’<sup>17</sup>**

Comparison has often been identified as the central method in the study of religion and there is a long-standing debate about how to theoretically and methodologically conceive of comparison. Oliver Freiberger describes comparison as a ‘basic and fundamental academic activity’; Michael Stausberg writes that ‘comparison is part of the working routine of most

15 Bergunder, ‘Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity’, 43.

16 E. Berg-Chan, K. Rakow, ‘Religious Studies: Revealing a Cosmos Not Known Before?’, *Transcultural Studies* (2016), 180-203; Bergunder, ‘Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity’, 42.

17 O. Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, New York 2019, 36; Davidsen, ‘Theo van Baaren’s Systematic Science of Religion Revisited’, 235.

methods'.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, we all are already comparatists. For Davidsen, that is not sufficient because such comparison lacks the systematic rigor needed to contribute to and expand our knowledge of the genus 'religion' and its related subcategories. How I employ comparison and how Davidsen envisions comparison in the systematic science of religion differ significantly. The following example from my own research will help to illuminate the difference.

While studying contemporary Buddhist discourses and practices in Western societies, I often encountered the notion that Buddhist teachings and meditation techniques show an inherent psychological quality that made them particularly prone to deal with questions of the human mind. I encountered these notions in the field among my interlocutors, in contemporary Buddhist literature, and in academic studies. This particular quality was often described as an essential feature of Buddhism through space and time. In order to make sense of that claim, I started to read more broadly about the relation between Buddhism, religion, psychology, modern conceptions of the self, and therapy in 19/20<sup>th</sup> century Western societies. The result was, that teachings and practices promoted by Buddhist experts in the 20/21<sup>st</sup> century showed indeed a strong resonance with contemporary psychological notions and therapeutic discourses, which is different from stating that Buddhism *per se* exhibits such traits. During my postdoctoral research among Evangelical Christians in the US, I observed similar discourses about the self and religio-therapeutic practices albeit in an entirely different religious field. The observed similarities between Buddhism and Evangelical Christianity in America do not tell us much about the genus 'religion'. What it shows us instead is that contemporary Western Buddhists and Evangelicals inhabit the same social and material world, a world that structures and simultaneously is structured by hegemonic knowledge regimes and practices of contemporary Western liberal societies, such as consumer capitalism, the regime of the self, and therapeutic culture. Several sociologists have argued that the modern discourse of the self naturalizes the idea of an autonomous self and nourishes the need for self-development and self-fulfillment supported by the therapeutic ethos of contemporary consumer societies.<sup>19</sup>

18 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 20; M. Stausberg, 'Comparison', in M. Stausberg, S. Engler (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, Florence 2011, 34.

19 Cf. A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge 1991; N. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, London 1991; N. Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, Cambridge 1996; E. Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, Berkeley 2008.



Assumptions about the modern self and personhood function thus as interfaces to the contemporary discourse on religion and spirituality in a market where the naturalized need for self-development and self-transformation becomes commodified. Such therapeutic ‘technologies of the self’ are provided by secular counselors, New Age spiritualities, Buddhist experts, and Christian pastors alike. The proliferation and popularity of such offers indicates that these are diversified answers to the naturalized and marketed need for self-development in contemporary societies.<sup>20</sup>

That particular comparison grew out of my fieldwork and research data obtained in two different religious fields that share the same geographical, cultural, and historical context. The comparative perspective offered two important insights for the research field of Buddhism in particular and for religion in contemporary societies more generally. First, it prevented me from subscribing to the popular notion that Buddhism naturally resonated with modern psychological theories and conceptions of the mind because it is essentially a religious theory of the mind. Rather, this particular reading of Buddhism is the product of a specific history, shaped by Buddhist and Western actors in a complex process and has to be understood as a discursive effect of ‘Buddhist Modernism’ and not as an essential trait of Buddhist traditions.<sup>21</sup> The existence of similar psychologized ideas and practices in other contemporary religious fields made such essentialist notions untenable. Second, my findings were not pointing towards a general capacity of the genus ‘religion’ to exhibit therapeutic effects for religious adherents. The comparative angle prompted me to make sense of my findings not by explaining it as a particular feature of religion, but as religious practices and discourses shaped by larger socio-cultural processes that effect religious and secular practices alike. I had to bring my ethnographic data into conversation with historical studies and social theories in order to say something more general although not about the genus religion, but about religious formations in contemporary Western societies under the conditions of modernity and globalization.

20 K. Rakow, ‘Therapeutic Culture and Religion in America’, *Religion Compass* 7 (2013), 485-497; K. Rakow, *Transformationen des Tibetischen Buddhismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Critical Studies in Religion/ Religionswissenschaft 6), Göttingen 2014, 90-98; K. Rakow, ‘Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen’s “Message of Hope”’, in J. Stievermann, P. Goff, D. Junker (ed.), *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, Oxford 2015, 213-239.

21 D. L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford 2008.

## Conclusion: The study of religion as a heterogeneous discipline

It is more than evident that we approach the task and aim of comparison in different ways and that should not surprise us because the study of religion is 'polytheoretical' as well as 'polymethodical'.<sup>22</sup> In a different article, Esther Berg-Chan and I have described religious studies as 'a heterogeneous discipline', which has diversified significantly over the last decades.<sup>23</sup> While I sympathize with Davidsen's concern for the future of our discipline, his suggestion of one narrowly defined program and a singular approach for all of us working under the umbrella of the study of religion seems counterintuitive and backward-oriented. It is an attempt to reduce diversity and complexity; an attempt to erect new boundaries and an unnecessarily narrow but normative understanding of disciplinary belonging and exclusion while singling out anthropology (and area studies) as 'the other' and the enemy that needs to be warded off. We are all threatened by budget cuts and restructuring measures and I fail to see how it helps to pit one discipline against another, to play off one approach against other approaches. Instead of making us all uniform while singling out a supposedly common enemy ('postmodern theory-hostile anthropology'), I suggest that we embrace the diversity of methods, theories, and research contributions of all our colleagues working on religion and religion-related matters in the broadest sense as all of these help to enrich our understanding and scholarly discourse on religion at large.

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<sup>22</sup> Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Berg-Chan, Rakow, 'Religious Studies', 181.