

AFTERWORD

Comparison in the Anthropological Study of Plural Religious Environments

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Abstract: Highlighting common threads in the pieces by Beekers, Kasmani and Mattes, and Dilger, this concluding essay reflects on the potential of comparison as conceptual innovation in the anthropological study of religious plurality. Asking how to develop innovative practices of comparison for the sake of grasping the dynamics of plural societies in the light of the articles in this collection, I argue that it is necessary to transcend the bifurcation of the study of religions, which was accentuated with the rise of the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, in favor of a focus on the secular configuration as a whole, paying attention to power dynamics that assign different spaces for action to different religions (notwithstanding their equality in legal terms). The point of comparison, understood as a critical project geared toward conceptual innovation, is not only to discern so far overlooked, unexpected differences and similarities, but also to understand how these differences and similarities, as well as the possibility to compare as such, are outcomes of long-standing entanglements.

Keywords: anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, conceptual innovation, religious plurality, secular configurations

Daan Beekers's plea for a comparative anthropology of Muslims and Christians occurs against the horizon of a current reappraisal of comparison, most recently articulated with vigor by Peter van der Veer (2016) in *The Value of Comparison* and debated in a special review section of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (Meyer et al. 2017). The fact that there are good reasons to be suspicious of certain modes of doing comparison—for instance, those grounded in Eurocentric evolutionary models geared toward generalization—does not imply that the use of comparison as a method for knowledge production should be discarded



in favor of a focus on particularities. What makes anthropology exciting as a discipline is its capacity to move deep into other phenomenological worlds of thought and lived experience *and* to make informed comparisons, be it through critical translations between such worlds and scholarly vocabularies, or through systematic assessments of differences and specificities with regard to certain categories or groups. This is a question of finding a balance between ‘going deep’ and ‘looking across’, not an either-or choice.

Beekers’s call to develop a comparative analytical framework for studying Muslims and Christians together is motivated by an important epistemological concern. Due to the lack of a comparative mindset in scholarly qualitative work on religion in contemporary Western societies, these groups have usually been kept separate in research, for instance, by framing the former as migrants and the latter as (ethnically) Dutch people who have not (yet?) succumbed to de-churching and secularization. In so doing, scholarly research tends to echo a problematic distinction made over and over in public debates, rather than opening up possibilities to spotlight common grounds. Similarly, my own interest in thinking about Muslims and Christians comparatively is grounded in an increasing unease with my own and other researchers’ strong focus on the rise of Pentecostalism in Ghana and across Africa. Such a focus makes scholars overlook how its manifestation is inflected by the presence of other groups in a wider religious environment, in which new crosscutting formats for doing religion arise and possibilities for religious expression and tolerance are negotiated with state officials and policy makers. To capture these dynamics, as Marloes Janson and I argued in a recent special section of *Africa* (Janson and Meyer 2016), there is the need to transcend the bifurcation of the study of religion in Africa into separate fields of scholarship focusing on Islam and Christianity, respectively. Achieving this goal requires thinking about and conducting comparison.

While scholars of religion are well equipped to gain insights into particular religious groups and movements, it is more difficult and less common to study the dynamics of plural configurations from a wider angle and in a relational perspective. How can innovative practices of comparison be developed for the sake of grasping these dynamics? Pondering the articles in this special section, I would like to raise three points.

Beyond the Anthropologies of Islam and Christianity

Beekers criticizes the anthropology of religion for its lack of comparative work across religious traditions, especially with regard to Islam and Christianity. This lack is partly due to the tremendous energy put into the development of the anthropology of Islam and its twin sister, the anthropology of Christianity,

over the last 15 to 20 years. Calling attention to theology, ethics, and piety, these anthropologies have fleshed out the need to ‘take religion seriously’ and thus not to reduce religious ideas, practices, and materials to instrumental ends.¹ Importantly, the scholars deploying these twin anthropologies exposed the secular lens that is usually taken as the natural vantage point for the study of Islam and Christianity. In so doing, they could point out how this lens yields misrepresentations of Islam and spotlight unacknowledged convergences between modern (Protestant) Christianity and secular culture. By the same token, the commitment to these anthropologies affirmed participation in distinct scholarly communities focusing on either Christianity or Islam and at most conducting comparison within the scope of one of these traditions, rather than across. Research on co-existence and religious plurality, however, cannot thrive under the predominance of conceptual approaches that are primarily concerned to do justice to Islam and Christianity from within.

And yet, while I agree with Beekers’s critique, I would like to stress that the anthropology of Islam, as developed by Talal Asad, Charles Hirschkind, and Saba Mahmood, certainly offers incentives for moving toward comparison. Its critique of the modernist framework to which a supposedly neutral approach to religion is indebted made (especially Western) scholars of religion aware of the taken-for-granted secular frame that shapes how they conceptualize and study religion. This secular frame is indebted to a post-Enlightenment Protestant take on religion in terms of private belief, which informs policies in the regulation of religion, public debates, and scholarship. Unmasking how the establishment and use of the modern category of the secular implied a particular mode of conceptualizing and dealing with religion that failed to address Islam—and by implication other non-Western religious traditions—in its own right as a living tradition, these scholars formulated an innovative and powerful conceptual critique of secularity in general, and the modern category of religion in particular. This line has been developed further in the strand of the anthropology of the secular developed at the flip side of the anthropology of Islam, which explores tensions and clashes between pious Muslims and secularists in Europe.²

While in my view it is time to transcend the research agendas formulated within the anthropologies of Christianity and Islam, I regard the anthropology of the secular that arose from the anthropology of Islam as an excellent starting point for a comparative study of the co-existence of Muslims, Christians, and other religious practitioners. This was also pointed out by the late, much-missed Saba Mahmood (2015) in her last book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, which investigates shifting modalities of co-existence of Copts, Bahai, and Muslims from the diversity regimes in the Ottoman Empire to present-day, constitutionally secular Egypt. Her book offers a stimulating example of how to trace the ways in which Islam and other religious traditions are regulated in modern societies and framed in scholarship against the backdrop

of the secular liberal thought traditions that inform policy, public debates, and knowledge production.

Comparison in Secular Configurations

The modes in which states define, relate to, and regulate the manifestation of religion differ (see also Giumbelli 2013), depending on historically situated ways of accommodating religion and on specific majority-minority relations between different religious groups. Beekers as well as Omar Kasmani and Dominik Mattes work in Northern European societies that undergo marked processes of de-churching and the decline of mainstream Christianity. The accommodation of religious newcomers, such as Muslim and Christian (post-)migrants, occurs within specific historical arrangements between Christian churches and the state that inform policies as well as public opinion about, for instance, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion. I very much welcome the initiative to establish comparability between the respective groups studied by Beekers and by Kasmani and Mattes. This makes it possible to spotlight similarities that would remain invisible if one were to insist on their singularity and specificities. And yet, the focus on surprising similarities should not blind us to the fact that these groups inhabit specific and unequal positions in the wider secular configurations of the Netherlands and Germany. The leveling of differences that occurs through this kind of comparison should not be mistaken for their (non-existent) equality in society. For comparison to unfold its critical potential, it must occur against the horizon of the specific and unequal positions of these groups in the plural religious environments in the Netherlands and Germany.

The role of the state in accommodating and regulating religion and ordering a plural religious field is explicitly addressed by Hansjörg Dilger, whose research on Muslim-Christian co-existence in Tanzania shows that religious multiplicity has become subject to state governance that has strong repercussions in the educational domain. The state paradoxically adopts a stance of ‘strict neutrality’ and ‘non-interference’ as a way of ordering religious affairs, while de facto consolidating long-standing, path-dependent inequalities between Muslims and Christians. Dilgers’s contribution also alerts us to the fact that it is high time to deconstruct the still resilient idea of Africa as intrinsically religious and never secular. Not only in Tanzania, but across Africa, politicians, citizens, and religious practitioners address religious co-existence by recurring to the secular constitutions that were inaugurated with the turns toward democracy and structural adjustment in the 1990s. This implies the introduction of an ideal-type modern notion of religion as a homogenizing category. Notwithstanding the fact that it sets off processes of religionization (especially with regard to so-called African traditional religion), the introduction of the category of religion

does not yield an equal-level playing field for all religious actors. What emerges is a highly differentiated religious environment that forms a breeding ground for tensions and conflicts.

Significant differences exist not only between religious environments within Africa and within Europe, but also between these regions. In Europe, with its increasing cultural and religious diversity, religious environments have become more plural and globalized, while modern ways of regulating religion in secular configurations have been introduced to Africa since the 1990s, in the wake of opening up to neo-liberal capitalism. How does the comparison of Muslims and Christians within one analytical frame address the different positionalities of various religious actors in such environments? How does one prevent a slippage from the laudable striving for one analytical frame into an assumption that Muslims and Christians, natives and (post-)migrants, would occupy equal positions in the multi-religious settings whose dynamics are to be unpacked through comparison? When engaging in comparison, the differences between the groups compared, which are due at least in part to stances of the state toward religion and its regulation, have to be acknowledged and addressed.

Comparison as Conceptual Innovation

Of course, the point of these articles is not a return to an old-style comparative religious studies that reified religious traditions as separate world religions. Nor do they undertake a by now more common comparative study of actual inter-religious encounters. Their concern is the conceptual issue of overcoming the “boundaries between the study of separate religions” (Beekers, introduction). This applies to boundaries between ‘religions’ construed by scholars through the ways in which they conceptualize and organize their research. The guiding idea, which I endorse, is that understanding religious plurality and the co-existence of Muslims and Christians in the same spaces requires an encompassing analytical framework that is able to highlight, on the basis of significant mediating categories, actual unexpected similarities and differences between them. Importantly, Beekers found similarities in the ways in which pious Muslims and Christians negotiate consumer capitalism, while Kasmani and Mattes noticed similar affective phenomena that would not have come into the picture if each of them had stayed in either the anthropology of Islam or of Christianity. In the research of Beekers and of Kasmani and Mattes, their respective interlocutors did not know each other; and while Beekers worked with young Muslims and Christians, Kasmani focused on an Islamic Sufi group and Mattes on a Pentecostal group. Comparing via mediating categories, such as affect and sensation (Kasmani and Mattes) and commitment (Beekers), they are interested in detecting an “analytic relationality” (Kasmani and Mattes, this

issue) in the ways in which their interlocutors respond to shared social conditions. Both of these small case studies offer intriguing glimpses of the ways in which believing Muslims and Christians experience the high capitalist worlds of Berlin and Rotterdam as sinful and potentially disruptive of their faith. While Kasmani and Mattes concentrate on the affective character of prayer meetings among Sufis and Pentecostals, Beekers shows how the engagement with secular consumer culture threatens *and* affirms their religious commitments. In my view, these articles offer exemplary models for a comparative approach toward Muslims and Christians in one frame.

Outlook

Over the past years I have become increasingly aware of the need to understand the dynamics of plural religious environments. To achieve this, comparison, understood as a critical conceptual project intended to spotlight overlooked similarities and differences, is necessary. The articles in this special section indicate productive directions for deploying comparison. They also make me ponder the limits of comparison, which by definition conceptualizes distinct entities, in the study of plural religious environments. As pointed out, it would be wrong to conceptualize these environments as hosting a number of distinct yet more or less equal religious groups. With regard to multi-religious settings, the comparison of entities construed for the sake of comparison must necessarily remain provisional and open, being alert to the relational dynamics through which Muslims and Christians and other religious and secular groups are situated.

The point is to explore the complex dynamics in which religious groups are asserting difference from and becoming similar to each other. The emphasis on the boundaries through which religious groups maintain their distinct identities may best be analyzed from a relational perspective that takes such bounded identities not as a natural starting point, but as a product of connections and entanglements that emerge from the dynamics of the whole configuration (Spies 2019). So the point of comparison is not only to discern unexpected differences and similarities that have so far been overlooked, but also to grasp the entanglements through which these differences and similarities—and thus the very possibility to compare—emerge.

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Notes

1. Somewhat paradoxically, in my own work on Christianity in Ghana, I felt a stronger affinity with the anthropology of Islam. I was particularly inspired by its focus on the body and materiality when exploring Islam as a living tradition in its own right that does not comply with an idea of religion as primarily an issue of inward, private belief. This prompted me to rethink, via a detour through the study of Islam, the proverbial ‘Protestant bias’ that also haunted my own research.
2. The anthropology of the secular contains several strands of theorizing religion, including also the anthropology of Christianity. Important for my point here is that the anthropology of Islam, in spotlighting clashes and tensions between Muslim piety and secular notions of religion in terms of private belief, developed a potentially comparative frame between Islamic religiosity and secular-ity. I take the anthropology of the secular as the ‘outside’ of the anthropology of Islam, where the potential collision of Islam as a living tradition with secular modernity—and hence the inadequacy of a modern conceptualization of religion—comes into the picture. Spotting such collisions is de facto a comparative enterprise.

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