Special Issue Article

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The comparative anthropology of religion, or the anthropology of religion compared: a critical comment

In this commentary, I argue that we need to expose the multiple layers of historical thinking about the production of the category of religion that play into both our scholarly thinking and the way religion is lived, understood and fought for in the lives of our informants. We can no more take the contours (or limits) of any particular religion for granted, or as self-evident, than we can take the category of religion, named as such, as a natural human phenomenon that is somehow free from the domain of culture.

Key words anthropology of religion, comparative anthropology, world religion, comparison, particularity

The history of comparative religion has traversed the disciplines of philology, history of religions and anthropology in a long and sometimes heralded intellectual tradition. In recent decades, anthropology has approached the methods of comparison tentatively, opting instead to let cases speak for themselves, without tackling the issue of comparativism directly, although it is always lurking in the background. To avoid the problem of comparison, and also to honour anthropology's insistence on emphasising the diversity found in multiple specific case studies, the anthropology of religion has in recent years taken the form of the anthropology of different, and distinct, religions. Rather than comparing religions, our field has begun to explore the various forms of each particular religion, and, specifically, those known as 'world religions'. But an ironic side effect of a refusal to compare explicitly has been a reification of the categories that both transcend and constitute the terms of comparison, namely the so-called world religions themselves.

Take, for example, the emerging Anthropology of Buddhism (e.g. Sihlé and Ladwig 2017), which, within a single journal issue, explores manifestations of Buddhism in Tibet, Buddhism in Myanmar and Buddhism in Thailand. Or take the more established Anthropology of Christianity, which, in Cannell's well-known volume (2006), considers Christianity in its various manifestations across the world, including in Bolivia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Melanesia, Peru and Sweden. We know the variability of culture well enough to know that a particular religion will look different in each of its contexts. And with our historical disciplinary emphasis on the cataloguing of human experience and identities, we know there is value in demonstrating, under the single rubric of the anthropology of religion – or the anthropology of a particular religion, in these cases – a sense of the range of practice and meaning that in fact belong

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to, or emerge from, something that *seems* like a singular category, like Buddhism or Christianity. Like physicists refracting the different bands of colour contained in a single stream of white light, we attempt to expose difference within what might appear at first glance a unitary identity. This is what contemporary anthropology is good for: the insistence on diversity, multiplicity, contestation and difference within a particular heuristic framework.

But what are the side effects of perpetuating a heuristic framework that underscores the world religions as the primary entry points for our study of religion in general? The aim of this paper is not to revisit the definition of religion – that discussion is more than 100 years old and is tired – but to interrogate the anthropological interest in furthering the particular categories these world religions constitute through expanding our attention to the anthropology of each. We seem to be using the categories of specific world religions as concrete, if multiple, ontologies – real ones, grounded in space, to be sure, but also somehow transcending historical time. Our response to the reality of religious multiplicity, both within and across religious categories – each of which we know to be dynamic – is to detail their contemporary manifestations in multiple locations. In this construction, we may reflect on religions as historically produced, and reproduced, phenomena, or sets of practices, but we rarely emphasise how they are also historically constructed categories with lives of their own – which our own academic work sometimes fuels. In short, we are in danger of using the heuristic categories as always and in every case real, or as having ontological (if not necessarily doctrinal) truth.

The intellectual costs of this slippage are high; as things stand, our use of these categories too easily forgets that they are historical productions, and that they remain, in some contexts, precisely heuristic. In others, of course, they are not, such as when the contours of a particular religion constitute the terms of deeply felt, sometimes violent, encounters or assertions of identity in the modern world. Something can be real, and experienced, and meaningful – while still being constructed, and reconstructed, and without ontological essence: arguably all human categories are. So, as a scholarly anthropological practice, describing and even comparing religious lives within (and across) the heuristic categories of the world religions can be productive. But where, in our anthropologies of these separate religions, is the demonstration of the construction of the categories themselves?

The difference between these two approaches is subtle, but at base they differ considerably, and they do not always combine well. In the model of the former, our task is simply to show what a range of practice, across location, may look like, while in the latter we focus on assessing the contemporary and historical constructions of a particular category of religion, on the part of both practitioners and scholars. Unqualified, the former can have regressive effects on the latter, and on our understanding of the variable constructions that are human religions. Our field needs to expose the multiple layers of historical thinking about the production of the category of religion, and those of particular religions, that play into both scholarly thinking and the way religion is lived, understood and fought for in the lives of our informants. We can no more take the contours or limits of any particular religion for granted, or as self-evident, than we can take the category of religion, named as such, as a natural human phenomenon that is somehow separate from the domain of culture. Let us ensure that our resistance to comparison does not translate into an unquestioning acceptance of the world's dominant categories, even as we describe them in multiple, diverse settings.

The anthropology of religion becomes the anthropology of a particular religion

Our particular strand of anthropology – showing how multiple kinds of experiences happen under the rubric of a singular religion – has been a practice in spirit at least since Clifford Geertz's *Islam observed: religious development in Morocco and Indonesia*, with his telling of how Islam looks and feels different depending on context (1968). Geertz compares the Islam of Southeast Asian Indonesia with that of North African Morocco, demonstrating eloquently that there is no such thing as an ahistorical Islam, and illuminating for his interpreters how Islam develops – 'progresses', 'evolves', 'moves', depending on which historical or theoretical paradigm we might use to describe these processual internal changes – differently in diverse contexts. Geertz did not call his work the 'Anthropology of Islam', however, and he might well have shuddered at the thought. For all his Weberian ways, Geertz tended to resist comparativism in its cruder guises, believing that understanding culture, and religion, needed to happen at the local level. Understanding humanity through patterns of cognition and symbolic meaning that played themselves out in specific contexts was the Geertzian generality; understanding Islam as a 'supposedly single creed' (1968: v) that needed to be explored – and unpacked, and thus differentiated – through multiple contextual frames was his pioneering innovation. But the point for Geertz was that the generalised category of Islam-as-such was meaningless once we have on-the-ground data about its contingent emergence through historical exigency.

The explicit 'Anthropology of Islam' makes its way into the bibliographic record two decades later, with Talal Asad (never the greatest fan of Geertz, and in this context critiquing also Ernest Gellner and Michael Gilsenan) suggesting that *The idea of an anthropology of Islam* could 'begin, as Muslims do' with attention to the 'founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith' (1986: 14), but that it should not stop there. Asad argues that Islam in its multiplicity can be studied by anthropologists as a 'discursive tradition' (1986: 14), through which we explore how these texts and the cultural worlds that grow out of their interpretative histories produce Muslim selves. In so doing, he wishes to preserve as distinct the religious aspect of cultural life, resisting the Geertzian anthropological inclination to see the entirety of a cultural formation as religious, but he also wishes to ensure that we do not conflate religion with text: 'not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition' (1986: 14).[1] Religion is synonymous with neither culture nor doctrine in this rendering, (and anthropologists would do well to keep their analyses distinct and their categories clear). In this way, Asad both asserts the category of Islam and allows for a potentially unlimited multiplicity of practices and interpretations within it.

In the last decade, multiple compendiums detailing the 'Anthropology of Islam' have been published, including an array of case studies (Marranci 2008; Bowen 2012; Kreinath 2012); each volume claims to be a register or collection of more contexts, more cases, more variation. Somehow, the suggestion goes, if we collect and document

[1] It is in large part Asad's own work that inspired the field of anthropology of religion to question the very construction of the category of religion itself (1993). In this earlier piece (1986), he charts a road between accepting religious life as an object of study, allowing for multiple representations - he advocates for 'an' anthropology of Islam, not 'the' anthropology of Islam - and appreciating how contingent any category of identity inevitably is.

enough dimensions of Islam as it is practised in different contexts in the modern world, we will be able to amass sufficient information so as to understand Islam, if not in its entirety or wholeness, at least in its diversity. Islam may not be describable as a totality, but by collecting in a series of volumes the ways it is practised and experienced as a 'discursive tradition', we can both grasp a sense of its range and approach the asymptotic axis of understanding that tradition as a whole.

These volumes reflect the current state of the field. Anthropologists know that identity is contingent, and religious identity is no different: the Anthropology of Christianity, the Anthropology of Buddhism and the Anthropology of Islam precisely try to fill the nuances of human knowledge, practice and experience into the otherwise still-empty categories of a singular religion, like the data cells in a survey not yet completed. Rightly, in these analyses, we take our informants' and interlocutors' self-identification as members of a particular religion at face value, and we elaborate the specifics of meaning in each of the contexts we select, placing them alongside other case studies precisely so as to flesh out the breadth and the range of religious life: it can mean many things to be Christian, to be Muslim, to be Buddhist, and, by comparing different contexts, we can start to see if and where there might be overlapping areas of experience or meaning within the categories; what, if anything, remains constant; and where and for what reasons contextual difference emerges. This is a noble enterprise, embracing both the inevitability of difference and the comparative project with cognisance and awareness.

So the anthropology of a particular world religion is quite a different project from the comparative history of religions, or the field that Eliade made famous, in which he sought a common religious project for the peoples of the world (1961). Eliade was convinced that all religions, past and present, spoke to the same human craving for meaning, and emerged from the same impulse to find and know something he called the 'sacred' (after Durkheim, though Eliade gave him no explicit credit, and meant something quite different by it). Eliade's sacred was constant, no matter its human manifestation, unlike Durkheim's, which was by definition established by the human society that worshipped it. Happily, the contemporary anthropology of religion upholds the Durkheimian stance, arguing and even demonstrating through its unpacking of diversity and multiplicity that religious life is about the production of collective values and the practices needed to produce and sustain them. Our interest is rather in whether the community values of multiple Muslim, Buddhist and Christian societies – each its own category – are parallel or cognate, and to what extent the practices that generate them resemble or approach each other. Does Islamic law mean the same thing to all practising Muslims (certainly not)? Are different forms of Christianity more similar or more different? Do different local or regional variations of Buddhism lead to an overarching set of values, or multiple microcosmic ones?

But the concern lies in that little clause: 'each its own category'. Is the anthropology of a particular religion a surreptitiously comparative project whereby the lens of comparison has been turned within the category of one religion rather than be applied across them? If so, we may jeopardise the one element of the comparative method that made it palatable, namely, the Weberian ideal type, which recognises as the very condition of comparison that any category to be compared is precisely a heuristic device. If the Anthropology of Buddhism explores different manifestations of Buddhism so as to reveal the varied practices that come under the category of Buddhism, do we not downgrade the interrogations regarding when and why something is classified as

Buddhist in favour of an assertion of the category as an overarching concept and an ontological – even transcendent – reality?

In short, the anthropology of religion has to acknowledge that it has inherited and continues to promote the category of religion *qua* religion itself, as an undeniable aspect of human society. This is not a problem in itself, as long as the history of that construction – for which there is a considerable, robust literature (e.g. Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Stroumsa 2010) – is part of our study and our scholarship. From the anthropological perspective, using the category of religion as a heuristic device is helpful, especially if we take the Durkheimian – or even Tylorian – line that to be religious is to be social, or even human. Religion in this Durkheimian context means that we participate in certain practices that enable us to identify in specific ways; in the Tylorian one it means that we sustain or uphold belief systems that include the immaterial, the invisible, the other-worldly or the super-natural simply because that is the way we are wired. There are vast differences between these two positions but either is defensible as a contemporary anthropological stance insofar as they both suggest that 'religion' is short-hand for being human, in the social sense in the former rendering, and in the cognitive sense in the latter. Neither the Durkheimian line of thinking, nor the Tylorian line of thinking (nor those of Durkheim's descendants, namely, Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, Leach, Levi-Strauss, among many others) about religion separates it from other spheres of human activity, however, such that a scholarly discussion about the contours of religiosity in a particular context must be a social, cultural investigation – or a cognitive, neural one. To study religion – and particular religions – is to study humanity.

The category of religion thus gives itself over fairly easily to the categories that are religions, however, and here it gets trickier. When religion takes the form of a named institution or an ascribed identity that designates it as a particular field within human society, among others, somehow equivalent but different, new troubles arise. There is a particular history to the ostensible plurality of 'world religions', a category which, ironically, itself demands and brings about the discursive reality of multiple singularities. It is this history of production – such that the categories of specific, singular religions seem natural, and obvious – that we must take care not to eclipse or obscure. Especially as anthropologists, we must be careful when we tread into the domain of those categories, even if we are insisting on multiplicity within them. 'The Anthropology of Christianity', 'The Anthropology of Islam', 'The Anthropology of Buddhism' appear to offer multiplicity within categories of singularity when in fact such anthropologies can be complicit in confirming an ostensibly ontological truth, rather than insisting on each as a historical category of thought from which enduring collective identity emerges.

A history of comparison, and comparative religion in particular

Interestingly, for a discipline that takes cross-cultural perspectives as the heart of its analysis, anthropology has produced relatively little on the nature of comparison itself – much less than, say, on ethnography or on method – although the comparative question is always hovering in the background. For explicit interrogations of

comparison, we must look rather to our sister discipline in the humanities, comparative literature, where our colleagues have taken up the question of comparison rather more explicitly, and critically (Masuzawa 2005; Melas 2007; Said 1993). At the outset, it may be fruitful to acknowledge that there is an inherent difference between comparative studies that seek sameness and those that seek difference. The German theological tradition that also claims the name 'anthropology' searches for universal truths about mankind, while our own discipline of social or cultural anthropology is more at home with the possibility of deep, sustained, incommensurable differences that occur through culture – of which either a part or the whole is sometimes called religion: these are radically different kinds of projects that go beyond the relatively simple questions of scale and vantage point. At stake is whether we are interested in a unifying quest or a differentiating one, and the terms through which we see people(s) as linked or distinct.

What is assumed when we line religions up next to one another and investigate each of their internal pluralities? There is a complex mixed message here, an anthropological ambivalence. On one hand, we claim, there is great diversity within any religion and we take care not to assume that 'Christianity' or 'Islam', to take the case studies of this volume, refer to a singular or monolithic phenomenon, belief system or set of practices. This is part of what 'the anthropology of Christianity' or 'the anthropology of Islam' allows us to do: the project gestures towards a refusal of the premise that any one designation of the religion may stand in unilaterally for the whole. In this mode, the 'anthropology of X religion' implicitly sees any religion, 'world' or otherwise, as a constantly evolving or changing, dynamic set of institutions constituted by the people who practise them, in a complex and contested contextual light. Institutional imperatives, historical contingencies, modern preoccupations all equally contribute to the formation of any particular construction or manifestation of Christianity, or set of ethics that constitute Christian life, just as they do the multiple kinds of Islam, or ethical configurations of Muslim life, that we see in the contemporary world. Such is the capacity of the anthropology of religion, and the anthropology of particular religions: we can break down the confines of those categories precisely by filling them in with content, and context, that is geographically, historically and sociologically situated.

But the story does not end there. By offering an anthropology of a particular religion, on the other hand – or, as some frame it in an attempt to be inclusive, a particular 'faith', or a particular 'tradition' (or 'faith tradition' or 'religious tradition', phrases that sound ostensibly more ecumenical, or at least less authoritative, in their eschewal of the word 'religion') – the category of that particular religion, or the designative capacity of the religion, as institution, and as a marker of cultural life, is made more real, more solid, not less. This move is, unintentionally, the very opposite of the one that uses the open signifier of religion to allow for multiple histories and that acknowledges infinite exigencies. It takes the category of identity as the starting point of analysis, and insists on an equivalence between such categories as they relate to people's practices and people's lives. In this way, it is reminiscent of how the Reformation understood the distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism: the category of identity was all. It mattered which one you said you belonged to, just as much as or more than it mattered what particular acts you engaged in.

Of course the attempt to classify or categorise populations according to whether they identified with the 'right' kind of Christian faith (Christianity being synonymous

with 'religion' in that contexts) long pre-dates the Reformation.[2] Asad's famous *Genealogies of religion* (1993) stems from the Reformation's particular insistence on categorisation but the power of the category of religion can likely be dated much earlier. Still, the 16th century categorical distinctions between religious life and so-called secular life continue to produce the modern understanding of equal and equivalent religions (if one is of a progressive persuasion) being the stuff of human diversity. Ironically, even to articulate difference here is to participate in the project of human uniformity. (If one is not of a persuasion whereby pluralism is held up as an ideal, religions may still be lined up, but in that case they may be understood as neither equal nor equivalent.)

So an analysis of the anthropology – and thus the history – of comparative religion must interrogate the assumptions of both comparison as a method and the project of comparing culture. Here Tomoko Masuzawa's excellent scholarship (2005) illuminates how, since the 18th century, comparative philology is at the heart of the project to create 'the relation … between the logic of scientific comparativism and the doctrine of religious pluralism' (2005: 27). She asks, pointedly, 'What is the logic of "world religions" that has become so prevalent, so naturalized in our discourse that it seems as though it were no logic, no ideology at all, but a mere reflection of the way things are?' (2005: 6). Indeed, philology was the ideal starting point for the project of religious comparison: if language is an equivalent structure in all human societies, by deciphering languages, the 18th-century logic went, philologists could establish the relations and histories between seemingly disparate religious cultures, and, specifically, the sacred texts of those cultures – and perhaps discover the origins of their own.

Naturally, the comparative endeavour also emerges from the analysis of species and their histories and relations that swept the sciences in the face of Darwin and Spencer's work in the mid-19th century: biology could be scientifically wrought, and language groups were no different. From there, then as now, the link between language and culture – and, more specifically, the link between scriptural language and sacred text – meant that comparative philology held the key to understanding what would come to be known as world religions, through the texts and the languages that made them their own, but also revealed all kinds of potential familial links. Some of these reputed histories, such as that between Indic civilisation and German Aryanism, were to have devastating political consequences by the 20th century, as when the Nazis used philological lineages to make the claim for pure Aryan, rather than Semitic, roots. The realm of science had long been left behind.

These dark histories need not be recounted in detail here, but we do well to recall that the groundwork for comparative religion was not a neutral affair: the intellectual history of pluralism is itself political. Importantly, comparative philology was intimately linked with comparative religion in the histories of these disciplines, leading to the damaging twin legacies of a hierarchical, evolutionist, taxonomy of human races and and religions, on one hand, and the exclusive use of textual materials to understand religions, such that a spiritual canon comprised of parallel 'sacred texts' became the default designation (and the implicit criterion) of being a 'world religion', on the other. Anthropology has very effectively challenged both of these legacies – we have no truck

[2] My thanks to Anna Sapir Abulafia and Ann Giletti for a stimulating conversation about medieval constructions of 'religion'; clearly only specific Christian practices constituted real 'religion' in the writings of papal authorities. These terms were contested at least as early as the turn of the first millennium.

with evolutionism, and we know that lived religion can be the most meaningful way to experience religion in practice – but we have yet to challenge the modernist results of such a powerful discourse that claims the parallel development of a set of 'world religions' that may then, with all the good will in the world, be laid out alongside one another as comparable expressions of being. By insisting on commensurability, we allow the fiction to persist that each of these categories - each religion - is an equivalent sphere of meaning and experience.

The case: a ritual in London

Who might be excluded when we classify religious practices within the 'world religions' paradigm, given that these heuristics do map closely on to many people's experience – and have become all the more real in terms of people's lives and identities? Perhaps we can use the nation as a comparative example. From the frame of the world's nations, and the anthropologies of them, what do we do with people on the borderlands, or migrating between regions, or with multiple national affinities? The model of the singular nation-state does not work as our only analytical frame because it unnecessarily restricts people, and would limit our understanding of the nature of human experience at the level of belonging, citizenship and identity if it were our only view. Of course, the identity of nationality and the identity of religion can play off one another: it may be that one must hold fast if the other is malleable – or both may be fixed, or both may be fluid – but the claim here is that the effort to produce multiple anthropologies of religions veers perilously close to taking the borders of nations as fixed without allowing for either the historical reality of the processes of the construction of those states, or for the possibility that citizenship is an unequal experience between states. In addition, not everyone fits into one nation or another, just as not everyone is easily categorized as belonging to a particular religion.

Let us take a concrete example – one that happens to be firmly rooted in the nation of England even as it confronts all the categories that are religious – in 21st-century London. We turn to a particular ritual gathering (a seemingly religious activity by any anthropological definition), to investigate a complex mesh of Christian/pagan/Zen/Indic/neo-Egyptian practices in the context of a contemporary community of countercultural artists and seekers who refuse to classify themselves as belonging to a particular – or indeed to any – religion. That they do not wish to be part of a 'world religion' is instructive: they do not wish to be classified.[3]

This ritual, which is conducted monthly, is designed to commemorate medieval sex workers who were the sub-tenants of the Bishop of Winchester's manor in the (contemporary) London Borough of Southwark (Hausner 2016). Its participants come from the area surrounding the graveyard which is the symbolic home of these deceased, impoverished spirits, but also from activists and artists from all over London, the country and, in some cases, the world, as it has become something of a tourist or

[3] Sociologists of religion have established a sizeable literature on new religious movements, or minority religious movements, as well as on spirituality, or on the new age 'marketplace'. But to cede such analyses to the field of sociology replicates an unhelpful distinction that was prevalent through much of the 20th century – that sociologists tend to social frames relevant to home terrain, while anthropologists deal with 'the rest of the world'.

travellers' attraction in a popular area of the capital. It is also a well-known site among global networks of activists for sex workers, including unions and those promoting good labour conditions.

It is a simple, unassuming ritual – involving poetry, song, chanting, the sharing of a swig of gin (which was offered, it is said, to poor women as a comfort in olden times), incense, candles and moments of silence and reflection. Most importantly, participants tie a ribbon or a memento on to the gates surrounding the graveyard – which is now, after years of ritual performance that also gave over to local lobbying for a protection of the site – a flourishing garden, run by volunteers, most of whom have been long-time attendees of the ritual event. The gates themselves have been preserved by the Greater London Authority, the administrative body that manages Transport for London, as a result of the long-time actions of ritualists who made it their business to be a thorn in the side of developers of the region. No London Tube or Underground station should go through this graveyard, or disrupt the spirits of the dead within it, the ritual participants proclaimed, month after month, and their ritual (and the petitions that accompanied it) ensured that this ritual wish was granted.

The chief ritualist, a Cambridge-educated radical artist named John Constable, who has trained with a Brazilian shaman, and who himself takes on the shamanic guise of a facilitator named John Crow in the context of the monthly ritual, staunchly resists the idea that he or the other participants of the ritual belong to a religion. He is aware of the problems with the category of religion – from both the perspective of critiquing the institution, and from the perspective of the singularity that is assumed within any given category. Further, he wishes to challenge the social hierarchy that is inherent when any of us are placed into a specific category – which, he argues, translates into a ranking of the social order. Wisely, he argues that bounded categories inevitably produce a hierarchical social structure.

In these arguments, John Constable/Crow sounds like Mary Douglas: there is (in his case, a hoped-for) power in being on the margins. If, by polluting the categories, something or someone becomes potent (sometimes too potent), this ritual precisely uses a 'polluted' category – the sex worker – to show what it is like to be – and to embrace being – on the outside. This ritual deliberately invites a marginal status, inverting the power of exclusion to claim political and even theological justice.[4] The power of the margins can thus be re-appropriated through ritual, and indeed it is often precisely fought over.

As a case in point, the margins in which the shaman John Crow sits are intentional: only from a marginal position in the contemporary world can he empathetically advocate for medieval sex workers, whose spirits act as the rallying call for social inclusion and equity in modern-day Southwark. John won the 'Campaigner of the Year' Erotic Award in 2011, and a Lifetime Achievement Sexual Freedom Award in 2017, for his artistic, political and shamanic work; these were awards he was happy to accept, although he noted that anything more mainstream would have had to be declined. He chooses to assert solidarity with those who have been on the margins, and thus refuses to categorise himself – even if it risks meaning he falls through the cracks. In fact, he expects to fall through the cracks: that's what the honouring of marginalisation (not the

[4] Many tantric rituals in South Asia similarly challenge the mainstream or conventional social order by embracing polluted categories, and they similarly defy categorisation: they are neither exclusively Hindu nor Buddhist. Interestingly, both the London ritual and many tantric rituals take place at, in or near a graveyard, a polluted space outside of mainstream cultural places.

appropriating of it) does. 'We're not a religious cult, although it might look that way', John asserts. 'We're not a united, single belief system.' This ritual honours the borderland of religion: it is where those participating in religious action but not identifying with any religious category belong.

And yet there is a distinctly religious story – at the level of category as well as the level of practice – to be told here. For one thing, this ritual began as a critique of the historical Church of England and has now become an active conversation with the contemporary Church, too. The Dean of Southwark, the Very Reverend Andrew Nunn, is a friend of the site, and on occasion he attends the gatherings; once he performed a consecration of the graveyard (in case the ritualists' claim that it was 'an unconsecrated burial ground' was true). Reverend Nunn and John Constable/Crow engage in frequent and warm conversation, and the Southwark Cathedral has eagerly and willingly put on John's plays about the histories of Southwark sex workers.

For another, the ritual consciously and deliberately draws from multiple religions, including but also beyond the so-called 'world religions': this is an ecumenical tale – or, better, an eclectic one, insofar as an 'ecumenical' claim refers to a history of inclusive religious practice from the perspective of the Christian church, and, like the larger disciplinary history that is being critiqued here, obscures a set of preoccupations on the part of the Christian west about the contours and boundaries of religious life. Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan and India are some of the religious cultures of the world that are brought together in the songs, symbols, icons and material objects of this ritual's practice. World religions are not eschewed, but nor are they kept apart or held aloft. On one Christmas gathering, when the proceedings included singing carols together, John announced, 'We'll be doing the orthodox versions tonight! If pagans are uncomfortable, please don't feel you have to go along with it!'

Finally, of course, this is a Durkheimian gathering, in that it brings together a community of those who feel themselves to be outside of the social order, and who want and need an alternative social focus: the graveyard-garden offers a totemic purpose for gathering. As John says, 'We are united in mind and in intention – we are part of a continuum.' We stand at the edge of a graveyard participating in a ritual that self-consciously links us with our ancestors, telling our origin myth, in the hopes of producing a better future. If ritual can bring together a group of like-minded humans who commune at a pre-determined place and time, it sounds like religion, even if its participants argue against belonging to any of the available categories.

Into which religious category can an ethnography of the Crossbones ritual reasonably sit? Does it count as a form of the 'Anthropology of Christianity'? Certainly John's interactions with the Deans and Reverends of the Southwark Cathedral make for a compelling analysis of the way the Christian establishment views and engages with its critics. And John's ritual – with candles, and songs, and images of the Virgin Mary – derives at least in part from a Christian childhood in Wales, now updated within a global religious ecumene. But he and his fellow ritualists would be deeply offended if we encompassed them within an anthropology of Christianity. Should their references to Zen, for example, place them in an anthropology of East Asian religions, or, with their references to Candomblé, in an anthropology of Brazilian religions? This suggestion seems even more far-fetched. How about New Religious Movements? Perhaps, but is a political-artistic grouping that meets for a ritual once a month a religious movement? Our categories leave no room for an exploration of the kind of religion John and his ritualists are ritually creating – and that is our weakness, and a cautionary tale to be told.

Implications for the anthropology of a religion

Is the anthropology of particular religions, then, moving backwards? Is it becoming a fashionable contemporary trend of displaying difference within the category of one religion, but with blinders as to the effects of comparative religion writ large? In short, are we playing into the world religions narrative, the old comparative religion model, such that in our zest to explore and explain diversity within religious frameworks, we are unwittingly creating boundaries anew – between frames considered sufficiently different as to no longer belong to the same category? If we demonstrate multiplicity in *each* world religion, are we somehow safe from the damaging history of the 18th and 19th century comparative project? In our healthy attention to detail, let us not forget the forest for the trees, and remember that the classification of religious life as pertaining only to a singular religious category – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism – comes with a significant scholarly and political history that denies overlap, multiplicity and the very process of category-making.

Given these histories, the questions we must ask ourselves as we look to the future of our discipline are: By producing the anthropology of Christianity, or the anthropology of Islam, or the anthropology of Buddhism (and all have been regularly written about and published in the last decade, by talented and thoughtful scholars), do we reproduce the social fact of religion, or a particular religion itself, in such a way that we suggest that it is a natural entity in the world, ignoring both those on the margins, and the ways in which these very categories come into being and inhabit their power? By comparing practices within the category of a singular religion (rather than across religions, which we now know would be too broad in a distasteful reminder of the 19th-century attempt to create a taxonomy of human cultures), do we ensure the promotion of understanding religious lives as diverse, and sidestep a popular discourse of religions as monolithic and singular? Or, despite our best intentions, are we reifying encompassing categories?

The defences against the charge that we are naively perpetuating the ideological platform of equivalent singularities are many. First, and most important, in many cases our own informants uphold the categories of religious identification, and actively participate in proclaiming them, and we need thus to reflect them as such. The tricky part is when our informants are engaging in religious practices, but not necessarily proclaiming a particular religious category: we need to be able to differentiate the practice from the proclamation of identity (Hausner and Gellner 2012). One strand of religious activity, then, is to practise in such a way that adheres to a category that *someone else* is naming; a different strand of religious activity is to practise in such a way that consciously proclaims an identity category. Very simply, anthropologists have to take care not to be the 'someone else' who names a category that is not offered up by our informants themselves. Of course, sometimes the 'someone else' claims others' practices as part of a religious identity category (their own or another's) without the express agreement of the practitioner – and describing this appropriation of practice into category is certainly part of the anthropological remit. But we, the anthropologists, cannot be the claimers.

Second, no doubt when we engage in the anthropology of a particular religion, we are precisely developing a pluralist – not a singular – internal view of it, by demonstrating in a way in which anthropology excels a diversity of practices, modes of identification and, most significantly, realms of meaning attached to varied and diverse

communities ranging in location, scale and demographic make-up. Documenting this multiplicity within the category of 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism' or 'Judaism', etc., necessarily complicates the putative singularity of the label, and concretely shows that we cannot assume that belonging to the overarching category brings with it the same set of beliefs, practices, experiences or meanings in each instance. In our way, then, anthropologists positively contribute to the complicating of the category itself, by refracting it with empirical, ethnographic material that precisely displays the multiple realities of religious life as it is lived.

But if we are consciously resisting the production of ideal religions and ideal religious practitioners, why do we keep the heuristic alive? How do we ensure that the anthropology of a particular religion is a way of interrogating the historical production of that religion, not just describing its contents in multiple places and forms? If we accept the categories of particular religions as writ, and interrogate their multiplicity from this position without actively recalling that the categories themselves are products of academic and political pasts, we participate in making them fixed even as we aim to demonstrate their fluidity. As Charles Tilly argues, 'We should resist the temptation to reify' (1984: 61). The concern here is that we have now accepted the modernist discourse – and perhaps not only because some of our informants have – without a conscious acknowledgement that we have done so.

If we are to uphold and describe religious categories – the categories of specific religions – we must do so in what is clearly a heuristic vein. We know categories are constructed, but we continue to use them, because they are used in the world: this is appropriate. Thus our anthropology of Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism can return to the pseudo-Weberian project to compare and contrast various religions as they are practised in the world, and that we have pushed further, in order to compare and contrast different variants of those religions within their own categories. This is no longer the production of the ideal type – neither the ideal form of a particular religion nor the ideal portrayal of a religious practitioner following a particular theology: we recount lived, practised forms of all the religions we categorise, in the place of an ideal Calvinist who becomes blurry as we track the metamorphosis of a cultural ideal. By acknowledging the history of these constructions, we remember the categories for what they are, as the ground of both lived experience and, often, contestation among our informants.

When our informants use such categories themselves, our task is relatively easy. But we must recall that these are not in all instances emic categories. If we assume that world religions are always legitimate and fixed categories (whatever variations we find within them), we will be blind to the possibility of encounter or engagement, or change, across the categories, a problem this volume tackles. Whether in the famous Nepali case where 'yes' is the answer to the question of whether someone is Hindu or Buddhist, or Janson's case of Chrislam (a conscious creation of a new category, as if her informants are aware that they won't count without one [2016]), or, in the case offered in this paper, where South Bank ritualists who look religious even as they defy the category of religion altogether, we have plenty of ethnographic evidence for religious life outside the categories. Buying into the paradigm of world religions makes us complicit with the modernist project to produce them, rather than be scholars of how they come to be produced in the first place.

Finally, we must remain aware of – and alive to – all the ways in which our informants, too, challenge the fixity or rigidity of singular religions, or their reification. They interpret multiply, adapt, adjust and tweak, such that analysing

how individuals or collectives engage with the categories that have been produced and developed as a modernist project can be one of the great contributions of the anthropology of religion. Understanding how our informants participate in the production of the categories of religion – or indeed any of the categories that have been handed down to them – as well as when they do not engage with, or even explicitly deny, the category in the first place can be how our field takes its rightful place in the advanced study of religion. The distinctions between those cases where our informants actively engage with the category of their religion, and those where they live their lives in meaningful ways that do not refer to a putatively religious category at all, may be as instructive as the Frazerian-style, encyclopaedic range of practices that we describe as emerging from a singular category. We must look beyond the category of particularity to understand how religion, broadly understood, is meaningful in people's lives.

By using the lens of a particular category of religion, we can investigate that religion in depth from a scholarly perspective, but we must do so without the cost of asserting that category as dominant when it may not be, ascribing an identity that is not explicitly claimed or reifying the category as an actual or unchanging one. We should be recalling religions as heuristics that have in turn been operationalised and made real by a set of historical and political, scholarly and popular, assumptions – and we should be recalling and uncovering this history, not making its products more real than they already are. The danger here is that, although we are the scholars of the category – and should be the scholars of its construction as well – we may unwittingly be contributing to its rigidity. No doubt we learn from placing cases next to each other, within categories as well as across them. But it is our job to challenge the rubric under which we do so. How do we allow difference to shine through the threat of homogenisation? Part of the solution is the refractive anthropology of a religion, but also, critically, we must recall that we may be participating in a particular history of the production of sameness by lining up religions as equal or equivalent manifestations of shared belief systems that map on to communities or identities in simple or parallel ways. Such narratives can easily eclipse complex, multiple histories of overlap and encounter, or the varying weight, relevance and importance of religious identity and its naming in different contexts. And we cannot let that happen: our job as anthropologists of religion is to recall that culture – our own as much as anyone's – emerges out of categories, and to challenge their natural-ness, their easy dominance, every step of the way.

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L'Anthropologie comparative des religions, ou l'Anthropologie des religions comparées: Un commentaire critique

Dans ce commentaire, je défends la nécessité de dévoiler les couches multiples de pensée historique portant sur la production de la catégorie religieuse, qui jouent un rôle à la fois dans la pensée académique et dans la façon dont la religion est vécue, comprise et défendue par nos informateurs au cours de leur vie. Nous ne pouvons plus prendre pour acquis, ou comme allant de soi, les contours (ou les limites) d'une religion particulière, ni considérer une catégorie de religion, désignée ainsi, comme un phénomène humain naturel, indépendant en quelque sorte du champ de la culture.

Mots clés anthropologie des religions, anthropologie comparative, religion mondiale, comparaison, particularité