

Introduction

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Although the field of religious studies long has been a province of comparativists, their current representatives now turn a critical eye to the projects of their predecessors. Comparative religionists today eschew their antecedents' tendencies to reduce different religions to their common denominator (to see only one religion where there are many) and to assert the superiority of their own faith tradition (to see one religion over and above all others). Correctives to these universalizing and hierarchizing tendencies include attending carefully to the differences as well as similarities among religions and appreciating the richness of religions' respective cultural contexts. Indeed, these remedies recur as themes in two earlier volumes on comparative religious studies, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* and "Comparison in the History of Religions: Reflections and Critiques."¹

As works that simultaneously describe the state of comparative religious studies today and prescribe ways to improve this subfield, both volumes, by necessity, are broad. They consider comparison at a theoretical level, taking up the questions of why scholars should compare aspects of religions and how they can better do so. By contrast, *Figuring Religions* shows how current comparativists can apply the general lessons that they have learned about examining differences and contexts, while adopting a particular set of approaches appropriate for studying a variety of religious expressions. To clarify religious ideas, images, and activities, the contributors to *Figuring Religions* focus on the figures of metaphor and metonymy in religious thought, art,

and rituals. These authors offer fresh outlooks on these aspects of religions, by applying trope theories developed recently in the disciplines of philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology.

These three types of theories allow comparative religionists to adapt the tacks that they take to religious forms. In choosing one of these frameworks to study such forms, a scholar indicates both the scale of her analysis and the relative importance that she will ascribe to similarity and difference as she compares the forms in question.

If, for instance, she follows in the footsteps of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, she will focus on metaphorical statements and will emphasize similarity and difference equally in her comparison. This comparison initially is implicit in a metaphorical assertion " x is y ," where the metaphor lies in the copula "is" that connects a subject (x) to whatever is predicated of it (y). Yet the comparativist can make the comparison explicit, by recognizing that, in this metaphor, the term "is" means both "is not" and "is like." Once she is aware of this double meaning, she sees that the metaphorical statement contains three sorts of tension: (1) tension between the statement's subject (x) and predicate (y), (2) tension between the statement's literal (x is y) and metaphorical (x is like y) interpretations, and (3) tension between the asserted identity of x and y and their obvious difference.² When the subject and predicate of the metaphorical statement come from different cultures, adopting Ricoeur's philosophical perspective allows the scholar to examine closely both the intersections and the disjunctures between these terms. The same holds true, if the statement in her sights is metonymical rather than metaphorical, though the relationship that the metonymy asserts is the contiguity rather than resemblance of the subject and predicate.³

If, however, the scholar is concerned primarily with a broader kind of comparison, with comparing the conceptual systems of different cultures rather than their key terms, she more likely will look at these networks of notions through the lens of the cognitive linguistics applied by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. On this view, the most salient features are metaphor, which is the "understanding and experiencing [of] one kind of thing in terms of another," and metonymy, which is the conceiving of a thing via its generally "physical or causal" relation to another thing.⁴ These kinds of cognition underlie and thereby structure the conceptual systems that people employ, the assemblages of ideas that arise as people encounter their environments. The scholar comparing such metaphorical or metonymical systems is more sensitive to their similarities than to their differences. While she, like Lakoff and Johnson, allows that distinct cultures and distinct physical conditions

give rise to different nexuses of concepts, she especially is interested in the similar sets of thoughts that emerge across cultures as human beings sense their surroundings with their bodies in the same ways.⁵

Yet she can explore a still wider area, if she steps back from conceptual systems to see more clearly the distinct cultures in which they are located. From this vantage point, she examines the cultural dynamics that condition the tropes and concepts before her. These tropes thus are a starting point for her inquiry, rather than its end. Therefore, seeing the tropes in spatial terms is helpful to her. In these terms, a metaphor arises where an element of “some source domain” is mapped onto a similar-seeming element of “some target domain,” a semantic field that appears to be “abstract,” because it includes elements that can be observed less readily than the contents of the source domain, a semantic field whose concreteness makes it seem more “familiar.” A metonymy, however, occurs between contiguous elements of a semantic field, when one of these elements is substituted for another. But, even as these two tropes differ, both are influenced by cultures. Because specific cultures structure the semantic domains from which these tropes draw, by determining continuously which elements the domains contain and the relative positions of these elements within the domains, a scholar cannot understand completely the tropes that she observes, unless she knows their surrounding cultures. Even if she sees similarities among different cultures’ tropes, only by appreciating the cultures’ particularities can she attain access to the complete complexity of the individual figures in front of her.⁶

Employing philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological approaches such as the ones just outlined enables the comparativists contributing to *Figuring Religions* to study statements, conceptual systems, and cultural contexts concerning religious tropes. By examining such facets of religious figures, these scholars figure religions more effectively, seeing their central ideas, their central images, and their central activities distinctly yet collectively.

These forms of religion form the themes of this volume’s three parts. Part I, “Figuring Religious Ideas,” treats not only notions native to religious traditions, but also categories that scholars apply as they study religious traditions. In chapter 1, Thomas A. Tweed examines philosophically the tropes that theorists have used to define religion, and the effects that metaphors for religion have on the scholars who use them. As he surveys such orienting tropes, he notes that religion has been represented in ways enabling its observers to focus on certain of its aspects rather than on others. Likening theorists’ metaphors to lenses, he concludes that scholars of religion are obligated to devote at least some of their exegetical energy to clarifying and—if

necessary—to replacing their intellectual forebears’ metaphors for religion, because this constitutive term demarcates their discipline as definitely and definitively today as before.

In chapter 2, I take a philosophical approach to comparing the designations of Homeric and Hindu works as epics. In my view, the statement that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are epics is an identity because the English word “epic” derives from a Greek term that interpreters used for the Homeric poems in ancient times. The statement that the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are epics, however, is a metaphor because modern English-speaking critics transferred the term “epic” to the Hindu poems centuries after they were composed. While resembling their Greek counterparts in their enormous poetic forms and heroic themes, the Sanskrit epics repeatedly embed narratives within narratives and express in their encapsulated tales a devotionism and a moral didacticism that do not mark the Greek epics. By distinguishing the senses in which the Greek and Indian texts may be considered epics, I recognize the contributions that the poems of each culture make to this rubric for religious literary works.

In chapter 3, Edward Slingerland argues that cognitive linguistics applies to metaphorical conceptions of the self in the *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist text. This application’s ease indicates that the embodied existence characteristic of all human beings accounts for metaphors for the self that are common to classical China and modern America. Thus, human interactions with bounded areas and containers give rise to a metaphor of the self as a container that may be filled with virtues, vices, inclinations, and knowledge; and human experiences with manipulating physical objects bring forth a metaphor of the self as an object. The commonness of these metaphors across cultures distinguished by disparate histories and environments points to the shared human experience that can serve as the theoretical point of departure for comparative religious projects.

James Egge evaluates in chapter 4 Slingerland’s proposal that conceptual metaphor theory be adopted as a methodology for the comparative study of religion. Contending that the flaws in the current formulation of conceptual metaphor theory are correctable, Egge extends its central idea of image-schematic projection, the use of image schemas—patterns of practical knowledge derived from sensory data about concrete objects, such as one’s own body and physical environment—as the terms in which to understand more abstract items. He analyzes key practical concepts in two Theravāda Buddhist texts—passion and asceticism in the *Dhammapada* and meditation in the *Visuddhimagga*—and demonstrates that these texts provide strong evidence

of the usefulness and validity of conceptual metaphor theory for comparing religions.

Part II, "Figuring Religious Images," focuses on the representations evoked by religious texts. In chapter 5, Ellen Haskell examines two kabbalistic texts that make extensive use of the metaphor of God as a suckling mother: Ezra of Geron's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and the *Sefer ha-Zohar*. In her inquiry Haskell works from anthropological assumptions that a metaphor, by locating its referents in only a small portion of the zone comprising a culture's characteristic ranges of various attributes, demonstrates that additional metaphors are needed to span this space; and that a person, by seeking to make metaphorical sense of his entire cosmos, can transform himself in such a way that he may become one with the whole of physical and cultural experience. For Haskell, then, the Jewish mystical works employ the metaphorical connotations and metonymical structures of the suckling-mother image, in order to relocate the kabbalists with respect to God. This relocation, which establishes a metaphysical social connection, conceptually transforms the kabbalists into beings capable of standing in the profoundly interdependent relationship with divinity that kabbalistic theology advocates. While Jewish images of God and Christian images of the Virgin Mary share the basic metaphor of suckling as spiritual transmission, the Jewish and Christian traditions differ as to the nature of the transmission and as to the relationships that it constructs between humanity and divinity.

In chapter 6, Terhi Utriainen argues philosophically that readers should regard as both metaphors and images the depictions of people in various states of dress and undress that appear in certain Biblical stories and in Finnish Lutheran sermons and hymns. More precisely, a dynamic notion of metaphor elucidates the processual aspects of human and Christian identities as they are constructed through the acts of dressing and undressing. Yet an even better understanding of these means of constructing identities arises by applying an idea of image. While a metaphor condenses information about a referent and makes it easier to grasp, by highlighting its resemblance to another phenomenon, an image opens up onto the fullness of envisioned existence. Therefore, identifying dressing and undressing as images reveals not only the multiple ways in which to conceive the identities associated with these acts, but also the nuances of the contexts in which these identities are constructed.

In part III, the focus shifts from religious images to religious activities. The particular practices with which Laurie L. Patton is concerned in chapter 7 are the Hindu rituals originating in the Vedic period, many of

which continue to be enacted today. She offers a fresh fivefold philosophical interpretation of the mantras recited during these rituals, by analyzing the metonymies that constitute these poetic chants. Thus, she illuminates (1) the mental world that frames Vedic rituals for their performers, (2) the pragmatism of the technical terms that these performers use as shorthands for sequences of ritual acts, (3) the specific ways in which the elements of the mantras' compound words refer to one another as they express implicit grammatical relationships, (4) the modeling of ritual acts on prototypes, and (5) the identification of ritual actors with the rituals' prototypical performers. In doing so, she demonstrates a metonymical method that can be used to study the interactions of word and act in other religions.

Religious practices are similarly central in chapter 8, where Yiqun Zhou studies in literary, ritual, and historical texts the spatial metaphors mirroring and influencing ancient Greek and Chinese women's participation in public festivals and domestic rites. Assuming anthropologically that spatial metaphors (the physical representations of social arrangements and hierarchies) both map and shape social relationships, Zhou argues that, although sexual separation—formulated typically as a spatial contrast between “inside” (read “female, domestic”) and “outside” (read “male, public”)—underlay and organized the Greek and Chinese societies, their female religious practitioners challenged differently the physical limits that such separation set. While the prestige and emotional satisfaction of Greek women grew when the women entered and forged friendships within the communities participating in extradomestic public festivals, authority and honor accrued to Chinese women who engaged in domestically located ancestor worship. This contrast between women's roles as reflected and constructed ritually in two paradigmatic classical civilizations bears on a better understanding of the civilizations' distinct legacies for Western and Eastern gender relations.

Whereas Zhou compares and contrasts the religious activities of two historically unrelated communities, Tony K. Stewart considers in chapter 9 the actual encounter between Muslims and Hindus in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Bengal. More precisely, he clarifies the process whereby Bengali Muslim theologians use the non-Islamic vocabulary of their native language, Sanskritically derived Bengali, to explain Islamic practices in terms that Bengali Hindus and Muslims alike can understand. Stewart, by taking a cognitive-linguistic approach to such works as the *Āgama* of Āli Rajā, substitutes a translation model for the syncretistic models that would have been applied by certain scholars preceding Stewart, had they interpreted the interreligious encounters among Āli Rajā and his peers. Specifically,

Stewart takes issue with his predecessors' overemphasis on the products yielded when the practitioners of different religions interact with one another, because adopting this product orientation—which is predicated on four problematic types of metaphor (borrowing, cultural overlay, alchemy, and reproduction)—obscures the processes that constitute the interreligious interactions. By categorizing these interactions as four kinds of translation (literal, approximate, analogous, and cultural), Stewart elucidates the dynamism inherent in interreligious expressions.

Figuring Religions thus offers new ways to compare prominent features of the world's religions, an experience that globalization has made common. In illuminating salient aspects of Hinduism, ancient Greek religions, Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam, this volume's contributors demonstrate that metaphor and metonymy theories from the fields of philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology can serve as lenses through which religious ideas, images, and activities—key characteristics of today's rapidly changing yet increasingly smaller world—can be seen more clearly.

These three features, perhaps the most common components of faith traditions, have been treated individually in earlier trope-focused inquiries across religions. These studies, while landmarks in their own rights, evince by omission the signal contributions of *Figuring Religions*.

The first of these works, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*, sets forth a theological analysis of the figurative language in which Christian conceptions of truth are couched.⁷ This text, while examining metaphors for the relationship between the Christian God and human beings, and addressing symbolic and mythic representations of this relationship, does not delve into theories of metaphor. Moreover, the book acknowledges that divine/human encounters are depicted similarly in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but does not extend its focus on figures to other faiths. Instead, this work asserts that truly understanding Christianity's teachings requires appreciating the richness of their representations, because such metaphors, symbols, and myths bring believers into contact with the divine. Centering on the figurative expressions of Christian truth-claims in scripture, theology, belief, and liturgy, the inquiry does not consider the tropes that constitute the categories used by scholars who study Christianity from without rather than from within.

Whereas *God and the Creative Imagination* views religious ideas more narrowly than does *Figuring Religions*, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* devotes more attention to religious visual images.⁸ This study of Christian uses of visual representations worldwide in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows that applying art-historical theories of visual culture can bring to light the religious beliefs and practices attending the creation and observation of religious images in all faith traditions. Yet, while *The Sacred Gaze* lingers productively on material representations (and adduces in passing an admirable array of visual manifestations of religions other than Christianity), the work skims over textual imagery and the disciplinary approaches suited to its interpretation.

If the practices of different religions are prominent in *Figuring Religions*, the practice of religion in general comes to the fore in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, an anthropological essay that accords primacy to ritual as the source of ontology, morality, and theology.⁹ Regarding ritual as the fundamental human behavior, as the means by which societies preserve their conventions, *Ritual and Religion* distinguishes three levels of ritual meaning: (1) the low-order meaning of the taxonomic distinction of linguistic terms, (2) the middle-order meaning of metaphorical similarity between icons and the objects that they indicate, and (3) the high-order meaning of the participatory unification of actors with entities beyond them. Although this elegant schema conduces to nuanced interpretations of ritual performances, the schema's adoption circumscribes metaphor within the sphere of material symbols and leads observers to overlook the metaphorical aspects of statements and mystical experiences.

At the same time that *Figuring Religions* advances new views on cognitive, visual, and ritual forms from a variety of faith traditions and historical periods, this volume suggests ways in which the earliest of its constituent investigations already have shaped the subfield of comparative religious studies. More precisely, the previously published essays that appear in the volume have broken paths of inquiry from which the volume's most recent essays have set forth in new directions.

Thus, just as Tweed's "Marking Religion's Boundaries: Constitutive Terms, Orienting Tropes, and Exegetical Fussiness" treats the metaphors associated with "religion" (a term that is constitutive of the discipline of religious studies), my "'Epic' as an Amnesiac Metaphor: Finding the Word to Compare Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Poems" centers on the metaphorical nature of "epic" (a constitutive term of the subdiscipline of religion and literature). In regard to religious traditions' own ideas, Egge's "Theorizing Embodiment: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Comparative Study of Religion" evaluates and elaborates the argument made in Slingerland's "Conceptions of the Self in the *Zhuangzi*: Conceptual Metaphor Analysis and Comparative Thought" for conceptual metaphor theory as a methodology

for comparing religions. The process whereby religious texts are embodied and enacted is examined in terms of metonymies in Laurie L. Patton's "Poetry, Ritual, and Associational Thought in Early India and Elsewhere" and in terms of metaphors and images in Utraiainen's "Metaphors and Images of Dress and Nakedness: Wrappings of Embodied Identity." And the ways in which metaphors inform religious communities' distinctive self-constructions are explored in view of Muslims and Hindus in pre- and early colonial Bengal in Stewart's "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," Jews and Christians in medieval Europe in Haskell's "Bathed in Milk: Metaphors of Suckling and Spiritual Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," and ancient Greek and Chinese women in Zhou's "Spatial Metaphors and Women's Religious Activities in Ancient Greece and China."

Taken together, then, the earlier and later studies that appear in *Figuring Religions* constitute a thought-provoking conversation across academic generations—a colloquy that can be comprehended completely only upon hearing both of its sides. This conversation, I hope, will continue with you.

NOTES

1. Patton and Ray 2000; Carter 2004.
2. Ricoeur 1977: 25, 7, 248, 298–99, 313.
3. Brown [1927] 1966: 149–50.
4. Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003: 5 (emphasis removed), 39.
5. Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003: 146, 247.
6. Fernandez 1991: 57, 123, 161, 192, 151, 196.
7. Avis 1999.
8. Morgan 2005.
9. Rappaport 1999.

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